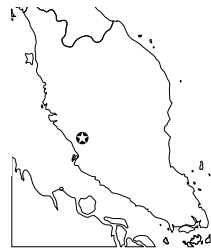


Kuala Lumpur



Kuala Lumpur's metamorphosis from the jungle hovel of tin prospectors to a gleaming 21st-century city of high-rises and highways seems like a triumph of man over nature. However, peer down on KL (as it's commonly known) from the bird's-eye height of Menara KL and it's clear that nature continues to fight back: this remains one of the greenest cities in Southeast Asia and is all the better for it.

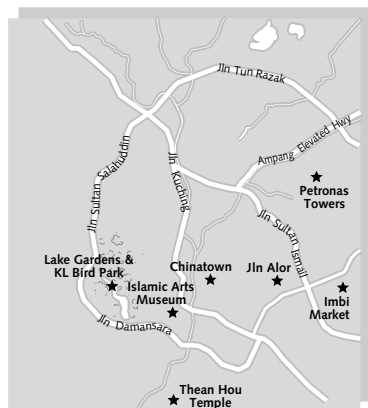
The blueprint was set early by the British who, in their colonial wisdom, crafted the Lake Gardens. This lush lung remains intact, as does the hillock of rainforest on which Menara KL rests and the old cricket field (now Merdeka Square) on which independence was declared back in 1957. The iconic Petronas Towers were developed alongside a beautifully landscaped park and to the north of the city more greenery surrounds Lake Titiwangsa.

In its built environment, few cities can compare to KL for diversity and daring. Imagine Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* crossed with an Arabian Nights Moorish fantasy and you begin to grasp a place where Chinese, Indian, Malay and contemporary structures coalesce into a fascinating whole.

The cream of Malaysian creativity can be experienced here also in the traditional crafts and cutting-edge art, design and fashion that can be found in KL's abundant malls and markets. Each ethnic community brings something to the table – most importantly in a delicious array of cuisines that make dining out the stellar experience in this star Southeast Asian urban performer.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Discovering vibrant **Chinatown** (p105) on a walking tour
- Marvelling at the steel-clad **Petronas Towers** (p95) and the swank Suria KLCC mall
- Breakfasting at **Imbi Market** (p115) and enjoying supper at **Jln Alor** (p114)
- Reviving in the greenery of the **Lake Gardens** (p102), with its showpiece **KL Bird Park** (p101)
- Admiring the beauty of Islamic art at the **Islamic Arts Museum** (p102)
- Paying respects to the heavenly mother at the **Thean Hou Temple** (p104)



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 03

■ POPULATION: 1.38 MILLION

■ AREA: 243 SQ KM

HISTORY

In 1857, 87 Chinese prospectors in search of tin landed at the apex of the Klang and Gombak Rivers and imaginatively named the place Kuala Lumpur, meaning 'muddy confluence'. Within a month all but 17 of the prospectors had died of malaria and other tropical diseases, but the tin they discovered in Ampang attracted more miners and KL quickly became a brawling, noisy, violent boomtown.

As in other parts of the Malay Peninsula, the local sultan appointed a proxy (known as Kapitan China) to bring the unruly Chinese fortune-seekers and their secret societies into line. The successful candidate Yap Ah Loy (Kapitan China from 1868 to 1885) took on the task with such ruthless relish that he's now credited as the founder of KL.

Loy had barely established control, however, when fighting broke out between local sultans for the throne of Perak. KL was swept up in the conflict and burnt to the ground in 1881. This allowed the British government representative Frank Swettenham to push through a radical new town plan that transferred the central government here, from Klang. By 1886 a railway line linked KL to Klang; by 1887 several thousand brick buildings had been built; and in 1896 the city became the capital of the newly formed Federated Malay States.

After occupation by Japanese forces during WWII (when many Chinese were tortured and killed, and many Indians sent to work on Burma's 'Death Railway'), the British temporarily returned, only to be ousted when Malaysia declared its independence here in 1957.

KL's darkest hour came on 13 May 1969 when race riots mainly between the Malays and Chinese communities claimed hundreds, perhaps thousands, of lives. A year later local government elections were suspended – ever since KL's mayor has been appointed by the Federal Territories Minister. In 1974 the sultan of Selangor ceded the city's land to the state so it could officially become the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur. The city has prospered ever since as Malaysia's political and commercial capital.

CLIMATE

Temperature ranges from 21°C to 33°C and the average humidity exceeds 82%. Although there's rain throughout the year, March to April and September to November are the wettest months.

ORIENTATION

Central KL is quite compact, even though its hilly terrain, multilane highways and paucity of footpaths conspire against walkers.

The city's colonial heart is Merdeka Sq. Southeast from here is bustling Chinatown, while immediately south, across a band of highways and train tracks, are the Masjid Negara (National Mosque), historic KL Train Station and the peaceful Lake Gardens. South of the Lake Gardens is KL Sentral, a regional and international train terminus with direct connections to the airport. KL Sentral is part of the area known as Brickfields. On the other side of the tracks further south is Bangsar Baru, a nucleus of trendy shops, restaurants and bars.

Another major arrival and departure point is the Puduraya long-distance bus station. East of Puduraya, the intersection of Jln Sultan Ismail and Jln Bukit Bintang marks the heart of the Golden Triangle, KL's premier business, shopping and entertainment district. Stacked with hotels, the Golden Triangle encompasses an area that stretches north to the Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC) development anchored by the Petronas Towers. Back at Merdeka Sq, if you head against the one-way traffic north-east along Jln Tuanku A Rahman (commonly called Jln TAR) you'll soon hit Little India, and further north, Chow Kit, a red-light area famed for its lively market. Immediately west of Chow Kit is the old Malay area of Kampung Baru. Jln Raja Laut runs almost parallel to Jln TAR and takes the northbound traffic towards Jln Tun Razak marking the outer northern boundary of the city centre; around here you'll find Lake Titivangsa and the National Art Gallery, Library and Theatre.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

Borders (Map p96; ☎ 2141 0288; Level 2, Berjaya Times Sq, Jln Imbi; ☎ 10am-10pm)

Kinokuniya (Map p96; ☎ 2164 8133; Level 4, Suria KLCC, Jln Ampang; ☎ 10am-10pm) Excellent range of English-language titles.

MPH Bookstores (www.mph.com.my) Bangsar (Map p118; ☎ 2287 3600; 2nd fl Bangsar Village II, 2 Jln Telawi 1; ☎ 10.30am-10.30pm); Golden Triangle (Map p96; ☎ 2142 8231; Ground fl, BB Plaza, Jln Bukit Bintang; ☎ 10.30am-9.30pm)

Silverfish Books (Map p118; ☎ 2284 4837; www.silverfishbooks.com; 58-1 Jln Telawi, Bangsar; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat) Publisher of contemporary Malaysian literature.