

# 5 strange facts about Malaysia's infamous Pudu Jail

By **Noel Wong @ FMT Lifestyle** - August 29, 2022 7:00 AM

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*The only physical evidence of Pudu Jail left standing is the iconic front gate as well as a portion of wall attached to it. (Wikipedia pic)*

PETALING JAYA: With impenetrable walls, imposing guard towers and rows of barbed wire, prisons are a good reminder to citizens that the law is not to be trifled with.

Ever since justice systems have existed, prisons have been used to incarcerate those convicted of crimes by the courts.

In Malaysia, prisons have been around since 1813, with the British building a prison in their new colony of George Town.

And today, there are over 30 institutions acting as jails for convicts, with a few such as Kajang Prison and Sg Buloh Prison having something of a reputation.

However, one particular jail that continues to be the topic of conversations is one that no longer even stands physically.

Truly, the legacy of Pudu Jail is one that has outlasted the physical building, with many older Malaysians having their own stories to tell about the place.

To clear the air about what's fact and fiction about this infamous prison, here's a few interesting bits of trivia about this former landmark of Kuala Lumpur.

### **1. It is built on a cemetery**

Construction of Pudu Jail first began in 1891, thanks to the British administration of Malaya which needed a facility to hold dangerous criminals.

Interestingly enough, the urban legend that Pudu Jail was built atop a cemetery is true, with construction taking place over a Chinese burial ground.

Little wonder then that many ghost stories tend to circulate around the prison, which became a brooding colonial symbol of the British Empire.

British engineer Charles Edwin Spooner, who would later work on the Sultan Abdul Samad Building and the KL Railway Station was tasked with its construction.

It was an unpleasant place to be, with inmates consisting of rapists and murderers, with cells often left in unsanitary conditions.



*Part of the 394 metre-long mural on the walls of Pudu Jail which earned it a spot in the Guinness World Records. (Wikipedia pic)*

### **2. It is featured in the Guinness World Records**

It's not often that prisons make a name for themselves in the prestigious Guinness World Records, but Pudu Jail had that rare honour.

What earned it an entry into the book? Well, it was a mural that was painted on the exterior walls of the prison.

It was thanks to an inmate named Khong Yen Chong that this mural came into existence, as he and a team of fellow inmates began work on it in 1984.

The mural stretched across 394 metres of the long wall, with some 2,000 litres of paint used to complete the entire mural.

Khong was so dedicated to his work that even after he was released from prison as a free man, he returned simply to ensure the mural would be completed.



*If Pudu Jail had not been demolished, it would have been among the oldest surviving buildings in the country. (Joseph Gan pic)*

### **3. A disease outbreak killed many prisoners**

As previously mentioned, the prison's inmates were not afforded the best of care during their time there, which did result in tragedy.

In August 1895, an outbreak of cholera spread through the prison which led to many prisoners being quarantined in their cells.

Unfortunately, only a few were treated while the rest were left to their fates, resulting in a death toll in the hundreds.

It took three years for the outbreak to finally subside and an investigation was launched to discover the outbreak source.

As it turned out, building atop a graveyard had the side effect of decaying corpses contaminating the prison's water system.

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*Curious members of the public gather outside Pudu Jail during the hostage situation of 1986. (National Archives footage)*

#### **4. A hostage situation once took place there**

In 1986, a routine medical check-up in the prison went awry when an inmate named Jimmy Chu and five fellow inmates took a doctor and his assistant hostage.

Chu, a former policeman, threatened to kill the hostages if not provided with a getaway car and a meeting with the deputy Home Affairs Minister, Megat Junid.

Initially unwilling to take a heavy-handed approach to the situation, the police brought in the inmates' family members to convince them to surrender.

Eventually, one inmate relented and allowed police commandos into the clinic, with the cops subduing the gang while rescuing the hostages.

For their crimes of kidnapping, the inmates were sentenced to death by hanging, with the gang meeting their end on Oct 10, 1989.



The Bukit Bintang City Centre sits atop the former site of the Pudu Jail today. (Legendary Lim pic)

## 5. It was replaced by Kajang and Sg Buloh Prison

With its age resulting in ever deteriorating conditions, the Malaysian government finally closed the prison in 2009, transferring inmates to the newer prisons in Kajang and Sg Buloh.

As commercial development projects were sprouting up and around the area, it was decided that the building was to be demolished as well.

There was some debate about whether the building ought to be preserved as a heritage building, but ultimately, demolition was confirmed.

By December 2012, only its front gate was left standing as was a small stretch of the wall on which the famous mural was painted.

Today, Bukit Bintang City Centre stands atop the former site of the prison, with nothing much of the prison left behind.

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