

Negeri Sembilan



Seat of the Minangkabau people and home to the Cape Rachado Forest Reserve (the last stretch of preserved forest on the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia), Negeri Sembilan (Nine States) has a lot of diversity for its small size. The pedestrian state capital, Seremban, is a slow starter with few notable sights, but within the city's orbit lie the tranquil towns of Sri Menanti, home of the beautifully noble Istana Lama (Old Palace), and Kuala Pilah with its lively night market.

The most popular region of the state is Port Dickson, a long stretch of white beaches chock-full of resorts of every calibre. From here it's an easy day trip to the Cape Rachado Forest Reserve where you can climb up to the ancient lighthouse, descend to empty beaches, search for elusive wildlife and, if you happen to be here between mid-February and mid-April, watch one of the greatest bird shows in the country when thousands of raptors cross low overhead from Sumatra in their annual northward migration.

It's hard to dig up authentic Minangkabau culture today as much has been lost since the people originally settled here from Sumatra in the 15th century, but fortunately the fiery cooking style has lost little of its potency. Search out this cuisine in Seremban and around.

HIGHLIGHTS

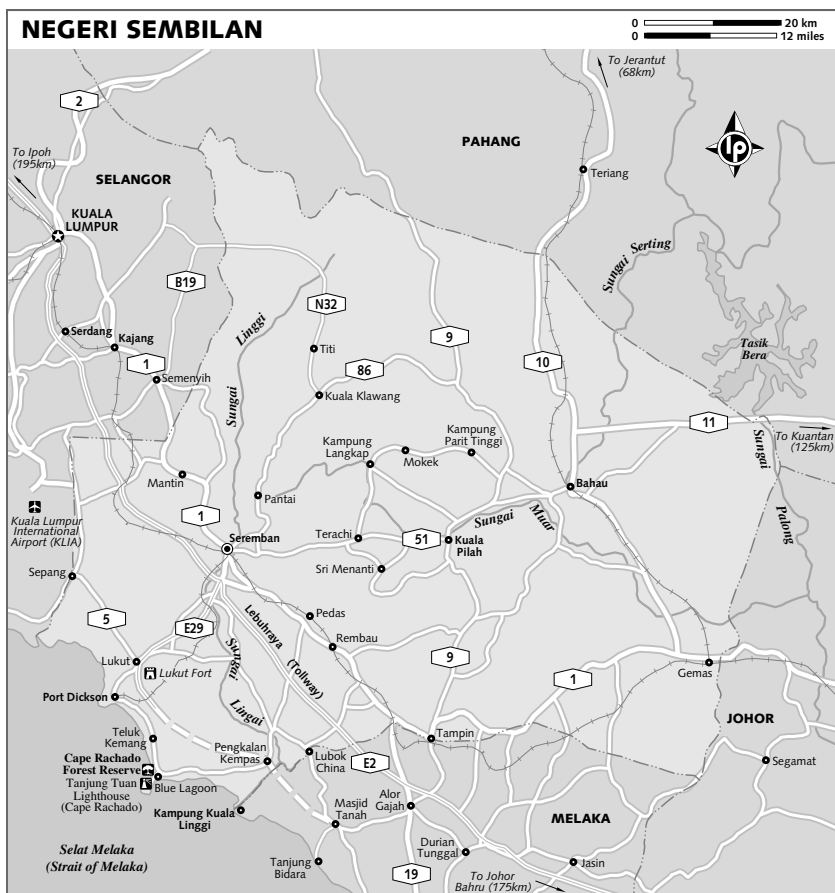
- Watching thousands of **raptors** (p235) soar overhead as they make their annual migration across the Straits of Melaka
- Hiking the trails of the **Cape Rachado Forest Reserve** (p234) through rich jungle to hidden beaches
- Ambling around sleepy Sri Menanti and marvelling at the impeccable woodwork of the grand **Istana Lama** (p233)
- Unwinding in luxury and chilling on the beach at the elegant and lush **Avillion Port Dickson** (p235)
- Chomping your way through the night market while chin-wagging with locals at **Kuala Pilah** (p234)



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 06

■ POPULATION: 1 MILLION

■ AREA: 6645 SQ KM



History

During the Melaka sultanate of the 15th century, many Minangkabau people from Sumatra settled here. With the rising power of the Bugis (a seafaring group of warrior-like Malay settlers from Makassar) in Selangor, the Minangkabau felt increasingly insecure, so they turned to Sumatra for protection. Raja Melewar, a Minangkabau prince from Sumatra, was appointed the first *yang di-pertuan besar* (head of state) of Negeri Sembilan in 1773. Out of this initial union emerged a loose confederation of nine *luak* (fiefdoms), although there is some debate about the confederation's exact make-up. The royal capital of Negeri Sembilan was established at Sri Menanti.

Like Selangor to the north, Negeri Sembilan was rich in tin, so for much of the 19th century it suffered unrest and political instability motivated by greed. After Raja Melewar's death, the title of *yang di-pertuan besar* was taken by a succession of Sumatran chiefs, until a series of protracted tin-related wars in 1824–32 led to the severance of political ties with Sumatra.

In the 1880s the British gradually intervened by increasing their influence in the area, and several territories were consolidated into a new confederacy controlled by a British Resident. Becoming part of the Federation of Malaya in 1948, the largely agricultural state has increasingly diversified its economy, with special emphasis on manufacturing.

Climate

The temperature in Negeri Sembilan ranges from 21°C to 33°C and average humidity exceeds 82%. There is rain through the year, with September to November the wettest months.

Getting There & Away

The Lebuhraya (North–South Hwy), connecting Johor Bahru and Kuala Lumpur, is the major road through the state. To get to Negeri Sembilan from KL, see p233; for interstate buses see p234 and p236.

SEREMBAN

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A mere 64km southeast of KL, Seremban is the low-key state capital with a bland and busy grid of streets at the centre of town and some lovely gardens and architecture on the city's fringes. Seremban's museums and parks can make an OK outing from KL (if you have a car) or a walk around the Lake Gardens is a pleasant diversion if you're changing buses and have a few hours on your hands.

Minangkabau-style buffalo-horn roofs may adorn many recent buildings, such as the city hall, but the only real access point to Minangkabau culture is at the Muzium Negeri, a component of the Taman Seni Budaya on the outskirts of town. The city itself is home mostly to Chinese and Indian populations.

Information

HSBC (50-52 Jln Dato Bandar Tunggal) Has a 24-hour ATM.

OCBC (cnr Jln Dato Lee Fong Yee & Jln Dato Bandar Tunggal) Has a 24-hour ATM.

Sembilan Internet Library (per hr RM3; ☎ 24hr)

Noisy gaming hall; east of the Carlton Star Hotel (p232).

Sights

ARCHITECTURE

Its wonderful multiple roof-points a striking landmark for central Seremban, the **Dewan Undangan Negeri** (State Secretariat Bldg; btwn Jln Dato Abdul Kadir & Jln Dato Abdul Malek) is a fine melding of modern and traditional architecture opposite the **Istana Besar** (Jln Bukit; ☎ closed to the public), home of the sultan of Negeri Sembilan. Directly south and once the offices of the colonial administration, the neoclassical (1912) **State Library** (off Jln Dato Hamzah), west of the Lake Gardens, is Seremban's most imposing colonial building.

Further south, the nine pillars of **Masjid Negeri** (State Mosque; Jln Dato Hamzah) represent the nine original states of Negeri Sembilan.

Seremban's central districts have a few colonial features hidden between lots of more modern buildings. Flee from the heat into the cool, white interior of the Catholic **Church of the Visitation** (85a Jln Yam Tuan), where Mass in English is held on Sunday at 9am, or the more sober **Wesley Methodist Church** (Jln Dato Sheikh Ahmad), built in 1920. The premier colonial school for Seremban's elite, the **King George V School** (Jln Za'aba), still functions as a high school.

Its roof decorated with dragons, the main altar of the **Liesheng Temple** (Jln Dr Samuel; ☎ daylight hr) is dedicated to three Taoist idols, chief among which is Guandi (the God of War). The Chinese characters above the altar mean 'Your needs will be answered'.

LAKE GARDENS

The quaint Lake Gardens are a tame recreation reserve and the place where courting couples go in the evenings. The gardens are at the edge of the green and tranquil colonial district that now mostly houses government quarters.

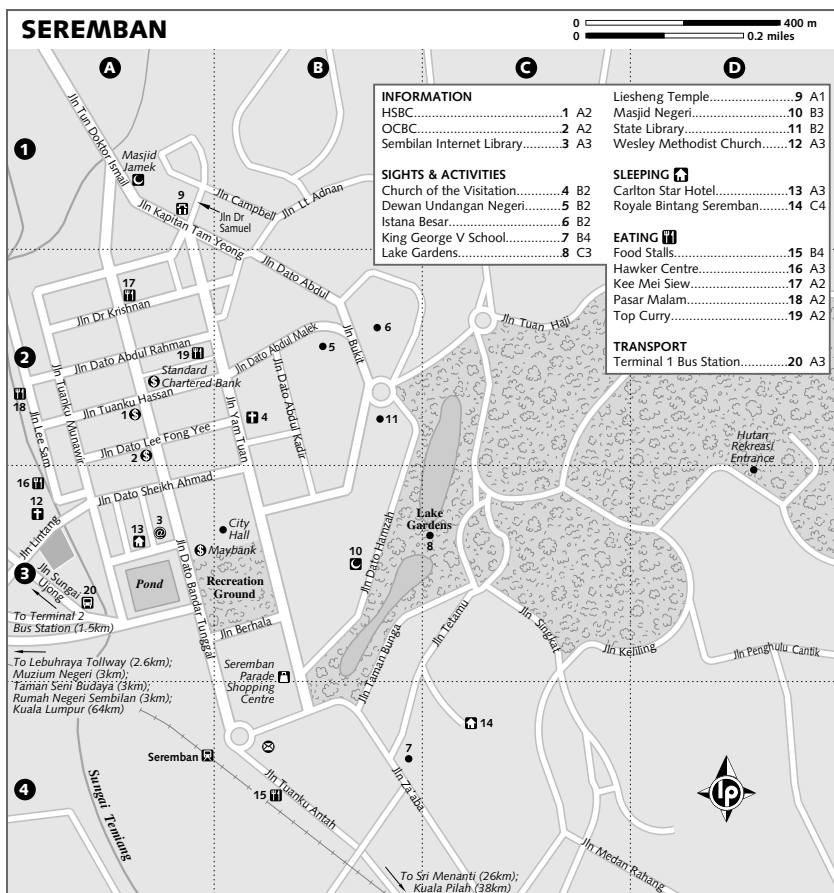
MUZIU M NEGERI

The **Muzium Negeri** (State Museum; Jln Sungai Ujong; admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue, Wed, Sat & Sun, 8.15am-1pm Thu, 10am-12.15pm & 2.45-6pm Fri), built in the style of a Minangkabau palace, displays handicrafts and historical exhibits. Displays cover the Emergency (see p37), complete with gruesome post-capture portraits of communist leaders. The museum is inside the **Taman Seni Budaya** (Arts & Cultural Park; Jln Sungai Ujong; admission free), which keeps the same hours.

Nearby and also on the museum grounds is the **Rumah Negeri Sembilan**, a less ornate traditional house with a shingle roof showing the hallmark curved-roof style based on the buffalo horn.

Sleeping

While the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) is only 20 minutes away, Seremban has a rather depressing selection of hotels. You're better off in KL – even Port Dickson or Melaka are only about an hour away by bus or train and are much better choices. Several of the cheap Chinese flop-houses in the centre of town are bordellos; we advise steering clear of those.



Carlton Star Hotel (☎ 762 5336; 47 Jln Dato Sheikh Ahmad; r RM75-115; ♿) Safe, freshly painted and within walking distance of Terminal 1 bus station, this hotel has boring but big business-style rooms. The staff is friendly and there's a handy internet cafe across the street.

Royale Bintang Seremban (☎ 766 6666; Jln Dato AS Dawood; www.royalebintang-seremban.com; r/ste from RM250/350; ♿ ♿) This four-star resort-style business hotel has uninspiring but comfortable rooms, a good range of restaurants and amenities (swimming pool with water slides, fitness centre, a jogging track to the nearby lake gardens and more) and helpful staff. It's the top choice for Seremban although greater luxury can be found in KL.

Eating

Minangkabau-style dishes worth a try, such as *masak lemak* (fish, meat or vegetables cooked in coconut milk), *rendang* (a thick, dry meat curry usually served with rice cooked in coconut milk) and *dendeng balado* (beef with chilli). It's also said that you haven't been to Seremban if you haven't tried the local *pao* (Chinese-style buns stuffed with meat).

Functional food stalls (generally open from morning to night), serving some Minangkabau fare, are south of the train station (on Jln Tuanku Antah), and at the upstairs **hawker centre** (Jln Lee Sam). The bustling Saturday **pasar malam** (night market; Jln Lee Sam) also has plenty of food stalls.

Ke Me Siew (24 Jln Dato Bandar Tunggal; ☎ 8am-6pm) This basic shop is a great place to pick up some of Seremban's famous *paò*.

Top Curry (☎ 767 2294; btw Jln Tuanku Hassan & Jln Dato Abdul Rahman; banana leaf meals RM6.50) Folks from KL come to visit just to eat at this cavernous cafe serving excellent southern Indian curries.

Getting There & Away

Seremban lies on the main north-south rail line from KL to Singapore. KTM Komuter trains, part of KL's city rail network, depart frequently between KL Sentral and Seremban (RM8, last train around 10pm, 45 minutes).

Transnasional buses (☎ 763 8798) leaving from the Terminal 1 bus terminal on Jln Sungai Ujong include departures to KL (RM7, 30 minutes, every 20 minutes), Singapore (RM45, five hours, two per day), Melaka (RM7, 1½ hours, hourly), Kuantan (RM22, six hours), Kuala Pilah (RM4.50, one hour, every 15 minutes) and Kuala Terengganu (RM39.70, six hours). Bus 67 runs to Port Dickson (RM4, one hour). The terminal has a **left-luggage counter** (small/big bag per hr RM1/RM1.50; ☎ 7.30am-9pm). Long-distance taxis muster upstairs for destinations such as Port Dickson (RM50), KL (RM90), Melaka (RM120) and Sri Menanti (RM40).

Some long distance buses stop at Terminal 2 about 1.5km from town centre – free shuttle buses run from here to Terminal 1.

To reach Seremban from KLIA, first take a bus from the airport to Nilai (RM3) and change to a KTM Komuter train to Seremban (RM2.50).

SEREMBAN TO KUALA PILAH

East from Seremban, the road meanders through the hills to the town of Kuala Pilah, penetrating the heartland of Minangkabau culture around the old royal town of Sri Menanti. Look out for **Minangkabau houses** along the main road, though the traditional thatch of buffalo-horn roofs has been replaced by more utilitarian corrugated iron. The village of **Terachi**, 27km from Seremban at the turn-off to Sri Menanti, has some particularly fine traditional houses, as do villages further north, including **Pantai**, and Sri Menanti itself.

Sri Menanti

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Tidy and placid Sri Menanti, 6km off the Seremban-Kuala Pilah road, is the old royal capital, first settled over 400 years ago by Minangkabau immigrants from Sumatra. Swathed in a silence only interrupted by bird song, this sleepy, disengaged hamlet nestles in a highland valley surrounded by green jungle hills, fringed with simple dwellings and scampering chickens.

Just past Sri Menanti's own tiny Lake Gardens is **Istana Besar**, the impressive palace of the sultan of Negeri Sembilan (not open to the public). Originally built in the 1930s, the later addition features a blue-tiled Minangkabau roof.

Just beyond Istana Besar is the magnificent **Istana Lama** (Old Palace; admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm Sat-Thu, 10am-12.15pm & 2.45-6pm Fri), now a museum. Designed by master craftsmen, the beautiful black hardwood palace is the centrepiece of Sri Menanti. Arranged over four floors, the palace was fashioned without the use of nails in 1908 as a temporary replacement for an even older palace that was razed by British soldiers during the Sungai Ujong wars. The structure is elevated on 99 pillars, many of them carved, each one representing the legendary 99 *luak* (clan) warriors. Inside you can see the king and queen's bedchambers, the children's playroom, a large dining room and huge dining table, as well as kris weaponry and royal regalia. Climb to the top floor for views over the gardens.

Back towards the main road in the compound next to the mosque is the **Makam Di Raja** (Royal Cemetery), which has a distinctive Victorian/Moorish pavilion. The prominent grave of Tuanku Abdul Rahman, the first king of independent Malaysia, is immediately inside the gates.

The two-storey **Sri Menanti Resort** (☎ 497 0577; dm/d RM15/77, chalet RM108-126; ☎ ☎), next to Istana Lama, has reasonably well-maintained rooms, including 14-bed dorms. Note that room prices rise by RM10 or so on Saturday and Sunday. Nonguests can avail themselves of the swimming pool for RM5.

To reach Sri Menanti from Seremban, take a bus to Kuala Pilah (RM4.50) and then a taxi (return trip around RM30).

Kuala Pilah

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Kuala Pilah, a pleasant valley town 40km east of Seremban, is one of the main townships in this strongly Minangkabau region. It's colourfully decorated with brightly painted shophouses.

Its few temples of note include the **Kuil Sri Kanthaswamy** (Jln Melang; ☎ main prayer hall 6.30am–7pm), overflowing with colour and arrayed with deities. The **Sansheng Gong** (Sansheng Temple; Jln Dato Undang Johol) has a skilfully carved boat, from the time of Qing emperor Guangxu, hanging just inside the door. The fierce-looking bearded idol in the centre is Guandi (God of War). There are marvellous carvings along the front of the temple and worn frescoes on the wall. Opposite the temple is an elaborate Chinese-style decorative archway dedicated to Martin Lister, the first British Resident (1889–97) of Negeri Sembilan.

There's no reason to get stranded here, but if you do, Kuala Pilah has several cheap Chinese hotels. The **Desa Inn** (☎ 481 8033; 745 Jln Dato Abdul Manap; d/f RM55/77; ☎) offers clean doubles with tiled floors, air-con, minute TVs, kettle, coffee and small balcony (but you may get woken by the sonorous 6am call to prayer).

For dinner, the lively **night market** (Jln Yam Tuan), near Desa Inn, kicks off at around 6pm daily when the air becomes heavy with the fragrance of satay (from 35 sen) and a medley of Malay and Indian aromas.

There are regular buses from Seremban (RM4.50, one hour, every 15 minutes). In Kuala Pilah, the **bus station** (☎ 288 7207) is hidden away behind the archway opposite the Sansheng Gong. Buses depart for Johor Bahru (RM25) and Kuantan (RM19).

PORT DICKSON

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When people talk about Port Dickson (PD) they're usually referring to the long coastline studded with beaches – the actual Port Dickson is a small uninteresting town slightly inland. The beach area is a popular spot for weekend warriors from KL, but during the week it's nearly deserted and is a good place to find a bargain resort and relax poolside for a few days or more. When you feel the need to move, head out to the Cape Rachado Forest Reserve (right) for some fabulous hiking.

For internet access, try **MDS Internet** (3A Km 6.5 Jln Pantai; per hr RM3), 400m south of the Seri Malaysia hotel. A useful moneychanger can be found at the bus station. The post office is opposite the bus station.

Sights & Activities

CAPE RACHADO FOREST RESERVE

The area's highlight is the 80-hectare **Cape Rachado Forest Reserve** (also called the Tanjung Tuan Forest Reserve), the only remaining patch of coastal forest on the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia. This jungle of towering lowland trees has secluded beaches that are ideal turtle laying grounds and is also a stop-over for over 300,000 migratory birds every year (see the boxed text, opposite, for more details). The turn-off to the reserve is near the Km 16 marker (the local bus can let you off here); head down the road for 2km to the Ilham Resort (opposite) and then through the forest reserve for another kilometre to the **Tanjung Tuan lighthouse** (Rumah Api). Unfortunately the lighthouse, which was first built in 1528 by the Portuguese and is the oldest in Malaysia, isn't open to the public. You can, however, walk around to the front of it for great views and on a clear day you can see Sumatra, 38km away across Selat Melaka. A simple network of trails heads into the forest from around the lighthouse and from the road towards the lighthouse to a handful of beaches (bring lots of water – it's a steep climb).

OTHER SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The strip of white sand that extends for some 16km along the coast is more popular for its proximity to KL than anything else, but it's pretty and a pleasant getaway. Unfortunately the water is fairly polluted and the surrounding tourist development looks, for the most part, industrial.

For something beyond jungle and sand, head to the **Port Dickson Ostrich Farm** (☎ 662 7496; Km 14.5 Jln Pantai; adult/child RM8/4; ☎ 9am–5.30pm) for ostrich races (11am and 3.30pm on weekends only), where the birds reach speeds of up to 70kph, as well as ostrich rides and a small farm teeming with crocodiles, goats, peacocks, rabbits and other furry friends.

At the festival of **Navarathiri** (September or October), the goddess Sri Maha Mariamman is conveyed at night on a chariot procession around Port Dickson. The goddess performs

IN RAPTURE OF RAPTORS

If you're in Port Dickson around mid-February to mid-April, don't miss the chance to see migrating raptors (birds of prey such as kestrels, falcons and eagles) make the crossing from Sumatra to the Asian continent via the Cape Rachado Forest Reserve. Some 25 species head north for the summer each year and, having used up most of their energy getting across the Straits of Melaka, are tired and fly so low that you can see them stunningly close-up. The birds that arrive late in the afternoon or evening often rest and recuperate at the reserve for the night before heading off again on their long journeys. Without this precious forested rest area, naturalists say that many of the birds would die of exhaustion or starvation.

Sightings are of course not guaranteed and you'll have the best luck seeing the birds from around the Tanjung Tuan Lighthouse between 11am and 3pm when the heat of the day creates thermals for the birds to soar on.

The **Raptor Watch Festival** is held during the height of the migratory period, usually during the first week of March when the lighthouse opens to the public, jungle walks are led by naturalists, live bands come out to the Cape to play and more. For more information and specific dates for the next festival go to www.raptorwatch.org.

a similar journey during the **Anniversary Prayers procession** (June or July).

The five-star **Admiral Marina & Leisure Club** (☎ 647 0888; Km 8; www.admiralmarina.com.my) has good dock facilities and is a transit point for racing sailboats.

Sleeping

Rotary Sunshine Camp Holiday Hostel (☎ 647 3798; Km 5 Jln Pantai; dm/r RM7/25) The blue barracks-like buildings behind a chain-link fence look a little depressing on arrival, but this place is so well tended and the staff so friendly that it'll soon win you over. Shower and cooking facilities are shared and it's a short walk to a good beach and cheap food. On weekdays you'll probably have the place to yourself.

Lido Hotel (☎ 662 5273; Km 13 Jln Pantai; d RM45-60; 🏠) It looks like a prison from the outside but inside the rooms are spacious, freshly painted and have attached bathrooms. It's right on the beach.

Casa Rachado (☎ 662 5177; casaranchado@maa.com.my; Tanjung Biru, Km 16 Jln Pantai; r from RM99, ste from RM180; 🏠 🍷) There's a brightly painted Caribbean theme going on at this resort near the Cape Rachado Forest Reserve entrance. Rooms are a little musty but upgrading to a suite gets you an apartment-sized place with a kitchen and views of the sea. Breakfast is included with all room types. There's a tiny mangrove-fringed beach in front and an OK pool. You can also camp here for RM30/50 for two/four people – tent, floor mat and kerosene lantern included.

Corus Paradise Resort (☎ 647 7600; www.corusparadisepd.com; Km 3.5 Jln Pantai; r RM168-418; 🏠 🍷)

This is a kitschy kid-friendly choice with a protected artificial lagoon and a big pool with water slides. Rooms are plain but comfortable and there is a handful of mediocre on-site restaurants.

Ilham Resort (☎ 662 6800; www.ilhamresort.com; Tanjung Biru, Km 16 Jln Pantai; r RM180-280, ste RM290-600; 🏠 🍷) Next to Cape Rachado Forest Reserve, Ilham is a massive, elegant resort on a calm bay. The suites are bland and nearly institutional feeling, but rooms have much more style with hardwood floors and muted light. There's a great pool and a quiet stretch of white sand beach.

our pick Avillion Port Dickson (☎ 647 6688; www.avillionportdickson.com; Km 5, Jln Pantai; r Sun-Thu RM300-500, r Fri & Sat RM450-950; 🏠 🍷) Beautifully designed and lushly planted with lily ponds, birds of paradise, bromeliads and palms, the accommodation highlight here is the over-the-water chalets that have big terraces you can swim from at high tide. Even the cheapest rooms here are classier than just about anywhere else, with their hardwood floors, elegant wood furnishings, flagstone bathrooms and loads of natural light. Also at hand are several good restaurants, a huge pool with slides, a tennis court and a gym.

Thistle Port Dickson Resort (☎ 662 7878; www.thistle.com.my; Km 16 Jln Pantai, Teluk Kemang; r from RM310; 🏠 🍷) This is a new exclusive hotel (in the refurbished Guoman Resort) set in 90 acres of landscaped grounds with manicured lawns, a private 3km beach, a golf course,

magnificent pool, beautiful views, a fitness centre and more.

Also recommended:

Kong Ming (Guangming) Hotel (☎ 662 5683; Km 13 Telok Kemang; d Sun-Thu from RM30, Fri & Sat from RM40) Seriously old and rundown but right on the beach, this place is clean, friendly and exudes a gritty, ancient charm.

Selesa Resort (☎ 647 4090; Km 8; superior/deluxe r RM230/290; 🏠 🚽) Minangkabau-style resort with sea-facing rooms, all with small balcony and rather old-style furniture. This is a particularly good stretch of beach.

Seri Malaysia (☎ 647 6070; Km 6; d Sun-Thu RM140, Fri & Sat RM160; 🏠 🚽) Motel-like rooms are right across the street from a good, low-key beach.

Eating

There's a night market with yummy local food stalls in Port Dickson town on the first Saturday of every month, but daily beachside food is limited to a few mediocre food courts, seafood *rumah makan* selling crab by the kilo (around RM22) and restaurants at the resorts.

El Cactus (☎ 012-646 3772; Km 4, Lot 2674, Jln Pantai; meals RM25; 🍷 5.30pm-midnight) is one of PD's few

nonhotel bars and a welcoming spot for dinner or a nightcap or two, with outside seating, a music system creatively mounted atop half a Fiat, lounge area, pool table, Latin music and menu (boneless chicken fajitas RM15), plus a relaxed atmosphere.

Getting There & Around

Hourly buses depart for Seremban (RM4, one hour) from where you can get connections to KL, Melaka and beyond. The taxi station is next to the bus station in the centre of town; taxi fares include Melaka (RM120), Seremban (RM50) and KL (RM130).

From Port Dickson town, local buses (RM1) run about every hour and will drop you off wherever you like along the beach. Ubiquitous share taxis are more reliable and convenient and cost RM2 for the first three or four kilometres – expect to pay RM5 to RM15 to get from Port Dickson town to your hotel (depending on the distance). You can flag share taxis down anywhere from the side of the road.

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