

# Spiritual Journey in Mythical Medan



**Ir. Tham Kum Weng**

*Ir. Tham Kum Weng previously worked for JKR for 18 years and has been practising as a C&S consulting engineers for the past 25 years. He focusses on engineering inspection assessment and evaluation of structures and bridges. He shares relevant travel experiences from his occasional travel.*

**D**uring a company family trip to Lake Toba, Medan, in early November, 2017, we unsuspectingly discovered an experience that would heal our souls as well as help us appreciate and cherish the diversity of this world.

Medan, the third largest city in Indonesia (population 3 million) is home to Graha Maria Annai Velankanni (Marian Shrine). This unique Catholic shrine is dedicated to The Lady of Good Health, in reverence to the 17th century apparition of Mother Mary in Velankanni, Tamil Nadu State, India.

The Catholic Church in Medan has been in operation since 2005. Its uniqueness stamps

from its spectacular Indo-Mughal architecture which incorporates components of other religions including Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism and Islamic features. Save for discreetly mounted crosses, an uninitiated passer-by could be forgiven for assuming the building to be a Hindu temple. It took amateurs four years (2011-2015) to build the shrine, masterminded by



Jesuit Priest Father James Bharaputra. It was largely funded by public donations. The external facade was painted in multi-colours of black, grey, white, red, green, blue and yellow in ascending order, with each colour symbolising a certain Christian concept. The colour sequence also symbolises profoundly the faith journey of a human from sin to God's glory.

It was built for the Tamil Catholic community which first came to Medan to work in the plantations in the 19th century, under the Dutch administration. It also serves as a pilgrimage centre for Catholics in South East Asia who come to seek healing, solace, peace and a cleansing of the soul.

The main prayer hall for prayer services (Eucharistic Masses etc.) on the upper floor is accessible via two spiral staircases on each side in the front. Inside the building, Bible quotations and images are displayed in four languages (Indonesian, English, Tamil and Chinese). Inside, I could feel such a sense of peace and calm,

coupled with joy and awe at God's creation that I burst out singing "How Great Thou Art".

On this short trip, we truly appreciated the open-mindedness of the majority Muslim population which accepted people of other races and faiths to practise their religions openly. It is heartening to see the people live in peace and harmony. ■