Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

MALAYSIAN BOAT G30



Malaysia is in Southeast Asia. Its capital, Kuala Lumpur, has the largest twin building called the Petronas Twin Tower. Kuala Lumpur is one of the most advanced in the world and an important economic city. Malaysia is still largely rural with forests covering large parts of the land. They are the home for rare flowers, birds and insects as well as different ethnic groups. People of Malay, Chinese and Indian backgrounds who live throughout the country, have influenced Malaysia's culture.



Malaysian boat model



The model is a type of boat that has been made in Pulau Duyung for a long time. Pulau Duyung is a region in Malaysia that is famous throughout southeast Asia for making boats.

This boat is called a bedar. The Indian dhows and Chinese junk boats are a similar shape. There are pictures of all three below. Can you tell the difference? These were all used to transport trade to other ports. The boat is easier to sail in shallow waters because the bottom, called a keel, is small. It is also light enough that it could be lifted out the water at the end of the day.



Left: A Chinese junk, an Indian dhow and a Malaysian bedar boat. It shows the similar styles and cultural influences.

The front of a boat is called the bow. You can see a strange shape on it. Does the shape look like anything you might recognise? The long, curling piece of wood represents an elephant's trunk. It is called the bangau. On the carved boats these decorative piece were very elaborate. As well as the shape of an elephant they could be made in the form of a dragon. Seamen once believed the bangau protected them against evil spirits in the sea.



Above: A bedar with its decorative bangau.

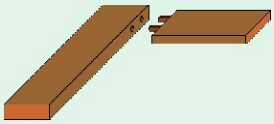
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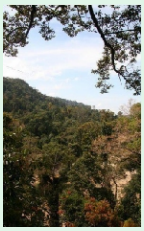
The small pointed piece is an okok. A boat's anchor is secured to the okok when sailing. A caping is the wooden vase shape that attaches the bangau and okok to the boat. Sailors also used it for navigation, lining the caping up with the land they were aiming for.

Bedar's are made without any building plans or nails. The shape and best fit was in the memory of the builder. He uses dowel joints to piece the boat together. To make the joint, a hole is drilled into the wood and a small peg inserted into the planks. These are used instead of nails to make sure the pieces don't come apart. A successful boat builder could build a great reputation throughout the area. The size of the boat decides the number of planks used. Before each plank was fitted edge to edge a slow fire steamed it into a curve. A layer of gelam bark is laid along the plank edge as it is pressed into position. The gelam keep the boat watertight. Once the hull is ready the curved wood inside the boat, called ribs, are carved into shape and then fitted. The wooden decking on the boat's surface is then fixed. When the boat is ready to be launched it is pushed into the sea on wooden rollers.



Above: A dowel joint.





The boat builders of Pulau Duyung use wood from the cengal tree. It grows in the nearby jungle so the wood is easy to find. Cengal is an important source for boats, houses and furniture. Malaysia has suffered from a lot of its forest being chopped down so the wood can be used for these products. As the wood has become harder to find the cost has gone up. Many of the traditional boat builders can no longer afford to make boats like the bedar. For many in Pulau Duyang and the whole country the prospect of losing their jungle, with its trees and animal life is a real problem.

