

History

As a modern independent nation, Malaysia has only been around since 1963, though the peninsula became independent of British colonial rule in 1957. The early history of the peninsula is hazy because of a lack of written records but events from the rise of the Melaka Sultanate in the 16th century were well documented by the nations which came here to trade with, and later rule over, the Malay peninsula. The following sections sketch in the main events – see the history sections of Kuala Lumpur (KL), Melaka and Penang for details of the rise of these destinations.

ORIGINAL PEOPLE

The first evidence of human life in the region was a 40,000-year-old skull found in Sarawak in 1958, but the oldest human relics found on the peninsula date back about 13,000 years. ‘Perak Man’ was genetically similar to the Negrito people who still live in the north of the peninsula. The Negritos were joined by Malaysia’s first immigrants, the Senoi, from southern Thailand, and later by the Proto-Malay, ancestors of today’s Malays, who came by sea from Indonesia between 1500BC and 500 BC. For more information on Malaysia’s indigenous people see p25.

EARLY TRADE & EMPIRES

By the 2nd century AD, Malaya was known as far away as India and Europe. Ptolemy, the Greek geographer, labelled it Aurea Chersonesus (Golden Chersonese) and Indian traders referred to the land as Savarnadvipa (Land of Gold). Malaya soon became a trading stop for Indian merchants in search of precious metals, tin and aromatic jungle woods. The first formalised religions on the peninsula – Hinduism and Buddhism – arrived with Indian traders, giving rise to the first recorded Hindu kingdom on the peninsula,

There are estimated to be 560 Christian missionaries striving to convert the Orang Asli (Original People; indigenous Malaysians) in Malaysia. Muslim groups are working just as hard to convert Orang Asli to Islam – several state governments have allegedly offered cash rewards for every Orang Asli converted.

THE LOST KINGDOM OF LANGKASUKA

We should not really be surprised that the early kingdom of Langkasuka was lost. Even at the time, people were unable to agree on its exact location. Chinese explorers claimed it was on the east coast, while Malay histories place it on the west coast near Penang. Probably there was just one kingdom extending right across the peninsula. Between the 3rd and 6th centuries, Langkasuka’s power dwindled and the Funan Kingdom, centred in what is now Cambodia, took over control of the region, before they were in turn supplanted by the Srivijaya Empire. The kingdom of Langkasuka disappeared from the map, though part of its name lives in on in the islands of Langkawi.

A HISTORY OF PIRACY

From the start of maritime trade to the present day, the Strait of Melaka has provided rich pickings for pirates. The earliest recorded seafaring pirates were the Orang Laut (Sea Gypsies), who were employed to police the trade routes by the Srivijaya Empire, but soon turned to piracy themselves. Parameswara, the founder of Melaka, also staged daring raids on traders from his temporary base of Temasek (Singapore); see p136. A millennium later and piracy is still a problem in the Strait of Melaka. There were 50 attacks in 2006, down from 79 in 2005, despite coordinated sea patrols by the Malaysian, Singaporean and Indonesian coast guards.

The tradition of piracy continues on land. Malaysia is one of the world’s most notorious centres for pirate goods – clothes, software, DVDs, auto parts, you name it. For many visitors, this makes Malaysia a shopping mecca. Convincing fakes of big name brands cost a fraction of the price of the real thing. Unfortunately, it’s not just big business that suffers – the trade in pirate software, films and music increases the price of legitimate goods for everyone and reduces the amount of money available to new artists and film makers. In response to international pressure, the government is slowly starting to crack down on the counterfeiting industry; take a walk around Chinatown’s Petaling Street Market (p77) and judge for yourself how successful this has been...

Langkasuka (from the Sanskrit for ‘resplendent land’); see opposite. Many key Malay words such as *bahasa* (language), *raja* (ruler) and *jaya* (success) are also Sanskrit terms.

From the 7th century to the 13th century, Malaya become dominated by the Srivijaya Empire, based in southern Sumatra. This Buddhist empire controlled the entire Malacca Straits, Java and southern Borneo and became fabulously rich from trade with India and China. Under the protection of the Srivijayans, a significant Malay trading state grew up in the Bujang Valley area in the far northwest of the Thai-Malay peninsula. The growing power of the southern Thai kingdom of Ligor and the Hindu Majapahit Empire of Java finally led to the demise of the Srivijayans in the 14th century.

The Other Malaysia by Farish A Noor is a collection of articles in which the writer uses forgotten gems of Malaysia’s history to comment on and critique contemporary Malaysian politics.

THE MELAKA EMPIRE

Founded around the 14th century, Malaya’s greatest empire was the brainchild of the renegade Hindu prince Parameswara (see p136), from Sumatra, who declared himself independent from the Javanese Majapahit Empire and was forced to flee to Temasek (Singapore). On arrival, Parameswara befriended the local chieftain, then killed him and pronounced himself ruler over the peninsula. From his base at Temasek, Parameswara and his pirate army wrought havoc on shipping and trade, until a huge Thai force drove Parameswara north to Melaka. As a seafarer, Parameswara recognised a good port when he saw it and he immediately lobbied the Ming emperor of China for protection from the Thais in exchange for generous trade deals.

TIMELINE

2nd century AD

700

1400

14th century

1445

1509

First trade recorded between Malaya and the ancient world.

The Buddhist Srivijaya Empire dominates Malaya, Singapore, Indonesia and Borneo for six centuries.

Foundation of Melaka, the most successful Malay sultanate.

The Srivijaya Empire comes to an end.

Islam becomes Melaka’s state religion and spreads throughout Southeast Asia.

The Portuguese land on the Malay Coast.

Thus the Chinese came to Malaysia. Equidistant between India and China, Melaka became a major stop for freighters from India loaded with pepper and cloth, and junks from China loaded with porcelain and silks, which were traded for local metal and spices. The Indian ships sailed in on the southwest monsoon, berthed in Melaka and waited for the northeast monsoon, which blew in the Chinese junks; both then sailed home when the winds reversed. Business boomed as regional ships and *perahu* (Malay-style sampans) arrived to take advantage of trading opportunities.

EARLY ISLAM

The first record of Islam on the peninsula was a stone plaque dated 1303 found in Terengganu. Islam came to Malaysia with Indian-Muslim traders and was quickly adopted by locals. In the mid-15th century, the third ruler of Melaka, Maharaja Mohammed Shah (1424–44) converted and his son, Mudzaffar Shah, took the title of sultan and made Islam the state religion. With its global trade links, Melaka became a hub for the dissemination of Islam and the Malay language across the region. The Melaka sultans soon ruled over the greatest empire in Malaysia's history, successfully repelling Siamese attacks.

THE PORTUGUESE ERA

By the 15th century, Europe had developed an insatiable appetite for spices, ostensibly to the mask the flavour of rotten meat in the days before refrigeration. At the time spices were conveyed via a convoluted trade route through India and Arabia, but the Portuguese decided to cut out the middle man and go directly to the source. They quickly established fortified depots along the sea route to Malaya, reaching the Malay coast in 1509. At first, the Portuguese were greeted warmly by the local sultan, but relations soon soured and the Portuguese laid siege to Melaka in 1511 under Viceroy Alfonso de Albuquerque, capturing the city and driving the sultans back to Johor.

The Portuguese secured Melaka by building the robust Porta de Santiago (A'Famosa fortress; see p142), and expeditions were sent to the Moluccas to secure trade deals for Moluccan spices. The Portuguese domination of Melaka lasted 130 years, though the entire period was marked by skirmishes with local sultans. Compared with Indian-Muslim traders, the Portuguese contributed little to Malay culture; attempts to introduce Christianity and the Portuguese language were never a big success, though a dialect of Portuguese, Kristang (see p147), is still spoken in Melaka.

THE DUTCH PERIOD

Vying with the Portuguese for control of the spice trade, the Dutch formed an allegiance with the sultans of Johor to drive the Portuguese from Melaka. The Dutch East India Company had no interest in God or national glory; they

Peninsular Malaysia was Buddhist and Hindu for a thousand years before the local rulers converted to Islam in the 15th century.

A government-sanctioned version of Malaysian history is given on the website Sejarah Malaysia (sejarahmalaysia.pnm.my).

MEANWHILE IN BORNEO...

While the East India Company was furthering its interests on the peninsula, Borneo was left largely to its own devices, until the arrival of British adventurer James Brooke. In 1835 Brooke inherited £30,000, bought a ship and sailed from London to Borneo, where he helped the local sultan suppress a tribal rebellion and took personal control of part of the island, founding his capital at Kuching. Through a combination of force and negotiation, Brooke gained control of large parts of Sarawak, founding his own dynasty of 'white Rajas', which ruled right up until 1941. The British obtained Sabah as down-payment on a debt from the Sultan of Brunei in 1865, though Brunei itself was preserved as a British protectorate.

came to Malaya to make money and negotiated directly for spices with the sultans of the local spice islands from their new base at Batavia (now Jakarta).

A joint force of Dutch and Johor soldiers and sailors besieged Melaka in 1641 and wrested the city from the Portuguese. In return for its cooperation, Johor was made exempt from most of the tariffs and trade restrictions imposed on other vassal states. Despite maintaining control of Melaka for about 150 years, the Dutch never really realised the full potential of the city. High taxes forced merchants to seek out other ports and the Dutch focused their main attention on Batavia as their regional headquarters.

EAST INDIA COMPANY

Britain entered the fray in the 18th century. With increasing British involvement in trade between India and China, the East India Company (EIC) needed a depot in Southeast Asia, and Francis Light negotiated a deal with the sultan of Kedah in 1786 to establish a settlement on the largely uninhabited island of Penang. Light immediately instituted a free-trade policy, which attracted massive trade from across the region.

Meanwhile, events in Europe were conspiring to consolidate British interests on the Malay peninsula. When Napoleon overran the Netherlands in 1795, the British, fearing French influence in the region, took over Dutch Java and Melaka. When Napoleon was defeated in 1818, the British handed the Dutch colonies back – but not before leaving the fortress of A'Famosa beyond use.

The British lieutenant-governor of Java, Stamford Raffles – yes, *that* Stamford Raffles – soon persuaded the EIC that a settlement south of the Malay peninsula was crucial to the India–China maritime route. In 1819, he landed in Singapore and negotiated a trade deal that saw the island ceded to Britain in perpetuity, in exchange for a significant cash tribute. In 1824, Britain and the Netherlands signed the Anglo-Dutch Treaty dividing the region into two distinct spheres of influence. The Dutch controlled what is now Indonesia, and the British controlled Penang, Melaka, Dinding and Singapore, which were soon combined to create the 'Straits Settlements'.

A History of Malaya by Barbara and Leonard Andaya brilliantly explores the evolution of 'Malayness' in Malaysia's history and the challenges of building a multiracial, post-independence nation.

1511

The Portuguese conquer Melaka.

1641

The Dutch wrest Melaka from the Portuguese.

1786

The British open a free-trading port in Penang.

1795

The British take over Dutch Java and Melaka before returning them after the defeat of Napoleon in 1818.

1824

Britain assumes control of Melaka as part of the Anglo-Dutch Treaty.

1841

James Brook becomes the first White Raja of Sarawak.

BRITISH MALAYA

The British enterprise in Malaya had always focused on trade, rather than territory, but the start of the civil wars between the sultans of Negeri Sembilan, Selangor, Pahang and Perak began to threaten British trade, leading to the first serious territorial expansion. In 1874 the British appointed the first colonial governor of Perak and, in 1896, Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang were united under the banner of the Federated Malay States, each governed by a British Resident.

Kelantan, Terengganu, Perlis and Kedah were then purchased from the Thais, in exchange for the construction of the southern Thai railway, much to the dismay of local sultans. The 'Unfederated Malay States' eventually accepted British 'advisers', though the sultan of Terengganu held out till 1919. As a result, these states received far fewer migrant workers from India and China. To this day, the states of the northeast peninsula form the heartland of the strident and increasingly fundamentalist Malay Muslim nationalist movement.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

As elsewhere in the empire, the British created massive social change in Malaya. Tin mines, rubber plantations and trading companies were created to swell the empire's coffers, but ethnic Malays were marginalised in favour of Indian and Chinese migrant workers who shared a similar economic agenda and had less nationalist grievance against the colonial administration. Malays were pushed from the cities to the countryside, while the Chinese were encouraged to work the mines, the Indians to tap the rubber trees and build the railways, the Ceylonese to be clerks in the civil service, and Sikhs to man the police force.

Founded by Chinese miners, Kuala Lumpur became the capital of the Federated Malay States in 1896 (for more on KL's history, see p70). By the time the Singapore Malay Union was formed in 1926, the ethnic balance of Malaya had changed dramatically. The 1931 census revealed that the Chinese numbered 1.7 million and the Malays 1.6 million. The Chinese came to dominate the capital and most towns on the coast, forming a new wealthy elite, and resentment among the Malay population grew. By the outbreak of WWII, Malays were vocally demanding independence.

WWII PERIOD

WWII came to Malaya just hours before the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in December 1941. The Japanese surged over the peninsula and captured Kuala Lumpur within a month. A month later they surged into Singapore. With its guns pointing uselessly out to sea, Singapore capitulated in February 1942. The popular perception that the British left Malaya to its fate is not quite accurate. Although Britain quickly ceded Malaya and Singapore, this

F Spencer Chapman's *The Jungle is Neutral* follows a British guerrilla force based in the Malaysian jungles during the Japanese occupation of Malaya.

ORANG ASLI

Throughout the history of Malaysia, settlers have jostled for control of the Malay peninsula. In the process, the indigenous people of Malaysia have emerged as the most marginalised people of all. According to data published by the **Department of Orang Asli Affairs** (JHEOA; www.jheoa.gov.my), in December 2004 Peninsular Malaysia had just under 150,000 Orang Asli (Original People); 80% live below the poverty line, compared with an 8.5% national average. The tribes are generally classified into three groups: the Negrito; the Senoi; and the Proto-Malays, who are subdivided into 18 tribes, the smallest being the Orang Kanak with just 87 members. In Borneo, Orang Asli make up about around 50% to 60% of the population but they face similar obstacles of poverty and neglect. There are dozens of different tribal languages and most Orang Asli follow animist beliefs, though there are vigorous attempts to convert them to Islam or Christianity.

The Orang Asli played an important role in early trade, teaching the colonialists about forest products and guiding prospectors to outcrops of tin and precious metals. They also played a vital role during the communist Emergency in the 1950s, acting as scouts and guides for anti-insurgent forces. After the communists were thwarted, 'guardianship' of the Orang Asli passed to the JHEOA, which has spectacularly failed to uphold Orang Asli rights in the face of exploitation by the government. Whenever logging, mining, agricultural or development projects infringe on Orang Asli land, native land rights are routinely ignored, usually for reasons of 'national interest'. JHEOA is also spearheading the campaign to convert the Orang Asli to Islam.

For an excellent introduction to the customs and culture of Malaysia's indigenous people, visit the Orang Asli Museum (p131), just north of Kuala Lumpur. A number of international NGOs are now campaigning for Orang Asli land rights and freedom of religious expression – see the sidebar, below.

was more through poor strategy than neglect. Many British soldiers were captured or killed and others stayed on and fought with the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) in a jungle-based guerrilla war throughout the occupation.

The Japanese achieved very little in Malaya. The British had destroyed most of the tin-mining equipment before their retreat, and the rubber plantations were neglected. However, Chinese Malaysians faced brutal persecution – the atrocities of the occupation were horrific even by the standards of WWII. The Japanese surrendered to the British in Singapore in 1945, after the devastating atom bombs dropped over Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

FEDERATION OF MALAYA

In 1946 the British persuaded the sultans to agree to the Malayan Union, which amalgamated all the peninsular Malayan states into a central authority and came with the offer of citizenship to all residents regardless of race. In the process, the sultans were reduced to the level of paid advisers, the system of special privileges for Malays was abandoned and ultimate sovereignty passed

For more information on the plight of Orang Asli people in Peninsular Malaysia, visit the websites of Temier Web (www.temiar.com), the Centre for Orang Asli Concerns (www.coac.org.my) or the Borneo Project (www.borneoproject.org).

1896

Kuala Lumpur becomes capital of the Federated Malay States.

1926

The Malay states and Singapore are united as the Singapore Malay Union.

1941–45

The Japanese invade and lay siege to Malaya and Singapore, ushering in a brutal five-year occupation.

1946

Creation of the Malayan Union, which is subsequently dissolved two years later, and replaced by the Federation of Malaya.

1948

Communist rebellion leads to the declaration of the Emergency in Malaya.

1951

British High Commissioner Sir Henry Gurney is assassinated in the Malayan Communist Party's guerrilla war against the British.

to the king of England. Bankrupted by the war, the third Raja Brooke allowed North Borneo and Sarawak to become the crown colony of British Borneo, while Singapore was granted a separate administration.

The normally acquiescent Malay population were less enthusiastic about the venture than the sultans. Rowdy protest meetings were held throughout the country, and the first Malay political party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), was formed, leading to the dissolution of the Malayan Union, and the creation of the Federation of Malaya in 1948, which reinstated the sovereignty of the sultans and the special privileges of the Malays.

THE EMERGENCY

While the creation of the Federation of Malaya appeased Malays, the Chinese felt betrayed, particularly after their massive contribution to the war effort. Many joined the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), which promised an equitable and just society. In 1948 the MCP took to the jungles and embarked on a 12-year guerrilla war against the British. Even though the insurrection was on par with the Malay civil wars of the 19th century, it was classified as an 'Emergency' for insurance purposes, so that claims could still be made on policies that didn't cover riots and civil commotions.

The effects of the Emergency were felt most strongly in the countryside, where villages and plantation owners were repeatedly targeted by rebels. In 1951 the British high commissioner was assassinated on the road to Fraser's Hill. His successor, General Sir Gerald Templer, set out to 'win the hearts and minds of the people'. Almost 500,000 rural Chinese were resettled into protected 'new villages', restrictions were lifted on guerrilla-free areas and the jungle-dwelling Orang Asli (see p25) were bought into the fight to help the police track down the insurgents.

In 1960 the Emergency was declared over, although sporadic fighting continued and the formal surrender was signed only in 1989.

MERDEKA & MALAYSIA

Malaysia's march to independence from British rule was led by UMNO, which formed a strategic alliance with the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC). The new Alliance Party led by Tunku Abdul Rahman won a landslide victory in the 1955 election and, on 31 August 1957, Merdeka (Independence) was declared. A unique solution was found for the problem of having nine state sultans eligible for the ceremonial position of paramount ruler – they would take turns once every five years (the current king is the Sultan of Terengganu).

In 1961 Tunku Abdul Rahman put forward a proposal suggesting a merger of Singapore, Malaya, Sabah and Sarawak, and modern Malaysia was born in July 1963. The new nation immediately faced a diplomatic crisis. The

Philippines broke off relations, claiming that Sabah was part of its territory (a claim upheld to this day), while Indonesia laid claim to the whole of Borneo, invading parts of Sabah and Sarawak before finally giving up its claim in 1966. The Malay-majority kingdom of Brunei, buoyed by wealth from its considerable oilfields, opted to leave Malaya and remain a British protectorate, finally becoming an independent nation in 1984.

ETHNIC TENSIONS

The marriage between Singapore and Malaya was doomed from the start. Ethnic Chinese outnumbered Malays in both Malaysia and Singapore and the new ruler of the island-state, Lee Kuan Yew, refused to extend constitutional privileges to the Malays in Singapore. Riots broke out in Singapore in 1964 and in August 1965 Tunku Abdul Rahman bowed to the inevitable and booted Singapore out of the federation. Over the following decades, the Chinese created a dynamic and prosperous city-state in Singapore, while Malaysia remained wracked by ethnic tensions.

Impoverished Malays became increasingly resentful of the economic success of Chinese Malaysians, while the Chinese grew resentful of the political privileges granted to Malays. Things reached breaking point when the Malay-dominated government attempted to suppress all languages except Malay and introduced a national policy of education that ignored Chinese and Indian history, language and culture.

In the 1969 general elections, the Alliance Party lost its two-thirds majority in parliament and a celebration march by the opposition Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Gerakan (The People's Movement) in Kuala Lumpur led to a full-scale riot, which Malay gangs used as a pretext to loot Chinese businesses, killing hundreds of Chinese in the process. Stunned by the savageness of the riots the Malaysian government decided that the Malay community needed to achieve economic parity if there was ever going to be harmony between the races.

NEW ECONOMIC POLICY

In 1970 the government introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) with the aim that 30% of Malaysia's corporate wealth be in the hands of indigenous Malays, or *bumiputra* (literally 'sons of the land'), within 20 years. A massive campaign of positive discrimination began which handed majority control over the army, police, civil service and government to Malays. The rules extended to education, scholarships, share deals, corporate management and even the right to import a car.

On one level, the policy was a success – it increased the wealth and political voice of Malays and quietened nationalist violence by Malay extremists. However, it also heralded an increase in complaints of cronyism, as well as discrimination against Indians and Chinese. Ever since the introduction of

Anthony Burgess's *A Malayan Trilogy* is based on his experiences as an information officer during the Malayan Emergency.

Noel Barber's *The War of the Running Dogs* is a classic account of the 12-year Malayan Emergency.

Communism is a thorny issue in Malaysia – Amir Muhammad's film *The Last Communist* was banned in 2006 for allegedly glorifying communism.

Explore the politics and ethos of Barisan Nasional (National Front) at www.bn.org.my.

The Indian and Chinese communities have their own organisations campaigning on minority issues – see the websites of the Malaysian Indian Congress (www.mic.org.my) and Malaysian Chinese Association (www.mca.org.my).

1957

1960

1965

1969

1970

1981

Merdeka (Independence) in Malaya; Tunku Abdul Rahman becomes the first prime minister. Malaysia comes into being in 1963.

Sir Gerald Temple, successor to Sir Henry Gurney, declares the Emergency over.

Singapore is formally expelled from Malaysia.

In 1969 race riots in Malaysia result in a national policy of positive discrimination for Malays.

Malaysia introduces the New Economic Policy – positive discrimination for ethnic Malays.

Dr Mahathir becomes prime minister of Malaysia.

the NEP, Malaysia has been ruled by Barisan Nasional (the National Front), a coalition of the Alliance Party and other pro-Malay parties, including the ultranationalist UMNO.

ENTER MAHATHIR

In 1981 former UMNO member Mahathir Mohamad became prime minister, despite a rocky political past where he was accused of failing to stand up for the Malay nationalist cause. Under Mahathir, Malaysia started to look away from Britain and Europe and model itself on Asian economies such as Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. Malaysia's economy went into overdrive, shifting almost overnight from commodities such as rubber and tin to industry and manufacturing.

Government monopolies were privatised, and massive investment was funnelled into state enterprises such as Petronas and the manufacture of the Proton, the first Malaysian car. Simultaneously, multinational corporations invested heavily in infrastructure and Malaysia embarked on a series of ostentatious civic schemes including the creation of a huge new political and technological enclave at Putrajaya (see p130). This wealth came at the cost of liberty – the government began a massive crackdown on dissent, ruling the sultans out of the legislative process and curbing the freedom of the judiciary and the press.

ECONOMIC & POLITICAL CRISIS

Things took a turn for the worse in 1997, when Malaysia was caught up in a region-wide recession triggered by the Thai currency crisis. Riding a growing wave of anti-Western sentiment, Mahathir shifted all the blame to the West. His own remedies for the ailing economy involved pegging the Malaysian ringgit to the US dollar, bailing out companies run by cronies, forcing banks to merge and preventing foreign investors from removing money from Malaysia's stock exchange. Mahathir was opposed by his deputy prime minister and heir apparent, Anwar Ibrahim, a fierce opponent of corruption.

In September 1998 Anwar was sacked and then arrested on dubious charges of corruption and sodomy, during which time he was assaulted in prison by the inspector general of police. Opposition marches calling for his release were harshly suppressed and Anwar was summarily sentenced to 15 years. In the 1999 general elections Barisan Nasional suffered huge losses to the new, radical Islamic party PAS (which stands for Parti Islam se-Malaysia), and Keadilan (People's Justice Party), the party headed by Anwar's wife.

The rise of PAS was just one sign of growing Islamic influence in Malaysia; the *syariah* (Islamic) courts also began to wield increasing influence over secular affairs.

Read about the Malaysian politics in the words of a former prime minister in *The Malay Dilemma* by Mahathir Mohamad.

Malaysia has two judicial systems: the federal court system rules on secular matters while the *syariah* (Islamic) courts have jurisdiction over Islamic affairs.

Laws that used to cover only Muslim Malays were extended to non-Muslims, women's rights were suppressed (see p35) and projects for new mosques and Islamic schools were initiated all over the country, while churches, temples and minority schools were closed down. At the same time, the government has cracked down on Islamic extremists, who have been implicated in violence from southern Thailand to Indonesia and the Philippines.

MALAYSIA TODAY

In 2003, Mahathir was replaced as prime minister by Abdullah Badawi, a former Islamic scholar. Abdullah shifted the focus of government from urban development to education and wealth redistribution, and promoted a new policy of Islam Hadhari, a progressive concept of Islam where religious values are enshrined within a secular state. PAS has seen a fall in support and Anwar Ibrahim was released from prison on appeal in 2004, though the courts refused to clear his name on any of the charges. Although banned from politics until 2008, Anwar continues to play an active role in the battle against corruption both in Malaysia and overseas.

Despite many positive developments, discrimination against minorities continues to rise and Islamic law is increasingly taking precedence over secular law, as in the recent apostasy ruling against Lina Joy (see p31). Many commentators now fear that Malaysia is creeping towards becoming a fully fledged Islamic republic, with implications for social stability and minority rights.

A particularly worrying development has been the widespread banning of films, songs and websites that allegedly 'present Malaysia in a bad light' (see boxed text, p38) and a spate of arrests of journalists, bloggers and website editors on spurious sedition charges, in most cases over comments criticising the NEP. See p32 for more on the issue of minority rights.

The elections in 2008 saw a massive drop in support for Prime Minister Badawi and the ruling coalition. The National Front lost its two-thirds parliamentary majority for the first time since 1969 and opposition parties gained control of five state assemblies, including Penang, which has already announced plans to abandon the New Economic Policy. Whatever happens, the next few years will see some radical changes in the Malaysian status quo.

Read about Anwar Ibrahim in his own words on the politician's official website – www.anwaribrahim.com.

The news website www.malaysiakini.com has uncensored news and comment on current events in Malaysia.

1997

Malaysian economy hit by recession.

1998

Deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim arrested and imprisoned on charges of corruption and sodomy.

2003

Dr Mahathir steps down as prime minister; Abdullah Badawi takes over.

2004

Anwar Ibrahim is released from prison.

2007

Police crack down on anti-discrimination rallies by Indian Malaysians in Kuala Lumpur.

2008

The 2008 elections saw a massive drop in support for Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and the ruling National Front coalition.

The Culture

REGIONAL IDENTITY

You don't have to spend long in Malaysia to realise that this is not one country, but three – although bound by a strong sense of shared experience and national identity, Malay, Chinese and Indian Malaysians identify most strongly with their own ethnic and religious communities. For the most part, despite their differences, everyone gets along, partly because they have to and partly because of the generous spirit of the country and its relative wealth compared with its immediate neighbours.

Making up around 60% of the population, Muslim Malays have traditionally dominated the countryside as farmers and *kampung* (village) dwellers, while the Chinese minority have traditionally formed the wealthy, urban elite. The roots of this go back to the European colonial period and the marginalisation of Malays in favour of more pro-European Chinese settlers. The Indian population also arrived in Malaysia during the colonial period, but Indians were employed as indentured labourers and many still find themselves at the bottom of the social heap, particularly in the cities.

Between these clearly defined ethnic groups are smaller mixed communities such as the Baba-Nonya (Peranakans) of Melaka, descendants of 15th-century Chinese immigrants who married Malay women (see p144), and the Chitty, descended from 14th-century Indian traders who married local women. Malaysia also has large numbers of tribal people – around 5% of the population – who make up the majority in Malaysian Borneo.

Perhaps the most important shift in the social structure of Malaysia has been the rise of the Malay community since independence. Following the departure of the British in 1957, Malaysia introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP), a nationwide programme of positive discrimination to bring marginalised Muslim Malays and certain groups of tribal people – known collectively as *bumiputra* – into the political and economic mainstream. The policy was nothing if not successful; Malays now form the overwhelming majority in the police force, army, civil service and government, and the *syariah* (Islamic) courts are taking an increasingly active role in political affairs, with implications for the future of secular democracy.

Some Indian and Chinese Malaysians have reported growing discrimination at all levels of government. The Hindu Rights Action Force, which is campaigning for better representation for Malaysian Indians, has accused the government of giving preferential treatment to social projects that benefit the Muslim community.

The underlying religious and ethnic tension is a fact of life in Malaysia, but as a rule it is less noticeable in the cities, particularly in historically mixed communities such as Kuala Lumpur (KL), Melaka and Penang. For foreign visitors, the most obvious sign of growing religious conservatism is the national obsession with propriety, which extends to newspaper polemics on female modesty and raids by the police on 'immoral' public establishments.

LIFESTYLE

By global standards most Malaysians lead relatively comfortable lives. The average monthly salary in Malaysia is around RM1750 (US\$500), less than in Singapore but more than in Thailand. With the low cost of most items, Malaysians manage to enjoy a reasonably high standard of living. However, many people in rural areas earn less than RM300 a month, well below the

The Malay surname is the child's father's first name. This is why Malaysians will use your Christian name after the Mr or Miss; to use your surname would be to address your father.

The website www.bangkai.net is a portal for civil liberties groups across Malaysia.

A MALAYSIAN CATCH-22

Officially, the Malaysian government is committed to the principle of Islam Hadhari (progressive Islam), which enshrines the right to freedom of religion. However since 1988, the secular courts have been unable to overrule decisions made by the *syariah* courts (which have jurisdiction only over matters of Islamic law).

Campaigners against the 1988 decision, hoping for a ruling that returned power to the secular authorities, backed the case of Lina Joy, a Christian Malay and a convert from Islam. Joy's case, in Malaysia's High Court and then Federal Court, may seem at face value to be simple enough: to change her official designation from Muslim to Christian. More serious legally was that in having this decision made by the secular courts, Joy was circumventing the *syariah* courts.

Under Malaysian law all ethnic Malays are classified as Muslims, which makes them subject to the jurisdiction of the *syariah* courts and a system of laws that only apply to Muslims, including a ban on marriage to people of other faiths. One of Lina Joy's aims in having her change of religion recognised was to gain permission to marry her Christian fiancée.

One area that is deemed to fall within the remit of the *syariah* courts is granting permission for Muslims to change religion. However, Joy and others who want to convert from Islam are caught in something of a catch-22 situation: to convert from Islam, and thus avoid any restrictions of Islamic law, a Muslim must apply for permission from the *syariah* courts, who have only once granted such permission (to a woman already dead). It was this paradox that Joy hoped to escape by taking her case to the secular courts.

In 2007 the Federal Court, supporting the High Court in 1999, ruled that Lina Joy could not change her religion outside of the *syariah* court system.

official poverty line. Unemployment is a growing problem, with local workers being undercut by migrant workers from Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines and Myanmar (Burma).

Although Western attitudes are gaining ground, particularly when it comes to wealth and material possessions, traditional customs and religious values still form the backbone of Malaysian society. Malays follow Islam devoutly, as well as adhering to older spiritual beliefs and *adat* (the village-based social system). With its roots in the Hindu period, *adat* places great emphasis on collective responsibility and on maintaining harmony within the community – almost certainly a factor in the general goodwill between the different ethnic groups in Malaysia. Many city-dwellers still hanker for this *kampung* spirit, despite the perks of city life.

The Muslim religious leader, the imam, holds a position of great importance in the community as the keeper of Islamic knowledge and the leader of prayer, but even educated urban Malaysians periodically turn to *pawang* (shamans who possess a supernatural knowledge of harvests and nature) or *bomoh* (spiritual healers with knowledge of curative plants and the ability to harness the power of the spirit world), for advice before making any life-changing decisions.

Religious customs govern much of the Chinese community's home life, from the moment of birth (which is carefully recorded for astrological consultations later in life) to funerals (with many rites and rituals). Most Indians in the region originally come from Tamil Nadu in India, so the Hindu and Muslim traditions of South India hold a powerful sway.

ECONOMY

The Malaysian economy has grown steadily since independence. Old earners such as rubber, tin and timber exports have been replaced by manufacturing, particularly electronics and electrical machinery, which accounts for 67.7% of exports. However, palm oil production still forms a significant part of the rural economy, as well as being the main engine driving deforestation; see p59.

The cartoonist and artist Lat is a national institution in Malaysia. His most famous character is *Kampung Boy*, whose village experiences mirror events in public life. Look out for his strip in the *New Straits Times*.

THE POWER OF PETRONAS

Oil was first discovered by the British Resident of the Baran district of Sarawak in 1882, but it was nearly a century before Malaysia started extracting oil and natural gas under the banner of Petrolia Nasional Bhd – better known as **Petronas** (www.petronas.com.my). Founded in 1974, the national oil and gas company continues to have the sole rights to develop oil- and gas-fields across Malaysia, the bulk of which lie between Peninsular Malaysia and Borneo.

Today Petronas is one of the world's largest corporations, with assets valued at RM239 billion and 30,000 employees in 31 different countries. Despite global concerns about peak oil, profits continue to rise – in 2007, Petronas earned a record pretax profit of RM76 billion, 10% up from 2006.

The phenomenal success of Petronas is all the more surprising considering the way that past earnings have been spent by the Malaysian government. The Petronas board is accountable directly to the prime minister, ensuring financial backing for a string of white elephant projects such as the construction of Putrajaya – a glimmering but so far mostly uninhabited new capital just south of Kuala Lumpur (KL) – and the similarly underutilised 'cyber-city' at Cyberjaya. Of course, some Petronas projects have widespread popular support – Petronas is the main sponsor of the Malaysian Formula One Grand Prix.

Multinational corporations invested heavily in the Malaysian economy in the Mahathir years, leading to an upsurge in construction and urban expansion. Simultaneously, soaring profits at Petronas, the national oil and gas company (see above), provided revenue for a string of grand civic projects such as Cyberjaya, planned as Malaysia's answer to Silicon Valley but still lying mostly dormant in the hills south of KL.

Under Abdullah Badawi, the nation has taken a more cautious approach to the economy. The ringgit was allowed to float freely in December 2005, and the government has pulled back on expensive construction programmes in favour of practical policies to improve education and reduce poverty. The government also seems less willing to plough money into overblown civic projects, and is more circumspect about bailing out ailing national enterprises such as the car manufacturer Proton, which saw a 40% drop in sales in 2006.

POPULATION

Malaysia's population is currently 27.17 million, with approximately 85% living in Peninsular Malaysia. Malays, including indigenous groups, make up 61.7% of the population, Chinese 23.8%, Indians 7.1% and the remaining 7.4% are mainly expat workers from Europe, Japan, Korea and other parts of Asia.

ETHNIC MINORITIES

Malaysia has always been a multicultural country, but the problem of balancing the needs of all these different religions and ethnic communities was thrown into sharp relief by the interracial riots of 1969. In the aftermath of the riots, the government introduced a programme to redistribute wealth and opportunities to the marginalised Malays, and promoted Bahasa Malaysia as the national language, which ushered in the broadly tolerant Malaysia of today.

Positive discrimination has been a partial, although unsurprisingly not a total, success (for further information, see p27). Increased representation of Malays has been achieved at the cost of under-representation of Chinese and Indians, and relations between the main ethnic communities remain strained.

Until the 1970s Penang had a small but active Jewish community, descended from refugees from China and Iraq. Most have now moved to Singapore, but funerals are still carried out at the Jewish cemetery in Penang.

In the past the government has been careful to show even-handedness in cultural issues and keep the Chinese and Indian communities on side in the interests of social stability. Political decisions seen to be influenced by Islamic thinking have been viewed as an erosion of this principle – for example, the banning, and then unbanning, of translations of the Bible, and the decision to make all Malaysian policewomen wear the *tudong* (headscarf), regardless of their religion.

MEDIA

The press in Malaysia has to be circumspect about what it says. Some journalists who have criticised government policies have been arrested on charges such as 'inciting racial tension', 'harming national unity' and 'revealing official secrets'. Self-censorship is commonplace and editorials take care not delve too deeply into stories of religious persecution and discrimination against Indians and Chinese.

The online news site Malaysiakini (www.malaysiakini.com) continues to be the leading voice of uncensored journalism in Malaysia, despite intimidation by the police and the youth wing of United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the largest Malaysian political party.

The government's decision not to censor the internet has created a fertile breeding ground for 'seditious' blogs that explore all the taboo subjects in Malaysian society (now you know what all those people tapping away at laptops in Malaysian cafés are doing!).

The government makes periodic noises about clamping down on bloggers and there have been a number of high-profile arrests, but there are still dozens of vocal online commentators – for example you'll find that there's always something interesting being said by Kenny Sia (www.kennysia.com) and Jeff Ooi (www.jeffooi.com).

Blogs Malaysia (www.blogsmalaysia.com) acts like an anarchic clearing house for many of Malaysia's leading blogs.

TALKING THE TALK

As a former British colony Malaysia is an easy place to travel for English-speakers, but it's still worth learning a few words of the local language – Bahasa Malaysia or Malay (see p246 for some useful phrases).

Although all Malaysians speak Malay, many are fluent in at least two other languages. Commonly spoken languages include Tamil, Hokkien, Cantonese and Mandarin, but there are many other Chinese dialects, various Indian and Orang Asli (Original People) languages, and even a form of 16th-century Portuguese known as Kristang (p147).

Even if you stick to English, you'll have to get used to the local patois – Manglish – which includes plenty of Mandarin and Cantonese words and short phrases from text messages and online chat. Many words are used solely to add emphasis and have no formal meaning, which can make things a little confusing. Used incorrectly, Manglish can come across as quite rude, so get a local to show you the ropes before trying it out in polite company. Some common Manglish terms to look out for:

Ah Used for questions, eg 'Why late ah?'

Got Used for all tenses of the verb 'to have', eg 'Got milk ah?'

Lah Used to affirm a statement, eg 'Don't be stupid lah!'

Liao Similar to 'already', eg 'All done liao.'

Le Used to make an order less harsh, eg 'Give le.'

Lor Used for explanations, eg 'Just is lor.'

Meh Used for sceptical questions, eg 'Really meh?'

One Used to add emphasis to the end of a sentence, eg 'That car so fast one.'

Reddie Another form of already, eg 'No thanks, eat reddie.'

RELIGION

The variety of religions found in Malaysia is a direct reflection of the diversity of races living there. Although Islam is the state religion, freedom of religion is guaranteed by law (see the boxed text, p31).

Islam

Islam came to Malaysia with South Indian traders, who practised a less strict form of the faith than the orthodox Islamic traditions of Arabia. It was adopted peacefully by the coastal trading ports of Malaysia and Indonesia, absorbing rather than conquering existing beliefs. Islamic sultanates replaced Hindu kingdoms, but the Hindu concept of kings remained. The social structure of *adat* remained in place, though decisions were made according to Islamic law.

Islam is a monotheistic religion. Muslims believe that the will of Allah was revealed on earth to the prophet Mohammed through the Quran. Religious scholars known as imams have the job of interpreting Islamic teachings, but there is no equivalent to the hierarchy of the Catholic or Anglican churches. Muslims draw divine inspiration directly from the Quran.

Most Malaysian Muslims are Sunnis, but all Muslims share a common belief in the Five Pillars of Islam: *shahadah* (the declaration of faith) – ‘There is no God but Allah; Mohammed is his Prophet’; prayer, ideally five times a day, in which the muezzin (prayer leader) calls the faithful to prayer from the minarets of every mosque; *zakat* (tax) usually taking the form of a charitable donation; fasting, including observing the fasting month of Ramadan, although the sick, children, pregnant women, the elderly and travellers are usually exempt; and hajj (the ritual pilgrimage to Mecca), which every Muslim aspires to do at least once in their lifetime.

Pre-Islamic ceremonies and beliefs are still widespread, but most Malays are ardent Muslims to the point that the history of Malaysia before Islam is rarely discussed or even acknowledged.

Chinese Religions

Chinese in the region usually follow a mix of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. Buddhism takes care of the afterlife, Confucianism looks after the political and moral aspects of life, while Taoism contributes animistic beliefs to teach people to maintain harmony with the universe. Chinese religion upholds a belief in the innate vital energy in rocks, trees, rivers and springs. At the same time, people from the distant past, both real and mythological, are worshipped as deities. Ancestor worship is particularly important to the Chinese in Malaysia.

On a day-to-day level most Chinese are much less concerned with the high-minded philosophies and asceticism of Buddha, Confucius or Lao Zi than they are with the pursuit of worldly success, the appeasement of the dead and the spirits, and the seeking of knowledge about the future. Like Hinduism, Chinese religion is polytheistic – as well as Buddha, Lao Zi and Confucius, there are a host of house gods, auspicious deities and gods and goddesses for particular professions.

The most popular gods and *shen* (local deities) are Kuan Yin, the goddess of mercy, and Toh Peh Kong, a local deity representing the spirit of pioneers, found only outside China. Kuan Ti, the god of war, is also very popular and is also regarded as the god of wealth.

Hinduism

Hinduism has been practised in Malaysia for 1500 years and there are clear Hindu influences in many Malay cultural traditions, such as *wayang kulit*

Muslim Malays are banned by law from gambling and buying alcohol.

For a handy introduction to the core teachings of Taoism visit www.taopage.org.

(shadow puppetry) and the wedding ceremony. Most practising Hindus today are the descendants of Indian contract labourers and settlers who came to Malaysia in the colonial era.

Hinduism has three core practices: *puja* (worship); the cremation of the dead; and the rules and regulations of the caste system. Although still very strong in India, the caste system has never been that significant in Malaysia, mainly because most Indian migrants came from the lower castes.

Hindus worship a vast pantheon of gods, some derived from real historical figures and others representing different forces and human characteristics, but all worshipped as attributes of one omnipresent divine force. This force usually has three physical representations: Brahma, the creator; Vishnu, the preserver; and Shiva, the destroyer or reproducer.

Hindus fall into various sects depending on which deity they most revere – most Malaysian Hindus are devotees of Shiva, represented by various South Indian incarnations, including Muruga/Murugan, Subramaniam, the Great Mother Mariamman and Kali. There are also large numbers of Vaishnavites who follow Vishnu, particularly his earthly incarnation as Krishna.

Hindu deities are frequently represented with multiple arms and faces showing different aspects of the divine character, most famously on the ornate *gopuram* (gateway towers) on Hindu temples. The four Vedas (Hindu books of divine knowledge), which are the foundation of Hindu philosophy, are believed to have emanated from the multiple mouths of Brahma.

Animism & Christianity

The religions of indigenous tribal people in Malaysia can broadly be described as animism. Natural phenomena are perceived to be animated by various spirits or deities, and a complex system of practices are used to propitiate these spirits. Ancestor worship is also a common feature of animist societies and departed souls are often considered to be intermediaries between this world and the next. Animism is only followed by a few communities in Peninsular Malaysia, but it remains widespread in Borneo.

Christianity has a small following, though numbers are growing in Borneo. Kuala Lumpur, Melaka and Penang all have small Christian minorities.

WOMEN IN MALAYSIA

As you travel through Malaysia, you'll see women taking part in all aspects of society, from politics and big business through to academia and family life. However, women in all communities, particularly those with conservative religious values, face restrictions on their behaviour despite the general openness of Malaysian society. Arranged marriage is common among Muslim and Hindu families and the concept of 'honour' is still a powerful force in internal family politics.

Although the wearing of the *tudong* (headscarf) is encouraged, women are permitted to work, drive and go out unchaperoned, though the religious authorities frequently crack down on *khalwat* (close proximity) – ie couples who get too intimate in public – which is considered immoral. Full purdah (the practice of screening women from men or strangers by means of a curtain or all-enveloping clothes) is rare. For many Muslim women from the Persian Gulf, a holiday to Malaysia represents a chance to throw off some of the restrictions of home and dress up in Western fashions.

Recent changes to Islamic family law have made it easier for men to marry and divorce multiple wives and claim a share of their property. Religious parties are also campaigning to remove the crime of marital rape from the statute books and bring in new laws requiring four male witnesses before a rape case can come to trial.

There are said to be 330 million deities in the Hindu pantheon!

Robert Wolff takes an esoteric look at Malaysia's tribal religions in his partly autobiographical book *Original Wisdom*.

In response to these moves, Marina Mahathir, the daughter of the former prime minister, compared the lot of Malaysia's Muslim women to that of blacks under apartheid in South Africa. **Sisters in Islam** (sistersinislam.org.my), run by professional Malaysian Muslim women, is campaigning to change patriarchal interpretations of Islam in Malay society.

ARTS

Despite the rush towards modernisation, traditional art forms such as *wayang kulit* (shadow puppetry) and *mak yong* (traditional dance) still have a popular following in Malaysia, alongside contemporary art, drama and film making. Each of Malaysia's diverse ethnic groups has its own artforms and traditions, which are experiencing something of a revival inside Malaysia.

Sadly, the government has a history of underperforming when it comes to promoting the arts. Under the Ninth Malaysia Plan, introduced in 2006, the government has shifted RM11.6 million in funding from the arts to new projects in education and development. Two notable events supporting the arts in Malaysia are the Boh Cameronian Arts Awards and the annual Amazing Malaysians award sponsored by the phone company Digi.

Literature

The oldest formal piece of Malay literature is *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals), a history of the Melaka sultanate written in the 16th century. During the colonial period, Malaysia attracted writers such as W Somerset Maugham and Joseph Conrad. The classic colonial expat experience is recounted by Anthony Burgess in *The Malayan Trilogy* written in the 1950s. In the 1960s Paul Theroux used Malaysia as the backdrop to his short story collection, *The Consul's File*.

The current bright light of the Malaysian literary scene is Tash Aw. His debut novel *The Harmony Silk Factory*, set deep in the heart of Peninsular Malaysia during part of WWII, won the 2005 Whitbread First Novel award. The harsh years of the Japanese occupation are vividly described by expat Malaysian Rani Manicka in *The Rice Mother*, the tale of a Sri Lankan bride who moves to Malaysia just before the outbreak of WWII. KS Maniam's *The Return* (1994) shines a light on the Indian Malaysian experience from the perspective of a student returning home after studying abroad.

If you want to find out more about what people are reading in Malaysia a couple of good places to start are the website of local publisher Silverfish (www.silverfishbooks.com); and Bibliobibili (<http://thebookaholic.blogspot.com>) – the erudite blog of Sharon Bakar, a Malaysian-based British expat.

Architecture

Malaysia has been producing noteworthy architecture since before the colonial period, but the country gained international attention with the construction of the Petronas Towers (p83) in KL in 1998. The towers have become the symbol of KL and a major drawcard for tourists, though you can only climb to the level of the Skybridge that connects the two towers.

The Petronas Towers is just one of a number of futuristic skyscrapers in the capital (see boxed text, p88), but perhaps the most striking buildings in KL are the administrative buildings around Merdeka Square (p80) designed by British architect AC Norman, who drew his inspiration from the Mughal architecture of India.

The Dutch and British were jointly responsible for distinctive colonial architecture of Melaka, but the real geniuses of architecture on the coast were the Chinese, who built distinctive stucco-fronted shophouses, ornate

temples, regal mansions and stately clan houses (see boxed text, p182) in Melaka, Penang and later in KL.

Malay architecture reached its peak under the sultans of Melaka – the traditional Malay house is built on stilts with high peaked roofs, large windows and lattice-like grilles in the walls to maximise the cooling effect of breezes. The layout of a traditional Malay house reflects Muslim sensibilities, with separate areas for men and women, as well as areas where guests of either sex may be entertained.

The best places to see traditional Malay houses are the *kampung* along the coast – for some of the finest examples, take a wander around Melaka's Kampung Morten and check out Villa Sentosa (p147). There are reconstructed *kampung* houses in KL at the Badan Warisan Malaysia (see boxed text, p89) and the National Museum (p89), and more traditional Malay homes in the city's Kampung Baru district (p93).

Drama & Dance

Traditional dramatic forms are still popular in Malaysia, particularly *wayang kulit*, shadow-puppet performances which tell tales from the Hindu epic the *Ramayana*, a distant link to Malaysia's Hindu past. The Tok Dalang (Father of the Mysteries) manipulates the buffalo-hide puppets behind a semitransparent screen, casting shadows onto the screen. The authentic shadow-plays at weddings and harvest festivals can last for many hours, though shorter performances are often laid on for visitors.

A number of traditional dances are still practised on the peninsula. Similar to Thai folk dances, the masked *menora* dance (performed only by men) and female-only *mak yong* dance are used to mark Buddhist festivals. Malay dances include *rodan*, traditionally performed by fishermen to encourage a good catch, and *joget*, an upbeat dance with Portuguese origins, often performed at weddings. In Melaka it's better known as *chakunchak*.

Malaysia's premier traditional dance troupe is the Petronas Performing Art Group (PPAG). Its repertoire includes more than 100 ethnic dances from across the country, including Chinese and Indian dances. Various professional troupes perform in KL (see p121 for the main venues), or there are several tourist-oriented dance shows (see p121). Theatre in Penang and Melaka tends to be restricted to shows at community theatres and traditional shows at festivals.

Musicals about national heroes are very popular – recent names to get the full stage treatment include sultanate-era warrior Hang Tuah and independence hero Tan Cheng Lock. There is also a growing interest in modern theatre in English, as well as in Malay, Indian and Chinese languages, though playwrights have to tread carefully when dealing with controversial topics such as race and religion. A growing phenomenon is the reinterpretation of the classics – director Sabera Shaik recently staged Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in KL, with the characters and story shifted to a mythical medieval Balinese kingdom.

SILAT

Properly known as *bersilat*, this Malay martial art originated in Melaka in the 15th century. Originally designed as an art of war, *silat* has evolved into a highly refined and stylised activity, more akin to a choreographed dance than self defence. The best places to see *silat* in Malaysia are at weddings and Malay festivals, where ritualised bouts are accompanied by music from drums and gongs.

The Women's Aid Organisation (www.wao.org.my) is campaigning for increased protection from violence for Malaysian women.

Peter Carey's *My Life As A Fake* is a great reworking of Frankenstein, set partly in Malaysia and evoking wonderfully the sultry side of Kuala Lumpur (KL).

Edited by Chen Voon Fee, the *Encyclopaedia of Malaysia: Architecture* will tell you everything you need to know about Malay architecture.

Visit www.kakiseni.com for up-to-date information on what's currently going on in the Malaysian arts scene.

BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU RAP FOR: IT MIGHT COME TRUE...

A major musical controversy ensued in 2007 when a Malaysian student rapper known as 'Namewee' was featured on the video site YouTube rapping about discrimination against Chinese Malaysians over the Malaysian national anthem. The rap provoked a national outcry from Malays, with some even calling for the student to be executed. The government initially pursued Namewee under Malaysia's sedition laws, but has since taken a more reconciliatory tone and for now, Namewee is continuing his studies in Taipei.

CHINESE OPERA

Cantonese-style *wayang* (Chinese opera) is popular among the Chinese community. Shows feature clanging gongs, high-pitched romantic songs and outrageous dances in spectacular costumes. Performances can go for an entire evening, but plots are fairly self-explanatory and you don't have to speak Cantonese to follow the story. Street performances are held during important festivals such as Chinese New Year (January/February), the Festival of the Hungry Ghosts (August/September) and the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods (September/October) – head to KL's Chinatown, Melaka or Penang's Georgetown for the best chance of seeing performances.

Music

Traditional Malay music is based largely on *gendang* (drums), but other percussion instruments include the gong and various tribal instruments made from seashells, coconut shells and bamboo. The Indonesian-style *gamelan* (a traditional orchestra of drums, gongs and wooden xylophones), also crops up on ceremonial occasions. The Malay *nobat* uses a mixture of percussion and wind instruments to create formal court music. For Western-style orchestration, attend a performance at the Dewan Filharmonik Petronas (p120), inside the Petronas Towers.

Islamic and Chinese influences are felt in the music of *dondang sayang* (Chinese-influenced romantic songs), and *hadrah* (Islamic chants, sometimes accompanied by dance and music). The KL-based **Dama Orchestra** (www.damaorchestra.com) combines modern and traditional Chinese instruments and play songs that conjure up the mood of 1920s and 1930s Malaysia.

On the popular music scene the Malaysian queen of pop remains the demure Siti Nurhaliza; her recent live album was recorded at London's Albert Hall. The poster boy of every good Muslim girl (and her eternally grateful family) is the devout Mawi. A more mainstream Malay artist is Reshmonu, who sings sprightly pop songs in English and Malay; you can catch him on Lonely Planet's *Six Degrees: Kuala Lumpur* DVD. Other local artists to keep an ear out for include jazz singer Shelia Majid, surf rockers Kugiran, R&B-influenced songstress Adibah Noor, and environmentally conscious world-music singer Zainal Abidin.

Crafts

Although Malaysia is modernising rapidly, many traditional crafts are still practised in KL, Melaka and Penang. Handmade fabrics, wood-carvings and other traditional crafts are popular souvenirs – here are some things to look out for.

TEXTILES

Produced by drawing or printing a pattern on fabric with wax and then dyeing the material, batik came to Malaysia with seafaring traders from

Indonesia. Batik fabrics can be made into clothes, cushion covers, tablecloths, placemats or simply displayed as works of art, but traditional abstract patterns have largely been replaced by figurative designs inspired by nature. Originally from Borneo, *pua kumbu* is a colourful weaving technique where the threads are first tie-dyed on a wooden frame using a traditional process known as *ikat*.

Another textile to look out for is *kain songket* (a luxurious fabric with gold and silver threads woven throughout the material). Clothes made from this beautiful fabric are usually reserved for the most important festivals and occasions. Another unusual art from the region, still practised in Melaka, is the traditional beadwork used to decorate Nonya shoes (see Wan Aik Shoemaker, p161).

BASKETRY & MENGKUANG

Basketry is a living art in Malaysia. Local people make all sorts of useful household items using rattan, bamboo, swamp nipah grass and pandanus leaves. Basketware from Borneo has the best reputation, but you can find lots of appealing items at souvenir shops in KL, Melaka and Penang. *Mengkuang* (a local form of weaving) uses pandanus leaves and strips of bamboo to make baskets, bags and mats.

KITES & PUPPETS

Eye-catching Malay kites and traditional *wayang kulit* (shadow puppets) are produced in the north of Peninsular Malaysia. Shadow puppets are made from buffalo hide to portray characters from epic Hindu legends, while kites are made from paper and bamboo strips in a variety of traditional designs. The crescent-shaped *wau bulan* (moon kite) of Kelantan can reach 3m in

Malaysian crafts get the full coffee-table treatment in the informative *Crafts of Malaysia* by Leo Haks and Dato Haji S Othman.

For more information on popular Malaysian crafts visit the website of Karyaneka (www.malaysiancraft.com).

DJ GABRIEL

Gabriel is a top club DJ and producer in Kuala Lumpur (KL), famed for his soulful House mixes. He lives in Bangsar and spins the decks regularly at KL's Zouk (p120).

What's the low-down on the KL club scene? The global dance scene used to look towards Europe and America but the world is getting smaller. DJs from this part of the world are starting to get noticed. I'm flying off to other countries several times a month to do sets – an Asian flavour is what the West is looking for right now. Zouk is the heart of the KL club scene. As most places close around 3am, there isn't time to keep hopping from club to club. I have a regular night upstairs at Zouk called Grown-Up Music where I play techno for purists. Most of my sets are at bigger venues but I prefer playing in a small room that's packed and intimate. There's a village culture in KL – all the DJs know each other and we work together to share ideas. We have a culture here called *lepak* – it means chilled out, laid-back. That's the defining feature of the club scene.

Is there a distinctive KL sound? I don't know – dance music in KL is so varied now. People are listening to lots of hip-hop, techno, House, R&B. A lot of influences are coming from Europe: Berlin is providing that pure electronic sound, and London provides the best of every genre. That said, educated clubbers are still in the minority in KL. People here are quite traditional and they don't like to do anything too different – you often find that all the radio stations play the same song at the same time.

What do you miss from KL when you play overseas? The food. KL is so diverse for food. And where else in the world can you find so many restaurants open 24 hours? In Malaysia, you never go hungry. If there's one dish I crave when I go overseas it's *nasi lemak* (rice steamed in coconut milk, served with *ikan bilis*, fried peanuts, egg, sambal or curries). It's like a meal in a packet, but so much better than McDonald's.

The KL-based Dama Orchestra combines modern and traditional Chinese instruments and play songs that conjure up the mood of 1920s and 1930s Malaysia.

length and breadth, while the *wau kucing* (cat kite) from Terengganu is the logo of Malaysia Airlines.

KRIS

The wavy-bladed daggers traditionally carried by Malays make popular souvenirs. Good-quality kris are marked out by the distinctive *pamor* (water pattern) on the blade, where various metal ores have mixed and fused. These days, kris are purely ceremonial – the king of Malaysia is normally photographed with a number of ornate, gold-handled kris, equivalent to the crown jewels of the British royal family.

METALWORK

Peninsular Malaysia has many skilled silversmiths who specialise in filigree and repoussé work, where designs are hammered through the silver from the underside. Objects crafted out of pewter (an alloy of tin) are synonymous with Selangor – the Royal Selangor Pewter Factory (p123) near KL is the largest pewter manufacturer in the world. Penang also has a number of pewter makers (see p200).

WOODCARVING

The most famous wood carvers in Malaysia are the Kenyah and Kayan peoples of Borneo, but the Orang Asli (Original People) of Peninsular Malaysia are also gifted carvers. The Mah Meri tribe from Pulau Carey (off the coast of Selangor) are particularly renowned for their sinuous carvings of animist spirits – you can see and buy some of their work at the Orang Asli Museum (p131) near KL.

Cinema

Although Malaysia's film industry dates back to the 1930s, its heyday was the 1950s, when P Ramlee took to the silver screen. Malaysia's answer to Douglas Fairbanks Jr acted in 66 films, recorded 300 songs, and even became a successful film director – his directorial debut *Penarik Becha* (The Trishaw Man; 1955) remains an enduring icon of Malay cinema. Malaysia's best known modern acting star is Michelle Yeoh, the agile, Ipoh-born star of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, though most of her work has been for the Hong Kong film industry.

More recently Yasmin Ahmad set a benchmark in Malaysian cinema by broaching the controversial subject of interracial relationships in her multiaward winning 2005 film *Sepet*. The film upset many religious Malays, as did her follow up *Gubra* (2006), which dared to take a sympathetic approach to prostitutes. Perhaps the best known Malaysian director is Taiwan resident Tsai Ming Liang. His latest film, the haunting interracial romance *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*, was filmed entirely in KL's Chinatown but it was banned and later released with massive cuts for presenting an allegedly 'negative depiction of Malaysia'.

Other directors of note include Ho Yu-Hang and James Lee, who picked up the Best Asean Feature award for his surreal 2005 comedy *The Beautiful Washing Machine*, set in KL. See www.doghouse73pictures.com for more films by James Lee. The production company **Red Films** (www.redfilms.com.my) has also produced some striking work, including Amir Muhammad's compelling *The Last Communist* (2006), banned by the Malaysian government for 'glorifying communism' before any government ministers had seen the film! For a local take on Malaysian film makers, see boxed text, p118.

Over the centuries the Malays have forged their kris (wavy-bladed daggers) from such diverse materials as meteorite iron, railway tracks, captured Dutch cannons and bicycle chains.

The big film event of 2006 was the release of Oliver Knott's *The Red Kebaya* (www.theredkebaya.com), a sumptuous period drama filmed partly in Penang's Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion (p181).

In recent years Malaysian censors have banned such diverse films and TV shows as *Saving Private Ryan*, *South Park*, *The Family Guy*, *Scary Movie*, *Zoolander*, George Clooney's *Good Night & Good Luck* and *Babe!*

Visual Arts

Among the most interesting and internationally successful contemporary Malaysian artists are Jalaini Abu Hassan (aka Jai), Wong Hoy Cheong, Bornean artist Ramsay Ong, landscape painter Wong Perng Fey, and Australian-trained multimedia artist Yee I-Lann. Amron Omar has focussed for nearly 30 years on *silat* (a Malay martial art; see p37) as a source of inspiration for his paintings – a couple are in the National Art Gallery in KL (p93).

You can also find work by contemporary Malaysian artists in KL's up-market commercial galleries (see p123) and at Penang's Alpha Utara Gallery (p183), Pinang Gallery (p186) and Muzium & Galeri Tuanku Fauziah (p203). Malaysia Airlines commissioned several contemporary artists, including Jai and the children's book illustrator Yusof Gajah to provide the interior and exterior decoration for KL's monorail trains.

Food & Drink

Robyn Eckhardt

Malaysia is a hungry traveller's dream destination – a multi-ethnic nation boasting a wide-ranging cuisine shaped over the centuries by the European, Indonesian, Indian and Chinese traders, colonisers and labourers who have landed on its shores. Come mealtime you'll find yourself spoilt for choice. Fancy breakfasting on Chinese dim sum? How about an Indian *dosa* (savoury pancakes) for lunch, followed by a selection of rich Malay curries for dinner? If the thought of choosing from the innumerable options is a bit overwhelming, seek advice from a local. Malaysians, opinionated but affable gourmets, love nothing more than to introduce outsiders to the joys of their cuisine. The traveller who partakes of the nation's edible delights will leave with delicious memories, as well as make a few *makan kaki* (food friends) along the way. In Malaysia it's not 'How are you?' but 'Sudah makan?' (Have you eaten yet?).

FLAVOURS

Though chillies are a mainstay of Malaysian cuisine few dishes are prohibitively spicy. Curries start with *rempah*, a pounded paste of chillies and aromatics such as garlic, shallots, *serai* (lemongrass), *kunyit* (tumeric), and *lengkuas* (galangal). Dried spices – coriander, fennel seeds, cumin, fenugreek – might also be included, especially if the dish is Indian-influenced. Capsicum also plays a starring role in the Malaysian condiment known as *sambal*: mild to fiery, made with fresh or dried chillies, and incorporating ingredients from dried fish to fruit, this cross between a dip and a relish accompanies simple soup noodles, lavish feasts, and every meal in between. There are as many variations of *sambal* as there are Malaysian cooks, but the most common is *sambal belacan*, made from fresh or dried red chillies pounded with dried *belacan* (shrimp paste). If its pungent punch puts you off initially, try, try again – *sambal belacan* is rarely loved at first bite but often proves addictive in the long run.

Fresh herbs such as cilantro, mint, *daun kesom* (polygonum), turmeric, *pandan* (screwpine leaves), lime- and curry-leaves impart a fresh liveliness to curries and noodle dishes. Malaysians prefer their food on the sweet side, but tartness is also key to the cuisine. *Asam* (sour) curries derive their piquancy from fresh tamarind, *belimbi* (a sour relative of the carambola or starfruit), and *asam keping* (the dried flesh of a tart fruit related to the mangosteen, also known as *gelugor*). Fresh *kalamansi* (a tiny, sour lime) juice dresses salads and is squeezed into *sambal belacan* just before it's served.

Belacan is the embodiment of the Malaysian love of fishy flavours. A Penang variation is *hae ko* (a black, sticky-sweet shrimp paste) that dresses *rojak* (vegetable-and-fruit salad). Other well-loved condiments from the sea include *budu* (a long-fermented anchovy sauce favoured by Malay cooks), and *cinjalok* (tiny shrimps treated with brine). *Ikan bilis* (dried anchovies) are deep-fried and incorporated into *sambal* or sprinkled atop noodle and rice dishes, while salted fish finds its way into stir-fries.

No Malaysian kitchen is without soy sauce, and its sweetened cousin *kecap manis*. Other seasonings and sauces integral to the cuisine are oyster sauce, hoisin sauce, and *taucu* (fermented, salted bean paste).

Many Malaysian curries contain coconut milk and the fruit's flesh is grated and dry-fried to make *kerisik* (a garnish for rice dishes). Grated coconut also features in many Malaysian sweets, where it is often paired with *gula melaka* (a distinctive dark sugar made from the sap collected from the flower stalks of the coconut palm).

Writer Robyn Eckhardt has lived in Asia for more than 12 years and collaborated on food-focused articles for publications such as *Travel + Leisure*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *Wall Street Journal Asia* and *Time Out Kuala Lumpur*.

The Star Guide to Malaysian Street Food lists worthy eateries in most Malaysian cities and towns. Entries include maps, information on what to order and hours of operation.

HEAD CHEF ZULKIFLI RAZALI

Zulkifli Razali is head chef at Bijan (p112), one of the most respected Malay restaurants in Kuala Lumpur (KL).

What are the must-try Malay dishes? One of my personal favourites is *udang masak lemak nenas* (prawns cooked with pineapple and coconut). We locals like it hot, with lots of chilli. *Rendang daging* (beef rendang) is another classic Malay dish. Kampung people love it because the lime leaves and coconuts grow in the villages. And everyone should try *rojak* (Malay-style salad). It comes in two styles: *rojak buah* (with fruit) and *rojak pasembor* (with prawn fritters, coconut dumplings, tofu and morsels of cucumber and turnip). Different parts of Malaysia have their own specialities, but there isn't really a KL-specific dish. The city is a real melting pot so you can find dishes from all over Malaysia in one spot. Of course, the different communities have their own cooking styles – Muslims won't eat pork or dishes cooked with wine, Hindus won't eat beef and some Chinese avoid beef and lamb. One dish everyone likes is *ayam panggang* (grilled chicken with chilli) – it's fast and tasty, which suits the hectic lifestyles of people in KL. If you're feeling brave, try *tempoyak* (fermented durian). It has all the flavour of durian without the strong smell.

What makes Malay cooking stand out from the crowd? It's the way we use spices and coconut. It's quite different from Chinese, Indian or Thai cooking. And sharing is a major part of eating in Malaysia – we like to put lots of dishes in the centre and share it around *hidang*-style, like a big buffet.

Where is the best place to sample Malay food? On the streets at hawker stalls! The street food is so good because the chefs focus on one dish. They make the same dish every day so they learn to make it perfectly. They're real experts!

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Malaysians would be hard-pressed to choose between *nasi* (rice) and *mee* (noodles) – one or the other figures in almost every meal. *Nasi lemak*, an unofficial 'national dish' and popular breakfast food, is rice steamed in coconut milk and served with *ikan bilis*, fried peanuts, sliced cucumber, *sambal* and half a hard-boiled egg – curry optional. Rice is also boiled with meat or seafood stock to make *bubur* (porridge), *nasi goreng* (rice fried with shallots and topped with an egg) and *lontong* (rice packed into banana leaf-lined bamboo tubes, cooked over wood, then sliced and doused with coconut milk gravy). Tinted blue with the butterfly or blue-pea flower (*bunga telung*) and adorned with fresh herbs, bean sprouts and *kerisik*, rice becomes the Malay favourite *nasi kerabu*. Glutinous, or sticky, rice is a common ingredient in Malaysian sweets.

Rice flour, mixed with water and allowed to ferment slightly, becomes the batter for *idli* (Indian steamed cakes) and *apam* (pan-fried pancakes). It goes into the making of noodles for dishes such as laksa: *asam laksa* is served in a fish-based sour and spicy broth, while curry laksa (also known as laksa lemak) comes in a chilli coconut gravy. Wide rice noodles known as *kway teow* are stir-fried with prawns, cockles, egg and bean sprouts to make the country's other 'national dish': *char kway teow*. Other rice noodles include *beehoon* (vermicelli) and *loh see fun* (stubby 'rat tail' noodles). *Chee cheong fun* are steamed rice-flour sheets sliced into strips and topped with meat gravy or chilli and black shrimp sauces.

Mee (round yellow noodles) are served in soup; stir-fried with curry leaves and chilli sauce for the Indian Muslim speciality *mee mamak*; or smothered in a sweet potato-based gravy for the Malay dish *mee rebus*. A favourite Chinese noodle dish is *won ton mee* – egg vermicelli floated in broth with pork dumplings, a few leaves of Chinese mustard greens and sliced pork – it can also be served 'dry', with the broth on the side.

Given Malaysia's multiple coastlines, it's no surprise that seafood plays a major role in the national diet. Quality is high and the options endless.

NOODLES, WET OR DRY

If the thought of hanging your head over a steaming bowl in Malaysia's withering heat puts you off soupy noodle dishes, consider adding the word *'konlo'* to your order. You'll end up getting a bowl of warm noodles tossed in light or dark soy sauce and a bit of oil, with the hot broth served on the side. Many Malaysians order their noodles 'dry' to protect the pasta's *al dente* integrity. As any *won ton mee* (egg vermicelli floated in broth with pork dumplings) connoisseur will tell you, a noodle that doesn't offer a bit of resistance to the tooth is hopelessly overcooked.

Favourites for *ikan bakar* (grilled fish; also known as *ikan panggang*) include *ikan tenggiri* (Spanish mackerel) and *ikan pari* (stingray), while pomfret and *garoupa* (a Southeast Asian white fish) are usually steamed Chinese-style with garlic, ginger and soy sauce. The whole head and 'shoulders' of large fish such as *ikan merah* (red snapper) and sea bass feature in the delectable Indian-Malay *kari ikan kepala* (fish-head curry). *Sotong* (squid) is battered and deep-fried, stirred into curries, and griddled on a banana leaf with *sambal*. Malaysians adore shellfish: from prawns to 'top shell' (a snail-like saltwater creature with sweet, snow-white flesh), and it isn't an authentic *char kway teow* unless it includes plump blood-red cockles. Crab is steamed or stir-fried with curry, and in Penang its meat is rolled into an extravagant soft spring roll *popiah* (spring roll).

Babi (pork) is *haram* (forbidden) to Malaysia's Muslims but is the meat of choice for the Chinese, who prefer fatty cuts such as the belly and shoulder; they even dress cooked dishes with lard oil. Crispy-skinned *char yoke* (roast pork), sweet glazed *char siew* (barbecued pork), and pork cracklings are eaten on their own and incorporated into noodle dishes and snacks. *Bak kut teh* (literally 'meat-bone tea') is a comforting dish of pork ribs (innards optional) stewed in a claypot with medicinal herbs, mushrooms and bean curd, and eaten with Chinese crullers. Malaysia's Hakka (a Chinese dialect group) are renowned for their succulent, long-cooked pork dishes such as sliced belly stewed with *khaw yoke* (taro).

Ayam (chicken) is tremendously popular in Malaysia; locals prefer flavourful *ayam kampung* (free-range birds) Nearly every coffee shop houses a stall selling *nasi ayam* (Hainan-style chicken rice; poached and sliced breast served with broth-infused rice, sliced cucumber and tomato, and chilli sauce). Most Malay eateries serve a variety of chicken curries, and the bird makes for Malaysia's most popular satay meat, where it's skewered, grilled and dipped in peanut-chilli sauce. Another oft-eaten fowl is *itik* (duck), roasted or simmered in star anise-scented broth and eaten with noodles, or stewed in a spicy *mamak* (Indian Muslim) curry.

Tough Malaysian *daging* (beef) is best in long, slow-cooked dishes such as Indonesian-influenced *rendang* (an aromatic dry-cooked coconut-milk curry). Lamb is a favourite of Malaysia's *mamak*, who stew ribs to tenderness in a spicy soup stew (*sup kambing*) that's served with sliced white bread.

Tau (soy beans) are consumed in many forms. *Tuahu ja* (soy-bean milk and warm, fresh bean curd), eaten plain or doused with palm-sugar syrup, are sold from white trucks. *Yong tauhu* is a healthy Hakka dish of firm bean curd and vegetables stuffed with ground fish paste. The chewy skin that forms on the surface of vats of boiling soy milk is fried golden or eaten fresh in noodle dishes, and *tauhu pok* (flavour-absorbent deep-fried bean curd 'puffs') are added to noodles and stews. Malaysians even barbecue bean curd, then stuff it with sliced cucumber and top it with sweet shrimp paste and peanuts. Malays stew *tempeh* (nutty-tasting 'cakes' of soybeans mixed with starter yeast and allowed to ferment) with vegetables in mild coconut gravy or stir-fry it with *kecap manis* and chillies.

Vegetables are an important part of the Malaysian table. A full Malay meal includes *ulam* (a selection of fresh vegetables and herbs) to eat with *sambal*. Eggplant, okra and cauliflower are cooked into curries and leafy greens like *daun ubi* (sweet potato leaves), *kangkong* (water spinach) and *choy sum* (yellow-flowered mustard) are stir-fried with garlic or *sambal belacan*. The humble yam bean or jicama (*sengkayang*) is particularly versatile: it's sliced and added raw to *rojak*; grated, steamed, and rolled into *popiah*; and mashed, formed into a savoury cake and topped with deep-fried shallots and chillies (*oh kuih*). Sweet yellow corn is sold as a snack, on or off the cob, from mobile carts.

In Malaysia a sugar high is never far away. Vendors selling sweets *kuih muih* (sweets) lie in wait in front of stores, on street corners and at markets. Many *kuih* incorporate freshly grated coconut and palm sugar – among the best are *ketayap* (*pandan* leaf-flavoured rice-flour 'pancakes' rolled around a mix of the two; also known as *kuih dadar*) and *putu piring* (steamed rice-flour 'flapjacks' filled with palm sugar and topped with coconut). *Cendol* is a heat-beating mound of shaved ice and chewy mung-bean 'pasta' doused in fresh coconut milk, palm-sugar syrup and condensed milk. The more elaborate *ais kacang* or ABC (the initials stand for *air batu campur* – mixed ice) combines flavoured syrups, jellies, red beans, palm seeds and sweet corn. Sweet coconut-milk porridges made with *gandum* (wheat) or *bubur kacang hijau* (mung bean) are an afternoon treat, and Chinese *tong sui* (warm sweet soups) featuring ingredients such as peanuts and winter melon are said to be as healthy as they are tasty. Don't leave Malaysia without sampling the subcontinental sweets stacked in colourful pyramids in Little India shop windows.

Those who have overindulged in *kuih* might repent with a dose of healthy tropical fruits. *Nenas* (pineapple), watermelon, *jambu* (rose apple), papaya and green guava are year-round choices, with more unusual fruits available seasonally. The dull brown skin of the sopadilla *ciku* (sopadilla) hides super-sweet flesh that tastes a bit like a date. Strip away the yellowish peel of the *duku* to find segmented, perfumed pearly flesh with a lycheelike flavour. April and May are mango months, and come December to January and June to July, follow your nose to sample notoriously odiferous love-it-or-hate-it durian. Should the king of fruits prove too repellent, consider the slightly smelly but wonderfully sweet yellow flesh of the young *nanika* (jackfruit).

DRINKS

Half the fun of taking breakfast in one of Malaysia's Little Indias is watching the tea wallah toss-pour an order of *teh tarik* (literally, 'pulled' tea) from one pitcher to another. Malaysians, who rank among the world's largest tea consumers, brew the leaf with ginger (*teh halia*), drink it hot or iced, with or without milk (*teh ais/teh-o-ais*), and tart it up with lime. For an especially rich cuppa head for an Indian café and ask for *teh susu kerabau* (hot tea with boiled fresh milk). Coffee is also popular – the dark, thick brew served in Chinese coffee shops is an excellent antidote to a case of jetlag. Caffeine-free alternatives include freshly blended fruit and vegetable juices; sticky-sweet green sugar-cane juice; and coconut water, drunk straight from the fruit with a straw. Other, more unusual, drinks include *barley peng* or *ee bee chui* (barley boiled with water, *pandan* leaf, and rock sugar served over ice); *air mata kucing* (sweet dried longan beverage); and *cincau* (a herbal grass-jelly drink; to add a splash of soy milk ask for a 'Michael Jackson'). Sweetened *kalamansi* juice and Chinese salted plums may sound a strange combination but make for a thoroughly refreshing potion (*kak cai shin moo*).

Sky-high duties on alcohol can make a boozy night out awfully expensive. The cheapest beers are those brewed locally, such as Tiger and Carlsberg,

Ever wondered why many durian stalls also sell mangosteens? The latter is thought to be a 'cooling fruit' that, eaten on the heels of 'heaty' durian, brings the body back into balance.

and Chinese liquor shops stock less expensive, if not always palatable, hard liquors.

REGIONAL SPECIALITIES

Mention Penang and Malaysians swoon. The island's reputation as gastronomic ground zero lures foodies from Kuala Lumpur, Singapore and beyond, who come to partake of its stellar hawker fare. Must-eats include the iconic *asam* laksa (round rice noodles in a hot and sour fish-based gravy topped with slivered torch ginger flower, chopped pineapple and mint leaves) and laksa *lemak* (comes with a curry broth that's spicier and lighter on the coconut milk than versions served elsewhere).

Hokkien *mee* (yellow noodles, bean sprouts, and shrimp in a rich prawn and pork stock), is another signature dish of the Pearl of the Orient, as is its *rojak* (fruit salad doused in Penang's unique sweet and gooey-black shrimp paste and topped with ground nuts). One food found all over Malaysia but firmly entrenched in the island's food history is *nasi kandar* (rice eaten with a variety of curries). A speciality of Penang's *mamak* community, the dish is named for the *kandar* (shoulder pole) from which, originally, ambulant vendors suspended pots of rice and curry. Drinks specific to Penang include nutmeg juice *lau hao* (nutmeg juice) and an iced infusion of eight Chinese medicinal herbs sweetened with rock and brown sugar (*pat poh peng*).

Penang and Melaka are known for Nonya (also spelled Nyonya), or Peranakan, cuisine, a fusion of Chinese and Malay ingredients and cooking techniques. The Malay word '*nonya*' refers to prominent women in the Baba-Nonya community, descendants of early Chinese male immigrants who settled in Penang, Melaka and Singapore, and intermarried with locals ('*baba*' is the male counterpart). Penang Nonya food is influenced by the cuisine of nearby Thailand and tends to be spicier and more sour than that of Melaka. The preparation of Nonya dishes is laborious and time-consuming and, Malaysians say, best left to home kitchens. Still, there are a couple of Penang Nonya hawker specialities worth seeking out: *kerabu beehoon* (rice vermicelli tossed with fiery *sambal* and garnished with toasted coconut and herbs), and *lorbak* (a crispy treat of pork seasoned with Chinese five-spice powder, wrapped in bean curd sheets and deep-fried). See p193 for Penang's eating options.

Melaka boasts a number of sit-down restaurants serving local Nonya favourites such as *ikan cili garam* (fish curry) and chicken cooked with *taucu*,

The word laksa derives from the Persian word for noodle, *lahsha* (slippery). The *Oxford Companion to Food* speculates that pasta was introduced to Indonesia (from where it migrated to Malaysia) by Arab traders or Indian Muslims in perhaps the 13th century.

MALAYSIA'S TOP TASTES

Don't even think about leaving Malaysia without sampling these much-loved specialities:

- *Nasi lemak* – rice steamed in coconut milk and served with *ikan bilis* (deep-fried anchovies), fried peanuts, half a hard-boiled egg, *sambal* (chilli sauce) and a selection of curries, often eaten for breakfast.
- *Char kway teow* – wide rice noodles stir-fried with prawns, cockles, bean sprouts and egg; it vies with *nasi lemak* for the title of 'national dish'.
- *Roti canai* – flaky unleavened bread griddled with ghee until crisp and eaten with curry or dhal. It is another breakfast favourite.
- *Asam laksa* – Penang's iconic dish is a sour and chilli-hot bowlful of round rice noodles in a fish-based soup, garnished with slivered torch ginger flower, chopped pineapple and mint.
- *Cendol* – a wonderfully refreshing sweet of shaved ice mounded over toothsome mung bean noodles, all doused in fresh coconut milk and luscious palm-sugar syrup.

A DISH BY ANY OTHER NAME

Be sure to keep your nomenclature straight when city-hopping. Penangites are justifiably proud of their Hokkien *mee*, a spicy dish of yellow noodles, bean sprouts and shrimp in a pork-and-prawn-based broth. Order Hokkien *mee* anywhere else in Malaysia, however, and you'll end up with a plate of deliciously greasy thick noodles stir-fried with pork and egg in a dark, soy-based gravy. In Penang *otak-otak* is a curried coconut-milk-and-fish 'mousse' steamed in a banana leaf, but in Melaka and other parts of the southern peninsula it takes the form of a grilled coconut leaf-wrapped fish paste and chilli sausage.

dark soy sauce, and sugar (*ayam pong teh*). In addition to its Nonya fare, Melaka is known for its unique take on Hainan chicken, which is served with a particularly zesty chilli sauce and ping pong-sized rice balls, rather than a mound of rice. A favourite evening snack is *satay celup*, skewered vegetables, meat, and seafood that diners cook themselves in a pot at the center of the table, which they then dip into a spicy, peanut-based sauce. Pork fans shouldn't miss the Melaka version of *popiah*, which includes bits of crackling and a splash of lard oil. Though *cendol* isn't unique to Melaka it's thought to be especially delicious there because vendors douse their ice with locally-produced palm-sugar syrup. For Melaka's food-scene recommendations, see p156.

Kuala Lumpur doesn't really lay claim to any dishes in particular, but there are some wonderful foods more easily found there than in Penang or Melaka. *Pan meen* (literally, 'board noodles') are substantial hand-cut or hand-torn wheat noodles tossed with dark soy and garlic oil, garnished with chopped pork and crispy *ikan bilis*, and served with soup on the side. Some versions include a poached egg. More expensive than your average noodle dish but well worth it are *sang har meen* (literally 'fresh sea noodles') huge freshwater prawns in gravy flavoured with Chinese rice wine and the fat from the shellfish heads, served over *yee mee* (crispy fried noodles).

Head to the city's Malay enclave of Kampung Baru to sample the specialities of Malaysia's eastern states, such as Kelantanese *nasi kerabu* and *ayam percik* (barbecued chicken smothered in chilli-coconut sauce) and, from Terengganu, *nasi dagang* (nutty, coconut milk-cooked red rice).

Kuala Lumpur also boasts a notable range of regional Chinese cuisines. Choose from eateries serving authentic Cantonese, Sichuanese, Dongbei (northeastern), Xinjiang, Guizhou, Teowchew, Hokkien and Hakka fare.

Need a break from Malaysian? Kuala Lumpur has a cosmopolitan dining scene and you needn't look far to find – thanks to Malaysia's huge migrant workforce – inexpensive Thai, Burmese, Nepalese, Indonesian, Bangladeshi and Pakistani fare. Restaurants serving Italian, French, fusion, Japanese and pan-Asian cuisine and ranging in style from casual to white-tablecloth are among its more upmarket dining options. For KL's eating recommendations, see p106.

FESTIVALS & CELEBRATIONS

It's no surprise that a people as consumed with food and its pleasures as Malaysians mark every occasion with edible delights.

Securing a restaurant reservation in the weeks leading to Chinese New Year can be tricky, as friends, colleagues and family gather over endless banquets. Each table is sure to be graced with *yee sang* (literally, 'fresh fish'), a Cantonese raw-fish dish believed to bring luck in the coming year. Other foods special to this time of the year (look for them in Chinese groceries) include pineapple tarts, snow-white melt-in-the-mouth cookies called *kuih bangkit*, deep-fried

Food website Fried Chillies (friedchillies.com) is a goldmine of unbiased Kuala Lumpur food reviews.

FASTING & FEASTING

Don't be deterred from visiting Malaysia during Ramadan (see the boxed text, p220), the Muslim holy month of sunrise-to-sunset fasting. Indian and Chinese eateries remain open during the day to cater to the country's sizeable non-Muslim population and, come late afternoon, Ramadan bazaars pop up all over the country. These prepared-food markets offer a rare chance to sample Malay specialities from all over the country, some of which are specific to the festive season or rarely found outside private homes. One of the country's biggest Ramadan markets is held in Kuala Lumpur's Malay enclave of Kampung Baru (p114). Cruise the stalls and pick up provisions for an evening meal – but don't snack in public until the cry of the muezzin tells believers it's time to *buka puasa* (break the fast).

Chinese arrowroot chips *nga ku* (deep-fried Chinese arrowroot chips) and *ti kuih* (glutinous rice cakes wrapped in banana leaf).

For several weeks before the Indian festival Deepavali Malaysia's Little Indias are awash in food stalls selling clothing, textiles, and household goods. Vendors also offer special sweets and savoury snacks, as well as foodstuffs shipped over from the subcontinent, such as hand-patted papadams and kulfi.

Malaysia's Ramadan bazaars are reason in themselves to visit Malaysia during the Muslim holy month. In Kuala Lumpur vendors compete every year to secure a lucrative spot at one of the city's Ramadan markets, which swing into action late in the afternoon to serve those breaking the fast at sunset. They offer an excellent opportunity to sample home-cooked, otherwise hard-to-find Malay dishes; see the boxed text, above.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

Malaysians argue that the tastiest and best-value food is found at hawker stalls, and they are fiercely loyal to their favourite vendors. Many hawkers have been in business for decades or operate a business inherited from their parents or even grandparents; the best enjoy reputations that exceed their geographical reach. To sample Malaysian hawker food simply head to a stand-alone streetside kitchen-on-wheels or a coffee shop or food court. Place your order with one or multiple vendors, find a seat (shared tables are common), and pay for each dish as it's delivered to your table. You'll be approached by someone taking drink orders after you've sat down – pay for these separately as well.

The term *kopi tiam* generally refers to old-style, single-owner coffee shops. These are simple, fan-cooled establishments that serve noodle and rice dishes, strong coffee and other drinks, and all-day breakfast fare such as half-boiled eggs and toast spread with *kaya* (coconut jam).

Intrepid eaters shouldn't overlook *pasar* (markets). Morning markets include stalls selling coffee and other beverages, as well as vendors preparing foods such as freshly griddled roti and curry and *chee cheong fun*. Takeaway (*ta pao*) or eat 'in' – most can offer at least a stool. Night markets are also excellent places to graze. The larger ones include Kuala Lumpur's Saturday market in the Malay enclave of Kampung Baru (p114); Penang's Pulau Tikus market on Jln Pasar, the market at the corner of Jln Macalister and Lorong Baru, as well as Gurney Dr (p194); and Melaka's Jonker's Walk (p158).

The word *restoran* (restaurant) applies to eateries ranging from the casual, decades-old Teowchew, Cantonese and Nonya places dotting Penang's Georgetown and small, family-run Malay restaurants in KL's Kampung Baru, to upscale establishments boasting international fare, slick décor and a full bar. Between the two extremes lie Chinese seafood restaurants (where the

Famous Street Food of Penang, a guide to the island's most well-known hawkers and their specialities, includes, along with maps and hours of operation, recipes.

main course can be chosen live, from a tank on the premises), as well as the numerous eateries found in Malaysia's many shopping malls.

While they often serve indifferent fare, a few chains rise above the pack. Keep an eye out for Penang-origin Kayu Nasi Kandar, named for the speciality of the house; Saravana Bavan, serving delicious Keralan (South Indian) delights; Little Penang, offering excellent versions of Nonya specialities; and Madam Kwan's, known for *nasi lemak* and authentically sour-spicy *asam* laksa.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Given the inclusion of shrimp paste and fish in many dishes, vegetarians and vegans will find it difficult to negotiate their way around most menus. Chinese vegetarian restaurants and hawker stalls (signage will include the words '*makanan sayur-sayuran*') are safe bets – they are especially busy on the 1st and 15th of the lunar month, when many Buddhists adopt a vegetarian diet for 24 hours. Indian vegetarian restaurants are another haven, for snacks such as steamed *idli* served with dhal and *dosa*, as well as *thali* (full set meals consisting of rice or bread with numerous side dishes).

Justlife, a chain of organic groceries with attached cafés, serves Western and local vegetarian fare and has stores in all major west coast cities, including Melaka and Penang.

EATING WITH KIDS

Travellers toting tots will do well at hawker centres and food courts, where the wide selection of dishes offers the best chance of satisfying fussy appetites. If familiar flavours are in order, head to one of the many Western fast-food outlets, pizza shops and restaurant chains dotting Malaysia's larger cities. Should the little ones crave a good old hamburger, stalls selling Ramly Burgers – thin-meat-patty sandwiches that enjoy cult status in Malaysia – are a local alternative to the Golden Arches.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

To those of us used to 'three square meals' it might seem as if Malaysians are always eating. In fact, five or six meals or snacks is more the order of the day than strict adherence to the breakfast-lunch-dinner trilogy. Breakfast is often something that can be grabbed on the run: *nasi lemak* wrapped to go (*bungkus*) in a banana leaf or brown waxed paper, a quick bowl of noodles, toast and eggs, or griddled Indian bread. Come late morning a snack might be in order, perhaps a *karipap* (deep-fried pastry filled with spiced meat or fish and potatoes). Lunch generally starts from 12:30pm, something to keep in mind if you plan to eat at a popular establishment. In the late afternoon, stalls offering teatime treats – sweet porridge, *vadai* (Indian deep-fried pulse

Food From the Heart: Malaysia's Culinary Heritage (Cross Time Matrix, 2004) is a collection of mouth-watering family recipes, culinary remembrances and kitchen counsel from 86 Malaysians; the proceeds from the book benefit seven Malaysian charities.

MALAYSIA'S WESTERN CONNECTION

Dine at enough Malaysian coffee shops and you're bound to run into lamb chops and mushroom soup. Though these may seem out of place on a menu that also features *belacan* (fermented prawn paste) fried rice and fish in sour curry, these dishes are as much a part of the Malaysian culinary universe as *laksa lemak* (curry laksa). Introduced by the British but popularised in the early decades of the 20th century by Hainanese immigrants who served as their private cooks – and later became known throughout the country for their prowess in the kitchen – Western classics such as chops (pork and chicken, in addition to lamb) and fish and chips are Malaysia's intergenerational comfort food. The best versions – found in old-time *kopi tiam* (coffee shops) sporting original floor tiles and peeling paint – are astoundingly authentic. Seek them out when a break from local fare is in order and eat a bit of history.

'donuts'), and battered and fried slices of cassava, sweet potato, and banana – pop up on street corners. *Mamak* stalls and hawker areas see a jump in business a few hours after dinner (which is eaten around 6:30pm or 7pm) as Malaysians head out in search of a treat to tide them over until morning.

You'll rarely find a knife on the Malaysian table – fork and spoon are the cutlery of choice. Forks aren't used to carry food to the mouth, but to nudge food onto the spoon. Chinese noodles and dishes served in Chinese restaurants are usually eaten with chopsticks (Westerners are offered a fork and a spoon as a courtesy). Malays and Indians eat rice-based meals with their right hand (the left is reserved for unclean tasks), using their thumbs to manoeuvre rice onto the balls of their fingers and then transferring the lot to their mouth. Moistening your rice with curries and side dishes helps things along and, as with any new skill, practice makes perfect. Before and after eating, wash your hands with water from the teapotlike container on your table (Malay eateries) or at a communal sink to the rear or side of the room. Napkins on the table (and a towel to wipe your wet hands) aren't a given, so it's always a good idea to carry along a pack of tissues when heading out to graze.

In some Chinese eateries a server will bring a basin of hot water containing saucers, chopsticks, bowls and cutlery to the table after you've placed your order. This is meant to allay hygiene concerns – remove the items from the water and dry them off with a napkin (or shake them dry).

COOKING COURSES

Enrolling in a cooking class is a great way to meet locals. Kuala Lumpur offers the best range; see p99.

EAT YOUR WORDS

Useful Phrases

These Malay phrases may help in off-the-beaten-track eating adventures – at most places in Malaysia English will be understood. For guidelines on pronunciation see p246.

Where's a ...?

restaurant

coffee shop

hawker centre

Can I see the menu?

I'd like ...

What's in this dish?

Is this dish spicy/sweet/sour?

Not too spicy, please.

I like it hot and spicy!

Please add extra chilli.

The bill/cheque, please.

Thank you, that was delicious.

I don't want any meat at all.

I'm a vegetarian.

... *di mana?*

kedai makan/restoran

kedai kopi/kopi tiam

pusat penjaja

Minta senarai makanan?

Saya mahu ...

Ini termasuk apa?

Makanan ini pedas/manis/asam?

Kurang pedas.

Saya suka pedas lagi!

Tolong letak cili lebih.

Minta bon.

Sedap sekali, terima kasih.

Saya tak mahu daging.

Saya makan sayur-sayuran sahaja.

Menu Decoder

ABC – a sweet colourful dish of shaved ice, red beans, agar jelly, palm-sugar seeds, chewy mung-bean-flour noodles, and sweet corn doused with palm sugar and other flavoured syrups, coconut milk and condensed milk

acar – sweet, sour and spicy fruit-and-vegetable pickle

air buah – fruit juice

ais kacang – see *ABC*

aloo gobi – Indian potato-and-cauliflower dish

apam – spongy, sourish Indian rice-flour 'pancake', usually eaten for breakfast, accompanied with coconut and chilli chutney

apam balik – sweet, crispy pancake filled with sugar and chopped peanuts; in Penang, a soft pancake filled with sliced banana

asam laksa – round rice noodles in a fish-based sour-and-spicy broth, topped with chopped pineapple and mint and served with *hae ko*

ayam goreng – fried chicken

ayam percik – barbecued chicken slathered in coconut milk gravy; from Kelantan, on the east coast of the peninsula

ayam pong the – Melaka Nonya dish of chicken cooked with preserved, salted soy beans, dark soy sauce and sugar

bak chang – steamed, leaf-wrapped glutinous rice dumpling with a sweet or savoury filling

bak kut teh – pork ribs stewed in a claypot with Chinese medicinal herbs, mushrooms and bean curd

barley peng – an iced drink of water boiled with barley and rock sugar, sometimes served with a squeeze of *kalamansi*

belacan kangkong – water convolvulus stir-fried with chillies and shrimp paste

biryani – steamed basmati rice with spices and meat, seafood or vegetables

bubur – sweet porridge made with coconut milk and dried beans or barley, or a savoury Ramadan dish of rice porridge with meat and herbs

bubur sumsum – smooth rice-porridge topped with *pandan*-coconut custard and doused with palm-sugar syrup

chendol – sweet dish of chewy mung-bean-flour noodles topped with shaved ice and doused in coconut milk, palm-sugar syrup and condensed milk

char kway teow – rice noodles stir-fried with egg, cockles, prawns, bean sprouts, chilli sauce and, sometimes, pork

char siew – sweet barbecued pork

char siew pao – steamed wheat-flour dumpling filled with chopped, sweet barbecued pork

char yoke – roasted pork with three layers: meat, fat and skin

chee cheong fun – in Penang, steamed rice-flour rolls topped with black shrimp paste, chilli sauce and sesame seeds; elsewhere, steamed rice-flour rolls topped with meat sauce

clay-pot rice – rice cooked in a claypot with chicken, mushroom, Chinese sausage and soy sauce

congee – rice porridge

curry laksa – round rice noodles, deep-fried soy bean pieces, bean sprouts, long beans and meat or seafood in a spicy chilli-coconut soup

dadar – see *ketayap*

dhal – Indian dish of seasoned stewed lentils

dim sum – Chinese sweet and savoury minidishes served at breakfast and lunch; also known as *dian xin* or *yum cha*

dosa – large, light, crispy pancake

fish-head curry – fish head and shoulders in spicy Malay-Indian red coconut curry with tomatoes and okra

gado gado – cold dish of bean sprouts, potatoes, long beans, bean curd, rice cakes and prawn crackers, topped with a spicy peanut sauce

Hainan chicken rice – poached or roasted chicken served with broth-infused rice, sliced cucumber and a variety of dipping sauces

Hakka mee – thin wheat noodles tossed with soy sauce and lard oil, topped with minced pork, slices of *char siew* and chopped scallions

Hokkien mee – in Penang, yellow noodles, bean sprouts and prawns in a prawn-and-pork stock; elsewhere, thick yellow noodles stir-fried with pork and dark soy sauce

idli – slightly sour steamed cakes made from a fermented rice-flour batter, usually eaten with thin curry or *dhal*

ikan asam – fish, tomatoes and okra in a thin red curry soured with tamarind

ikan bakar – grilled fish

ikan cili garam – Melaka Nonya dish of fish in a spicy, red curry sauce

ikan gulai tumis – Penang Nonya dish of fish (usually pomfret) in a spicy sour curry
ikan panggang – see *ikan bakar*
kari ayam – curried chicken
kari ikan kepala – Indian-Malay coconut milk-based fish-head curry with tomatoes and okra
karipap – deep-fried pastry filled with curried meat or seafood and potatoes
kaya – rich egg-and-coconut jam
keema – spicy minced meat
kerabu beehoon – rice vermicelli tossed with spicy *sambal*, toasted coconut, and herbs
ketayap – green, sweet *pandan*-flavoured pancakes filled with grated coconut and palm sugar
kofta – minced-meat or vegetable ball
korma – mild Indian yogurt-based curry
kulfi – Indian ice cream
laksa – one of a number of noodle dishes with soup; see *asam laksa*, *laksa lemak*, and curry laksa
laksa lemak – see curry laksa; Penang-style has a lighter, slightly sour broth
laksam – a Malay dish of wide, thick rice-flour ‘noodles’ topped with bean sprouts and fresh herbs, doused with mild coconut gravy
lassi – yogurt-based drink
lau hu – nutmeg juice
lontong – pressed rice cakes in spicy coconut-milk gravy topped with fried *tempeh*, long beans, hard-boiled egg, *sambal* and toasted grated coconut
lorbak – a Nonya snack of pork seasoned in five-spice powder, wrapped in bean curd sheets and deep-fried
masala dosa – thin rice-flour pancake rolled around spicy curried potatoes and vegetables
mee goreng – fried noodles
mee mamak – yellow noodles fried with chicken, tofu pieces, scallion, tomato and chilli sauce
mee rebus – yellow noodles served in a thick, sweetish sauce made from sweet potatoes and garnished with sliced hard-boiled eggs and green chillies
mee siam – white thin noodles in a sweet-and-sour gravy made with tamarind
mee soto – noodle soup with shredded chicken
mee sua – thin white rice noodles stir-fried with meat, bean sprouts and seaweed
murtabak – *roti canai* filled with pieces of mutton, chicken or vegetables
nasi air – Malay-style *congee*; a brothy rice soup with fresh herbs and sliced chicken
nasi biryani – saffron rice flavoured with spices and garnished with cashew nuts, almonds and raisins
nasi campur – buffet of curried meats, fish and vegetables, served with rice
nasi dagang – dish of unpolished rice steamed with coconut milk and served with a variety of curries; from Terengganu, on the east coast of the peninsula
nasi goreng – fried rice, often topped with a fried egg and served with prawn crackers
nasi kandar – a *mamak* (Indian Muslim) speciality of rice served with a selection of curries
nasi kerabu – a Malay dish of blue-tinted rice topped with bean sprouts, fresh herbs and toasted grated coconut
nasi kunyit – rice soaked in water with turmeric, cooked with coconut milk
nasi lemak – rice boiled in coconut milk, served with fried *ikan bilis*, peanuts, half a hard-boiled egg, *sambal* and an optional curry dish
nasi minyak – ‘oil rice’, or rice cooked with *ghee*, margarine and dry spices, topped with raisins and nuts
nasi padang – Indonesian meal of rice accompanied by a selection of curries, vegetables and *sambal*
onde-onde – *pandan*-scented glutinous rice-flour balls filled with palm sugar and rolled in fresh grated coconut
pan meen – wheat-flour pasta cut into thick strips or torn by hand into pieces; served ‘dry’ topped with chopped pork and *ikan bilis*, or ‘wet’ in meat broth with green vegetables
pat poh peng – iced infusion of Chinese medicinal herbs sweetened with rock and brown sugar
pecel jawa – see *gado gado*

popiah – fresh, or fried, spring roll made with wheat-flour wrappers and filled with boiled yam bean, tofu, bean sprouts, and chilli and sweet sauces
pulut panggang – glutinous-rice rolls stuffed with a filling of grated coconut, chopped dried prawns and chilli, and grilled in a banana leaf
putu piring – steamed rice-flour cakes filled with palm sugar and topped with fresh grated coconut
otak-otak – in Penang, a spicy, coconut fish ‘mousse’ steamed in a banana leaf; in southern Malaysia, a spicy fish sausage grilled in a coconut leaf
raita – side dish of cucumber, yogurt and mint
rasam – spicy-and-sour soup to accompany a *thali* meal
rendang – spicy, aromatic dry coconut curry of beef or chicken
rogan josh – stewed mutton in a rich sauce
rojak – Penang-style, a fruit-and-vegetable salad dressed with chilli sauce and black shrimp paste and topped with peanuts; Indian *rojak* is a salad of cucumber and assorted fritters doused in a peanut-based sauce
roti canai – unleavened flaky bread cooked with *ghee* on a hotplate; eaten dipped in *dhal* or curry
roti bakar – toast, usually eaten with butter and *kaya* and a half-boiled egg
saag – spicy chopped-spinach dish
sambal belacan – essential Malaysian spicy and fishy dipping sauce made from chillies and shrimp paste
sambal udang – hot curried prawns
sambar – fiery mixture of vegetables, lentils and split peas
samosa – pastry filled with curried vegetables or meat
sang har meen – large freshwater prawns cooked in a gravy flavoured with Chinese rice wine and prawn heads, served over deep-fried noodles
satay – skewered pieces of chicken, beef or mutton grilled and served with a peanut-based dipping sauce
soto ayam – spicy chicken soup with vegetables and potatoes
steamboat – meats, seafood and vegetables cooked at the table by being dipped into a pot of boiling clear stock
sup kambing – mutton ribs (innards and tongue optional) in a spicy, herby broth
tauhu bakar – firm bean curd grilled, split, stuffed with slivered cucumber and bean sprouts and topped with dark sweet sauce and peanuts
teh ais – iced tea with evaporated milk
teh halia – ginger tea
teh kosong – tea without milk or sugar
teh-o – tea without milk
teh tarik – tea made with evaporated milk, which is literally pulled or stretched (*tarik*) from one glass to another
Thali – Indian full set meals consisting of rice or bread with numerous side dishes
tikka – small pieces of meat or fish served off the bone and marinated in yogurt before baking
tong sui – Chinese sweet soups eaten warm, said to be good for the health
tom yam – red chilli-based hot-sour-sweet seafood soup
ulam – selection of raw herbs and vegetables eaten with *sambal*, to accompany a Malay meal
vadai – Indian snack of deep-fried pulse ‘donuts’ seasoned with chillies and curry leaves
won ton mee – egg vermicelli served with pork dumplings in soup; or ‘dry’, tossed with dark soy and topped with sliced *char siuw*
yee sang – ‘lucky’ raw-fish salad dressed with sweet sauce, eaten in the weeks leading up to Chinese New Year
yong tau fu – bean curd and vegetables stuffed with fish paste and, sometimes, served in fish-based gravy
yu char kway – Chinese deep-fried crullers, often eaten with *congee*
yu yuan mian – fish-ball soup

Food Glossary

asam – sour
ayam – chicken
ayam kampung – free-range chicken, small and sinewy but preferred over intensively farmed birds for its superior flavour
babi – pork
belacan – fermented prawn paste
brinjal – aubergine (eggplant)
budu – pungent long-fermented anchovy sauce
bhindi – okra (lady's fingers)
bungkus – wrapped (in banana leaf or paper), to go
chapati – griddle-fried wholewheat bread
chilli padi – extremely hot small chilli
choy sum – Chinese mustard greens served steamed with oyster sauce or added to noodle soups
daging – beef
daun kesom – polygonum or 'Vietnamese mint'; a pungent, spicy herb used in Malaysian cooking
daun kunyit – turmeric leaf
daun pisang – banana leaf, often used as a plate in Malaysia
daun salam – fresh herb native to Indonesia, used in some Malay dishes
daun ubi – cassava leaves, usually eaten stir-fried with garlic or cooked with *tempoyak*
Dongbei – northeastern Chinese provinces, known for wheat noodles, dumplings and hearty stir-fries
dow see – fermented, salted black beans
duku – round, yellowish brown-skinned fruits with pearlescent perfumed flesh and a lycheelike flavour
fish sauce – liquid made from fermented anchovies and salt
galangal – gingerlike root used to flavour various dishes
garam – salt
garam masala – sweet, mild mixture of freshly ground spices
garoupa – white fish popular in Southeast Asia, usually steamed Chinese-style with ginger, garlic and soy sauce
ghee – clarified butter
gula melaka – dark sugar made from the sap of the coconut palm flower stalk, usually sold in flat disks or short tubes
hae ko – black sticky-sweet shrimp paste native to Penang
Hainan – southern Chinese island province, origin of many immigrants to Malaysia; Hainanese are known for their skill in the kitchen
Hakka – Chinese dialect group known for their hearty, rustic foods and pork dishes
halal – food prepared according to Muslim dietary laws
haram – forbidden to Muslims
hoisin sauce – thick sweet-spicy sauce made from soya beans, red beans, sugar, flour, vinegar, salt, garlic, sesame, chillies and spices
Hokkien – immigrants from China's Fujian province, known for their seafood dishes; the same word is used to describe their language
ikan bilis – deep-fried anchovies
ikan merah – red snapper
ikan pari – stingray, a popular fish for barbecuing
ikan tenggiri – mackerel, usually used to make the broth for *asam laks*
itik – duck
jambu – rose apple
kalamansi – tiny, sour lime
kambing – lamb
kangkong – water convolvulus or morning glory; thick-stemmed type of spinach
kecap – soy sauce
kecap manis – sweet soy sauce

kelapa – coconut
kepala ikan – fish-head, usually in curry
kuih muih – Malay sweets
kway teow – flat broad rice noodles
lala – clams
lemak – fatty or rich; often used to describe dishes made with coconut milk or cream
loh see fun – 'rat tail noodles'; short, stubby and chewy rice flour noodles often used in claypot dishes
lombok – type of hot chilli
makanan sayur-sayuran – vegetarian food
mamak – Indian Muslims; '*mamak*' comes from the word for 'uncle' in Tamil
manis – sweet
mee pok – flat noodles made with egg and wheat
mee – noodles
naan – tear-shaped leavened bread baked in a clay oven
ngangka – jackfruit, can be eaten as a vegetable in curries and stews
nasi – cooked rice
nenas – pineapple
Nonya – prominent women in the Baba-Nonya community, the descendants of early Chinese male immigrants who settled in Penang, Melaka and Singapore and intermarried with locals (also spelled Nyonya); their cuisine is a fusion of Chinese and Malay ingredients and cooking techniques
pakora – vegetable fritter
pandan – screwpine
pappadam – Indian cracker
pisang goreng – banana fritter
pu dina – mint sauce
rempah – pounded paste of chillies and aromatics that is the basis of a Malaysian curry
sambal – a variety of chilli-based sauces
santan – coconut milk
sengkuang – yam bean or jicama
Sichuan – region in south central China famous for its spicy cuisine; also spelt Szechuan
sotong – squid
susu – milk; fresh cow's milk is 'susu kerabau'
tamarind – large bean from the tamarind tree with a brittle shell and a dark brown, sticky pulp; used for its sweet-sour taste
tandoori – Indian style of cooking in which marinated meat is baked in a clay oven
taro – vegetable with leaves like spinach, stalks like asparagus, and a starchy root similar in size and taste to the potato
tau – soy bean
taucu – fermented, salted bean paste
tauhu fa – fresh, smooth bean curd, eaten warm, plain or with sugar syrup
tauhu pok – deep-fried bean curd
tempoh – nutty-tasting 'cakes' of soybeans mixed with starter yeast and allowed to ferment, usually sliced and fried with ingredients such as chillies and *ikan bilis* or stewed in coconut milk with vegetables
tempoyak – fermented durian paste, usually mixed with *budu* and chillies for a dip or cooked with leafy green vegetables
yee mee – crispy deep-fried noodles

Environment

THE LAND

Covering a total of 329,758 sq km, Malaysia consists of two distinct regions. Peninsular Malaysia is the long finger of land extending south from Thailand towards Indonesia. Most large cities – including Kuala Lumpur (KL), Melaka and Penang – are found on the west coast where the land is flat and the soil fertile. The interior is made up of densely forested hills, descending steeply to the sparsely populated east coast.

The other part of the country, comprising over half its area, is Malaysian Borneo, which shares the island of Borneo with the Indonesian state of Kalimantan and the tiny Sultanate of Brunei. Malaysian Borneo is made up of Sabah and Sarawak, and is characterised by dense jungle, with many large river systems. Mt Kinabalu (4101m), in Sabah, is the highest mountain between the Himalayas and New Guinea.

WILDLIFE

Malaysia is one of the world's so called 'mega-diversity' areas. The Malaysian jungle is believed to be 130 million years old and tropical rain-forest covers around 40% of the country (although official figures dispute this). The forests support a staggering amount of life: around 14,500 species of flowering plants and trees, 210 species of mammal, 650 species of bird, 150 species of frog, 80 species of lizard and thousands of types of insect. Although vast tracts of forests have been cleared, some magnificent areas remain mostly protected by a nationwide system of reserves and parks (opposite).

Animals MAMMALS

Sadly, Malaysia's signature animal, the charismatic orang-utan, is only found in the jungles of Sabah and Sarawak, along with the unique proboscis monkey, a curious creature with a pot belly and (on males) a dangling, pendulous nose. Commonly seen monkeys in Peninsular Malaysia include graceful gibbons; various species of tree-dwelling langurs (leaf monkeys); and pugnacious macaques, the stocky, aggressive monkeys that solicit snacks from tourists at temples and nature reserves. If you are carrying food, watch out for daring raids and be wary of bites – remember these are wild animals and rabies is a potential hazard.

Malaysia has several species of wild cat, most endangered because of hunting and the trade in body parts for traditional medicines. Tigers are now extremely rare, and leopards and black panthers (actually black leopards) are only occasionally spotted on the peninsula. Smaller bay cats, leopard cats and marbled cats are faring slightly better, in part because they need less territory and eat smaller prey (birds and small mammals). You may also run into various species of civet cats, a separate family of predators with vaguely catlike features but longer snouts and shaggier coats.

Big herbivores to look out for include rare tapirs, something between a wild pig and a hippo, with a curving snout and a distinctive two-tone colour scheme. Pangolins, also known as scaly anteaters, feed exclusively on ants and termites, and roll into a ball as a form of self defence, making them very vulnerable to hunters. Numerous species of bat flit around the peninsula – most distinctive is the c'oglike fruit bat, a huge but harmless fruit-eater often seen taking wing from caves and trees at dusk.

The Encyclopedia of Malaysia: The Environment by Professor Sham Sani Dato, one volume of an excellent series of illustrated encyclopedias, covers everything you need to know about Malaysia's environment.

The word orang-utan comes from the Malay phrase for 'Wild Man' or 'Man of the Forest'.

The Malaysian Nature Society (www.mns.org.my) runs various nature-related projects across the country; see the website for details.

BIRDS

Malaysia has a number of distinctive birds – 650 species live on the peninsula alone. Keep an eye out for colourful pittas, kingfishers, trogons and flycatchers, various species of bulbul, handsome long-tailed great arguses (a species of pheasant) and regal hornbills, with their huge, toucanlike beak. You can spot exotic species in many urban parks, but for rarer birds you'll have to head to the jungle – see p61 for some excellent birding hotspots. Another must-see is KL's Bird Park (p82).

REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS

Some 250 species of reptile have been recorded in Malaysia, including 140 species of snake. Cobras and vipers pose a potential risk to trekkers, although the chances of encountering them are low – see p244 for tips for treating snake bites. Large pythons are sometimes seen in national parks and you may also encounter 'flying' snakes, lizards and frogs (all these species glide using wide flaps of skin). Even in city parks, you stand a good chance of running into a monitor lizard, a primitive-looking carrion feeder notorious for consuming domestic cats.

Four species of marine turtle are native to Malaysia: hawksbills, green turtles, olive-ridleys and giant leatherbacks. Although they nest on many Malaysian beaches, all four species are currently listed as endangered (see p58) because of coastal development and the harvesting of turtle eggs for food. To help preserve these magnificent creatures, avoid buying any products made from turtles. You may be able to see turtles nesting near Melaka (p164) but take care to avoid creating bright lights or loud noises that could disturb laying females.

Plants

The wet, tropical climate of this region produces an amazing range of trees, plants and flowers, including such signature species as the carnivorous pitcher plant, numerous orchids and the parasitic rafflesia (or 'corpse flower'), which produces the world's largest flower – a whopping 1m across when fully open. However, vast tracts of rainforests have been cleared to make way for plantations of cash crops such as rubber and palm oil. Just look out of the window on the flight into Kuala Lumpur International Airport and you'll see endless rows of oil palms, introduced by the British from West Africa in the 20th century – see p59 for the environmental implications of palm oil cultivation.

NATIONAL PARKS & OTHER PROTECTED AREAS

The British established Malaysia's first national park in 1938 – it now forms part of the Taman Negara National Park at the northern end of the peninsula (see p100 for tours from KL). There are 26 other national parks across the country along with numerous government-protected reserves and sanctuaries for forests, birds, mammals and marine life – however, these conservation areas protect less than 5% of the country's natural habitats.

Parks and reserves to look out for in the area covered by this book include Penang National Park (p207) and Teluk Bahang Forest Reserve (p206) near Penang, the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (p132) and Templer Park (p132) near KL, and Hutan Rekreasi Air Keroh (p163) near Melaka. Accommodation or camping sites are provided at most reserves and national parks but transport and accommodation is increasingly being handled by private tour companies. There are also several marine parks, including the reef conservation area at Pulau Payer, accessible on snorkelling and diving trips from Penang – see p185.

Tropical Marine Life of Malaysia & Singapore, Tropical Birds of Malaysia & Singapore and Tropical Plants of Malaysia & Singapore are some of the titles in Periplus Editions' great series of field guides to the plants and animals of Malaysia.

Rafflesia is the world's largest flower – this monster bloom has no stem, leaves or true roots and it gives off a smell of rotten meat to attract flies to carry its pollen to other rafflesia.

LAST CHANCE TO SEE...

Habitat loss is pushing several of Malaysia's best-loved species towards extinction. The **Malaysian Nature Society** (www.mns.org.my) has extensive resources on endangered species in the region. The following animals are among the most at risk:

- Around 11,300 orang-utans are thought to live in the forests of Sabah and Sarawak, but their future is threatened by habitat loss; the population has declined by 40% in the last 20 years. The **Orangutan Foundation** (www.orangutan.org.uk) supports conservation projects in Malaysia and Borneo.
- The Sumatran rhinoceros is found only in a few isolated areas of Sabah and Peninsular Malaysia. The last survey by the **World Wildlife Fund** (WWF; www.wwfmalaysia.org) in Sabah found evidence of just 13 individuals. The nonprofit organisation **SOS Rhino** (www.sosrhino.org) is campaigning to save the species from extinction.
- Malaysia's 1200 Asian elephants are severely threatened by habitat loss and competition with farmers for land. This competition frequently leads to elephants being shot. Tours run from Kuala Lumpur (KL) to the Kuala Gandah Elephant Conservation Centre (see p100) where you can see some of these wonderfully intelligent creatures up close.
- Indo-Chinese (Malaysian) tigers were only given legal protection in 1976, and today just 500 are thought to remain in the forests of Peninsular Malaysia. Hunting for pelts and body parts for traditional medicines and competition for land with humans (where tigers are invariably the loser) are the main threats facing the tiger. **WWF Malaysia** (www.wwfmalaysia.org) is working in several areas of Peninsular Malaysia to reduce the risk of conflict between humans and tigers. You can also find information on the **Save the Tiger Fund** (www.savethetigerfund.org) website.
- The clouded leopard is even rarer than the Malaysian tiger, but for broadly the same reasons. A US-based project aimed at raising awareness about the endangered status of this beautiful big cat is the **Clouded Leopard Project** (www.cloudedleopard.org).
- All of Malaysia's turtle species are threatened by marine pollution, accidental (and deliberate) capture in drift nets and massive harvesting of turtle eggs in coastal villages. The number of giant leatherback turtles is believed to have fallen by a shocking 98% since the 1950s. To make a donation or volunteer to help sea turtle conservation, check out the website of **Turtle Aid Malaysia** (www.umt.edu.my/turtle/).
- Dugongs are found off the southern end of the peninsula; these rare marine herbivores are threatened by the destruction of the sea grass beds they feed on, as well as hunting and injury from fishing nets and boat propellers. The UN is now working with local oil companies to help conserve the dugong, in conjunction with WWF Malaysia and other organisations.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Malaysia treads a delicate line when it comes to the environment. On one level the government wants to appear to be doing something, particularly with the growing concern about atmospheric pollution caused by forest fires in neighbouring Indonesia. At the same time, the government has promised the population a certain standard of development. Malaysia's big problem has always been balancing development with environmental protection. Ever since the colonial era, the Malaysian economy has depended on plantation crops such as palm oil and rubber, and on destructive industries such as mining, logging and petroleum extraction. Big business still has the ear of government when it comes to environmental decisions.

Forest Management & Logging

Logging in Malaysia is reckoned to generate at least US\$4.5 billion a year, employing hundreds of thousands of Malaysians. It also wreaks untold

ecological damage. The **World Rainforest Information Portal** (www.rainforestweb.org) reports that Malaysia's deforestation rate is over 2.4% annually. The government produces more favourable statistics, but the scientific consensus is that 60% of Malaysia's rainforests have already been logged. In the process, dozens of species have been driven towards extinction and hundreds of thousands of tribal peoples have been displaced from their ancestral lands.

Government initiatives such as the National Forestry Policy have reduced deforestation by a third to 900 sq km a year, and the long-term aim is to reduce the timber harvest by 10% year on year. However, this still means that Malaysia is losing an area of forest three times larger than Kuala Lumpur every year. One positive development has been the creation of several new national parks in Sarawak and Sabah.

Close to KL, the Forestry Research Institute of Malaysia (p132) is pioneering work into new ways of preserving and regenerating Malaysia's rainforests. You can visit in person and help support its work on a day trip from KL. For more information on government forestry projects visit the **Forestry Department** (www.forestry.gov.my) website.

Overdevelopment

During the Mahathir era, Malaysia embarked on a massive campaign of construction and industrialisation. Huge swathes of countryside were sacrificed to make space for housing estates, factories and highways, displacing many indigenous communities from their ancestral lands. KL developers are increasingly setting their sights on cheap rural land in Selangor – the new capital in Putrajaya has gobbled up 4932 hectares of prime agricultural land. Although the national desire for construction shows some signs of slowing down, new projects are still getting the green light with little concern for the environmental impact.

The construction of new hydroelectric dams is another worrying issue. Although the new dams have the capacity to generate huge amounts of electricity, this has to be balanced against the social and environmental impact. Problems have been most acute on Borneo, but large numbers of Orang Asli

Wild Malaysia: The Wildlife & Scenery of Peninsular Malaysia by Junaidi Payne and Gerald Cubitt is a lavishly illustrated, large-format coffee-table guide to Malaysian wildlife and habitats.

Proving every argument has two sides, the Palm Oil Truth Foundation (www.palmoiltruthfoundation.com) is campaigning to debunk accepted theories on climate change and the environment, including the alleged negative effects of palm oil production.

PALM OIL: ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK?

When scientists first discovered that palm oil could be refined into biodiesel, it looked like a massive environmental breakthrough. A bright future loomed, where cars would run on environmentally friendly palm-oil diesel instead of fossil fuels, significantly reducing the amount of CO₂ being released into the atmosphere. This was particularly good news for Malaysia, the world's largest producer of palm oil and also a major global supplier of crude oil. Unfortunately, nothing environmental is ever quite as simple as it seems.

The Malaysian government seized on biodiesel as a way to bring down fuel prices, and dramatically increased the area of land approved for palm-oil plantations. In 2003 the campaigning organisation **Friends of the Earth** (www.foe.org) reported that palm-oil production was responsible for 87% of deforestation in Malaysia. The idea that biodiesel is a 'clean fuel' is further undermined by the massive use of pesticides and fertilisers in palm-oil production. In Indonesia, land clearance for palm-oil plantations is thought to be responsible for 75% of forest fires (see p60) and palm-oil production also produces thousands of tonnes of polluting sludge, which is dumped unceremoniously into rivers or the sea, disrupting aquatic ecosystems.

Unfortunately, consumers around the world are unwittingly contributing to the problem by buying palm-oil derivatives – it crops up in products as diverse as chocolate, crisps and toothpaste. Various environmental organisations, including Friends of the Earth, are lobbying Asian governments to adopt sustainable farming practices for palm-oil production, but with the current enthusiasm for biofuels, this may be too little, too late for Malaysia's rainforests.

(original people) have been displaced by the dam project at Kuala Kubu Baru, north of KL. For the latest information check www.xlibris.de/magickriver, the website of writer, cartoonist and activist Antares.

Another side effect of forest clearing for development has been an increase in flooding and landslides. Construction rules were tightened in 1993 after a 12-storey building collapsed in Selangor, but development continues unabated in the cooler highlands close to KL. The community-based organisation **Regional Environmental Awareness Cameron Highlands** (Reach; www.reach.org.my) is campaigning to protect the threatened Cameron Highlands from the concrete trucks.

The local Friends of the Earth organisation is Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM); check out its various campaigns on www.foe-malaysia.org.my.

Haze

Large parts of Southeast Asia face an ongoing threat from 'haze' – the polluting smoke from fires created as a result of slash-and-burn agriculture in the Indonesian states of Kalimantan and Sumatra. The haze has been linked to an increase in respiratory disease and other health complaints, leading the government to declare a state of emergency in parts of the Klang Valley in 2005. The haze is at its worst in southern parts of Malaysia, usually around September and October, just before the rainy season.

Activities

Kuala Lumpur (KL), Melaka and Penang have no shortage of interesting ways to keep you amused during your stay. For nature buffs, there are jungle treks and bird-spotting tours. Thrill-seekers can go rock climbing, mountain biking or white-water rafting, while grown-up waterbabies can don masks and fins to explore the underwater world on the coral reefs near Penang. More sedate activities include golf and boat cruises on rivers and lakes. Then there are more esoteric activities for the mind and body – meditation, yoga and a host of pampering spa treatments.

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

It's hard to ignore the great outdoors in Malaysia – at points the rainforest extends right into the city. This is great news for nature fans and adrenaline junkies. Within an hour's drive of central KL, you can rock climb, mountain bike, trek and swim in jungle pools. Penang is another excellent centre for wilderness activities – the surrounding waters are teeming with fish and half the island is covered by jungle. There are also more leisurely outdoor activities – bird-watching, river cruises and golf. Here are some of the top ways to connect with the great outdoors.

Bird-Watching

Peninsular Malaysia is home to an incredible range of weird and wonderful birdlife, from iridescent flycatchers to the huge Malaysian hornbill. Most tour agents can arrange on-demand bird-watching tours with a guide. Top spots for a bit of birding are listed below.

KUALA LUMPUR

Numerous wild bird species can be spotted at Bukit Nanas Forest Reserve (p88) in central KL and the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM; p132) and Templer Park (p132) just north of the capital. If you don't fancy heading out into the wild unknown, you can see an impressive range of species at KL's excellent Bird Park (p82).

PENANG

Track down white-bellied eagles and 48 other species of bird in Penang National Park (p207) and Teluk Bahang Forest Reserve (p206), both easily accessible from Georgetown. You can also spot many exotic birds on forest walks atop Penang Hill (p202), accessible by the funicular railway. For birding more on-the-beaten-track, try the Penang Bird Park (p213) in Butterworth.

Boating

Boat cruises along the Melaka River are a popular diversion for visitors to Melaka – see p152 for details. The lakes at Putrajaya near KL are another popular spot for cruises (see p131) – take your pick from luxury cruise boats or gondala-like *perahu*. More leisurely boating is possible in many city recreational parks, including Lake Gardens Park (p82) and Taman Tasik Titiwangsa (p93) in KL.

An interesting time to be in Penang is during the annual Penang International Dragon Boat Festival (p171) held in May/June, which is attended by teams from around the world.

A good pocket-sized companion for bird-watchers in Malaysia is *A Photographic Guide to Birds of Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore* by GWH Davison and Chew Yen Fook.

Peninsular Malaysia is home to more than 600 species of birds.

The Penang dragon boat races have taken place every year since 1976 – see www.penangdragonboat.com for details.

Diving, Snorkelling & Watersports

Malaysia is famed for its fabulous coral reefs, attracting scuba divers from around the world. Unfortunately, the Strait of Melaka is often too murky for snorkelling or diving. Things are much better over on the east coast of the peninsula, but the west coast does have some good places to witness the underwater world. By far the best snorkelling and diving in the area is at Pulau Payer Marine Park, accessible by boat between Penang and Langkawi – see p185 for details.

Various beach resort watersports – jet skiing, waterskiing, parasailing – are possible at Batu Ferringhi (p209) on Penang. Freshwater kayaking is possible at the Wetland Park (p131) in Putrajaya near KL.

Kurt Srvcula's *Diving in Malaysia* is the definitive Malaysia diving guide.

SAFE & RESPONSIBLE DIVING

Before embarking on a scuba-diving, skin-diving or snorkelling trip, carefully consider the following points to ensure a safe and enjoyable experience:

- If you're scuba diving, obtain a current diving certification card from a recognised scuba diving instructional agency before heading out.
- Be sure you are healthy and feel comfortable diving.
- Obtain reliable information about physical and environmental conditions at the dive site (eg from a reputable local dive operation).
- Be aware of local laws, regulations and etiquette about marine life and the environment.
- Dive only at sites within your realm of experience; if available, engage the services of a competent, professionally trained dive instructor or dive master.
- Be aware that underwater conditions vary significantly from one region, or even site, to another. Seasonal changes can significantly alter any site and dive conditions. These differences influence the way divers dress for a dive and what diving techniques they use.
- Ask about the environmental characteristics that can affect your diving and how locally trained divers deal with these.

Please also consider the following tips when diving and help preserve the ecology and beauty of reefs:

- Never use anchors on the reef, and take care not to ground boats on coral.
- Avoid touching or standing on living marine organisms or dragging equipment across the reef. Polyps can be damaged by even the gentlest contact. If you must hold on to the reef, only touch exposed rock or dead coral.
- Be conscious of your fins. Even without contact, the surge from fin strokes near the reef can damage delicate organisms. Take care not to kick up clouds of sand, which can smother organisms.
- Practise and maintain proper buoyancy control. Major damage can be done by divers descending too fast and colliding with the reef.
- Take great care in underwater caves. Spend as little time within them as possible as your air bubbles may be caught within the roof and thereby leave organisms high and dry. Take turns to inspect the interior of a small cave.
- Do not collect or buy corals or shells or loot marine archaeological sites (mainly shipwrecks).
- Ensure that you take home all your rubbish and any litter you may find as well. Plastics in particular are a serious threat to marine life.
- Do not feed fish.
- Minimise your disturbance of marine animals. Never ride on the backs of turtles.

Golf

Golf is becoming an obsession for the Malaysian middle classes and new courses are springing up all over the country, frequently as part of exclusive private clubs. In fact, clearing land for golf clubs has become a serious environmental issue – golf courses contribute heavily to soil erosion and rainwater run-off, as well as increasing fertiliser and pesticide levels in the local water table.

Many of Malaysia's golf clubs are reserved for members of exclusive country clubs or hotel guests, but there are still some great places for visitors to tee off. Good options to consider include Titiwangsa Golf Club and Kelab Darul Ehsan in KL (p94), the A'Famosa Resort (p165) near Melaka and Bukit Jambul Country Club (p184) near Penang. Club hire is usually available and green fees start at around RM50 for nine holes.

Mountain Biking

If the only thing you fear is a flat planet, you can find some wonderfully rugged wilderness trails in the countryside around KL, Melaka and Penang. Visit the website **KL Bike Hash** (www.bikehash.freesevers.com) for tips on mountain biking around Malaysia (including places to rent bikes) and details of upcoming cycle 'hashes' in the hills around Kuala Lumpur.

The most serious bikers bring their own wheels from home, but good-quality mountain bikes are available locally if you'll be sticking around for a while – see p232. The following wilderness areas offer some fantastic opportunities for mountain biking.

KUALA LUMPUR

The best places to ride near KL are Templer Park (p132) and the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (p132) – both have rugged jungle trails where you can slip and slide, bounce and charge to your heart's content. The parks lie outside the city limits but you can take a commuter train to the edge of town and cycle from there.

MELAKA

In Melaka, Eco Bike Tour (p152) offers interesting guided cycle trips to local *kampung* (villages).

PENANG

Bikes can be hired for local rambles in Penang (see p174) – the Penang International Mountain Bike Challenge in September attracts bikers from across the region. The best places to cycle near Georgetown are the forest trails of Penang National Park (p207), Teluk Bahang Forest Reserve (p206) and Penang Hill (see p202).

Rock Climbing

The limestone cliffs that rise around Kuala Lumpur offer some excellent opportunities for rock climbing, particularly the exposed massifs around the Batu Caves (see p131). Most routes here are bolted, but there's no harm bringing a selection of nuts, hexes, cams and slings and some rigging biners as disposable anchors. Carry plenty of chalk – climbing in the tropics is a sweaty business. See the websites following for information on routes and grades.

Tour operators in KL offer day trips to the Batu Caves area for around RM150 including lunch and climbing gear – see p99 for some suggestions.

See the website of Golf Malaysia magazine (www.golfmalaysia.com.my) for the low-down on golfing on the peninsula.

For first timers, wall-climbing day trips can be arranged at Pulau Jerejak (p204) near Penang.

Useful climbing web resources:

rockclimbing.com (www.rockclimbing.com/routes/Asia/Malaysia/Kuala_Lumpur)

Wild Asia (www.wildasia.net/main.cfm?page=article&articleID=213)

Swimming

Most hotel pools are reserved for guests, but Peninsular Malaysia has some fabulous wet-and-wild theme parks where you can ride the slides and surge the wave pools to your heart's content. All are great for children and most are easily accessible on public transport. In KL, the best choices are Sunway Lagoon (p129) and Desa Waterpark (p130). As well as the water parks, you can splash around in natural jungle pools at the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM; p132) and Templer Park (see p132) near KL.

The best places to swim on Penang are the tourist beach at Batu Ferringhi (p209) and the wild beaches and jungle waterholes at Penang National Park (p207). However, note that jellyfish can be a problem for sea swimming. There's also the family-friendly water park at Midlands Park Centre (p188).

Theme Parks

If the moment of anticipation before a roller coaster thunders into the abyss has you reaching for your rosary, skip this section. If not, read on. Peninsular Malaysia has some world-class theme parks with all the usual goofy mascots, fast-food franchises, booths selling tacky souvenirs and vertiginous thrill rides. Malaysian theme parks are well maintained and most offer all-day passes and a good selection of gentle rides for younger children.

KL has the best options. Cosmo's World (p96) has an adrenaline-focused set of rides squeezed into the Berjaya Times Square mall and there are more good theme parks at Sunway Lagoon (p129), Mines Resort City (p130) and Genting Highlands (p133).

For information on water parks, see above.

Walking & Trekking

The jungle encroaches almost into the middle of both KL and Penang, providing some excellent opportunities for old-fashioned jungle trekking. Most of the parks have clearly marked walking trails, picnic areas and waterfalls

SAFETY GUIDELINES FOR WALKING

Before embarking on a walking trip, consider the following points to ensure a safe and enjoyable experience:

- Pay any fees and possess any permits required by local authorities.
- Be sure you are healthy and feel comfortable walking for a sustained period.
- Obtain reliable information about physical and environmental conditions along your intended route (eg from park authorities).
- Be aware of local laws, regulations and etiquette about wildlife and the environment.
- Walk only in regions, and on trails, within your realm of experience.
- Be aware that weather conditions and terrain vary significantly from one region, or even from one trail, to another. Seasonal changes can significantly alter any trails. These differences influence the way walkers dress and the equipment they carry.
- Ask before you set out about the environmental characteristics that can affect your walk and how local, experienced walkers deal with these considerations.

The World Club Climbing Malaysia website (www.climbingmalaysia.org) has information on indoor and outdoor climbing in Malaysia.

where you can take a dip (suitably clothed of course). Many people just visit on day trips, but some parks allow camping and almost all are easily accessible by public transport. Here are some top spots for trekking.

KUALA LUMPUR

Some of the best places for walks are north of the capital. FRIM (p132) has a huge network of forestry trails and a fabulous suspended walkway in the forest canopy, and there are more rugged jungle tracks in Templer Park (p132).

If you don't have the energy or inclination to carve your own way through the virgin jungle, there are plenty of more leisurely walks. In KL, the Bukit Nanas Forest Reserve (see p88) sits right in the middle of the city, with a series of nature trails that will give you a taste of the jungle without having to leave the city limits.

You might also consider arranging a tour to Taman Negara National Park in the far north of the Peninsula – several agents in KL offer overnight packages (see p99).

MELAKA

Melaka has less unspoiled rainforest than KL or Penang, but you can take a leisurely walk along paved forest trails in Hutan Rekreasi Air Keroh (p163), which also has a treetop canopy walk.

PENANG

Penang Island has large areas of pristine jungle to explore. Strap on your hiking boots and head to Penang National Park (p207) or Teluk Bahang Forest Reserve (p206), both near the village of Teluk Bahang at the north-west tip of the island. If you don't feel up to the full jungle-Jim experience, a network of easier forest trails snakes over Penang Hill (p202), accessible from Georgetown by funicular railway.

White-Water Rafting

Malaysia has some excellent rivers for white-water rafting but only a handful are accessible from KL, Melaka and Penang. Tour operators in KL offer full-day rafting trips on the Grade I to Grade III waters of the Sungai Kampar (Kampar River) in Perak for around RM255 per person – see p99 for details.

INDOOR ACTIVITIES

As well as enjoying the great outdoors, don't overlook the relaxing effects of the great indoors. Spa treatments, yoga and meditation are popular all over Asia and Malaysia is no exception. KL has by far the biggest selection of spas and therapy centres, but you can also find some deliciously indulgent spas at luxury hotels in Melaka and Penang.

Meditation & Yoga

First introduced by Indian migrants in the colonial era, yoga is a popular leisure activity in Malaysia. As well as the traditional yoga centres attached to ashrams and Hindu religious centres, you'll find numerous spas offering yoga and meditation classes, often modified to appeal to first-time yoga practitioners. Here are the best places to try.

Several cultural centres in KL offer courses in traditional forms of meditation, yoga and t'ai chi (p99). There are also a number of modern yoga centres offering various styles of yoga for beginners as well as for more advanced practitioners (p95).

For an introduction to the walking trails of Penang island consult the website <http://trails.forestexplorers.com/index.shtml>, run by local naturalist Forest Ang.

RESPONSIBLE TREKKING

To help preserve the ecology and beauty of Malaysia's countryside, consider the following tips when trekking.

Rubbish

- Carry out all your rubbish. Don't overlook easily forgotten items, such as silver paper, orange peel, cigarette butts and plastic wrappers. Empty packaging should be stored in a dedicated rubbish bag. Make an effort to carry out rubbish left by others.
- Never bury your rubbish: digging disturbs soil and ground cover and encourages erosion. Buried rubbish will likely be dug up by animals, who may be injured or poisoned by it. It may also take years to decompose.
- Minimise waste by taking minimal packaging and no more food than you will need. Take reusable containers or stuff sacks.
- Sanitary napkins, tampons, condoms and toilet paper should be carried out despite the inconvenience. They burn and decompose poorly.

Human Waste Disposal

- Contamination of water sources by human faeces can lead to the transmission of all sorts of nasties. Where there is a toilet, please use it. Where there is none, bury your waste. Dig a small hole 15cm (6in) deep and at least 100m (320ft) from any watercourse. Cover the waste with soil and a rock.
- Ensure that these guidelines are applied to a portable toilet tent if one is being used by your trekking party. Encourage all party members, including porters, to use the site.

Washing

- Don't use detergents or toothpaste in or near watercourses, even if they are biodegradable.
- For personal washing, use biodegradable soap and a water container (or even a lightweight, portable basin) at least 50m (160ft) away from the watercourse. Disperse the waste water widely to allow the soil to filter it fully.
- Wash cooking utensils 50m (160ft) from watercourses using a scourer or sand instead of detergent.

Erosion

- Hillsides and mountain slopes, especially at high altitudes, are prone to erosion. Stick to existing trails and avoid short-cuts.

Penang's Trisula Yoga school (p187) offers well-respected six-week training courses in hatha yoga and reiki. In Melaka, the Renaissance Melaka Hotel (p156) is one of several upmarket hotels offering yoga classes for guests.

Spa Treatments

Riding an international wave of enthusiasm for wellness and traditional therapies, Malaysia is going spa crazy. Most big hotels and resorts have upmarket spas offering the full range of massages, rubs and marinades, and many malls have their own private spas where you can escape for a dose of self-indulgence. Each of Malaysia's ethnic groups has introduced its own forms of traditional medicine, so local spas offer everything from Chinese reflexology to Indian Ayurveda (herbal medicine) and Malay traditional massage. Wellness is no longer a girls-only affair; many of the big resort

The website www.yoga-basics.com is an excellent online guide to the basics of yoga practice.

- If a well-used trail passes through a mud patch, walk through the mud so as not to increase the size of the patch.
- Avoid removing the plant life that keeps topsoil in place.

Fires & Low-Impact Cooking

- Don't depend on open fires for cooking. Cutting wood for fires in popular trekking areas can cause rapid deforestation. Cook on a light-weight kerosene, alcohol or Shellite (white gas) stove and avoid those powered by disposable butane gas canisters.
- If you are trekking with a guide and porters, supply stoves for the whole team. In alpine areas, ensure that all members are outfitted with enough clothing so that fires are not a necessity for warmth.
- If you patronise local accommodation, select those places that do not use wood fires to heat water or cook food.
- Fires may be acceptable below the tree line in areas that get very few visitors. If you light a fire, use an existing fireplace. Don't surround fires with rocks. Use only dead, fallen wood. Remember the adage 'the bigger the fool, the bigger the fire'. Use minimal wood, just what you need for cooking. In huts, leave wood for the next person.
- Ensure that you fully extinguish a fire after use. Spread the embers and flood them with water.

Wildlife Conservation

- Do not engage in or encourage hunting. It is illegal in all parks and reserves unless you are a member of an indigenous tribal community in the area.
- Don't buy items made from endangered species; in doubt, avoid all products made from wild animals.
- Don't attempt to exterminate animals in huts. In wild places, they are likely to be protected native animals.
- Discourage the presence of wildlife by not leaving food scraps behind you. Place gear out of reach and tie packs to rafters or trees.
- Do not feed the wildlife as this can lead to animals becoming dependent on hand-outs, and can create unbalanced populations and problems with disease.

Environmental Organisations

- The **Malaysian Nature Society** (www.mns.org.my) is the main organisation promoting conservation in Malaysia – see the website for details of current environmental issues to consider.

and hotel spas offer dedicated spa treatments for men as well as women. Here are some of the options.

KUALA LUMPUR

The capital has a fabulous selection of luxury spas, plus plenty of more accessible massage and reflexology centres that won't cost you an arm and a leg. Another interesting option here is to visit a blind masseur at one of the rehabilitation centres for the blind in Brickfields. For more on all these options, see the boxed text on p95.

MELAKA

Melaka has a number of spas and therapy centres offering reflexology, traditional Chinese treatments and massages – see p148.

Malay traditional massage came to Malaysia from Java. Unlike Thai or Chinese massage, Malay massage makes extensive use of *minyak* (herbal oils).

PENANG

There are spas are several resorts on Penang Island, including the Jerejak Resort & Spa (p204) on Pulau Jerejak and the Grand Plaza Park Royal (p211) and Shangri-La Rasa Sayang Resort (p211). There are also a few reflexology/massage places in Batu Ferringhi (p209).