

# Pudu Prison and Times Square Hotel: An Unusual Symbiosis

> Kuala Lumpur-  
Dominick A. Merle

A five-star room with a view, and what a sight--a full overhead of Malaysia's most notorious prison, gallows and all. A few floors down and I'd be locking eyeballs with the tower guard.

**B**ut wait! Don't leave, this is no ghastly travel article. It gets better, almost inspirational. You can show it to the entire family, for goodness sake.

The question: Can a brand new five-star hotel and a nasty old hard-core prison live happily-ever-after, side by side?

That's not exactly what the Berjaya Group had in mind in 2003 when it spent \$1.3-billion U.S. to construct its Times Square Hotel & Convention Center in the heart of Kuala Lumpur. The infamous Pudu Prison across the street, which had housed the worst of the worst criminals for over 100 years, had been closed since 1996 and was operating as a museum and tourist attraction, something like Alcatraz.

Now, five-star hotels and museums are a nice fit, even prison museums. So for a few years visitors would tour the old penitentiary with its tiny cells and shoebox-size windows, the dreaded rattan caning area...even the death house and hangman's platform.

But then the bottom dropped out of the museum business while crime showed an unhealthy increase, much like in this part of the world. So in 2005 the Old Pudu Museum became Pudu Prison again, and the Times Square Hotel now had prisoners instead of paintings across the street.

There goes the neighborhood--right? Wrong. The hotel's occupancy rate rose higher than ever and many guests are now asking for rooms with a view of the prison instead of Kuala Lumpur's city center and its dazzling twin towers. ▶



View of prison gate with hotel in background

منظر لسجن بودو مع الفندق

"We used to sell those rooms only after we were filled," said Julian Arthur, a guest relations officer. "Now they're in demand. People always seem to want something different, something they can go home and talk about."

The strange fascination wasn't limited to room selection. The hotel's main dining area sprawls from the east to the west (prison) side and the latter was usually filled first each morning with everyone, including me, vying for a window table.

One morning a long line of prisoners in their orange jumpsuits were led single file from one wing to another. Everyone left their breakfasts to watch the procession. Little wonder why two of the hottest TV shows this season are "Prison Break" and "Lockup."

I decided to have a closer look at our sinister neighbor the next morning. The exterior walls of the prison were covered with murals painted by the more gifted inmates--obviously under heavy guard-- back in 1996 when the prison was being closed.

I approached the main gate and to my astonishment, it was slightly ajar, so I edged in sideways. Now I was in a small area, much like a foyer, facing another walled-off section that contained a small window. I

started to walk towards the window when I heard a man's voice say something indiscernible, turned and saw a uniformed guard in a booth.

He spoke a little English and told me there were about 400 prisoners being held for various crimes, that the death house and gallows were still there but that all executions were now taking place at another interior prison in the middle of nowhere. Then he asked me, politely but firmly, to leave. While I was taking some exterior photos, I heard another voice inside and the steel gate was sealed.

Back at the hotel that afternoon I stopped in the lounge, where the windows also face Pudu. Some newly-arrived guests entered, walked towards the glass and one man half-shouted in English, "Look, it's a prison!" Being an old hand at this sort of thing, I just smiled and kept looking out the window.

"I just got out," I announced. ■

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Drug warning sign outside prison

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