

Malaysia, the Sultan and Plenty of Rules



Modern Kuala Lumpur is the political, economic and cultural center of Malaysia. The Petronas Towers dominate the skyline as they were the tallest towers at time of construction. Staying in Chinatown is a great way to visit the Central Market and a variety of temples. To the west is the colonial district which contains a variety of exhibits. The Museum of Islamic Arts contains a variety of interesting exhibits, including recreations of the most important mosques throughout the world. There are also intricate designs related to Korans and calligraphy. Nearby are the large National Mosque and National Planetarium which looks at the Islamic role in astronomy. The National Museum of History gives a detailed look at Malaysian History.

Historically important Melaka is a short trip from Kuala Lumpur. A nightly sound and light show does a quality job highlighting Melaka history under the Portuguese, Dutch, British and finally as an independent country by highlighting important buildings in the area south of Bukit St. Paul. One of those buildings is the Istana Ke Sultanan which is a reconstructed timber palace with an attractive garden. The palace details life in the Malay royal court. St. Paul's Church and a series of buildings called Stadthuys, are also located on the bukit (hill). One of the more interesting museums is the Museum of Enduring Beauty which details how humans in a variety of cultures forcible change there appearance. The graphic photographs and items include foot binding, lip disks and tattoos.

On the other side of the Melaka River is Chinatown, containing several points of interest. The Baba Nonya Heritage Museum shows how wealthy Chinese used to live. Other points of interest include a Sikh temple, Little India, great sunsets and an extensive cemetery for Chinese with detailed replicas of ships.

The city of Georgetown dominates life on Penang Island in the northern part of Malaysia. Fort Cornwallis dates to when the British under Captain Francis Light disembarked in 1786. Although historically important, nothing about its architecture stands out. Penang Museum and Art Gallery gives a more in depth look at life in Malaysia throughout the years. There are several British colonial buildings in the Lebuh Pantai district including the Anglican St. George's Church. Further north is the popular esplanade, where people watch the sunset and get a bite to eat at the markets.

The mixture of Chinese and Indian culture is noteworthy. There is a small, yet hectic area called Little India



that has Hindu temples, the smell of curry and Bollywood movies for sale. More noticeable is the Chinese community with numerous businesses in numerous sectors, with all seemingly open until late at night.

Malaysia's interior includes the largest national park, Taman Negara. The park is most easily accessed by the city of Jernatut, which is nice enough but doesn't have any other reason to visit besides access to park. Accessing the park is a combination of bus and boat trips to Kuala Tahan, which has ample accommodation and floating restaurants in the narrow part of the river.

The park itself has several activities. The most obvious is trekking on the paths that are not marked very well. There will be many birds, insects, snakes and, in the "bat cave", an amazing amount of bats. After getting use to the swaying, the canopy walkway is a great way to walk along the tops of the trees and possibly see some monkeys. The hides are basic bunk wooden accommodation located well inside the park that can be rented and increase the possibility of seeing larger animals. Also, a night trip allows for viewing more animals.



Malaysia is split into the Peninsular side and the Bornean states of Sarawak and Sabah, where the small country of Brunei is located. Before Bill Gates, the Sultan of Brunei (Hassanal Bolkiah), was the wealthiest person in the world with assets over \$30 billion. Despite accumulating personal wealth, the Sultan used his country's oil wealth for the benefit of his country and diversified the economy. In addition, he saw developing tourism as unnecessary until recently. Thus, traveling in Brunei is expensive and there isn't that much to see. Bus service from the capital of Bandar Seri Begawan ends at six at night and Brunei is officially a dry state so entertainment is limited.

Most of the things to see are related to the Sultan and his over forty-year reign. The Brunei Museum is a collection of art and gifts to the sultan. Istana Nurul Iman is the official residence of the Sultan and contains over 250 toilets. The Royal Regalia Building and Brunei History Center are two more "ode to the Sultan" buildings. In addition, there are many billboards with the Sultan on it. It seems that the people truly revere the Sultan and despite purchasing two hundred polo horses, the Sultan seems concerned for his people's well-being.

The splendor of Islam is the other item of note while visiting Brunei. The Jama 'Asr Hassanal Bolkiah Mosque is Brunei's largest mosque. It contains golden domes, a mixture of vibrant blues and greens on its interior, marble floors,



massive chandeliers and a beautiful garden. Non-Muslims had to wear something that looked like graduation cloaks while visiting the mosque. This mosque was located close to my hotel; my room contained a big arrow on the ceiling as a reminder of which direction Mecca is. The “other” mosque is Omar Ali Saifuddien Mosque, located in the city center of Bandar. The mosque stands out because it is all white except for a massive golden dome. The absolute area, for washing one’s feet of before entering the mosque, is attractive for its large fountains.

In stark contrast to the Omar Mosque is the poor area of Kampung Ayer, or water village. About thirty thousand people live in this stilt village in what can best be described as shacks. The village is really its own city as they have their own places of worship and utilities. The shacks are connected by wooden walkways of varying sturdiness.



On the southern end of Peninsular Malaysia is the “country of rules”, Singapore. Laws include no chewing gum, no jaywalking and no smoking in public. All carry fines and signs throughout the country encourage people to follow the rules and turn in those who don’t, which nets a monetary reward. I did notice that nobody jaywalked, and everyone waited for the light to cross the road. The degree of regulation has led to brain drain, with many of Singapore’s educated youth leaving for more entertaining locations.



Despite the heavy regulation, downtown Singapore has numerous attractions. The Colonial District contains the Victorian Parliament House, the Supreme Court, City Hall, a concert hall and many restaurants along the Singapore River. The Singapore Cricket Club is still members only, but the nearby recreation club is open. The most notable building is Raffles Hotel, harkening back to British colonialism. The rooms are still expensive, complimented by gourmet food, expensive shops and the “Singapore Swing” cocktail drink.

To the west is Fort Canning Park, which is located on a large hill overlooking the city.

Underground is the Battle Box, which was the British operations complex in World War II. The complex uses wax replicas coupled with video and audio to recreate the unsuccessful resistance to the Japanese. Above ground, young people play war with plastic guns and there are gardens and parks to visit.

In contrast to the “anything goes” parts of Southeast Asia, the more conservative countries of Malaysia, Brunei and Singapore may seem dull. The lack of attractions in Brunei and the excessive laws in Singapore are somewhat limiting. However, in all three countries things are well organized, extremely safe and there are still enough attractions to make for an enjoyable trip.

