

History

As the countries we know today, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei have been around since 1963, 1965 and 1984 respectively. The region's history, of course, stretches back much further, although pinning down exactly how far back is a moot point due to a lack of archaeological evidence and early written records. What is known for sure is that early civilisation here was shaped by the ebb and flow of the convergent sea trade from China and India. The following sketches in the main events – see the history sections of the destination chapters for more-specific details of each region and p17 for the latest happenings.

Key Malay words like *bahasa* (language), *raja* (ruler) and *jaya* (success) are Sanskrit terms imported to the area by Indian visitors as early as the 2nd century AD.

It's thought that the word Malay (or Melayu) is based on the ancient Tamil word *malia*, meaning 'hill'.

ORIGINAL PEOPLE

The discovery of a 40,000-year-old skull in the Niah Caves of Sarawak in 1958 (see p450) gives a notional starting point to pre-history in Malaysia. In Peninsular Malaysia, the oldest remains are of the 11,000-year-old skeleton, 'Perak Man', which has genetic similarities to the Negrito who now live in the mountainous rainforests of northern Malaysia. The Negritos were joined by Malaysia's first immigrants, the Senoi, who are thought to have slowly filtered down from central and southern Thailand around 2500 BC.

A third wave, the Proto-Malay, ancestors of today's Malays, came from the Indonesian islands between 1500 and 500 BC. They settled first on the coasts but later were forced upriver into deeper jungle. For more on Malaysia's indigenous people see p38.

EARLY TRADE & EMPIRES

By the 2nd century AD Malaya was known as far away as Europe. Ptolemy, the Greek geographer, labelled it 'Aurea Chersonesus' (Golden Chersonese); it was believed the area was rich in gold. Indian traders also referred to the land as Savarnadvipa (Land of Gold) and were already making regular visits to Malaya in search of the precious metal, tin and aromatic jungle woods. These Indian visitors had a significant impact on Malay social systems, beliefs and culture, introducing them to Hinduism, Buddhism and notions of kingship.

Much more significant was the dominance of the mighty Srivijaya Empire, which held sway from the 7th to the 13th centuries. This Buddhist empire controlled the entire Malacca Straits, Java and southern Borneo, and the great wealth flowing through the area in terms of trade (see p32).

Under the protection of the Srivijayans, a significant Malay trading state grew in the Bujang Valley of Kedah. Relics of temple complexes that house both Buddhist and Hindu artefacts are still being excavated and provide a reminder of the Hindu-Buddhist era in the Malay peninsula.

TIMELINE

c 38,000 BC

Earliest evidence of human life in the region is a 40,000-year-old skull found in Sarawak's Niah Caves. These early inhabitants are believed to be related to the aborigines of Australia and New Guinea.

c 150AD

European knowledge of the Malay peninsula is confirmed in Ptolemy's book *Geographia*, which labelled the landmass 'Aurea Chersonesus'. It's likely that Romans visited the region during trading expeditions to India and China.

200

Langkasuka, one of the first Hindu-Malay kingdoms, is established on the peninsula around the area now known as Kedah. It lasted in one form or another until the 15th century.

THE LOST KINGDOM OF LANGKASUKA

Early Chinese and Malay histories describe an independent kingdom known as Langkasuka, which existed on the Malay peninsula as early as the 2nd century AD. From the descriptions of the lands, it's reckoned that Langkasuka was in the region of Kedah, centred on the sacred mountain Gunung Jerai.

Between the 3rd and 6th centuries, Langkasuka's power dwindled and the Funan Empire, centred on what is now Cambodia, took over control of the region until they were in turn supplanted by the Srivijaya Empire. Langkasuka disappeared from Malaysia's maps although part of its name lingers on the islands of Langkawi. It was also raised as a possible name for an independent Malaya.

THE MELAKA EMPIRE

This history of the Malay state begins in earnest in the late 14th century when Parameswara, a renegade Hindu prince from a little kingdom in southern Sumatra, washed up around 1401 in the tiny fishing village that would become Melaka (p239).

Realising Melaka's potential as a natural deep-water port and that it could never grow without protection from the Thais, Parameswara sent envoys to China to offer tribute. The timing was fortuitous. The Ming emperor had just begun a series of maritime missions to find alternatives to the overland route to the West, and he agreed to offer protection. Melaka became a port of call for the massive Chinese junks that were to ply the oceans for several decades. The junks were also a magnet for the other key traders of the time, the Indians.

Melaka was ideally situated as a halfway point for trade between the two nations. The Indian ships sailed in on the southwest monsoon, berthed in Melaka and waited for the northeast monsoon, which blew in the Chinese junks. Their goods were traded, and the Indians sailed back to India on the same winds that brought in the Chinese. Business boomed as regional ships and *perahus* (traditional Malay boats) arrived to take advantage of trading opportunities.

EARLY ISLAM

The local adoption of Islam is believed to have spread through contact with Indian Muslim traders. The religion gained such respect that by the mid-15th century the third ruler of Melaka, Maharaja Mohammed Shah (r 1424–44), had converted. His son Mudzaffar Shah took the title of sultan and made Islam the state religion.

As the 15th century progressed, Melaka became Southeast Asia's major entrepôt, attracting Indian Muslim merchants from competing Sumatran ports, and a centre for Islam, disseminating the religion throughout the Indonesian archipelago. The Melakan sultans ruled over the greatest empire

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, postindependence nation.

The Other Malaysia (www.othermalaysia.org) is a resource in which forgotten and sidelined gems of Malaysia's history, politics and culture are gathered together.

600

From their base in southern Sumatra, most likely around modern-day Palembang, the Buddhist Srivijaya Empire dominates Malaya, Singapore, Indonesia and Borneo for another six centuries.

1136

The Kedah Annals record that the local Hindu ruler Phra Ong Mahawangsa converted to Islam and took the name Sultan Mudzaffar Shah, thus founding the sultanate of Kedah, the oldest on Peninsular Malaysia.

1363

Brunei's first Sultan Awang Alak Betatar takes the name Muhammad Shah on his conversion to Islam, prior to his marriage to a princess from Johor-Temasik.

Sejarah Melayu (Malay Annals), a literary work covering the establishment of the Melaka sultanate and 600 years of Malay history, is believed to have been compiled by Tun Sri Lanang, the *bendahara* (chief minister) of the Johor Royal Court in the early 17th century.

in Malaysia's history, successfully repelling Siamese attacks. The Malay language became the lingua franca of trade in the region.

Meanwhile across the South China Sea, the first sultan of Brunei, Muhammad Shah, ruled over the kingdom from 1363 to 1402. He converted to Islam in 1363 on the occasion of his marriage to a princess from Johor-Temasik. By the 15th century Sultan Bolkiah reigned over the empire's 'Golden Age': in contrast to the tiny state it is today, at that time Brunei held sway over all of the islands of Borneo and much of the present-day Philippines. Well into the 16th century Bolkiah's armies managed to resist the inroads that Spanish and Portuguese forces tried to make into his territories.

THE PORTUGUESE ERA

By the 15th century Europe had developed an insatiable appetite for spices, and the sole suppliers were Venetian merchants, who obtained them from Arab traders, who obtained them from Indian Muslim traders, who obtained them...from Melaka.

The Portuguese were determined to break this chain for 'God, glory and gold'. Their strategy was to build fortresses to control the sea-trade route between Lisbon and Melaka. In 1511 a fleet of 18 heavily armed ships, led

A HISTORY OF PIRACY

The lucrative trade routes around the Malay peninsula have long provided rich pickings for pirates. As far back as the Srivijaya Empire, from the 7th to 13th centuries, piracy was a problem. The Srivijayans used the seafaring people the Orang Laut (also known as Sea Gypsies) to police the trade routes, but by the 11th century they had switched sides and become pirates themselves. Parameswara, founder of Melaka, was also a pirate, attacking trading ships from his temporary base of Temasek (Singapore).

A millennium later piracy in the Strait of Melaka, one of the world's busiest waterways, remains a problem. To combat the pirates, Malaysia formed a coast guard that together with forces from Singapore and Indonesia have run coordinated patrols since 2004. They seem to be having an impact as the International Maritime Bureau recorded that attacks in 2008 had dipped to two compared to seven in 2007.

It's not just at sea that the authorities have to keep a lookout for pirates. The street markets of Kuala Lumpur and any number of other cities and towns are packed with pirated copies of DVDs, CDs, computer software and various luxury and brand-name fashion goods. The Business Software Alliance, a Malaysian anti-piracy watchdog, reports that over 60% of all software used by businesses are illegal copies. The authorities, keen to preserve Malaysia's growing reputation as a high-tech hub, are cracking down, sending inspectors into businesses and issuing fines to those found using pirated software.

1402

The one-time Hindu prince and pirate Parameswara (1344–1414) founds the great trading port and sultanate of Melaka; seven years later he marries a Muslim princess and adopts the Persian title Iskandar Shah.

1446

A naval force from Siam (Thailand) attacks Melaka. Warded off, the Siamese return in 1456 but are again rebuffed. Such attacks encourage Melaka's rulers to develop closer relations with China.

1485

Under the rule of Sultan Bolkiah Brunei enjoys its 'Golden Age', when it controlled land as far south as present-day Kuching in Sarawak and north towards the islands of the Philippines.

by Viceroy Alfonso de Albuquerque, defeated Melaka's army of 20,000 men and their war elephants.

The Portuguese immediately built a fortress, the A Formosa, to protect their new acquisition. Expeditions were sent to the Moluccas, the source of the spices, where a monopoly agreement was signed with the local sultan. Within a few years Lisbon had replaced Venice as the greatest trading centre for Eastern goods.

The 130 years in which the Portuguese held Melaka were fraught with wars and skirmishes. Their monopolistic attitude to trade and their determination to spread Christianity earned them few friends. The new Johor Empire, where part of the former sultan's entourage had set up camp, never gave up hope of recapturing Melaka and continually harassed Portuguese ships in the Strait of Melaka.

THE DUTCH PERIOD

Johor's fortunes improved drastically with the arrival of the Dutch, who chose them as allies in the region. Unlike the Portuguese, the Dutch East India Company had no interest in God or national glory. The company's aim was solely making money and it focused single-mindedly on wresting complete control of the spice trade from the Portuguese. The Dutch set up a base in Batavia (now Jakarta) and negotiated for spices directly with the sultans of the spice islands.

Together with Johor, the Dutch attacked Melaka and, in January 1641, captured the city from the Portuguese. In return for their cooperation Johor was freed from virtually all the tariffs and trade restrictions imposed on other states by the Dutch. Johor also overcame threats from the Minangkabau of Sumatra and by the end of the 17th century it was among the strongest Asian powers in the region.

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 choice of Batavia as their regional HQ meant they were not inclined to invest their full attention on Melaka.

ENTER THE EAST INDIA COMPANY

British interest in the region began with the need by the East India Company (EIC) for a halfway base for its ships plying the India–China maritime route. The first base was established on the island of Penang in 1786 (see p176).

Meanwhile, events in Europe were conspiring to consolidate British interests in 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 they had destroyed the walls of A Formosa.

The British lieutenant-governor of Java, Stamford Raffles, had long felt that Britain, Europe's most powerful nation, should expand its influence

Sabri Zain's colourful website *Sejarah Melayu: A History of the Malay Peninsula* (www.sabrizain.org/malaya) contains a wealth of historical info including a virtual library of nearly 500 books and academic papers.

Peninsular Malaysia was Buddhist and Hindu for 1000 years before the local rulers converted to Islam in the 15th century.

1509

Portuguese traders sail into Melaka. Although at first greeted warmly, acting on the advice of his Indian Muslim councillors, the Melakan sultan later attacks the Portuguese ships, taking 19 prisoners.

1511

Following the Portuguese conquest of Melaka, the sultan and his court flee, establishing two new sultanates on the peninsula: Perak to the north and Johor to the south.

1629

The Portuguese in Melaka and the sultanate of Johor bury their differences to successfully defend themselves against the navy of Iskandar Muda, the sultan of Aceh in Sumatra. However, the same year Aceh conquers Kedah.

over Southeast Asia. He bitterly resented handing Java back to the Dutch and eventually managed to persuade the EIC that a settlement south of the Malay peninsula was crucial to the India–China maritime route.

THE RISE OF SINGAPORE

In 1819 Raffles landed on Singapore, at the time part of the Johor Empire. Johor's sultan had died while his elder son was away, and his younger son, aligned with the Dutch, had been proclaimed sultan. In return for supporting the elder son as the rightful sultan Raffles extracted a treaty granting the British sole rights to set up a trading post on Singapore.

'It is impossible to conceive a place combining more advantages... it is the Navel of the Malay countries', wrote a delighted Raffles soon afterwards. The statement proves his foresight because at the time Singapore was little more than an inhospitable swamp surrounded by dense jungle with a population of 150 fishermen and a small number of Chinese farmers. Raffles returned to his post in Bencoolen, Sumatra, but left instructions on Singapore's development as a free port with the new British Resident, Colonel William Farquhar.

In 1822 Raffles returned to Singapore and governed it for one more year. He initiated a town plan that included levelling a hill to form a new commercial district (now Raffles Place) and erecting government buildings around Forbidden Hill (now Fort Canning Hill). Wide streets of shophouses with covered walkways, shipyards, churches and a botanical garden were all built to achieve his vision of a Singapore that would one day be 'a place of considerable magnitude and importance'.

Raffles' blueprint also embraced the colonial practice of administering the population according to neat racial categories, with the Europeans, Indians, Chinese and Malays living and working in their own distinct quarters.

Dutch protests over the original treaty (which was followed up in 1823 by a second treaty fully ceding Singapore to Britain) were set aside when the two nations signed the Anglo-Dutch Treaty in 1824, dividing the region into two distinct spheres of interest: the Dutch controlled what is now Indonesia, and the British had the Malay peninsula and Singapore.

BORNEO DEVELOPMENTS

Britain did not include Borneo in the Anglo-Dutch treaty, preferring that the EIC concentrate its efforts on consolidating their power on the peninsula rather than furthering their geographical scope. This left a path clear for an opportunistic British adventurer, James Brooke (p405), to make his fortune. In 1841, having helped the local viceroy quell a rebellion, Brooke was installed as raja of Sarawak, with the fishing village of Kuching as his capital.

Through brutal naval force and skilful negotiation, James Brooke extracted further territory from the Brunei sultan and eventually brought

Read about the rise of Singapore from the man at the centre of it all – Lee Kuan Yew – in his memoirs *The Singapore Story* and *From Third World to First*.

Covering events up to 2001, the second edition of Graham Saunder's *History of Brunei* is the only full-length study of how this tiny country came to be formed.

1641

After a siege lasting several months the Dutch, with the help of the Johor sultanate, wrest Melaka from the Portuguese; this marks the start of Melaka's decline as a major trading port.

1786

Francis Light cuts a deal with the sultan of Kedah to establish a settlement on the largely uninhabited island of Penang. Under a free-trade policy the island's new economy thrives.

1790

The sultan of Kedah's attempt to retake Penang from the British fails. He is forced to cede the island to the British East India Company for 6000 Spanish dollars per annum. In 1800 Province Wellesley on the mainland is added to the deal.

peace to a land where piracy, headhunting and violent tribal rivalry had been the norm. The 'White Raja' dynasty of the Brookes was to rule Sarawak until 1941 and the arrival of the Japanese.

Unlike the British, the White Rajas included tribal leaders in their ruling council. They also discouraged large European companies from destroying native jungle to plant massive rubber plantations. They encouraged Chinese migration, and, without European competition, the Chinese came to dominate the economy.

The once-mighty empire of Brunei continued to shrink. In 1865 the American consul to Brunei persuaded the ailing sultan to grant him what is now Sabah in return for an annual payment. The rights eventually passed to an Englishman, Alfred Dent. In 1881, with the support of the British government, Dent formed the British North Borneo Company to administer the new settlement. To prevent a scramble for Brunei's remains, in 1888 the British government acceded to a request by the sultan to declare his territory a British protectorate.

Oil was first discovered by the British Resident of the Baran district of Sarawak in 1882 but it wasn't until 1974 that the national oil and gas company Petronas was set up.

BRITISH MALAYA

In Peninsular Malaya, Britain's policy of 'trade, not territory' was challenged when trade was disrupted by civil wars within the Malay sultanates of Negeri Sembilan, Selangor, Pahang and Perak. In this last state, the British were forced to intervene in a succession dispute in 1874; one of the rivals for Perak's throne asked the British to appoint a Resident (or adviser) in return for guaranteeing his position as sultan. From then on the sultan had to consult the Resident on all matters, 'other than those touching on religion and Malay customs'.

The ingenious Resident system preserved the prestige of the sultans but effectively gave the British complete control. Through the late 19th century and into the early 20th century it was gradually introduced into the other states at the same time as the term British Malaya came into use, signalling the Crown's intention to take charge of the whole peninsula. Terengganu was the last state to accept a British Adviser in 1919.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The British exploited the peninsula's resources with gusto. Building ports, roads and railways, and selling huge tracts of virgin rainforest, they encouraged entrepreneurs to invest in tin mines, rubber plantations and trading companies. Believing that the Malays were best suited to farming and fishing, they encouraged immigrants from China to work the mines, Indians to tap the rubber trees and build the railways, Ceylonese to be clerks in the civil service, and Sikhs to man the police force.

1819

By backing the elder brother in a succession dispute in Johor, Stamford Raffles gains sole rights to build a trading base on the island of Singapore.

1823

A second treaty is signed in which the Johor sultan fully cedes Singapore to Britain. A year later the Dutch and British carve up the region into what eventually becomes Malaya and Indonesia.

1826

Having swapped Bencoolen on Sumatra for the Dutch-controlled Melaka, the British East India Company combines this with Penang and Singapore to create the Straits Settlements.

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

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

Revolusi 48 (<http://revolusi48.blogspot.com> in Bahasa Malaysia), the documentary sequel to Fahmi Reza's *10 Tahun Sebelum Merdeka* (10 Years Before Merdeka), chronicles the largely forgotten armed revolution for national liberation launched against British colonial rule in Malaya.

Even though the 'better-bred' Malays were encouraged to join a separate arm of the civil service, there was growing resentment among the vast majority of Malays that they were being marginalised in their own country. A 1931 census revealed that the Chinese numbered 1.7 million and the Malays 1.6 million. Malaya's economy was revolutionised, but the impact of its liberal immigration policy continues to reverberate today. The Singapore Malay Union was formed in 1926 and by the eve of WWII Malays, too, were pushing for their independence.

WWII PERIOD

A few hours before the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Japanese forces landed on the northeast coast of Malaya. Within a few months they had taken over the entire peninsula and Singapore. The poorly defended Borneo states fell even more rapidly.

In Singapore, the new governor, General Yamashita, slung the Europeans into the infamous Changi Prison, and Chinese communists and intellectuals, who had vociferously opposed the Japanese invasion of China, were targeted for Japanese brutality. Thousands were executed in a single week. In Borneo, early resistance by the Chinese was also brutally put down.

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. The Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA), comprising remnants of the British army and Chinese from the fledgling Malayan Communist Party, waged a weak, jungle-based guerrilla struggle throughout the war.

The Japanese surrendered to the British in Singapore in 1945. Despite the eventual Allied victory, Britain had been humiliated by the easy loss of Malaya and Singapore to the Japanese, and it was clear that their days of controlling the region were now numbered.

FEDERATION OF MALAYA

In 1946 the British persuaded the sultans to agree to the Malayan Union. This amalgamated all the Peninsular Malayan states into a central authority; removed the sovereign rights of the sultans, who would remain as paid 'advisers'; offered citizenship to all residents regardless of race; abolished the special privileges of the Malays (which included favourable quotas in civil service employment and government scholarships); and vested ultimate sovereignty in the king of England. Singapore was to be administered separately. North Borneo and Sarawak became the Crown Colony of British Borneo (the third Raja Brooke realised he could not afford to rebuild after the war).

While the sultans were cajoled and coerced into the Malayan Union, the normally acquiescent Malay population was less easily persuaded. Rowdy pro-

1839

British buccaneer James Brooke lands in Sarawak and helps quell a local rebellion. Two years later in gratitude the Brunei sultanate installs him as the first White Raja of Sarawak.

1865

Brunei's American consul is granted what is now Sabah by the sultan in return for an annual payment. The rights pass to Alfred Dent, an Englishman, who in 1881 forms the British North Borneo Company.

1874

The Pankor Treaty between the British and the sultan of Perak sees the British Empire start to take control of Peninsular Malaysia; the first British Resident of Perak, Sir James Birch, is installed.

test meetings were held throughout the country, and the first Malay political party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), was formed.

After intense meetings between the sultans, British officials and UMNO, the Malayan Union was revoked, and the Federation of Malaya was declared in 1948. The federation upheld the sovereignty of the sultans and the special privileges of the Malays. Citizenship for non-Malays was made more restrictive. Although the Malays were ecstatic about the British climb-down, the Chinese felt they had been betrayed and that their role in resisting the Japanese was poorly appreciated. Many turned to the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), which promised an equitable and just society.

THE EMERGENCY

The ensuing MCP-led insurrection was a full-on civil war (the MCP received little support from the Malays, and their main Chinese supporters were subsistence farmers living along the jungle fringes); it was called an 'Emergency' by the British for insurance purposes, so that claims could still be made on policies that didn't cover riots and civil commotions.

The Emergency hardly touched Malaya's principal cities but caused plantation owners and villagers to live in terror of attacks. Following the assassination of British High Commissioner Sir Henry Gurney in 1951, his successor General Sir Gerald Templer set out to 'win the hearts and minds of the people' through a combination of military tactics and social policies.

Almost 500,000 rural Chinese were resettled into protected New Villages, and guerrilla-free areas had all food restrictions and curfews lifted. Another key move was gaining the support of the jungle-dwelling Orang Asli (see p38). The communists were gradually forced further back into the jungles and towards the Thai border. In 1960 the Emergency was declared over, although sporadic fighting continued and the formal surrender was signed only in 1989.

MERDEKA & MALAYSIA

UMNO led a less militant campaign towards independence. By forming the Parti Perikatan (PP; Alliance Party) with the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC), they presented a convincing argument for a racially harmonious, independent nation. In 1955 the British promised independence in two years and held an election to determine the government of the new nation.

PP, led by UMNO's Tunku Abdul Rahman, won a landslide victory, 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 position of paramount leader – they would take turns (see p43).

Singapore's politics were dominated by communists and left-leaning trade unions. In 1959 the People's Action Party (PAP) was voted into government.

Anthony Burgess wrote about his experiences in Kelantan as an information officer for the colonial administration in the 1950s in the first volume of his memoirs *Little Wilson and Big God*.

Amir Muhammad's film *The Last Communist* (www.redfilms.com.my/lelakikomunis.htm) was banned in Malaysia in 2006 for allegedly glorifying communism.

For an excellent introduction to the customs and culture of Malaysia's indigenous people, visit the Orang Asli Museum (p132), just north of Kuala Lumpur. Also see the website of the Center for Orang Asli Concerns (www.coac.org.my).

1888

Having lost much territory to the British Empire, Brunei's sultan accepts the inevitable and signs a treaty to make his country a British protectorate. A British Resident is installed in 1906.

1896

Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang join as Federated Malay States, their sultans conceding political power to British Residents. In return Britain pledges not to interfere in matters relating to Malay traditions and Islam.

1909

Britain does a deal with the Thai king to gain control of Kelantan, Terengganu, Perlis and Kedah. The final standout Johor succumbs to a British Resident in 1914, completing the set of 'Unfederated Malay States'.

THE ORANG ASLI

According to data published by the Department of Orang Asli Affairs (JHEOA; www.jheoa.gov.my) in December 2004, Peninsular Malaysia has just under 150,000 Orang Asli (Original People), who are generally classified into three groups: the Negrito, the Senoi and the Proto-Malays. These can be further divided into 18 ethnic groups (the smallest being the Orang Kanak with just 87 members, the largest the Semai with 43,505 members), which speak distinctly different languages. The majority remain animists, although there are ongoing attempts to convert them to Islam.

The Orang Asli played important roles in early trade, when products of the jungle were much sought after, but their significance waned as trade products became more sophisticated. During the Malayan Communist Emergency in the 1950s they became 'useful' again. The communists were fighting a jungle guerrilla war, and the Orang Asli were important providers of food, shelter and information. The British Malayan government realised that if they were to win the war, the support of the Orang Asli was crucial. They won them over by setting up jungle 'forts' close to their settlements, which supplied them with medical care and food.

After the communists were thwarted, 'guardianship' of the Orang Asli was undertaken by JHEOA. Originally set up to represent Orang Asli concerns to the government (ie land rights), the department has evolved into a conduit for government decisions. Asli land rights are not recognised, and when logging, agricultural or infrastructure projects require their land, their claims are regarded as illegal.

In Sabah and Sarawak, despite indigenous people being in the majority and Native Customary Rights being legislated, their lack of effective political representation has seriously compromised their land rights. Logging of their rainforests and, more recently, huge oil palm plantations have reduced their land areas considerably. Their enforced isolation from the land and the success of Christian missionaries over the last century has resulted in fragmented communities and the slow disappearance of traditional identity.

In Brunei the indigenous people comprise about 6% of the population. With Brunei's economic interests lying largely in off-shore oil and gas fields, encroachment on the indigenous people's land and rights has been minimal.

Websites that provide information on the Orang Asli peoples are Temiar Web (www.temiar.com) and the Borneo Project (www.borneoproject.org).

It was led by Lee Kuan Yew, a young Cambridge-trained lawyer, who garnered popular support through astute compromises with the trade union leaders. Britain remained responsible for defence and foreign relations.

Although Britain was keen to be rid of its remaining colonies, it was unlikely that it would grant Singapore independence while there was any possibility of a communist government. For Malaya, which was still fighting a rump communist guerrilla force, the thought of an independent communist-dominated Singapore, 'a Cuba across the causeway', was highly unattractive.

In 1961 Tunku Abdul Rahman proposed a merger of Singapore and Malaya. To address the fear that the huge number of Singapore Chinese would tip the racial balance, his plan included the British Borneo territories

1941

Landing at Kota Bharu on Malaya's northeast coast, the Japanese make a lightning dash down the peninsula. Within a month they've taken Kuala Lumpur, and a month later they are at Singapore's doorstep.

1942

The British suffer a humiliating defeat in February as they capitulate Singapore to the Japanese. The occupiers rename it Syonan (Light of the South) and treat all harshly until being defeated themselves in 1945.

1944

A primarily Australian force, Z Special Unit, parachute into Sarawak's Kelabit Highlands and win over the natives. Armed with blowpipes and led by Australian commandos, this unlikely army scores several victories over the Japanese.

in the new nation. Malaysia was born in July 1963 with the fusing of Malaya, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak.

The new nation immediately faced a diplomatic crisis. The Philippines broke off relations claiming that Sabah was part of its territory. More seriously, Indonesia laid claim to the whole of Borneo and decided the solution to this 'annexation' was 'Konfrontasi'. Indonesian armed forces crossed into Sabah and Sarawak from Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo), and landings were made in Peninsular Malaysia and even Singapore. Although it was three years before Indonesia officially ended the confrontation, Malaysia was never seriously threatened.

Brunei had been planning to be part of Malaysia but at the eleventh hour Sultan Sri Muda Omar Ali Saifuddin III had second thoughts. He had inherited a fabulously rich country following the discovery of oil in 1929 and, having wrested control of Brunei's internal affairs back from the British, was now determined to use this vast wealth to modernise and develop the infrastructure of the nation rather than see the powers that be in KL take the spoils.

ETHNIC TENSIONS

With Brunei and its tipping balance of Malays out of the picture, the marriage between Singapore and Malaya was doomed from the start. Ethnic Chinese outnumbered Malays in Malaysia, and Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, knowing this, called for a 'democratic Malaysian Malaysia'.

In August 1965 Tunku Abdul Rahman bowed to the inevitable and booted Singapore out of the federation, leaving Lee publicly sobbing. Within a couple of decades, though, the smile was firmly back on Lee's face. The little island with few natural resources other than its hard-working population had managed to claw its way from obscurity to world admiration for its rapid and successful industrialisation.

Meanwhile, back on the peninsula, the Malaysian government's attempts to develop a Malaysian identity through the Malay language and national education were stymied by Chinese resistance. The Chinese were fiercely protective of their schools, which taught in Mandarin, and were resistant to any moves that might threaten their continued existence.

By the mid-1960s Malays were called for measures to alleviate the stranglehold that foreign and Chinese companies had on the economy. Malays owned less than 2.5% of corporate wealth and, as they had little capital and know-how, things were not likely to change. Something had to give.

The 1969 general elections were contentious, and racial sentiments were strong. For the first time PP lost its two-thirds majority in parliament. A celebration march by the opposition Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Gerakan (The People's Movement) party in Kuala Lumpur got out of hand,

Brunei's ties with its former colonial master remain strong: UK judges sit in the High Court and Court of Appeal and a British Army Gurkha battalion is permanently stationed in Seria.

Chronicle of Malaysia 1957–2007, edited by Philip Mathews, is a beautifully designed book showcasing 50 years of the country's history in news stories and pictures.

Dr Mahathir Mohamad's first book, *The Malay Dilemma*, in which he postulated that Malay backwardness was due to hereditary and cultural factors, was banned in 1970.

1946

Following public opposition to the proposed Malay Union, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) is formed on 1 March, signalling the rise of Malay nationalism and a desire for political independence from Britain.

1948

The start of the period known as the Emergency, when the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) took to the jungles and began fighting a guerrilla war against the British that would last for 12 years.

1951

Sir Henry Gurney, British high commissioner to Malaya, is assassinated by MCP rebels on the road to Fraser's Hill, a terrorist act that alienates many moderate Chinese from the party.

leading to full-scale riots. The government declared a state of emergency, but by the time things quietened down nearly 200 people, mostly Chinese, had been killed. Stunned by the savageness of the riots the government decided that racial harmony could be achieved only if there was economic parity between the races.

NEW ECONOMIC POLICY

In 1970 a 'New Economic Policy' set a target whereby 30% of Malaysia's corporate wealth had to be in the hands of indigenous Malays, or *bumiputra* ('princes of the land'), within 20 years. Malay companies were heavily favoured for government contracts; low-interest *bumiputra* loans were made easily available; and thousands of Malays were sent abroad on government scholarships.

PP invited opposition parties to join them and work from within. The expanded coalition was renamed the Barisan Nasional (BN; National Front), which continues to rule to this day.

To boost the *bumiputra* share in the corporate world, public listed companies were forced to relinquish 30% of their shares to *bumiputra* share-buyers – many of whom bought through *bumiputra* trust funds controlled by government institutions. By its target date of 1990 *bumiputra* corporate wealth had risen to 19%, 11% short of the original target. However, poverty had fallen from 49% to 15%, and a new Malay middle class had emerged.

THE ERA OF MAHATHIR

In 1981 Mahathir Mohamad, a charismatic and outspoken doctor from Langkawi, became prime minister. As a young man Mahathir had been expelled from UMNO for criticising the then prime minister and causing disunity in the party.

During his watch Malaysia's economy went into overdrive, growing from one based on commodities such as rubber to one firmly rooted in industry and manufacturing. Government monopolies were privatised, and heavy industries like steel manufacturing (a failure) and the Malaysian car industry (successful but heavily protected) were encouraged. Multinationals were successfully wooed to set up in Malaysia, and manufactured exports began to dominate the trade figures.

However, Mahathir also presided over a period during which the main media outlets became little more than government mouthpieces. He ended the practice of giving the sultans final assent on legislation, and the once proudly independent judiciary appeared to become subservient to government wishes, the most notorious case being that of Anwar Ibrahim (see opposite). He also permitted widespread use of the Internal Security Act (ISA; see opposite) to silence opposition leaders and social activists, most

Malaysian Politicians Say the Darndest Things Vols 1 & 2 (see www.kinibooks.com) by Amir Muhammad gathers together jaw-dropping statements uttered by the local pollies over the last three decades – stuff like 'If you come across a snake and a man from a certain ethnic community, you should hit the man first'.

1953

Formation of Parti Perikatan (Alliance Party) between UNMO, the Malay Chinese Association (MCA) and Malayan Indian Congress (MIC). Two years later it wins 80% of the vote in Malaya's first national elections.

1957

On 31 August Merdeka (independence) is declared in Malaya; Tunku Abdul Rahman becomes first prime minister. A year later in Singapore the People's Action Party (PAP) led by Lee Kuan Yew is voted into government.

1963

In July the British Borneo territories of Sabah and Sarawak are combined with Singapore and Malaya to form Malaysia – a move that sparks confrontations with Indonesia and the Philippines.

TROUBLE WITH THE ISA

In July 2009 thousands of people took to the streets of Kuala Lumpur to protest against the Internal Security Act (ISA). This draconian law allows for the arrest and detention of any person without the need for trial under circumstances in which the government deems them to be a threat to national security. Ever since the ISA's enactment in 1960 those circumstances have been wide open to interpretation, with several opposition parties and Amnesty International (www.aimalaysia.org) claiming the law has been much abused by the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition.

Heading up the protest was opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, who was jailed under the ISA for 22 months in the early 1970s for championing the cause of poor farmers. More recently, in September 2008, Democratic Action Party (DAP) MP Teresa Kok (<http://teresakok.com>) was jailed under the ISA for a week for allegedly requesting that a local mosque turn off its loudspeakers broadcasting the call to prayer. Shortly after, law minister Zaid Ibrahim resigned from the Cabinet in support of Kok and others arrested using the ISA.

Detainees, who can be held for 60 days incommunicado, are typically incarcerated at the Kamunting Detention Centre near Taiping, a prison that's become Malaysia's Guantánamo Bay. Apart from Ibrahim, opposition leaders Lim Kit Siang and Karpal Singh have both spent time as inmates there, as has the one-time student activist, journalist and playwright Hishamuddin Rais (<http://tukartiub.blogspot.com> in Bahasa Malaysia). Rais' play *Bilik Sulit*, about the police interrogation of an ISA detainee, is based on the testimonials of former detainees and has been performed around Malaysia. The tide may be turning on the ISA. Even before the July 2009 protests in which over 400 people were arrested, PM Najib had agreed to review the controversial law.

famously in 1987's Operation Lalang when 106 people were arrested and the publishing licences of several newspapers were revoked.

ECONOMIC & POLITICAL CRISIS

In 1997, after a decade of near constant 10% growth, Malaysia was dragged into the regional currency crisis. Characteristically, Mahathir railed at the West, blaming unscrupulous Western speculators for deliberately undermining the economies of the developing world for their personal gain. Ignoring the advice of the International Monetary Fund, he pegged the Malaysian ringgit to the US dollar, bailed out what were seen as crony companies, forced banks to merge and made it difficult for foreign investors to remove their money from Malaysia's stock exchange. Malaysia's subsequent recovery from the economic crisis, which was more rapid than that of many other Southeast Asian nations, further bolstered Mahathir's prestige.

At odds with Mahathir over how to deal with the economic crisis had been his deputy prime minister and heir apparent, Anwar Ibrahim. Their falling out was so severe that in September 1998 not only was Anwar sacked but he was also charged with corruption and sodomy. Many Malaysians, feeling that

One of Prime Minister Mahathir's favourite mega projects, the Multimedia Super Corridor (www.mscomalaysia.my) stretching from the Kuala Lumpur City Centre to the new KL International Airport at Sepang, was first announced in November 1995. It is still ongoing and in 2006 was extended to cover the whole Klang Valley area.

1965

In August, following Singapore's 1964 refusal to extend constitutional privileges to the Malays in Singapore and subsequent riots, Singapore is booted out of Malaysia. Lee Kuan Yew becomes Singapore's first prime minister.

1967

Sultan Sri Muda Omar Ali Saifuddin III voluntarily abdicates in favour of his eldest son and the current ruler, the 29th in the unbroken royal Brunei line, Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah.

1969

Following the general election, on 13 March race riots erupt in KL, killing 198. In response the government devises the New Economic Policy of positive discrimination for Malays.

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

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

Lawyer and writer Karim Raslan's *Journeys Through Southeast Asia: Ceritalah 2* is worth searching out for its interesting views on contemporary Malaysia.

Anwar had been falsely arrested, took to the streets chanting Anwar's call for 'Reformasi'. The demonstrations were harshly quelled and in trials that were widely criticised as unfair by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and then US Vice President Al Gore, Anwar was sentenced to a total of 15 years' imprisonment. The international community rallied around Anwar, with Amnesty International proclaiming him a prisoner of conscience.

BN felt the impact in the following year's general elections when it suffered huge losses, particularly in the rural Malay areas. The gainers were the fundamentalist Islamic party PAS (Parti Islam se-Malaysia), which had vociferously supported Anwar, and a new political party, Keadilan (People's Justice Party), headed by Anwar's wife Wan Azizah.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ISLAM

Islam has always played a key role in Malaysian politics, but the rise of PAS, which aims to install an Islamic government in Malaysia, was certainly sparked by the Anwar crisis. More worrying has been the unearthing of radical Islamic groups that the Malaysian government accuses of using deviant teachings to spread militant Islam.

In an effort to outflank PAS's religious credentials, UMNO from its dominant position with the BN has been inching Malaysia closer to becoming more of a conservative Islamic state. Some local authorities have tried to ban or restrict dog ownership (conservative Muslims see dogs as unclean) and prosecute couples for holding hands or kissing in public. There was a move for policewomen, regardless of their religion, to wear the *tudong* (headscarf) at official parades and the whole crazy business over the banning, then unbanning, of the Bible in Iban. There have also been several high-profile demolitions of non-Muslim religious buildings (including a couple of 19th-century Hindu temples) for allegedly not having proper planning permission.

Meanwhile, Brunei, by far the most Islamic nation in the region, has maintained something of a reputation as a model state since its independence in 1984. While the country has always been staunchly Muslim, full Islamic law (including the prohibition of alcohol) was only introduced in 1991. The mid-'90s saw the peak of Brunei's oil wealth – and the worst excesses of the sultan's brother Prince Jefri (see p587), whose consumption seriously damaged the national economy. Traditional and conservative it may be, but there's every sign that Brunei is a nation trying at least to keep in step with the changing demands of modernity (see p18).

ABDULLAH VS MAHATHIR

Prime Minister Mahathir's successor, Abdullah Badawi, was sworn into office in 2003 and went on to lead BN to a landslide victory in the following year's election. In stark contrast to his feisty predecessor, the pious Abdullah

1970

Brunei Town, the country's capital, is renamed Bandar Seri Begawan after the title accorded to the former Sultan Sri Muda Omar Ali Saifuddien III following his abdication.

1974

Following the formation of the Barisan Nasional (BN) in 1973, this new coalition led by Tun Abdul Razak wins the Malaysian general election by a landslide.

1981

The outspoken Dr Mahathir Mohamad becomes prime minister of Malaysia and introduces policies of 'Buy British Last' and 'Look East' in which the country strives to emulate Japan, South Korea and Taiwan.

immediately impressed voters by taking a nonconfrontational, consensus-seeking approach. He set up a royal commission to investigate corruption in the police force (its recommendations have yet to be implemented) and called time on several of the massively expensive mega projects that had been the hallmark of the Mahathir era, including a new bridge across the Straits of Johor to Singapore.

This decision was the straw that broke the doctor's back, causing the former PM to publicly lambaste his successor – an outburst that was largely ignored by the mainstream media. Mahathir turned to the internet to get his views across and raged against press censorship – which many found pretty rich given his own autocratic record while in power. At the same time the ever-outspoken Mahathir found himself at the sharp end of a lawsuit for defamation from Anwar Ibrahim, relating to the since-disproved charges of homosexuality against his former deputy. This case continues to trundle its way through the legal system at the same time as Anwar fights a second round of homosexuality charges.

BN ON THE ROPES

Released from jail in 2004, Anwar returned to national politics in August 2008 on winning the bi-election for the seat vacated by his wife. This was despite sodomy charges again being laid against the politician in June and his subsequent arrest in July. At the time of research, the case had yet to be tried, but appears so full of holes that Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch Asia and Al Gore have again thrown their support behind Anwar.

March 8: The Day Malaysia Woke Up by Kee Thuan Chye is the writer's personal reaction to the politically significant 2008 election and includes interviews with and contributions from a range of notable Malaysians including former law minister Zaid Ibrahim.

Malaysia Today (<http://mt.m2day.org/2008>), the popular Malaysian news blog founded by Raja Petra Kamarudin, a former political detainee, receives 1.5 million hits per day.

MALAYSIA'S GOVERNMENT

Malaysia is made up of 13 states and three federal territories (Kuala Lumpur, Pulau Labuan and Putrajaya). Each state has an assembly and government headed by a chief minister (in Malay *Menteri Besar*). Nine of the 13 states have hereditary rulers (sultans), while the remaining four have appointed governors as do the federal territories. In a pre-established order, every five years one of the sultans takes his turn in the ceremonial position of Yang di-Pertuan Agong (king). Since December 2006 the king, who is also the head of state and leader of the Islamic faith, has been the sultan of Terengganu.

Malaysia's current prime minister is Najib Razak, who heads up the BN, a coalition of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and 13 other parties. The official opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR), its leader being Anwar Ibrahim, is a coalition between Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), the (DAP) and Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS). They all sit in a two-house parliament, comprising a 70-member Senate (*Dewan Negara*; 26 members elected by the 13 state assemblies, 44 appointed by the king on the prime minister's recommendation) and a 222-member House of Representatives (*Dewan Rakyat*; elected from single-member districts). National and state elections are held every five years.

1982

Malaysia experiences the worst outbreak of dengue fever in its history, resulting in 35 deaths. The first edition of Lonely Planet's *Malaysia, Singapore & Brunei* is published.

1984

A somewhat reluctant Sultan Hassanah Bolkiah leads Brunei to complete independence from Britain. The country subsequently veers towards Islamic fundamentalism, introducing full Islamic law in 1991.

1990

After more than three decades in the job, Lee Kuan Yew steps down as prime minister of Singapore, handing over to Goh Chok Tong. Lee still keeps an eye on government in his role as 'Minister Mentor'.

Available on DVD (www.dahuangpictures.com) is Amir Muhammad's 2009 documentary *Malaysian Gods*, which commemorates the decade since the Reformasi movement began in 1998 with the sacking of Anwar Ibrahim as deputy PM.

As the leader of the Pakatan Rakyat (PR; People's Alliance), the opposition coalition that had made sweeping gains against BN in the March 2008 election, Anwar tried – and failed – to persuade some 30 BN MPs to switch sides so PR could form a new government. Meanwhile, UMNO scrambled to find a successor to Abdullah, who became the scapegoat for the party's election losses. However, his appointed successor, deputy PM Najib Razak, was becoming embroiled in a murder and corruption scandal (see below).

Malaysians also took note when Zaid Ibrahim resigned as law minister in September 2008, partly over the government's practice of detaining its critics without trial (see the boxed text, p41). The *New York Times* reported Zaid as saying 'The institutions of government have become so one-sided it will take years to restore professionalism and integrity', and in criticism of the economic privileges given to *bumiputra* that Malaysia had 'sacrificed democracy for the supremacy of one race'.

It's a curious fact, though, that despite such positive discrimination policies being in place now for over 30 years, the position of *bumiputra* in the economy remains more or less the same. A handful of well-connected Malays have certainly benefited but the vast majority remain poor. One of

THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE MURDERED MONGOLIAN WOMAN

The annals of Malay history are packed with some pretty incredible tales but few can compete with that of the murder of Altantuya Shaariibuu, a Mongolian woman who in October 2006 was shot then blown up in the Malaysian jungle with military-grade explosives.

At a trial which started in June 2007, two Special Branch policemen were charged with Shaariibuu's murder along with Abdul Razak, a high-profile political analyst and aid to Najib Razak, now prime minister but at the time deputy PM and defence minister. Abdul, who admitted to an affair with Shaariibuu, was subsequently acquitted of ordering the policemen to commit the murder.

At the same time Najib, under attack from opposition politicians and high-profile bloggers (one of whom has since fled the country pending sedition and defamation trials relating to his accusations), was forced to publicly deny any connection with the killing, stating that he had never met Shaariibuu. The case became even murkier when the French newspaper *Liberation* published an article alleging Shaariibuu had acted as an interpreter in a multimillion-dollar deal between Malaysia and a French arms company over the sale of three submarines. When Shaariibuu had learned of the commissions (the opposition parties call them bribes) involved in the deal she is alleged to have tried to blackmail those involved, including Abdul. The article also claimed that immediately prior to her death Shaariibuu had arrived in KL in the company of a shaman who would cast a spell over Abdul if he didn't cooperate.

In a second trial the policemen were found guilty and sentenced to death in April 2009 – a verdict that they are currently appealing against. Shaariibuu's father, who now looks after his daughter's two young boys, is suing the policemen and the Malaysian government for RM100 million.

1998

Anwar Ibrahim's disagreements with PM Mahathir over how to deal with the Asian currency crisis, as well as his attempts to tackle government corruption, see him sacked, arrested, sent for trial and jailed.

2003

Having announced his resignation the previous year, Dr Mahathir steps down as prime minister in favour of Abdullah Badawi. He remains very outspoken on national policies, recording his views in a blog (<http://chedet.co.cc/chedetblog>).

2004

A month after the election in which BN takes 199 of 219 seats in the Lower House of parliament, Anwar Ibrahim sees his sodomy conviction overturned and is released from prison.

the few politicians openly advocating the scrapping of the *bumiputra* policy is Anwar Ibrahim.

A MORE RELAXED SINGAPORE

In 1990 Lee Kuan Yew retired, though he still holds the position of 'Minister Mentor'. Lee was followed as prime minister by Goh Chok Tong, who was just keeping the seat warm until Lee's eldest son Lee Hsien Loong was ready to take over the top spot in 2004. Lee Jnr continues to run the country efficiently, if a little less autocratically than his dad. Jailing political dissidents has been replaced with suing them for defamation, but freedom of speech and the press are still tightly controlled.

Conspicuous too has been the relaxation of attempts to control every aspect of Singaporean life. Sugarless chewing gum has been available for some years now and the legalisation of bar-top dancing and deregulation of liquor licensing has led to a boom in Singapore's bar and club scene – Singaporeans are free to blow their high disposable incomes on as many S\$15 pints as they like, or indeed gamble it all away once the island's two 'integrated resorts' (ie casinos) open.

Perhaps Singapore's greatest contemporary challenge is to convince its youth – many of whom have enjoyed a lifetime of relative financial security – that continuing restrictions on freedom of speech are appropriate in an era of free global information and communication.

Lee Hsien Loong is the highest-paid head of government in the world, pulling in an annual salary of nearly S\$3.8 million (around US\$2.8 million) in 2008.

Lee's Law: How Singapore Crushes Dissent by Chris Lydgate is a disturbing and sad account of the rise and systematic destruction of Singapore's most successful opposition politician lawyer JB Jeyaretnam.

2007

As the country celebrates 50 years since independence it is also shaken by two anti-government rallies in November in which tens of thousands take to the streets of KL to protest.

2008

In the March election BN retains power but suffers heavy defeats to the revitalised opposition coalition Pakatan Rakyat (PR); in August Anwar Ibrahim becomes PR leader following his re-election to parliament.

2009

In April Najib Razak, son of Malaysia's second prime minister Tun Abdul Razak, succeeds Abdullah Badawi as prime minister. He announces a 1Malaysia concept with the slogan 'People First, Performance Now'.

The Culture

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

Although Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei share many cultural similarities, their respective populations do behave differently.

Any discussion about Malaysians (that is, anyone born in Malaysia regardless of ethnic background) immediately leads into issues about the differences between the country's majority Malay population and the sizable Chinese and Indian minorities. The stereotypes of Malays being rural, traditional people and the Chinese being urban and capitalist still hold some credibility but are breaking down, as increasing numbers of rural Malays are attracted by the wealth and jobs of the cities.

The Indians, the next-largest group, are divided by religion and linguistic background. A small, English-educated Indian elite has always played a prominent role in Malaysian society, and a significant merchant class exists, but a large percentage of Indians – imported as indentured labourers by the British – remain a poor working class.

For the most part, despite their differences, everyone gets along, partly because they have to, and also maybe because of the languid, generous spirit of the country – one fostered by a warm climate and a fruitful land. This friendliness and hospitality is what visitors see first and foremost. This said, ethnic tension in Malaysia does exist (see p49). There's also a national obsession with propriety, as evidenced, for example, in the fuss that broke over partially nude photos of the politician Elizabeth Wong leaked on the web in 2009 (see p54).

Moving from the cities to the more rural, and thus Malay, parts of the country, Islamic culture comes more to the fore, particularly on the east coast of the peninsula. On the whole though you'll find rural Malaysians pretty relaxed and certainly less business-obsessed than their urban brothers. Over in Malaysian Borneo where no one ethnic group holds sway, the cooperation and friendliness factor noticeably rises. You'll be fascinated by the communal lifestyle of the tribes who still live in jungle longhouses – again, here hospitality is a key ingredient of the social mix.

The cultural differences between easy-going Malaysia and fast-paced Singapore are striking. At a simplistic level this can be put down to the ethnic mix being tilted in favour of the Chinese who tend to be more competitive and better educated. Singaporeans can be pushy, but on the whole you're likely to find their straightforward, no-nonsense approach refreshing after travelling in other parts of Asia.

Bruneians are exceedingly proud of their country and their sultan whom they adore. They tend to see Malaysia as being poor and corrupt, even though in terms of lifestyle Muslim Bruneians are not that different from their Malay brethren. Out in the longhouses of the country's tiny interior the approach to life is practically indistinguishable from that across the border in Sarawak.

LIFESTYLE

In Southeast Asian terms most Malaysians, Singaporeans and Bruneians lead relatively comfortable lives. Malaysians earn the lowest average monthly salaries of the three (the equivalent of around US\$850, compared with US\$2714 in Singapore and US\$1040 in Brunei) but then the costs of living in Malaysia are not as high.

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

Status-conscious
Malaysians love their honourable titles which include, in order of importance, Tun, Tan Sri, Datuk and Dato'.

Kiasu, a Hokkien word describing Singaporeans, literally means 'afraid to lose', but embraces a range of selfish and pushy behaviour, where the individual must not lose out at all costs.

Increasing Westernisation and the pace of modern life are changing the cultures of the region, but traditional customs and religious values remain strong. Malays in all three countries generally follow Islam devoutly, as well as adhering to older spiritual beliefs and the village-based social system, known as adat. Many aspects of adat are a part of everyday life in the *kampung* (villages), and indeed even in urban areas.

The enduring appeal of the communal *kampung* spirit shouldn't be underestimated – many an urbanite from KL or Singapore hankers after it, despite the affluent Western-style living conditions they are privy to at home. In principle, villagers are of equal status, though a headman is appointed on the basis of his wealth, greater experience or spiritual knowledge. Traditionally the founder of the village was appointed village leader (*penghulu* or *ketua kampung*) and often members of the same family would also become leaders. A *penghulu* is usually a haji, one who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca.

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. The *pawang* and the *bomoh* are keepers of a spiritual knowledge that is part of an older tradition. Spirits, magic and such things as *keramat* (saint) worship still survive – despite such ideas being at odds with Islamic teachings. Many traditional beliefs and adat customs have adapted to Islam, rather than having been destroyed by it.

Religious customs and superstitions govern much of the Chinese community's home life, from the moment of birth (which is strictly recorded for astrological consultations later in life) to funerals (with many rites and rituals). Most Indians in the region originally come from South India, so the customs and festivals that are more important in the south, especially Tamil Nadu, are the most popular.

All three countries have dabbled, to different degrees, with social and economic policies to shape the lives of their citizens. In Malaysia, the New Economic Policy (NEP; see p40) was designed to promote the position of Malays – it's only been partially successful. In Singapore the government encouraged birth control in the 1970s and 1980s (to stem a booming population), but that plan worked too well and it now provides much encouragement, financial and otherwise (in particular, to educated Chinese Singaporeans) to have more children. In Brunei the Sultan has steered his nation towards Islamic fundamentalism, adopting a national ideology known as Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB).

ECONOMY

The Malaysian economy has enjoyed steady growth since independence. Rubber, tin and timber are no longer the main export earners, and the manufacturing sector dominates, particularly electronics and electrical machinery, which account for nearly 50% of exports in 2007. Seduced by tax incentives, hamstringing trade unions and a very pro-business government,

Adat, with its roots in the region's Hindu period and earlier, is customary law that places great emphasis on collective rather than individual responsibility and on maintaining harmony.

A *pawang* possesses skills and knowledge about such things as the rice harvest, fishing and rain-making, and knows the rituals needed to ensure their success and appease the necessary spirits.

THE POWER OF PETRONAS

Set up in 1974, the Malaysian national oil and gas company Petroliaam Nasional Bhd is better known as Petronas (www.petronas.com.my). It has the sole right to develop oil and gas fields across the country, the bulk of which are off the coast of Terengganu, Sarawak and Sabah. In 2008 *Fortune* magazine ranked the company, which had revenues of over US\$66,000 million as the 9th-most profitable in the world and the most profitable in Asia. The company contributes more than a third to the Malaysian government's annual budget and employs over 33,000 people worldwide in 103 subsidiaries.

Malaysian politicians have been known to call in a *bomoh* – a traditional spiritual healer and spirit medium – during election campaigns to assist in their strategy and provide some foresight.

multinationals have poured billions into the Malaysian economy, particularly during Mahathir's premiership (1981–2003).

In recent years there's been less political willingness to prop up national industries such as Proton (a car manufacturer). There's also been a push into the leisure and services industries, with a big success story being AirAsia, the budget airline (purchased from the government for RM1 in 2001 by entrepreneur Tony Fernandes) that has grown from six planes to a fleet of 110, carrying an expected 22 million passengers in 2009.

Through the promotion of free trade, and making itself attractive to foreign investors (tax breaks, few currency exchange restrictions and excellent infrastructure), Singapore has famously created a robust dynamic economy. However, manufacturing, for so long the engine room of Singapore's success, is in decline, due in large part to the rapid growth of China and India. In its place, the government is building up sectors like biomedical engineering and multimedia to ensure the country's future. Massive tourism investments such as the Integrated Resorts (p495) are also in the pipeline.

Brunei's economy is also strong, but the country is almost entirely reliant on oil and gas, resources that could run out any time between 2015 and 2030. Production is capped to try to ration the supply, and extensive new deep-sea explorations are planned. The government's attempts to diversify the economy, concentrating on agriculture, technology and banking, have met with some success but attracting the foreign investment necessary for large projects has proved tricky. Foreign labour is limited to protect the domestic workforce, around 60% of whom work in either the civil service or the armed forces.

POPULATION

As of September 2008 Malaysia had a population of 27.7 million people, over 85% of whom live on the peninsula. Malays, including indigenous groups,

THE PERANAKANS

Peranakan means 'half-caste' in Malay, which is exactly what the Peranakans are: descendants of Chinese immigrants who from the 16th century onwards settled in Singapore, Melaka and Penang and married Malay women.

The culture and language of the Peranakans is a fascinating melange of Chinese and Malay traditions. The Peranakans took the name and religion of their Chinese fathers, but the customs, language and dress of their Malay mothers. They also used the terms Straits-born or Straits Chinese to distinguish themselves from later arrivals from China.

Another name you may hear for these people is Baba-Nonyas, after the Peranakan words for men (*baba*) and women (*nonya*). The Peranakans were often wealthy traders who could afford to indulge their passion for sumptuous furnishings, jewellery and brocades. Their terrace houses were brightly painted, with patterned tiles embedded in the walls for extra decoration. When it came to the interior, Peranakan tastes favoured heavily carved and inlaid furniture.

Peranakan dress was similarly ornate. Women wore fabulously embroidered *kasot manek* (beaded slippers) and *kebaya* (blouses worn over a sarong), tied with beautiful *kerasong* (brooches), usually of fine filigree gold or silver. Men – who assumed Western dress in the 19th century, reflecting their wealth and contacts with the British – saved their finery for important occasions such as the wedding ceremony, a highly stylised and intricate ritual dictated by adat (Malay customary law).

The Peranakan patois is a Malay dialect but one containing many Hokkien words – so much so that it is largely unintelligible to a Malay speaker. The Peranakans also included words and expressions of English and French, and occasionally practised a form of backward Malay by reversing the syllables.

TALKING THE TALK: THE REGION'S MANY LANGUAGES

As former British colonies Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei are all fantastic countries to visit for English speakers, but linguists will be pleased to tackle the region's multitude of other languages. Malaysia's national language is Bahasa Malaysia. This is often a cause of confusion for travellers, who logically give a literal translation to the two words and call it the 'Malaysian language'. In fact you cannot speak 'Malaysian'; the language is Malay.

Other languages commonly spoken in the region include Tamil, Hokkien, Cantonese and Mandarin, but there are also Chinese dialects, various other Indian and Orang Asli languages, and even, in Melaka, a form of 16th-century Portuguese known as Cristang. All Malaysians speak Malay, and many are fluent in at least two other languages – a humbling thought for those of us who only speak English!

One final thing: you may be slightly confused by the English you do hear – both Malaysia and Singapore have developed their own unique way with the language known respectively as Manglish and Singlish (see p607).

make up around 65% of the population, Chinese 26%, Indians 8% and others make up the remaining 1%.

Singapore has a population of 4.8 million, including foreign residents. Chinese are the largest ethnic group (75.2%) followed by Malays (13.6%), Indians (8.8%) and 2.4% from other races.

Brunei's population is 390,000, with Malays and some other indigenous people accounting for around 67%; the Chinese make up 11% of the total; Iban, Dayak and Kelabit people about 6%; the rest are migrant workers and expats.

MULTICULTURALISM

From the ashes of Malaysia's interracial riots of 1969, when distrust between the Malays and Chinese peaked, the country has managed to forge a more tolerant, multicultural society. Though ethnic loyalties remain strong, the emergence of a single 'Malaysian' identity is now a much-discussed and lauded concept, even if it is far from being actually realised.

The government's *bumiputra* policy (see p40) has increased Malay involvement in the economy, albeit largely for an elite. This has helped defuse Malay fears and resentment of Chinese economic dominance, but at the expense of Chinese or Indian Malaysians being discriminated against by government policy. The reality is that the different communities coexist rather than mingle, intermarriage being rare and education still largely split along ethnic lines.

Singaporean government policy has always promoted Singapore as a multicultural nation in which Chinese, Indians and Malays can live in equality and harmony while maintaining their distinct cultural identities. There are imbalances in the distribution of wealth and power among the racial groups, but on the whole multiculturalism seems to work much better in small-scale Singapore than it does in Malaysia.

Similarly Brunei's small scale (not to mention great wealth) has allowed all its citizens, some 30% of whom are not Muslim, to find common goals and live together harmoniously in a state run according to Islamic laws.

MEDIA

Few people are under any illusions about the freedom of the press in the region to report on what they like, how they like. The authorities in Singapore and Brunei keep a tight leash on all media outlets, the Singaporean government going as far as to ban political comment on the internet and in blogs during the 2006 election campaign.

CRUSADING JOURNALIST: STEVEN GAN

In 1999, Steven Gan together with Pramesh Chandran set up the online newspaper **Malaysiakini** (www.malaysiakini.com). It was a gamble for Gan, Malaysiakini's editor, who took a big paycut from his position as a correspondent at Bangkok's *The Nation* newspaper to return to his native country – but one that has ultimately paid off since the site has bucked the trend for online media in being one of the few subscriptions-based services that makes money, averaging 300,000 unique visits a day and an income from subscriptions alone of RM2 million.

Why did you decide to go into online media? There was a lot happening at the time and a need for an alternative news source. Mahathir was still in power, the sacking of Anwar in '98 that precipitated the Reformasi movement was in full swing. A lot more people were interested in politics – but from the mainstream papers they weren't getting the news they wanted to read. It would have been impossible for us to get a print licence, but to launch online was no problem – all we needed was a regular business licence.

What have been your biggest stories? We've consistently reported on police brutality. Those stories eventually forced the government to organize a royal commission on the problem. Our coverage of the VK Lingam affair (when a video clip surfaced, allegedly showing the lawyer Lingam in the process of influencing the appointment of a Malaysian judge) also resulted in a royal commission inquiry.

Why haven't the authorities tried to shut you down? To Mahathir's credit, even though he made sure that the print media towed the government line, he was persuaded that for his pet multimedia supercorridor project to be successful, censorship of the internet was a no-go area. His successors have behaved likewise. We are currently fighting a lawsuit brought against us by the chief minister of Sarawak for our reports on illegal logging deals in his state, but we're confident of winning.

What are your plans for the future of Malaysiakini? We've moved into publishing books on current affairs and our online TV channel is proving a success. We would still like to put out a weekly print magazine, but that's not going to happen under the current government.

In Malaysia, since Mahathir's retirement as prime minister in 2003, there has been noticeably more freedom in what the media covers. The stringent laws haven't changed but the mind-set of journalists has and there's less self-censorship than in the past. In 2006 the government allowed the Qatar-based TV news station Al Jazeera to set up its Asian broadcasting centre in KL (in the Petronas Towers) and the practically unfettered expansion of newspapers and blogs on the web is further proof of a more liberal attitude.

RELIGION

Freedom of religion is guaranteed throughout this mainly Islamic region but you'll be hard pressed to find practicing Jews (see boxed text, opposite). Hinduism roots in the region long predate Islam, and the various Chinese religions are also strongly entrenched. Christianity has a presence, more so in Singapore than peninsula Malaysia where it has never been strong. In Malaysian Borneo many of the indigenous people have converted to Christianity, although others still follow their animist traditions.

Islam

Most likely Islam came to Malaysia in the 14th century with the South Indian traders and was not of the more-orthodox Islamic tradition 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, though the Hindu concept of kings remained. The traditions of adat continued (see p47), but Islamic law dominated.

The *Malaysian Insider* (www.themalaysianinsider.com) is an online newspaper that offers a largely uncensored take on events and personalities in Malaysia.

The cartoonist and artist Lat is a national institution in Malaysia. His witty sketches turn up in the *New Straits Times* newspaper, in advertisements and in books, including *Kampung Boy*.

Malay ceremonies and beliefs still exhibit pre-Islamic traditions, but most Malays are ardent Muslims and to suggest otherwise to a Malay would cause great offence. With the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, the calls to introduce Islamic law and purify the practices of Islam have increased, but while the federal government of Malaysia is keen to espouse Muslim ideals, it is wary of religious extremism. *Syariah* (Islamic law) is the preserve of state governments, as is the establishment of Muslim courts of law, which since 1988 cannot be overruled by secular courts.

Chinese Religions

The 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, and Taoism contributes animistic beliefs to teach people to maintain harmony with the universe. But to say that the Chinese have three religions is too simple a view of their traditional religious life. At the first level Chinese religion is animistic, with a belief in the innate vital energy in rocks, trees, rivers and springs. At the second level people from the distant past, both real and mythological, are worshipped as gods. Overlaid on this are popular Taoist, Mahayana Buddhist and Confucian beliefs.

On a day-to-day level most Chinese are much less concerned with the high-minded philosophies and asceticism of the 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. Chinese religion incorporates elements of what Westerners might call 'superstition' – if you want your fortune told, for instance, you go to a temple. The other

ANTI-SEMITISM IN MALAYSIA *Adam Karlin*

Me and a buddy had sank a few beers, but not nearly as many as the locals at the table next to us. One of them came over to our table and refilled our glasses, apropos of nothing – typical Malaysian friendliness. I smiled, gave a heartfelt '*terima kasih*' (thank you).

Then his stumbling drunk friend sat across from us and asked where we were from. My friend said, 'England.' I said, 'America.' He frowned, then said, loudly, 'America is controlled by the Jews.' My friend raised her eyebrows. 'I'm sorry?'

'The Jews! The Yahudi! Control everything!' he continued.

I smiled evenly and said, 'Have you ever met a Jew?'

'No.'

'Well, you have now.'

The drunk started yelling, sputtering and stumbling all at once, before finally getting up and shouting, 'You are not welcome in Malaysia!'

Muslim Malays are some of the friendliest people on earth, but anti-Semitism, ostensibly tied to criticism of Israel, is sadly widespread. If the roots of this anger were just directed at Israel, it would be somewhat understandable (if still one-sided). But with the exception of the (considerable) fact that Israeli passport holders are not permitted to enter Malaysia without clearance from the Ministry of Home Affairs, very few local Muslims differentiate between Israelis and Jews at large. Across the country, banners advocate boycotts of 'Yahudis' (Jews), not just Israel.

Former Prime Minister Mahathir made a 2003 speech to an Islamic leadership conference claiming the USA is a tool of Jewish overlords and once cancelled a planned tour of Malaysia by the New York Philharmonic because the program included work by a Jewish composer.

Not every, or even most, Malaysians would have acted like the (drunk) man above (who was held back by his friends, to their immense credit), but there is an entrenched voice in local media, particularly Muslim media, that is unfriendly to Jews. You may find more acceptance in majority Chinese and Hindu areas, but in the Malay heartland of Terengganu, Perlis, Kedah and Kelantan, Jewish travellers may find it best to keep their religion hidden.

THAIPUSAM

The most spectacular Hindu festival in Malaysia and Singapore is Thaipusam, a wild orgy of seemingly hideous body piercings. The festival happens every year in the Hindu month of Thai (January/February) and is celebrated with the most gusto at the Batu Caves (p131), just outside of Kuala Lumpur.

The greatest spectacle are the devotees who subject themselves to seemingly masochistic acts as fulfilment for answered prayers. Many of the devotees carry offerings of milk in *paal kudam* (milk pots) often connected to the skin by hooks. Even more striking are the *vel kavadi* – great cages of spikes that pierce the skin of the carrier and are decorated with peacock feathers, pictures of deities, and flowers. Some penitents go as far as piercing their tongues and cheeks with hooks, skewers and tridents.

The festival is the culmination of around a month of prayer, a vegetarian diet and other ritual preparations, such as abstinence from sex, or sleeping on a hard floor. While it looks excruciating, a trance-like state stops participants from feeling pain; later the wounds are treated with lemon juice and holy ash to prevent scarring. Like firewalking, only the truly faithful should attempt the ritual. It is said that insufficiently prepared devotees keep doctors especially busy over the Thaipusam festival period with skin lacerations, or by collapsing after the strenuous activities.

Originating in Tamil Nadu (but now banned in India), Thaipusam is also celebrated in Penang at the Nattukotai Chettiar Temple (p187) and the Waterfall Hilltop Temple (p187), and in Johor Bahru at the Sri Thandayuthabani Temple. Ipoh attracts a large number of devotees, who follow the procession from the Sri Mariamar Temple in Buntong to the Sri Subramaniam Temple in Gunung Cheroh. In Singapore, Hindus march from the Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple (p500) on Serangoon Rd to the Chettiar Hindu Temple (p498).

thing to remember is that Chinese religion is polytheistic. Apart from the Buddha, Lao Zi and Confucius there are many divinities, such as house gods, and gods and goddesses for particular professions.

Hinduism

Hinduism in the region dates back at least 1500 years and there are Hindu influences in cultural traditions, such as *wayang kulit* (see p58) and the wedding ceremony. However, it is only in the last 100 years or so, following the influx of Indian contract labourers and settlers, that it has again become widely practised.

Hinduism has three basic 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 was never significant in Malaysia, mainly because the labourers brought here from India were mostly from the lower classes.

Hinduism has a vast pantheon of deities although the one omnipresent god usually has three physical representations: Brahma, the creator; Vishnu, the preserver; and Shiva, the destroyer or reproducer. All three gods are usually shown with four arms, but Brahma has the added advantage of four heads to represent his all-seeing presence.

Animism

The animist religions of Malaysia's indigenous peoples – collectively known as the Orang Asli (see p38) – are as diverse as the peoples themselves. While animism does not have a rigid system of tenets or codified beliefs, it can be said of animist peoples that they perceive natural phenomena to be animated by various spirits or deities, and a complex system of practices is used to propitiate these spirits.

Ancestor worship is also a common feature of animist societies and departed souls are considered to be intermediaries between this world and the next. Examples of elaborate burial rituals can still be found in

Silat, or *bersilat*, is a Malay martial art that originated in 15th-century Melaka. Today it is a highly refined and stylised activity, more akin to dance than self defence.

Among the most popular Chinese deities (or *shen*) are Kuan Yin, the goddess of mercy and Toh Peh Kong, representing the spirit of pioneers and found only outside China.

some parts of Sarawak, where the remains of monolithic burial markers and funerary objects still dot the jungle around longhouses in the Kelabit Highlands (p458). However, most of these are no longer maintained and they're being rapidly swallowed up by the fast-growing jungle.

WOMEN IN MALAYSIA, SINGAPORE & BRUNEI

Women had great influence in pre-Islamic Malay society; there were female leaders and the descendants of the Sumatran Minangkabau in Negeri Sembilan still have a matriarchal society. The arrival of Islam weakened the position of women in Malaysia. Nonetheless, women were not cloistered or forced to wear full purdah as in the Middle East, and Malay women today still enjoy more freedom than their counterparts in many other Muslim societies.

As you travel throughout the region you'll see women taking part in all aspects of society, from politics (see boxed text, p54) and big business through to academia and family life. However, no less a figure than Marina Mahathir, prominent women's rights campaigner and daughter of the former prime minister, in 2006 compared the lot of Malaysia's Muslim women to that of blacks under apartheid in South Africa. In Mahathir's view her Muslim sisters are treated as second-class citizens held back by rules that don't apply to non-Muslim women.

Mahathir's outburst followed changes to Malaysia's Islamic family law that make it easier for Muslim men to take multiple wives, to divorce them and to take a share of their wives' property (similar laws already exist in Brunei, where the Sultan has two wives). Female politicians were prompted to vote for the changes by the women's ministry when they were apparently reassured the laws could be amended later.

In Chinese-dominated Singapore women traditionally played a small role in public life. However in recent years, women have started to take up key positions in government and industry.

In Islamic Brunei more women wear the *tudong* (headscarf) than in Malaysia. Many work and there are even one or two female politicians. Since 2002 female Bruneians have been able to legally transfer their nationality to their children, if the father is not Bruneian.

ARTS

Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei are not widely known for their arts, which is a shame as there is much creativity here – particularly in Malaysia and Singapore. Traditional art forms such as *wayang kulit* (shadow puppetry) and *mak yong* (dance and music performances) continue and stand alongside contemporary art, drama and film-making. There's a distinctive look to Malaysia's vernacular architecture as well as a daring and originality in modern constructions. The region is also producing authors who are gaining attention in the wider world.

Singapore has boosted spending on arts across the board with the aim of making the island state the arts hub of the region, in stark contrast to Malaysia where very little public money is assigned to the arts.

Literature

Writers of the calibre of W Somerset Maugham, Joseph Conrad and Noel Coward were inspired by the region in the early 20th century. The classic colonial expat experience is recounted by Anthony Burgess in *The Malayan Trilogy* written in the 1950s. In the late 1960s Paul Theroux lived in Singapore which, together with Malaysia, forms the backdrop to his novel *Saint Jack* and his short-story collection *The Consul's Wife*.

The Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (www.scwo.org.sg) seeks to unite various women's organisations throughout the island state.

Sisters in Islam (sistersinislam.org.my) is the website of a group of professional Malaysian Muslim women who refuse to be bullied by patriarchal interpretations of Islam.

The best source of information for what's currently going on in the Malaysian arts scene is Kakiseni (www.kakiseni.com).

The Singaporean National Arts Council (www.nac.gov.sg) sponsors a huge range of arts and cultural events across the state.

A leading light of the Malaysian literary scene is the London-based Tash Aw (www.tash-aw.com/index2.html), whose debut novel, *The Harmony Silk Factory*, set deep in the heart of Peninsular Malaysia partly during WWII, won the 2005 Whitbread First Novel Award. His 2009 follow-up *Map of the Invisible World*, which focuses of Malaysia and Indonesia in the 1960s, is also garnering great reviews. Hot on Aw's heels are Tan Twan Eng (www.tantwaneng.com) whose literary debut *The Gift of Rain*, long-listed for the 2007 Man Booker Prize, is set in Penang just before and during WWII, and Preeta Samarasan (<http://preetasamarasan.com>) author of *Evening is the Whole Day*, a novel that focuses on the experiences of an Indian immigrant family living on the outskirts of Ipoh in the early 1980s.

Foreign Bodies and *Mammon Inc* by Hwee Hwee Tan (www.geocities.com/hweehwee_tan) are among the best of contemporary Singaporean fiction. Tan pinpoints the peculiar dilemmas and contradictions facing Singaporean youth. Other celebrated novels by Singaporean writers include *Tigers in Paradise* by Philip Jeyaretnam, *Juniper Loa* by Lin Yutang, *Tangerine* by Colin Cheong and *Playing Madame Mao* by Lau Siew Mai. Short-story fans should read *Little Ironies* by Catherine Lim and *12 Best Singapore Stories* by Goh Sin Tub.

Architecture

Malaysia and Singapore have both made their mark in the world of modern architecture with two iconic buildings: KL's Petronas Towers (p95); and the Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay complex in Singapore (p495). Both have drawn attention to other interesting skyscrapers and civic buildings in the cities that take inspiration from both local culture and the environment –

CAMPAIGNING POLITICIAN: ELIZABETH WONG

A human rights and environmental activist for over 15 years, Elizabeth Wong (<http://elizabethwong.wordpress.com>) was elected as a rep of the Pakatan Rakyat (People's Alliance) in the Selangor state election in March 2008. Almost a year later the 39-year-old single woman, Selangor's spokesperson for tourism and environmental issues, found herself at the centre of a media storm after partially naked photos of her, taken by a former lover, were leaked to the press and online. The readiness with which some people used this unwarranted intrusion into Wong's private life to question her character spoke volumes about Malaysia's conservative attitudes on sexual mores and the shady nature of local politics.

What made you stand for election? Because I have a vision of what politics could be like in Malaysia. It's about trying to make it less dirty. We don't have political discourse here; instead it's about smearing each other. No wonder politicians have such a bad reputation! But politics is what drives the economy and sets the social agenda. In particular I want to change young people's perceptions about politicians – that they can be interested in conserving the environment, making the world a safer place for women and so on.

What have your experiences since the election taught you? I've learnt a very important lesson in keeping focus and being patient. By the next election, those aged 45 and under will be the majority of voters – these people want to place their hopes in fresh blood, not those with tainted reputations who are only interested in playing the old style of politics.

What environmental initiatives are you working on? I'm in support of the Green Building Index (GBI) that's been developed by the Architects Association of Malaysia (PAM) and the Civil Engineers' Association (ACEM). If Selangor adopts the GBI as part of the building approvals' code then we will be the first state in Malaysia to do so.

And what about new tourism possibilities in Selangor? The Sultan is planning on opening up his palace in Klang (see p139) and there's also a new environmental interpretive centre out beside the mangroves along the Sungai Sepong, an area that's being labelled as the Sepong Gold Coast as resort development happens around Bagan Lallang beach.

for example the space-age design of Sir Norman Foster's Expo MRT station, which helps combat Singapore's tropical heat. Foster Partners is also responsible for Singapore's equally space-agey Supreme Court.

Vividly painted and handsomely proportioned, traditional wooden Malay houses are also perfectly adapted to the hot, humid conditions of the region. Built on stilts, with high, peaked roofs, they take advantage of even the slightest cooling breeze. Further ventilation is achieved by full-length windows, no internal partitions, and latticelike grilles in the walls. The layout of a traditional Malay house reflects Muslim sensibilities. There are separate areas for men and women, as well as distinct areas where guests of either sex may be entertained.

Although their numbers are dwindling, this type of house has not disappeared altogether. The best places to see examples are in the *kampung* of Peninsular Malaysia, particularly along the east coast in the states of Kelantan and Terengganu. Here you'll see that roofs are often tiled, showing a Thai and Cambodian influence. In KL there's a fantastic example in the grounds of Badan Warisan Malaysia (see p98) as well as the many old traditional wooden homes of the city's Kampung Baru district. Also check out the collection of vernacular houses from across Malaysia at Langkawi's Temple Tree (p223).

In Melaka, the Malay house has a distinctive tiled front stairway leading up to the front verandah – examples can be seen around Kampung Morten (p244). The Minangkabau-style houses found in Negeri Sembilan are the most distinctive of the *kampung* houses, with curved roofs resembling buffalo horns – the design is imported from Sumatra.

Few Malay-style houses have survived Singapore's rapid modernisation – the main place they remain is on Pulau Ubin (p504). Instead, the island state has some truly magnificent examples of Chinese shophouse architecture, particularly in Chinatown, Emerald Hill (off Orchard Rd) and around Katong. There are also the distinctive 'black and white' bungalows built during colonial times; find survivors lurking in the residential areas off Orchard Rd. Most noticeable of all, though, will be the rank upon rank of Housing Development Board (HDB) flats (www.hdb.gov.sg) – close to a million units so far – that the vast majority of Singaporeans call home. Find out more about Singapore's varied mix of architecture at the Singapore City Gallery (p499).

Despite its oil wealth, there's little that's flashy in the architecture of Brunei's modest capital, Bandar Seri Begawan, where the city's skyline is dominated by the striking Omar Ali Saifuddin Mosque (p577). It's quite a different story, however, out at Jerudong, home to the Sultan's opulent palace and the eye-boggling Empire Hotel (p586).

Drama & Dance

Traditional dramatic forms remain a feature of Malaysia's performing arts scene, particularly on the more-Malay east coast of the country. It's here, in towns such as Kota Bharu and Kuala Terengganu, that you're most likely to see *wayang kulit* – shadow-puppet performances, similar to those of Java in Indonesia, which retell tales from the Hindu epic the *Ramayana*. It's a feat of endurance both for performer and audience since the shadow plays, which often take place at weddings or after the harvest, can last for many hours.

Interesting recent developments on the *wayang kulit* scene include Malaysian composer Yii Kah Hoe's collaboration *Bayang* with the Singapore Chinese Orchestra and the *wayang kulit* troupe Istamuzika performed in Singapore in November 2008. Fahmi Fadzil and Azmyl Yunor also perform their *wayang pasar* – humorous sketches all in Bahasa Malaysia but pretty understandable – at venues such as the bazaar held on KL's CapSquare (see p102) and have also created *wayang pasar* performances using light bulbs: for more info see <http://projekwayang.blogspot.com>.

To find out more about what people are reading in the region, check local publisher Silverfish (www.silverfishbooks.com); and Bibliobibili (<http://thebookaholic.blogspot.com>), the blog of Sharon Bakar, a Malaysia-based British expat.

Peter Carey's *My Life as a Fake* is a great reworking of Frankenstein partly set in Malaysia and wonderfully evoking the sultry side of Kuala Lumpur.

KS Maniam's *The Return* (1994) shines a light on the Indian Malaysian experience, through his character's search for a home on returning from being educated abroad.

Malaysia's premier traditional dance troupe, an ensemble of 30 musicians and 60 dancers, is the Petronas Performing Art Group. Its repertoire includes over 100 ethnic dances from across the country.

Singapore's leading dance company, Singapore Dance Theatre (www.singaporedance.com), puts on performances ranging from classical ballet to contemporary dance.

The Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society (www.nas.org.sg) runs Singapore's only full-time troop of Indian dancers and musicians, performs South Indian dance and music and holds an annual drama festival.

Traditional dances include *menora*, a dance-drama of Thai origin performed by an all-male cast dressed in grotesque masks; and the similar *mak yong*, where the participants are female. These performances often take place at Puja Ketek, Buddhist festivals held at temples near the Thai border in Kelantan. The *rodak* is a dance from Terengganu. Often performed at Malay weddings by professional dancers, the *joget* is an upbeat dance with Portuguese origins; in Melaka it's better known as *chakunchak*.

When it comes to contemporary drama and dance Singapore tends to have the edge. Apart from the blockbuster productions that regularly check into the Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, there's a lot of interesting work by local theatre companies such as Action Theatre (www.action.org.sg), Wild Rice (www.wildrice.com.sg), Toy Factory Ensemble (www.toyfactory.com.sg) and the Singapore Repertory Theatre (www.srt.com.sg).

In Malaysia, head to the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre (KLPac; p122) to see the latest in Malaysian performing arts; a hit play here in 2009 was *Air Con* by Shannon Shah which picked up several gongs in the annual Cameronian Arts Awards. Also check out any productions by the performing arts collective Five Arts Centre (www.fiveartscentre.org).

CHINESE OPERA

In Malaysia and Singapore *wayang* (Chinese opera) is derived from the Cantonese variety, which is seen as a more music hall mix of dialogue, music, song and dance. What the performances lack in literary nuance they make up for with garish costumes and the crashing music that follows the action. The scenery is virtually nonexistent, and props rarely consist of more than a table and chairs, but it is the action that is important.

Performances can go for an entire evening and it is usually easy for the uninitiated to follow the gist of the action. The acting is very stylised, and the music can be searing to Western ears, but seeing a performance is well worthwhile. 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 the Chinatown areas of KL and Singapore, or to Melaka or Penang's Georgetown for the best chance of seeing performances.

Music

TRADITIONAL & CLASSICAL

Percussion instruments figure large in traditional Malay music, including the *gendang* (drum), of which there are more than a dozen types, and a variety of gongs made from shells (*cerucap*), coconut shells (*raurau*), and bamboo (*kertuk* and *pertuang*). The *gamelan*, a traditional Indonesian gong orchestra, is found in the state of Kelantan, where a typical ensemble will comprise four different gongs, two xylophones and a large drum. All of these instruments are present in the *nobat* (traditional Malay orchestra) which only plays on ceremonial occasions.

Islamic and Chinese influences are felt in the music of *dondang sayang* (Chinese-influenced romantic songs accompanied by an orchestra), and *hadrah* Islamic chants, sometimes accompanied by dance and music.

The region has a trio of top-class traditional orchestras. In Malaysia, the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra plays at the Dewan Filharmonik Petronas (p121) in the Petronas Towers. In Singapore, catch the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO, at the Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay) and the well-respected Singapore Chinese Orchestra which plays not only traditional and symphonic Chinese music but also Indian, Malay and Western pieces.

POP & ROCK

The Malaysian queen of pop remains the demure Siti Nurhaliza (<http://siti.zone.com>). Other local artists to keep an ear out for include the alternative pop artist Faizal Tahir, runner up of *One in Million*, Malaysia's version of *Idol*; jazz artists Atilia (www.atilia.us) and Shelia Majid (www.sheilamajid.com); the surfer rock music band Kugiran (their *Surfin' with the Legend* CD sees them cover songs by Malaysian icon P Ramlee); songstress Adibah Noor (<http://adibah-noor.com>), who has a bit of an R&B thing going on; and Zainal Abidin (www.zainalabidin.com), well known on the world music circuit.

Singapore's small band scene includes groups such as Electrico and Ugly in the Morning (www.uglyinthemorning.org), both of whom have released several albums, and jazz artists of an international quality such as pianist Jeremy Montiero and his sister Clarissa. Corrinne May (www.corrinnemay.com) has had success in the US with her four acoustic pop albums. Many successful Singaporean singers are Mandarin or Cantonese exports to the Taiwanese and Hong Kong market. These include Kit Chan, Stefanie Sun, Tanya Chua and Ah Du.

Crafts

Across Malaysia you'll find many traditional crafts still practised. In Brunei, too, crafts (especially *jong sarat* weaving, silverwork and basketry) have traditionally been more important than fine arts.

BATIK

Originally an Indonesian craft, batik – produced by drawing or printing a pattern on fabric with wax and then dyeing the material – has made itself equally at home in Malaysia. You'll find locally produced batik across Malaysia, but Kelantan and Terengganu are its true homes. Batik can be made into clothes, homewares, or simply be created as works of art: the pioneer and master of this was Chuah Thean Teng (1912–2008; see www.yahongart.com).

BASKETRY

The baskets of the Iban, Kayan, Kenyah and Penan are among the most highly regarded in Borneo. Weaving material include rattan, bamboo, swamp nipah grass and pandanus palms. In addition to baskets, related techniques produce sleeping mats, seats and materials for shelters. While each ethnic group has certain distinctive patterns, hundreds or even thousands of years of trade and interaction has led to an intermixing of patterns. Some ethnic groups still produce baskets and other goods in the traditional way and these can be found in some of the markets of Malaysian Borneo. Others may be offered for sale upon a visit to a longhouse.

FABRICS & WEAVINGS

A speciality of Kelantan and Terengganu, *kain songket* is a hand-woven fabric with gold and silver threads through the material. Clothes made from this beautiful fabric are usually reserved for the most important festivals and occasions. *Mengkuang* is a far more prosaic form of weaving using pandanus leaves and strips of bamboo to make baskets, bags and mats.

Pua kumbu is a colourful weaving technique used in Malaysian Borneo to produce both everyday and ceremonial items decorated with a wide range of patterns. A special dyeing process known as *ikat* is used to produce the colours for *pua kumbu*. *Ikat* dyeing is performed while the threads of the pattern are already in place on the loom, giving rise to its English name, warp tie-dyeing.

Jit Murad's play *Spilled Gravy on Rice*, a big hit in Malaysia and Singapore, is about child abuse, homosexuality, drugs and Zionism, proving that English-language theatre can escape censorship.

See the blog *Wayang – Fascinating World of Chinese Opera* (<http://wayangchineseopera.blogspot.com>) for more on local performances.

Malaysia's Dama Orchestra (www.damaorchestra.com) combines modern and traditional Chinese instruments and plays songs that conjure up the smoky elegance of the 1920s and '30s.

MULTICULTURAL MUSICIAN: RESHMONU

Winner of three AIM awards – the Malaysian equivalent of the Grammys – in 2004 for his debut album *Monumental*, singer-songwriter Reshmonu's (www.reshmonu.com) 2009 release *Harapan* (Hope) blends local rhythms and instruments into R&B and Latin grooves such as samba and bossanova. Famous for his distinctive look of braided hair with flowing extensions, the multitalented 32-year-old has opened concerts for the likes of Alicia Keys and the Prodigy and featured on Lonely Planet's TV program *Six Degrees: Kuala Lumpur*.

How did you get into the music business? While I was studying for my degree in engineering I worked as a sound engineer in a club. I had the opportunity to meet many famous musicians and began to understand how the industry works. Singer Prema Lucas heard me sing and said I should be on the stage. I started collecting material which resulted in my first album.

Your latest album isn't being sold in shops – what's the deal with that? The big labels have pretty much given up on promoting local artists in Malaysia and the record stores take around 50 per cent of the sales price. So I'm always trying new approaches to selling my music. You can buy my music online via www.rrecords.net, my own record label. *Harapan* is also packaged in a denim pouch designed by Key Ng, a favourite Malaysia fashion designer of mine, because it's not just about the music but the complete package.

On your previous albums you sing in English, but *Harapan* is all in Bahasa Malaysian. Why the change? Dude, I'm Malaysian – I'm not trying to get away from that fact. It was really about finding the right time to launch into the market with a Malay album. Besides, my music has always featured a mix of instruments – the *gendang*, a type of Malay drum; the Indian *tablas* and *sitar*; and the Chinese *erhu* – it reflects Malaysian society.

What other projects do you have going on? I've set up a recording studio and video production unit and am moving into representing other artists – any type of music, by anyone, from any part of the world – with a scheme to sell single music downloads to mobile phones with a major Malaysian telco.

And about the hair...? Yeah, everyone asks that. I had it done four years ago for a show and have kept it this way ever since – it's my one indulgence. It takes two hairdressers to work on it for four hours every two weeks.

KITES & PUPPETS

Crafts most associated with the predominantly Malay states of Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah and Perlis are the making of traditional kites and *wayang kulit*. The *wau bulan* (moon kite) of Kelantan is a traditional paper and bamboo crescent-shaped kite that can be as large as 3m in length and breadth. Terengganu's *wau kucing* (cat kite) is the logo of Malaysia Airlines. Shadow puppets are made from buffalo hide in the shape of characters from epic Hindu legends.

SILVER & OTHER METALWORK

Kelantan is famed for its silversmiths, who work in a variety of ways and specialise in filigree and repoussé work. In the latter, designs are hammered through the silver from the underside. Kampung Sireh at Kota Bharu is a centre for silverwork. Brasswork is an equally traditional skill in Kuala Terengganu. Objects crafted out of pewter (an alloy of tin) are synonymous with Selangor where you'll find the Royal Selangor Pewter Factory (see p497) as well as other pewter manufacturers.

WOODCARVING

The Orang Asli tribe of Hma' Meri, who live in a village on Pulau Carey (p140), off the coast of Selangor, are renowned woodcarving craftsmen. In Malaysian Borneo the Kenyah and Kayan peoples are also skilled woodcarvers. In these societies, *kelirieng* (burial columns of up to 2m in diameter and

Songket Revolution (www.yayasantnz.org) is a beautifully illustrated book showcasing the history of *kain songket* and contemporary fashions using the traditional Malay handwoven fabric.

For more information on popular Malaysian crafts visit the website www.malysiancraft.com.

10m in height, and entirely covered with detailed carvings) were used to bury the remains of headmen. Decaying remnants of *kelirieng* are still uncovered in the rainforest of Sarawak, and an example can be seen in Kuching Municipal Park. Less formidable, but equally beautiful, the Kenyah and Kayan also produced smaller wooden hunting-charms and ornate wooden knife-hilts known as *parang ilang*.

Cinema

Yasmin Ahmad's multi-award-winning *Sepet* (2005), about a Chinese boy and Malay girl falling in love, cut across the country's race and language barriers and in turn upset many devout Malays, as did her follow-up *Gubra* (2006) which dared to take a sympathetic approach to prostitutes. Causing less of a stir was *Talentine* (2009), her film about the run-up to an inter-school performing-arts contest.

Amir Muhammad's work also pushes the boundaries on issues that the government won't allow to be discussed in the public arena. His movie *Lelaki Komunis Terakhir* (The Last Communist Man; 2006) was banned, along with his follow-up movie *Apa Khabar Orang Kampung* (Village People Radio Show; 2007); find out more about them at www.redfilms.com.my.

Muhammad's producer and a pioneer of the Malaysian new wave of directors is James Lee, whose best-known pictures are *Room to Let* (2002) and *Beautiful Washing Machine* (2004). Find out about and purchase some of these films and those of other local indie directors at www.dahuangpictures.com.

Singapore has never been a leading light in film production, but during the 1990s some local movies began to gain international attention, in particular Yonfan's *Bugis Street* and Eric Khoo's *Mee Pok Man*, both released in 1995. Khoo's *12 Storeys* (1997) and more recent *Be with Me* (2005) and *My Magic* (2008) have since featured in competition at Cannes. The last film was nominated for the prestigious Palm d'Or.

The commercially successful, but controversial Royston Tan (www.royston.tan.com) continues his love/hate relationship with Singapore's censors. His first feature, *15*, had 27 scenes snipped. In response, he produced the hilarious short music video *Cut* (available on YouTube). His last two films, *881* and *12 Lotus* were Chinese-language features.

Visual Arts

Among the most interesting and internationally successful of contemporary Malaysian artists are Jalaini Abu Hassan ('Jai'), Wong Hoy Cheong, landscape painter Wong Perng Fey, and Yee I-Lann, first recipient of the Australian High Commission Kuala Lumpur residence program. Amron Omar focuses on *silat* (Malaysian martial arts) as a source of inspiration for his paintings – a couple are in KL's National Art Gallery (p103). The capital's commercial galleries (p122) also represent several of these artists and often produce many fine catalogues to support exhibitions.

In Singapore the visual-arts scene is also vibrant, with painting, sculpture and multimedia the vehicles of choice for dynamic explorations into the tensions between Western art practices and the perceived erosion of traditional values. Highly regarded local artists include Da Wu Tang, Vincent Leow, Jason Lim and Zulkifl Mahmud, all of whom took part in the 2007 Venice Biennale.

The Brunei Art Forum in Bandar Seri Begawan promotes local contemporary artists (mostly painters) such as Zakaria Bin Omar, Haji Padzil Haji Ahmad, Pengiran Mohd Roslan Pg Haji Bakar and Teck Kwang Swee, and fosters international links.

The king of Malaysian cinema in the 1950s was P Ramlee who acted in some 70 films in his lifetime and remains a national icon; a road is named after him in KL.

Tsai Ming Liang's *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*, filmed entirely on location in KL, takes a starkly beautiful but glacially slow look at the tensions in Malaysia's multicultural society.

Your main chance to catch films made in the region is during April's Singapore International Film Festival (www.filmfest.org.sg).

Food & Drink Robyn Eckhardt

Centuries of trade, colonisation, and immigration have left their culinary mark on Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei in the form of cuisines so multi-faceted it would take months of non-stop grazing to truly grasp their breadth. Nowhere else in Asia are the elements of three great culinary traditions – those of China, India and the Malay archipelago – so intertwined. The result is dishes both starkly monocultural (think Chinese wonton noodles and the southern Indian rolled ‘pancakes’ called *dosa*) and confusingly – but delightfully – multi-culti (*debal*, a Melakan Eurasian stew, marries European-originated red wine vinegar, Indian black-mustard seeds, Chinese soy sauce and Malay candlenuts). In this region, where the choices are endless, gastronomic malaise is unlikely to be a problem. That’s a blessing, but also a curse of sorts – so many dishes, so little time.

In the beautifully photographed book *Inside the Southeast Asian Kitchen* local experts share their knowledge of ingredients, cooking implements and techniques, along with authentic recipes.

FLAVOURS

Malaysia, Brunei and Singapore have similar populations, share a tropical climate and were all at one time home to important trading ports along the spice route. As a result their cuisines are characterised by comparable flavours and are built on a shared foundation of basic ingredients.

Chillies (*cili*), both fresh and dried, are a kitchen staple. (Chilli-phobes need not worry; the region boasts plenty of mild dishes too.) Capsicum stars in sambal, a dip cum relish; its many varieties incorporate ingredients ranging from dried shrimp to fruit and are served alongside humble soup noodles, lavish rice spreads and every meal in between. Chillies are the base of *rempah* (called *bumbu* in Brunei), a pounded paste also containing, at its most basic, garlic and shallots, which forms the foundation of curries, soups and stews.

Herbs and aromatics such as coriander, mint, *daun kesom* (polygonum, a peppery, slightly astringent leaf also known as laksa leaf), celery leaves (from the slender, jade-green Asian variety rather than thick-stemmed, mild-flavoured Western celery) *daun kunyit* (turmeric leaves), curry leaves, lemongrass and wild lime leaves impart a fresh liveliness to curries and noodle dishes. Fragrant pandan leaves are often called ‘Southeast Asian vanilla’ for the light, slightly sweet essence they lend to sweets. (Pandan is also a natural

CULINARY HIGHLIGHTS

Don’t leave the region without trying the following:

- *ambuyat* – think of Brunei’s sago mash as a blank palette upon which to paint the vibrant flavours of accompanying dishes
- *cendol* – shaved ice, fresh coconut milk, pandan ‘pasta’ and sweet, smoky palm sugar beat the heat deliciously
- *roti canai* – flaky, crispy griddled bread dipped in curry and dhal and accompanied by a mug of frothy *teh tarik* (‘pulled’ tea) is one of the world’s best ways to wake up
- *char kway teow* – silky rice noodles, plump prawns, briny cockles, chewy Chinese sausage, crispy sprouts, fluffy egg, a hint of chilli – all kissed by the smoke of a red-hot wok. Need we say more?
- Hainanese chicken-rice – tender poached chicken accompanied by rice scented with stock and garlic and a trio of dipping sauces plain and spicy

deodoriser, so don't be surprised to see a bundle of leaves stashed beneath the rear window of your taxi).

Sourness is also an important facet of the region's cuisines. *Asam* (sour) curries and noodle dishes derive piquancy primarily from tamarind and *asam keping*, the flesh of a tart fruit related to the mangosteen that's sliced into thin coins and dried. Malay cooks also make sour soups and sambals with a tiny green fruit called *belimbing*, a relative of the star fruit. Both limes and calamansi, a cross between lime and Mandarin orange, are juiced for salads; slices are served with laksa and other noodle dishes.

Belacan (dried shrimp paste) embodies the Malaysian, Singaporean and Bruneian love of fishy flavours. A black, sticky-sweet version native to Penang, called *hae ko*, dresses vegetable and fruit salad (*rojak*) and is stirred into *asam* laksa, a sour fishy noodle dish, right before serving. Other well-loved condiments made from the fruits of the sea include *cincaok* (*cencalu* in Brunei), krill mixed with salt and sugar and left to ferment (it's often eaten with rice and eggs) and *budu*, a sludgy long-fermented anchovy sauce favoured by Malay cooks. These piscine condiments lend umami to many a sambal, dipping sauce and curry and, though certainly odiferous, can be addictive; after a few weeks of sampling you may find yourself wishing you could sneak a block of *belacan* past your home country's custom agents.

The region's wet markets devote whole sections to dried seafood, with some stalls specialising in *ikan bilis* – tiny dried anchovies that are deep-fried till crispy and incorporated into sambal or sprinkled atop noodle and rice dishes – and others displaying an array of salted dried fish. Shrimp too, are dried, then ground into *rempah*, fried with vegetables, or tossed into salads and even eaten out of hand as a snack. In Brunei sardines are smoked and then dried in the sun for *tahai*, an ingredient in curries.

No local kitchen is complete without sauces that were originally introduced to the region by the Chinese: soy sauce (and its sweetened cousin *kecap manis*), fermented salted bean paste (*taucu*), oyster sauce and hoisin sauce.

Curries and sweets are made *lemak* (fatty and rich) with coconut milk. Grated coconut is dry-fried, sometimes with dried chillies and other flavourings, to make *kerisik*, a garnish for rice, and is an ingredient in many *kuih* (sweets), where it's often paired with *gula Melaka*, a distinctive dark brown sugar made by boiling the sap collected from cut flower stalks of the coconut palm.

STAPLES

Rice & Noodles

The locals 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' of Malaysia, is rice steamed with coconut water, and topped with *ikan bilis*, peanuts, sliced cucumber, sweet-hot sambal and half a hard-boiled egg (curry optional). Banana leaf rice – rice served on a banana leaf 'plate' with a choice of curries – is daily Indian fare. In Singapore, Hainanese chicken-rice, a plate of rice flavoured with garlic and broth, tender poached chicken, sliced cucumber and dipping sauces, assumes similar iconic status. Rice is boiled in water or stock to make porridge (*congee* or *bubur*), fried with chillies and shallots for *nasi goreng*, and packed into banana leaf-lined bamboo tubes, cooked, then sliced and doused with coconut-and-vegetable gravy for the Malay speciality *lontong*. Glutinous (sticky) rice – both white and black – is a common *kuih* ingredient; Malays mix glutinous rice with sugar and allow it to ferment for sweet-and-sour, slightly alcoholic *tapai*, which goes nicely with ice cream.

Many restaurants add a 10% service charge. If you see '++' at the bottom of your menu, add 15% for government taxes and service charge.

When is a fruit not a fruit? When it's a young jackfruit (*nangka muda*), which Malay cooks treat as a vegetable, stirring it into coconut milk-based curries.

Rice flour, mixed with water and allowed to ferment, becomes the batter for Indian *idli*, steamed cakes to eat with dhal (stewed pulses), and *apam*, crispy-chewy pancakes cooked in special concave pans. Rice flour-based dough is transformed into sweet dumplings like *onde-onde*, coconut flake-dusted, pandan-hued balls hiding a filling of semi-liquid *gula Melaka*.

Many varieties of noodle are made from rice flour. Wide, flat *kway teow* are stir-fried with prawns, cockles, egg and bean sprouts for Malaysia's other 'national dish', the hawker speciality *char kway teow*, and stubby *loh see fun* (literally 'rat-tail noodles') are stewed in a claypot with dark soy sauce. *Meehoon* (or *beehoon*, rice vermicelli) are the noodle of choice for pork noodle soup. *Chee cheong fun* – steamed rice flour sheets – are sliced into strips and topped with curry or sweet brown and red chilli sauces.

Round yellow noodles are served in soup and stir-fried with curry leaves, bean sprouts and chilli sauce for the Muslim-Indian speciality *mee mamak*. A favourite Chinese dish anywhere in the region is *won ton mee* – wheat-and-egg vermicelli floated in clear meat broth with silky-skinned dumplings, a few leaves of Chinese mustard and sliced roast or barbecued pork.

A primary starch for Bruneians and some indigenous communities in the eastern Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak is sago flour, laboriously extracted from the trunk of a variety of palm tree. In Brunei, it's mixed with water and cooked to make *ambuyat* (or *ambulung*), a sticky whitish paste. Served by twisting around chopsticks or long-twined forks, *ambuyat* is usually dipped into *cacah*, a sambal *belacan* and tamarind-based sweet-and-tart sauce, and accompanied by boiled or smoked seafood and salads. Sago flour is also roasted with coconut and mixed with sugar to make *sagun*, a delicious 'dip' for mashed banana slices.

Konemann's *Southeast Asian Specialties* provides an overview of Singaporean and Malaysian foods, detailing everything from Sabahan tribal fare to the art of cultivating mushrooms.

Cradle of Flavor is James Oseland's ode to the Singaporean, Malaysian and Indonesian home-cooking the American food writer and editor fell in love with more than two decades ago.

Seafood

Lengthy coastlines and abundant rivers and estuaries mean that seafood forms much of the diet for many of the region's residents. *Ikan* (fish) is left whole, slathered and stuffed with *rempah*, and wrapped in banana leaves (or left naked) and cooked on the grill for *ikan bakar* (grilled fish) or rubbed with turmeric and deep-fried to accompany Indian rice meals. Cut into chunks or steaks, it's cooked in hot and sour stews or coconut curries fragrant with aromatic spices. Whole fish steamed with ginger and garlic is a Chinese favourite. The head and shoulders of large fish are prized; a Chinese cook might steam and serve it smothered in a garlic and *taucu*-based sauce, while an Indian would cook it in spicy and sour curry; Malaysians chop fish heads, deep-fry them, and serve them with *meehoon* in a fish and tomato broth redolent of ginger and rice wine, enriched with evaporated milk. *Sotong* (squid) is deep-fried, stirred into curries or griddle-grilled on a banana leaf with sambal. Shellfish is much adored; Bruneians boil *udang* (prawns) with lemongrass, tamarind and chillies; Singaporeans stir-fry crab with chillies or black pepper; and Malaysians insist that if it doesn't have fresh cockles it's not a real *char kway teow*.

Meat

Haram (forbidden) to Muslims, *babi* (pork) is the king of meats for Chinese; some hawkers even drizzle noodles with melted lard. Whether roasted till crispy-skinned (*char yoke*) or marinated and barbecued till sweetly charred (*char siew*), the meat is eaten with rice, added to noodles, and stuffed into steamed and baked buns. Malaysian Hakka (a Chinese dialect group) are renowned for succulent, long-cooked pork dishes like *khaw yoke*, sliced belly seasoned with five spice, layered with sliced taro and steamed.

Chicken (*ayam*) is tremendously popular in Malaysia and Singapore, but more of a special occasion meat in Brunei (as is beef or buffalo). Malay eateries offer a variety of chicken curries, and the meat regularly turns up on skewers, grilled and served with peanut sauce for satay. Another oft-enjoyed fowl is *itik* (duck), roasted and served over rice, simmered in star anise-scented broth and eaten with yellow *mee*, or stewed with aromatics for a spicy Indian-Muslim curry.

Tough local beef (*daging*) is best cooked long and slowly, for dishes like coconut milk-based *rendang*. Chinese-style beef noodles feature tender chunks of beef and springy meatballs in a rich, mildly spiced broth lightened with pickled mustard. Indian Muslims do amazing things with mutton; it's worth searching out *sup kambing*, stewed mutton riblets (and other parts, if you wish) in a thick soup, flavoured with loads of aromatics and chillies that's eaten with sliced white bread.

Vegetables

Vegetable lovers will have a field day. Every rice-based Malay meal includes *ulam*, a selection of fresh and blanched vegetables – wing beans, cucumbers, okra, eggplant and the fresh legume *petai* (or stink bean, so-named for its strong garlicky taste) – and fresh herbs to eat on their own or dip into sambal. Indians cook cauliflower and leafy vegetables such as cabbage, spinach and roselle (sturdy leaves with an appealing sourness) with coconut milk and turmeric. Other greens – *daun ubi* (sweet potato leaves), *kangkong* (water spinach), Chinese broccoli and yellow-flowered mustard – are stir-fried with sambal *belacan* or garlic. The humble jicama is particularly versatile; it's sliced and added raw to *rojak*; grated, steamed, and rolled into *popiah* (soft spring rolls), and mashed, formed into a cake and topped with deep-fried shallots and chillies for Chinese *oh kuih*. Sweet corn is plentiful, sold by vendors grilled or off-the-cob and steamed, at almost every night market.

Tau (soy beans) are consumed in many forms. Soy-milk lovers can indulge in the freshest of the fresh at Chinese wet markets, where a vendor selling deep-fried *crullers* (long fried-doughnut sticks) for dipping is never far away. *Dou fu* (soft fresh bean curd), eaten plain or doused with syrup, makes a great light snack. *Yong tauhu* is a healthy Hakka favourite of firm bean curd and vegetables like okra and eggplant stuffed with ground fish paste and served with chilli sauce. *Fucuk*, which is the chewy skin that forms on the surface of boiling soy milk, is fried golden or eaten fresh in noodle dishes, and absorbent deep-fried *tauhu pok* (bean curd 'puffs') are added to noodles and stews. Malays often cook with *tempeh*, a fermented soy bean cake with a nutty flavour, stir-frying it with *kecap manis*, lemongrass and chillies, and stewing it with vegetables in mild coconut gravy.

Cakes & Desserts

The locals are passionate about sweets; vendors of cakes and pastries lie in wait on street corners, footpaths and in markets. Many *kuih* incorporate coconut, grated or in the form of milk, and palm sugar; among the tastiest are *ketayap*, rice flour 'pancakes' rolled around a mix of the two, and *putu piring* (steamed rice flour 'flapjacks' filled with palm sugar and topped with coconut). Some *kuih* – such as *pulut panggang* (banana leaf-wrapped and grilled glutinous rice-and-coconut tubes filled with grated coconut, chopped dried chillies and dried shrimp) combine sweet and savoury flavours to fantastic effect.

Tong sui (the Chinese name for 'sweet soups'), such as sweet potato and sago pearls in a coconut milk-based broth, are reviving snacks. Perhaps the region's most beloved dessert is *cendol*, a heat-beating mound of shaved ice and chewy mung-bean-flour 'pasta' doused with fresh coconut milk and palm sugar syrup. ABC (for *ais batu campur* or 'mixed ice'), its more flamboyant

Malaysian English-language food 'zine *Flavours* produced three indispensable culinary guides: *Star Street Food Guide*, covering all of Malaysia, *Famous Street Food of Penang*, and the *Perak Good Food Guide*.

INTREPID EATING

Adventurous diners should seek out these specialties:

- *Perut ikan* – this Penang Nonya coconut-milk curry, made with fish innards, pineapple and fresh herbs, is spicy, sweet, sour and – yes – a little fishy.
- *Siat* – when stir-fried, plump sago grubs turn golden and crispy and boast a savoury fattiness recalling pork crackling.
- *Bak kut teh* – order this comforting stewed pork dish ‘with everything’ and be converted to porcine bits and bobs.
- *Sup torpedo* – Malay bull’s penis soup is – like many ‘challenging foods’ – said to enhance sexual drive.
- *Kerabu beromak* – on Langkawi, coconut milk, chillies and lime juice dress this ‘salad’ of rubbery but appealingly briny sea-cucumber slices.

cousin, is a hillock of shaved ice garnished with fluorescent-coloured (and mostly artificial-tasting) syrups, jellies, red beans, palm seeds and sweet corn. Don’t leave the region without investigating the colourful sub-continental *mithai* (sweets) stacked in Little India shop windows; our favourite is creamy, buttery – and, yes, tooth-achingly sweet – milk *halva*.

Fruits

Almost every tropical fruit under the sun can be found at one time of the year or another. Watermelon, pineapple, papaya, crispy sweet-sour guava, and juicy rose apples are year-round treats. *Kedondong* (ambarilla, a small green sour fruit with a single spiky seed), make refreshing juice. Keep an eye out for *ciku*, tan oval fruits whose golden flesh tastes like a honey date. Lychees, rambutan and longan – variations on a white-fleshed, single-seed, juicy and sweetly perfumed theme – are much prized. Try to get past jackfruit’s slightly off-putting musky odour, because its sweet flesh – particularly that of the orange-ish honey variety – hints at vanilla. Stinky durian is gag-inducing to some and manna from heaven to others.

DRINKS

Half the fun of taking breakfast in one of Singapore’s or Malaysia’s Little Indias is watching the tea *wallah* toss-pour an order of *teh tarik* (‘pulled’ tea) from one cup to the other. Locals love their leaves; tea is also brewed with ginger for *teh halia*, drunk hot or iced, with or without milk (*teh ais* or *teh-o ais*), and soured with lime juice (*teh limau*). For an especially rich cuppa head to an Indian cafe and ask for *teh susu kerabu*, hot tea with boiled fresh cow’s milk. *Kopi* (coffee) is also extremely popular, and the inky, thick brew owes its distinctive colour and flavour to the fact that its beans are roasted with sugar. *Kopi* is served in Chinese coffee shops (ask for *kopi-o* if you don’t want sweetened condensed milk in yours, *kopi gaw* if you want it especially strong, and *kopi bing* if you want it milky and iced) and is an excellent antidote to jet lag.

Caffeine-free alternatives include freshly squeezed or blended vegetable and fruit juices, sticky-sweet fresh sugar-cane juice (nice with a squeeze of calamansi), and *kelapa muda*, or young coconut water, drunk straight from the fruit with a straw. Other, more unusual drinks are *ee bee chui* (barley boiled with water, pandan leaf and rock sugar), *air mata kucing* (made with dried longan), and *cincau* or herbal grass jelly (if you ask for a ‘Michael Jackson’ yours will include a splash of soy milk). Chinese salted plums add an oddly refreshing dimension to sweetened lime juice, in *asam boi*.

Thanks to sky-high duties, alcohol is pricey in Singapore and Malaysia (and banned or, more accurately, limited to hotels and high-end restaurants in Brunei); for a cheap, boozy night out stick to locally brewed beers such as Tiger, Carlsberg and Guinness. Chinese stores stock a variety of less expensive and sometimes surprisingly palatable hard liquors.

NATIONAL & REGIONAL SPECIALITIES

For Brunei specialities see p584.

Malaysia

PENANG

This northwestern state is the region's gastronomic ground zero; KL residents have been known to make the four-hour drive for a single meal and hungry Singaporeans pack out hotels on weekends. Hawker food is a must. Other than *char kway teow*, don't-miss dishes include the laksa twins: *asam* (round rice noodles in a hot and sour fish gravy topped with slivered pineapple, cucumber, mint leaves and slightly astringent torch ginger flower) and *lemak* (with a coconut milk-based broth that's spicier and lighter than versions served in KL and Singapore). Search out also Hokkien *mee* (also known as prawn *mee*), which consists of rich pork and prawn stock with bean sprouts, sliced pork, shrimp and – if you order like a local – *meehoon* and yellow *mee* mixed.

Penang is home to *nasi kandar*, rice eaten with a variety of curries, a *mamak* (Indian Muslims, many of whom address their seniors with the term *mama*) speciality named after the *kandar* (shoulder pole) from which ambulant vendors once suspended their pots of rice and curry. *Mee goreng* (fried noodles) is served all over the region, but really finds its groove in the hands of Mamak wok jockeys, who make it smokier and spicier than elsewhere and often garnish their noodles with a mound of spicy sautéed squid.

Penang, along with Melaka and Singapore, is also known for its Nonya or Peranakan cuisine, a fusion of Chinese, Malay and Indian ingredients and cooking techniques born of intermarriage between Chinese immigrants and local women (*nonya* are the women descended from these marriages; their male counterparts are *baba*). Penang Nonya dishes, influenced by nearby Thailand, are spicier and tarter than those of Melaka and Singapore; examples are *kerabu beehoon*, rice vermicelli tossed with sambal and lime juice and garnished with fresh herbs, and *otak otak*, curried fish 'custard' steamed in a banana leaf.

PERLIS & KEDAH

Thai culinary influence extends to foods in Malaysia's west-coast states of Perlis and Kedah where fish sauce is as common a seasoning as *belacan*. Here, look for laksa *utara*, a lighter but still spicy and intensely fish-flavoured version of Penang's *asam* laksa. Further south is Ipoh, the mostly Chinese capital of Perak state and a town with a reputation for excellent eating. Pasta lovers rave over Ipoh's rice noodles, said to derive their exceptional silky smoothness from the town's water. Judge for yourself with the local version of Hainanese chicken – served with a side of barely blanched bean sprouts and noodles instead of rice – and *hor fun*, rice noodle soup with shredded chicken breast. Ipoh is also known for its 'white' coffee, made from beans roasted in butter or margarine; it's an exceptionally smooth brew, but be sure to order it at a bona fide old-style coffee shop or you're likely to end up with '3-in-1' coffee powder dissolved in hot water instead of the real thing.

KUALA LUMPUR & NEGERI SEMBILAN

Almost all of Malaysia's specialties can be found in KL, but two dishes in particular are more easily found here than elsewhere: *pan meen* (literally

Renowned Singaporean cook Irene Yeo never found time to write a cookbook. Luckily, her daughter has assembled 100 of her most scrumptious recipes into a slim volume called *Irene's Peranakan Recipes*.

The author of this chapter teams with a professional photographer to publish EatingAsia (<http://eatingasia.typepad.com>), a food blog on Southeast Asian street foods, ingredients and culinary culture, focusing on Malaysia.

'board noodles'), thick and chewy wheat noodles tossed with dark soy and garnished with chopped pork, *ikan bilis*, and shredded cloud ear mushrooms; and *sang har meen* ('fresh sea noodles'), huge freshwater prawns in gravy flavoured with rice wine and prawn fat served over crispy noodles. Klang, a port city an hour south of KL, is home to *bak kut teh*, a truly comforting stew made with pork, garlic, dark soy sauce, and Chinese medicinal herbs; the dish is eaten with rice, Chinese *crullers* and pot after pot of tea (to dissolve the fat, or so locals say). Further south in Negeri Sembilan state, descendants of Minangkabau who immigrated from the Indonesian island of Sumatra hundreds of years ago dish up a mean *nasi padang* – rice accompanied by a parade of fiery curries, *gulai* (fish and vegetables cooked in mild coconut milk gravy), soups and sambals.

MELAKA

There's more Nonya delights to be had in Melaka – think *ayam pong teh* (chicken cooked with *taucu*, dark soy sauce and sugar) and *ikan cili garam* (fish curry) – as well as local specialties of indeterminate origin like satay *celup* (skewered meat, seafood, and vegetables cooked at the table in a tub of peanut-based sauce) and Hainanese chicken served with rice moulded into balls. Often overlooked here is Cristang cuisine, the edible result of intermarriage between Portuguese colonisers and local women and an intriguing blend of Chinese/Peranakan, Indian, Malay and, of course, European ingredients. Its standard bearer is *debal* (devil's curry), a chilli-laden stew flavoured with turmeric and mustard seeds and soured with wine vinegar. A few eateries in Melaka's small Portuguese settlement specialising in *ikan bakar* (grilled fish slathered with sambal) offer Cristang dishes; also check menus at Melaka's many Nonya eateries.

JOHOR

Johor state boasts two tasty Malay noodle specialties: *mee bandung*, yellow noodles topped with a zippy, tomatoey shrimp gravy, and *mee rebus*, the same type of noodles doused with a sweet-savoury sauce thickened with sweet potatoes. The state also has its own variation on the laksa theme, consisting of spaghetti in a thin spicy fish gravy topped with chopped fresh herbs. The small town of Muar is known for *otak otak*, which is nothing like the identically named Penang Nonya dish; here it takes the form of chilli-spiked fish 'sausage' wrapped in banana leaf and grilled.

KELANTAN & TERENGGANU

If you really want to explore Malay cuisine the best place to be is the peninsular east coast. Kelantan state's capital Kota Bharu boasts Malaysia's most beautiful wet market, as well as plenty of places to try specialties like *ayam percik* (chilli paste-marinated chicken, grilled and doused with coconut sauce) and visually arresting *nasi kerabu*, rice tinted blue with natural colouring

'Ketchup' is derived from the Hokkien word *ke-tsiap*, which is a fermented fish sauce brought by Chinese traders to Melaka, where it was encountered by Europeans.

Celine Marbeck's *Cuzinhia Cristang* weaves history and anecdotes with wonderful recipes to tell the story of this sadly disappearing Melakan Eurasian cuisine.

A DISH BY ANY OTHER NAME

In Singapore 'laksa' is a bowl of noodles in coconut curry soup; in Malaysia it could be one of several varieties of noodle. In Penang Hokkien *mee* is a spicy noodle soup with bean sprouts, pork and prawns, but elsewhere in Malaysia it's a mound of thick stir-fried noodles with pork and cabbage in a dark soy sauce. For Indians *apam* is a rice-flour pancake to eat with coconut-and-chilli chutney, while for Chinese it's a spongy griddled cake filled with ground peanuts and sugar. And while *otak otak* is a barbecue-charred, chilli-spiked fish sausage in southern Malaysia, up north on Penang it's a fish custard steamed in banana leaf.

obtained from dried pea flowers, topped with bean sprouts, a lively mixture of chopped herbs, *kerisik*, and sambal. *Kao yam*, a *nasi kerabu* variation, boasts rice coloured green with pandan leaves, tossed with *budu*, raw vegetables and shredded mackerel. The local congee is *nasi air*, a breakfast dish of beef-based rice soup enhanced with cardamom, cinnamon, and coriander seeds and loads of fresh herbs. *Laksam*, the Kelantanese take on laksa, combines fantastically toothsome wide, flat rice noodles doused with *budu*-spiked coconut milk and topped with bean sprouts and herbs. In Terengganu state, a vendor dishing up mounds of red rice signals *nasi dagang*. The slightly nut-flavoured grain is cooked with coconut water and eaten with fried chicken and sambal – essentially *nasi lemak*, Terengganu style. Graze the east coast long enough and you may develop a few cavities; local cooks excel at making all manner of *kuih* and even savoury dishes have a noticeably sweet edge.

SARAWAK & SABAH

Laksa is breakfast food in Sarawak, where residents wake up with spicy, coconut-rich curry soup packed with rice vermicelli, omelette strips, chicken and prawns (truth be told, Sarawak laksa is Malaysia's tastiest). Another popular noodle dish is *kolok mee*, a Hokkien creation of chewy noodles drizzled with lard oil and soy and topped with chopped and sliced barbecued pork. Sarawak's highlanders specialise in dishes cooked in bamboo, such as the chicken dish *ayam pansoh* (a special occasion dish of chicken wrapped in tapioca leaves and cooked with water inside a length of bamboo). Don't leave the area without purchasing some of Sarawak's famed highland rice as a souvenir.

Sabah is home to *midin* (also called 'Sabah veggie'), a sweet green stalk with a whiff of asparagus flavour that's fantastic stir-fried. If you're in Kota Kinabalu, consider splurging on a meal of bounty from the South China Sea, chosen by your own self from a fish tank and cooked to order at one of the city's many seafood restaurants. Two other piscine specialties deserve mention: *umai* (also called *hinava*, and found in Sarawak as well), raw fish seasoned simply with lime juice, coconut milk and chillies, and noodles made of fish paste, served in a magnificent seafood broth with fish balls and chunks of sea bass. For more about Sabah specialities see p350.

Singapore

Singapore's culinary landscape is a near replica of Malaysia's, but in miniature; much of what you eat in the former can be had in the latter and vice versa. Still, Singaporeans do lay special claim to a few dishes – such as crab stir-fried with black pepper and fried carrot cake (squares of radish-flour cake stir-fried with bean sprouts, chilli sauce and salted radish) – that just seem to taste best when prepared at one of the city-state's many squeaky-clean hawker stalls. *Kari kepala ikan* (fish-head curry) was allegedly invented by a Singaporean-Indian cook playing to the Chinese love of fish cheeks. Made with the head and shoulders of large fish such as red snapper or garoupa, the dish is a magnificent melange of fiery chillies, fragrant dry spices, tart tamarind, and unctuous coconut milk. Singaporeans love their *roti prata* (the equivalent of Malaysia's *roti canai*) for breakfast, and have their own version of laksa – called simply 'laksa' – noodles in a prawn and coconut milk-based, highly spiced soup.

If you're looking to splash out you've come to the right place; Singapore's high-end dining scene is second to none in Southeast Asia. Whether you're hankering for handmade papardelle, steak frites, sparkingly fresh sashimi or a molecular gastronomic morsel quick-frozen in liquid nitrogen and bedecked with foam, you'll find it in a posh restaurant there. The city-state's drinks scene is quite happening as well; there's even a restaurant that specialises in pairing cocktails with food.

The forum on makanutra.com is the go to for local recommendations on where to find the best edible everything in Singapore.

FESTIVALS & CELEBRATIONS

As might be expected of a people consumed with food and its pleasures, Singaporeans, Malaysians and Bruneians mark every special occasion with celebratory edibles.

In the weeks leading to Chinese New Year, friends, colleagues and families gather over endless banquets. Every table is graced with *yue sang* (*yee sang* or *yu sheng* – ‘fresh fish’), a mound of grated raw vegetables, pickles, pomelo pieces and crispy fried dough pieces topped with sliced raw fish. Diners mix the dish together with their chopsticks, lifting the ingredients high while shouting ‘*Lo hei!*’, Cantonese for ‘tossing luck’. Other foods to keep an eye out for at this time of year are pineapple tarts, *nga ku* (deep-fried arrowroot slices, tastier than potato chips), and glutinous rice cakes wrapped in banana leaf (*ti kuih*) that are often sliced, layered with taro and sweet potato, and deep-fried.

During Ramadan special food markets swing into action in the late afternoons, offering a wide variety of Malay treats. As not all vendors are professionals, this is a good opportunity to try Malay foods cooked in home kitchens.

During Deepavali (Diwali), the Indian Festival of Lights, make your way to a Little India, where you’ll find stalls selling textiles and household goods, but also special mithai such as *jalebi* (deep-fried fritters soaked in sugar syrup) made on the spot, and savoury snacks like *muruku* (crispy fried coils of rice leaf-studded dough).

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

Many locals would argue that the best (and best-value) food is found at hawker stalls, and who are we to argue? Most of these dishes can’t be found in restaurants and when they are, they’re rarely as tasty, so hawker stall dining is a must if you really want to appreciate the region’s cuisines in all their glory. To partake, simply head to a stand-alone streetside kitchen-on-wheels, coffee shop, or food court (hawker food in Malaysia and Brunei is perfectly safe to eat, but the squeamish may want to start slowly, in one of Singapore’s sanitised hawker centres). Place your order with one or a number of different vendors, find a seat (shared tables are common), and pay for each dish as it’s delivered. After you’re seated you’ll be approached by someone taking orders for drinks, which are also paid for separately.

Kopitiam generally refers to old-style, single-owner Chinese coffee shops. These simple fan-cooled establishments serve noodle and rice dishes, strong coffee and other drinks, and all-day breakfast fare like soft-boiled eggs and toast to eat with *kaya* (coconut jam).

Restoran (restaurant) applies to eateries ranging from casual, decades-old Chinese establishments to upscale establishments boasting international fare, slick decor and a full bar. Between the two extremes lie Chinese seafood restaurants where the main course can be chosen live from a tank, as well as the numerous cafes found in Malaysia’s many shopping malls.

The married duo behind website Chubby Hubby (www.chubbyhubby.net/blog) keep readers up-to-date on Singapore’s evolving upscale dining scene, with a dash of hawker and *kopitiam* reviews thrown in for good measure.

WESTERN CONNECTION

Don’t be surprised to find chops and mushroom soup sharing space with *belacan* fried rice on Singaporean and Malaysian *kopitiam* menus. Introduced to the region by the British but popularised in the early 20th century by the Hainanese immigrants who worked as their cooks and later opened their own restaurants, Western classics like pork chops with roast potatoes and fish and chips are considered local comfort foods. The best versions, usually found in *kopitiam* that predate the end of colonisation, are deliciously authentic to origin.

MOTO ROTI SELLER: NYAMBAR

Motorcycles toting packaged roti (breads and buns), biscuits, sweets, and other edibles are a common sight on Malaysian and Singaporean roadways. We caught up with moto driver Nyambar at a roti depot on the outskirts of KL.

How old are you, and how long have you been a moto roti vendor? I'm 25. Been selling for more than six years.

How did you get your job? My father does the same thing. After I saved for a motorcycle he introduced me to the man who supplies us with roti.

What do you sell? And what's your most popular item? Everything. Breads, *kuih* (sweets), some fruit. *Minum* (drinks) from my cooler. Roti goes first, then fruit.

Do you have a fixed route? Of course. We all keep to one route. I go to building sites. Sometimes I sell to road workers too.

What time do you get off work? And when's your off day? When all is finished I go home. Sometimes I'm out all day, sometimes only seven hours. No regular off day, *lah!* Public holidays only, because there's no building on public holidays.

Consider grazing at one or more *pasar* (markets). Morning markets usually have Chinese-owned stalls selling coffee (a *cruller* maker will be nearby) and Indian-operated *teh tarik* stalls offering freshly griddled roti. Triangular *bungkus* (packages) piled in the middle of tables contain *nasi lemak*; help yourself and pay for what you eat. *Pasar malam* (night markets) are also good hunting grounds, where you'll find everything from laksa to fresh-fried sweet yeast donuts.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Given the inclusion of shrimp paste and other seafood products in many dishes, vegetarians and vegans may find it difficult to negotiate their way around many a menu. Chinese vegetarian restaurants and hawker stalls are a safe bet (signage will include the words '*sayur sayuran*'); they're especially busy on the first and fifteenth of the lunar month, when many Buddhists adopt a vegetarian diet for 24 hours. Look also for Chinese stalls and eateries displaying rows of stainless steel pans and advertising 'economy rice'; some of these are pure veg every day. South Indian restaurants are another haven, for snacks like *idli* to eat with dhal, *dosa* (crispy pancakes sometimes filled with potato curry), and thali (full meals consisting of rice or bread with numerous small servings of curries and vegetables). Some offer vegetarian banana leaf rice meals and economy rice-like displays of varied 'meat' and 'fish' dishes made with gluten and soy.

EATING WITH KIDS

Those travelling with young ones will find the wide selection of dishes on offer at hawker centres and food courts to be the perfect way to satisfy fussy palates. If familiar flavours are in order, head to one of the many Western fast-food outlets that have cropped up in every corner of the region. The locals love kids and will go to lengths to make them happy so unless you're heading for the poshest white-tablecloth establishment in town your children are likely to be welcomed with open arms.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

To those of us used to 'three squares' it might seem as if Malaysians, Singaporeans and Bruneians never stop eating. In fact, five or six meals and snacks is more the order of the day than strict adherence to the breakfast-lunch-dinner trilogy. And except for maybe toast and soft-boiled eggs and dim sum, what's eaten for breakfast can often be eaten for dinner and vice versa.

'Laksa' is derived from '*laksha*', the original Persian word for noodle. It's believed that Arab or Indian Muslim traders introduced pasta to Malaysia in the 13th century.

DINING DOS & DON'TS

If eating with your hands:

- Wash your hands first; in Malay restaurants use water from the 'teapot' on the table while holding your fingers over the tray.
- Use only your right hand, and scoop food up with your fingers.
- Serve yourself from the communal plate with utensils, never your fingers.

Don't make these mistakes:

- Don't offer alcohol or pork to Muslims (and don't mention pork to Muslims).
- Don't stick your chopsticks upright in a bowl of rice; it symbolises death to Chinese.

When the Portuguese conquered Melaka with a fleet launched from Goa they brought along vindaloo, which morphed into the Cristang speciality *debal*.

Friedchillies.com is a goldmine of unbiased information – in the form of a lively forum, focused articles and videos – on Malaysian food and eateries.

The first meal is often taken on the run, something quick like *nasi lemak*, *roti canai*, or toast and eggs. In fact, almost any hawker food can be purchased *ta pao* (to go); it's not unusual to see customers toting an order (or five) of noodles apportioned into separate bags of starch, soup and veggie. Come late morning a snack is in order – perhaps a *karipap* (deep-fried pastry filled with spiced meat) or a *kuih*. Lunch begins around 12.30pm, something to keep in mind if you plan to eat at a popular establishment.

The British left behind a strong attachment to afternoon tea, consumed here in the form of tea or coffee and a sweet or savoury snack such as *tong sui*, various Indian fritters, battered and fried slices of cassava, sweet potato, and banana and – of course – *kuih*. Mamak stalls and hawker areas see a jump in business a few hours after dinner as locals head out in search of a treat to tide them over until morning.

Fork and spoon are the cutlery of choice, except in Western-oriented establishments or *kopitiam* serving chops and fish and chips, where you might get a knife too. Don't put the fork in your mouth, but use it to gently nudge food onto your spoon. Chinese noodles and dishes served in Chinese restaurants are usually eaten with chopsticks (though fork and spoon are available on request). Malays and Indians eat rice-based meals with their right hand only, using thumb to manoeuvre rice onto the balls of the fingers and then into the mouth. (This is easier done if you moisten your rice with curries and side dishes and mash the lot together.) Wash your hands before and after with water from the teapot-like container on the table (Malay eateries) or at a communal sink at the side or rear of the room. Napkins are a rarity so it's always a good idea to carry a pack of tissues.

In some Chinese eateries you'll be given a basin of hot water containing saucers, chopsticks, bowls and cutlery. This is meant to allow for hygiene concerns; remove the items and dry them off or shake them dry.

EAT YOUR WORDS**Useful Phrases**

These Malay phrases may help in off-the-beaten track eating adventures – at most places in the region English will be understood. For guidelines on pronunciation see p606.

Where's a ... ?

restaurant
hawker centre

Can I see the menu?

I'd like ...

What's in this dish?

... *di mana?*

Kedai makan

Pusat penjaja

Minta senarai makanan?

Saya mau ...

Ini termasuk apa?

Not too spicy, please.
I like it hot and spicy!
The bill/check, please.
Thank you, that was delicious.
I don't want any meat at all.
I'm a vegetarian.

Kurang pedas.
Saya suka pedas lagi!
Minta bon.
Sedap sekali, terima kasih.
Saya tak mau daging.
Saya hanya makan sayuran.

Food Glossary

achar	vegetable and/or fruit pickle
ais kacang	dessert of ice shavings topped with syrups, coconut milk, red beans, seeds and jelly
aloo gobi	Indian potato-and-cauliflower dish
ambuyat	whitish paste made from sago flour eaten with curries and side dishes
ayam	chicken
ayam goreng	fried chicken
bak chang	rice dumpling filled with savoury or sweet meat and wrapped in leaves
bak kut teh	pork ribs and parts stewed with garlic and Chinese medicinal herbs (Malaysia) or garlic and white pepper (Singapore)
belacan	fermented prawn paste
belacan kangkong	water convolvulus stir-fried in prawn paste
bhindi	okra (lady's fingers)
biryani	steamed basmati rice oven-baked with spices and meat, seafood or vegetables
brinjal	aubergine (eggplant)
carrot cake	firm radish cake cubed and stir-fried with egg, garlic, chilli, soy sauce, and bean sprouts; also known as <i>chye tow kway</i>
cendol	dessert of shaved ice and mung-bean-flour 'pasta' doused with coconut milk and liquid palm sugar
chapati	griddle-fried wholewheat bread
char kway teow	wide rice noodles stir-fried with cockles, prawns, Chinese sausage, eggs, bean sprouts, and soy and chilli sauces
char siew	sweet and sticky barbecued pork fillet
char yoke	crispy-skinned roasted pork fillet
chicken-rice	steamed chicken, served with rice boiled or steamed in chicken stock, slices of cucumber and a chilli-ginger sauce
chilli padi	extremely hot small chilli
choi sum	popular Chinese green vegetable, served steamed with oyster sauce
claypot rice	rice cooked in a clay pot with chicken, mushroom, Chinese sausage and soy sauce
congee	Chinese porridge
daun kunyit	turmeric leaf
daun pisang	banana leaf, often used as a plate in Malaysia
daun salam	leaves used much like bay leaves in cooking
dhal	dish of puréed lentils
dim sum	sweet and savoury minidishes served at breakfast and lunch; also known as <i>dian xin</i> or <i>yum cha</i>
dosa	large, light, crispy pancake
dow see	fermented, salted black beans
fish sauce	liquid made from fermented anchovies and salt
fish-head curry	head and 'shoulders' of large fish such as red snapper in curry sauce; also known as <i>kepala ikan</i>

gado gado	cold dish of bean sprouts, potatoes, long beans, bean curd, rice cakes and prawn crackers, topped with a spicy peanut sauce
galangal	ginger-like root used to flavour various dishes
garam masala	sweet, mild mixture of freshly ground spices
garoupa	white fish popular in Southeast Asia
ghee	clarified butter
gingko nut	meaty nut used in soups and desserts or roasted and chopped for sauces, salads and meat dishes
gula jawa	brown palm-sugar sold in thin blocks
halal	food prepared according to Muslim dietary laws
hoisin sauce	thick sweet-spicy sauce made from soya beans, red beans, sugar, flour, vinegar, salt, garlic, sesame, chillies and spices
Hokkien mee	yellow noodles fried with sliced meat, boiled squid, prawns and strips of fried egg; in Penang, hot and spicy prawn and pork noodle soup
idli	steamed rice cake
ikan asam	fried fish in sour tamarind curry
ikan bilis	small deep-fried anchovies
kangkong	water convolvulus; thick-stemmed type of spinach
kari ayam	curried chicken
kecap	soy sauce
keema	spicy minced meat
kepala ikan	fish head, usually in curry or grilled
kofta	minced-meat or vegetable ball
kopi-o	black coffee
korma	mild Indian curry with yoghurt sauce
kueh melayu	sweet pancakes filled with peanuts, raisins and sugar
kueh mueh	Malay cakes
kway teow	broad rice-noodles
laksa	noodles in a spicy coconut soup with bean sprouts, quail eggs, prawns, shredded chicken and dried bean curd; also called Nonya laksa to differentiate it from Penang laksa (or <i>asam</i> laksa), a version that has a prawn paste and tamarind-flavoured gravy
lassi	yoghurt-based drink
lombok	type of hot chilli
lontong	rice cakes in spicy coconut-milk gravy topped with grated coconut and, sometimes, bean curd and egg
lor mee	noodles with slices of meat, eggs and a dash of vinegar in a dark brown sauce
masala dosa	thin pancake rolled around spicy vegetables with <i>rasam</i> on the side
mee	noodles
mee goreng	fried noodles
mee pok	flat noodles made with egg and wheat
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
murtabak	<i>roti canai</i> filled with pieces of mutton, chicken or vegetables
naan	tear-shaped leavened bread baked in a clay oven
nasi	rice
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 goreng	fried rice
nasi lemak	rice boiled in coconut milk, served with <i>ikan bilis</i> , peanuts and a curry dish

nasi padang	Malay rice and accompanying meat and vegetable dishes
pakora	vegetable fritter
pan meen	wide, thick wheat noodles tossed with dark soy and topped with ground pork, <i>ikan bilis</i> and shredded cloud ear mushrooms
pappadam	Indian cracker
phrik	chillies
pilau	rice fried in ghee and mixed with nuts, then cooked in stock
pisang goreng	banana fritter
popiah	similar to a spring roll, but not fried
pudina	mint sauce
raita	side dish of cucumber, yoghurt and mint
rasam	spicy soup
rendang	spicy coconut curry with beef or chicken
rijsttafel	literally 'rice table'; a buffet of Indonesian dishes
rogan josh	stewed mutton in a rich sauce
rojak	salad doused in a peanut-sauce dressing that may contain shrimp paste
roti canai	unleavened flaky bread cooked with ghee on a hotplate; eaten dipped in dhal or curry; also known as <i>paratha</i> or <i>roti prata</i>
saag	spicy chopped-spinach dish
sambal	sauce of chilli, onions and prawn paste that has been fried
sambal udang	hot curried prawns
sambar	fiery mixture of vegetables, lentils and split peas
samosa	pastry filled with vegetables or meat
santan	coconut milk
satay	pieces of chicken, beef or mutton that are skewered and grilled
Sichuan	region in south central China famous for its spicy cuisine
soto ayam	spicy chicken soup with vegetables and potatoes
steamboat	meat, seafood and vegetables cooked at the table by being dipped into a pot of boiling clear stock
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
tauhu goreng	fried bean curd and bean sprouts in peanut sauce
teh kosong	tea without milk or sugar
teh tarik	tea made with evaporated milk, which is literally pulled or stretched (<i>tarik</i>) from one glass to another
teh-o	tea without milk
tikka	small pieces of meat or fish served off the bone and marinated in yoghurt before baking
tom yam	tomato-red hot-and-sour spicy seafood soup
umai	raw fish marinated and served with onions
won ton mee	soup dish with shredded chicken or braised beef
yong dou fu	bean curd stuffed with minced meat
you char kway	baton-shaped deep-fried <i>cruller</i> eaten for breakfast, as a snack, or with <i>bak kut teh</i> and congee/porridge
yu tiao	deep-fried pastry eaten for breakfast or as a dessert
yu yuan mian	fish-ball soup

Environment

THE LAND

Malaysia

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 Asia as if pointing towards Indonesia and Australia. Much of the peninsula is covered by dense jungle, particularly its mountainous, thinly populated northern half. On the western side of the peninsula there is a long, fertile plain running down to the sea, while on the eastern side the mountains descend more steeply and the coast is fringed with sandy beaches.

The other part of the country, comprising more than 50% of its area, is Malaysian Borneo – the northern part of the island of Borneo (the larger, southern part is the Indonesian state of Kalimantan). Malaysian Borneo is divided into the states of Sarawak and Sabah, with Brunei a small enclave between them. Both states are covered by dense jungle, with many large river systems, particularly in Sarawak. Mt Kinabalu (4095m) in Sabah is Malaysia's highest mountain.

Singapore

Singapore consists of the main, low-lying Singapore island and 63 much smaller islands within its territorial waters. It is situated just above 1° north in latitude, a mere 137km north of the equator. Singapore island is 42km long and 23km wide; with the other islands, the republic has a total landmass of 700 sq km (and this is growing through land reclamation).

In the centre of Singapore island, Bukit Timah (162m) is the nation's highest point. This central area is an igneous outcrop, containing most of Singapore's remaining forest and open areas. The western part of the island is a sedimentary area of low-lying hills and valleys, while the southeast is mostly flat and sandy. The undeveloped northern coast and the offshore islands are home to some mangrove forest.

Brunei

The sultanate covers just 5765 sq km (the Brunei government-owned cattle farm in Australia is larger than this!). It has no mountain ranges or great rivers, and at its widest the country's larger, western part measures only 120km from side to side. White sandy beaches along the coast give way to low hills rising to around 300m in the interior. The capital, Bandar Seri Begawan, overlooks the estuary of the mangrove-fringed Sungai Brunei (Brunei River), which opens onto Brunei Bay and the separate, eastern part of the country, Temburong. This sparsely populated area of largely unspoilt rainforest consists of a coastal plain drained by Sungai Temburong and rises to a height of 1850m at Bukit Pagon, the highest peak in the country. Western Brunei is divided into the three administrative districts of Brunei-Muara, Tutong and Belait. Approximately 75% of Brunei retains its original forest cover.

WILDLIFE

Malaysia is one of the world's so-called 'mega-diversity' areas. The country's jungle, believed to be 130 million years old and according to government figures covering around 70% of the country, supports a staggering amount of life: around 14,500 species of flowering plant and tree, 210 species of mammal, 600 species of bird, 150 species of frog, 80 species of lizard and thousands of types of insect. Although vast areas of forest have been cleared,

Ria Tan's site Wild Singapore (www.wildsingapore.com) is a blog and a wonderful resource about wildlife and wildlife-related projects in the region.

Pulau Ubin and Chek Jawa by Chua Ee Kiam are illustrated with beautiful photographs by Kiam, a dentist who has become one of Singapore's most high-profile environmental activists.

WWF-Malaysia (www.malaysia.org) is one of the country's leading conservation organisations, running more than 50 projects, from saving endangered species to protecting the natural environment.

some magnificent stands remain mostly protected by a nationwide system of reserves and parks (p78). With patience and some luck, you may encounter the following animals, birds and reptiles in their natural habitat.

Animals

APES & MONKEYS

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. Captive orang-utans can be viewed at Sabah's Sepilok Orang-Utan Rehabilitation Centre (p375), the Semenggoh Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre (p428) in Sarawak and the Singapore Zoo (p504).

More closely related to apes than monkeys, the tailless and shy gibbons live in the trees, where they feed on fruits such as figs. Their raucous hooting – one of the most distinctive sounds of the Malaysian jungle – helps gibbons establish territories and find mates. Several species inhabit large stands of forest in Peninsular Malaysia and in Borneo.

Malaysia has 10 species of monkey, divided into langurs and macaques. Langurs (leaf monkeys) are mostly tree-dwelling, while pugnacious macaques are 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.

The proboscis monkey is a type of langur and is probably Malaysia's second-most-famous animal, after the orang-utan. The male is an improbable-looking creature with a pendulous nose and bulbous belly; females and youngsters are more daintily built, with quaint, upturned noses. Proboscis monkeys inhabit only the forests of Borneo, where they live almost entirely on leaves. The Sungai Kinabatangan (p379) in Sabah is the best place to look for these monkeys, although there are also colonies in Bako National Park (p423) in Sarawak, and in Brunei.

The beautiful silvered leaf monkey is a langur whose fur is frosted with grey tips; observe it at Taman Alam Kuala Selangor (p141) and at Bako National Park (p423).

CATS & CIVETS

In 2004 research proved that the Malayan Tiger – as depicted on the Malaysian coat of arms and only found on the Malay Peninsula – is considered a subspecies of the Indo-Chinese tiger. The exact population is unknown but is considered by the WWF to be around 500, the vast majority of which are found in the states of Pahang, Perak, Terengganu and Kelantan. Hunting and encroachments on their natural habitat by logging operations have put the species under threat.

In March 2009 a proposal to create a 40-hectare tiger park on Penang drew criticism from the Malaysian Conservation Alliance for Tigers, who pointed out that the island had no record of the animals ever having lived there and that the project would very likely undermine government commitments to protect jungle corridors in order to double the wild tiger population to 1000 by 2020.

Species of leopard including the black panther and the rare clouded leopard are found in Malaysia, as well as smaller species of wild cats, such as the bay cat, a specialised fish-eater, and the leopard cat, which is a bit larger than a domestic cat but with spotted fur.

You may also spot various species of civet cat, a separate family of predators with vaguely catlike features but longer snouts and shaggier coats.

The Orangutan Foundation (www.orangutan.org.uk) supports conservation projects in Malaysia.

The pig-tailed macaque, with golden-brown fur and a tail that is merely a dangling stump, is sometimes trained to pick coconuts.

Find out all about the Malayan Tiger at www.malayantiger.net, the website of the Malaysian Conservation Alliance for Tigers (MYCAT).

The Clouded Leopard Project (<http://cloudedleopard.org>) has funded several conservation efforts on Malaysian Borneo for this beautiful animal that may be rarer than the Malayan tiger.

The Kuala Gandah Elephant Conservation Centre (p303) is the place to learn more about the elephant's plight and see some of the magnificent animals.

BATS

Malaysia has more than 100 species of bat, most of which are tiny, insectivorous (insect-eating) species that live in caves and under eaves and bark. Fruit bats (flying foxes) are only distantly related to insectivorous bats; unlike them they have well-developed eyes and do not navigate by echolocation. There are fruit bats in Taman Negara (p294) and Deer Cave in Gunung Mulu National Park (p452) in Sarawak, where several million insectivorous bats stream out at dusk.

BIRDS

There's excellent bird-watching within a day's travel of Kuala Lumpur; prime locations include Taman Negara (p294), Fraser's Hill (p134) and Taman Alam Kuala Selangor (p141), where you may spot the secretive mangrove pitta, the stately crested serpent eagle and various species of kingfisher.

Both Sabah and Sarawak have fantastic bird-watching, including some 38 species found nowhere else. Good locations include Gunung Mulu National Park (p452), Mt Kinabalu (p363), Sungai Kinabatangan (p379) and the Danum Valley (p384).

Species to keep an eye out for include brilliantly coloured pittas, trogons, jungle flycatchers, bulbuls, bat hawks, hornbills and the Bornean bristlehead.

In Singapore the Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve (p505) is home to 140 species of bird.

LAST CHANCE TO SEE...

Habitat loss has placed several of the region's animals in serious danger of extinction. Apart from the orang-utan (p75), tiger (p75) and giant leatherback turtle (opposite), the following are among those most at risk:

- Asian elephant – In 2009 there was great excitement at the announcement that a population of 631 elephants had been found living in Taman Negara (p294). This doesn't detract from the fact that the elephant is highly endangered. Protecting elephants helps safeguard thousands of other species within its habitat since the animals create vital natural pathways by knocking over trees, allowing smaller species to feed, as well as dispersing plant seeds in its dung. However, due to habitat loss, elephants are forced to hunt for food in areas surrounding forests such as plantations, where they raid crops on a massive scale. This leads to them either being shot by farmers or simply dying of starvation.
- Dugong – Found off the coast of Sabah and in the area between Johor and Singapore, these rare herbivorous marine mammals can consume as much as 30kg of seagrasses a day. Their survival is, however, threatened by the destruction of the seagrass beds as well as them getting caught up in fishing nets and being hunted.
- Pangolin – Also known as the scaly anteater, the pangolin feeds exclusively on ants and termites and is best known for its tactic of curling up into a ball to escape threats. Pangolin meat is considered a delicacy in the region and its scales are also a popular ingredient in Chinese medicine, causing a lucrative trade in smuggling the creatures out of Malaysia.
- Sumatran rhinoceros – These are found mainly in isolated areas of Sabah and Endau-Rompin National Park (p269) on the peninsula. In Sabah a 2005 report conducted by the WWF found evidence of just 13 of these animals. Since they need at least 10 sq km of rainforest in which to roam, their chance of survival is slim, especially given the rate at which such forest is disappearing. To find out about the project SOS Rhino: Borneo go to www.sosrhino.org/programs/index.php.
- Malayan Tapir – Deforestation is also endangering this extraordinary animal that looks like a cross between a wild pig and a hippo. Growing up to 2m in length and weighing some 300kg, they are herbivorous and are sometimes seen at the salt licks in the further reaches of Taman Negara (p294). For more information see www.tapirs.org.

DON'T DISTURB THE TURTLES

If you're fortunate enough to be around when a turtle is laying its eggs, take the following steps to ensure that the creature is disturbed as little as possible:

- Stay at least 10m away from any turtle crawling up the beach.
- Don't use torches (flashlights) or camera flashes.
- Sit and wait patiently for the turtle to crawl to the top of the dunes – do not impede her. It may be many hours before she is ready to lay eggs.
- Resist the temptation to take flash photos of hatchlings making their way to the ocean.

REPTILES

Some 250 species of reptile have been recorded, including 140 species of snake. Most snakes are inoffensive, but all should be treated with caution, because if you are bitten by a dangerous one you may find yourself far from help (see p604 for details of what to do if this happens).

Pythons are sometimes seen in national parks and one, the reticulated python, is reputed to grow to 10m in length. Several species of flying snake inhabit the rainforests; they don't literally fly, but glide from trees by extending a flap of loose skin along either side of their bodies. There are also 'flying' lizards and frogs.

The reptile you're most likely to see is the monitor lizard. These carrion-eaters are especially easy to spot on island beaches – Pulau Perhentian Besar (p319) is home to several monsters close to 2m in length. Although they look scary, they generally shy away from humans, unlike their close relative the Komodo dragon.

TURTLES

Of the world's seven species of turtle, four are native to Malaysia. The hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) and the green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) both have nesting areas within Sabah's Turtle Islands National Park (p379).

Olive ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) and giant leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*) turtles, together with the first two, nest on Peninsular Malaysia's east coast. Unfortunately, all four are currently endangered, with leatherback numbers having fallen a staggering 98% since the 1950s; sightings of them are now incredibly rare. It's believed the drop is the result of decades of accidental capture in drift nets, turtle-egg harvesting and marine pollution. Biologists estimate that around one turtle hatchling in every thousand survives the 35 to 50 years it takes to reach maturity; turtle populations simply can't survive years of near-complete egg harvest. See p316 for details of the Ma' Daerah Turtle Sanctuary and sign up for the WWF's Egg = Life campaign at www.saveturtles.my.

While the collection and sale of leatherback eggs have been banned since 1988, in coastal markets it's common to see hundreds of eggs of the smaller green, hawksbill and olive ridley turtles, all of which have seen a marked decline in their populations. It may seem like an uphill battle, but there are some things you can do to help protect these magnificent creatures, such as not buying turtle eggs, turtle meat or anything made from turtle shell.

The turtle's egg-laying process is amazing. After crawling well up the beach, each female leatherback (who can weigh up to 750kg and reach up to 2m in length) digs a deep hole in the sand for her eggs. Into this cavity the turtle, with much huffing and puffing, lays between 50 and 140 eggs. Having covered them, she heads back towards the water. It all takes an enormous effort, and the turtle will pause to catch her breath several times. Back in the water, this heavy, ungainly creature glides off silently into the night.

A Field Guide to the Mammals of Borneo by Junaidi Payne, Charles M Francis and Karen Phillipps and *Pocket Guide to the Birds of Borneo* are both excellent references for travelling naturalists.

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.

Tropical Marine Life of Malaysia & Singapore, Tropical Birds of Malaysia & Singapore, Tropical Fruits 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.

Plants

The wet, tropical climate of this region produces an amazing range of flora, some unique to the area, such as certain species of orchid and pitcher plants as well as the parasitic rafflesia, which produces the world's largest flower, growing up to 1m across (see p432). The dense rainforest that once covered large swathes of both the peninsula and Borneo has been cleared to make way for vast plantations of oil palms (see below) and other cash crops – what's left is now usually preserved in national parks and other reserves.

A single hectare of rainforest (or dipterocarp forest) can support many species of tree, plus a vast diversity of other plants, including many thousands of species of orchid, fungi, fern and moss – some of them epiphytes (plants that grow on other plants). Other important vegetation types include mangroves, which fringe coasts and estuaries and provide nurseries for fish and crustaceans; the stunted rhododendron forests of Borneo's high peaks, which also support epiphytic communities of orchids and hanging lichens (beard moss); and the *kerangas* of Sarawak, which grows on dry, sandy soil and can support many types of pitcher plant.

NATIONAL PARKS & OTHER PROTECTED AREAS

The Malaysian and Bruneian jungles contain some of the world's oldest undisturbed areas of rainforest. It's estimated they've existed for about 100 million years, as they were largely unaffected by the far-reaching climatic changes brought on elsewhere by the Ice Age.

Fortunately, quite large areas of some of the best and most spectacular of these rainforests have been made into national parks, in which all commercial activities are banned. The British established the first national park in Malaysia in 1938 and it is now included in Taman Negara (p294), the crowning glory of Malaysia's network of national parks, which crosses the borders of Terengganu, Kelantan and Pahang. In addition to this and the 27 other national and state parks across the country (23 of them located in Malaysian Borneo), there are various government-protected reserves and sanctuaries for forests, birds, mammals and marine life.

Accommodation is not a problem when visiting most national parks. Various types are available, from hostel to chalet. Transport and accommodation operations are increasingly being handled by private tour companies, who require you to book in advance and pay a deposit.

THE PROBLEM OF PALM OIL

The oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*), a native of West Africa and introduced into Malaysia in the 1870s, is probably now the most common tree in Peninsular Malaysia. The country's first oil-palm plantation was established in 1917; today, according to the **Malaysian Palm Oil Council** (www.mpoc.org.my), Malaysia is the world's leading producer of palm oil, accounting for over 40% of global production. The oil is extracted from the orange-coloured fruit, which grows in bunches just below the fronds. It is used primarily for cooking, although it can also be refined into biodiesel – an alternative to fossil fuels.

For all the crops' benefits, there have been huge environmental consequences to the creation of vast plantations that have replaced the native jungle and previously logged forests; in 2003 Friends of the Earth reported that palm-oil production was responsible for 87% of deforestation in Malaysia. The use of polluting pesticides and fertilisers in palm-oil production also undermines the crop's eco credentials.

The **Palm Oil Action Group** (www.palmoilaction.org.au) is an Australian pressure group raising awareness about palm oil and the need to use alternatives. **Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil** (www.rspo.org) tries to look at the issue from all sides while seeking to develop and implement global standards. **Proforest** (www.proforest.net) has also been working with **Wild Asia** (www.wildasia.org) on the Stepwise Support Programme, designed to promote sustainability within the palm-oil industry.

MALAYSIA'S TOP 10 NATIONAL PARKS

Park	Features	Activities	Best time to visit	Page reference
Bako National Park	beaches, proboscis monkeys	coastline walks, trekking	May-Sep	p423
Batang Ai	primary forest crawling with wild orang-utan	trekking	year-round	p434
Endau-Rompin National Park	lowland forest, unique plants, Sumatran rhinos, waterfalls and rivers	trekking, wildlife-spotting	Apr-Sep	p269
Gunung Mulu	caves, the Pinnacles, Headhunters Trail	caving, trekking, mountain-climbing	May-Sep	p452
Kinabalu	Mt Kinabalu	mountain-climbing	May-Sep	p357
Niah	caves	caving, trekking	May-Sep	p450
Penang	meromictic lake, monkeys	trekking	Apr-Jul	p202
Perlis	Gua Wang Burma cave, stump-tailed macaques, Malaysia's only semideciduous forest	caving, trekking	Jun-Aug	p228
Taman Negara	canopy walkway, hides, jungle trails, rivers	trekking, wildlife-spotting, river trips	Apr-Sep	p294
Tun Sakaran	sand-fringed islands, technicolour reefs	snorkelling, diving	year-round	p388

Singapore's **National Parks Board** (Nparks; www.nparks.gov.sg) manages 10% of the island's total land area, which comprises over 50 major parks and four nature reserves, including Singapore Botanic Gardens (p501), Bukit Timah Nature Reserve (p505) and Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve (p505).

For details of Brunei's national parks, see p574.

Marine Parks

Malaysia's marine parks range from inaccessible islands with no tourist facilities to tourist meccas like Pulau Tioman. In order to protect their fragile underwater environments, no potentially destructive activities like fishing or motorised water sports are allowed. This makes these parks ideal for activities such as snorkelling, diving or just lazing around on the beach. There is a RM5 entry fee for all marine parks, but its collection is inconsistent.

Some of the more accessible marine parks:

- Pulau Kapas (p315)
- Pulau Payar (p220)
- Pulau Perhentian (p319)
- Pulau Redang (p317)
- Pulau Tioman (p274)
- Seribu Archipelago (p266)
- Tun Sakaran (p388)
- Tunku Abdul Rahman (p354)
- Turtle Islands (p379)

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Malaysia's government maintains that it is doing its best to balance out the benefits of economic development with environmental protection and conservation. Others, including a long list of wildlife and environmental-protection

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

The Encyclopaedia of Malaysia: The Environment edited by Sham Sani, one volume of an excellent illustrated series of encyclopaedias, covers all you may wish to know about Malaysia's environment.

agencies and pressure groups, beg to differ, pointing out how big business continues to have the ear of government when decision time rolls around.

In contrast, in Singapore strict laws control littering and waste emissions are policed vigilantly. The **Singapore Green Plan 2012** (www.mewr.gov.sg/sgp2012), a 10-year blueprint for environmental sustainability, was updated in 2006; it focuses on waste management, clean air, water supply and ecology. Though little of the island's original wilderness is left, growing interest in ecology has seen new bird sanctuaries and parkland areas created, with new parks in the Marina Bay development as well as a series of park connectors that link up numerous existing parks and gardens around the island.

However, massive government effort doesn't necessarily translate to environmental awareness on the ground level. Some locals still love their plastic bags when shopping and getting domestic helpers to wash their cars daily. Having said that, Singaporeans are encouraged to recycle but aren't provided with an easy means to do so (all waste in housing development board flats still go into one central bin).

With few roads and much of its tiny area covered by forest, car emissions are the least of Brunei's problems. However, like much of the region, it suffers the effects of smoke haze (see below) from Indonesia.

Deforestation

Malaysia's logging and palm-oil businesses provide hundreds of thousands of jobs, yet they also wreak untold ecological damage (see p78) and have caused the displacement of many tribal people and the consequent erosion of their unique cultures.

There's a disparity between government figures and those of environmental groups, but it's probable that more than 60% of Peninsular Malaysia's rainforests have been logged, with similar figures applying to Malaysian Borneo. Government initiatives such as the National Forestry Policy have led to deforestation being reduced to 900 sq km a year, a third slower than previously. The aim is to reduce the timber harvest by 10% each year, but even this isn't sufficient to calm many critics who remain alarmed at the rate at which Malaysia's primary forests are disappearing.

Sustained campaigning seems to be producing results: the gazettement of the 117,500 hectare Royal Belum State Park in 2007 was a major victory for the Malaysian Nature Society, which continues to campaign for similar protection to be extended to the neighbouring Temengor Forest Reserve. In Sarawak and Sabah several national parks and reserves have recently been created or extended, such as the Maliau Basin Conservation Area and the Pulong Tau National Park. However, the effects of logging are still clearly being felt in the region, which now suffers unusually long floods during the wet season.

One way forward perhaps lies in Sarawak, ironically the state where Malaysia's primary forests are most under threat. Here Kuching is the base for the **Sarawak Biodiversity Centre** (www.sbc.org.my), an organisation that aims to assist drug companies in their search for valuable medical compounds

For up-to-date news and information on environmental issues affecting Malaysian Borneo check out the website of Renang Sarawak (Sarawak News; www.rengah.c2o.org).

Regional Environmental Awareness Cameron Highlands (REACH; www.reach.org.my) has been working since 2001 to preserve, restore and maintain this region as an environmentally sustainable agricultural area and tourist resort within a permanent nature reserve.

BEWARE THE HAZE

The region's environment faces an ongoing threat from the so-called 'haze' – the smoke from fires in the Indonesian states of Kalimantan and Sumatra. Most of these fires are set by Indonesian farmers and plantation companies in order to clear land for agricultural purposes. The haze is at its worst in Singapore and parts of Malaysia usually around March and September and October, just before the rainy season – check the web (such as Singapore's National Environment Agency site <http://app2.nea.gov.sg/index.aspx>) for up-to-date reports.

LAWYERING FOR NATURE: ANDREW SEBASTIAN

Established in 1940, the Malaysian Nature Society (MNS), the country's oldest and longest-running environmental NGO, with around 4000 members, is an advocate of strict ecotourism policies and environmental policies. It also runs the Taman Alam Kuala Selangor Nature Park (p141) and the Dark Cave at Batu Caves (p131). London-trained lawyer Andrew Sebastian is their head of communications.

How did you come to be involved with the MNS? I grew up at FRIM (p132), where my father worked for the forestry department, so that gave me a love of nature. I've now worked for the MNS for the past 12 years.

What's your major campaign at present? A campaign started by the MNS in 1993 resulted in the protection of 117,500 hectares of old-growth forest in the Royal Belum State Park (in Perak) in 2007. But the job is only partially done since the neighbouring area of Temengor is being logged as we speak – getting this 300,000-hectare area similarly protected will be our focus for the next year, since the logging affects large animals who are falling prey to poachers, not to mention the viability of hornbills – all 10 species that exist in Malaysia – who make their homes in the old trees. If they go, there goes your ecotourism opportunity.

And what else are you working on? We are keen to establish a code of conduct for ecotourism practitioners in Pulau Langkawi (p215), particularly those who take part in the feeding of sea eagles and Brahminy kites – there are reports of the birds being fed chicken entrails rather than their natural diet of fish and seafood, which is possibly having long-term detrimental effects. We're also concerned about the proposals to set up a tiger park on Penang. The island should instead be marketing itself to tourists for its unique culture and world heritage history and for its potentially beautiful beaches, many of which need to be cleaned up.

What have been among your successes? We've been instrumental in getting the government to realise that bird tourism is a big opportunity for the country by helping identify sites that are important so that they can be protected and developed sensitively – we're focusing on three main sites: Fraser's Hill, the Panum valley in Sabah and Taman Negara. We've also had some success in lobbying for the sustainable development of the marine park islands, in particular on Pulau Tioman, where our campaign against the proposed new airport has seen the project taken completely off the shelf.

Could the government be doing more? The national ecotourism master plan drawn up in the 1990s remains a guideline – it's a great idea but many of the suggestions need to be put into law if they're really going to work.

from the rainforest. If the multimillion-dollar cure for cancer or AIDS can be found in these forests, it might just be their partial saviour.

For more on what the government is doing in relation to forest management, see the websites of the forestry departments of **Peninsular Malaysia** (www.forestry.gov.my), **Sarawak** (www.forestry.sarawak.gov.my) and **Sabah** (www.forest.sabah.gov.my). For the alternative point of view, read William W Bevis's award-winning *Borneo Log: The Struggle for Sarawak's Forests*, an evocative narrative that starkly outlines the environmental and human impacts of the logging that goes on in Sarawak, and the website **What Rainforest?** (whatrainforest.com).

Overdevelopment

Wherever you go in Malaysia you're sure to see plenty of construction. Overdevelopment of land for commercial and residential use is taking a toll, not just on the environment.

Economically unnecessary and environmentally unsound dam-construction projects are top of the list of concerns, the most controversial being Sarawak's Bakun Dam (p443). Plagued by financing difficulties since its inception, the still-to-be-completed dam has so far forced up to 11,000

Ian Buchanan spent eight years creating the exquisite illustrations and text for *Fatimah's Kampung* (<http://en.cap.org.my>), a parable about how Malaysia is in the process of sacrificing nature and traditional values for economic development.

indigenous people from their homes. Such projects are indicative of how the land rights of indigenous peoples are consistently ignored in Malaysia. Particularly affected have been the nomadic Penan of Sarawak, who to some extent have resisted government moves to have them resettle.

On hillsides in Peninsular Malaysia, overdevelopment married to poor construction standards has caused several disastrous landslides, one of the most recent being in December 2008 in Bukit Antarabangsar when four people died as 14 luxury homes tumbled down. The collapse of a 12-storey building in Selangor in December 1993 killed 49 people. The government has toughened up construction codes, but development of such precariously sited facilities continues apace in the cooler highland areas within easy reach of KL, such as the Cameron Highlands.

The marina being constructed in Tekek on Pulau Tioman (p276) has aggravated environmentalists who argue it will damage coral reefs in the area. It has already forced a few hotel operations to close and at the time of writing was an ugly construction site. The proposed second (offshore) airstrip at Pulau Tioman has also drawn fire for similar reasons, although it appears this project may have been postponed.

Some 75% of Kelantan's coast is also under attack from erosion; in the worst cases the shoreline is retreating by up to 10m a year.

Outdoor Activities

For the active traveller Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei are top-class destinations. Nature lovers and rugged adventurers can undertake a wide range of treks, from simple strolls along marked paths to multi-day marathons practically hacking through virgin jungle. Thrillseekers can go rock-climbing, mountain-biking and white-water rafting or don masks and fins to explore the coral reefs and aquatic environments of many marine parks. More sedate activities include golf and bird-spotting.

The following highlights the main outdoor activities in Malaysia; see the Singapore (p492) and Brunei (p572) chapters for details of activities there.

BIRD-WATCHING

Malaysia's tropical jungles and islands are home to over 600 species of birds; see p76 for a brief overview. The principal twitching destinations are:

Cape Rachado Forest Reserve (p234)

Endau-Rompin National Park (p269)

Fraser's Hill (p134)

Gunung Gading National Park (p429)

Gunung Mulu National Park (p452)

Kenong Rimba State Park (p303)

Mt Kinabalu (p363)

Royal Belum State Park (p169)

Similajau National Park (p444)

Taman Negara (p294)

The inaugural Standard Chartered KL Marathon (www.kl-marathon.com) took place in June 2009 and included a 5km fun run and half marathon as well as the full 42.195km race.

BOATING

If you just want to paddle around an ornamental lake that's easily achieved in KL (see p102 and p103). In Melaka boat cruises along the Melaka River (p246) are a popular diversion, as are the cruises across the lake in Putrajaya (p137), which in 2009 hosted its first international dragon boat race (www.putrajayadragonboat.com).

For more serious sailors the **Royal Langkawi Yacht Club** (☎ 04-966 4078; www.langkawiyahtclub.com) in Kuah (p216) is a useful starting point. The **Royal Selangor Yacht Club** (☎ 03-3168 6964; www.rsyc.com.my) at Pelabuhan Klang (p139) also offers a variety of courses for beginners through to more experienced sailors.

CAVING

Malaysia's limestone hills are riddled with caves (*gua*) to lure spelunkers. Some of these, such as the Batu Caves (p131), near KL, are easily accessible and can be visited with little special equipment or preparation, while others are strictly the terrain of the experienced caver.

The most challenging caves include Gua Charas (p288) and Gua Musang (p336), as well as those found in Taman Negara (p294) and Gunung Mulu National Park (p452).

Malaysian Fishing Net (www.fishing.net.my) has some useful links for those who are interested in fishing through Malaysia.

CYCLING

Malaysia's excellent roads make it one of the best places in Southeast Asia for bike touring. Perhaps the most popular route is the one up the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia, with its relatively quiet roads. However, if you're fit and energetic, you may prefer the hillier regions of the peninsula's interior or Malaysian Borneo – ideal for mountain-biking. Attracting some of the world's top cyclists is **Le Tour De Langkawi** (www.ltdl.com.my), a week-long

race generally held in February, which despite its name actually follows a 1000km route around the peninsula stretching from the Genting Highlands to Melaka.

DIVING & SNORKELLING

Reasonable prices, an excellent variety of dive sites and easy access make Malaysia a great diving choice for both first-timers and old hands. The main centres include:

Pulau Perhentian (p320)

Pulau Redang (p317)

Pulau Tioman (p275)

Seribu Archipelago (p266)

Semporna Archipelago (Sipadan in particular; p388)

Pulau Layang Layang (p369).

MTB Asia (www.mtbasia.com/Links/links1.htm) is a portal with links to several mountain-biking related sites covering both Peninsular Malaysia and Borneo.

Island-based boat dives are the most common, but a few areas, like Sabah's Pulau Sipadan (p388), have some cracking sites right off the beach. You may also come across live-aboard boats to get you to more remote spots.

The standards of diving facilities in Malaysia are generally quite high and equipment rental is widely available. Most places offer the universally recognised Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) certification. While it is possible simply to show up and dive at some of the larger dive centres like Pulau Tioman, it's a good idea to make arrangements in advance, if only to avoid waiting a day or two before starting. Diving at Sipadan is capped at 120 divers per day (see p341 for information about pre-planning in Sabah).

Most dive centres charge around RM180 to RM250 for two dives, including equipment rental. A three-dive day trip at Sipadan costs RM250 to RM450. PADI open-water courses average around RM800. Many resorts and dive operators also offer all-inclusive dive packages, which vary widely in price.

The northeast monsoon brings strong winds and rain to the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia from early November to late February, during which time most dive centres simply shut down. Visibility improves after the monsoon, peaking in August and September. On the west coast conditions are reversed and the best diving is from September to March. In Malaysian Borneo the monsoons are less pronounced and rain falls more evenly throughout the year.

GOLF

Welcome to the home of flood-lit golf – playing at night when it's cooler is a favourite pastime in Malaysia. KL offers over 40 courses in and around the city, including the **Royal Selangor Golf Course** (Map pp92-3; ☎ 9206 3333; www.rsgc.com.my; Jln Kelab Golf, off Jln Tun Razak; green fees from RM60). There are world-class courses elsewhere on the peninsula – see p188, p217 and p219.

If you want to tee off in a cooler environment head to Fraser's Hill (p135) or the Cameron Highlands (p159).

KAYAKING & WHITE-WATER RAFTING

Malaysia's mountains plus rainforests equals fast flowing rivers providing ideal opportunities for river-rafting and kayaking enthusiasts. On the peninsula, Kuala Kubu Bharu (p133) has become the white-water hot spot with rafting and kayaking organised along the Sungai Selangor.

In Gopeng on Sungai Kampar, 20 minutes' drive north of Ipoh, rafting trips and other outdoor adventures are offered at the **MY Gopeng Resort** (☎ 019-542 3773; www.mygopengresort.com).

It is a *serious* health risk to fly within 24 hours of your last dive. It's also unsafe to dive directly after flying due to poorly pressurised cabins and dehydration.

RESPONSIBLE DIVING

Please consider the following tips when diving or snorkelling, and help preserve the ecology and beauty of the reefs:

- Do not use anchors on the reef, and take care not to ground boats on coral. Encourage dive operators and regulatory bodies to establish permanent moorings at popular dive sites.
- Avoid touching living marine organisms with your body, or dragging equipment across the reef. Polyps can be damaged by even the gentlest contact. Never stand on coral, even if it looks solid and robust. If you must hold onto the reef, touch only exposed rock or dead coral.
- Be conscious of your fins. Even without contact the surge from heavy fin strokes near the reef can damage delicate organisms. When treading water in shallow reef areas, take care not to kick up clouds of sand. Settling sand can easily smother the delicate organisms of the reef.
- Practise and maintain proper buoyancy control. Major damage can be done by divers descending too fast and colliding with the reef. Be aware that buoyancy can change over the period of an extended trip: initially you may breathe harder and need more weight; a few days later you may breathe more easily and need less weight.
- Resist the temptation to collect or buy coral or shells. Apart from the ecological damage, taking home marine souvenirs depletes the beauty of a site and spoils the enjoyment of others. The same goes for marine archaeological sites (mainly shipwrecks). Respect their integrity; some sites are even protected from looting by law.
- Ensure that you take home all your rubbish and any litter you may find. Plastics in particular are a serious threat to marine life. Turtles can mistake plastic for jellyfish and eat it.
- Resist the temptation to feed fish and discourage snorkel operators from baiting marine life. You may disturb their normal eating habits, encourage aggressive behaviour or feed them food that is detrimental to their health.

White-water rafting has become quite the craze in Sabah, with KK-based operators taking travellers south of the city to the Beaufort Division (p398) for some Grade 3–4 rapids on the Sungai Padas (Padas River). Calmer water at Sungai Kiulu near Mt Kinabalu is a tamer option for beginners.

Kayaking is offered by **Kuching Kayak** (☎ 082-253005; www.kuchingkayak.com; 269 Jln Padungan) in Kuching.

MOUNTAIN CLIMBING

Mt Kinabalu (p357) is an obvious choice – and it's recently got a tad more challenging thanks to the addition of a *via ferrata* descent; see p359 for details.

Borneo's blockbuster is not the only mountain worth climbing in Malaysia. Sabah's Mt Trus Madi (p396) is a far more difficult peak to ascend than Mt Kinabalu. Sarawak's Gunung Mulu (p456) is a challenging four-day climb, while on the peninsula, there are several good climbs in Taman Negara, including Gunung Tahan (p298), which stands at 2187m. There are also a few lesser peaks scattered around that make pleasant day outings.

SURFING

Wannabe Layne Beachleys and Kelly Slaters should haul their boards to Cherating (p289) and Juara on Pulau Tioman (p274), Malaysia's surfing hot spots – see p291 for further details.

TREKKING

In Malaysia's national parks there are treks to suit all levels of ability, from 20-minute jaunts to 10-day expeditions: see p79 for our top national park

For a list of golf clubs around the country and other information see the website of the Malaysian Golf Association (☎ 03-9283 7300; www.mgaonline.com.my).

Keen mountain-climbers should try to pick up a copy of *Mountains of Malaysia – A Practical Guide and Manual* by John Briggs.

Thrillseekers can set their pulses racing on the Flying Fox and anti-gravity G-Force X rides run in and around KL by AJ Hackett (www.ajhackett.com/malaysia).

trekking recommendations, as well as p356. Even in the heart of KL it's possible to stretch your legs in the Bukit Nanas Forest Reserve (p98); alternatively head a little north of the city to find a fantastic network of forest trails and the suspended walkway at the Forestry Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM; p132).

Responsible Trekking

Most treks in national parks and similar areas require a guide, and when they aren't required, it is often quite handy to recruit one. A good guide will be able to gauge your abilities and push you a little, rather than taking the easiest way as a matter of course. Try a shorter guided hike before

JUNGLE-TREKKING TIPS

Hiking through rainforest in hot, humid and sometimes wet conditions can be exhausting – like doing jumping jacks in a Turkish sauna – you'll be continuously sweaty no matter how fit you are. Oh, and don't forget about the critters – leech and mozzie bites are pretty much guaranteed. The rewards, however, are priceless – from alpine vistas to backwoods longhouses, your jungle jaunt will undoubtedly provide the perfect chitchat fodder at your next cocktail party.

The following guidelines will help to make the experience as painless as possible. See p602 for information on how to deal with leeches.

- Throw fashion out the window – comfortable, loose-fitting clothing is paramount. On overnight trips, bring two sets of loose-fitting clothing: one for hiking and one to put on at the end of the day (keep your night kit in a plastic bag so that it stays dry). Lightweight cotton is ideal. Within minutes of starting out, your hiking kit will be drenched and it will stay that way throughout your trip. If you'll be travelling through dense vegetation, wear long trousers and a long-sleeved shirt. Otherwise, shorts and a T-shirt will suffice.
- A breathable oversized rain jacket (read: not a garbage bag!) will be extremely handy – you are, after all, trekking through a rainforest.
- Contrary to popular belief, it's better to navigate the jungle in sturdy running shoes rather than expensive hiking boots (although most locals prefer *kampung adidas*; p352). Thongs are handy for going in and out of longhouses.
- Invest in some leech-proof socks – they look like little Christmas stockings minus the decorative fur. They can be hard to come by in some parts of Malaysia, so consider buying them online before your trip.
- Drink plenty of water. If you're going long distances, bring a water filter or, if you want to keep your carrying weight down, a water purification agent like iodine.
- Get in shape long before your trek and start slowly – try a day hike before setting out on a longer trek.
- Take a guide if you're setting off on a longer and/or lesser-travelled trek.
- Bring talcum powder to cope with the chafing caused by wet undergarments. Wearing loose underwear (or better yet, no underwear at all) will also help prevent chafing.
- If you wear glasses, treat them with an anti-fog solution (ask at the shop where you buy your glasses). Otherwise, you may find yourself blinded by steamed-up glasses soon after setting out.
- Consider adding a Tupperware (or equivalent) container to your packing list to protect your camera and/or binoculars from the elements.
- Other must-haves include sunscreen, insect repellent, a water bottle (stainless steel seems to be the trendiest sustainable option these days) and a torch (preferably a headlamp to keep your hands free). If you are worried about dehydration, electrolyte sachets (RM1) are available at local pharmacies all over the region.

setting off on an overnight adventure to get a sense of how you fare in tropical trekking conditions. Hiring a local guide is the best way to make sure you're in touch with local customs and concerns as you move through tribal lands.

Remember the golden rule of rubbish: if you carried it in, carry it out. Don't overlook easily forgotten or inconvenient items, such as plastic wrapping, cigarette butts, water bottles, sanitary napkins and so forth. Never bury your rubbish – it may be out of sight, but it won't be out of reach of animals.

Where there's a toilet, use it. Where there isn't one, bury your waste. Dig a small hole 15cm deep and at least 100m from any watercourse. Consider carrying a lightweight trowel for this purpose. Cover the waste with soil and a rock. Use toilet paper sparingly and bury it as well. If the area is inhabited, ask locals if they have any concerns about your chosen toilet site.

While your guide may happily hack his way through the undergrowth if necessary, you should always stick to the marked trails, however indistinct they may be. Carving your own path through the jungle can disrupt local people, not to mention the plants and wildlife.

© Lonely Planet. To make it easier for you to use, access to this chapter is not digitally restricted. In return, we think it's fair to ask you to use it for personal, non-commercial purposes only. In other words, please don't upload this chapter to a peer-to-peer site, mass email it to everyone you know, or resell it. See the terms and conditions on our site for a longer way of saying the above - 'Do the right thing with our content.'