

magnificent MALAYSIA

by thomas wilmer

A Pacific land of cultural plurality and natural wonders.

From lions, tigers, elephants, monkeys to some of the world's prettiest beaches and luxurious and reasonably priced five-star city hotels coupled with phenomenal shopping bargains, there's truly a niche for every sensibility in Malaysia.

A three-hour walk-about in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur reveals a pulsating city, vibrant with life, and a peaceful melding of Malay, Chinese and Indian cultures. Visually, the city is graced with the world's tallest (twin towers) building, and a short distance away are grand and stately colonial mansions – weathered clapboard-sided remnants from the days when “the sun never sets” on the British Empire. The former British colonial structures stimulate thoughts of Summerset Maugham's Singapore Sling-sipping rubber plantation managers and industrialists going to the “club” for a round of bridge. Speckled throughout town, moldy art deco edifices from the 1930s and concrete tenements from the 1950s and '60s, stand defiantly in the shadows of glistening-glass, multi-national corporate high rises.

The denizens of Malaysia are predominantly Moslem and accordingly many of the women wear scarves covering their heads. Rarely seen is the full-blown veil-covered face; a surprising number of females even wear cutting-edge European-style urban garb. A most intriguing non-verbal-language exchange was to elicit eye contact with a smile to see if the people walking past would smile in reply or simply turn their heads away. Invariably, both men and women typically broke into warm smiles of welcome. In a word, the people encountered throughout Malaysia are invariably supremely friendly and gracious.

THE RITZ FOR LESS

There are more than 5,000 five-star hotel rooms in Kuala Lumpur. Most surprising are the incredibly inexpensive rates at the city's elite hotels. For example, a club level room at the Ritz Carlton or a luxurious abode at the Mandarin Oriental will cost less than \$90 U.S. per night. The amenities, cuisine and service at these hotels are equal to or better than at sister properties around the world where a comparable stay is at least \$400 to \$500 per night. Out on the street, trendy coffee houses and cutting-edge gourmet restaurants are interspersed with ageless, family-style Chinese and Indian dinner houses. Bintang Walk, loaded with upscale shops and attractions, is the city's revitalized cultural core and its dynamic pulse reminds many visitors of Times Square in New York City.

It's hard to miss the preponderance of ever-present fast food joints in Kuala Lumpur. Colonel Sanders smirks out from behind a three-story-tall red and white KFC-logo, plastered on the side of a high rise, while within a three-block radius one will feel (possibly uncomfortably) close to home with Planet Hollywood, Pizza Hut, Burger King and a 7-Eleven directly across the street.

A WORLD-CLASS SHOPPING DESTINATION

A shopping spree is reason enough to visit Kuala Lumpur, and Malaysia in general, at some of the world's most sophisticated atrium-style, multi-story shopping malls, packed with every conceivable international logo-brand shop. The combination of the robust U.S. dollar and the Malaysian ringet (fixed at 3.5 to the dollar) makes for some excellent bargains, notably china, pearls and pewter.

Recently, Kuala Lumpur has garnered a reputation as one of Asia's premier shopping destinations – supplanting Singapore's former hold on the title. Today, more than 40 percent of hotel occupancy is comprised of Singaporeans in town for a shopping spree and a five-star budget holiday.



From top: Malacca street scene; Over water bungalows at Pangkor Laut; Tanjon Jara Resort; photos by Thomas Wilmer.



Like clockwork, traffic creeps to a halt within the urban core throughout the morning and evening rush hour period, but beyond the city limits awaits a modern and efficient freeway system not unlike Germany's Autobahn.

SACRED BATU CAVES – GUARDED BY MONKEYS

The urban reaches of Kuala Lumpur abruptly give way to rich agricultural landscapes, and fewer than 10 kilometers beyond the city fringe are the mystical Batu Caves. Utilized as a hideout by underground guerrilla forces during WW II, the caves also have served as an intriguing sacred Hindu-shrine for more than a century. Situated on a mountainside that abruptly thrusts up from the surrounding low-lying valley, the cave entrance is reached via a steep cascade of broad concrete steps. Platoons of Macaque monkeys (reminiscent of the sinister winged-monkeys from the *Wizard of Oz*) station themselves at strategic points along the route to the cave entrance. With eagle-eyed vigilance, the monkeys survey the unsuspecting pilgrims as they ascend and descend the stairway in hopes of snatching an unguarded lunch or candy bar. The main chamber towers are more than 70-feet straight up, crowned by a milky-white, stalagmite-accented ceiling. Etched out of clefts in the cave's rock-faced alcoves is an array of sacred Hindu shrines, with intricate, colorful renderings of the various Hindu deities, including the revered elephant god and, of course, the not-to-be-messed-with monkey god. Priests tend their respective temples – that is, when they're not distracted by Macaque's attempting to rip-off offerings of fresh oranges and apples. A Batu cave is well worth a visit and every year tens of thousands of Hindus make a special pilgrimage to this sacred spot.



PANGKOR LAUT RESORT – CLOSE TO EDEN

It's a long way from home, but the compact 300-acre Pangkor Laut Island will

Top: Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's capital city
Left: Hindu deities at entrance to Batu Caves
Right: Macaque monkeys guard the entrance to Batu Caves, photos by Thomas Wilmer.

