

# Handmade History

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20 minutes from Kiala Lumpur's glistening modern buildings is a structure from a different place and time. Hugh Ujhazy cisisys the house that Dato' Rudin Salinger built.

Within walking distance of the KL-Seremban highway, a small kampung dozes as it has for many a year. The jungle is still a rich tapestry over the hills and the traffic moves slowly up the wide roads. Taking an unmarked turn down a narrower road, the leafy gate to the unique, the Aga Khan Award-winning house known as Rudinara is revealed.



As complex and unique as its owners, the house has stood on the three-acre property for almost 20 years. It was built over the course of six-and-a-half years by the owner and a one-eyed, one-armed craftsman from Kelantan. This might explain why the house bears the hallmarks of a one-of-a-kind construction.

On the verandah hangs an intricately carved birdcage, empty of bird. "The wild birds come and sing in the mornings so the cage is inhabited by the spirit of the bird. There's no need to cage a bird to hear its song here," says Dato' Salinger.

Drawing heavily on a legacy of Malay house construction, the house is built essentially from a local hardwood called "chengal." Hand-picked trees in local forests were felled, dried and cut to suit the construction of the house. "The core of the house is a stone cylinder with walls over a meter thick," says Dato', slapping the wall to emphasize its solid construction. The house hangs from the core; two levels capped with a handmade crescent and star.

The wood pillars holding up the structure are six-sided, allowing them to be joined in interesting ways, shaping the house above like a long-prowed Malay fishing boat. The "bow" of the boat is a cool covered verandah, high above the trees and lush foliage across the property. The peak of the house holds the master bedroom, cradled beneath a high-ceilinged room of handmade ceramic tiles.

"Ibrahim, the craftsman, made a detailed map of the windows around the house. Each frame was made individually and the translucent, patterned glass cut to fit exactly in that window alone," says Dato' Salinger, remembering the man he worked with for so long on this house. "All of the assistants were over sixty when the job started so the amount of skill they possessed was phenomenal." Most of the structure has no nails, no screws, no mechanical fasteners at all. "The seats and floor boards are nailed down," chuckles Dato' Salinger. "But where you are sitting is a straight drop to the ground". Pointing to the top of

the verandah roof, he mentions a particularly complex joint above our heads. “Only wooden pegs were used at critical places. The remainder of the structure is a gigantic hardwood jigsaw of carefully made cuts and spans held together by the force of gravity.”

The house is all about flow. All the rooms extend from the central core so moving from kitchen to living room to guestroom is uninterrupted.

“Come on, we’ll go and circumnavigate the house,” invites Dato’ as he heads off into the lower part of the house. Within the central area is a chengal staircase which leads up into the aerie that is the master bedroom. Fittings are simple and the floor’s warm wide planks of chengal caress your feet as you walk. Effectively, the space is only two rooms since no interior walls exist on either level.

Vents in the floor allow air to circulate, ventilating the house even when the windows are closed. Let into the walls around each level are a continuous stream of bookcases crammed with books. “We’ve read every single one,” says the owner. There is also the front page of a newspaper showing an elegant woman holding a tricolor flag.

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“My mother originally left France to work in a newspaper in French Indo-China. She and her sister were sent to Hawaii for a conference and then decided to visit San Francisco.”

Dato’ Salinger points at the date on the newspaper; 14 July 1933. Bastille Day. “This photo shows my mother the day after she landed in San Francisco,” he explains, “She ended up as editor of the paper. My aunt was an actress in the Bay area”. He himself was the youngest of four boys born into a lineage rich in both mechanical and intellectual achievement. “I got all the mechanical talent. I can fix anything with my hands,” says Dato’ Salinger, peering through his glasses down at his gnarled fingers.

His job as a physics professor led him to Malaysia beginning a lifelong dedication to teaching and learning about – as well as preserving and developing – Malaysian crafts and achievements.

Heavy plantings across the property provide annual harvest of kilos of cloves, pepper and native fruits. “I dry the cloves in my oven down in Petaling Jaya,” says Dato’ as he offers a small fragrant bag of the spice. Being a part of the environment and sitting outside among the leaves of fruit trees, it is easy to forget that Kuala Lumpur’s city centre is only twenty minutes away.

Arrayed within the house are collected artifacts from all over the country. They include an enormous cast brass cooking pot spanning almost a meter across. It was made for Dato’ Rudin by a local craftsman. “Last Raya, I cooked rendang for thirty people on the fire downstairs” Dato’ says, hoisting the massive pot in his arms. In his house, Dato’ conducts cooking classes which focus on local ingredients and cooking methods and using items collected over the years to turn out solid authentic Malay cuisine.

Pausing by the door, Dato' Rudin stops to examine a massive cylinder used to produce noodles for curry laksa. The dough is made of flour and sago flour, being thick and viscous. Suspended over a pot of boiling water, the dough is squeezed out through holes to cook instantly.

Around each doorway are carvings of key passages from the Quran. Carved by two of Malaysia's foremost wood carvers, the intricate and beautiful letters are raised in ornate and rich wood frames. "Ibrahim helped me build the house," says Dato' "and from the proceeds made the Haj to Mecca where he died and is buried."

This spry, articulate and devout man who conceived and built Rudinara, who has lived, worked and collected a lifetime of memories in it, raised a family and seen grandchildren come, grow and leave, continues to work with his hands to preserve the house and the life it encompasses.

Rudinara is indeed one of a kind and may never be replicated as the skills around its construction are passing away. Rudinara is a tribute to the land it occupies and to all who were involved in its creation.

*This article was written by Hugh Ujhazy*

*This article has been edited for ExpatGomalaysia.com*

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