



Melaka

Back when Kuala Lumpur was a malaria-ridden swamp and Penang was yet to become the 'Pearl of the Orient,' Melaka was already one of the greatest trading ports in Southeast Asia. Over time it lost favour to Singapore and became a sleepy backwater compared with its high-rolling cousins, but today it's this lost-in-time feel that makes the place so charming.

It's still said that the soul of the country can be glimpsed through the city's mixed Malay, Chinese, Indian and European heritage and the serene *kampung* (villages) scattered among the state's tropical forests, farmlands and beaches. It's true: this is Malaysia's good side and it's no wonder Melaka has become one of the country's most popular destinations. The variations on traditional cuisine, including the famed Malay-Chinese Nonya food, are reason enough to visit and are a delicious way to experience the region's cultural diversity.

While the coastlines of Pulau Besar and Tanjung Bidara don't compare with the country's other beaches, partially due to the water quality of the Strait of Melaka (one of the world's busiest shipping routes), they do make a relaxing getaway or day trip from the state's capital. Other diversions away from the city are manufactured creations: the wildlife and theme park of Ayer Keroh and the golf course and water park of A'Famosa Resort.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Eating Chinese dim sum for breakfast, Nonya food for lunch and Pakistani tandoori for dinner at Melaka's **fabulous restaurants** (p249)
- Catching glimpses of old-time Melaka while leisurely wandering through historic **Chinatown** (p243)
- Snacking, perusing trinket stands and watching Dr Ho Eng Hui pummel his finger into a coconut at the **Jonker Walk Night Market** (p243)
- Feeling like a happy fool while rocking out to 80s dance hits in a wacky Melaka **trishaw** (p253)
- Imagining the past and all its intricacies at the **Baba-Nonya Heritage Museum** (p243)
- Watching freighters move down the Strait of Melaka while lounging on the white sands of **Tanjung Bidara** (p254)



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 06

■ POPULATION: 759,000

■ AREA: 1652 SQ KM

History

However the history of the city-state of Melaka is told, the story of the state is inseparable from that of the city for which it was named. Before the late 14th century, Melaka was a simple fishing village.

Parameswara, a Hindu prince from Sumatra, was the founder of Melaka (see the boxed text, opposite). Under Parameswara, the city became a favoured port for waiting out monsoons and resupplying trading ships plying the strategic Selat Melaka. Halfway between China and India, and with easy access to the spice islands of Indonesia, Melaka attracted merchants from all over the East.

In 1405 the Chinese Muslim Admiral Cheng Ho, the 'three-jewelled eunuch prince', arrived in Melaka bearing gifts from the Ming emperor and the promise of protection from Siamese enemies. Chinese settlers followed, who mixed with the local Malays to become known as the Baba and Nonya, the Peranakans or Straits Chinese (see the boxed text, p48). The longest-settled Chinese people in Malaysia, they grafted many Malay customs to their own heritage. By the time of

Parameswara's death in 1414, Melaka was a powerful trading state. Its position was consolidated by the state's adoption of Islam in the mid-15th century (see p31).

In 1509 the Portuguese came seeking the wealth of the spice and China trades, but after an initially friendly reception, the Melakans attacked the Portuguese fleet and took a number of prisoners. This prompted an outright assault by the Portuguese, and in 1511 Alfonso de Albuquerque took the city. Under the Portuguese, the fortress of A'Famosa was constructed, and missionaries strove to implant Catholicism. While Portuguese cannons could easily conquer Melaka, they could not force Muslim merchants from Arabia and India to continue trading there, and other ports in the area, such as Islamic Demak on Java, grew to overshadow Melaka.

The period of Portuguese strength in the East was short-lived, as Melaka suffered harrying attacks from the rulers of neighbouring Johor and Negeri Sembilan, as well as from the Islamic power of Aceh in Sumatra. Melaka declined further as Dutch influence in Indonesia grew and Batavia (modern-

