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Hidden away in the eastern coast of Kuala Terengganu, there is a small fishing island that glitters like emerald along the East Coast strait, where ancient boat builders reside.

There is sawdust all over the floor and pieces of planks lying around. The air is thick with the scent of wood, floating into heat of the afternoon. With a steady and firm hand, Abang Man saws into the thick plank of wood, leaving a trail of fine dust around him, caved in a vessel the size of a small whale. The *azan* resounding across the river is drowned out by the sound of metal gnawing into wood. He is one of the few remaining boat-makers in Pulau Duyong.



"Cengal wood is around RM17,000 per tonne. It's pretty expensive considering that we're the only folks that build full wooden boats these days. Everyone else is going synthetic with fiberglass." Expensive as it is, *cengal* wood has been used by these traditional boat-makers for centuries. The wood is hardy, dense and resistant against both water and termites – perfect for a seafaring vessel.



There are less than 10 boat-makers who practise the traditional trade in Pulau Duyong, all of them dotting the shore of the small island. Commissions are rare these days and they would be lucky to have at least one job order a year. The boat-makers would set to work on a variety of vessels ranging from sailing to fishing boats.

"Depending on the sort of vessel you want, it could cost you from RM200,000 to half a million. It would generally take up to six months to a year to complete," says Abang Man as he steadily hammers the wooden nails in. What makes the boats of Pulau Duyong unique is that the vessels are built fully out of wood and nailed together using *paku naga*, wooden pegs that are claimed to be stronger than iron nails.



Curator and historian enthusiast **Pn. Rohani Longuet**, a 40-year French resident of the island describes how the boats of the Malay Archipelago were far more advanced than those built in the West and remain to be so, by way of design. In fact, for years, foreign researchers have visited the island to learn the craft and attempt to reverse-engineer the unique boat-building design.



These days, it is difficult to get youths involved with the boat-building trade. The months-long process of building a boat can be laborious and not many have patience for the finer details of this craft. While there is a general lack of youthful presence at these shipyards, there are an encouraging few who take apprenticeship under these boat-builders out of pure interest and love for the craft.



"I don't know how much longer we'll be here. Us boat-builders are few and getting old. Maybe we'll be around in the next 10 years, maybe five," Encik Johari says as he rests against the boat he's building. Like *cengal* wood, the craft is rare, reducing and the practitioners even more so. As he carves delicately into the hull, Encik Johari's calloused hands tell a centuries-old tale of hardy craftsmanship, finer details and a secret knowledge that will die with his generation.

By **Azif Azuddin**
Photos by **Azif Azuddin**

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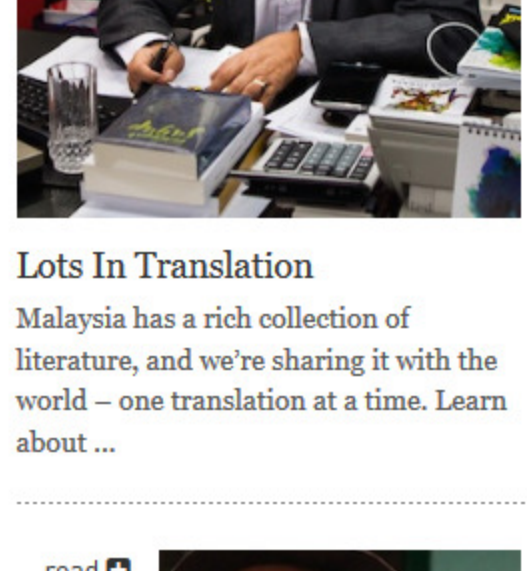
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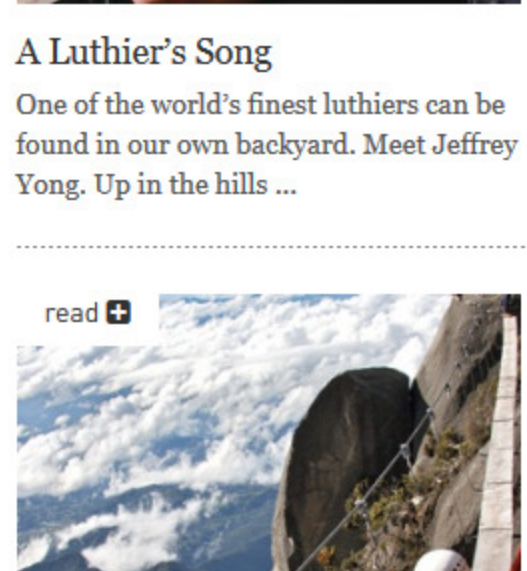
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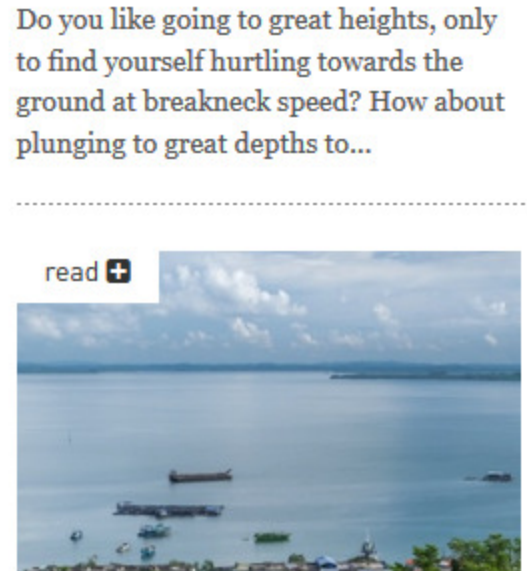
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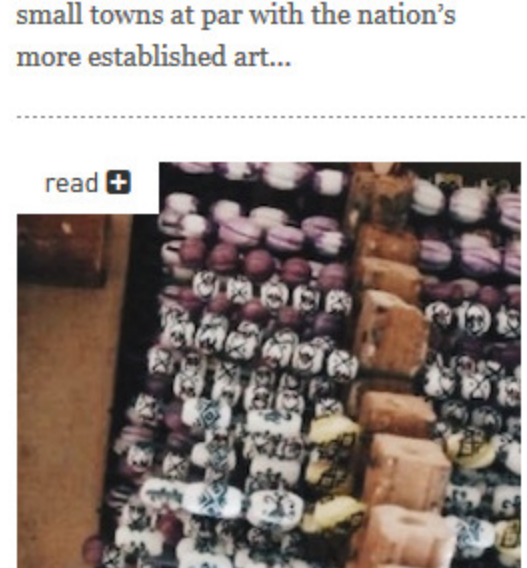
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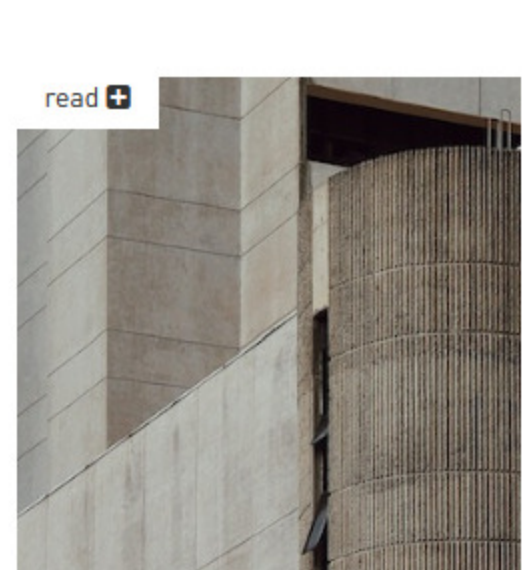
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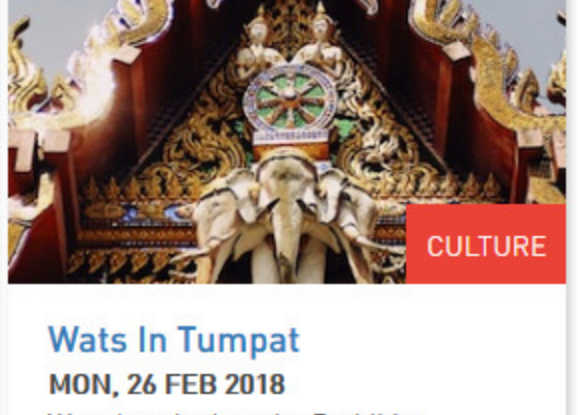
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