

Understand Malaysia, Singapore & Brunei

MALAYSIA, SINGAPORE & BRUNEI TODAY 562

Malaysians, Singaporeans and Bruneians are all tackling complex issues of race, religion and economics.

HISTORY 565

These three countries emerged from and were forged by the lucrative trade in spices, rubber and oil around the Malay peninsula.

PEOPLE, CULTURE & POLITICS 576

Malays, Chinese and Indians mingle in these multicultural nations. There are also scores of indigenous people, particularly on Borneo.

RELIGION 583

Islam is the region's main religion but Hinduism predates it in these parts. Animism and the various Chinese beliefs are also present.

ARTS & MEDIA 587

The contemporary art scene is thriving, particularly in Malaysia and Singapore. However, in all three countries media freedom is curtailed.

ENVIRONMENT 592

The conservation of mega-diverse environments in the region is balanced with economic development.

Malaysia, Singapore & Brunei Today

National tragedies and political troubles have impacted Malaysia in recent years. Passenger airplanes have fallen from the sky, an earthquake struck Sabah, and Prime Minister Najib Razak battled allegations of corruption and a faltering economy. Singapore mourned the death of its founding father Lee Kuan Yew then celebrated its 50th anniversary by re-electing his son as prime minister. Still no elections in the Sultanate of Brunei, but it has introduced sharia laws.

Best in Print: Fiction

The Garden of Evening Mists

(Tan Twan Eng; 2012) An elegant, multi-layered narrative that carries the reader from WWII occupied Malaya through to the terrors of the Emergency.

Crazy Rich Asians (Kevin Kwan; 2013) Light entertainment that skewers Singapore's jet-set generation.

Malaysian Tales (ed Daphne Lee; 2011) Local fables, fairy tales, myths and legends re-imagined and retold by contemporary writers.

Devil of a State (Anthony Burgess; 1961) The novel's setting of an imaginary caliphate Dunia is based on Burgess's time in Brunei in the 1950s.

Best on Film

Ilo Ilo (Anthony Chen; 2013) A 2013 Cannes Film Festival award winner, this touching story is about a troubled Chinese-Singaporean boy and his Filipino maid.

Bunohan (Dain Said; 2012) Moody, slow-moving thriller about a kickboxer on the run and troubled family relations on the Kelantan coast.

Sepet (Yasmin Ahmad; 2005) Love across the cultural barriers as a Chinese boy and a Malay girl fall for each other.

Lost Flights & an Earthquake

The discovery in July 2015 of plane debris on the Indian Ocean island of Reunion finally offered conclusive proof about the fate of Malaysian Airlines flight MH370, 18 months after its disappearance. Many questions about the final hours of MH370 and its 239 passengers still remain, not least of which is where the rest of the wreckage is.

The scattered remains of Malaysia Airlines MH17, which crashed on 17 July 2014 in the Donetsk area of Ukraine with a loss of 298 lives, were all too apparent. The official Dutch Safety Board report on the causes of the crash, published in October 2015, confirmed that the flight was shot down by a surface-to-air missile.

Although it was also unexpected, the geological causes of the earthquake that struck Sabah on 5 June 2015 and claimed the lives of 18 people on Mt Kinabalu are not in doubt. This didn't stop some locals believing that the quake, which registered 6.0 on the Richter scale, was the result of the region's animist spirits being angered by the disrespectful behaviour of Western tourists at the summit of the mountain six days earlier.

Najib Under Fire

In July 2015 Malaysia's Prime Minister Najib Razak, already taking the flack for a currency at a 17-year low against the US dollar and the introduction of an unpopular general sales tax, faced a new crisis. The Wall St Journal and other media sources implicated him in a corruption scandal involving the government's IMBD sovereign investment fund that aims to turn Kuala Lumpur (KL) into a global financial hub. The fund has racked up huge debts at the same time as it appears that nearly US\$700 million had been transferred from it into Najib's personal bank accounts.