

# Kuala Lumpur



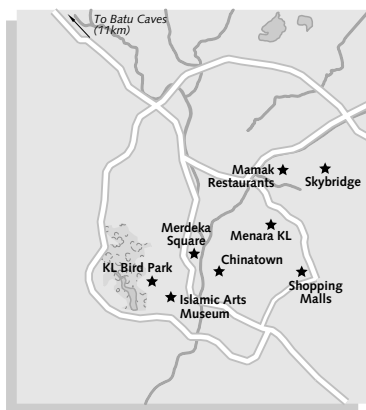
Kuala Lumpur – KL to its friends – is more than just a capital city: it is a monument to Malaysian ingenuity and determination. From humble beginnings as a tin-mining shanty town, KL has evolved into a 21st-century metropolis, dominated by the tallest skyscrapers in Southeast Asia and flush with the proceeds of international trade and commerce. Over the years, KL has faced its share of challenges but nothing has succeeded in suppressing the determination of locals to make KL, and Malaysia, a leader among Asian tiger economies.

The marketing slogan for the Malaysian tourist board is ‘truly Asia’ and nowhere is this more true than in the capital. KL is every inch the Asian cyber-city: historic temples and mosques rub shoulders with space-age towers and shopping malls; traders’ stalls are piled high with pungent durians and counterfeit DVDs; and locals sip cappuccino in wi-fi-enabled coffee hops or feast at bustling streetside hawker stalls serving food from across the continent.

The most striking thing about KL from a visitor’s perspective is its remarkable cultural diversity. Ethnic Malays, Chinese prospectors, Indian migrants and British colonials all helped carve the city out of the virgin jungle, and each group has left its indelible mark on the capital. Eating, shopping and nightlife are undeniable highlights of any visit to KL, but don’t restrict yourself to the city – there are numerous parks and monuments dotted around KL that make easy day trips for a break from the hustle and bustle.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Giddy views from the **Skybridge** (p86) at the Petronas Towers or the **Menara KL** (p88)
- Feasting in KL’s fabulous **mamak restaurants** (p110)
- Shopping till you drop at KL’s city-sized **shopping malls** (p122) – bring the platinum card!
- Taking in the temples and markets of **Chinatown** (p76) and the colonial architecture of **Merdeka Square** (p80)
- Exploring the peaceful Lake Gardens – don’t miss the **Bird Park** (p82) and the **Islamic Arts Museum** (p83)
- Hiking up the 272 steps to the **Batu Caves** (p131)



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 03

■ POPULATION: 1.8 MILLION

■ AREA: 243 SQ KM

## HISTORY

The founding of KL was almost an accident. In 1857, 87 Chinese prospectors in search of tin landed at the meeting point of the Klang and Gombak rivers and set up camp, naming the spot 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, ruled over by so-called 'secret societies', a network of Chinese criminal gangs.

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 '85), took on the task with such ruthless relish that he's now credited as the founder of KL. According to legend, Yap Ah Loy was able to keep the peace with just six policemen, such was the respect for his authority in the Chinese community.

Loy had only just established control when local sultans went to war over the throne of Perak and its tin mines, marking the start of the Malay Civil War. 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 which transferred the central government from Klang to KL. By 1886 a railway line linked KL to Klang. A year later a new city was constructed in fire-resistant brick, and in 1896 KL became the capital of the newly formed Federated Malay States.

The British surrendered Malaya early in WWII and KL was brutally occupied by Japanese forces. Many Chinese were tortured and killed, and many Indians and British prisoners of war were sent to work on Burma's notorious 'Death Railway'. The British temporarily returned after WWII, only to be ousted when Malaysia finally declared its independence in 1957 at Merdeka Square (Independence Square). KL continued to thrive, but its confidence took a knock in 1969 when race riots between Chinese and Malays claimed hundreds, perhaps thousands, of lives. In the aftermath of the riots, thousands of Chinese were dispossessed of their homes and the Muslim Malay community consolidated its control over the army, police and political administration.

The city officially became the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur when it was ceded by the sultan of Selangor in 1974. Its mayor and councillors are appointed on the recommendation of the government, which is dominated by Malay politicians. There's little accountability and a job on the council is largely seen by locals as license to print money, not least because KL is Malaysia's most prosperous and populous city.

In 1996, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed approved the construction of a new political capital 20km south of KL at Putrajaya (p130). Although only 50,000 of the 330,000 residents planned for Putrajaya have moved into their new homes, the budget for the project has already exceeded US\$5 billion. Putrajaya was made the official seat of the Malaysian government in 1999. Since the turn of the millennium, Kuala Lumpur has been in the news more for demonstrations than innovation – city police used tear gas and water cannons to disperse antidiscrimination protests by thousands of ethnic Indians in 2007 and 2008, arresting many protesters under Malaysia's draconian security laws.

## ORIENTATION

Although this is one of the more manageable Asian capitals, KL is divided into a series of separate neighbourhoods by a network of multilane highways and railway lines. As a result, getting from A to B can involve numerous underpasses, bridges and road crossings. You may find that it's easier to travel by public transport, even over short distances. One exception to this rule is the built-up area around the Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC) – walking is often quicker than changing lines on KL's poorly integrated rapid transit system (see p126).

The colonial heart of KL is Merdeka Square, near the confluence of the two rivers from which the city takes its name. Just northeast of Merdeka Square is Little India, a bustling neighbourhood of Indian-owned shops and restaurants, while further south is Chinatown, noteworthy for its cheap accommodation, night market, temples and long-distance bus station. West of Chinatown (across a maze of flyovers and railway tracks) are the peaceful Lake Gardens, home to many of KL's best-known tourist attractions. South of the Lake Gardens is the ethnically mixed neighbourhood of Brickfields, where you'll find KL Sentral, the