

Malaysia: Travel Information

A flavorsome culture fusion - from high-tech to no-tech.



Introduction

Malaysia is one of the most pleasant, hassle-free countries to visit in southeast Asia. It's buoyant and wealthy, and has moved towards a pluralist culture based on a vibrant and interesting fusion of Malay, Chinese, Indian and indigenous cultures and customs. Penang's sprawling main centre, Georgetown, boasts impressive colonial architecture, temples, lively Chinese culture, great shopping and even better food. Steeped in history, with an appealing old-fashioned character that's fast disappearing, it attracts most of the island's tourists.



The Cameron Highlands, in the centre of Peninsular Malaysia, comprise a series of hill stations at altitudes between 1500-1800m (4920-5904ft). This fertile area is the centre of Malaysia's tea industry and it's the place where locals and visitors come to escape the heat of the plains. But there are many other attractions to enjoy. Making a circuit of Penang Island will take you through a varied landscape of jungle and coast, farmland, plantations and fishing villages. The beaches along the north coast are the most visited and easily accessible, while Malaysia's newest - and smallest - national park is on the northwest headland. Don't miss charming Penang Hill with its funicular and colonial hill station, or the amazing Kek Lok Si Temple - the largest Buddhist shrine in the country. Attractions include jungle walks, waterfalls, tours of tea plantations and beautiful gardens. The cool weather tempts visitors to exertions like golf, tennis, and long walks, normally forgotten at sea level - but this is really Malaysia's R 'n' R capital par excellence for those who don't like the beach and enjoy a bout of colonial nostalgia.

Weather Overview

It's hot and humid year-round in Malaysia with temperatures rarely dropping below 20°C (68°F), even at night, and usually climbing to 30°C (86°F) or more during the day. The tropics can take some adjusting to so take it easy when you first arrive and avoid running around in the heat of the midday sun. Throughout the region the humidity tends to hover around the 90% mark, but on the peninsula you can always escape from heat and humidity by retreating to the delightfully cool hill stations.

The region has a monsoonal climate, but only the east coast of peninsular Malaysia has a real rainy season. The wettest season on the west coast of the peninsula is between September and December; on the east coast and in Sabah and Sarawak it's between October and February. Rain, when it comes, generally interrupts the sunshine only briefly; most of it falls in short, strong bursts. It rarely rains all day.

Visa Overview

Commonwealth citizens and most European nationals do not need visas for visits of less than three months. Visitors are usually issued an extendable 30- or 60-day visa on arrival.

History:

Pre 20C

Aboriginal Malays (Orang Asli) began moving down the Malay peninsula from southwestern China about 10,000 years ago. The peninsula came under the rule of the

Cambodian-based Funan, the Sumatran-based Srivijaya and the Java-based Majapahit empires, before the Chinese arrived in Melaka in 1405. Islam arrived in Melaka at about the same time and spread rapidly. Melaka's wealth soon attracted European powers, and the Portuguese took control in 1511, followed by the Dutch in 1641. The British established a thriving port in Penang in 1786 and took over Melaka in 1795.

The British traded for spices and colonised the interior of the peninsula when tin was discovered. East Malaysia came into British hands via the adventurer Sir James Brooke (who was made Rajah of Sarawak in 1841 after suppressing a revolt against the Sultan of Brunei) and the North Borneo Company (which administered Sabah from 1882). Gradually, the Federated Malay States were created in piecemeal fashion over the course of the 19th century.

Modern

The final pieces of the Malaysian mosaic fell into place when Britain took formal control of both Sabah and Sarawak after WWII. The indigenous labour supply was insufficient for the needs of the developing rubber and tin industries, so the British brought large numbers of Indians into the country, altering the peninsula's racial mix.

The Japanese overran Malaya in WWII. Communist guerrillas who fought the Japanese throughout the occupation began an armed struggle against British rule in 1948 and Malaya achieved independence in 1957. Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore combined with Malaya to establish Malaysia in 1963, but two years later Singapore withdrew from the confederation. The formation of Malaysia was opposed by both the Philippines and Indonesia, as each had territorial claims on East Malaysia.

Tension rose in 1963 during the 'Confrontation' with Indonesia. Indonesian troops crossed Malaysia's borders but were repelled by Malaysian and Commonwealth forces. In 1969, violent riots broke out between Malays and Chinese, though the country's racial groups have since lived in relative peace together. The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) has been in power since 1974. Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is keen to exert his influence on the world stage as a pan-Asian leader, presided over a booming economy until 1997, when tumbling Asian currencies dragged the ringgit down with them.

In September 1998 the country hosted the Commonwealth Games, but the public relations aspect of the competition came apart when students and citizens protested against the unfair sacking and later imprisonment of deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim. Continuing street protests calling for the resignation of Dr Mahathir Mohamad have unsettled Malaysia's reputation as one of the most politically stable of southeast Asian countries. By the time the 21st century rolled around, social upheavals had faded to a distant rumble and the Malaysian economy had clawed its way back into the black. Dr Mahathir Mohamad remained a controversial figure until the end. Just before his resignation in October 2003, after 20 years at the helm, the PM addressed a meeting of Islamic countries hosted by Malaysia, and exhorted them to collectivise against an alleged world Jewish conspiracy. His replacement, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, won a March 2004 election in a landslide. In August 2004 the country's highest court upheld Anwar Ibrahim's appeal against his sentence and he was released from jail.



Recent

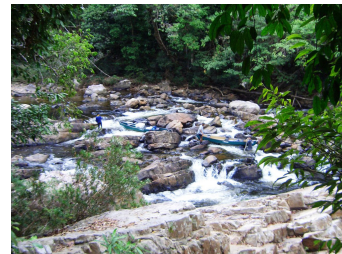
Sheltered by the island of Sumatra, Malaysia was hit by the December 2004 tsunami's secondary 'shadow' wave, which travelled at 160km/h (compared to the primary wave speed of 800km/h). The impact resulted in 68 deaths and US\$25 million in property damage. Areas affected included the island of Penang and Langkawi, and parts of the mainland in the states of Kedah, Perlis and Perak. In the resort areas of Penang and Langkawi, clean-up efforts were quick and efficient and all beachfront hotels were at full operating capacity within two weeks of the event.

In March 2006 Abdullah unveiled a new five-year plan for Malaysia, the ninth such economic and social agenda in the country's independent history, and thus known by the shorthand '9MP'. Unlike Mahathir's previous plans - sometimes referred to as Wawasan 2020 (Vision 2020) which focussed on major construction and industry projects- the 9MP seeks to tackle Malaysia's crisis in education. Since his release from prison Anwar has been steadily rebuilding his political platform. However he is barred from running for political office until 2008 and for this reason - as well as to capitalise on the inevitable feel-good factor following the 50th anniversary celebrations of Malaysia's Independence (Merdeka) in August 2007 - it's widely suspected that Abdullah will call an election towards the end of 2007, even though he doesn't actually have to until 2009.

Places of Interest

Taman Negara National Park

Taman Negara is billed, perhaps wrongly, as a wildlife park. Certainly this magnificent wilderness area is a haven for endangered species such as elephants, tigers, leopards and rhinos, but numbers are low and sightings of anything more exotic than snakes, lizards, monkeys, small deer, and perhaps tapir, are rare.



Sepilok Orang-Utan Rehabilitation Centre

Tel: 089531 180

One of only four orang-utan sanctuaries in the world, Sepilok is among Sabah's top tourist attractions - so much so that the atmosphere can be a bit like a circus or a zoo. Nonetheless, a visit to Sepilok can be a memorable experience. The orang-utans are impressive, young orang-utans particularly so, all ginger fur and intelligent eyes.

Batu Caves

Just north of Kuala Lumpur a towering limestone outcrop is home to the impressive Batu Caves. The caves were 'officially' discovered around 120 years ago by American naturalist William Hornaday. A short time later a small Hindu shrine was built in the vast open space, later known as Temple Cave.



Attractions

Penang

Penang's sprawling main centre, Georgetown, boasts impressive colonial architecture, temples, lively Chinese culture, great shopping and even better food. Steeped in history, with an appealing old-fashioned character that's fast disappearing, it



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But there are many other attractions to enjoy. Making a circuit of Penang Island will take you through a varied landscape of jungle and coast, farmland, plantations and fishing villages. The beaches along the north coast are the most visited and easily accessible, while Malaysia's newest - and smallest - national park is on the northwest headland. Don't miss charming Penang Hill with its funicular and colonial hill station, or the amazing Kek Lok Si Temple - the largest Buddhist shrine in the country.

Sights further afield include the eerie Penang War Museum, the slithery Snake Temple and the inland town of Balik Pulau. Georgetown also has air and bus links to other towns in Malaysia and beyond.

Cameron Highlands

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Travel Alert

Floods in Southern Malaysia

In late December 2006 southern and western Malaysia were hit with heavy flooding, with Johor state bearing the worst of the deluge. The floodwaters are receding but travellers are advised to avoid these areas while they recover and monitor the news for any ongoing developments.

Health Conditions

Dengue fever

Unlike the malaria mosquito, the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, which transmits the dengue virus, is most active during the day, and is found mainly in urban areas, in and around human dwellings. Signs and symptoms of dengue fever include a sudden onset of high fever, headache, joint and muscle pains, nausea and vomiting. A rash of small red spots sometimes appears three to four days after the onset of fever. Severe complications do sometimes occur. You should seek medical attention as soon as possible if you think you may be infected. A blood test can indicate the possibility of the fever. There is no specific treatment. Aspirin should be avoided, as it increases the risk of haemorrhaging. There is no vaccine against dengue fever.

Hepatitis

Several different viruses cause hepatitis; they differ in the way that they are transmitted. The symptoms in all forms of the illness include fever, chills, headache, fatigue, feelings of weakness and aches and pains, followed by loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, dark urine, light-coloured faeces, jaundiced (yellow) skin and yellowing of the whites of the eyes. Hepatitis A is transmitted by contaminated food and drinking water. Seek medical advice, but there is not much you can do apart from resting,

drinking lots of fluids, eating lightly and avoiding fatty foods. Hepatitis E is transmitted in the same way as hepatitis A; it can be particularly serious in pregnant women. Hepatitis B is spread through contact with infected blood, blood products or body fluids, for example through sexual contact, unsterilised needles (and shaving equipment) and blood transfusions, or contact with blood via small breaks in the skin. The symptoms of hepatitis B may be more severe than type A and the disease can lead to long-term problems such as chronic liver damage, liver cancer or a long-term carrier state. Hepatitis C and D are spread in the same way as hepatitis B and can also lead to long-term complications. There are vaccines against hepatitis A and B, but there are currently no vaccines against the other types. Following the basic rules about food and water (hepatitis A and E) and avoiding risk situations (hepatitis B, C and D) are important preventative measures.

Malaria

If you are travelling in endemic areas it is extremely important to avoid mosquito bites and to take tablets to prevent this disease. Symptoms range from fever, chills and sweating, headache, diarrhoea and abdominal pains to a vague feeling of ill-health. Seek medical help immediately if malaria is suspected. Without treatment malaria can rapidly become more serious and can be fatal. If medical care is not available, malaria tablets can be used for treatment. You should seek medical advice, before you travel, on the right medication and dosage for you. If you do contract malaria, be sure to be re-tested for malaria once you return home as you can harbour malaria parasites in your body even if you are symptom free. Travellers are advised to prevent mosquito bites at all times. The main messages are: wear light-coloured clothing; wear long trousers and long-sleeved shirts; use mosquito repellents containing the compound DEET on exposed areas (prolonged overuse of DEET may be harmful, especially to children, but its use is considered preferable to being bitten by disease-transmitting mosquitoes); avoid perfumes and aftershave; use a mosquito net impregnated with mosquito repellent (permethrin) - it may be worth taking your own, and impregnating clothes with permethrin effectively deters mosquitoes and other insects.

Rabies

This is a fatal viral infection. Many animals can be infected (such as dogs, cats, bats and monkeys) and it's their saliva that is infectious. Any bite, scratch or even lick from a warm-blooded, furry animal should be cleaned immediately and thoroughly. Scrub with soap and running water, and then apply alcohol or iodine solution. Medical help should be sought promptly to receive a course of injections to prevent the onset of symptoms and death.

Getting there

Overview

Malaysia's main international airport is at Sepang, 75km (47mi) south of KL. Most tourists either fly into Sepang or arrive overland from Thailand or Singapore. However, Penang also has international flights, and Kuching in Sarawak and Tawau in Sabah have flights to/from Kalimantan. There is a departure tax of 40.00 on international flights, but if you buy your ticket in Malaysia the tax is already included in the ticket price. Departure tax for flights to Singapore and Brunei is only 5.00. There are five road border crossings between Malaysia and Thailand (two on the west coast, one in the centre and two on the east coast). There is also a west-coast rail link. To get to/from Singapore, you can cross the causeway at Johor Bahru, catch a ferry or take the train. There are three ferry services between Malaysia and Indonesia (Penang-Medan, Melaka-Dumai and, in East

Malaysia, Tawau-Tarakan). There's also a difficult road link between Sarawak and Kalimantan.

Getting around

Overview

Malaysian Airline System (MAS) and Air Asia are the main domestic airlines, servicing both the peninsula and Sabah and Sarawak. Fares are reasonable but it's unlikely that you'll need to fly in Peninsular Malaysia unless you're in a real hurry. It's cheaper to fly to East Malaysia from Johor Bahru than from KL. In East Malaysia, flying is often the only quick way to get around. Note that flights in East Malaysia are frequently fully booked during school holidays and are prone to delays due to the vagaries of the weather. Peninsular Malaysia has a fast, economical and widespread bus system, and this is generally the best way to get around. Sabah has excellent roads, and minibuses ply the main routes. Buses ply Sarawak's major trunk road, but hardly anywhere else. Peninsular Malaysia has a comfortable and sensibly priced railway system, but there are basically only two lines: one linking Singapore to Thailand via KL and Butterworth, and the other branching off this at Gemas and heading northeast to Kota Bharu. In Sabah, there's a narrow-gauge line through the Pegas River gorge from Tenom to Kota Kinabalu that is well worth catching. In Peninsular Malaysia, long-distance taxis are twice the price of buses but they're a comparatively luxurious and efficient way to travel. If you want to get around by car, all major car-rental firms have KL offices. There are no boat services between Peninsular and East Malaysia, but fast boats ply the rivers of both Sabah and Sarawak. Local taxis in Malaysia are metered. Rickshaws have all but disappeared in KL, but they are still a viable form of local transport in provincial areas. KL has a notoriously bad public transport system, and peak-hour travel in the city should be avoided at all costs.

Fast Facts:

Time Zone

GMT/UTC +8

Weight measures

Metric

Area Sqkm

329,750 sq km

Area Code

Country Code: 60

Population

23,000,000

Spoken Language

English (other)

Tamil (other)

Chinese (other)

Malay (official)
Known as Bahasa Malaysia

Religion

52% Muslim, 17% Buddhist, 12% Taoist, 8% Christian, 8% Hindu, 2% tribal

Currency

Malaysian Ringgit (RM)

Electricity

240V 50Hz

Electrical Plug

British-style plug with two flat blades and one flat grounding blade