

Cendol in Jonker Walk

Joanne Poh follows her gut instincts and discovers more than Malacca's culinary gems

IN MALACCA, don't expect your directional queries to be met with precise responses. Don't expect the ease of an efficient public transport system or the comfort of plush surroundings.

For that matter, don't expect to be courted by fawning wait staff or smilingly chaperoned to your seats. Expect service to run at a relaxed pace at best.

The 10 million visitors who make their way to Malacca each year have not come to be pampered and fussed over, nor have they come to live in the lap of luxury. No, they have come for the food.



Clockwise from above: Baba laksa, cendol in the museum-café at Jonker 88, chicken rice balls with roast chicken. PHOTOS: JOANNE POH



Cendol

Not since Turkish Delight has a dessert fired the imagination of poets and ignited the passions of zealots. Cendol may not have had a song written in its honour, but still it is no exaggeration to say that this humble dessert is for many local and domestic visitors the main reason to keep returning to Malacca.

Don't be deceived by its unassuming appearance. While cendol looks as harmless as a mound of ice kacang, it has become a

bit of a legend in Malacca. Stalls on every street corner hawk various permutations of the dessert, from classic flavours to the downright bizarre.

The holy grail of cendol is to be found within the hallowed premises of Jonker 88 (Jalan Hang Jebat, Jonker Walk), whose durian cendol has attained cult status among Singaporean and domestic tourists.

The museum-café, set in the courtyard of a restored shophouse, has been decorated to be deliberately reminiscent of 1920s Shanghai. While the vintage typewriters and Mao posters are admittedly quite atmospheric, most visitors dismiss the interior as a mere afterthought because the cendol is just too good. The richness of the gula melaka and coconut milk is unrivalled, and the jelly pleasingly chewy.

While you are in the area, hop on over to Jalan Tukang Besi which runs parallel to Jonker Walk. Dubbed "Harmony Street" by the well-meaning tourism board, it is home to Chinese temples, a Hindu temple and a mosque.

The northern end of the street has meanwhile evolved into a bit of a hippie enclave. Dreadlocked backpackers kick up slippery feet in the numerous guesthouses lining Jalan Tukang Besi, many of which seem to have Bob Marley tracks on permanent rotation.

Scruffy bars and cafés with classic motorcycles parked out front sit amiably alongside hip art galleries and a tattoo parlour of the psychedelic variety.

Chicken Rice Balls

At first, it is a little baffling that moulding ordinary Hainanese chicken rice into golf ball-sized mounds can alter the flavour of this Singaporean staple.

More conscientious tasting reveals that the flavouring of the rice does in fact differ slightly from that of the Singaporean version; in addition the rice tends to be fluffier and less oily. Endemic to Malacca, the round shape is said to promote the retention of heat.

There are a few prominent outlets specialising in chicken rice balls, but those in the know swear by Hoe Kee Chicken Rice (4 Jalan Hang Jebat, Jonker Walk).

This sparse little eatery dispenses with the frills simply because it can — the food speaks

for itself. The rice is fragrant and the steamed and roasted chicken plump and juicy.

If you happen to visit on a Friday or Saturday night, you get the bonus of being able to enjoy your chicken rice balls with a view of the bustling Jonker Walk Night Market. Souvenirs and trinkets make up the bulk of goods on sale, and if you wish, you can purchase items as random as wooden clogs and Angry Birds water bottles.

Baba Laksa

Visitors to Malacca's Jonker Walk might feel as if they have been teleported into one of the world's many Chinatowns. Malacca is arguably more Chinese than Singapore, and most definitely more Chinese than fortune cookies.

Rotund red lanterns dangle importantly above shop entrances, Chinese script can be spotted crawling up walls and pillars everywhere, and Malaysian-accented Mandarin is par for the course.

In this centre of Peranakan culture, it is no surprise that laksa, the quintessential Peranakan dish, is popular with both tourists and locals alike. Distinctly different from the Singaporean version with its thick noodles and tau pok, Baba laksa is a tasty variant with a lighter soup base and thin noodles.

Long lines snaking onto the street outside Jonker 88 suggest that it is the go-to place for a decent laksa, and while popular opinion is not always the best indicator of quality, in this instance I recommend that you just join the queue.



Above: Jonker Walk is home to great food; right: Curios at the museum-café at Jonker 88.



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GETTING THERE

Malacca is about three to four hours away by car. Driving directions are available on <http://maps.google.com>. Alternatively, coach tickets can be booked online via websites such as <http://www.busonlineticket.com/>.

GETTING AROUND

Town Bus 17 will take you from Melaka Sentral Terminal to Mahkota Parade and the historic core containing Jonker Walk and the iconic Dutch Square. A ticket from Melaka Sentral to Dutch Square/Jonker Walk will cost you RM 1.

WHERE TO STAY

Holiday Inn Melaka is located about 15 minutes' walk from Jonker Walk and the iconic Dutch Square. Parking facilities are provided. Room rates start from about RM 213.00.



Gaudily-dressed trishaws are an amusing sight.