

A royal labour of love

Tomorrow, the Yang di-Pertuan Agong and Raja Permaisuri Agong, the Sultan of Brunei, and Queen Sirikit of Thailand will join the Sultan and Raja Perempuan of Kelantan in a dinner in Kota Baru to celebrate the Silver Jubilee of their rule. The royal repast will also inaugurate the new State Banquet Hall of the Istana Negeri. KEE HUA CHEE managed an exclusive preview.

PICTURES COURTESY OF PUCUK REBUNG ROYAL GALLERY-MUSEUM, SURIA KLCC

WHEN the King and Queen, Malay Rulers, Sultan of Brunei and Queen Sirikit dine under 28 glittering chandeliers tomorrow night, it will be an occasion for all of Kelantan to be proud of.

The occasion? To commemorate Tuanku Ismail ibni Almarhum Sultan Yahya Petra's 25 years on the throne. The dinner will be at the new State Banquet Hall of Istana Negeri.

Though the Sultan and Raja Perempuan Kelantan continue to live at nearby Istana Mahkota, they took a hands-on approach to the design of the pillarless, 4,180sqm hall, which took more than four months to finish. The foundation was laid in Nov 2003 and the last finishing touches added in March.

The old banquet hall could hardly accommodate 300 people, and that too over more than two rooms. The new hall, on the other hand, seats 1,400 people with room to spare.

The Istana Negeri was built in the 70s when the late Sultan Yahya Petra, father of the current Sultan, was the Yang di-Pertuan Agong. The State Banquet Hall is the first addition to the palace in nearly 30 years. The elegant Islamic profile of the Istana Negeri is reflected in the new banquet hall. It has the same flow and feel as the palace, so much so it's hard to believe it is a recent addition.

A royal passage allows the Kelantan Sultan, Raja Perempuan and family to show their royal guests to the hall from the existing palace, while other guests enter through a formal reception hall.

Kelantan's State Banquet Hall reflects the personal taste of Sultan Ismail Petra and the Raja Perempuan Tengku Anis who took a deep interest in its construction. It is a shining example of Kelantanese craftsmanship, long renowned for their silverware, songket, batik, woven goods and carvings. Not for nothing is Kelantan referred to as the Cradle of Malay Culture.

Architect Willie Ngu and interior consultant Henry Bong — the founder of Pucuk Rebung — worked with their teams under the supervision of the Raja Perempuan.

Says Bong, 51, "I feel honoured to have worked with the Raja Perempuan as this is surely the project many interior designers dream of."

"The Raja Perempuan knew exactly what she wanted and the ready banquet hall is a manifestation of her vision and ideals."

"Her Royal Highness is a totally hands-on person and guides by giving all the help she can. She was personally involved in all the stages. She has very high standards."

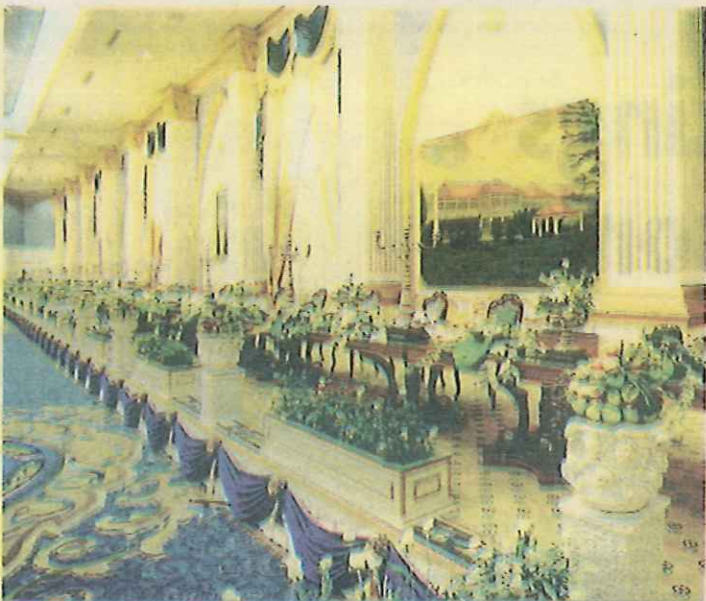
"She listens to good advice and is receptive to new ideas and suggestions. We were encouraged to speak our minds and present alternative versions."

"Her Royal Highness has a background in interior design, so it was a great pleasure to be able to work with her to create a masterpiece. Poor design proposals and shoddy work — these were not tolerated," grins Bong.

He adds, "We conceptualised, designed, as well as put together all the interior design elements ourselves, from the carpets, doors and



A cosy corner in the waiting room.



The banquet hall all decked-out for the Sultan's Silver Jubilee do tomorrow night.

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arches, to the railings, curtains and fixtures, down to the details on the door knobs."

The Anglo-Malay interior of the banquet hall is a study in classic yet contemporary furnishing. As befits a palace with nine-metre high ceilings, it is grand and regal but not intimidating. The central chandelier weighs a whopping 750kg and is five metres wide.

The carpet motifs include padi stalks laden with grain, *bunga nyior* (coconut flower), pineapple and deer — Kelantan's symbol of royal power since the days of Che Siti Wan Kembang, the 17th century queen and the only woman to rule a state. These motifs are repeated on the ceiling.

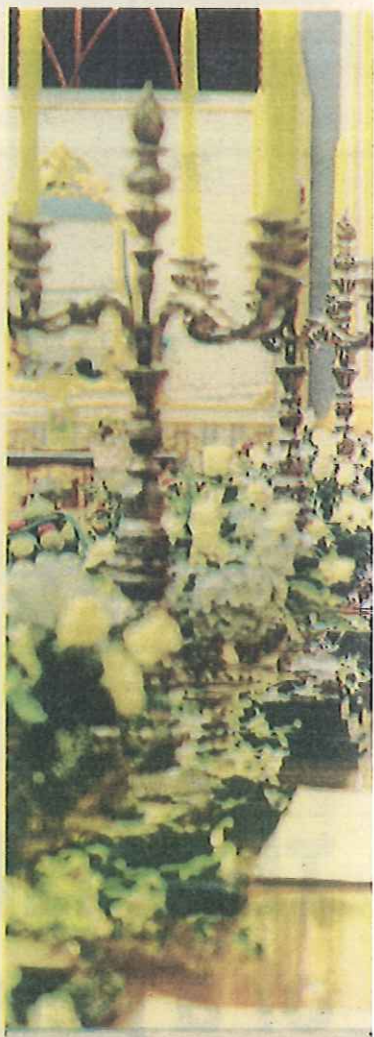
The attached Corinthian pillars lend a Western air and are counterbalanced by ele-

gant Islamic arches. Even the delicate floral scrolls on the table were personally selected by the Raja Perempuan.

"I recently attended the Sultan's private dinner. At around 1am, I visited the State Banquet Hall, and who should be there in their evening gowns but the Sultan and Raja Perempuan," recalls Bong. "This is not considered really late, though, because the Raja Perempuan has been known to brainstorm with her design team until 4am!"

"Her daughter Tengku Amalin A'-Ishah Putri once asked her mother why she did not just leave everything to the professionals. The Raja Perempuan replied that it was a task she enjoyed, creating works of great design and beauty. She also wanted to leave behind a personal legacy."

Even the two dominant colours of blue and yellow in the banquet hall have a story behind them. Blue is the Sultan's official colour, while yellow is that of the Raja Perempuan. The two colours combine to create an edifice for royal functions. The State Banquet Hall has become a



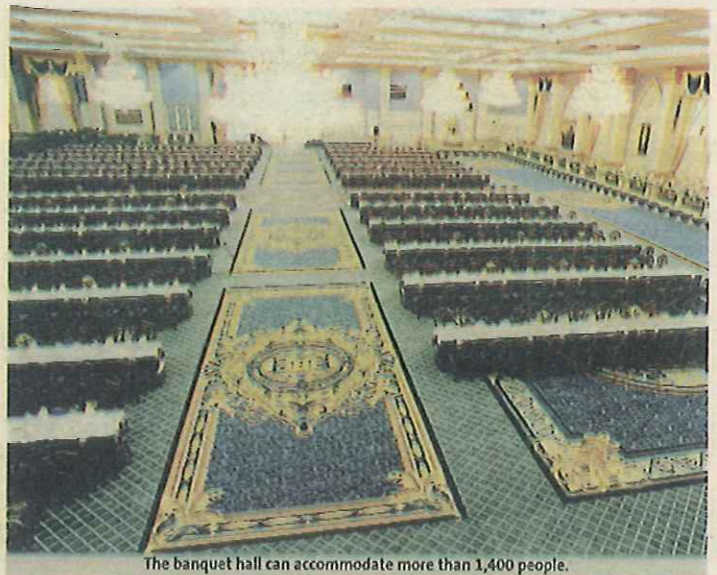
The central chandelier weighs 750kg and is five metres wide.

genuine example of a labour of love, and what better moment to unveil it to the world than on the Sultan's Silver Jubilee. **W**

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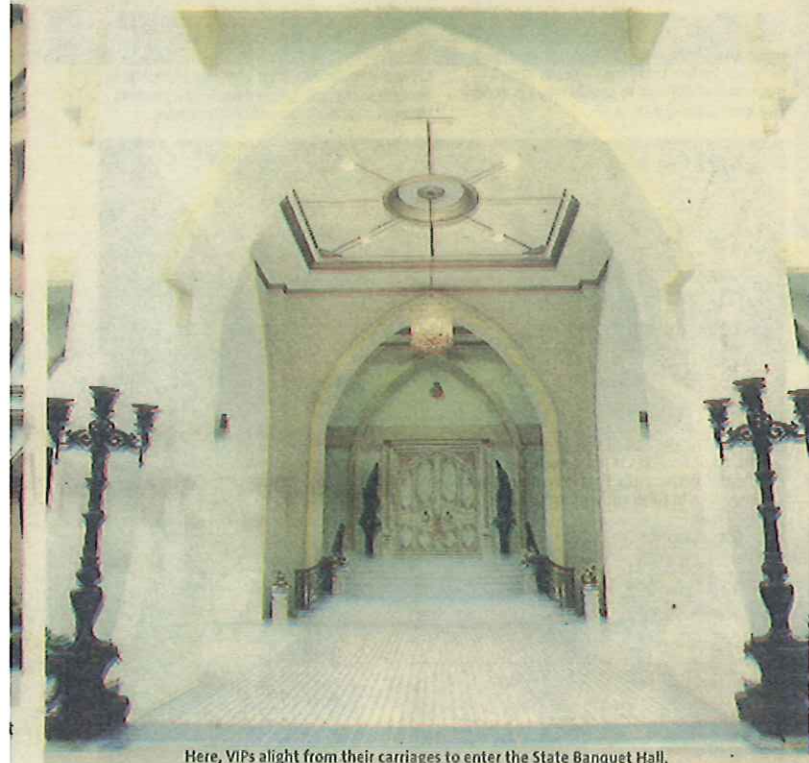
The royal table looking elegant for the big night.



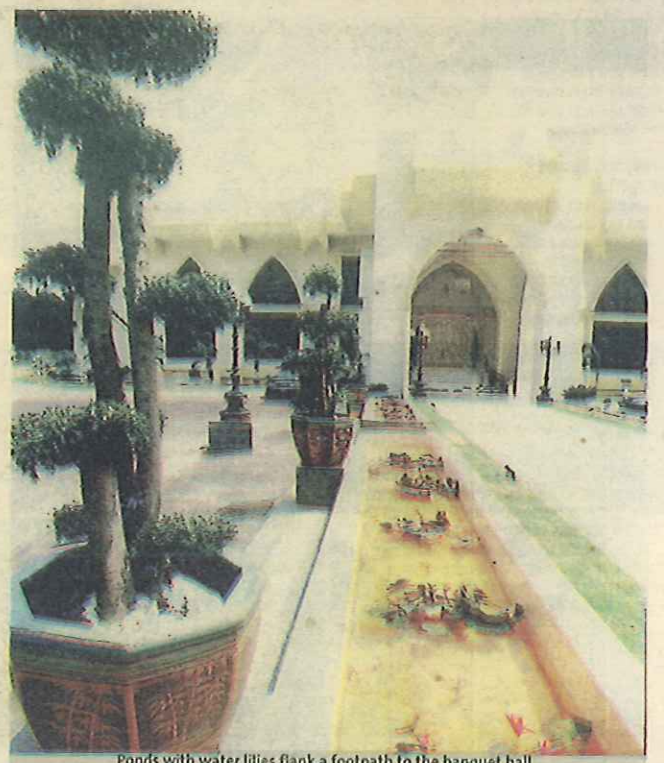
The banquet hall can accommodate more than 1,400 people.



The Fountain Plaza fronts the banquet hall and Istana Negeri (right).



Here, VIPs alight from their carriages to enter the State Banquet Hall.



Ponds with water lilies flank a footpath to the banquet hall.