

Over
4.5 million
copies sold!

CULTURE SHOCK!

A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette

The *CultureShock!* series is a dynamic and indispensable range of guides for those travellers who are looking to truly understand the countries they are visiting. Each title explains the customs, traditions, social and business etiquette in a lively and informative style.

CultureShock! authors, all of whom have experienced the joys and pitfalls of cultural adaptation, are ideally placed to provide warm and informative advice to those who seek to integrate seamlessly into diverse cultures.

Each *CultureShock!* book contains:

- insights into local culture and traditions
- advice on adapting into the local environment
- linguistic help, and most importantly
- how to get the most out of your travel experience

CultureShock! Malaysia is the complete guide for those who wish to make the most of this country's rich mix of traditional ways of life and ultramodern cityscapes. A dazzling, eclectic blend of East and West, historic and contemporary, fast and slow, Malaysia boasts an incredible array of diverse experiences within a single country: from the urban street vibes of Kuala Lumpur to the lush rainforests of Borneo; the sun-kissed, sandy beaches of Langkawi to the old-school colonial charm of Melaka; and the laid-back homeliness of its towns to world-class luxury in Penang. Get the most out of your stay with this essential guide to a captivating Southeast Asian gem with multiple facets, moods and characters.

visit our website at:
www.marshallcavendish.com/genref

mc Marshall Cavendish
Editions

TRAVEL/CULTURE

ISBN 978-981-4794-51-0



9 789814 794510

CULTURE SHOCK!
MALAYSIA

Marshall Cavendish
Editions
mc



CULTURE SHOCK!

A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette

MALAYSIA

Kate Mayberry

For Review only

CULTURE **SHOCK!**

A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette

MALAYSIA

Kate Mayberry

© 2019 Kate Mayberry and Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) Private Limited

Published by Marshall Cavendish Editions
An imprint of Marshall Cavendish International



All rights reserved

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner. Requests for permission should be addressed to the Publisher, Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) Private Limited, 1 New Industrial Road, Singapore 536196. Tel: (65) 6213 9300
E-mail: genref@sg.marshallcavendish.com Website: www.marshallcavendish.com/genref

The publisher makes no representation or warranties with respect to the contents of this book, and specifically disclaims any implied warranties or merchantability or fitness for any particular purpose, and shall in no event be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damage, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages.

Other Marshall Cavendish Offices:

Marshall Cavendish Corporation, 99 White Plains Road, Tarrytown NY 10591-9001, USA •
Marshall Cavendish International (Thailand) Co Ltd, 253 Asoke, 12th Flr, Sukhumvit 21 Road,
Klongtoey Nua, Wattana, Bangkok 10110, Thailand • Marshall Cavendish (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd,
Times Subang, Lot 46, Subang Hi-Tech Industrial Park, Batu Tiga, 40000 Shah Alam, Selangor
Darul Ehsan, Malaysia.

Marshall Cavendish is a registered trademark of Times Publishing Limited

National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Name(s): Mayberry, Kate.

Title: CultureShock! Malaysia : a survival guide to customs and etiquette / Kate Mayberry.

Other title(s): Malaysia: a survival guide to customs and etiquette. | Culture shock Malaysia. |

Series: Culture shock!

Description: Singapore : Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2019.

Identifier(s): OCN 1102616165 | ISBN 978-981-47-9451-0 (paperback)

Subject(s): LCSH: Etiquette--Malaysia. | Malaysia--Social life and customs. | Malaysia--
Description and travel.

Classification: DDC 959.5 --dc23

Printed in Singapore

Photo Credits:

All photos by the author except pages viii (Omar Elsharawy on unsplash.com); xi (Izuddin Helmi Adnan on unsplash.com); and 217 (Joshua Anand on unsplash.com). Cover photo by Jegathisan Manoharan (pexels.com)

All illustrations by TRIGG

Culture shock is a state of disorientation that can come over anyone who has been thrust into unknown surroundings, away from one's comfort zone. *CultureShock!* is a series of trusted and reputed guides which has, for decades, been helping expatriates and long-term visitors to cushion the impact of culture shock whenever they move to a new country.

Written by people who have lived in the country and experienced culture shock themselves, the authors share all the information necessary for anyone to cope with these feelings of disorientation more effectively. The guides are written in a style that is easy to read and covers a range of topics that will arm readers with enough advice, hints and tips to make their lives as normal as possible again.

Each book is structured in the same manner. It begins with the first impressions that visitors will have of that city or country. To understand a culture, one must first understand the people—where they came from, who they are, the values and traditions they live by, as well as their customs and etiquette. This is covered in the first half of the book.

Then on with the practical aspects—how to settle in with the greatest of ease. Authors walk readers through how to find accommodation, get the utilities and telecommunications up and running, enrol the children in school and keep in the pink of health. But that's not all. Once the essentials are out of the way, venture out and try the food, enjoy more of the culture and travel to other areas. Then be immersed in the language of the country before discovering more about the business side of things.

To round off, snippets of information are offered before readers are 'tested' on customs and etiquette. Useful words and phrases, a comprehensive resource guide and list of books for further research are also included for easy reference.

CONTENTS

For Review only

Acknowledgements	vii	Main Holidays	130	Chapter 6		Manglish	253
Preface	ix	Ghosts and Superstition	132	<u>Sedap!</u>	197	Jawi	255
Map of Malaysia	xiv	Malaysian Politics	138	Truly Malaysia	199	Other Languages	256
		The Mechanics of Parliament	143	Dessert, Snacks and Cake	203	Learning Malay	258
				Coffee and Tea	206		
Chapter 1		Chapter 4		Local Tea and Coffee	209	Chapter 9	
<u>First Impressions</u>	1	<u>Fitting In</u>	146	The Colonial 'Classics'	208	<u>Working in Malaysia</u>	259
		Greetings	147	Durians	210	Malaysian Rubber Time	260
Chapter 2		Titles	148	Eating at Home	212	Meeting and Greeting	261
<u>Geography and History</u>	9	Dress	150	Eating Out	216	Doing Business	263
The Climate	14	Chapter 5		Halal Products	217	Sensitivities	264
History	17	<u>Practicalities</u>	155	Eating at Restaurants	218	Government Offices	265
Mahathir Mohamad	31	What to Bring	156			Working Days and Holidays	266
Anwar Ibrahim	37	Visas and Permits	157	Chapter 7		Taxation	267
City Portraits	41	Accommodation	159	<u>Enjoying Malaysia</u>	221		
		Utilities	164	Getting Out and About	222	Chapter 10	
Chapter 3		Keeping Connected	165	Plane Travel	224	<u>Malaysia in Brief</u>	269
<u>Ways of Seeing: They and You</u>	61	Domestic Help	166	Road Travel	226	Famous Malaysians	274
Malaysian Malaysians	62	Banking and Money	169	The Arts	230	Culture Quiz	279
The Malay Community	64	Shopping	171	Cinema	235		
The Chinese Community	85	Schools	173	Nightlife	238	Dos and Don'ts	283
Peranakan or Straits-born Chinese	106	Driving	177	Sport, Clubs and Gyms	239	Resource Guide	286
The Indian Community	107	Health	186	The Great Outdoors	240	Further Reading	306
Orang Asli (Orang Asal)	119	Clinics and Hospitals	192	Volunteering	241	About the Author	311
Indigenous People in Sarawak and Sabah	121	Getting Married	193	Must-Sees	243	Index	312
Malaysia's Migrants	127	Deaths	194	Chapter 8			
		The 'Haze'	195	<u>The Language(s)</u>	248		
				Malay Pronunciation	251		
				Useful Malay Words and Phrases	252		

In the course of my work as a journalist I have met all kinds of Malaysians, from prime ministers to eager schoolboy footballers, transgender activists, market stallholders and high-flying bankers, and travelled to every state of the country (with the glaring exception of Perlis).

Those experiences inform the heart of this book, which I hope provides a flavour of what it is like to live in Malaysia today and answers at least some of the many questions you may have about this fascinating, but all too frequently overlooked country.

Help and advice came from far too many people for me to name them individually, but special mentions must go to my wonderful husband and daughter who put up with endless questions, gave valuable insight—particularly on food—and provided necessary encouragement.

Researching and writing this book has given me another excuse to read and the opportunity to revisit old classics like Rehman Rashid's *A Malaysian Journey*, which was one of the first books I read when I decided to move to Malaysia and convinced me I had made the right choice.

While much of my working life has tended to involve late night discussions over glasses of tea lamenting the state of Malaysia with despondent activists, the historic change of government in May 2018 has triggered a renewed sense of optimism.

This is truly an exciting time to be in Malaysia. Make the most of it.



My first home in Kuala Lumpur was a post-independence two-bedroom flat with parquet floors and an expansive balcony in the city's eastern hills, surrounded by tropical gardens and forest, and home to wild boar, monkeys and native birds. I expect there were snakes there too, but I never saw them.

The road to the apartment block took me along tree-shaded roads past 1950s-style terraced houses, sprawling mansions and patches of jungle. After it rained, mist would settle over the tarmac. All this only seven kilometres from the Twin Towers.

I had moved from Singapore, where I'd arrived a few years before with only a rucksack, packing my now rather more extensive possessions into the back of a locally-hired truck and hoping that customs would allow the consignment through and that nothing would be broken on the 350-kilometre journey north. As it happened, the border proved relatively smooth and the only casualty was a riotously coloured fruit bowl that I didn't even realise had gone missing until a few months later.

The apartment was a retreat from the frenetic activity of the city and the endless traffic jams—I soon learned that I had to leave for work at 6.45am if I wanted to have a stress-free start to the working day; if I left just five minutes later the traffic would be bumper-to-bumper and the space between each lane of cars filled by an apparently endless stream of moped riders.

The area itself was a sharp contrast with Singapore, where, although we'd also lived in a walk-up apartment, everything seemed more carefully manicured and the city appeared to be

engaged in a constant battle for control—of nature, people, climate. In KL and its suburbs, people seemed more willing to let things be. Beyond a strange predilection for topiary, particularly in the city centre, trees grew wild, bougainvillea spilled from houses, road verges were left untended for months, and kerbstones, where they existed, were painted only rarely. And while the Malaysian capital was less wealthy than Singapore, it had a spirit that often seemed lacking in its more prosperous southern neighbour.

At that time, Malaysia was still emerging from the Asian Financial Crisis that had brought years of rapid economic growth to an end. My four-storey block, with just two flats on each floor, had few residents. Sometimes the water that spluttered out of the tap was brown with sediment. Every few months the power disappeared. Even the phone line was unreliable, although we later discovered that was the fault of the resident macaques who liked to while away the afternoons playing with the junction box.

From the balcony, we looked out towards the Twin Towers, a symbol of the country's meteoric rise. Emerging from the grounds of an old race course, the towers dominate a skyline dotted with the half-finished visions of buildings that had been brought to a premature end with the recession.

The pool at our apartment block was renowned for the packs of monkeys that had made their home there. According to urban myth, they had stolen numerous outfits from unsuspecting residents, raided fridges and destroyed apartments. I had pooh-poohed such stories, but when I went to the pool one morning came across a group of them lounging about at the top of the steps, picking out fleas from each other's fur. There were a couple of babies clinging to their mothers and some big monkeys too. I thought they would move. They thought I would. We stared at each other for a while. I took a step forward. They carried on sitting. The large males looked decidedly hostile. Teeth were bared. I realised this wasn't a stand-off I was going to win and retreated back to my apartment.



Sparkling, modern, iconic—the Petronas Twin Towers designed by Cesar Pelli are still the tallest twin towers in the world today.

When my daughter was about three we decided to splurge on a weekend break at The Datai in Langkawi. The resort is one of the region's most stunning, built within an ancient rainforest with views across the emerald waters of the Andaman Sea to Thailand. One morning, when the light was particularly beautiful, I stepped out onto the balcony to take a photo of the scene. Heeding the warnings pasted to the windows about marauding troops of macaques waiting for their moment to sneak into the rooms of unsuspecting guests, I made sure to close the door behind me, but was astonished when I turned around to see a hairy grey monkey about the same height as my daughter standing in front of her, eyeing the cookie she was just about to put in her mouth. The scene played out in slow motion, as we grabbed the cushions from the sofa and threw them at the intruder and the monkey grabbed the cookie from my shocked daughter's hands, turned on its heels and rushed out of the door.

Malaysians themselves were bruised but unbowed. Mahathir Mohamad, then nearing the end of his first term in office (although no one yet knew that) had boosted morale with a year-long tax holiday even as his decision to fire his former deputy Anwar Ibrahim and put him on trial for corruption and sodomy undermined his hold on power.

The process of change was underway, although few could have imagined that two decades later, the two men would reunite in a successful election bid that would end the political dominance of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and its Barisan Nasional (National Front) coalition after the incumbent prime minister became embroiled in a multi-billion dollar fraud scandal described by the US Department of Justice as one of the worst cases of kleptocracy it had ever known.

Even before moving to the country, I had always found Malaysia an easier place to work as a journalist than Singapore—the government might have been semi-autocratic but people were more open, and more willing to share an opinion even if it ran contrary to the official view.

Indeed, sitting in the local coffee shop, a cup of milky tea or coffee in hand, discussing the latest political gossip seemed almost a national pastime.

Over the years, of course, I have come to understand that beyond that somewhat superficial 'first impression' there are many layers to Malaysia's political and cultural discourse and that race and religion, all too frequently exploited by political leaders, continue to cast a long shadow over Malaysian life much as they have since the British adopted a policy of 'divide and rule' to better maintain their control of the Southeast Asian territory.

When I introduce myself to a Malaysian and the conversation comes around to the fact that I am married to a local, the first question is always about race. "Is he Malay, Chinese or Indian?" they ask, in that order and never any other. In 20 years and numerous encounters, only one Malaysian has not asked the question. The question, I suppose, helps that particular Malaysian decide how best to deal with me. But the order of the question is revealing too: Is it that Western women who are married to locals are more likely to be married to Malays—hence putting Malay first—or is it indicative of a kind of national pecking order, an order of supposed importance?

What it means to be Malaysian, and how to keep such a diverse group of peoples together, is a question the country has been struggling with since even before independence in 1957. Some six decades later, it seems it is no closer to finding an answer.

MAP OF MALAYSIA

For Review only



CHAPTER 1

FIRST IMPRESSIONS



“We are all Malaysians. This is the bond that unites us.”

— **Tunku Abdul Rahman,**
first prime minister of Malaysia

What you'll notice first:

1. **The humidity.** It's inescapable, and the first thing that will hit you, particularly if you are used to a temperate climate, when you emerge from the the air-conditioned comfort of the airport. Humidity also means plenty of rain and combined with the heat (see point 2), regular and spectacular thunderstorms.
2. **The heat.** Also inescapable. When the temperature falls to 22 degrees Celsius, as it sometimes does, Malaysians put on sweaters and complain about how cold it is.
3. **Greenery.** The lush landscape comes with the year-round humidity. The orderly lines of palm oil and rubber plantations start at the boundary fence of Kuala Lumpur International Airport, and cover much of the peninsula (and an increasing area of the Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak). In between, the more chaotic landscape of the millennia-old tropical rainforest survives. Cities like Kuala Lumpur are developing fast—buildings replaced, highways expanded—but trees are, for now, still more common than in many other Asian metropolises. Some of the oldest and most beautiful raintrees, their branches reaching out into a canopy across the car park and manicured lawns, can be found within the grounds of the Royal Selangor Golf Club in the heart of Kuala Lumpur. The Forest Reserve Institute of Malaysia, just 20 kilometres from the city centre, offers a more rustic jungle experience for urban residents.
4. A majority of Malaysia's 32 million people are Muslim and, for the most part, both men and women **dress conservatively**. This does not mean women are required to cover their heads, although many Muslim women choose to do so, but when visiting government offices it is advisable to dress appropriately: shirts, trousers and proper shoes for men (no flip-flops or sandals), covered shoulders and a longer skirt or trousers for women.
5. Malaysia is one of the world's most **ethnically diverse** countries. The trading routes that put Malaysia on the map brought people to the country from all over the globe, some of whom married and stayed, creating unique blended cultures with their own traditions, foods and dress. These days, the majority of the country's people are known as *bumiputra* (sons of the soil), a designation that includes the majority ethnic Malays who are Muslim, as well as some indigenous people. Together, they make up about 68.8 per cent of the population





The ornate, 19th-century home of the Chans, a wealthy Peranakan family in Melaka. The house became a museum in the 1980s.

and are entitled to special treatment in getting loans, buying property and securing places at local universities. There are also large numbers of ethnic Chinese (23 per cent), whose ancestors started coming to Southeast Asia as early as the 15th century, as well as citizens of Indian ancestry (7 per cent). In Melaka, Penang and Singapore, the earliest Chinese settlers married local Malay women and together created the Peranakan (or Nyonya) culture with its distinctive food, fashion and culture.

The orang asal, the original

inhabitants of the peninsular, continue to live in the forest, but face growing pressure from logging companies and their political supporters. The country's enormous diversity also means you'll hear Malaysians switching easily between different languages. From the official national language of Bahasa Malaysia/Bahasa Melayu to English, Mandarin, Tamil, indigenous languages such as Iban and Kadazandusun, and a wealth of other dialects (even for Malay). According to the CIA World Factbook, Malaysia has 134 living languages.

6. **Incredible food.** A result of the country's ethnic mix, which means spicy curries laced with coconut milk,

freshly grilled satays, noodle soups of everything from curry to prawns to fish balls and pork, and laksas unique to almost every state. And that's just for starters. It is impossible to tire of the food in Malaysia. No wonder Bahasa Malaysia has so many words for delicious.



Hawker food remains hugely popular throughout Malaysia and the best stalls may have been in families for generations.

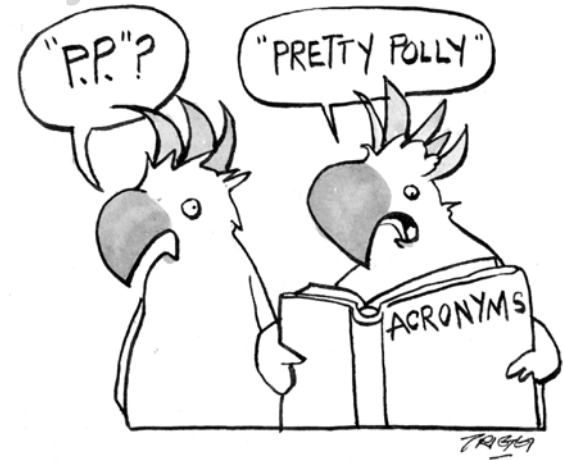
7. **Religion.** Malaysians, particularly the ethnic Malays who are Muslim by birth, take their faith seriously. Under the constitution, Islam is the country's official religion, but followers of other faiths are guaranteed the right to profess and practice their religion. There are mosques in every town and suburb (smaller places of worship are known as *surau*) with prayer rooms in shopping malls, offices and even airports and railway stations. There are also numerous Chinese temples (usually Buddhist or

Taoist), Hindu places of worship and Sikh *gurdwaras*. Most churches were built during colonial times, but these days there are also Evangelical Christian congregations holding services in converted shops and cavernous former factories.



Lanterns decorating the courtyard at the Cheng Hoon Teng temple.

8. **Acronyms.** Malaysians love them. Almost as much as Singaporeans. Kuala Lumpur is KL (kay-el), Petaling Jaya is PJ (pee-jay). Then there's the LDP (Lebuhraya Damansara Puchong—a highway), the MRT (Mass Rapid Transit), LRT (Light Rail Transit), KLIA (Kuala Lumpur International Airport), ERL (Express Rail Link), MAS (Malaysia Airlines) ... And every town seems to have the name of success—Jaya.



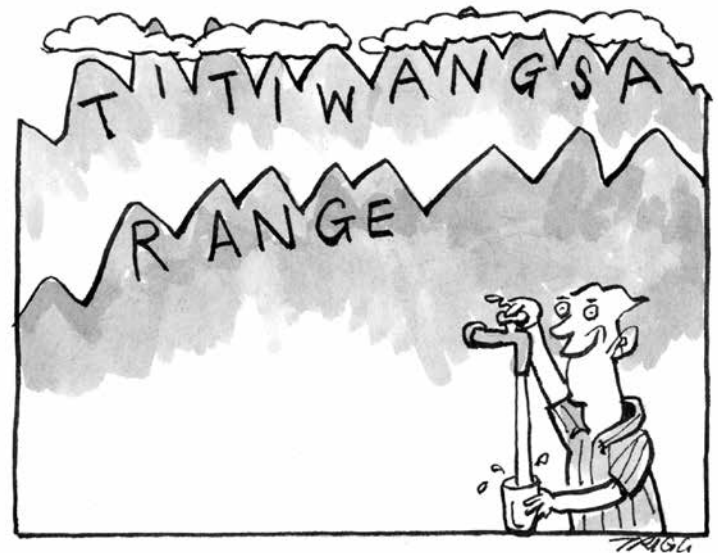
9. **Traffic.** LOTS of it. Not on the scale of Jakarta, Bangkok or Manila, but KL still has lots of cars. Even with the arrival of a new metro line, congestion remains a problem and journeys to and from the city centre are usually a crawl at peak times; on occasion it can take as long as two hours to cover the ten kilometres between the city and the inner suburbs in the west popular with foreign residents. Friday nights can be gridlock, especially when it rains. During holiday seasons, everyone takes to the roads, bringing the main North-South highway and the Karak highway, which connects the east and west coasts, to a halt. Be prepared to spend a lot of time stuck in traffic. Charge up the phone, get some snacks and make sure you have been to the toilet before you embark on your journey. The sheer volume of cars also means that parking is a nightmare. Malaysians think nothing of double or even triple parking. Most of the time, the culprit will leave a note on your windscreen, but if they have not and a car

is blocking your exit, the custom is to press your horn continuously until the driver comes out and moves their vehicle.

10. **Shopping malls.** Malaysians love shopping malls—by the end of 2019 there are expected to be nearly 700 across the country—but not necessarily because they love to shop (although it seems they do). In such a hot, humid and occasionally oppressive climate, an air-conditioned shopping mall is a great place to cool down, and it is not too expensive either—if you can avoid the lure of the shops and cafés and just wander the marble walkways.

CHAPTER 2

GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY



“There were days of cloudless skies and unforgiving heat, but the one impression that remains now is of rain, falling from a bank of low floating clouds, smearing the landscape into a Chinese brush painting.”

— Tan Twan Eng, *The Gift of Rain*

Malaysia is made up of two parts—west and east—covering a total land area of 328,657 square kilometres separated by the expanse of the South China Sea. West Malaysia, otherwise known as Peninsular Malaysia, extends for more than 1,000 kilometres from Thailand’s southern border down to Cape Piai, the most southerly point of the Asian continent, which lies just north of the equator.

The so-called main range, or Titiwangsa range, is the mountainous and forested spine that runs almost the length of the peninsula (rising as high as 2,134 metres) and remains a distinct barrier between its east and west coasts, as it has done since the first explorers fought their way into the interior. The highest peak on the peninsula is Gunung Tahan at 2,207 metres, in the central part of the country.

A highway across the mountains was finished in the 1970s, and now runs as far as Kuala Terengganu on the east coast, significantly reducing the time it takes to drive across the country. Political manoeuvring and the Asian Financial Crisis stretched construction to two decades with the final stretches opening only in 2015, and the road is still in the process of being extended further north. It will eventually end in the northeastern state of Kelantan.



Although the project has been the subject of much controversy, mainland Chinese companies are also building a railway that will skirt the mountains and provide another way for people and cargo to travel between the east and west. The existing railway line to the northeast was completed between 1910 and 1930 and takes between nine and ten hours to cut through the country’s forested heart.

Despite the pressures of development, the mountainous jungle terrain remains a haven for endangered wildlife including tigers and elephants. The mountains are also the source of many of the rivers that run to the Strait of Malacca in the west or South China Sea in the east and provide much of the country’s drinking water.

The peninsula has 11 states, from the agricultural 'rice bowl' of the northwest—Perlis and Kedah—to the more laid-back and conservative east coast—Kelantan and Terengganu—where life continues to move to the rhythm of the climate even with recent (often controversial) efforts to develop more industry in the area.



Rice remains a staple of Malaysian cooking. It is typically grown in the states of the northwest.

The central state of Pahang, the biggest in the peninsula, includes the ancient rainforests of Taman Negara, Malaysia's national park, but stretches as far as the South China Sea, while Selangor, which hugs the west coast on one side and Kuala Lumpur on the other, is the richest part of the country.

Johor takes up most of the southern part of the peninsula. In between are the smaller states of Penang, Perak, Melaka and the so-called Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya, the administrative centre that was built at the end of the 1990s.



Originally the home of the most senior colonial official, Carcosa Seri Negara in KL later became a government guest house, then luxury hotel. It was used as the location for Nick's family home in *Crazy Rich Asians*.

Tin ore and natural resources were what helped make the city of Kuala Lumpur, and the states of Perak and Selangor wealthy, leaving behind an architectural legacy of ornate mansions and homes that still survive—despite the march of development—in smaller cities like Ipoh and George Town, and in isolated enclaves around the parts of Kuala Lumpur that have managed to avoid the clutches of the developers.



East Malaysia is a two-hour flight away from Kuala Lumpur and is made up of the two Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak, which agreed to join Singapore and the states of the Malayan peninsula in 1963 to create the country known as Malaysia.

In size and scale, both Sabah and Sarawak dwarf all of the peninsula states—Sabah covers 73,631 square kilometres and Sarawak a colossal 124,450 square kilometres. Borneo as a whole is the world's third-largest island. Sabah is the location of Mount Kinabalu (at 4,095 metres the highest peak in Malaysia and one of the tallest mountains in Southeast Asia) and also boasts some of the world's most stunning dive sites. The two Malaysian states share a border with Indonesia (the province is known as Kalimantan) and Brunei, where the Sultan remains an absolute monarch.

Adding to the sense of separation, the two states have jurisdiction over their own immigration. Malaysians from the peninsula are not allowed to work in Borneo without a permit and can be, and have been, barred from entry. Foreign visitors, even though they might have 'arrived' in Malaysia when they showed their passports to immigration officers at KLIA, will need to go through the whole process again once they arrive in the Borneo states.

THE CLIMATE

There is nothing quite like a tropical downpour: the rain comes in sheets, cascading off roof tops, the sound of falling raindrops drowning out everything else.

Traditionally, Malaysia has two seasons a year—the wet (monsoon) season and the not-so-wet season—but the weather has become more unpredictable in recent years and now it is not unusual for there to be rain when it is supposed

to be dry and dry when it should be raining. In the past, most beach resorts on the east coast would close for the monsoon season, but these days many stay open and some even offer refunds if it rains for more than a certain number of hours in the day.

The timing of the monsoon depends on whether you're on the west or east coast of the peninsula, or in Borneo. The monsoon on the east coast tends to start around October and continue until the end of February, bringing spectacular storms, rough seas and the risk of flooding. At the end of 2014, towns and villages across the east and south of the country were inundated and at least 21 people lost their lives. Some parts of the highway connecting the two sides of the peninsula were also submerged beneath the flood waters.

On the west coast, the monsoon lasts from the end of May to the beginning of October manifesting itself in thunderstorms in the late afternoon and early evening.

Usually, it is hottest around August and September: the time of year which has been plagued by the so-called 'haze' from the burning of forest owned by plantation companies in Indonesia, and sometimes Malaysia itself. Some laugh wryly that thanks to the haze pollution the country now has three seasons, but some years have been so bad that schools have been forced to close and people urged to stay indoors.

Even outside the monsoon season, humidity in Malaysia remains extraordinarily high; the thick, sticky air wraps itself around your face every time you step outside, glasses mist up, and condensation forms not on the inside of the car windscreen (as in cold climates), but on the outside. Given the country's position just north of the equator the humidity

is not at all surprising, but for people used to more temperate climates it does take a while to get used to. A check on any weather app at any time during the year will usually show the temperature in Kuala Lumpur between 25 and 35 degrees Celsius with humidity upwards of 80 per cent, and regular downpours.

The only places where it is cool on the peninsula are the hill resorts—Cameron Highlands, Genting Highlands, Fraser's and Maxwell Hill—where temperatures can drop to about 15 degrees Celsius at night. It is not unusual in these areas to see people wrapped up in winter jackets and wearing woolly hats once the sun has gone down.



Tea bushes on the valleys of Cameron Highlands. Tea was first grown here by the Russell family, founders of Boh Tea.

Given its elevation, temperatures drop sharply at night on Kinabalu, as well. Of course, the other places where it is decidedly chilly are offices and shopping malls. Most people bring sweaters to work to beat off the air-conditioning.

HISTORY

The nation of Malaysia as we know it today is actually relatively new—created in 1963 when the Borneo states of Sabah (then a British colony known as North Borneo) and Sarawak (also a British colony, but before that a private fiefdom of the Brooke family) decided to join Malaya to form a new federated nation. Singapore was also part of the initial Malaysia Agreement, but the island went its own way just two years later as political tensions between the country's constituent parts increased. Singapore's departure left Malaysia with 13 states, and a multicultural population majority Malay but with significant minorities of Chinese, Indians and indigenous people.

Homo sapiens, modern human beings, have been living in the parts of Southeast Asia now known as Malaysia for millennia.

In Sarawak's Niah Caves, British palaeontologists unearthed a fossilised skull thought to be as many as 35,000 years old back in 1958, while evidence of early human settlement has also been found in Perak on the peninsula where archaeologists in the Lenggong Valley unearthed 'Perak Man' in 1991, the skeleton of a Stone Age man, which is now preserved in a museum close to the cave where it was found.



About an hour north of Penang, in the Bujang Valley, archaeologists have also discovered the remains of what they think may be the country's oldest settlement. The Kedah Tua (Old Kedah) Kingdom is thought to be about 1,900 years old, which makes it older than the empires of the Majapahit (AD1200) and Sri Vijaya (AD700), and the first Malay Hindu-Buddhist kingdom in the Malaysian peninsular.

Mokhtar Saidi, an Associate Professor at Penang's Universiti Sains Malaysia who led the dig, says he believes Kedah Tua was both a centre of iron ore manufacture and an early port city—a convenient place for traders to rest as they travelled from west to east and back again. Archaeological digs have unearthed the remains of a jetty, iron-ore smelters, kilns and temple, probably of Indian/Hindu origin—complexes that suggest the Bujang Valley was more than a simple trading port and a site not only of commercial importance, but also of cultural significance.

After Kedah Tua fell into decline, Malaysia continued to benefit from its strategic location, as the ports along the peninsula's west coast provided a safe place for both Arab and Chinese traders to rest.

While early populations were animist—the country's earliest inhabitants were the peoples now known as orang asal (original people), a collective term for about 150,000 people from at least 18 different ethnic groups—trade exposed the people of the peninsula to new ways of thinking.

The Javanese, who were then Hindu, occupied the peninsula around 1330–1350 and gradually Hinduism and Buddhism began to put down roots.

Melaka was the place it all began for modern Malaysia, after Srivijaya prince Parameswara, who had been forced out of Singapore (then known as Temasek) by the Siamese,

sailed north in search of a refuge and established a small settlement, nothing more than a fishing village, on the west coast in around 1400. Fortuitously for Melaka, China decided to resume trade with Southeast Asia and the Ming Emperor despatched Admiral Cheng Ho to the region.

For some 200 years, with China's protection helping keep the Siamese armies at bay, Melaka flourished attracting traders from far and wide.

It was around this time that Islam also became established in the peninsula, starting in Melaka with (it is said, although debated) Parameswara himself. The gradual inter-mingling of religions and cultures is still evident today. Traditional Malay performances are often inspired by Hindu epics such as the Mahabharata while Malay weddings include many customs that predate Islam's arrival in the peninsula.

In the years that followed, as European nations scoured the globe for spices and other exotic goods, Melaka became a wealthy and strategically important port. But the city's success and its position on such a crucially important sea route meant it was coveted by others. In 1511, the Portuguese seized control of Melaka, building the A Famosa fortress—the ruins of which can still be seen today—and, on the hill behind where the Sultan's palace had once stood,



A young man performing the Kuda Kepang, a dance that was brought by settlers from Java.

For Review only

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kate Mayberry was born in the United Kingdom and long dreamed of living and working overseas. After a brief flirtation with Russia, she moved to Southeast Asia in the early 1990s and never left. After a few years working as a journalist in Singapore, she moved to Kuala Lumpur in 1999 where she has continued to report on Malaysia and the wider Asia-Pacific (with the occasional foray into Sri Lanka).