

EXCURSIONS

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Nobody has ever accused Singapore of being the middle of nowhere. If anything, the island state is about as centrally located as it gets, and there are plenty of places a few hours (and in most cases a quick trip through immigration) from the cacophonous hubbub of central Singapore that are worth a visit.

For a quick plunge into bucolic splendour that leaves behind all of Singapore's overstimulating modernity, you don't even need to bring your passport; Pulau Ubin is one of the last inhabited (though barely) parts of the country that has yet to feel the cold scrape of construction crews armed with heavy machinery. Often billed as a glimpse into Singapore's past, life on this Singapore-controlled island nestled between Singapore and Malaysia hasn't changed much over the last hundred years. Most visitors come over for a day's walking or cycling along Singapore's best mountain-bike paths, but it's possible to spend a night under the stars (they're still there, even though you can only see half a dozen this close to the city lights), or at the island's lone but none-too-shabby resort.

Just across the causeway is where you'll find Johor, the state encompassing the southernmost tip of Peninsular Malaysia. It's home to amazing ecoparks, pretty seaside villages, beautiful cycling roads and plenty of lovely scenery; a few days exploring the area is time well spent. Even if you confine your excursion to the districts closest to Singapore, you'll run across some interesting surprises (ostrich farm, anyone?). And though it won't win any prizes in the 'excellence in urban planning' category, the city of Johor Bahru (a Frisbee

toss across the Causeway) is a pretty interesting place to explore for an afternoon, not to mention a favourite shopping getaway for Singaporeans on the prowl for bargains.

Travel in Malaysia is covered in Lonely Planet's *Malaysia, Singapore & Brunei*. Lonely Planet's *Malay Phrasebook* may also come in handy.

PULAU UBIN

Ah, Pulau Ubin, Singapore in name alone! This small and heavily forested island is a mere 15-minute bumboat ride from Singapore, but once you get there you'll think you've stepped into a different century. With its double-digit population (most of whom still live in traditional kampong houses), mangrove swamps, dense forests and gorgeous hiking and cycling trails, Ubin offers an amazing natural escape from the overcrowded consumer frenzy of Singapore. Not surprisingly, Ubin is particularly popular with nature lovers, students and mountain bikers.

The bumboat from Changi Village's incongruously modern ferry terminal arrives at Ubin's **village**, a ramshackle time capsule of Singapore's past, where fish traps and the skeletal remains of abandoned jetties poke out of the muddy water, stray cats prowl for birds, and docile dogs flop unmolested on the sleepy streets. Still unconnected to the Singaporean electric grid, the businesses in this the only business centre on the island are still driven by gas-powered generators, which accounts for the din and – thankfully localised to the village – pollution.

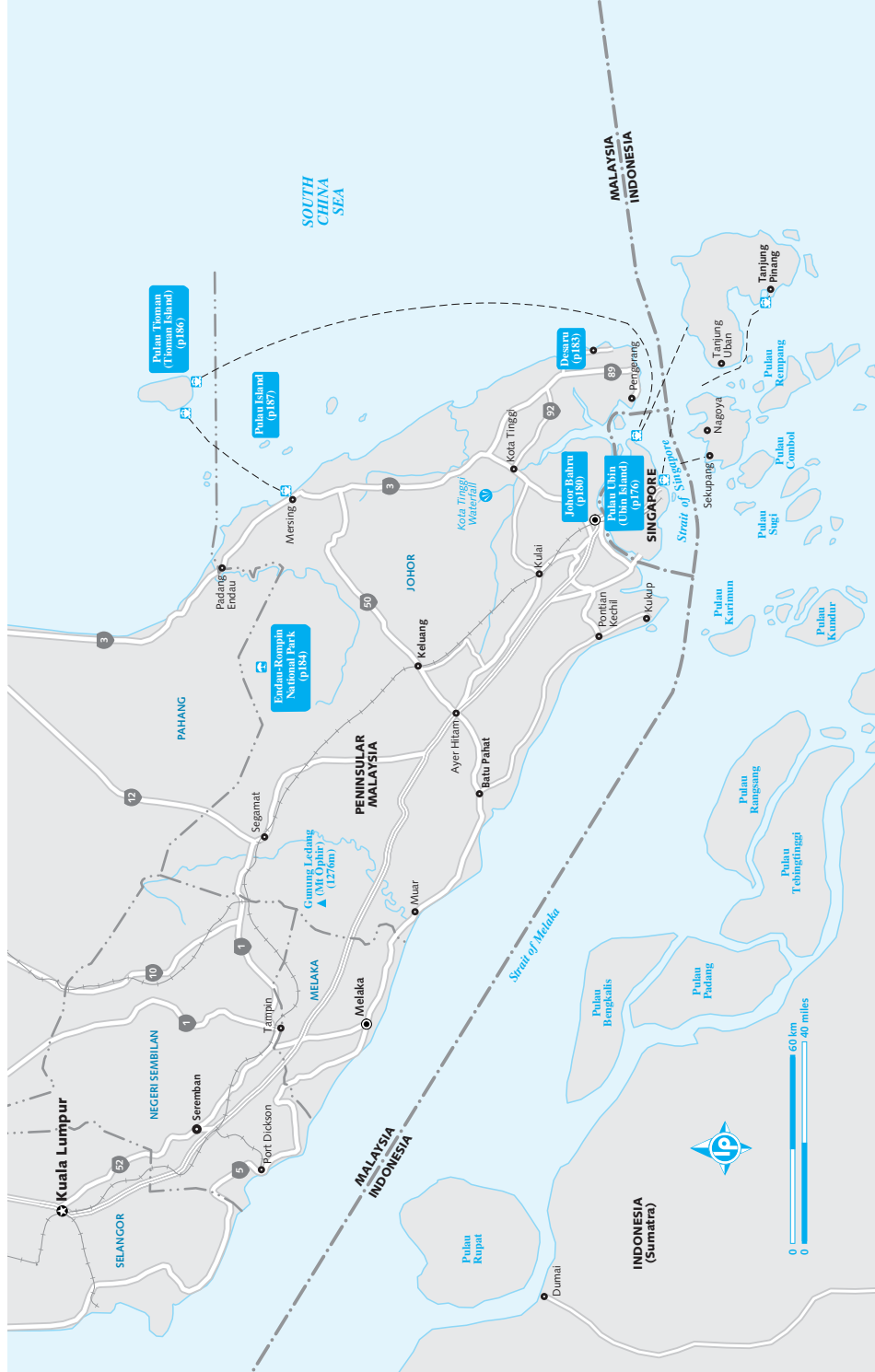
TRANSPORT: PULAU UBIN

Distance from mainland Singapore 500m

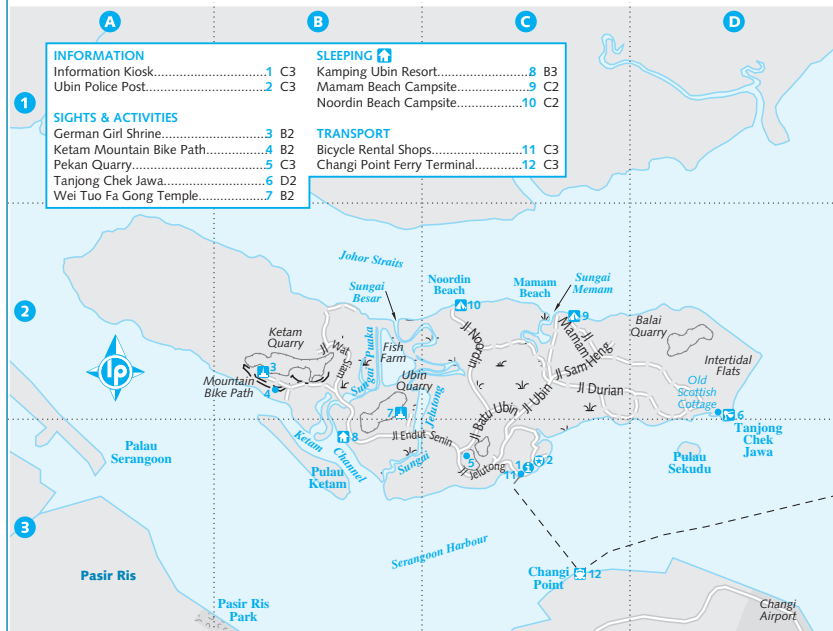
Direction Northeast

Travel time 15 minutes

Boat Getting to Pulau Ubin is easy. A taxi from the city centre to the Changi Village ferry terminal will cost about \$20 and take about 20 minutes. Public transport is cheaper, naturally, so if you can spare an hour or so, get the MRT to Tanah Merah, then bus 2 or 29 to the Changi Village interchange; from there it's a two-minute walk to the ferry terminal. Ferries leave whenever there are 12 people to fill a boat and ostensibly run 24 hours a day, though there are unlikely to be regular departures much beyond 8.30pm. The trip each way costs \$2.50 per person, and bicycles are an extra \$2.



PULAU UBIN

 0 800 m
 0 0.4 miles


It's here in the village that you'll find a half-dozen bicycle rental shops offering everything from cheap Chinese-made clunkers (\$4 per day) to good-quality mountain bikes (Specialized, Trek and Giant, mostly) complete with shock absorbers, for anywhere between \$10 and \$20. If you're just here to cruise around the island, the cheap ones are fine, but if you're planning to tackle the newly constructed trails on Ubin's western end, the better bikes are well worth the investment. Whatever you choose, make sure you test gears and brakes before sealing the deal; Zen though Ubin may

be, the art of bicycle maintenance doesn't seem to be a local strong point.

The village is also where the island's restaurants, souvenir stands and grocery stores are. There are a few spots scattered around the island where you can buy snacks and drinks, but if you're planning to wander too far its best to stock up on provisions here.

Biking, hiking, bird-watching, culture and nature are what bring people to Ubin, so unless you enjoy the hum of diesel generators, you'll want to pass through the village before too long. From the village, head out to the eastern edge of the island to check out the **Tanjong Chek Jawa**, a beautiful wetlands area teeming with mangroves and boasting a 21m-high tower for viewing wildlife and a 1km coastal boardwalk for strolling. Until recently, the area was off limits to casual tourists and accessible only through guided tours. Nowadays individual travellers are permitted without a guide, though you'll still be asked to register and obey strict regulations against disturbing local flora and fauna. While guides are no longer mandatory, you may want to consider hiring the services of two sisters who collectively run a unique business known as the Ubin Experience (see left).

THE UBIN EXPERIENCE

Kamariah and Samsiah Abdullah, co-operators of the **Ubin Experience** (☎ 9100 6958), lead botanical tours introducing visitors to the natural and cultural aspects of the island that their family has called home for generations.

Costing \$120 per group (the minimum suggested number is six, though the sisters often lead groups of up to 20), tours include a jungle walk, herb gathering, and a Malay cooking class followed by a feast inside the sister's 200-year-old kampong home, the oldest structure on the island.

THE GERMAN GIRL SHRINE

The curiously named **German Girl Shrine** is a bright yellow shack housing a large white urn next to an assam tree. The shrine is filled with all manner of charms, offerings, folded lottery tickets, a medium's red table and chair, burning candles and joss paper. Legend has it that the young German daughter of a coffee plantation manager, running away from British troops who had come to arrest her parents during WWI, fell to her death into the quarry behind her house. Discovered a day later, she was initially covered with sand, though Chinese labourers eventually gave her a proper burial. Her ghost supposedly haunts the area to this day.

However, somewhere along the way, this daughter of a Roman Catholic family became a Taoist deity, whose help some Chinese believers seek for good health and, particularly, good fortune. A small, devoted collection of Singaporeans regularly make the trek to the shrine, dodging mountain bikers who've taken over the area to seek the spectral maiden's favours. Some reportedly even bring German-speaking mediums along.

Pekan Quarry sits on the right side of the road heading out towards the eastern end of the island. The quarry is a beautiful deep pool ringed with granite cliffs, the sort of place that looks like it's custom-made for lazy days spent swimming; it's a pity that swimming is strictly forbidden in all of Ubin's quarries. This one is fenced off, though the fence is drooping and somewhat half-hearted in sections. In any event, no-one's going to arrest you for taking a look.

After the first bridge, a dirt track on the right leads you to **Wei Tuo Fa Gong temple**. This 80-year-old Buddhist temple sits on a hill overlooking a pond filled with carp and turtle, and contains a number of impressive shrines and statues of the Buddha meditating atop lotus blossoms. A truly living place of worship, the temple is surrounded by gardens meticulously maintained by worshippers, and is home to a dozen or so stray dogs that are fed and cared for by resident monks.

Back on the main road, another 500m of some mildly strenuous uphill cycling takes you past the chocolate-brown chalets and the impressive climbing wall tower of the **Kampung Ubin Resort** (p180). The climbing wall and surrounding action-toys (zip-lines and rappelling cables) are mostly used for corporate 'team-building' events, though resort guests are permitted to use them as well by advance arrangement. The resort also has a private beach, complete with beach chairs and sea-kayaks.

Just after the resort the road climbs to the northwest and into the part of Ubin least-visited by pedestrians and most beloved by cyclists; it's here, surrounding the Ketam Quarry, that you'll find the **Ketam Mountain Bike Park**. Though not as fraught with opportunities for orthopaedic injury as, say, the parks around Moab, Utah, by Singapore standards the park is pretty cool, and definitely built for mountain bikers of at least intermediate level.

With over a dozen trails of varying skill levels, the newly built park is a mountain-bikers wet dream, and – hopefully – proof that the Singapore government intends to keep Ubin wild and free for the next decade at least.

Incongruously enough, the mountain bike park is also home to one of Singapore's quirkiest religious offerings, the **German Girl Shrine** (above).

Past the bike park the road becomes an unpaved pathway. Here you'll find yourself truly wandering (or riding) through the most rustic area that Singapore has to offer. It's in this last chunk of Ubin that free-range chickens and wild pigs (there are said to be scores of the latter) roam free, making it the only part of Singapore where being mauled by a wild animal is an actual possibility.

How long Ubin will remain unspoilt depends on both government plans, and the considerable strength of public pressure to preserve the island in its current state. It's hoped by many that in the near term the government's resources will be tied up in the Herculean task of building casinos in the newly reclaimed downtown waterfront area (not to mention its continuing efforts to transform Sentosa Island into Singapore's Disneyland), keeping Ubin wild for at least the foreseeable future. There's little doubt that eventually the government would like to bring Ubin's transport and facilities into line with Singapore's policy of relentless modernisation. For now, its jungle charms remain unscathed.

Information

Focus Ubin (www.focusubin.org) A good website with current listings.

Information Kiosk (☎ 6542 4108; 🕒 8am–5pm)

Ubin Explorer (www.ubinexplorer.com) Organises trips to and around the island.

Ubin Police Post (☎ 6542 8664)

Eating

There are four Chinese restaurants and one Halal Muslim restaurant located in Ubin Village, and another eatery inside the Kampung Ubin Resort. A few private homes have set up small drink and snack stalls along the roads as well. If you want a serious Malay feast, arrange it through Kamariah and Samsiah Abdullah of the Ubin Experience (p178).

Sleeping

Kampung Ubin Resort (☎ 6388 8388; www.marinacountryclub.com.sg; 1-2-bedroom chalets \$90/175) This recently renovated chalet resort is a good alternative for outdoor types and activity junkies looking for a definitively different Singapore experience. The resort has its own ferry to Singapore, making it quite doable as a general base of exploration for those who want to see Singapore from the green fringes. Rates go down slightly on weekdays.

Noordin Beach & Mamam Camping (☎ Information kiosk 6542 4108; ☎ 8am-5pm) Pleasant free camping spots with imported white-sand beaches. Watch out for otters, bats and the odd python! If planning group camping, consult the national park officers at the Information Kiosk for more details. Campers are advised to drop by the Ubin Police Post to register, so they know where to look for your remains should you be eaten by wild pigs.

HURRY UP AND WAIT (OR PAY)

Changi Point ferry terminal is the jumping-off point for trips to Pulau Ubin and Pengarang, on the south-eastern tip of the Malay peninsula. But don't let the terminal's sparkingly modern exterior fool you into expecting regular schedules; in actuality, the terminal is more a central hangout for a dozen or so privately owned 12-seater bumboats, which do the runs across the straits. In order to make each journey profitable, the captains wait until there are 12 paying customers before leaving. Going to Pulau Ubin, this is rarely an issue – at least not during daytime hours.

But unless you're travelling with 11 of your friends, you may have to wait before heading across to Malaysia (then again, you may be that magical passenger who offers the green-light for 11 others). The boat captains don't actually care how many passengers under they are, just as long as they're paid for 12. For this reason, it's not uncommon for a group of eight or so to just agree to pony up the cash for the extra tickets to get the journey underway.

JOHOR BAHRU

☎ 07

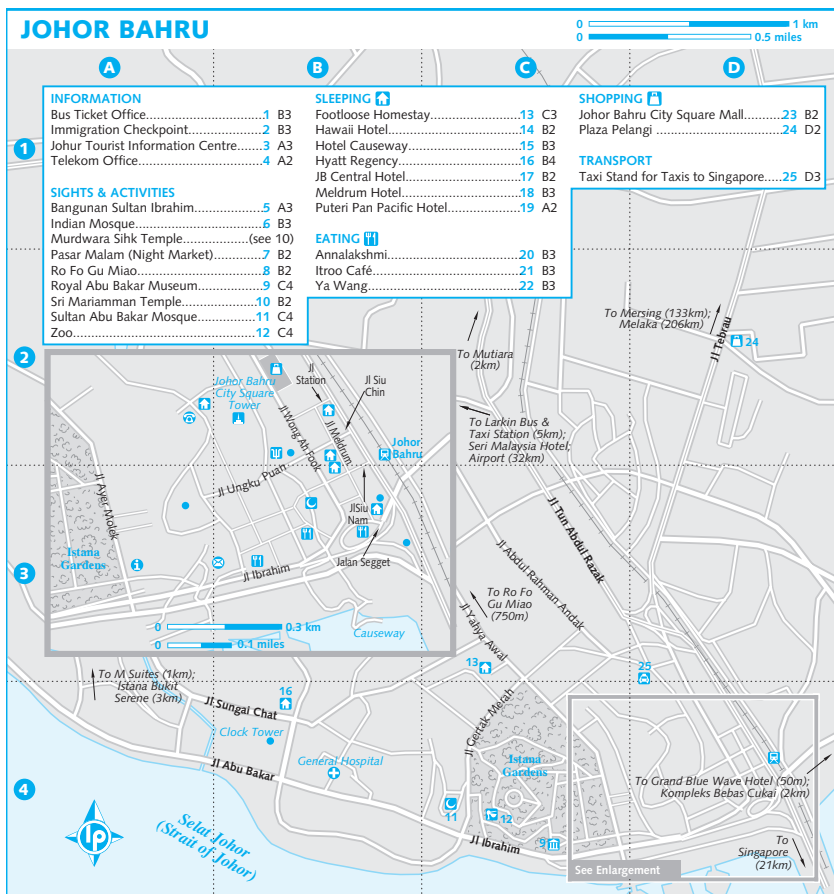
Connected to Singapore by the 1038m-long Causeway, Johor Bahru (or JB as it's commonly known) is to Singapore what Shenzhen is to Hong Kong: a vastly cheaper, grittier sister city across the border with an ever-slight edge of lawlessness that visitors from the 'safe' side of the border blow way out of proportion. Though dingier than over-polished Singapore, JB is actually more like a mash-up of a few Singapore neighbourhoods. The Peranakan-style shophouses in the area just above the Straits of Johor are much like the newly renovated ones found in Joo Chiat (minus the 'newly renovated' part). The area surrounding the Sri Mariamman Temple looks and smells like Little India, right down to the small shops selling silks and saris.

JB is almost considered a suburb of Singapore. Thousands of people – Singaporeans included – live there and commute through the crowded Woodlands checkpoint, which handles about 50,000 people a day. Singapore residents flock over here at weekends and on public holidays to take advantage of cheaper grocery and petrol prices, and stock up on pirated CDs and DVDs. For those staying in Singapore past the usual visa period, a trip to JB is the easiest way to get around a trip to the immigration office. JB also has a few places worth visiting in their own right, not to mention some excellent (and inexpensive) eating options and, of course, pirated DVDs galore.

AROUND JOHOR BAHRU

One day is enough time to take in most of JB's sights. As you leave the immigration checkpoint, walking west will take you through the neighbourhood of Peranakan-style shophouses just south of the blue-domed **Indian Mosque**, the Muslim counterpoint to the nearby Sri Mariamman Temple. Wandering through this area gives a good idea of what Singapore might have looked like 20 years ago.

Continuing westward along the esplanade of Jalan Ibrahim, you'll find one of JB's main attractions, the **Royal Abu Bakar Museum** (☎ 223 0555; Jalan Ibrahim; adult/child US\$7/3; ☎ 9am-5pm Sat-Thu). The former Istana Besar (main palace) of the Johor royal family, it was built in Victorian style on a small hill overlooking the Johor Strait by the Anglophile sultan Abu Bakar in 1866. The palace is now a museum chock-full of the sultan's posses-



sions, furniture and hunting trophies. There are some superb pieces, making it worth a visit for those interested in perusing royal bric-a-brac. Even if you aren't going into the museum, the magnificent surrounding grounds (admission free) are a lovely place for a stroll.

West of this is a small **zoo** (adult/child Rm2/1; ☎ 8am-6pm), but with one of Asia's best zoos just across the water it's hardly worth the effort.

A little further west, off Jalan Gertak Merah, is the impressive **Sultan Abu Bakar Mosque** (Jalan Gertak Merah); like some of the mosques in Singapore, it features a mish-mash of architectural influences – including Victorian. Also like the mosques in Singapore, it took some time to build (eight years from 1892 to 1900), but you can see why. Hailed in Singapore as one of the most magnificent mosques, it occupies

large grounds and, according to its caretaker, can hold up to 2000 people.

If you continue west (you'll have to take a taxi), you can see the real residence of the Sultan of Johor, the **Istana Bukit Serene** (Jalan Straits View), but of course you're not allowed to wander in and say hello.

For those who want to keep to a walking-only JB tour, head back east along the waterfront until you get to the most impressive **Bangunan Sultan Ibrahim** (State Secretariat Bldg; Bukit Timbalan), which overlooks the city centre. An imposing fortress-style building that looks like it was transported from Mogul India, the fortress was built in the 1940s, and is, sadly, not open to tourists. Follow Jalan Ungku Puan, which runs away from this building and you'll pass on your left the **Sri Mariamman Temple**, a beautiful Hindu temple with ornate carvings and devotional

TRANSPORT: JOHOR BAHRU

Distance from Singapore 1km

Direction North

Travel time 30 minutes to one hour

Bus Many bus companies run bus services from Singapore to Malaysia. Visit <http://plusliner.com> for online and off-line ticketing services for Plusliner and NiCE Executive coaches plying between Malaysia and Singapore. The Singapore–Johor express coach leaves every 15 minutes from the Queen St bus terminal (Map p68) between 6.30am and 11pm and costs \$2.40. Alternatively take the public bus 170, which also runs from the Queen St terminal every 15 minutes, between 5.20am and 12.10am and costs \$1.70. Yet another, quicker, option is to go to Kranji MRT station by train and catch bus 160, or Mailsing MRT and catch bus 950, either of which cuts down on your bus time dramatically.

In all cases, when you get to the Singapore checkpoint, take all your belongings and get off. After clearing immigration, you have to wait for the next bus (but don't have to pay again, as long you have your ticket). Repeat the process at the Malaysian side, or simply take a two-minute walk into Johor Bahru city centre. The public bus stops at the Komtar Shopping Centre and then the Larkin bus terminal 5km north of the Causeway, while the coach stops only at the bus terminal.

Coming back, the public bus costs Rm1.20 and the coach Rm2.40.

If at all possible, avoid crossing at weekends, when it gets infernally busy and the whole process can become a frustrating waste of time. Coming back into Singapore on a Sunday evening is little short of a nightmare.

Taxi A taxi from the city into Johor Bahru will cost around \$28, more if there is a long wait at immigration. Alternatively, you can try to pick up a share taxi from the Queen St bus terminal (Map p68); the price will depend on how many people are going and how long a line you have at both immigration checkpoints.

artwork that is the heart of JB's Hindu community. Almost under the temple sits the **Pasar Malam** (night market), a favourite eating spot where you can also find some souvenirs and clothes. Starting at 5.30pm, it is divided into three sections (Chinese, Malay and Indian) and has a great selection of dishes. Also next to the Hindu Temple is the **Murdwara Sikh Temple**, and across the street (overlooked by the Puteri Pan Pacific hotel) is the **Ro Fo Gu Miao**, a beautiful, elaborately painted Chinese temple with a large wooden door. It is reputedly the only temple in Johor that survived WWII and is hence a highly sacred place for Chinese Malays.

From here, you can stroll back towards the border crossing, or spend more time in JB shopping or eating.

Information

Johor Tourist Information Centre (☎ 222 3590; www.tourismmalaysia.gov.my; 2 Jalan Ayer Molek;

☎ 8am–5pm Mon–Fri)

Shopping

For shopping most people head to the big malls like the fancy **Johor Bahru City Square** (☎ 226 3668; 108 Jalan Wong Ah Fook), along the chaotic, somewhat dirty Jalan Wong Ah Fook thoroughfare just across from the immigration post. **Plaza Pelangi**, an even fancier mall featuring handicrafts, fashion and food, seems to

have surpassed City Square in the modernity stakes, while **Kompleks Bebas Cukai duty-free shopping complex** (☎ 922 2611; Bukit Kayu Hitam), about 2km east of the Causeway, proudly proclaims itself one of the largest duty-free complexes in the world, with more than 160 shops. In general, you won't get much in JB that you can't get in Singapore, though prices tend to be lower.

Eating

Johor Bahru can be a fine place for dining; many of our Singaporean friends swear that Malay dishes here are simply 'more authentic' than they are at home. (Keep in mind that Singaporeans are hands-down the most 'obsessed with culinary minutia' people on the planet!) The streets and alleys just across the border are filled with excellent street-food options.

Annalakshmi (☎ 227 7400; www.annalakshmi.com.sg; 39 Jalan Ibrahim) This lovely vegetarian restaurant is sister to the one of the same name over in Singapore. Their 'pay what you like' policy ensures that spirituality and good food is placed over profit.

ITRoo Cafe (☎ 222 7780; jjchong@pc.jaring.my); 17 Jalan Dhoby A popular cafe with very friendly service in JB's colonial district. The best iced cappuccino in Malaysia.

Ya Wang Restaurant (☎ 224 8624; 28 Jalan Segget) *Ya wang* is Mandarin for 'duck king', which gives you a fair idea of what this little restau-

rant a few blocks from the Causeway border crossing specialises in. Savoury, juicy, delicious and half the price of what you'll pay in Singapore.

Sleeping

From cheap flophouses to decent mid-priced hotels, sleeping options are mostly clustered in the Jalan Meldrum neighbourhood, just east of the railway station. Upper-end travellers have a few other options away from the hub.

Meldrum Hotel (☎ 227 8988; hotel_meldrum@po.jaring.my; 1 Jalan Meldrum; r Rm66) Smart, clean rooms with air-con, TV and shared toilets. Superior room has its own toilet and shower for Rm99.

Hotel Causeway (☎ 224 8811; causewayhotel@yahoo.com; 6a-6f Jalan Meldrum; r Rm100) Slightly nicer than the Meldrum for about the same price, this is one of the more reliable choices in the area. However, for a few ringgit more you're better off staying at the brand new Hotel JB Central.

JB Central Hotel (☎ 222 2833; www.jbcentralhotel-johorbahru.com; Merlin Tower, Jalan Meldrum; r from Rm120) Though testing the upper end of the budget category (for JB at least), this brand new hotel on the northern end of Jalan Meldrum is by far the cleanest and most comfortable of the downtown sleeping options. Upper-floor rooms offer excellent views of northern Singapore and JB.

Puteri Pan Pacific Hotel (☎ 219 9999; www.puteripacific.com; Kotaraya Plaza; r from Rm270) This top-end hotel is close to town and overlooks some of JB's most impressive temples and mosques. It's often packed on weekends, so book in advance. Best top-end bet close to town. Big discounts.

Hyatt Regency (☎ 222 1234; hyatt@hrjb.po.my; Jalan Sungai Chat; s/d from Rm430/450) A stylish, top-end joint, the Hyatt is a bit far out of town for most casual JB tourists, but might be what you're looking for if you plan on an extended stay during which expense isn't an object.

GREATER DESARU

☎ 07

Desaru is in the Kota Tinggi district, the most southeasterly area of Peninsular Malaysia. Unlike nearby Johor Bahru across the Johor Delta, this region is sparsely populated, far less developed, and virtually undiscovered by tourists save for the few Singaporeans who head to **Sungai Rengit** (the southernmost town of note) for extravagant seafood meals on the cheap.

Close enough to Singapore for an afternoon trip, the area is pretty, filled with Malaysian charm, and home to a number of surprising attractions. The beaches aren't exceptional this far south (thanks to oil exploration and heavy shipping), but the road wrapping around the coast offers exceptional scenery, making it a favourite for cyclists from Singapore.

Pengerang port served as a British Operations Centre during WWII, giving it a certain historical cache. But aside from a Malaysian navy base, there isn't much to see right off the bumboat from Singapore; there are usually a few taxis waiting to take passengers up to the town of Sungai Rengit, 8km up the peninsula.

Sungai Rengit is a good town in which to base yourself for exploration around the area, though Seban Golf & Marina Resort (p184) is a nice treat, if you can afford it. There are a couple of cheap hotels, cheap and midrange restaurants, and the main street is worth a stroll. Check out the large steel lobster statue by the waterfront, apparently the town mascot. There are a few sandy beaches just north of town, but water quality is really dependent on tidal activity. Locals do swim there, but you're probably better off further away from Singapore.

The real attraction of the area is sightseeing, soaking in the flavour of the Malay peninsula without really leaving Singapore's orbit. North-east of Sungai Rengit the road is lined with palm trees punctuated occasionally by kampung houses and small clearings from which locals sell traditional Malay snacks and drinks. There are also some attractive temples and mosques along the road. Keep your eyes open at about the 3km mark out of town for a lovely single-storey **shrine** to Kuan Yin, goddess of

TRANSPORT: GREATER DESARU

Distance from Singapore 12km (to Pengerang port)

Direction Northeast

Travel time One hour (from Singapore)

Bus/boat The cheapest way to get to this chunk of Johor is by catching a ferry from the Changi Point ferry terminal (the same one the boats to Pulau Ubin leave from) to Pengerang. The bumboats hold 12 and leave when they're full, so be prepared to either wait or pay extra to convince the captains to leave. Generally speaking, 10 to 12 boats leave each way per day. Once there, you can hire a taxi at the dock. Alternatively, there are four boats per day from Tanah Merah Terminal in Singapore that go directly to Seban Golf & Marina Resort.

mercy. Built in a traditional southern-Chinese style, the shrine features a small pagoda with a golden statue of the goddess out front.

Five kilometres out of town on the left you'll come across the **Ostrich Showfarm** (☎ 826 5846; adult/child Rm10/6), a 2-hectare ostrich farm and petting zoo that travellers with kids won't want to miss. Activities range from ostrich feeding and riding to, on some days, watching baby ostriches emerge from their huge shells. Ostrich Showfarm-owner Joyce Teh does a good job teaching groups about the huge birds, making the place a popular stop for school field trips. Burgers and satay are sold out front – made from ostrich meat, naturally.

From the Ostrich Farm, you can continue heading along the coastal road, which eventually curves northward. As the coast shifts from south-facing (Singapore) to east-facing, the beaches actually become quite nice. **Teluk Punggal Beach** is one of the more popular ones in the area, and probably the day-trip limit of all but the strongest cyclists.

Eating

Sungai Rengit has a dozen or so restaurants to choose from. If you're just looking for snacks, head to the waterfront – just east of the giant lobster statue there are a few stalls selling Malaysian snacks for a few ringgits. On the north side of town on Jalan Kerisi are three semi-enclosed seafood restaurants frequented mostly by Singaporeans. We found the food at Jade Garden Seafood Centre to be good, but we were overcharged despite previous negotiation.

Sleeping

Sungai Rengit has a couple of cheap and decent hotels to choose from. If you're looking for something at the top end, check out Seban Golf & Marina Resort (right).

Tai Hoe Hotel (☎ 826 3855; www.taihoe.com.my; 36 Jalan Haji Abu Bakar; r Rm100) Oddly expensive for the area, the Tai Hoe is nonetheless clean and comfortable. Deluxe rooms (Rm 130) have antique rosewood furniture and flat-screen TVs.

Hotel Hiap Hwa (☎ 826 3111; 52 Jalan Siakap; s/d Rm68/88) Another comfortable hotel, deluxe rooms have ocean views (and views of Sungai Rengit's iconic metal lobster) from the balcony. Add Rm20 to the price on weekends.

RESORTS

After a few weeks in Singapore, you may find yourself looking for luxury that won't leave your bank account bleeding. If so, this end of the Malay peninsula has much to offer. Gener-

ally filled to capacity on the weekends (with Singaporeans, naturally), these places are uncrowded and usually cheaper on weekdays.

Seban Golf & Marina Resort (☎ 826 6688, Singapore 6333 3363; www.sebanacove.com; r from Rm200, 📶 🚗) Probably the largest of the resorts, this may be just the ticket. A full-fledged resort located on the beautiful Seban River Delta, it offers swimming pools, spas, two beautiful restaurants and, of course, amazing golfing. Management can help arrange visits to all the sights around Desaru, and the resort has its own boat going to and from Singapore several times daily. Discounted rates available through the website.

Desaru Golden Beach Hotel (☎ 822 1101, Singapore office 6235 5476; r from Rm150; 📶 🚗) Offers beautiful rooms and villas in a lush tropical setting up the coast from Seban. The hotel also has a good golf course, and offers ferry transit to and from Changi ferry terminal in Singapore.

The Pulau Desaru Beach (☎ 622 2222; www.thepulau.com.my; r from Rm200; 📶 🚗) Another favourite with Singaporeans looking for a break from urban hustle, this resort offers beautiful accommodation and plenty of land- and ocean-gear activities. Check out the website for regular promotional packages.

ENDAU-ROMPIN NATIONAL PARK

📶 07

The standard quick getaways from Singapore are often beachy (Bintan, Desaru, Rawa, Tioman...) but in fact it's possible to hop on a train in the morning and by lunchtime

TRANSPORT: ENDAU-ROMPIN NATIONAL PARK

Distance from Singapore 180km

Direction North

Travel time Four to five hours

Bus/train/car The vast majority of people visit the reserve on an organised tour, which will pick you up from Mersing or Kluang. To get to Mersing, take the Transnasional bus from Lavender St bus station (Map p68; \$16.50, 9am and 10am, four to five hours). To reach Kluang, hop on the 7.40am train from Tanjong Pagar railway station (adult/child \$16/12, two to three hours). If coming by road, take Rte 50, travelling east, and turn off around 4km after Kahang at the 'Batu 26' marker. From there it's a bumpy 58km ride to the visitor centre.

THE BIGFOOT

Yes, another one. In recent years there have been several highly publicised sightings of an apelike creature (called *hantu jarang* in Malay) dwelling in the remote and largely unexplored forests of Endau-Rompin. Descriptions follow the standard format repeated in Nepal, North America and other 'bigfoot' locations: a large, shy, hairy hominid, about 2.5m to 3m tall, walking on two legs.

In 2005, a group of labourers reported seeing a group of primates near a river, and there have been a handful of unsubstantiated claims of sightings and shootings over the years. A zoologist claimed that a bigfoot was shot dead in 2001, but that loggers (conveniently) destroyed its remains.

Predictably, the rash of recent sightings has spawned the usual laughable hoaxers, attention seekers and melodramatic TV 'investigations'. Serious attempts to find evidence of such a creature have yielded a few inconclusive footprints and little else.

The *Orang Asli* guide we asked about the bigfoot laughed dismissively and said: 'If people come here and are told it is real, we are cheating them.'

Enough said? Perhaps, but like all such mysteries, a few rational voices are unlikely to stop the speculation. And perhaps, just *perhaps*, it really exists...

be in the thick of a 280-million-year-old rainforest.

Endau-Rompin National Park, overshadowed by the more famous Taman Negara to the north, encompasses around 870 sq km of forest atop the site of a tremendous ancient volcanic eruption. Fed by three rivers that slide down from two plateaux, the park is home to Malaysia's last Sumatran rhino (only an estimated two or three remain), as well as tigers, tapir, gibbons, deer, boar, countless birds, fish and rare plant species.

Despite its rich endowment of wildlife, Endau-Rompin's animals are not easy to spot, because much of the park is wisely closed off to visitors. However, it is an excellent place for bird-watching and trekking, and it's often possible to spot wild elephants, deer, boar and the occasional gibbon and tapir.

The park is closed during the wet season between November and February.

It's possible to get to the park in your own vehicle (see [opposite](#)), but once at the park it's wise to hire a guide (at Rm50 to Rm60 per day) to explore the park, as it's easy to get lost. The majority of visitors come on organised trips booked through Malaysian agents (see [p186](#)).

Come prepared for the jungle, with light clothing that dries easily (you'll be crossing rivers on foot), lots of insect repellent, a sleeping bag (if camping), sunscreen and a torch. There are also lots of leeches in the forest – Wellington boots and long pants tucked into long socks (speciality leech-proof socks can be bought at outdoor-activities shops) are the best defence against these blood-sucking pests, which easily penetrate even the stoutest walking boots.

Treks

There are several walks, ranging from easy to strenuous. The most popular begins from the [Nature Education & Research Camp \(NERC\)](#) or [Kuala Jasin camp](#) and follows the Jasin River along a fairly flat stretch to the [Kuala Marong camp](#), which sits at the confluence of the Jasin and Marong Rivers. From there you have two options. For a shorter one-day walk, you cross the Jasin River on foot and continue for about 1km to the [Upeh Guling falls](#). An imposing 100m cascade when the river is up, during the driest months it's no less impressive, as the drop in water level reveals a surreal landscape of cauldron-like depressions gouged out of the rock, formed over millennia by trapped stones.

Descending the falls again, another 30 minutes brings you to [Tasik Air Biru](#), a beautiful turquoise natural swimming hole with what is claimed to be the clearest waters in Malaysia –

THE RIDER'S LODGE

Tucked away up a dirt road amid rolling hills and plantations, this grand white [manor house](#) (☎ 652 5330; www.riderslodge.com.my; r incl breakfast from Rm298), with its ample stables, looks like it was built in the 1920s, but in fact was only finished in 2000. Most people come to ride the magnificent horses (or play golf at the neighbouring club), but even if you're not interested in riding, it's a beautiful, peaceful weekend retreat, with extremely friendly staff. There are special packages for horse riders, beginner or expert.

The best way to get there is with your own (or a hired) vehicle – it's 45 minutes from the Tuas checkpoint. Alternatively, take a train from Singapore to Kulai and the manor will pick you up.

the perfect spot to cool off. From there turn and retrace your steps to your camp.

A longer walk takes a short rope bridge from Kuala Marong and follows a faint, tiring trail to the **Buaya Sangkut falls**. If you're camping, you can sleep at the **Batu Hampar** site around 2km from Kuala Marong. Then, the next morning, set out for the 4km hike to Buaya Sangkut. It's a long uphill walk, but the rewards when you hit the top of the falls are worth it.

It's possible to camp at the top of the falls, rather than at Batu Hampar – waking up in such a magical location is unforgettable.

Tours

Visiting Endau-Rompin independently is a little tricky, unless you have your own vehicle, which you can leave at the visitor centre or at the NERC, once you've secured your entry permit from the visitor centre.

Tour packages typically involve a two- or three-night stay and will pick you up in Mersing, or at the railway station in Kluang, or in Kahang. Accommodation is either in dorms or A-frame chalets at Kampung Peta, NERC or Kuala Jasin. If you have a group of four or more people, you can usually customise your trip and specify where you want to go and where you want to sleep. Some trips include tubing down the river and village visits. Online travel operators include the following:

Journey Malaysia (☎ 03-2692 8049; www.journeymalaysia.com; 3-day 2-night packages per person or in a group of 4 or more from Rm500)

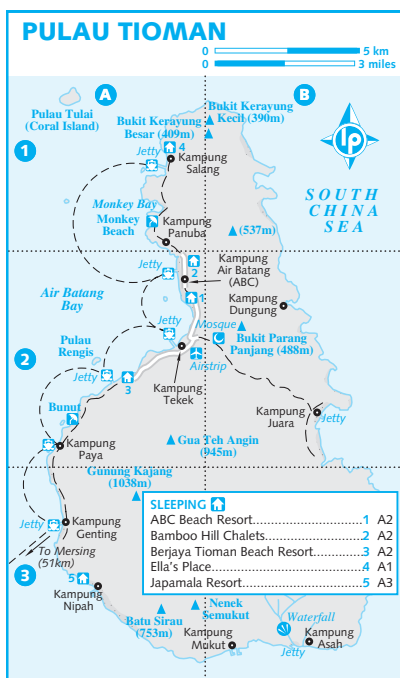
Cuti (☎ 03-3343 2884; www.cuti.com.my; 3-day 2-night package from Rm505)

Alternatively, contact **Omar's Backpacker's Hostel** (☎ 799 5096) in Mersing, which arranges trips to the reserve.

PULAU TIOMAN

☎ 09

The largest and most spectacular of Malaysia's east coast islands (though cynics say it's



been overdeveloped), Tioman has beautiful beaches, clear water, good snorkelling and some excellent dive sites.

Tioman is the most popular destination on the east coast and it can get very crowded, especially at weekends and during public holidays. The main budget accommodation areas are in the villages of **Air Batang** (usually called ABC), **Salang**, **Juara** and **Tekek**, all of which have good beaches and swimming. Of all these, Salang is the most popular, with the highest number of beach chalet operations, the best nightlife on the island, and proximity to the **Monkey Bay** and **Pulau Tulai** snorkelling and diving sites. Tekek is the administrative centre of Tioman. It contains the airport, hospital, shops, moneychangers and post office, but it's not very attractive.

SANDFLIES

Pulau Tioman, Pulau Rawa, and all of the Seribu Archipelago islands are blighted by sandflies. These minuscule bloodsucking pests are capable of ruining your beach holiday more effectively than any mosquito – and they are a lot harder to spot. Their bites are acutely itchy and have the tendency to develop into hard lumps topped with a blister, which can last for weeks. Highly potent repellent is effective to an extent, but if you find yourself being targeted, the only way to avoid them is either to stay off the beach, or spend all day in the sea.

TRANSPORT: PULAU TIOMAN

Distance from Singapore 178km

Direction Northeast

Travel Time Air/overland 35 minutes/five hours

Air If you have plenty of cash and not much time, **Berjaya Air** (Map pp62–3; ☎ 6227 3688; berjaya-air.com; 67 Tanjong Pagar Rd) operates daily flights (\$305) direct to Tioman's airport from Singapore's Seletar Airport, departing at either noon, 1.35pm or 3.05pm. The flight takes 35 minutes.

Bus/boat Early birds can catch the **Kaiho Coaches** (☎ 07-241 8208) bus to Mersing (\$35 return), except during the monsoon between October and February. The bus departs from Newton MRT station at 6.30am and takes three to four hours. Alternatively, hop on the **Transnasional** (☎ 6294 7034; \$16.50) bus, which leaves the Lavender St bus terminal (Map p68) at 9am and 10am. When you arrive at Mersing, you have two options. The speedboats (Rm45 one way) are quickest, taking a bit more than an hour, but many find them unpleasantly fast. The normal ferries (Rm35 one way) leave around five times a day and take up to three hours, stopping off at the various beaches in a south-to-north direction. Departures are dependent on tide, conditions and number of passengers.

Sleeping & Eating

There's a huge range of accommodation on Tioman, the majority of it identical basic wooden beach chalets, typically with a bed, fan and bathroom. Most of them offer food, with varying degrees of skill.

ABC (☎ 419 1154; Air Batang; chalets Rm120) Long-standing favourite, located slightly away from the bulk of the ABC operations. Reasonable chalets in a garden setting.

Bamboo Hill Chalets (☎ 419 1339; Air Batang; r Rm70, chalets Rm100-120) Perched on a hillside, this small collection of simple chalets boast verandahs and spectacular views.

Ella's Place (☎ 419 5005; Salang; chalets Rm25-60) The best of the Salang cheapies, with friendly owners, decent food and a great stretch of beach.

Japamala Resort (☎ 603 4256 6100; www.japamala.resorts.com; chalets Rm390-1450) The best upmarket resort on Tioman, located on the quiet southwest corner of the island, it claims to be open during the monsoon.

Berjaya Tioman Beach Resort (☎ 419 1000; chalets Rm275-385) This is the largest and fanciest resort on Tioman, although it's slightly rough around the edges. It offers a huge range of activities.

PULAU RAWA

☎ 07

For those who find Tioman a bit too overdeveloped and overcrowded, Pulau Rawa is a better option. More peaceful, with beautiful crystal-clear water and fine white sands, it's extremely popular with Malaysian and Singaporean weekenders, so book weeks in

advance (especially for public holidays) or go on a weekday.

There's only one place to stay, the **Rawa Safaris Island Resort** (☎ 799 1204; www.rawasfr.com; chalets Rm280-430), and since the running of it passed out of the hands of some Johor royalty, the service has improved considerably. There are full-board packages available, which considering you don't have a choice of where to eat anyway, are probably a good idea.

Ask for one of the five waterfront chalets, which sit on stilts over the sea and have fantastic views.

Unlike much Tioman accommodation, Rawa is open year-round. The island is tiny and there's not much exploring to do, but most people come to lie around, do a bit of snorkelling and perhaps indulge in a spot of volleyball or kayaking. It's the perfect place to do nothing at all.

If you're planning a boozy trip, smuggle your own, as resort prices are high. Officially you're not allowed to bring your own, but as long as you're discreet, nobody will notice.

TRANSPORT: PULAU RAWA

Distance from Singapore: 170km

Direction: Northeast

Travel time: Five hours

Bus/boat: Get the bus to Mersing from Singapore (see above). The Rawa ferry (30 minutes, Rm35 one-way) leaves around noon every day, though they'll wait if they know you're coming.

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