

Perak



The old chestnut, 'What do you prefer, the mountains or the ocean?' goes over pretty well in Perak, peninsular Malaysia's second-largest state. If you're not exploring through limestone hills honeycombed with caves and sprinkled with Chinese temples, you're probably lazing along the Straits of Melaka on Pulau Pangkor. Smooth blue ocean versus jungle peaks patched with tea and strawberry plantations? Decisions, decisions.

There's quite a bit of stuff to see between these altitudinal extremes, though. Perak is one of Malaysia's most historically rich states: the country's former (and still significant) economic engines of tin mining and rubber tapping have their roots, as it were, in Darul Ridzuan, the Land of Grace. Perak's enterprising Chinese population has had a disproportionately huge impact on the evolution of modern Malaysia, while the state's geographic position along the Straits has put it at the centre of much of the national narrative. Thanks to all this heritage there are some pleasantly faded cities well worth your exploration: the royal seat of Kuala Kangsar; the garden metropolis of Taiping; Bukit Larut, the oldest hill station in Malaysia; and sprawling Ipoh, with its colonial architecture and Buddhist cave temples.

Still, with such a varied geography this is, unsurprisingly, a state made for experiencing physical beauty, from Matang Mangrove Forest Reserve to the Cameron Highlands (in Pahang state, but accessible from here), Malaysia's premier hill retreat.

'Perak' means 'silver' in Malay, but historians debate whether the word references the state's tin mines or the fish off its sandy coast. In other words, does Perak's identity come from the mountains, or the ocean? Why not check out both?

HIGHLIGHTS

- Polishing off strawberries and tea, and trekking in the **Cameron Highlands** (p159)
- Snacking on delicious street food in **Ipoh** (p157)
- Lazing on one of the fine beaches on **Pulau Pangkor** (p150)
- Soaking up the colonial charm of **Taiping** (p169)
- Getting lost amid the mangroves at **Matang Mangrove Forest Reserve** (p173)



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 05

■ POPULATION: 2.4 MILLION

■ AREA: 21,005 SQ KM

History

Today's sultanate of Perak dates back to the early 16th century, when the eldest son of the last sultan of Melaka, Sultan Muzaffar Shah, established his own dynasty on the banks of Sungai Perak (Perak River). The state's rich tin deposits quickly made it a target of both covetous neighbours and foreign forces.

Dutch efforts in the 17th century to monopolise the tin trade were unsuccessful, but remains of their forts can still be seen on Pulau Pangkor (Pangkor Island) and at the mouth of Sungai Perak. In the 18th century the Bugis from the south and the Siamese from the north made concerted attempts to dominate Perak, but British intervention in the 1820s trumped them both.

The British had remained reluctant to meddle in the peninsula's affairs, but growing investment in the Strait settlements, along with the rich tin mines of Perak, encouraged their interest. The mines also attracted a great influx of Chinese immigrants, who soon formed rival clan groups allied with local Malay chiefs, all of whom battled to control the mines.

The Perak sultanate was in disarray, and fighting among successors to the throne gave the British their opportunity to step in, making the first real colonial incursion on the peninsula in 1874. The governor, Sir Andrew Clarke, convened a meeting at Pulau Pangkor at which Sultan Abdullah was installed on the throne in preference to Sultan Ismail, the other major contender. The resultant Pangkor Treaty required the sultan accept a British Resident, to be consulted on all issues other than those relating to religion or Malay custom. One year later, Sultan Abdullah was forced, under threat of deposition, to accept administration by British officials on his behalf.

Various Perak chiefs united against this state of affairs, and the Resident, James WW Birch, was assassinated at Pasir Salak in November 1875. Colonial troops were called in to fight a short war, Sultan Abdullah was exiled and a new British-sanctioned sultan was installed. The next British Resident, Sir Hugh Low, had administrative experience in Borneo, was fluent in Malay and was a noted botanist – he even had a pitcher plant (*Nepenthes Lowii*) named after him. He assumed control of taxes from the tin mines and practised greater intervention in state affairs. In 1877 he introduced the first rub-

ber trees to Malaysia, and experimented with planting tea and coffee as well. The sultans, meanwhile, maintained their status, but were increasingly effete figureheads, bought out with stipends.

The first railway in the state, from Taiping to Port Weld (now known as Kuala Sepetang), was built in 1885 to transport the wealth of tin; the result was rapid development in Taiping and Ipoh. In 1896 Perak, along with Selangor, Pahang and Negeri Sembilan, became part of the Federated Malay States. The Resident system persisted, however, even after the Japanese invasion and WWII, ending only when Perak became part of the Federation of Malaya in 1948. Perak joined the new independent state of Malaysia in 1957.

Climate

Perak has a tropical climate, and is hot and humid throughout the year; daily temperatures average between 21°C and 32°C, and humidity levels hover at a steady 90%. There are brief downpours and occasional lighter rain throughout the year, with June and July usually being the driest months. The Cameron Highlands are much cooler; temperatures rarely rising above 21°C. Rainfall is more frequent too.

Getting There & Away

Both the main rail line and the Lebuhraya (E1; North–South Hwy) run the length of the country, from Johor Bahru in the south to the Thai border in the north, giving easy access to the Perak state capital, Ipoh, and other major towns. Ipoh is the state transport hub, with bus connections to most major towns on the peninsula, and has an airport with regular flights to/from Kuala Lumpur.

Getting Around

Almost everywhere in Perak is accessible by bus from Ipoh. Trains are not particularly useful for travelling within the state. Lumut is the departure point for ferries to Pulau Pangkor, and is well served by bus connections.

SOUTHERN PERAK

The road north from KL crosses the state border from Selangor into Perak at Tanjung Malim. If you have your own transport, you