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# THE HILLS HAVE IRON

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24 March 2016

*Or, they used to. We visit Bukit Besi, Terengganu, a former mining town that was once rich in iron ore.*

Up in Terengganu lie hills of iron, from a time long ago when the state's economy bloomed from iron rush, prosperous miners and the myth of hidden gold.



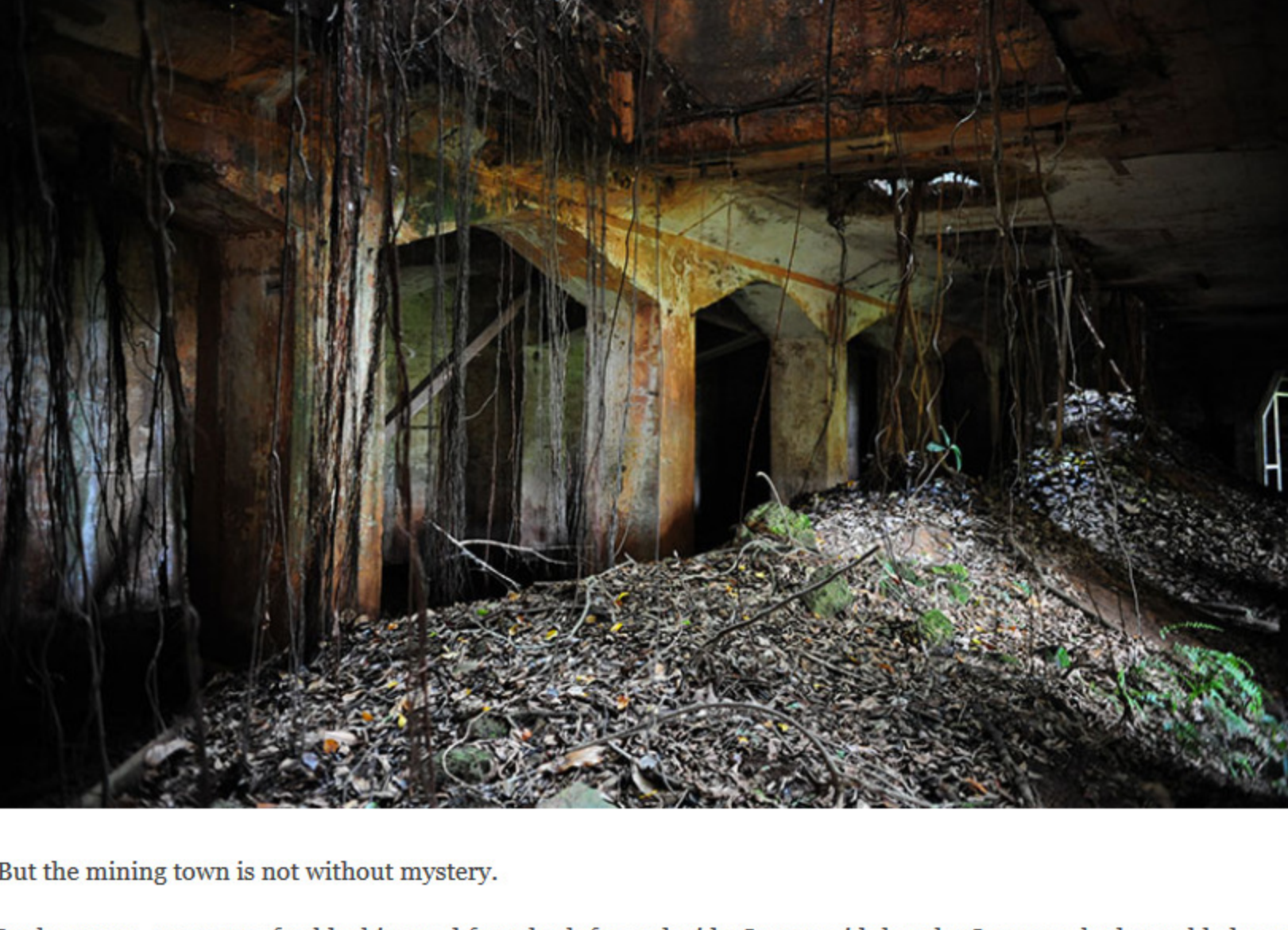
At 80, Embong Osman is the last living miner residing in the tranquil former mining town of Bukit Besi. Originally from Kijal, Embong was among the many who migrated to Bukit Besi, seeking fortunes in the booming iron ore industry. Back then, miners like himself earned \$3.80 a day, working for eight hours on shift. To be a Bukit Besi miner back then was prestigious and the wages he earned was considered a large sum.



The Japanese first came in 1916 to set up the Nippon Mining Company and started operations in 1929, with over 1,080 hectares of untapped riches at their feet. They also established a 29-kilometre railway leading to the Sura port in Dungun where Japanese ships waited eagerly for the iron ore. This involved boring a hole through the now-iconic Bukit Tebok that's become a landmark for the sleepy seaside town.

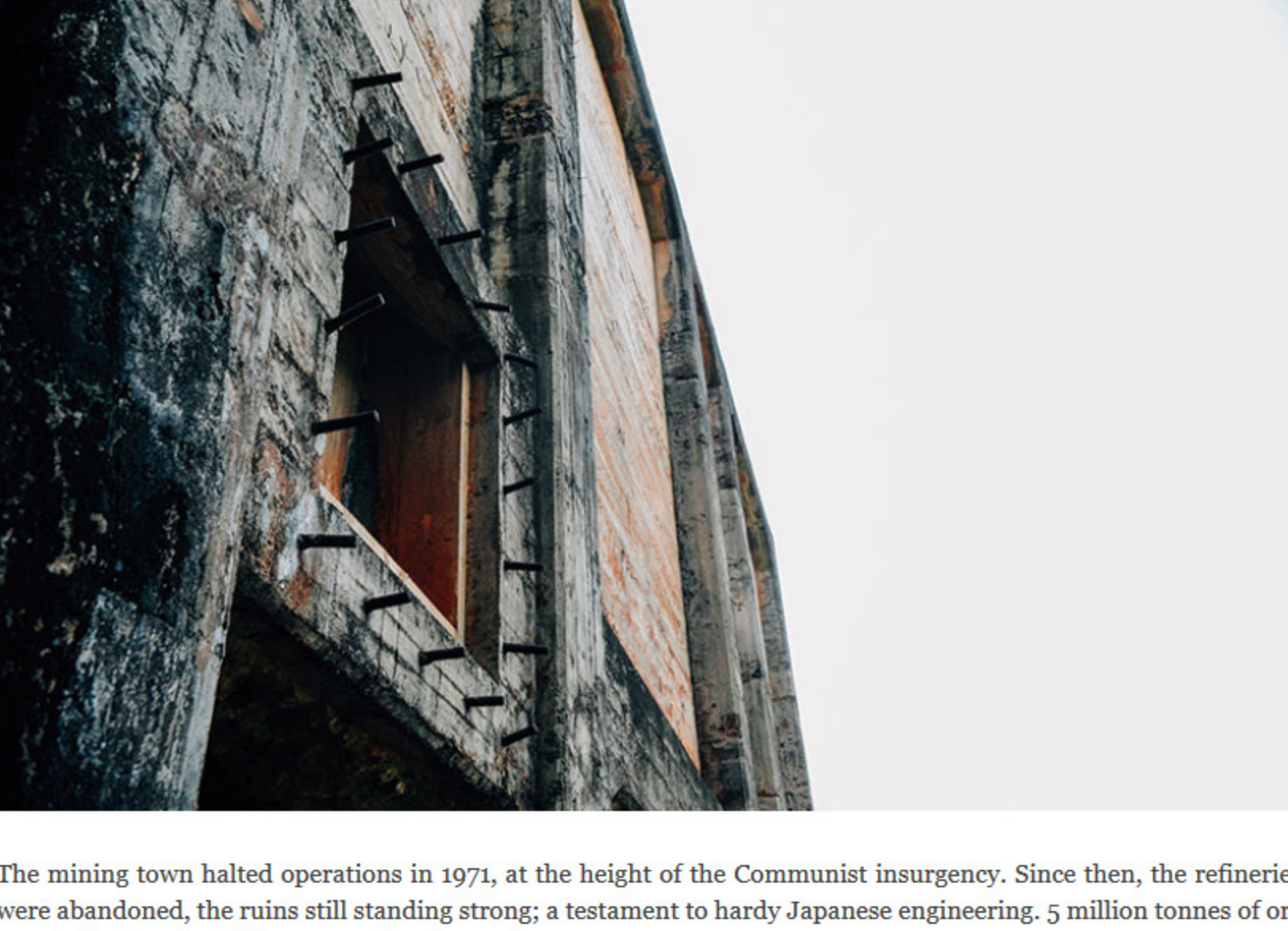


With its prosperous community, Bukit Besi thrived in the years leading up to the Malayan independence and decades after. During that time, the industry had long exchanged hands from the Japanese to the British, after the former lost the Second World War in 1945. In fact, even after the Japanese lost the war, the mass industry saw a heightened demand from the Japanese as part of its post-war recovery efforts.



But the mining town is not without mystery.

In the 1940s, rumours of gold whispered from both far and wide. It was said that the Japanese had stumbled upon gold amidst iron. Ask any Bukit Besi villager about the rumours of gold now and they would chuckle, having heard the question for decades. Many dismiss it as a myth. Some however, would claim that the gold was real, with chests of it hidden either underneath secret tunnels or in supposed communist gravesites.



The mining town halted operations in 1971, at the height of the Communist insurgency. Since then, the refineries were abandoned, the ruins still standing strong; a testament to hardy Japanese engineering. 5 million tonnes of ore remain in the misty hills surrounding the settlement.

Terengganu's economy has since shifted to petroleum. But the refineries left behind by decades of disuse and the sleepy former port town of Dungun stands silently, wondering if it will ever return to its former glory.

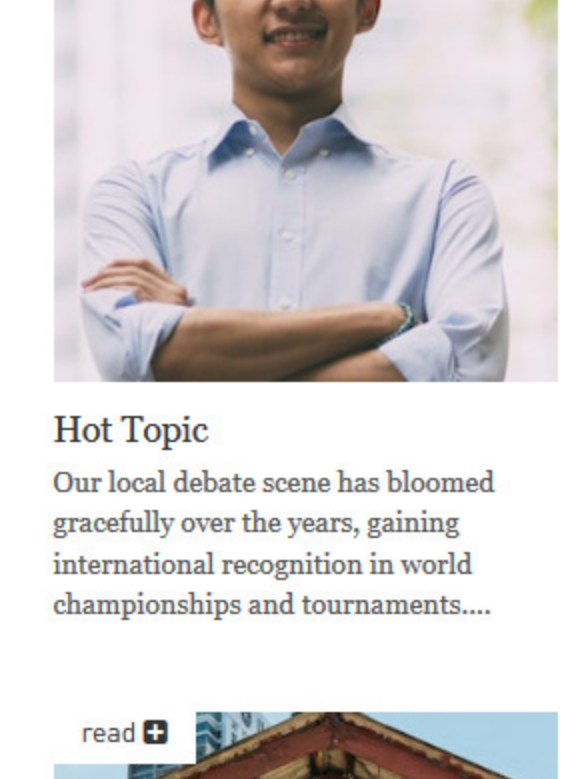


By Aziff Azuddin  
Photos by Aziff Azuddin

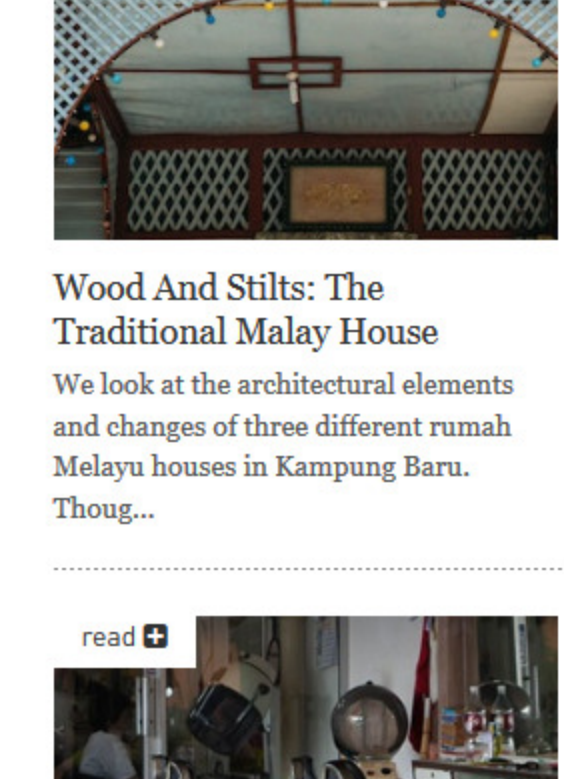
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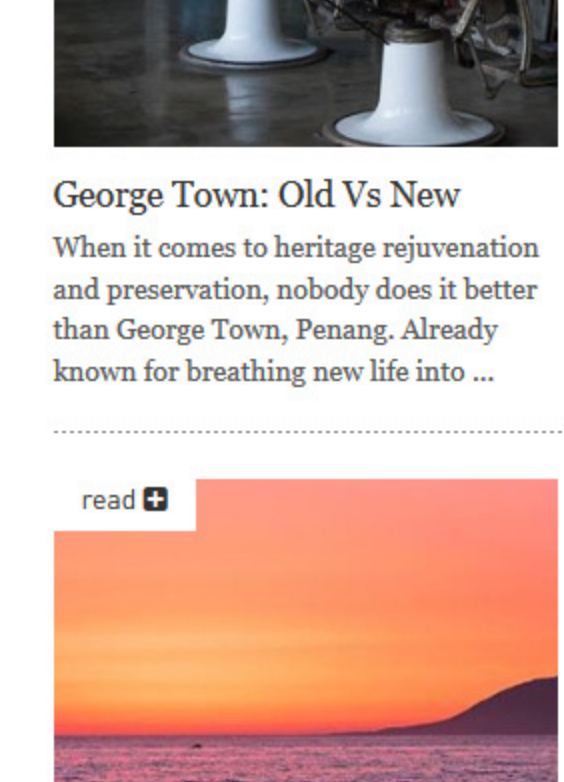
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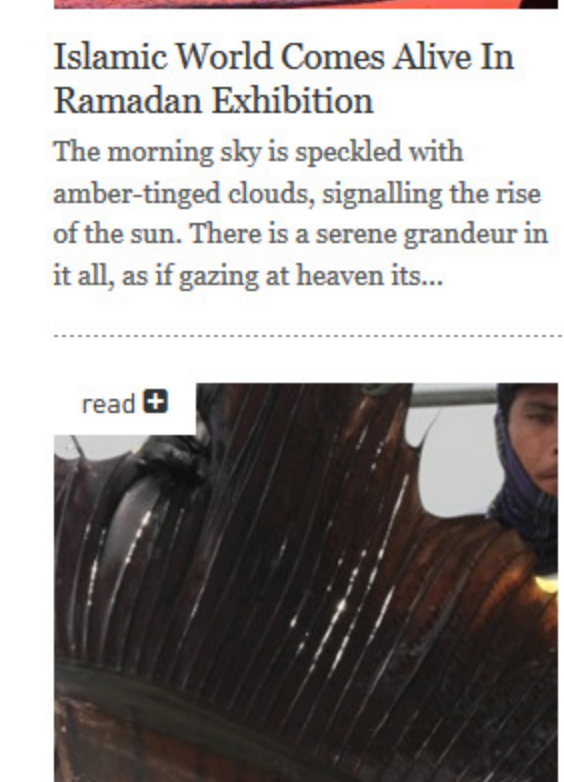
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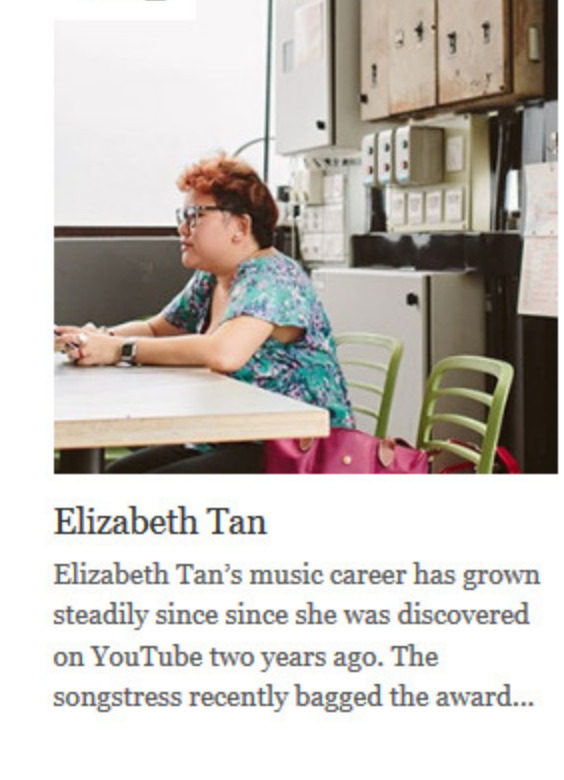
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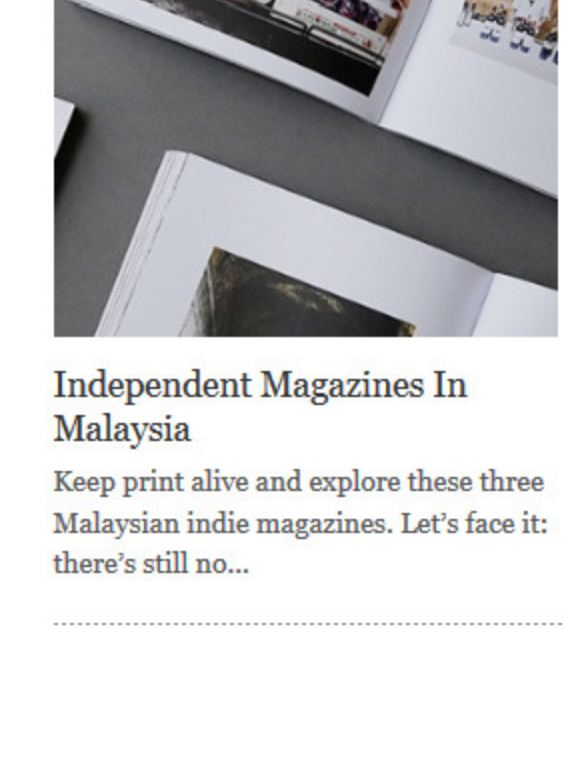
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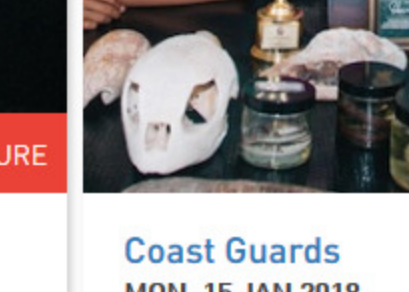
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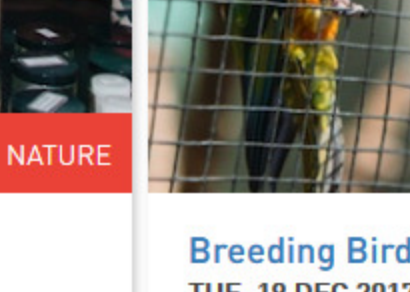
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