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About 1,800 words

MALAYSIA PRIMER

by

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Shiny new cars race past ox carts plodding along the highways. Street merchants peddle unrecognizable fruit on rickety wooden carts in the shadows of modern shopping malls. Thick jungles merge into newly planted oil palm plantations as the country plunges toward a national goal of industrialization by the year 2020. Welcome to Malaysia.

For many travelers this country remains something of a mystery, a peninsular unknown between renowned Thailand and more visible Indonesia. So while you are trying to pinpoint Malaysia on the map, consider:

Although many miles away, Malaysia is surprisingly accessible in terms of things to see and do, ease of getting around, and affordability. The cost of airfare to Malaysia may be more than to other destinations, but once there, the costs are extremely low.

Malaysia also offers the most developed tourist infrastructure in Southeast Asia. Across the country, regional tourist offices distribute colorful, accurate brochures and useful information (See sidebar for travel specifics).

Still not enticed? Then you should also consider that Malaysia caters to many interests and budgets. There are unspoiled islands and beaches to loaf upon; clear blue waters in which to snorkel and scuba; thick, tropical jungles and forests to stroll through; natural and man-made sights to see; a variety of museums to visit. It is the kind of place seasoned travelers like to keep secret.

A MANAGEABLE CAPITAL

Most visits begin in Malaysia's prosperous, manageable capital of Kuala Lumpur, known everywhere in Malaysia as "KL". It is one of Asia's easiest capitals to navigate. Stop at the tourist office, called the Tourist Development Corporation (TDC), in the Putra World Trade Center, 45 Jalan Tun Ismail. It is a bit far from the center but there you can get a variety of maps, brochures, advice and information on all parts of Malaysia. These basic materials are free. More detailed maps and books are available for a small fee.

Among general sights to see are the street markets and the many ornate mosques, especially the modern "Masjid Negara", or National Mosque. Don't be confused with the nearby railway station, with its arches and towers. Chinatown is bustling and offers insight into the lifestyles of this populous Malaysian minority. The National Museum, the sprawling Lake Gardens, the National Museum of Art and the many craft centers offer cultural diversions.

If cities are your interest, head down the west coast to Malaysia's oldest and most historic city, Melaka. For centuries, this strategic port was an important center for international trade. The Portuguese, Dutch and English colonialists each took turns controlling the city, and today there are many leftovers of European architecture.

Walking along the winding streets amidst fortress ruins and old churches is a graphic lesson in colonial world history. An interesting, informative sound and light show, the first in east Asia, traces the town's history each evening.

A mile or so from town is the old Portuguese settlement, although there are few Portuguese left. Climb the partially restored St. John's Fort for the best panorama of the town. On the way back to town wander through the largest Chinese cemetery outside China; some of the 12,000 tombs date to Ming times.

Another town of note, and perhaps Malaysia's biggest tourist draw, is Georgetown on the island of Penang, on the north end of the west coast. Here you will find history (as the oldest British settlement in Malaysia) as well as hotels, beaches, temples, museums, markets and gardens. The Chinese influence here is stronger than anywhere else in Malaysia.

If you are traveling around the rest of Asia or the world, Penang is also known as a regional budget airfare center. Shop around for incredible deals at the many travel agencies.

THE 'REAL' MALAYSIA

Do not get carried away on the west coast, though, because the "real" Malaysia is waiting on the east coast. Here the pace of life slows and the Chinese and European influences are minimal.

All along the east coast are a number of small fishing villages, a few luxury hotel resorts and the uniquely Malaysian kampungs, or tourist beach villages. The best-known of these is Cherating, where an A-frame hut and meals cost less than \$10 a day. Nearby is a Club Med, although the two crowds rarely mix.

To really get away, head offshore to one of the many islands. I went to the Perhentian islands, south of Kota Bahru. For about \$3 a day I had a tiny hut with the surf in front and a kerosene lamp at night. It was quite basic; showering under buckets with water hauled up from a 10-foot-deep well, and a jungle walk to the bathroom along a narrow dirt path.

I am a budget die-hard, and found the primitive conditions quite fun. For those less inclined to roughing it, there are several other accommodations available, some of which feature generator-produced electricity and other conveniences. Meals cost a couple dollars at any of several cafes along the beach.

Arrangements on most other islands are similar. Ask fellow tourists along the way for details about their island visits. The main activities will be sunning, snorkeling and beach combing. There will no phones, televisions or newspapers within miles.

Another tourist draw is the turtle-watching beach of Rantau Abang. From May to September giant leatherback turtles drag up the beach to lay their eggs. This has turned into something of a circus, though, with local "spotters" being more interested in whisking around groups of tourists than in the turtles' well-being. Make careful inquiries to find reputable spotters. You can also search the beaches on your own at night, although some areas are restricted.

Near the bottom of the peninsula among several other islands is Malaysia's ultimate getaway, Pulau Tioman. This is where the musical "South Pacific" was filmed, and you cannot get more idyllic than that. Hike across the island, take scuba lessons, or laze on the beach. There are many island resorts and kampungs from which to choose, with luxury and price to suit all tastes.

FORESTS AND JUNGLES, TOO

After some lazy days on the beaches you may want to experience some of the mountains. Head north of Kuala Lumpur to the Cameron Highlands, one of many hill stations (plantations) around the center of the country. The weather is cool and the pace is calm. There are a number of easy walks of various durations through the forests and tea plantations. The town of Tanah Rata is the main center with a range of hotels and rest houses available.

Closer to Kuala Lumpur is the touristed Genting Highlands station, where you can blow some money in the casinos and expensive hotels. Fraser's Hill is also nice but is more remote and smaller than the Cameron Highlands.

More adventurous travelers may want to go farther inland to Taman Negara, Malaysia's huge national park (it covers over 4,300 square kilometers of jungle). The journey starts with a two-hour ride in a

canopied, motor-powered canoe to the park headquarters. Accommodations there range from spotless, private bungalows to tents, and restaurants range from fancy to basic.

Over a dozen trails lead off into the jungle, where hides (raised observation platforms) overlook salt licks. Native fauna such as tapirs, deer, wild pigs and the occasional elephant come to visit the salt licks. Along the trails are an incredible array of insects, birds and plants. You may see monkeys and shy gibbons zipping through the treetops, and you will hear sounds you never imagined could exist.

The park is closed during the rainy season, from November to mid-January. It is advisable to contact the main park office in KL to see if reservations are needed.

THE OTHER MALAYSIA

If you seek more outdoor challenges, look to the "other Malaysia"; the states of Sabah and Sarawak on the northern part of Borneo. Together they make up 60 percent of the Malaysian land mass but have only 3 million of the country's 17 million people. Heading out here requires a bit of planning.

The good news is that there is a network of national parks throughout both states offering some of the most spectacular natural sights in Malaysia. Getting to see the native Dyaks is a bit more difficult, but their longhouses are relatively accessible in many areas.

Kuching, the capital of Sarawak, has an excellent museum full of information on the Dyaks, a generic name for the native peoples of Borneo. After an informative stop there, many visitors head up the Rajang River to visit the Dyak villages. The farther you go, the more "authentic" the longhouses (and the skulls hanging from the porches) become. Current information on travel should first be obtained at the tourist office in Kuching.

Information on the national parks is also distributed in Kuching. A quick rundown:

Near Kuching is Bako National Park, where you can see rare proboscis monkeys. Bearded pigs and silver leaf monkeys will come up to your veranda looking for food scraps.

Niah Caves Park, a day-long bus trip away, has two interesting caves. The Great Cave features locals balancing on 100-foot bamboo poles, collecting nests used in bird nest soup. The oldest human remains found in Southeast Asia, dating back 40,000 years, were found here.

The Painted Cave has cave paintings and burial canoes, although little is known about either.

Gunung Mulu Park is for the truly adventurous, requiring special permits and transportation to visit. Thought to be one of the most extensive cave systems in the world, most of the passages have yet to be explored. Nearby Lambir Hills Park features several incredible, unspoiled waterfalls and hiking trails going through the most botanically diverse area on earth.

Access to most parks is easy via public buses. Bungalows and dorms are available for a few dollars a night, and meals are usually available. All parks have cooking facilities and basic food shops.

Sabah is home to Gunung Kinabalu, Southeast Asia's highest peak. There is a national park at the mountain's base, but be warned climbing to the summit at 4,100 meters (over 12,000 feet) takes plenty of stamina. If you survive, visit the nearby hot springs for a deserved rest.

On the east coast is the Sepilok Forest Reserve, best known for its orangutan sanctuary. The orangutans here have been found in logging camps or in illegal captivity and are being rehabilitated for return to the jungle.

Other highlights include the "Turtle Islands", breeding grounds for hawksbill and green turtles, and the diving paradise of Sipadan Island, renowned in Southeast Asia.

In the end, travel in Malaysia is as luxurious, relaxing or adventurous as you want to make it. Perhaps the only obstacle will be finding time to experience the variety of sights, sounds and peoples found in this far away yet accessible land.

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SIDEBAR

Spring and summer are probably the best seasons to visit Malaysia. Depending on where you are there, the rainy season will fall sometime between September and February. Monsoon rains can make travel difficult in Borneo between November and January, so plan accordingly. Expect warm, muggy temperatures year-round and brief, afternoon thundershowers in the spring and fall.

Malaysia can be seen comfortably for \$18 a day; for \$40 a day you can live very well. Always ask the price before you agree to buy something, and bargaining is expected.

Buy a phrasebook and learn a few Malay phrases. You will find the people will be doubly helpful and friendly. "Bahasa Malaysia" is considered one of the easiest languages in the world to learn.

Three-month travel visas are issued to westerners at the border. There is no need to obtain a visa in advance, and there are no travel restrictions within the country.

For accommodations, a number of western chains and western-style hotels can be found in all the major cities. These are very expensive, though, and you will pay over \$100 for a luxury hotel in the capital. For budget accommodations, seek out the Chinese hotels in every town and village. There are usually several to choose from with a variety of luxury and prices. Expect to pay from \$6 on up per person. A nice room with private bath will run about \$15. The Malaysia tourist office listed at the end has available a listing of inexpensive hotels throughout the country.

There are many "kampungs" along the coasts and on the islands. These are compounds with individual

huts, usually right on the beach. Very basic and very cheap, they often include simple meals. Expect to pay about \$3 a day and up for your own hut, which will include at least one meal.

For transportation, there is limited train service but very cheap and extensive bus service. Buses generally run on time, with fares averaging two or three dollars for a several-hour journey on an open-windowed bus. Air conditioned buses run most longer routes and cost a bit more. Long-distance, shared taxis are often available for slightly more than the bus. The national airline, Malaysian Air Systems (MAS), offers many flights and tourist bargains to destinations within Malaysia. (See below).

Rental cars are available in the bigger cities on an unlimited mileage basis. Daily rates start at about \$50. You will need an International Driving Permit and don't forget to drive on the left! Motor scooters and bicycles are also widely available to rent. Hitchhiking is easy, safe and fun for the adventurous, and a great way to meet the locals.

Restaurants and food stalls, known as "warungs", abound and food comes in three main varieties; Malay, Chinese and Indian. The latter two are a legacy of British colonial days when Chinese and Indian civil servants were brought in as administrators. At mealtimes, look over a few restaurants and choose one which seems to be clean and friendly. As with everywhere in Asia, it is wise to stick to bottled water and drinks.

The Malaysian currency, called the dollar or ringgit, is divided into 100 sen. Current exchange rates are about 2.5 ringgit to one US dollar. Traveler's cheques are easily cashed at banks around the country. Major credit cards are accepted in the larger establishments in principal cities. American Express has a few offices around Malaysia.

A note: as Malaysia is a predominantly Moslem country, you may be curious about the call to prayer several times a day. Loudspeakers from mosques around the country crank up with prayers sung in Arabic, reminding the faithful to attend. You are welcome to visit most mosques anytime, but note local dress codes. There may also be different sections for men and women. Above all, remember to

take your shoes off before you go inside. Just watch the locals and behave accordingly.

For airfare information, you can start by calling Malaysian Air Systems, especially for fares within Malaysia. Low season is September through June.

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