

Destination Kuala Lumpur, Melaka & Penang

The story of Peninsular Malaysia is painted large in the historic cities of Kuala Lumpur (KL), Melaka and Penang. Many of the pivotal events in Malaysian history – the first Chinese settlements, the rise of the Melaka sultans, the arrival of the British, the declaration of Malaysian independence in 1957 – took place in these three fascinating cities. Here, the stories of Malaysia's diverse ethnic groups and colonial empires are intertwined – South Indian cooks serve fiery curries from the doorways of Sino-Portuguese houses built as part of trade deals between European powers and the sultans of Melaka. The diversity of the peninsula is perhaps Malaysia's biggest drawcard – this is not one country but three, the best of Malay, Indian and Chinese culture united under one flag.

In April 2007 the rulers of the nine Malaysian states selected Sultan Mizan Zainal Abidin as the 13th king of Malaysia – the first king to be born after independence from colonial rule. Later the same year Malaysia celebrated 50 years of independence with a string of festivals and special events. However, Malaysia's famous policy of unity in diversity is showing signs of strain. Ever since independence, the Malay community has been strengthening its control over the government, police and military, and Indian, Chinese and tribal Malaysians are facing increasing marginalisation and discrimination. Simultaneously, the *syariah* (Islamic) courts are growing in power, threatening the secular foundation of Malaysian democracy.

In recent years Malaysia's sedition laws have been used to detain growing numbers of bloggers, journalists and other critics of the Malay-dominated government. In late 2007 police used tear gas and water cannons to break up antidiscrimination protests by thousands of Malaysian Indians in KL – the ringleaders were even charged with attempted murder before the government backed down under local and international pressure. The same year Malaysian Chinese student Wee Meng Chee (aka Namewee) caused a major political storm by posting a satirical rap criticising the government to the tune of the Malay national anthem on the video website YouTube (see p38).

Malaysia's increasingly strict stance on public morality has also caused a few casualties – Malaysia's first reality-TV pop star, Faizal Tahir, was censored for exposing his chest at a concert in early 2008, and the organisers of a concert by the Pussycat Dolls faced a massive fine in 2006 for allowing the public performance of 'suggestive dance routines'. Malaysia's censors also cited public decency as an excuse for banning Ang Lee's award-winning gay love story *Brokeback Mountain*. All of which is a little ironic considering that the Malaysian health minister, Chua Soi Lek, was forced to step down in 2008 after appearing in an amateur pornographic DVD.

Another hot potato in Malaysian politics is economic migration. Migrant workers are one of the main causes of population growth in Peninsular Malaysia, placing a growing strain on jobs and resources; the government is taking an increasingly hard line on illegal workers from India, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines. There's an inevitable ethnic angle to the

FAST FACTS

Population: Malaysia 27.17 million; Kuala Lumpur 1.8 million; Melaka 688,694; Penang 1.31 million
Rate of population increase: one person every 56 seconds
Rate of population increase due to international migration: one person every five minutes.
GDP: US\$12,900
Rate of inflation: 3.2%
Literacy rate: 89%
Private car ownership: 195 cars per 1000 citizens
Average noise level in Kuala Lumpur: 70 decibels
Hokkien (Fujian Chinese) speakers in Penang: 638,900
Kristang (pidgin Portuguese) speakers in Melaka: 5000

debate – as part of its immigration crackdown, the government introduced new restrictions on visas for Indian migrant workers, widely perceived as a punishment for Indian protests against discrimination in 2007.

But the prognosis is not entirely gloomy. Malaysia continues to ride a wave of economic optimism, despite declining profits at some of the big state corporations. In a bid to revitalise the ailing fortunes of the Proton – the first Malaysian car – local designers have come up with a new concept in driving: the Muslim automobile. Built to appeal to drivers from Islamic countries, the revamped Proton features a compass pointing to Mecca and other must-have religious accessories. And Malaysia continues to embrace the digital age with aplomb – KL is already one of the most connected cities in Southeast Asia and free wi-fi hotspots are due to blossom across Penang in 2008.

Meanwhile, Malaysia's new administrative capital continues to rise at Putrajaya, 20km south of Kuala Lumpur. Budgeted at US\$60 billion, this futuristic enclave is slowly filling with politicians and civil servants, though the much touted Putrajaya monorail is years away from being completed. On one level, the glistening federal capital is a perfect symbol for the aspirations of the nation, but many see parallels with Malaysia's wider ethnic crisis. The new inhabitants of Putrajaya are overwhelmingly Malay and the new city features numerous Islamic institutions, but few concessions to Malaysia's other ethnic groups.

Communal relations seem less strained in Melaka, where Malaysians from all backgrounds are injecting new money into old rubble as part of an ambitious project to resurrect the ruined fort, Porta de Santiago (A'Famosa). This is positive news considering the damage caused by the floods that hit Melaka in 2006 and 2007, leaving thousands homeless. With more heavy rainfall predicted, the municipality voted to replace the official 2008 New Year celebrations with special prayers for divine intervention to prevent a repeat of the floods.

It may take more than divine intervention to prevent sparks flying in the new Malaysian parliament. The 2009 elections saw a massive drop in support for Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and the ruling National Front coalition. Returning to politics after a four-year political ban, former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim has emerged as the effective leader of the opposition, in charge of a coalition of Islamic, Chinese and secular parties. The new Chinese-dominated administration in Penang has already announced its intention to abandon the policy of positive discrimination towards Malays – the next few years are likely to see some radical changes to the Malaysian political system...

Nevertheless, from a visitor's perspective, Malaysia continues to more than satisfy the tourism department slogan: *Malaysia, Truly Asia*. Kuala Lumpur is the same captivating theme park of historic monuments and city-sized shopping malls; Penang remains a fascinating hodgepodge of British-era monuments and Chinese temples; and Melaka is the museum of Malaysia, preserving not just the buildings but the culture of the diverse groups who helped found the nation. Factor in some of the best food and retail therapy in Southeast Asia and there's only one question left: what are you waiting for?

Getting Started

Malaysia is one of the easiest countries in Southeast Asia for international travellers – English is widely spoken, good accommodation is easy to find, restaurants serve up some of the finest food in Asia and locals are used to dealing with people from all over the world. Kuala Lumpur (KL), Melaka and Penang have hotels, restaurants, attractions and transport options to suit all budgets. KL is the main international hub for Malaysia, though a few international flights go directly to Penang. Getting from KL to Melaka or Penang is a breeze with plentiful and inexpensive buses, trains and flights.

WHEN TO GO

Peninsular Malaysia is part of the wet tropics, but the monsoon is only a minor obstacle to travel: rain falls fairly evenly throughout the year and the October-to-April rainy season is only marginally wetter than the rest of the year. As a general rule, the lowest rainfall is from May to August. Temperatures rarely dip below 30°C so bring plenty of loose-fitting cotton clothes. Note that the peninsula is periodically affected by haze from fires in Indonesia (see p60), particularly in September and October. The haze can trigger respiratory complaints and asthma, as well as creating a pall of urban smog.

Malaysia's diverse ethnic groups hold celebrations throughout the year. The festivals can be a great spectacle, particularly *Thaipusam* and Chinese New Year in January or February (p219). Many locals travel to visit friends and relatives during this period, so hotels and seats on buses, trains and planes can be in short supply. Most things run as normal during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, but *Hari Raya Puasa* (see p220 for dates) and Christmas can get very busy. Beach and hill resorts get crowded at weekends throughout the year but are generally quiet during the week.

COSTS & MONEY

KL, Melaka and Penang have hotels, restaurants and transport options to suit all budgets. At the bottom of the accommodation scale, cheap backpacker hostels offer dorm beds with hot and cold running bedbugs for as little as RM9 per night. Considering the exchange rates, it's usually worth upgrading to a cheap hotel or trying one of the new breed of upmarket traveller guesthouses – double rooms with bathroom start from RM60. In the midrange category, RM70 to RM200 will get you a clean room with a TV and air-con plus a hot shower in the bathroom. Top-end hotels can be bona fide bargains, with promotional rates as low as RM250.

Cheap food is one of the delights of Malaysia. Don't be afraid to step out of your comfort zone and sample the excellent street food and local restaurants – a meal that costs RM10 can be just as delicious as a meal that costs RM300. The top-end hotels offer world-class cooking at prices that bring tears to the eyes. Soft drinks, juices, tea and coffee are the local quaffs of choice. Beer, wine and spirits are widely available but much more expensive – if cost is an issue, buy your beers from convenience stores rather than restaurants.

Getting from A to B will never cost a fortune. KL has an extensive public transport system, and Melaka and Penang have inexpensive buses, taxis and rickshaws. With persistence you can usually get drivers to use the meter or bargain to a reasonable fixed fare. Buses, trains, long-distance taxis and international flights are all excellent value.

See Climate (p217) for more information.

HOW MUCH?

Double room at a mid-range hotel RM70-200
Cup of *kopi* (coffee) or *teh tarik* (hot tea) RM2-4
Bowl of *laksa* RM5
Restaurant meal RM20
Designer label shirt RM70

TOP 10



FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Malaysia has loads of fast-paced festivals and special events (see p219). Plan your travels around the following, but remember to book ahead during peak holiday seasons.

- 1 **Thaipusam**, Batu Caves and Penang, January/February
- 2 **Chinese New Year**, countrywide, January/February
- 3 **KL International Tower Jump**, KL, March
- 4 **Malaysian Grand Prix Formula**, Sepang near KL, April
- 5 **Dragon Boat Festival**, Penang, June to August
- 6 **Por Thor (Hungry Ghosts Festival)**, Penang and Melaka, August
- 7 **Hari Kebangsaan (Malaysian National Day)**, countrywide, 31 August
- 8 **Lantern Festival**, countrywide, particularly Penang, September
- 9 **Hari Raya Puasa**, countrywide, September/October
- 10 **Deepavali**, countrywide, October/November

EATING & DRINKING

Junk the diet – eating is a reason to come to KL, Melaka and Penang all by itself. Allow your appetite to steer you towards the following taste sensations:

- 1 Start the day with *roti canai* (unleavened bread and curry) and *teh tarik* (tea with condensed milk), the classic Malay **tiffin** (p106).
- 2 KL's food streets offer dozens of restaurants crammed into one location – try **Jalan Alor** (p106) for top-notch Malay-Chinese food.
- 3 Looking for somewhere to take a date? Try the restaurants on the **Starhill Gallery Feast Level** (p107).
- 4 Drink in the view as well as your cocktail at one of KL's **skyscraper bars** (p116).
- 5 Make a night of it at KL's food-tastic **night markets** (p91).
- 6 Fancy a midnight snack? Many of KL's excellent **mamak restaurants** (see p110) are open 24/7.
- 7 Slurp some spicy sour **asam laksa** (p194), the renowned speciality of Penang.
- 8 Learn to make your own Nonya cuisine on a **cooking course** (p150) in Melaka.
- 9 No meal is complete without pudding – make time for shaved ice desserts such as **cendol** (p45) and **air batu campur** (p45).
- 10 Hold your nose and discover what all the fuss over **durian** (p81) is about.

UNIQUE EXPERIENCES

Asia is never predictable. Here are some of the quirkier experiences on offer in Kuala Lumpur, Melaka and Penang:

- 1 Crossing the **Skybridge** (p86) between the Petronas Towers.
- 2 Riding a roller coaster through a shopping mall at KL's **Berjaya Times Square** (p96).
- 3 Walking in the rainforest canopy at the **Forest Research Institute of Malaysia** (p132).
- 4 Climbing the 272 steps to the **Batu Caves** (p131) beside a 43m-tall statue of Muruga.
- 5 Witnessing gruesome acts of religious devotion at **Thaipusam** (p221).
- 6 Lighting a 2m-long stick of incense at Penang's **Kuan Yin Teng** (p181) temple.
- 7 Riding the **cable car** (p203) to Kek Lok Si, Malaysia's biggest Buddhist temple.
- 8 Trekking through the jungle to empty beaches at **Penang National Park** (p207).
- 9 Touring old Melaka in an outrageously dolled-up **trishaw** (p151).
- 10 Running the gauntlet of fortune tellers and snack vendors at **Jonker's Walk Night Market** (p158).

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Checking the visa situation (p225). Note that citizens of Israel can only enter Malaysia with a visa – which is granted at the discretion of the Malaysian embassy in the country where you apply.
- Checking government travel advice (see p219).
- Your credit card – major cards are accepted at many shops, restaurants and hotels, but keep the emergency lost-or-stolen number handy.
- An umbrella for sudden showers.
- A torch or headlamp, a pair of binoculars, mosquito net and leech-proof socks – essential gear for jungle treks.
- A fleece or light jacket to beat the air-con on chilly bus journeys.
- A swimming costume (Malaysian pool rules: one-piece for women, tight shorts for men).
- A sheet, blanket or sleeping bag liner – many cheap hotels do not provide a top sheet.
- An appetite – Malaysia is heaven for foodies!

Besides the travel essentials, luxuries are very moderately priced. Your money will go a lot further here than in most Western countries, particularly when shopping for clothes and electronics.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

The Consumption of Kuala Lumpur by Ziauddin Sardar is an evocative meditation on the once-sleepy capital evolving into a technological marvel. Incisive comment on modern Malaysia can be found in *The Other Malaysia* and *From Majapahit to Putrajaya – Searching for the Other Malaysia* by Malaysian journalist Farish A Noor.

Malaysia's complex relationship with religion is explored in the Malaysia chapter of Ian Buruma's *God's Dust*, based on a visit to a hard-line Islamic commune near KL in the 1980s. Although the commune has since been disbanded, many of the issues raised are still pertinent today. Literary knight VS Naipaul offered his own insights into Malaysian Islam in *The Believers* (1982) and *Beyond Belief* (1999).

For a more historical perspective, try *The Golden Chersonese and the Way Thither*, written by Isabella Bird in 1883 after a stiff-upper-lip journey through the jungles of Peninsular Malaysia. A less romantic take on jungle life is given in *The Jungle is Neutral* by Spencer Chapman, a British soldier who helped train Malayan forces to resist the Japanese invasion.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Kuala Lumpur Tourism (www.kualalumpur.gov.my) KL-centric website from the Kuala Lumpur Tourism Action Council.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Succinct summaries on travel to Malaysia, the Thorn Tree forum and much more.

Malaysiakini (www.malaysiakini.com) Malaysia's best online news site.

Tourism Malaysia (www.tourismmalaysia.gov.my) Official government tourism site, with listings of domestic and international tourist offices.

Tourism Melaka (www.melaka.gov.my) State information portal for Melaka.

Tourism Penang (www.tourismpenang.gov.my) Government tourism site for Penang.

Virtual Malaysia (www.virtualmalaysia.com) Government portal for tourism in Malaysia.

On the Road



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This wasn't what I was used to in the wet tropics. Perfect blue skies, brilliant sunshine overhead, ducking into the shade of palm trees to escape the glare. In fact, Kuala Lumpur (KL) probably has the best weather of all the Southeast Asian capitals. In five weeks I saw only half a dozen rain showers; although, admittedly, one left me knee-deep in black murky water, the origins of which I didn't want to speculate about. The sunny days provided perfect opportunities to try and capture the space-age magnificence of the Petronas Towers on film – I just wish I'd packed a wider lens.



CELESTE BRASH Notice the giant cicada blending perfectly into my wrinkled brown shirt? My son found this guy dying in a gutter so we kept him for the day and named him Chirpy. He (or she?) seemed happy just clinging onto one of our shirts and if you touched his back gently he would sing beautifully. Cicada nymphs live underground for several years, then survive only a few weeks in this adult stage. They do bite (not poisonous) but Chirpy never bit us. If any Malaysians thought we were strange carrying around a giant bug, they kept it to themselves.

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