

History

As modern countries, 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.

ORIGINAL PEOPLE

The earliest evidence of human life in the region is a 40,000-year-old skull found in the Niah Caves of Sarawak in 1958 (see p393). Little else is known about these early inhabitants, but they are believed to be related to the first people of Australia and New Guinea.

In Peninsular Malaysia, the oldest remains are of the 13,000-year-old skeleton, 'Perak Man', which has been found to be genetically similar 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. These Neolithics had better stone tools, and archaeological findings in Gua Cha (Kelantan) include pottery and ornaments.

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 information on Malaysia's indigenous people see the boxed text, p38.

EARLY TRADE & EMPIRES

By the 2nd century AD Malaya was known from 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. Key Malay words like *bahasa* (language), *raja* (ruler) and *jaya* (success) are Sanskrit terms.

Much more significant was the dominance of the mighty Srivijaya Empire, which held sway from the 7th to the 13th centuries and was based in southern Sumatra most likely around modern day Palembang. 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. The growing

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.

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

THE LOST KINGDOM OF LANGKASUKA

Early Chinese histories describe an independent kingdom known as Langkasuka, which existed on the east coast of the Malaysian peninsula as early as the 2nd century AD. However, early Malay histories locate Langkasuka on the west coast and it's clear, from the descriptions of the lands, that it's in the region of Kedah, centred on the sacred mountain Gunung Jerai. It's possible that the kingdom stretched the breadth of the peninsula.

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.

power of the southern Thai kingdom of Ligor and the Hindu Majapahit Empire of Java finally led to the demise of the Srivijayans in the 14th century.

THE MELAKA EMPIRE

Melaka, Malaya's greatest empire, was founded by Parameswara, a renegade Hindu prince. Parameswara was from a little kingdom in southern Sumatra, which he rashly declared independent of the Javanese Majapahit Empire. After an expedition was sent to crush the upstart, Parameswara fled to Temasek (today's Singapore), where he was welcomed by the local chief. Eight days later he killed his host and pronounced himself ruler.

Temasek was a vassal state of the Thai empire. Over the next five years Parameswara and his fellow pirates wrought havoc on shipping and trade, until a huge Thai expedition saw them off. Parameswara fled up the Malay peninsula, finally settling in the tiny fishing village of Melaka (p228) in 1400. Parameswara, however, foresaw its potential as a natural deep-water port.

Realising that Melaka 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* arrived to take advantage of trading opportunities.

EARLY ISLAM

A stone monument with Arabic inscriptions, dating from 1303, was found along the Terengganu river, indicating that this east-coast Malay state was the first to receive Islam. The religion had spread east with Indian Muslim traders and gained such respect that by the mid-15th century the third ruler of Melaka, Maharaja Mohammed Shah (r 1424–44),

'Melaka became a port of call for the massive Chinese junks'

TIMELINE 600

The Buddhist Srivijaya Empire dominates Malaya, Singapore, Indonesia and Borneo for six centuries

1400

Foundation of Melaka, the most successful Malay sultanate

1445

Islam becomes Melaka's state religion and spreads throughout Southeast Asia

1511

Portuguese conquer Melaka

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 on the high seas remains a problem for the region. Although the tsunami of 2004 caused a lull in pirate attacks in the Strait of Melaka, at least four major attacks were recorded in Malaysian waters in 2005, with boats being held for ransom by pirates armed with guns and knives. To combat the pirates, Malaysia has formed a Coast Guard and the country, together with Singapore and Indonesia, have run coordinated patrols since 2004.

And it's not just at sea that the authorities have to keep a look out for pirates. Stroll around the street markets of Kuala Lumpur and any number of other Malaysian towns and cities and you're sure to come across pirated copies of DVDs, CDs, computer software and various luxury and brand name fashion goods. The Business Software Alliance, a Malaysian antipiracy watchdog, reports that over 60% of all software used by businesses are illegal copies. On this score the authorities, keen to preserve Malaysia's growing reputation as a hi-tech hub, are cracking down, sending inspectors into businesses and issuing fines to those found using pirated software.

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 Melaka sultans ruled over the greatest empire in Malaysia's history, successfully repelling Siamese attacks. The Malay language became the lingua franca of trade in the region.

Across the South China Sea, Brunei was shaping up nicely as trading port rival to Melaka. By the time the sultan converted to Islam Brunei was well on its way to its 'golden age' of the mid-16th century when it controlled land as far south as present day Kuching in Sarawak and north towards the islands of the Philippines.

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 1509 Portuguese traders sailed into Melaka. Although they were at first greeted warmly, acting on the advice of his Indian Muslim councillors, the Melaka sultan later attacked the Portuguese ships and took 19 of their party prisoner.

The Portuguese saw this as just the excuse they needed to launch a full-scale assault on Melaka. In 1511, led by Viceroy Alfonso de Albuquerque,

they returned with a fleet of 18 heavily armed ships. Within a month Melaka's army of 20,000 men and their war elephants had been defeated. The sultan and his court fled, establishing two new sultanates on the peninsula; Perak to the north and Johor to the south.

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 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. 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, after a siege lasting several months, they 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.

EAST INDIA COMPANY

British interest in the region began with the East India Company's (EIC) need for a halfway base for its ships plying the India-China maritime route. In 1786 Francis Light negotiated a deal with the sultan of Kedah to establish a settlement on the largely uninhabited island of Penang. Light instituted a free-trade policy at Penang, which was a clear contrast to the monopolistic methods of the Portuguese and Dutch. Penang thrived, and by 1800 it had a population of over 10,000.

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.



Exterior of Christ Church, Melaka

RICHARD JANSON

'Johor's fortunes improved drastically with the arrival of the Dutch'

The Other Malaysia by Farish A Noor is a collection of articles in which the writer uses forgotten gems of Malaysia's history to comment on and critique contemporary Malaysian politics.

1641

Dutch wrest Melaka from Portuguese; end of Melaka's importance as a port

c 1690

Johor strongest Asian power in region

1786

British open free-trading port in Penang

1819

Stamford Raffles founds Singapore

The British lieutenant-governor of Java, Stamford Raffles, had long felt that Britain, the most powerful nation in Europe, should expand its influence 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 STRAITS SETTLEMENTS

In 1819 Raffles landed on Singapore, at the time a territory of the Johor empire and governed by a local chieftain. The Johor empire was engaged in a succession dispute. The former sultan had died while his elder son was away, and his younger son had been proclaimed sultan. The Dutch had a treaty with the young sultan, but Raffles threw his support behind the elder, recognising him as the rightful sultan. A treaty was signed between the new sultan, the local chief and Raffles for British sole rights to build a trading settlement. In 1824 a second treaty was signed that ceded Singapore to Britain forever in exchange for cash and a life pension for the sultan and local chieftain.

Raffles was delighted with the success of his deal. Writing soon after, he waxed lyrical: 'It is impossible to conceive a place combining more advantages... it is the Navel of the Malay countries'. The statement proves Raffles' foresight because at the time Singapore was little more than an inhospitable swamp surrounded by dense jungle.

Protests by the Dutch were silenced in 1824 when the two nations signed the Anglo-Dutch Treaty, 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. Two years later Britain combined its possessions of Malaya, Penang, Melaka and Singapore to create the Straits Settlements.

RISE OF SINGAPORE

Raffles left instructions on the early development of Singapore with the new British Resident, Colonel William Farquhar. Singapore was to be a free port; a fort was to be built, and convenient watering places 'with firm shingle for rolling the casks' were to be installed.

Singapore's population of 150 fishermen and a small number of Chinese farmers swelled immediately. Chinese, Malays and Indonesians poured in, attracted by its free-port status and the permanent British tenure. By 1821 the population had grown to 10,000; the harbour was filled with ships from all over the archipelago; and trade boomed.

Three years later Raffles returned to Singapore and governed it for one 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.



Raffles Hotel – a Singapore institution

RICHARD I'ANSON

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*.

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 (p334), to make his fortune.

In 1835 Brooke inherited £30,000, bought a ship and sailed from London to Borneo, where he found the weak Brunei sultanate struggling to put down a rebellion by the native Dayaks and Sarawak Malays. He was offered a part of Sarawak if he would help quell the rebellion. With swashbuckling panache he succeeded, and in 1841 he was installed as raja of Sarawak, with the fishing village of Kuching (p339) as his capital.

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

British acquisition of Sabah (p420) was less romantic. 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.

Brunei, the once mighty empire, was now a tiny and divided sultanate. To prevent a scramble for the remains, the British government decided to preserve the weakened sultanate and in 1888 declared it a British protectorate.

BRITISH MALAYA

In Peninsular Malaya, Britain's determined policy of 'trade, not territory' was challenged when trade was disrupted by civil wars within the Malay sultanates. There were conflicts in 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 it was gradually introduced into 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.

In 1896 Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang became known as the Federated Malay States, each governed by a British Resident.

'headhunting and violent tribal rivalry had been the norm'

1824

Dutch and British carve up region into what eventually becomes Malaya and Indonesia

1841

James Brook becomes first White Raja of Sarawak

1874

British intervene in Malay sultanate; first British Resident installed

1896

Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang join as Federated Malay States

Kelantan, Terengganu, Perlis and Kedah were under Thai suzerainty. Fearing that they might fall into French or German hands, the British made a deal with the Thai king, offering loans to build railways in exchange for his Malayan states. The sultan of Kedah, enraged by the Thai betrayal, is reported to have said his sultanate had been 'bought and sold like a buffalo'. Helpless against British power, the sultans of these 'Unfederated Malay States' accepted British advisers. Johor, though well ruled by its sultan, finally succumbed in 1914. Terengganu was the last state to accept a British Adviser in 1919.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The British set about exploiting the peninsula's resources with gusto. Building ports, roads and railways, and selling huge tracks of virgin rainforest, they encouraged British 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.

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 problems of its liberal immigration policy would reverberate for decades to come. The Singapore Malay Union was formed in 1926 and by the eve of WWII Malays were pushing for their independence.

WWII PERIOD

WWII came to Malaya a few hours before the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Landing at Kota Bharu (p321) on the north-east coast of Malaya, the Japanese made a lightning dash down the peninsula, and within a month they had taken Kuala Lumpur. A month later they were at Singapore's doorstep. With its guns pointing uselessly out to sea, Singapore capitulated in February 1942. The poorly defended Borneo states fell even more rapidly.

The Japanese ruled harshly from Singapore, which they had renamed Syonan – Light of the South. The 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.

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.

In Borneo, early resistance by the Chinese was brutally put down. In 1944 a primarily Australian force, Z Special Unit, parachuted into the

Kelabit Highlands and won over the natives (see p415). Armed with blowpipes and led by Australian commandos, this unlikely army scored several victories over the Japanese.

The Japanese surrendered to the British in Singapore in 1945 after the devastating atom bombs had been dropped over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. 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 protest 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. They were easy pickings for the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), which promised an equitable and just society.

THE EMERGENCY

In 1948 the MCP took to the jungles and began fighting a guerrilla war against the British that would last for 12 years. Even though the 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' 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 principle cities but caused plantation owners and villagers to live in terror of attacks. The most violent period was the early 1950s; in 1951 the British high commissioner to Malaya Sir Henry Gurney was assassinated on the road to Fraser's Hill. Gurney's 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.

Wikipedia's section on Malaysian history (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malaysian_history) provides a potted and authoritative overview.

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

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.

1909

Kedah, Perlis and Kelantan become Unfederated Malay States

1919

Terengganu accepts British adviser, the last state on the peninsula to do so

1941-45

Japanese occupation of Malaya, Singapore and Brunei

1948-60

The Emergency in Malaya

THE ORANG ASLI

According to data published by the Department of Orang Asli Affairs (JEOA) 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 JEOA. 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.

For an excellent introduction to the customs and culture of Malaysia's indigenous people, visit the Orang Asli Museum (p124), just north of Kuala Lumpur.

Almost 500,000 rural Chinese were resettled into protected New Villages and guerilla-free areas had all food restrictions and curfews lifted. Another key move was gaining the support of the jungle-dwelling Orang Asli (see boxed text, above). 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 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.

The Alliance Party, 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 p41).

Singapore's politics were dominated by communists and left-leaning trade unions. In 1958 the People's Action Party (PAP) was voted into government. 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 Britain 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 put forward a proposal suggesting 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 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 (it still does). More seriously, Indonesia, under President Soekarno, 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 the Sultan Sri Muda Omar Ali Saifuddien 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 Kuala Lumpur take the spoils. In 1967 the sultan voluntarily abdicated in favour of his eldest son and the current ruler, the 29th in the unbroken royal Brunei line, Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah.

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'. Singapore refused to extend constitutional privileges to the Malays in Singapore and riots broke out there in 1964.

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.



Omar Ali Saifuddien Mosque – commissioned by and named after Brunei's 28th sultan
HOLGER LEUE

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.

1957

Merdeka (independence) in Malaya; Tunku Abdul Rahman becomes first prime minister

1963

Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak join Malaya to form Malaysia

1965

Singapore leaves Malaysia and Lee Kuan Yew becomes the first prime minister of Singapore

1967

Sultan Omar Saifuddien of Brunei abdicates in favour of his son

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 calling 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 the Alliance Party 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 leading to a full-scale riot. The government declared a state of emergency, but by the time things quietened down hundreds, mostly Chinese, had been killed. Stunned by the savageness of the riots the Malaysian 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.

The Alliance Party invited opposition parties to join them and work from within. The expanded coalition was renamed the Barisan Nasional (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. His first book, *The Malay Dilemma*, in which he postulated that Malay backwardness was due to hereditary and cultural factors, was banned in 1970.

One of Mahathir's first acts as prime minister was to institute a 'Buy British Last' policy (after being criticised for the Malaysian government's

successful corporate takeover of Britain's oldest plantation company, Guthrie Corporation) and the 'Look East' policy (favouring Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, which he admired for their strong work ethic and the close symbiotic relationship between government and business).

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 (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 Malaysia's most sacred institutions were hamstrung. 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 became subservient to government wishes, the most notorious case being that of Anwar Ibrahim (see boxed text, p43).

ECONOMIC & POLITICAL CRISIS

One of Mahathir's key economic policies was Wawasan 2020 (Vision 2020), 2020 being the date by which the country would be developed into the hi-tech economic tiger of Southeast Asia. A key part of this vision was the so-called Multimedia Super Corridor linking the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur to the nascent cybercities of Putrajaya (p128) and Cyberjaya. However, in 1997, after a decade of near constant 10% growth, Malaysia was dragged into the currency crisis that had started in Thailand and spread throughout the region.

Characteristically Mahathir railed at the West, blaming unscrupulous Western speculators for deliberately undermining the economies of the developing world for their personal gain. He famously ignored the economic recovery theories of the International Monetary Fund and prescribed his own remedies for the ailing economy. Pegging the Malaysian ringgit to the US dollar, bailing out what were seen as crony companies,

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. 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 Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who heads up the Barisan Nasional (National Front), a coalition of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and 13 other parties. The main opposition parties are the Democratic Action Party (DAP), Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) and Parti Keadilan Rakyat. All sit in a two house parliament, comprising a 70-member Senate (26 members elected by the 13 state assemblies, 44 appointed by the king on the prime minister's recommendation) and a 219-member House of Representatives (elected from single-member districts). National elections are held every five years.

'racial harmony could be achieved only if there was economic parity between the races'

1969

Race riots in Malaysia result in national policy of positive discrimination for Malays

1974

Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition led by Tun Abdul Razak wins Malaysian election by landslide

1981

Dr Mahathir becomes prime minister of Malaysia

1982

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forcing banks to merge and making it difficult for foreign investors to remove their money from Malaysia's stock exchange were measures that many predicted would spell disaster. However, Malaysia's 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 (see opposite). 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 Anwar had been falsely arrested, took to the streets chanting Anwar's call for 'reformasi'.

When Anwar arrived in court with a black eye (the inspector general of police was eventually found guilty of his prison assault and sentenced to six months' jail), the number of Anwar's supporters swelled and Kuala Lumpur saw weekly marches calling for his release. The demonstrations were harshly quelled. In trials that were widely criticised as unfair, Anwar was sentenced to a total of 15 years' imprisonment.

In the 1999 general elections the Barisan Nasional suffered huge losses, particularly in the rural Malay areas. The gainers were Malaysia's Islamic party, PAS (standing for Parti Islam se-Malaysia), which had vociferously supported Anwar, and a new political party, Keadilan (People's Justice Party), headed by Anwar's wife.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ISLAM

Islam has always played a key role in Malaysian politics, but the rise of the fundamentalist Islamic party, PAS, which aims to install an Islamic government in Malaysia, is unlikely to have happened without 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. The revelation that many of the Bali bombers had spent years preaching in Malaysia and that some Malaysians were key members of Jemaah Islamiah, the Indonesian militant group connected to al-Qaeda, has shocked most Malaysians. Invoking the Internal Security Act, which allows detention without trial, the government acted swiftly to arrest and detain those whom it suspected of being associated with terrorist groups.

In contrast to the often incendiary proclamations of Mahathir, the current prime minister Abdullah Badawi, a thoughtful Islamic scholar, has provided moderate leadership in a period when sound Islamic credentials are proving to be crucial in Malaysian politics. In many respects, Badawi has stolen PAS's thunder by inching Malaysia closer to becoming more of a conservative Islamic state. The recent flap over policewomen, regardless of their religion, wearing the *tudong* (headscarf) at official parades is one manifestation of this, alongside growing pressure for Malay women in general to wear it. There was also the whole crazy business over the banning, then unbanning, of the Bible in Iban and the to-do over the movies *Sepet* and *Gurba* (see p58), which dared to (very mildly) challenge the way Malays see themselves.

Amid all the fuss about militant Islam, it's instructive to remember that 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 p604), whose outrageous 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 p28).

A GENTLER MALAYSIA

On 31 October 2003 Prime Minister Mahathir stepped down after 22 years in power, and his successor, Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, was sworn into office. Abdullah won an overwhelming victory in the general elections of 21 March 2004, with Barisan Nasional taking 199 of 219 seats in the lower house of parliament. UMNO itself won 110 seats.

THE RISE AND FALL – AND RISE AGAIN – OF ANWAR IBRAHIM

For a while it looked as if Anwar Ibrahim was fated to be the lead character in a contemporary Malaysian rewriting of the legend of Icarus, playing the gilded youth who fell from grace after flying too close to the sun. In Anwar's case the sun was Dr Mahathir Mohamad, a wily politician determined not be eclipsed by his ambitious deputy. It's a cautionary tale with a twist, though.

As a young man Anwar, born on Penang in 1947, formed the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (Abim), which, according to Anwar's website (www.anwaribrahim.com), aimed to 'promote and uphold the principles of moderate Islam and to campaign for moral upliftment and social justice'. For his pains he would be detained for 22 months without trial under Malaysia's draconian Internal Security Act (ISA).

It was his nemesis Mahathir who invited him to join UMNO and the government in 1982. His rise through the ranks was meteoric and before his sacking in 1998 he had served as minister of youth and sports, agriculture, education and finance. In 1993 *Euromoney* named him as one of the world's top four finance ministers; in 1996 *Asiamoney* named him Finance Minister of the Year. As Mahathir's deputy he seemed unassailable – until he started to move to tackle corruption in government and disagreed with the PM on the strategy for dealing with the Asian monetary crisis.

The subsequent recovery of Malaysia's economy proved Mahathir to be right in his hard-line approach, but the vicious treatment of Anwar – sacked, humiliated, beaten, given an unfair trial and left to languish in jail – was ultimately a step too far. The international community rallied around Anwar with Amnesty International proclaiming him a prisoner of conscience and *Newsweek International* naming him Asian of the Year at the end of 1998, soon after his sacking.

With Mahathir's retirement in 2003 the way was cleared for Anwar's rehabilitation. A year later the Federal Court overturned his sodomy conviction and he was released from prison. However, the appeal against his corruption conviction failed, which means, barring a royal pardon, Anwar is banned from taking a direct part in politics until April 2008. Even so, Anwar is very much back on the Malaysian campaign trail while his wife Wan Azizah keeps his old parliamentary seat warm as the sole parliamentary representative of the People's Justice Party. He's also in the process of suing Mahathir for damages totalling RM100 million after the former PM refused to apologise to him (and he continues to repeat the disproved allegations about Anwar's homosexuality).

'Islam has always played a key role in Malaysian politics'

1984

Brunei becomes independent

1990

Lee Kuan Yew steps down as prime minister of Singapore; Goh Chok Tong takes over

1998

Anwar Ibrahim sacked, arrested and sent for trial

2003

Dr Mahathir steps down as prime minister; Abdullah Badawi takes over

'freedom of
speech and
the press are
still tightly
controlled'

PAS was reduced to seven seats in parliament (from 27 previously), lost control of the state of Terengganu and barely held on to Kelantan with 24 out of 45 seats. Even PAS's leader Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang lost his parliamentary seat. The socialist DAP, with predominately urban ethnic Chinese support, won 12 seats in parliament, and party chairman Lim Kit Siang became Leader of the Opposition in parliament.

In stark contrast to his outspoken predecessor, Abdullah is noted for his nonconfrontational, consensus-seeking approach. He's also been determined to root out corruption in government and unafraid to call time on several of the massively expensive mega projects that had been the hallmark of the Mahathir era. A special commission was established to look into corruption in the police force, although its recommendations have yet to be implemented. Most tellingly, there's also much more freedom in the press these days to comment about these matters – although, on this point, you might not find Mahathir agreeing (see p28).

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. Singapore has also retained its highly conservative view of public displays of affection – scandalous photos of couples canoodling in public make front page news!

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, while long-haired male travellers are no longer in danger of having SHIT (suspected hippie in transit) stamped in their passport. The legalisation of bar-top dancing and deregulation of liquor licencing means that Singapore's bar and club scene is booming – Singaporeans are free to blow their high disposable incomes on as many S\$15 pints as they like.

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 for an era of free global information and communication.

2004

Anwar Ibrahim released from prison

2007

Malaysia celebrates 50 years since independence

The Culture

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

Although Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei share many cultural similarities it's pretty easy for visitors to tell each country apart by the way their respective populations behave.

Any discussion about the collective psyche of Malaysians (that is, anyone born in Malaysia regardless of ethnic background) will immediately lead you into issues about the differences between the country's majority Malay population and the sizable minorities of Chinese and Indians. The old stereotypes of Malays being a rural, traditional people and Chinese being an urban, capitalist class still hold credibility but are breaking down; in particular the number of urban Malays is growing, attracted by the new 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 disadvantaged labouring 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, the tension in Malaysian society is undeniable and it doesn't help that there seems to be a national obsession with propriety. As one commentator told us, 'there's a lot of tut-tutting, finger wagging and curtain twitching'. Recent high-profile raids by the religious police on Kuala Lumpur (KL) nightclubs to weed out naughty alcohol-imbibing Muslims, and much ado about the wearing of the *tudong* (the headscarf of Muslim women) in public underline the point.

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 is all to do with the ethnic mix being tilted firmly in favour of the Chinese. One word you'll hear to describe Singaporeans is *kiasu*. A Hokkien word literally meaning 'afraid to lose', the *kiasu* philosophy embraces a whole range of selfish and pushy behaviour, where the individual must not lose out at all costs. And are Singaporeans *kiasu*? At the risk of generalising, it's true that they are competitive and a bargain will seldom pass a Singaporean by. But they are also admirably straightforward and have a no-nonsense approach that you're likely to find refreshing after travelling in other parts of Asia.

Meanwhile in Brunei, the mainly Muslim citizens have much in common with their Malay brethren in terms of outlook, if not lifestyle – you won't find the kind of poverty here that can still exist in Malaysia. As the absolute monarchy inches towards a form of democracy and life

'there's a lot of tut-tutting, finger wagging and curtain twitching'

beyond the oil economy it will be interesting to see how the people of Brunei react. 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\$900, compared with US\$11,300 in Singapore and US\$8760 in Brunei) but then the costs of living in Malaysia are not as high. Unemployment rates are also higher in Malaysia than in Singapore and Brunei but all three countries are growing and look to neighbouring countries to supply workers for many industries.

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* (village), and indeed even in urban areas.

Adat, with its roots in the Hindu period and earlier, is customary law that places great emphasis on collective rather than individual responsibility and on maintaining harmony. The enduring appeal of this 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. A *pawang* possesses skills and esoteric 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 *bomoh* is a spiritual healer who has not only learned the knowledge of curative plants but can contact the spirit world and harness its power.

Islamic fundamentalism and Western rationalism have helped to undermine the role of the *pawang* and the *bomoh*, but 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. It's not uncommon, for example, for politicians to call in a *bomoh* during election campaigns to assist in their strategy and provide some foresight.

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.

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

THE POWER OF PETRONAS

Oil was first discovered by the British Resident of the Baran district of Sarawak in 1882. It wasn't until August 1974, though, that Malaysia got around to setting up the national oil and gas company Petrolia Nasional Bhd, better known as Petronas (www.petronas.com.my). It continues to have 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.

Today Petronas is one of Malaysia's largest economic entities, with assets to the value of RM239,077 million, employing 30,000 people in business interests spread across 31 countries. In the year to March 2005, the company – which is government-owned and accountable directly to the prime minister – earned after-tax profits of RM35,356 million on revenue that was up 40.5% from 2004. When it came to bankrolling his beloved Multimedia Super Corridor from Kuala Lumpur (KL) to Putrajaya, no wonder former premier Mahathir Mohamad called upon Petronas.

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 notoriously encouraged birth control in the 1970s and 1980s (to stem a booming population), but that plan backfired and it now provides much encouragement, financial and otherwise, to Singaporeans (in particular, 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 67.7% of exports. Seduced by tax incentives, hamstrung trade unions and a very pro-business government, multinationals have poured billions into the Malaysian economy, particularly during Mahathir's premiership.

Abdullah's stewardship of the economy has been more cautious and less gung ho. The currency was allowed to float freely again in December 2005, and there has been a noticeable pulling back on major construction programmes, such as the 'crooked bridge' link to Singapore (see p249), and a new economic plan that puts the emphasis on education and poverty eradication (see p28). There's also less willingness to prop up national industries such as the Proton car manufacturer. The hoped-for Malaysian silicon valley of Cyberjaya remains pretty much a convenient fiction – yes, you will see the logos of multinationals on the buildings of this hi-tech neighbour to Putrajaya, but the truth is that many offices and factories here remain empty, while the real business of international commerce goes on in KL.

Despite having no natural resources other than its harbour and well-educated population, Singapore has become Southeast Asia's economic boom town. Through the promotion of free trade, and making itself attractive to foreign investors (tax breaks, few currency exchange restrictions and excellent infrastructure), Singapore has created a robust economy growing at around 6% annually. 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

'Singapore has become Southeast Asia's economic boom town'

to ensure the country's future. Massive tourism investments are also in the pipeline.

Brunei's economy is 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

Malaysia's population is currently 24.4 million, with approximately 85% living in Peninsular Malaysia and the remaining 15% in Sabah and Sarawak. Malays, including indigenous groups, make up 61.7% of the population, Chinese make up 23.8%, Indians make up 7.1% and others make up the remaining 7.4%.

Singapore has a population of 4.43 million including foreign residents. Chinese are the largest ethnic group (76.7%) followed by Malays (13.9%), Indians (7.9%) and 1.5% from other races.

Brunei's population is 379,400, with Malays and some other indigenous people accounting for around 70%. Chinese make up 15% of the total; Iban, Dayak and Kelabit people 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 very 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 has done little to quell Chinese or Indian fears, or the reality of their being discriminated against by government policy.

TALKING THE TALK: THE REGION'S MANY LANGUAGES

Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei, all former British colonies, 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, apart from English and Malay, include Tamil, Hokkien, Cantonese and Mandarin, but there are also more Chinese dialects, various other Indian and Orang Asli languages, and even a form of 16th-century Portuguese known as Kristang (see p235). Although all Malaysians speak Malay, 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 in Malaysia and Singapore – both countries have developed their own unique way with the language known respectively as Manglish and Singlish (see p625).

Brunei has a young population: around 30% are under 15.

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 males (*baba*) and females (*nonya*). The Peranakans were often wealthy traders who could afford to indulge their passion for sumptuous furnishings, jewellery and brocades. Their terrace houses were gaily 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.

In the past the government was careful to show even-handedness in cultural issues and keep the Chinese and Indian communities on side. However, many believe that there is a steady movement towards the Islamicisation of Malaysia with recent issues such as the banning (then unbanning) of the Bible in Iban and with controversial conversions from Islam to other faiths becoming headline news and sparks to wider fears in the community.

The once-bitter issue of the promotion of Bahasa Malaysia, the national language, has also ultimately helped unify the country as the proficiency and use of the language has spread among all races. The government has also allayed Chinese and Indian concerns at attempts to introduce it as the sole language of instruction in all levels of education and is again promoting English, for business and practical reasons.

Singaporean government policy has always been to promote 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

No-one is 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.

'No-one is under any illusions about the freedom of the press in the region'

In Malaysia, the *Sarawak Tribune* was shut down after it reprinted the cartoons lampooning the prophet Mohammad that got Denmark into such hot water during 2005. Even so, 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 another interesting move the government has allowed the Doha-based TV news station Al Jazeera to set up its Asian broadcasting centre in KL (in the Petronas Towers).

The valiant online news site Malaysiakini (www.malaysiakini.com) continues to be at the forefront of telling it like it is: its big coup during 2005 was the broadcast of the mobile phone film clip showing how a Chinese woman in police detention was subjected to a humiliating search procedure. Malaysiakini still can't get a licence to become a print publication but it is planning on launching an online TV station called Asia 24-7, covering news and current affairs in the region.

Elsewhere on the internet, locally produced blogs are sprouting up like daisies (now you know what all those people tapping away at laptops in Malaysian cafés are doing!), each providing quirky, unique points of view on life in the region. Blogs Malaysia (www.blogsmalaysia.com) acts like an anarchic clearing house for many of these sites. To go straight to some interesting sites you should check out Kenny Sia's amusing blog (www.kennysia.com) and the award-winning political insights of Jeff Ooi (www.jeffooi.com).

RELIGION

The variety of religions found in the region is a direct reflection of the diversity of races living there. Although Islam is the state religion of Malaysia and Brunei, freedom of religion is guaranteed in both these countries, as it is in Singapore. Hinduism was practised in the region long before Islam became dominant in the mid-14th century. The Chinese religions are as predominant as the people. Christianity has never been strong, but has had an impact upon Malaysian Borneo, where many of the indigenous people have converted, although others still follow their animist traditions.

Islam

Islam came to Malaysia 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 p46), but Islamic law dominated.

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.

Kelantan state is the country's hotbed of Islamic fervour, and the state government is keen to apply *syariah* to all of its citizens although it has failed to do so, so far.

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*.



Islam came to Malaysia peacefully in the 15th century.

HOLGER LEUE

Chinese Religions

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 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.

The most popular gods and local deities, or *shen*, are Kuan Yin, the goddess of mercy, and Toh Peh Kong, a local deity representing the spirit of the pioneers and found only outside China. Kuan Ti, the god of war, is also very popular and is regarded as the god of wealth.

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.

Westerners often have trouble understanding Hinduism, principally because of its vast pantheon of gods. You can look upon all these different gods simply as pictorial representations of the many attributes of one god. 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. The four *Veda* – the books of 'divine knowledge' – which are the foundation of Hindu philosophy, are believed to have emanated from his mouths.

Animism

The religions of indigenous peoples of Malaysia – collectively known as the Orang Asli (see p38) are as diverse as the peoples themselves. Despite their differences, they can generally be grouped together as animists. 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 are used to propitiate these spirits.

'Hinduism in the region dates back at least 1500 years'

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), when the constellation of Pusam is in its ascendancy, and is celebrated with the most gusto at the Batu Caves (p123), just outside of Kuala Lumpur (KL).

The greatest spectacle is the *kavadi* carriers, 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 *ve/ 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. Couples whose prayers for children have been answered carry their babies on their shoulders in saffron cradles made of sugar-cane stalks.

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 and the Waterfall Hilltop Temple, 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 in a procession from the Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple on Serangoon Rd to the Chettiar Hindu Temple (p516).

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 some parts of Sarawak, where the remains of monolithic burial markers and funerary objects still dot the jungle around longhouses in the Kelabit Highlands (p414). 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 women 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 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 (see p216), 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. To find out more about the controversy and other issues facing Muslim women in Malaysia, go to Sisters in Islam (sistersinislam.org.my) – the website of a group of professional Malaysian Muslim women who refuse to be bullied by patriarchal interpretations of Islam.

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

In Islamic Brunei more women wear the *tudong* 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 daringness and originality in modern constructions. Contemporary literature is also showing promise with the region producing authors who are gaining attention in the wider world.

Singapore has boosted spending across the board on arts with the aim of making the island state the arts hub of the region. Malaysia's arts community has it less easy; under the Ninth Malaysia Plan (see p28) government arts and culture spending has been slashed by RM11.6 million. Aiming to boost the profile of the Malaysian theatre and arts scene are the Cameron Arts Awards, funded by Boh Tea; check out the winners on the Kakiseni website (www.kakiseni.com). Mobile phone company Digi (www.digi.com.my) also sponsors the annual Amazing Malaysians awards, which provide funds to an interesting range of local arts projects and individual artists.

Literature

Literature in these parts dates back to the *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals), a history of the Melaka sultanate from the 16th century. Writers of the calibre of W Somerset Maugham, Joseph Conrad and Noel Coward were inspired by the region in the early part of the 20th century. The classic colonial expat experience is recounted by Anthony Burgess in *The Malayan Trilogy* written in the 1950s. You can read of Burgess' own experiences in Kelantan in the first volume of his memoirs, *Little Wilson and Big God* (1987). 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 current bright light of the Malaysian literary scene is Tash Aw. His debut novel, *The Harmony Silk Factory*, is set deep in the heart of Peninsular Malaysia partly during WWII. It has been translated into over a dozen languages and won the 2005 Whitbread First Novel award. Another expat Malaysian Rani Manicka scored a popular hit with her 2003 debut novel *The Rice Mother*, set in Malaysia, and has since followed it up with *Touching Earth*, a harder-edged story about the loss of innocence of

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

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.

'Women had great influence in pre-Islamic Malay society'

two Balinese sisters in London. 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.

Hwee Hwee Tan's *Foreign Bodies* and *Mammon Inc.* are among the best of contemporary Singaporean fiction. Tan pinpoints precisely 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.

If you want to find out more about what people are reading in the region, a couple of good places to start are the website of local publisher Silverfish (www.silverfishbooks.com); and Bibliobibuli (<http://thebookaholic.blogspot.com>), the erudite blog of Sharon Bakar, a Malaysian-based British expat.

Architecture

Malaysia and Singapore have both made their mark in the world of modern architecture with two iconic buildings: the Petronas Towers in KL (p88); and the equally striking Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay complex in Singapore (p515). Both have drawn renewed attention to other interesting skyscrapers and civic buildings in the cities that take inspiration from both local culture (see p89) and the environment – 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 new, and equally space-agey, Supreme Court.

Gaily coloured 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, a lack of internal partitions, and latticelike grilles in the walls. The layout of a traditional Malay house reflects Muslim sensibilities. Notably, 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* (villages) 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 (see p330). In KL there's a fantastic example in the grounds of Badan Warisan Malaysia (see p92) as well as the many old traditional wooden homes of the city's Kampung Baru district.

In Melaka, the Malay house has a distinctive tiled front stairway leading up to the front veranda – to see examples take a wander around Kampung Morten (p233). 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.

Hardly any Malay-style houses have survived Singapore's rapid modernisation – the only place you'll see them is on Pulau Ubin (p522). 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 – close to a million units so far – that the vast majority of Singaporeans call home. If you want to find out more about Singapore's varied mix of architecture drop by the Singapore City Gallery in Chinatown (p518).

Despite its oil wealth, there's little that's flashy in the architecture of Brunei's modest capital, Bandar Seri Begawan. As you'd expect for a Muslim country, the city's skyline is dominated by the striking Omar Ali Saifuddin Mosque. It's quite a different story, however, once you get out to Jerudong, home to the Sultan's opulent palace and the eye-boggling Empire Hotel (p603).

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.

The Tok Dalang, Father of the Mysteries, sits behind a semitransparent screen and manipulates buffalo-hide puppets, whose images are thrown onto the screen. It's a feat of endurance both for performer and audience since the shadow plays can last for many hours. They often take place at weddings or after the harvest.

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*.

Malaysia's premier traditional dance troupe, an ensemble of 30 musicians and 60 dancers, is the Petronas Performing Art Group (PPAG). Its repertoire includes over 100 ethnic dances from across the country, including Chinese and Indian dances. Look out for details of its performances in KL, where you can also see more-regular tourist-orientated dance shows (see p112).

Singapore's leading dance company, Singapore Dance Theatre (www.singaporedancetheatre.com), puts on performances ranging from classical ballet to contemporary dance. The Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society (www.nas.org.sg), which runs Singapore's only full-time troop of Indian dancers and musicians, performs South Indian dance and music and holds an annual drama festival.

When it comes to contemporary drama and dance Singapore has 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), Toy Factory Ensemble (www.toyfactory.org.sg) and the Singapore Repertory Theatre (www.srt.com.sg). A good time to catch new productions is during Singapore Arts Festival (www.singaporeartsfest.com) every June.

In Malaysia, property and industrial giant YTL has invested in the exciting Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre (KLPac; p113); head here or to the Actors Studio in Bangsar to see the latest in Malaysian performing arts. If it's anything by local playwright Jit Murad, grab a ticket



Petronas Towers, Kuala Lumpur

GLENN BEANLAND



Traditional dance and music performance, Kelantan, Malaysia

JEAN-BERNARD CARILLET

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

'Malaysia and Singapore have both made their mark in the world of modern architecture'

immediately. His play *Spilled Gravy on Rice* was a big hit both in Malaysia and Singapore; its subject matter included homosexuality, drug-taking and Zionism, not to mention child abuse, proving that English-language theatre can fly under the censorship radar.

Musicals continue to be popular in both countries, 2006 offering up the traditional in the shape of *Puteri Gunung Ledang – The Musical* (a show based on the tragic love story of the legendary princess of Gunung Ledang and the warrior Hang Tuah, which had already been one of Malaysia's most successful recent movies) – and the contemporary *M, the Opera*, a unconvincing stab at modern opera Malaysian style, all about fashion and vocal histrionics, composed by Saidah Rastam with an original libretto by Jit Murad.

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 Malay music is based largely on the *gendang* (drum), of which there are more than a dozen types. Other percussion instruments include the *gong*, *cerucap* (made of shells), *raurau* (coconut shells), *kertuk* and *pertuang* (both made from bamboo), and the wooden *celampang*. 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. An interesting ensemble is Malaysia's Dama Orchestra (www.damaorchestra.com), which combines modern and traditional Chinese instruments and plays songs that conjure up the smoky elegance of the 1920s and 1930s.

SILAT

Properly known as *bersilat*, this Malay martial art originated in Melaka in the 15th century. Today it is a highly refined and stylised activity, more akin to a choreographed dance than self defence. Demonstrations are often performed at ceremonies and weddings, accompanied by music from drums and gongs. Tourist shows are often put on in Kota Bharu at the Gelanggang Seni (p324).

'Traditional Malay music is based largely on the *gendang* (drum)'

The region has a trio of top-class traditional orchestras. In Malaysia, the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra plays at the Dewan Filharmonik Petronas 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.

On the popular music scene, the Malaysian queen of pop remains the demure Siti Nurhaliza; her recent live album was recorded at London's Albert Hall. The poster boy of every good Muslim girl (and her eternally grateful family) is the devout Mawi; his CD *Akademi Fantasi* was the megahit of 2005. Tapping into more-international pop sensibilities is Reshmonu, an award-winning artist whose album *Monumental – The Journey Continues* was picked up by Sony BMG. Reshmonu sings in English and Malay and you can catch him on Lonely Planet's TV programme *Six Degrees: Kuala Lumpur*. Other local artists to keep an eye out for in the racks of the region's CD shops include: Shelia Majid, a respected Malaysian jazz singer; the surfer rock music band Kugiran (their *Surfin With The Legend* CD sees them cover songs by Malaysian icon P Ramlee); songstress Adibah Noor, who has a bit of an R&B thing going on; and Zainal Abidin, well known on the world music circuit.

In Singapore the lively band scene includes groups such as Electrico and Ugly in the Morning, both of whom produced solid first albums, and jazz artists of an international quality such as pianist Jeremy Montiero and his sister Clarissa.

Crafts

In Malaysia you'll find many traditional crafts still practised. The indigenous peoples of Malaysian Borneo have a particularly rich legacy of arts and crafts. In Brunei, too, crafts (especially *jong sarat* weaving, silverwork and basketware) 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 fabrics are made into clothes, cushion covers, tablecloths or placemats, or simply as works of art. Malay designs are usually less traditional than those found in neighbouring Indonesia.

BASKETRY

The woven baskets of the Iban, Kayan, Kenyah and Penan are among the most highly regarded in Borneo. The most common weaving material is rattan, but bamboo, swamp nipah grass and pandanus palms are also used. 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.

KAIN SONGKET & MENGGUANG

A speciality of Kelantan and Terengganu, *kain songket* is a hand-woven fabric with gold and silver threads through the material. Clothes made

For more information on popular Malaysian crafts visit the website of Karyaneka (www.malysiancraft.com).

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.

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* (shadow puppets). 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.

PUA KUMBU

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.

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 p114) as well as other pewter manufacturers.

WOODCARVING

The Orang Asli tribe of Mah Meri who live in a village on Pulau Carey, off the coast of Selangor, are renowned woodcarving craftsmen; you can see and buy some of their work at Selangor's Orang Asli Museum (p124).

The most skilled carvers of Malaysian Borneo are believed to be the Kenyah and Kayan peoples. In these societies, *kelirieng* (burial columns), of up to 2m in diameter and 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

Although the region's film industry dates back to the 1930s, its heyday was the 1950s when the king of Malaysian cinema was P Ramlee. His directorial debut *Penarik Becha* (1955) was a huge commercial success. Ramlee also acted in some 70 films in his lifetime and remains a national icon.

Malaysia's best-known actress today is Michelle Yeoh, the agile, Ipoh-born star of *Tomorrow Never Dies* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Yeoh gained her fame in Hong Kong and is not involved in the local film scene, which of late has been showing some promise – and not a little controversy.

Yasmin Ahmad's multi-award-winning *Sepet* (2005), a low-budget love story of a Chinese boy and Malay girl, 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. It will be interesting to see how the Malaysian public reacts to the upcoming movie *I Don't Like to Sleep Alone*, by Kuching-born but now Taiwan resident director Tsai Ming Liang. Filmed entirely in KL's Chinatown and Little India the movie also takes a cool look at the tensions in Malaysia's multicultural society and is sure to be imbued with the art house director's usual steamy sexuality. Other recent locally produced Malaysian movies to watch out for are those released by Red Films (www.redfilms.com.my) including Bernard Chauly's *Gol & Gincu* (Goalposts & Lipstick; 2005) and *The Red Kebaya* (www.theredkebaya.com; 2006), directed by Oliver Knott.

Singapore has never been a leading light in film production, but during the 1990s some local movies began to gain international attention, in particular *Bugis Street* and Eric Khoo's *Mee Pok Man*, both released in 1995. Khoo's *12 Storeys* (1997) and most recent *Be With Me* (2005) have since featured in competition at Cannes.

Visual Arts

Among the most interesting and internationally successful of contemporary Malaysian artists are Jalaini Abu Hassan ('Jai'), Wong Hoy Cheong (a major retrospective of his work spanning 20 years was held at the National Art Gallery in 2004), landscape painter Wong Perng Fey, and Yee I-Lann, first recipient of the Australian High Commission Kuala Lumpur residence programme. Amron Omar, from Alor Setar, has focused for nearly 30 years on *silat* (see p56) as a source of inspiration for his paintings – a couple are in the National Art Gallery (p92) in KL.

The best chance you'll have of seeing any of these artists' work is to visit KL's upmarket commercial galleries such as Valentine Willie Fine Art (p113), which represents several of them and produces many fine catalogues to support its often changing exhibitions. It's also refreshing to see that Malaysia Airlines has commissioned several contemporary artists, including Jai and children's book illustrator Yusof Gajah to provide the interior and exterior decoration for KL's monorail trains.

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 Tan Swie Hian, Heman Chong and Francis Ng, all of whom took part in the Venice Biennale of 2003.

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.

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 (4101m) 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 government-owned cattle farm in Australia is larger than this!). It has no mountain ranges or great rivers, and at its widest the 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.

A sparsely populated area of largely unspoiled rainforest, Temburong 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 forests have been cleared, some magnificent stands remain mostly protected by a nationwide system of reserves and parks (p65). With patience and some luck you may well encounter the following animals, birds and reptiles in their natural habitat.

Animals

ORANG-UTAN

Asia's only representative of the great apes, the orang-utan is increasingly rare and found only on the islands of Sumatra and Borneo. Unlike many primates, orang-utans are generally solitary animals; they are also unusual because they build a nest of sticks and branches in which to sleep each night.

Adult males can weigh up to 100kg, stand up to 1.5m tall and have an arm-span of nearly 3m. In contrast, females are of far more delicate build and seldom weigh more than 50kg.

The best places to see them up close are at the Sepilok Orang-Utan Rehabilitation Centre (p467) in Sabah, the Semenggoh Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre (p373) in Sarawak and the Singapore Zoo (p522).

GIBBONS

More closely related to apes than monkeys, gibbons live in the trees, where they feed on fruits such as figs. Gibbons are superbly adapted to their lifestyle: they have small, slender bodies, short legs and long arms to allow them to swing effortlessly through the trees. Like apes they have no tail. 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, but they are generally shy of people.

MONKEYS

Malaysia has 10 species of monkey, divided into langurs and macaques. Langurs (leaf monkeys) are mostly tree-dwelling, and generally have black palms and soles, and grey faces. Macaques have pale palms and soles, and brown- or red-coloured faces; they spend a great deal of time on the ground, although they are also agile climbers.

The greyish-brown long-tailed macaque is the most common and widespread of Malaysia's monkeys. The pig-tailed macaque is slightly bigger, with golden-brown fur; its tail is merely a dangling stump. This species is sometimes trained to pick coconuts.

Malaysia's various species of langur are far more retiring than macaques and some are very attractively marked. The silvered leaf monkey's black fur is frosted with grey tips; this beautiful animal can be observed at Taman Alam Kuala Selangor (p131) in Peninsular Malaysia and at Bako National Park (p368) in Sarawak. The upper body of the banded langur is usually a black or dark grey colour; the spectacled langur has white rings around its eyes; and the maroon langur of Malaysian Borneo has reddish fur similar to that of the orang-utan.

The fantastic proboscis monkey is a type of langur and is probably Malaysia's second-most-famous animal, after the orang-utan. The male proboscis monkey 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



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

DENNIS JONES

The Malaysian Nature Society (www.mns.org.my) runs various nature-related projects across the country and has a range of publications.

of Borneo, where they live almost entirely on leaves. The Sungai Kinabatangan (p470) in Sabah is the best place to look for these monkeys, although there are also colonies in Bako National Park (p368) in Sarawak, and in Brunei.

CATS

Malaysia has many species of wild cat, including the largest and some of the smallest. Several species – such as the tiger (see opposite) – are no longer common because of the pressures of hunting and, more recently, the trade in body parts for their supposed medicinal qualities. The leopard is still occasionally reported on the peninsula; it's a secretive animal and may actually be relatively common.

The black form of the leopard – often called black panther – is more common in Malaysia than the spotted variety. Neither leopard nor tiger has been recorded in Borneo.

Several smaller species of cat hunt birds and small mammals in forests and adjoining plantations, although one – the bay cat – is a specialised fish-eater.

The leopard cat is a widespread species a bit larger than a domestic cat; as its name suggests, it has spotted fur. The marbled cat is similar in size, with less-distinct markings.

CIVETS

Members of this diverse, sometimes attractive group of mainly carnivorous animals bear a superficial resemblance to cats. However, they differ in that they usually have long, pointed snouts. The common palm civet is found throughout Malaysia, even straying into the outskirts of urban areas (including Singapore).

The Malay civet is slightly larger and attractively patterned, with a ringed tail and spotted or striped coat. The binturong is the largest of the civets; it has a shaggy black or dark-brown coat that helps keep it dry in its damp forest habitat.

TAPIR

An extraordinary animal that looks like a cross between a wild pig and a hippo, the Malaysian tapir's only living relatives inhabit the jungles of South and Central America. Tapirs can grow up to 2m in length and weigh some 300kg; they are herbivorous and are sometimes seen at the salt licks in the further reaches of Taman Negara (p285). Adult tapirs have a two-tone colour scheme, almost black in the foreparts, changing to white hindquarters.

PANGOLINS

Also known as the scaly anteater, the pangolin feeds exclusively on ants and termites. It is a small, nonthreatening animal, measuring only 1m in length. It's covered in broad scales like a pine cone, and uses its powerful claws to dig open ant and termite mounds. Its method of self defence is to roll up into a ball. Pangolins are found throughout Peninsular Malaysia and Borneo, often straying into gardens and plantations.

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

ENDANGERED SPECIES

Habitat loss is causing several of the region's animals to be seriously endangered with extinction. The following are among those most at risk.

Asian elephant Protecting Asian elephants, which number only around 1200 on the peninsula, helps safeguard thousands of other species within its habitat. The elephant creates 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. The Kuala Gandah Elephant Conservation Centre (p296) is the place to learn more about the elephant's plight and see some of the magnificent animals.

Clouded leopard Even rarer than the Malaysian tiger is this beautiful animal. In 2003 the Perak Wildlife and National Parks Department caught one that had wandered into a residential area in Temoh, about 50km from Ipoh. It was then handed over to the zoo in Melaka. A US-based project aimed at raising awareness about the leopard's endangered status is the **Clouded Leopard Project** (www.cloudedleopard.org).

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 getting caught up in fishing nets and being hunted. The Malaysian Nature Society has a full report online (www.mns.org.my/marine.php?op=display&id=52).

Giant leatherback turtles All of Malaysia's turtle species are under threat but the numbers for leatherbacks have fallen by a staggering 98% since the 1950s, and 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. To make a donation to sea turtle conservation check out the website of the **Sea Turtle Outreach Program** (www.kustem.edu.my/seatru) and adopt a turtle or a turtle nest, or even volunteer for one of its research projects. Also see p307 for details of the Ma' Daerah Turtle Sanctuary.

Indo-Chinese (Malaysian) tiger Only in 1976 were tigers given legal protection in Malaysia, when it was estimated that there were perhaps only 300 left – nobody knows for sure how many there are today. In 1999 the Malaysia branch of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) set up a project in the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) oil palm plantations in Jerangau Barat, Terengganu, to help cut down on the number of tiger attacks on people. The project ran until September 2003 and was successful in that only one tiger attack had been reported since November 2002. WWF-Malaysia is currently looking at running similar projects in other tiger 'hot spots' such as Ulu Muda in Kedah, Belum and Temenggor Reserves, both in Perak, and in Jeli, Kelantan. For details see www.wwfmalaysia.org/features/special/current.htm. You can also find information at **Save The Tiger Fund** (www.savethetigerfund.org/index.htm).

Sumatran rhinoceros These are found mainly in isolated areas of Sabah and Endau-Rompin National Park (p260) on the peninsula. In Sabah a 2005 report conducted by 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 volunteer on a project to help protect the rhinos check the website of the nonprofit organisation **SOS Rhino** (www.sosrhino.org).

echolocation. There are fruit bats in Taman Negara (p285) and Deer Cave in Gunung Mulu National Park (p405) in Sarawak, where several million insectivorous bats stream out at dusk in wave after wave of flapping black wings.

BIRDS

Even in large cities there are usually a few species of bird easily spotted in parks and gardens, including bulbuls, starlings and house swifts. In Peninsular Malaysia there's excellent bird-watching within a day's reach of Kuala Lumpur; prime locations include Taman Negara (p285), Fraser's Hill (p126) and Taman Alam Kuala Selangor (p131), where you may spot the secretive mangrove pitta, the stately crested serpent eagle and various species of kingfisher.

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.

Both Sabah and Sarawak have fantastic bird-watching, including some 38 species found nowhere else. Good locations include Gunung Mulu National Park (p405), Mt Kinabalu (p439), Sungai Kinabatangan (p470) and the Danum Valley (p474).

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 (p523) is home to 140 species of bird.

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 p622 for details of what to do if this happens). Cobras and vipers are the most dangerous, although the chances of encountering them are low.

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, which can be found in both Peninsular Malaysia and Borneo. These carrion-eaters are especially easy to spot on island beaches – Pulau Perhentian Besar (p313) 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 (p469).

The 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 listed as endangered (see p63).

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

'The reptile you're most likely to see is the monitor lizard'



Green turtle
ERNEST MANEWAL

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.

PALM OIL

Although it was only introduced to Malaysia in the 1860s, the oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*), a native of West Africa, is probably the most common tree in Peninsular Malaysia today. When travelling along rural roads, particularly in Johor, Pahang and Sabah, you'll come across vast plantations of oil palm trees that stretch to the horizon. The plantations have replaced the native jungle that once covered this land, with huge environmental consequences.

Malaysia's first oil palm plantation was established in 1917. Since WWII Malaysia has been the world's top producer of palm oil, and current annual output is around 7.2 million tonnes. The oil is extracted from the orange-coloured fruit, which grows in bunches just below the fronds. It is used primarily for cooking, although research is under way to find other uses, such as for engine fuel. Malaysia has invested heavily in palm oil, and it is one of the country's major primary industry exports.

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.

Plants

The wet, tropical climate of this region produces an amazing range of trees, plants and flowers. Some of the flora is 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. 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 above) and other cash crops – what's left is now usually preserved in national parks and other reserves.

Rainforest is often referred to as dipterocarp forest. Rainforest communities are extremely complex and a single hectare 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 British established the first national park in Malaysia in 1938 and it is now included in Taman Negara (p285), 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 26 other national 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. In all, though, it's estimated that only 5% of the country's natural habitat is fully protected.

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.

MALAYSIA'S TOP 10 NATIONAL PARKS

Park	Features	Activities	Best time to visit	Page reference
Bako	beaches, coastline walks, proboscis monkeys	trekking	May-Sep	p368
Endau-Rompin	lowland forest, unique plants, Sumatran rhinos, waterfalls and rivers	trekking, wildlife spotting	Apr-Sep	p260
Gunung Mulu	caves, the Pinnacles, Headhunters' Trail,	caving, trekking, mountain-climbing	May-Sep	p405
Kinabalu	Mt Kinabalu	mountain-climbing	May-Sep	p437
Niah	caves	caving, trekking	May-Sep	p393
Penang	meromictic lake, monkeys	trekking	Apr-Jul	p191
Perlis	Gua Wang Burma cave, stump-tailed macaques, Malaysia's only semideciduous forest	caving, trekking	Jun-Aug	p217
Pulong Tau	remote jungle, Mt Murud	trekking	year-round	p414
Taman Negara	canopy walkway, hides, jungle	trekking, wildlife-spotting, river trips, trails, rivers	Apr-Sep	p285
Tunku Abdul Rahman	gorgeous sand-fringed islands	snorkelling, diving	May-Sep	p434

Accommodation is not a problem when visiting most national parks. Various categories 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.

Singapore's **National Parks Board** (Nparks; www.nparks.gov.sg) manages 3326 hectares of nature reserve as well as Singapore Botanic Gardens (p520) and Fort Canning Park (p515). The main protected areas are Bukit Timah Nature Reserve (p523), Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve (p523), Chek Jawa on Pulau Ubin (p522) and MacRitchie Reservoir (p523), which at 2000 hectares is the island's largest nature reserve.

For details of Brunei's national parks see p593.

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 (p308)
- Pulau Payar (p209)
- Pulau Perhentian (p313)
- Pulau Redang (p310)
- Pulau Tioman (p265)
- Seribu Archipelago (p258)
- Tun Sakaran (p477)
- Tunku Abdul Rahman (p434)
- Turtle Islands (p469)

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.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Malaysia's care for the environment remains a sensitive issue. The government has long maintained that it is doing its best to balance out the benefits of further development with conservation. This said, Malaysia does have some significant self-created problems to face up to.

In contrast, Singapore is a paragon of environmental enlightenment. Strict laws control littering and waste emissions and they are policed vigilantly. The Singapore Green Plan 2012, a 10-year blueprint for environmental sustainability launched in 2006, 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, and a second botanic garden is slated for the new Marina Bay development.

One of the most significant contributions to a healthy environment has been Singapore's commitment to public transport and control of the motor car – the benefits of which are something that traffic-clogged KL has only recently woken up to.

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 p69) from Indonesia.

Forest Management & Logging

Logging is big business in Malaysia; it is reckoned to generate at least US\$4.5 billion a year and provide hundreds of thousands of jobs. Yet it also wreaks untold ecological damage (see p389 and p472) and has caused the displacement of many tribal people and the consequent erosion of their unique cultures.

Rainforestweb.org (www.rainforestweb.org) reports that since the mid-1990s Malaysia's deforestation rate has been over 2.4% annually. 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 in Sarawak and Sabah, as several national parks and reserves have recently been created or extended, such as the Maliau Basin Conservation Area and the Pulong Tau National Park. The Lower Kinabatangan wildlife sanctuary has finally been gazetted, and wildlife corridors and sustainable logging initiatives introduced. However, the effects of logging are still clearly being felt in the region, which now suffers unusually long floods during the wet season. In May 2006 the headmen of 17 Penan communities on Sarawak's Baram river wrote to the head of the UK lumber company Jewson Ltd, pleading with it to cease using Malaysian-sourced timber. The Penan claim that timber is being extracted from their native land against their will.

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 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.

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.

Another positive government initiative is the Forestry Resource Institute of Malaysia (FRIM) – you can see its work on regenerating rainforests at its base outside KL (p124).

For more details of 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. For up-to-date news and information check out the website of **Rengah Sarawak** (Sarawak News; www.rengah.c2o.org).

Overdevelopment

Malaysia's current government may have reined in the mega projects that were the leitmotif of the Mahathir years, but still 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 but also on indigenous people whose homes and livelihoods are being destroyed.

Economically unnecessary and environmentally unsound dam-construction projects are top of the list of concerns, the most controversial being the Bakun Dam (p388) in Sarawak. Plagued by financing difficulties since its inception, the still-to-be-completed dam has so far forced up to 11,000 indigenous people from their homes. There's now much concern that the Sarawak government plans to set up an aluminium smelting plant to make use of the power generated when this white elephant finally comes on line.

Indigenous people were also affected by the dam built in 2003 on the Selangor River near Kuala Kubu Bharu (KKB) on the way to Fraser's Hill. The precedent for this dam is not good: in 1883 a much smaller dam near KKB burst and destroyed the entire town. For the latest information check the website of Antares (www.xlibris.de/magickriver), a writer, cartoonist and activist formerly known as Kit Lee.

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 – see p67. There's also the ongoing struggle between the Barawan people and the local authorities in Gunung Mulu National Park – see p411.

On hill sides in Peninsular Malaysia, overdevelopment has caused several disastrous landslides. The collapse of a 12-storey building in Selangor in December 1993, which killed 49 people, made the government toughen 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 (p150).

The community-based organisation **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.

The marina being constructed in Tekek on Pulau Tioman (p265) 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.

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. While some of these fires are of natural origin, most are set by Indonesian farmers and plantation companies to clear land for agricultural purposes.

The haze is at its worst in Singapore and parts of Malaysia usually around September and October, just before the rainy season. Because this is a yearly problem in the region, it pays to check the Web for up-to-date reports before heading to Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei, particularly Malaysian Borneo.

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

Food & Drink

Variety is the spice of life. In Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei that claim certainly rings true. Here a simple staple like rice is transformed from *bubur* (rice porridge) to *nasi lemak* (coconut rice); from *ketupat* (compressed rice) to *tuak* (rice wine). Practically every dish offers fresh insight into the history and culture of this colourful region. A mouthful of the Nonya dish *babi pong teh* (stewed pork), for example, reveals how Malay cooking techniques and Chinese ingredients have been combined to create something new. The spices used in curries – turmeric, cumin, coriander – hint at the Arab and Indian merchants who tarried on the shores of Malaysia. The multicultural traditions of the region offer the food-lover a gastronomic experience like no other – so dig in!

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Forget potatoes – rice (*nasi*) and noodles (*mee*) rule in this region. Rice is eaten steamed; fried with other ingredients; boiled into sweet or savoury porridge; or, with glutinous varieties, steamed and moulded into tubes or cubes. Noodles can be made from wheat, wheat and egg, rice, or mung beans, and are used in a bewildering number of dishes, either fried or boiled.

The variety of fresh fish (*ikan*) available is mind-boggling. Malays generally prefer their fish fried whole and stuffed with spices, or chopped into chunks or steaks and served in a spicy *asam* (tamarind) sauce. The Chinese prefer to cook larger fish either steamed (when the fish is extremely fresh), fried or braised. Fish also comes served in a variety of laksa (noodles in a spicy soup) and in the delicious *otak otak* (spiced rectangles of fish paste wrapped in banana leaf and grilled over charcoal).

Shellfish (*karang*) and crustaceans (*unam*) are also highly popular, with tiny oysters popping up in *or luh* (fried oyster omelette), cockles in *char kway teow* (broad, flat rice-flour noodles stir-fried with Chinese sausage and egg in a sweet, dark soy sauce), and whole crabs in pepper-crab and Singapore chilli-crab dishes.

Apart from fish, chicken (*ayam*) is possibly the most consumed meat in the region, especially the ubiquitous Hainanese chicken rice (chicken and rice with chilli-ginger sauce). Beef (*daging lembu*) and mutton (*daging kambing*, which also refers to lamb as well as kid and goat) are common

TOP FIVE ESSENTIAL LOCAL DISHES

In your travels around the region don't miss out on the following:

Ais kacang Beat the heat with a colourful pile of shaved ice with syrup, red beans, jelly, sweet corn and evaporated milk.

Hainanese chicken rice The fragrantly poached chicken comes with a chicken-flavoured mound of rice, a clear soup and a chilli and ginger *sambal* (relish).

Laksa This quintessential noodle dish comes in myriad local variations from Penang's sour sweet *asam* tamarind laksa to Sarawak laksa with a toasted rice and coconut base and kalamansi lime zing.

Nasi lemak Whether you have it for breakfast or lunch this dish, comprising coconut milk-cooked rice, fried anchovies, hard-boiled egg, cucumber slices, crunchy peanuts and *rendang* (a thick meat curry), is a Malaysian classic.

Roti canai The traditional local breakfast is this crispy griddle-fried dough pancake dipped in a thin lentil or chicken curry. Get your fingers sticky and dig in!

Edited by Rosalind Mowe, *Southeast Asian Specialities*, a coffee-table book in Konemann's Culinaria series, is beautifully illustrated with many photographs and sections on Malaysian and Singaporean cuisine.

in Malay dishes such as beef *rendang* (beef in a thick coconut-milk curry sauce), *daging masak kicap* (beef in soy sauce) and *gulai daging* (beef curry).

While pork (*babi*) is considered *haram* (forbidden) among Muslims, the Chinese, Peranakans and Eurasians (but not so much the Indians) revel in its flavour. The Chinese, especially, love the fatty layers of belly pork. Pork ribs are also used to make the peppery, herbal *bak kut teh* (pork-rib soup).

Protein-rich soya bean (*dao*, sometimes also called *tau*) is present in many dishes, whether in the form of bean curd, fermented beans or soy sauce. Pulses – dried beans, peas and lentils – form the basis of many an Indian vegetarian dish, including dhal (lentil, pea or bean, also called *daal*) curry and *dosa*, paper-thin rice-and-lentil crepes served with coconut chutney and curry.

It is impossible to conceive of a Malaysian or Singaporean meal without chilli (*cili*). Blended and ground with other spices, it adds depth to a curry. Chillies blended on their own form the base for many a *sambal* (relish) and chilli sauce.

Considered the heart and soul of Malay curries and sauces, *rempah* is a mix of spices created by pounding a combination of wet (including shallots, lemon grass, garlic, chilli and ginger) and dry (items such as candlenuts, cinnamon, coriander seeds, cumin, cloves and peppercorns) ingredients together to form a paste.

Other flavourings you'll come across include oyster and fish sauces, ketchup, onion and garlic, ginger (*halia*), turmeric (*kunyit*), galangal (blue ginger), lemon grass (*serai*) and pandanus leaves (*daun pandan*).

Among the region's many types of fruit and vegetables are some that you may not be so familiar with. The long, rigid and green bittergourd (*peria*) is usually sliced thinly and fried with shrimp, fried in an omelette, or stuffed with fish paste. With a hollow stem and large, arrowhead leaves, water convolvulus (*kangkong*) is a popular vegetable often served fried with *sambal belacan* (chilli and spicy shrimp-paste).

Butterfly or blue-pea flower (*bunga telang*) is a tiny, deep-blue flower that provides the natural blue colouring for many Malay, Peranakan and Eurasian desserts and rice dishes (it gives the Kelantan speciality, *nasi kerabu* – cooked rice tossed with finely shredded herbs – its bluish hue). The white, mildly sweet, juicy flesh of the yam bean (*sengkuang*) – which is really a tuber – is often eaten raw in salads. When cooked, it is one of the major ingredients in the cooked vegetable stuffing that is served with *popiah* (Peranakan spring rolls that are not deep-fried).

Fruit is usually served raw, ripe and sliced, in a big, mixed fruit platter. They are sometimes used in salads such as *rojak* (salad with a dressing based on shrimp paste) or *kerabu tau geh* (bean-sprout salad).

It is almost impossible to stay neutral about the durian. The creamy, bittersweet flesh is eaten fresh or incorporated in a number of dishes (see boxed text, p73). The dark-purple mangosteen (roughly the size of a tennis ball) has sweet, white flesh inside. Its tart sweetness is often used to balance the rich creaminess of durian.

The red, leathery and hairy skin of rambutans conceals a sweet, succulent, semitranslucent white flesh. Also not so attractive on the outside is jackfruit, but its bright yellow flesh is sugary sweet and wonderfully fragrant. The brown-coloured flesh of the *chiku* is soft and sweet, but the texture is a little sandy. The *jambu* (rose apple) looks like a bell and, when ripe, is bright pink with a waxy skin. Its flesh is watery and sweet. Locals enjoy it sliced and dipped in a combination of dark soy sauce and sliced chillies.

Yvonne Tan's nicely illustrated *Penang Food Odyssey* lists the favourite hawker food and meals around the island. Recipes include those for *asam* laksa and curry Kapitan.

Food From the Heart – Malaysia's Culinary Heritage is a gorgeously photographed book (by SC Shekar) with essays by Dawn Tan. Profits from its sale go to local charities.

Regional Variations

Although the food of the region is as varied as its people, the differences across the three countries can sometimes be very subtle, coming down to, for example, a choice of fish used in a laksa or whether the rice is served shaped into little balls rather than heaped onto a plate.

In the west coast Malaysian states of Kedah and Perlis there's a strong Thai influence. Lemon grass, kaffir lime leaves, lime juice and fish sauce are more common in dishes here. Ipoh, the state capital of Perak, is famed for its Chinese food, such as Ipoh kway teow – rice noodles topped with sauce, shredded chicken and mushrooms.

The food of Penang and Melaka both reflect the intermingling of cultures that has happened in these parts. Dishes such as *murtabak* (pan-fried rice dough with chicken, beef or mutton, or vegetables) and *jiu hoo char* (stir-fried shredded cuttlefish with yam bean) represent Penang's spice-trade-centric history, while Melaka is renowned for its Peranakan (Nonya) dishes combining Malay, European and Chinese cooking styles and ingredients (for more information on Peranakan culture, see p49).

To experience true Malay cuisine dine along the Malaysian east coast in the states of Kelantan and Terengganu. Kelantan in particular boasts some unique specialities such as *nasi ayam percik* (barbecued chicken marinated with spicy coconut gravy) and *nasi kerabu* (blue-tinted rice served with fish crackers and fried salted-fish).

Over in Malaysian Borneo, a variety of fish dishes are popular, including Sabah's *hinava* (raw fish marinated with lime juice and herbs). Sago palm is the main starch component of some tribal meals. Sago-based dishes include *linut*, a thick translucent paste eaten hot with *sambal*. Wild boar and deer are Sarawak favourites, and vegetable dishes made with jungle ferns and *paku* (fern shoots) are not to be missed.

Bruneian cookery is almost identical to Malaysian cuisine, with strong Chinese, Malay and Indian influences. The country also hosts plenty of Western-style cafés and restaurants.

In food-crazy Singapore you can eat just about anything; a couple of representative dishes are Hainanese chicken rice and Singapore chilli crab.

Celine Marbeck's *Cuzinha Cristang: A Malacca-Portuguese Cookbook* offers an overview of the Portuguese-influenced food culture, still surviving after 600 years, of Melaka.

THE ART OF FUSION

Malaysians and Singaporeans are long time masters at dipping and diving into the region's varied cultures for their culinary inspiration, so it's no surprise that both nations have taken to the whole modern fusion movement like ducks to water. Here's a roll call of some of the more intriguing-sounding fusion dishes we came across in Kuala Lumpur (KL) and Singapore.

- Anglo Indian cheese chop, Hindustani vegi-rolls, penne a la India and spaghetti korma – That Indian Thing (p107)
- Otak spaghetti and otak sandwich – Ikopi (p107)
- Grilled foie gras saté with peanut sauce – Frangipani (p106)
- Mexican-meets-Singaporean: chilli crab–meat enchiladas – Cha Cha Cha (p560)
- Sri Lankan crabs done southern Chinese Foochow-style – seasoned, steamed, then chilled and served with hot chilli sauce – Singapura Seafood Restaurant (p561)
- Italian/Australian/French: squid-ink ravioli with Balmain Bugs in a tomato compote – Coriander Leaf (p556)
- Cambodian chilli and basil chicken with *gỏi cuốn* (Vietnamese rice paper rolls) – IndoChine Waterfront (p556)

VARIATIONS ON A STINKY THEME

When it comes to durians, Malaysians aren't happy to leave a great thing be. The so-called king of fruit turns up in a variety of recipes including *durian pengat*, a porridgelike sweet made by cooking durian pulp, coconut cream and palm sugar until gooey-thick; the black saccharine and chewy long-stewed *dodol durian*; and Nonya-style *yulian gao*, a cake sold in cylindrical 20cm sticks. Vendors add durian to their *ais kacang* (Malaysian iced-dessert), roti (bread) and Chinese mooncakes; batter and deep-fry it, tempura-style; and make it into chips. Restaurants serve durian gateau and tiramisu. Extremists may want to try *tempoyak* (fermented and near-alcoholic durian pulp) mixed with fish curry, *sambal* (relish) and rice. Over-indulged by all means, but just remember that despite its stinky odour Malays believe that durian is a powerful aphrodisiac, hence the old adage, 'When the durians go down, the sarongs go up'.

DRINKS

Freshly made fruit juices are readily available at most hawker centres and even in some shopping malls. As well as the familiar options, there's sugar cane juice, pressed straight from the cane and an amazing thirst-quencher when served with a wedge of lemon; soursop, a dark green, prickly fruit with a slightly acidic, tropical-flavoured pulp; and *kalamansi* – a tiny, mouthwatering type of lime.

Coconut water (*air kelapa*) is very popular, usually served in the actual coconut. The eye-catchingly pink *air bandung* combines rose syrup and condensed milk. There's also soya-bean milk (*air soya*), and the black-coloured grass-jelly drink that is considered a great herbal tonic.

Tea (*teh*) and coffee (*kopi*) are both fantastically popular, with the per capita consumption of tea in Malaysia alone about half a kilogram a year. Tea is brewed for longer to give it stronger flavour and is often served with thick condensed milk; a favourite style is *teh tarik* (stretched tea) where the tea is poured from a height back and forth between cups to cool it and increase its flavour. Coffee is equally strong and again comes with condensed milk unless you specify otherwise.

Despite alcohol consumption being frowned upon in predominantly Muslim Malaysia, alcohol is available and there are some local tipples to try, including toddy (palm-sap wine) and *tuak* (rice wine), the latter a speciality of the tribal people of Borneo.

CELEBRATIONS

In this region every event, from Chinese New Year to the Muslim Hari Raya Puasa to the Indian Deepavali, is a banquet of delights.

Traditional weddings can include days of feasting. Much of the food bears symbolic significance. A Peranakan mother-in-law, for example, may present a special *nasi lemak* (coconut rice with fried fish) to the mother of her son's bride, to acknowledge that the bride is a virgin. At Malay weddings, guests are presented with ornate, beautifully packaged gifts of hard-boiled eggs when they leave – a wish for fertility and offspring.

To celebrate births across most cultures in Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei, the baby's first month is marked with a banquet attended by friends and family. On the 100th day, some Chinese families cook a chicken, and its tongue is rubbed on the baby's lips to ensure the child will be an eloquent speaker.

On progressive birthdays in Peranakan and Chinese families, for example, the birthday person is served *diam mee*, fine egg noodles and hard-boiled eggs (some use quail eggs) in a sweet soup. The noodles

Lonely Planet's *World Food: Malaysia & Singapore* by Su-Lyn Tan gives an in-depth view of all that both these countries offer in terms of food and drink.

represent long life. One should take care never to break the noodles while lifting them up, as this represents a life cut short. *Shou tao* (longevity peach buns) shaped like peaches (believed to symbolise spring-time and beauty) and filled with red-bean or lotus-seed paste are another enduring favourite.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

The neighbourhood *kedai kopi* or *kopi tiam* (both the Malay and Hokkien terms are commonly used, the latter more so in Singapore) is a no-frills café where neighbours may stop for a *kopi* or *teh*, and a meal. They are usually open throughout the day and, some, much like hawker centres, have individual stalls that specialise in specific dishes.

The hawker meal is central to the experience of eating in the region. Great effort has been made (especially in Singapore) to raise the hygiene standards of hawker food by moving hawker carts off the streets and into permanent stalls at hawker centres and food courts. But locals will argue that the best food is still found at the compact little kitchens-on-wheels that line alleyways and street corners, fill whole hawker enclaves and cluster around popular coffee shops.

That said, it's difficult to define street food purely as food served at these roadside stalls. There is very little difference between the types of dish served from a street-side hawker cart and a stall in a hawker centre or food court (in Singapore these carts have almost disappeared, although they are still to be found throughout Malaysia).

Restoran (restaurants) can refer to a broad variety of eateries, ranging from humble joints with no air-conditioning, surly service and decidedly local items on the menu, to swish fine-dining establishments with designer interiors, foreign chefs and sommeliers, and cutting-edge cuisine.

Roving drink carts wheeled by vendors dishing up various drinks, usually juices, are commonly found on most busy street corners in Malaysia. In Singapore, search for them in hawker centres, food courts and shopping malls. Breakfast in the region is usually served between 7am and noon, lunch from noon to 2.30pm and dinner from 6pm until 10pm.

Apart from in Brunei, alcohol is freely available, but it's likely to be more expensive than you'd pay at home and recreational drinking is the preoccupation of a relatively younger set. In more Malay (ie Muslim)

'Ketchup' comes from the word *ke-tsiap* – a Chinese fish sauce encountered by European traders in the ports of Melaka and Penang.

TRAVEL YOUR TASTE BUDS

Adventurous gourmands should seek out and order the following:

- *Perut ikan* (fish stomach) – head to Penang for this dish of fish innards cooked in a coconut curry, lightly scented with mint, and presented on top of sliced beans and pineapple.
- *Tempoyak* (fermented salted durian) – Perak natives mix durian flesh with salt and leave it in an airtight jar in the refrigerator for at least three days. Most commonly mixed with pounded chilli to make a *sambal* (relish) that is eaten with rice, it can also be incorporated in curry dishes.
- *Siat* (sago grubs) – stir-fried with shallots and ginger, these fat grubs are a protein-rich delicacy in Sarawak.
- Fish-head curry – trust us, this Singaporean speciality tastes fabulous, especially the soft muscle around the eyeballs.
- Frog porridge – it may sound disgusting, but the frog's legs in this comforting dish taste just like chicken (don't they always?) and it comes in either a spicy or nonspicy version.

KUALA LUMPUR & SINGAPORE FOOD GUIDES

We've done our utmost to search out the best dining possibilities in Kuala Lumpur (KL) and Singapore, two cities high up on our personal list of favourite dining destinations in the world. However, if you really want the lowdown on where to go, ask a local. What's that, you don't know any locals? No worries, help is at hand in the shape of two local food guides and websites.

In KL, the gourmands' handbook is **The Foodsters' Guide**, a refreshingly down-to-earth compilation of some of the reviews and features that appear on the website www.friedchillies.com/fc/. The guide also has recommendations for food road trips to Penang, Perak, Melaka and Johor, while the website includes a discussion board where you can find out what's getting local foodies fired up.

In Singapore the street-food and restaurant scene is very ably covered by **Makansutra** (www.makansutra.com), which appears both online and as a more-or-less annual print guide; it has recently published a guide to Malaysia, too. Check out their suggested tours of the 15 Singaporean Hawker Legends or sign up for one of its guided food safaris (see p533).

parts of the country you'll be restricted to drinking at Chinese restaurants and cafés, and top-end hotels.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Although there's an abundance of fruit and vegetables available in these countries, purely vegetarian Malay dishes are not common. Seafood and meat products are often used as flavouring for many dishes.

This said, the prevalence of Hindu and Buddhist cultures in the region also means that finding purely vegetarian restaurants in most of the big cities and towns shouldn't be too problematic. Head for the Little Indias of Kuala Lumpur (KL) or Singapore and you'll discover a wide range of restaurants serving great vegetarian food, from roti and dhal for breakfast to thali (meal platter of rice, curried veg soup and breads) for lunch and dinner. See the Eating sections in KL (p104) and Singapore (p554) for reviews of places serving vegetarian food. Pure vegetarian Buddhist Chinese restaurants are also a great option – some of the flavoured tofu and other fish- and meat-substitute-based dishes are so skilfully prepared at these places that you'd swear they really did contain prawns, beef or chicken.

Away from the big cities, your best bet is to stick to simple noodle and rice dishes and salads such as *rojak* (without the fermented shrimp paste, *belacan*, if you don't do seafood), always specifying to the cooks and staff that you are vegetarian (*Saya hanya makan sayuran*). If you're a vegan say *saya tidak makan yang di perbuat dari susu atau daging* (I don't eat dairy products or meat).

EATING WITH KIDS

The good news for those travelling with children is that in the bigger towns and cities of the region you'll rarely be far from a fast food-joint of the type that kids the world over crave. Having said this, the relatively high standards of food preparation and the good quality of ingredients and water mean that you shouldn't be afraid that your children (and you) eat what the locals do. A meal at a hawker centre can be not only tasty but also an educational experience, an opportunity to get to know the various cultures of the region through their different foods. Dishes you should have no problems getting the little darlings to wolf down include satay beef or chicken, and the lurid shaved-ice mountains of *ais kacang*. If they don't mind a bit of spice and getting their fingers messy (and who doesn't?) then chilli crab is also fun for older kids.

'purely vegetarian Malay dishes are not common'

HABITS & CUSTOMS

Eating is pretty much an obsession with Malaysians and Singaporeans, and it may seem that they eat all the time! Breakfast is usually bought from a roadside or hawker stall on the way to work and may consist of anything from a filling *nasi lemak*, soupy Chinese noodles, delicate *dosa* or soft-boiled eggs and *roti kaya* (toast with coconut egg jam), to an egg McMuffin. The mid-morning snack may be a curry puff filled with a dry chicken-and-potato curry, and a quarter of a hard-boiled egg, or *you char kway* (a deep-fried dough stick) – and a *kopi* (coffee with sweet condensed milk).

Lunch starts around noon and runs until 2.30pm. At the numerous hawker areas and food centres you'll discover that diners first focus on scoring themselves a clean table and seat before ordering a one-course meal of local favourites such as noodles or clay-pot rice. Eating is a functional (and often hot and sweaty) affair at this time of day. It's common for diners to share the empty seats at their table with perfect strangers. In swankier, air-conditioned food courts expect, apart from the local specialities, renditions of Western, Japanese, Thai and other foods, all of which reveal the intrinsic openness the locals have towards different cuisines.

For busy couples and families, dinner is also often eaten at hawker stalls. Meals are more substantial, and diners tend to mix their cuisines, maybe opting for an Indian salad, a Malay rice dish and a Chinese dessert. Home-cooked dinners, on the other hand, tend to be centred on just one style of cuisine, usually that traditional to the family. Then, there's always supper. After partying into the wee hours, it's back to the hawker stalls for many locals to wind down over barbecued chicken wings, peppery pork-rib soups and greasy *or luah* (fried oyster omelette) – all wonderful at soaking up all that alcohol!

At home Malays and Indians often eat with their fingers, while the Chinese use chopsticks. If they are using cutlery, people in the region tend to opt for spoons and forks, rather than a knife and fork. When eating some dishes, such as a banana-leaf meal, part of the experience is to dig in with fingers, but if you're squeamish about this the eatery will oblige with a spoon and fork.

COOKING COURSES

With all this wonderful food around it's not surprising that there are several people on hand to show you how to cook it. The best places to head are the major cities with Singapore in particular specialising in cookery courses (see p532). In KL you can also try your hand in the kitchen (p97) while on the other side of the country in Kota Bharu it's possible to take a Malay cookery workshop (p324).

IN PRAISE OF THE MAMAK

You've not really eaten in Malaysia unless you've joined the locals contentedly slurping *teh tarik* (stretched tea) or chowing down noodles at their favourite *mamak* stall or café – this is where Malaysians head when they crave comfort food. The equivalent of a greasy spoon café, *mamak* places specialise in dishes such as *maggi goreng* (Maggi brand noodles fried and topped with a fried egg) and *nasi lemak* (coconut rice), the closest thing Malaysia has to a truly national dish. There's often an Indian flavour to the food but *mamak* cooking is quite distinct from regular Indian cuisine. *Mamak* chefs are mainly Indian Muslims, so their recipes contain the beef forbidden to Hindus; a classic *mamak* creation is the *murtabak*, a pan-fried dough packet of minced beef, mutton or chicken. *Mamak* curries are often milder and there's an overall comforting sweetness to the cooking.

The Food of Malaysia, edited by Wendy Hutton, is a good collection of local recipes, all nicely photographed in colour.

My Great Grandma Never Left our Kitchen is Shirley Zecha's personal historical journey through the Nonya, Chinese and Indonesian-Dutch home-cooked cuisine of her family.

DINING DOS & DON'TS

If eating with your fingers:

- Wash your hands first
- Remember to use serving spoons, not your fingers, to take food from the communal dish
- Use your right hand, and scoop up the food using just the tips of your fingers
- Mix your curries with your rice well, before raising a mouthful to your lips

And a few dining no-nos:

- Don't serve alcohol or pork to Muslims
- Avoid serving beef to Hindus or Buddhists
- Never stick your chopsticks into a bowl of rice – this symbolises death to the Chinese

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 p624.

Where's a...?

restaurant
hawker centre

Can I see the menu?

I'd like...

What's in this dish?

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.

... di mana?

kedai makan

pusat penjaja

Minta senarai makanan?

Saya mau...

Ini termasuk apa?

Kurang pedas.

Saya suka pedas lagi!

Minta bon.

Sedap sekali, terima kasih.

Saya tak mau daging.

Saya hanya makan sayuran.

Menu Decoder

achar

ais kacang

aloo gobi

ayam goreng

bak chang

bak kut teh

belacan kangkong

biryani

carrot cake

cendol

char kway teow

char siew

vegetable pickle

dessert of ice shavings topped with syrups, coconut milk,

red beans, seeds and jelly

Indian potato-and-cauliflower dish

fried chicken

rice dumpling filled with savoury or sweet meat and

wrapped in leaves

pork-rib soup with hints of garlic and Chinese five-spice

water convolvulus stir-fried in prawn paste

steamed basmati rice oven-baked with spices and meat,

seafood or vegetables

omelette-like dish made from radishes, egg, garlic and

chilli; also known as *chye tow kway*

drink/dessert of coconut milk and palm-sugar syrup with

fine short strings of green-bean flour dough

broad noodles, cockles, Chinese sausage and eggs fried in

chilli and black bean sauce

sweet roasted pork fillet

chicken rice	steamed chicken, served with rice boiled or steamed in chicken stock, slices of cucumber and a chilli-ginger sauce
clay-pot rice	rice cooked in a clay pot with chicken, mushroom, Chinese sausage and soy sauce
congee	Chinese porridge
dhal	dish of puréed lentils
dim sum	sweet and savoury mini-dishes served at breakfast and lunch; also known as <i>dian xin</i> or <i>yum cha</i>
fish-head curry	red snapper in curry sauce
gado gado	cold dish of bean sprouts, potatoes, long beans, bean curd, rice cakes and prawn crackers, topped with a spicy peanut sauce
Hokkien mee	yellow noodles fried with sliced meat, boiled squid, prawns and strips of fried egg
idli	steamed rice cake
ikan asam	fried fish in sour tamarind curry
kari ayam	curried chicken
kofta	minced-meat or vegetable ball
kopi-o	black coffee
korma	mild Indian curry with yogurt sauce
kueh melayu	sweet pancakes filled with peanuts, raisins and sugar
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 asam laksa), a version that has a prawn paste and tamarind-flavoured gravy
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 rasam on the side
mee goreng	fried noodles
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
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 bills</i> , peanuts and a curry dish
nasi padang	Malay rice and accompanying meat and vegetable dishes
pilau	rice fried in ghee and mixed with nuts, then cooked in stock

SERVICE CHARGE & TAXES

In the more expensive hotels and restaurants of Malaysia and Singapore you'll be charged a government tax of 5%, and most likely a service tax of 10%. This often expressed as ++ on the menu.

popiah	similar to a spring roll, but not fried
raita	side dish of cucumber, yogurt and mint
rasam	spicy soup
rendang	spicy coconut curry with beef or chicken
rijstaffel	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 udang	hot curried prawns
sambar	fiery mixture of vegetables, lentils and split peas
samosa	pastry filled with vegetables or meat
satay	pieces of chicken, beef or mutton that are skewered and grilled
soto ayam	spicy chicken soup with vegetables and potatoes
steamboat	meats, seafood and vegetables cooked at the table by being dipped into a pot of boiling clear stock
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 yogurt before baking
tom yum kung	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 tau foo	bean curd stuffed with minced meat
you char kway	deep-fried Chinese dough sticks
yu yuan mian	fish-ball soup
yu tiao	deep-fried pastry eaten for breakfast or as a dessert

Food Glossary

ayam	chicken
belacan	fermented prawn paste
bhindi	okra (lady's fingers)
brinjal	aubergine (eggplant)
chapati	griddle-fried wholewheat bread
chilli padi	extremely hot small chilli
choi sum	popular Chinese green vegetable, served steamed with oyster sauce
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	puréed lentils
dosa	large, light, crispy pancake
dow see	fermented, salted black beans
fish sauce	liquid made from fermented anchovies and salt
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
ikan bilis	small deep-fried anchovies
kangkong	water convolvulus; thick-stemmed type of spinach
kecap	soy sauce
keema	spicy minced meat
kepala ikan	fish head, usually in curry or grilled
kuéh mueh	Malay cakes
kway teow	broad rice-noodles
lassi	yogurt-based drink
lombok	type of hot chilli
mee pok	flat noodles made with egg and wheat
mee	noodles
naan	tear-shaped leavened bread baked in a clay oven
nasi	rice
pakora	vegetable fritter
pappadam	Indian cracker
phrik	chillies
pisang goreng	banana fritter
pudina	mint sauce
sambal	sauce of chilli, onions and prawn paste that has been fried
santan	coconut milk
Szechuan	region in south central China famous for its spicy cuisine; also spelt Sichuan
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