

Johor



Lashed to Singapore across the Strait of Johor by a Causeway and bridge, Johor is the Malay Peninsula's southernmost and most populous state and one of Malaysia's most economically vibrant regions. Although eclipsed by the dazzling city-state of Singapore, the state capital Johor Bahru (JB) has forged a robust and healthy economy. Travel-wise, Johor Bahru's squalid central core north of the Causeway is a turn-off, even for those fleeing squeaky clean Singapore, but determined visitors can seek refuge in pockets of interest, not least of all the impressive Royal Abu Bakar Museum and JB's reputation for tasty dining.

But there's little reason to linger in Johor Bahru and travellers will be quick to trade its urban monotones for Johor's abundant natural charms. The relaxed fishing village of Mersing on the east coast dispatches legions of wayfarers bouncing over the waters of the South China Sea to the beautiful islands of the Seribuat Archipelago. Most reach dry land at Pulau Tioman in Pahang state, one of Malaysia's most stunning isles, but there's a tempting cluster of smaller and less-visited islands to select from in the aquamarine waters. For those seeking sun, sand, snorkelling and all the trappings of an island paradise, there's little need to go further.

For those aiming to hit the high ground, Gunung Ledang offers a great escape in the far west of Johor. Further inland, trekkers can penetrate Endau-Rompin National Park and explore some of the last undisturbed swathes of lowland rainforest in Peninsular Malaysia, where excellent hiking opportunities abound and rumours of an elusive apeman, the Snaggle-Toothed Ghost, persist.

HIGHLIGHTS

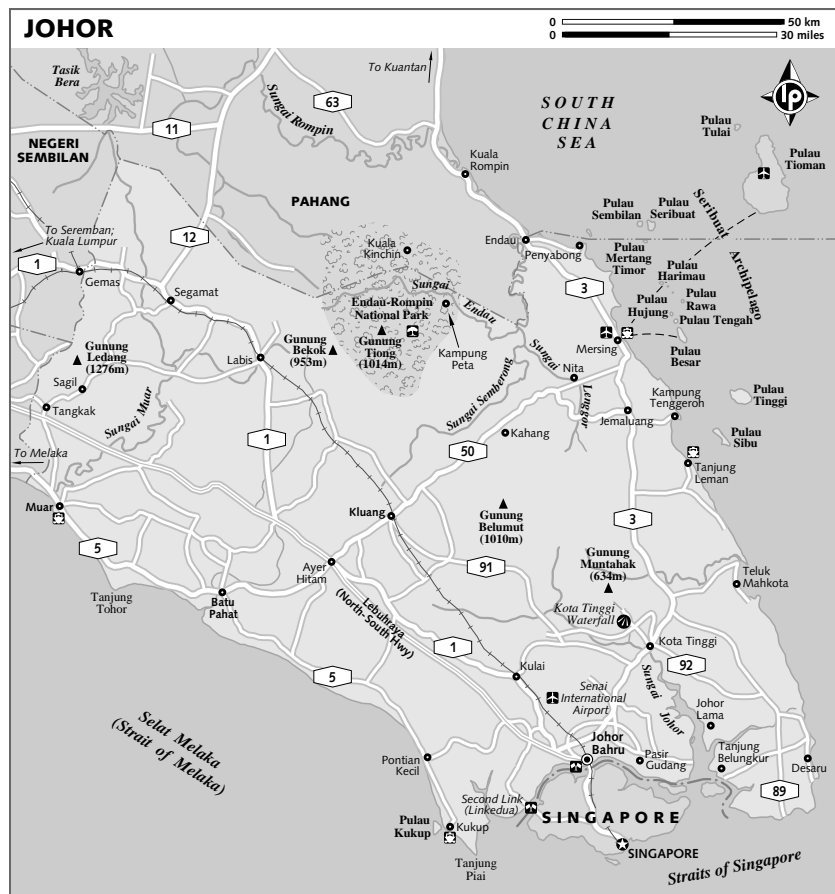
- Admiring the sultan's treasures at the **Royal Abu Bakar Museum** (p249) in Johor Bahru (JB)
- Clambering up **Gunung Ledang** (p255), Johor's loftiest peak
- Recharging in unhurried **Mersing** (p255) and launching trips to the breathtaking islands nearby
- Immersing yourself in the waters and beautiful island panoramas of the **Seribuat Archipelago** (p258)
- Penetrating the jungle and pondering the thundering waterfalls of **Endau-Rompin National Park** (p260)



■ TELEPHONE CODES: 06, 07

■ POPULATION: 3 MILLION

■ AREA: 19,984 SQ KM



History

Johor's history is really a continuation of Melaka's. With the fall of Melaka to the Portuguese in the 16th century, Johor emerged as the pre-eminent Malay state, its rulers seen as the protectors of the western Malay states. The Portuguese soon attacked Johor, but were eventually content to allow its leaders to rule from their capital on Sungai Johor (Johor River), despite the sultans' impediment to trade in the area.

The kingdom of Aceh on the northern tip of Sumatra also had ambitions in the area. The second half of the 16th century saw a three-way struggle between the Portuguese, Johor and Aceh for control of the peninsula and Selat Melaka (Strait of Melaka), with

Achinese attacks on Johor continuing well into the 17th century.

Johor's trump card came in the form of the Dutch, with whom they formed an alliance to take over Melaka in 1641 (see p33). A war with the Bugis (a warrior-like seafaring group of Malay settlers from Macassar (Ujung Padang) in Celebes who rose to power in Selangor) in 1716 weakened Johor, and further political instability followed when a Minangkabau, Raja Kecil of Siak, claimed the throne and overthrew the weak sultan in 1719. His control lasted for just two years, when the Buginese installed Sulaiman, the son of the former sultan Abdul Jalil, on the throne. His descendants ruled the state until it eventually

disappeared in the early years of the 20th century. Throughout the 18th century the Bugis influence in the state increased. However, when the Dutch East India Company wrested control of Riau (in Indonesia) and Johor in 1784, the era of Bugis domination of western Malaya came to an end.

In 1819, with the court of the Johor sultan split by Malay and Bugis factions, Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles succeeded in bringing about the cession of Singapore to the British and the pensioning-off of the sultans, while actual power went to the *temenggong* (Malay minister in charge of defence and justice). The *temenggong* continued to exercise proficient rule in the state, the most notable among them being the flamboyant Abu Bakar, who elevated himself to the position of sultan of Johor in 1886. Through his contacts with influential people in London and Singapore, he was able to resist British attempts to bring Johor closer under its control. Abu Bakar also undertook an ambitious programme of modernisation for the state, while continuing to live the high life. Today he is fondly remembered as the Father of Johor.

Abu Bakar's successor and son, Ibrahim, was less powerful and in 1914 was forced by the British to accept a 'general adviser' who had powers similar to those exercised by the British Residents in other states. Sultan Ibrahim was still the ruler of Johor when it became part of the Federation of Malaya in 1948. The state capital Johor Bahru (JB) was only promoted to the rank of city in 1994.

Climate

The temperature in Johor ranges from 21°C to 32°C, with an average humidity exceeding 82%. Although there is rain through the year, the wettest months are from May to December.

National Parks

Johor's prime national park, Endau-Rompin (p260), is a remote 870-sq-km expanse of jungle in the north. For details of other parks, contact the **Johor National Parks Corporation** (☎ 07-223 7471; www.johorparcs.com).

Getting There & Around

The Lebuhraya (North-South Hwy), connecting Johor Bahru and Kuala Lumpur, is the main transport artery to the north.

Johor Bahru is also connected to Kuala Lumpur (KL) by rail and is accessed from Singapore by rail and road. There are also boat services to ports in Sumatra from Johor Bahru. The airport is 32km northwest of JB, in Senai. At Ayer Hitam on the Lebuhraya (North-South Hwy), Route 3 in the east connects Mersing to Johor Bahru.

See transport sections in Johor Bahru (p252), Muar (p254) and Mersing (p258) for details of connections to destinations within Johor and to the rest of Peninsular Malaysia.

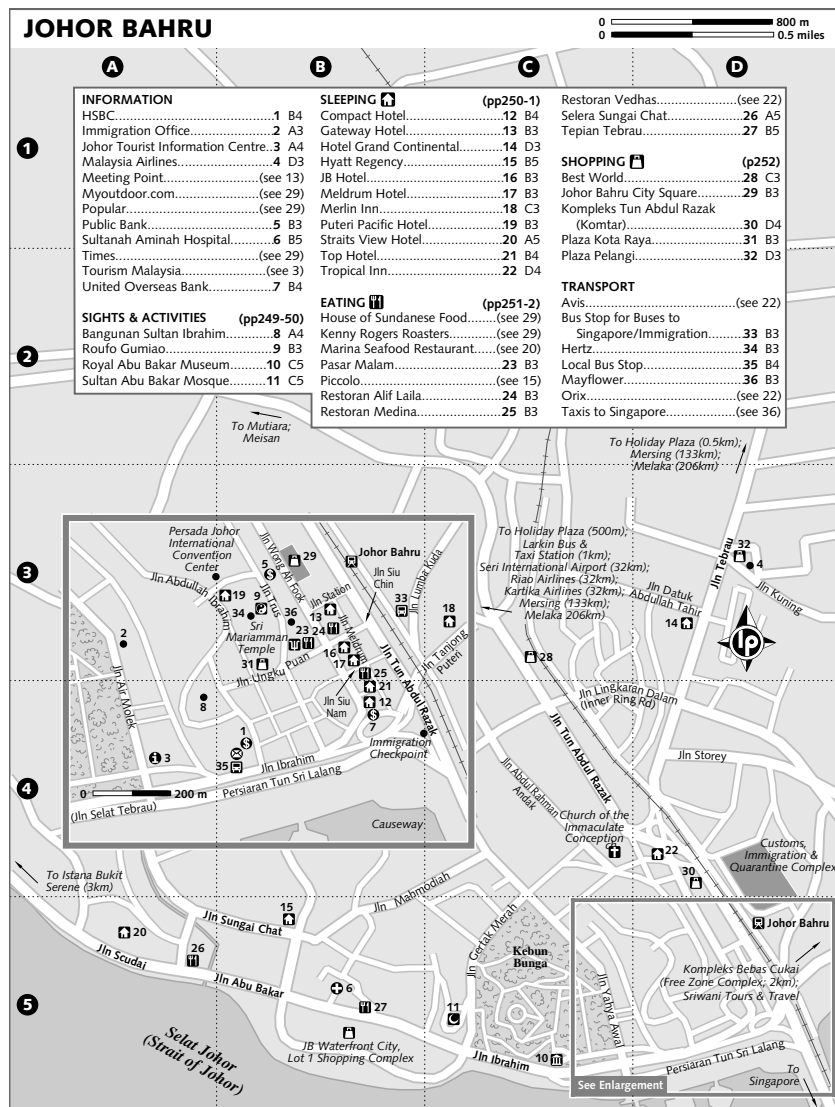
JOHOR BAHRU

☎ 07

Capital of the state of Johor, Johor Bahru (popularly called JB) is the southern gateway to Peninsular Malaysia, connected to Singapore by road and rail across a 1038m-long Causeway. JB inevitably suffers from comparisons with its successful, plutocratic southern neighbour. Historical significance and pockets of interest aside, few foreign travellers linger in JB, and the city is largely a transit point for those on the way to more exotic destinations. On the practical side, flying into or out of JB rather than using Singapore as a regional transport hub can net big savings on tickets (p505).

On weekends and public holidays, Singaporeans flock across the Causeway for shopping and excitement. Central JB exudes a seedy border-town feel, but a government crackdown on JB's fleshpot reputation, coupled with a spiralling crime rate (including bag-snatching and car theft) have sent male Singaporeans elsewhere for their paid pleasures. Street theatre is provided by medicine vendors dangling snakes and promising penis enlargement with their elixirs; turbaned *bomoh* (Islamic spiritual healers) selling magical 'love oil' at astronomical prices; and Chinese fortune tellers divining futures with the hexagrams of the *yijing*. (Book of Changes or I-Ching). The *kedai gunting rambut* (barber shops) are a frequent sight, offering not haircuts, but woken.

A major part of the Singapore-Johor-Riau growth triangle (Sijori), JB is a burgeoning centre of investment and construction. A distinctively designed international convention centre, topped with an angled, oblate roof, is



going up while a colossal construction site adjacent to the train station is set to house the vast new Customs, Immigration and Quarantine complex (CIQ) complex; tentatively due for completion in 2006), changing the face of Johor Bahru at one costly swipe. Relations with its southerly neighbour continue to be prickly and Malaysia and Singapore are

still wrangling over a new bridge to replace the aged Causeway (see opposite).

Orientation

The road and railway across the Causeway drive straight into the heart of JB. The train station – awaiting reinvention as JB Sentral, a major component of the colossal

construction efforts shaking up the area – is just east of the tatty grid of streets that make up the centre of town. West of the Causeway, Jln Ibrahim stretches along JB's waterfront, leading you to the city's colonial district with its parkland, colonial buildings and museum. The Second Link (Linkedua) between Johor and Singapore connects Tanjung Kupang in the southwest of Johor with Tuas in Singapore's west.

The Larkin long-distance bus and taxi station is 5km northwest of the train station. Senai International Airport is 32km northwest of the city centre, in Senai.

Street names often change several times in the space of a few kilometres eg Jln Air Molek becomes Jln Yahya Awal as it crosses Jln Gerak Merah. In similar fashion, the major Jln Ibrahim undergoes several name changes as it heads away from the Causeway.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Popular (☎ 221 8970; Johor Bahru City Sq, 108 Jln Wong Ah Fook)

Times (☎ 221 9134; Lot M4-11 & M4-12, Level 4, Johor Bahru City Sq, 108 Jln Wong Ah Fook)

IMMIGRATION OFFICES

Immigration office (☎ 224 4255; 1st fl, Block B, Wisma Persekutuan, Jln Air Molek)

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet cafés can be found in most shopping malls around town (see p252).

Meeting Point (59 Jln Meldrum; per hr RM3; 10.30am-10pm) Just south of the Gateway Hotel.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Sultanah Aminah Hospital (☎ 223 1666; Jln Skudai)

MONEY

Moneychangers infest the central areas, and rates are competitive. The following all have Maestro, Plus, MasterCard, Visa and Cirrus ATMs.

HSBC (Jln Timbalan) Has a 24-hour ATM.

Public Bank (Jln Wong Ah Fook)

United Overseas Bank (2 Jln Wong Ah Fook) Has a 24-hour ATM.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourism Malaysia (☎ 222 3590; www.johortourism.com.my; 5th fl, Jotic Bldg, 2 Jln Air Molek; 9am-5pm Mon-Sat)

Johor Tourist Information Centre (Jotic; ☎ 223 4935; 5th fl, Jotic Bldg, 2 Jln Air Molek; 9am-5pm Mon-Sat)

TRAVEL AGENTS

Myoutdoor.com (www.myoutdoor.com; Ground fl, Jotic Bldg, 2 Jln Air Molek; 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Specialising in trips to Malaysia's islands.

Dangers & Annoyances

Although travelling in JB is generally safe, visitors should be alert to motorcycle-riding bag-snatchers.

Sights

ROYAL ABU BAKAR MUSEUM

Once the Johor royal family's principle palace, the marvellous Istana Besar was built in Victorian style by Anglophile sultan Abu Bakar in 1866, and is open to the public

BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATERS?

The Second Link across the Strait of Johor from the west of Singapore has eased traffic flows, but the main Causeway connecting Johor Bahru and Singapore still suffers from horrifying congestion. Over 60,000 cars daily grind across the Causeway and the Johor Bahru rush-hour tail-back can have commuters chewing their steering wheels. A new causeway bridge is the obvious answer, and is crucial to the economic development of Johor, but Malaysia and Singapore have been at odds over this long-time pet project of former Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad.

Despite Johor Bahru's US\$293 million Customs, Immigration and Quarantine (CIQ) complex (a project whose very existence could depend on a new link) inching towards completion, in April 2006 Malaysia took the bold step of cancelling the bridge altogether. Mahathir Mohamad is furious that his bizarre vision of a crooked half-bridge, linking with the Causeway at the border, has been canned (see p28). So it's once again back to the negotiating table for Malaysia and Singapore over the bridge, amid continued wrangling over the price of fresh-water imports from Malaysia and over maritime boundaries, as well as a territorial dispute over the tiny island of Pulau Batu Puteh (called Pedra Branca in Singapore).

as the **Muzium Diraja Abu Bakar** (☎ 223 0555; Jln Ibrahim; adult/child \$US7/3; 𠂆 9am-5pm Sat-Thu, ticket counter closes 4pm) – the admission fee is also payable in ringgit (at a bad exchange rate).

The finest museum of its kind in Malaysia, conveying the tremendous wealth and privilege of the sultan and housing his possessions, the museum is arranged much as it was when it served as the palace. The superb exhibits embrace Chinese, Japanese, Indian and Malay carved wooden pieces and a dazzling full-sized crystal-glass table and chairs from France. The hunting room has some bizarre exhibits from *pukka sahib* days when wildlife was there to be shot, including elephant's-foot umbrella stands and antelope-leg ashtrays.

The 53-hectare palace grounds (free entry) are beautifully manicured and provide a great breathing space in this cramped and messy city. Good views unfold across the strait, until they smack into Singapore's industrial backside.

OTHER SIGHTS

West of the museum is the most attractive part of Johor Bahru, the old colonial/royal district of greenery and fine buildings.

Under construction from 1892 to 1900, the magnificent **Sultan Abu Bakar Mosque** (Jln Ibrahim) is a mixture of architectural styles (principally Victorian). The minarets resemble British clock towers, and the abiding impression is that of a colonial administrative building.

With a 32m stone tower, **Istana Bukit Serene** (Jln Skudai) is the residence of the sultan of Johor. The palace was built in 1932 and features Art Deco influences. Though not open to the public, you can glimpse it on the waterfront, 5km west of the Abu Bakar museum.

Sitting magnificently atop Bukit Timbalan, designed by Palmer & Turner architects, the imposing **Bangunan Sultan Ibrahim** (State Secretariat Bldg; Bukit Timbalan) is a mighty melange of colonial pomp, Islamic motifs and indigenous design. Completed in 1942, the city landmark was employed as a fortress by the Japanese as they prepared to attack Singapore.

The **Catholic Church of the Immaculate Conception** (☎ 224 3034; 9 Jln Gereja) provides refreshing relief from Johor's searing streets. Try to get here for the Tamil feast of Pon-

gal in mid-January, when an intriguingly colourful harvest festival service is held within the church.

The **Chinese Roufo Gumiao** (Roufo Temple; Jln Trus), near the centre of town, is a shrine dedicated to Hongxian Dadi, Yuanxian Shangdi and Weitian Dadi, all Taoist characters whose effigies adorn the temple interior.

Sleeping

Generally, hotel rooms mentioned here include private shower or bath, unless stated otherwise.

BUDGET

The main zone of cheap and low bracket midrange hotels clusters on and around Jln Meldrum, in the centre of town. Budget price tags are high for Malaysia, and most visitors stay in Singapore or flee to other destinations on the peninsula.

JB Hotel (☎ 223 4989; 80-A Jln Wong Ah Fook; d RM40-50, f RM60; a) Air-con doubles come with TV, tiled-floor, large shower rooms and clean furniture at this good choice in the town centre. Cheaper fan doubles (with shared shower/toilet) are spacious and hygienic, an improvement on other hotels in this price bracket.

Gateway Hotel (☎ 223 5029; 61 Jln Meldrum; d RM70; a) Offering slightly better value for money than other hotels crammed into the tatty city centre, all rooms here come with TV and attached shower. The useful internet café Meeting Point is nearby.

Top Hotel (☎ 224 4755; 12 Jln Meldrum; s/d RM55/66; a) This ambitiously named hotel offers acceptable rooms (albeit musty, with tatty curtains). All have air-con, TV, phone and passable shower rooms.

MIDRANGE

Hotels in this price bracket inflate prices on Friday, Saturday and Sunday by about 10%.

Meldrum Hotel (☎ 227 8988; 1 Jln Siu Nam; d RM71.50; a) Scowling service aside, this centrally located hotel has roomy accommodation and is reasonably comfortable.

Straits View Hotel (☎ 224 1400; straitsvhjccg@po.jaring.my; 1-D Jln Scudai; tw/d RM95/105; a) Perched facing the Strait of Johor, service here can be rather slack. The ground-floor bar is noisy, but rooms are well-furnished and spacious with coffee- and tea-making facilities, TV,

phone and clean shower rooms. The restaurant here, **Marina Seafood Restaurant** (p252), is recommended.

Compact Hotel (☎ 221 3000; www.compacthotel.com.my; 18 Jln Wong Ah Fook; d RM130, junior ste RM150; a) Right in the heart of JB, this is a comfortable, clean and modern high-rise hotel offering good value for money. Rooms are clean and neat, with plastic-wood floor, work desk, broadband, phone, TV, modern furniture, shower room and hairdryer. Nonsmoking floors are offered, and discounts clip standard room prices to around RM99 (RM30 more gets you a fridge and coffee- and tea-making facilities).

Tropical Inn (☎ 224 7888; 15 Jln Gereja; s/d with breakfast RM175; a) Standard rooms here at the Tropical are slightly tatty, but good value, with coffee- and tea-making facilities, cold-water jug in fridge, clean bathrooms with long, deep bathtubs, and powerful air-con. Hotel rooms are on the 17th to 24th floors, so views are excellent; promotional prices start at RM125.

Puteri Pacific Hotel (☎ 223 3333; www.puteripacific.com; Jln Abdullah Ibrahim; d RM188, ste from RM310, with breakfast; a s) Just south of the modern Persada Johor International Convention Centre (under construction at the time of writing), this centrally located hotel benefits from attentive, polite staff, a range of fine restaurants (including the basement Chinese restaurant) and facilities such as tennis and squash courts.

TOP END

Mutiara (☎ 332 3800; www.mutiarahotels.com; Jln Dato Sulaiman; d RM410; a s) Travellers looking for a deluxe option should consider this hotel, located 2km north of the city centre. Rooms are comfortable and all come with satellite TV, minibar and hairdryer. The hotel's Chinese restaurant, **Meisan** (p252), is recommended; there's live music in the Polo Lounge.

Hyatt Regency (☎ 222 1234; www.johorbahru.regency.hyatt.com; Jln Sungai Chat; d/ste RM440/850; a s) The excellent Hyatt is west of the city centre, overlooking the Strait of Johor. Rooms are fully equipped, there's a fitness centre, tennis courts and several restaurants (including the **Piccolo**, p252), cafés, bars and wifi access in the lobby. The swimming pool is an attraction, its waterslides highly popular with kids. Promotional rates hover

at around RM280 (rates quoted include breakfast).

Also recommended:
Hotel Grand Continental (☎ 332 3999; 799 Jln Tebrau; s/d RM253/276; a s)
Merlin Inn (☎ 276 5522; merlinjb@time.net.my; 10 Jln Bukit Meldrum; s & d with breakfast RM200; a s) Centrally located and good value.

Eating

Dining – especially seafood – is one of Johor Bahru's most appealing activities, and satiating yourself at one of the hawker venues around town is highly recommended. Singaporeans also drift across the Causeway in the evenings for cheap seafood.

HAWKER CENTRES

Tepian Tebrau (Jln Abu Bakar; meals RM7; 𠂆 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This food centre is celebrated for its excellent *ikan bakar* (grilled fish), other seafood, and stalls serving up a catch-all of Malaysian food. It has views overlooking the Straits of Johor.

Pasar malam (night market; Jln Wong Ah Fook) Outside the Hindu temple, this nightly market provides an authentic alternative to Singapore's sanitised food courts. Local specialities include Johor *laksa* (noodles steeped in coconut flavours); and *mee rebus* (noodles drenched in a thick sauce), showing the Javanese influence here.

Selera Sungai Chat (Jln Abu Bakar; meals RM20) One kilometre west of Tepian Tebrau is this other well-patronised seafood centre specialising in *ikan bakar*.

RESTAURANTS

Restoran Alif Laila (☎ 226 0445; 57 Jln Meldrum; meals RM7; 𠂆 breakfast, lunch & dinner) With all its food on display so you can see what you are getting, this cheap and friendly outfit offers very good value in its range of roti and curries, and is popular with locals.

Restoran Medina (cnr Jln Meldrum & Jln Siu Niam; meals RM10; 𠂆 24hr) Busy and very popular restaurant serving excellent and highly affordable *murtabak* (roti filled with mutton, chicken or vegetables), biryani and curries.

Restoran Vedhas (1 Jln Gereja; meals RM10; 𠂆 lunch & dinner) Reasonably priced southern and northern Indian meals – *dum* biryani dishes, dhal curry and tandoori chicken, as well as a selection of meat-free dishes and naan (bread baked in a clay oven).

House of Sundanese Food (☎ 226 6788; 3rd fl, Johor Bahru City Sq, 108 Jln Wong Ah Fook; meals RM20; 𠄎 lunch & dinner) Popular restaurant with a pleasant setting for *siakap bakar* (grilled seabass; RM39), *ayam bumbu rujak* (mixed spicy chicken; RM9), *satay sunda* (six for RM10) and other Indonesian favourites.

Piccolo (☎ 222 1234; Hyatt Regency, Jln Sungai Chat; meals RM40-50; 𠄎 dinner daily, lunch Sat & Sun) Inviting alfresco Italian restaurant (pizza, pasta, steaks) doubling as a poolside bar, with a strong wine list and live music Tuesday to Sunday from 9pm to midnight.

Meisan (☎ 332 3800; Mutiara Hotel, Jln Dato Sulaiman; meals RM45-50; 𠄎 lunch & dinner) Meals at this fine Sichuan (Szechwan) restaurant are rather expensive, but authentically spicy and full of flavour. Set meals are available for those eager to avoid the pricier à la carte dishes.

Also recommended:

Kenny Rogers Roasters (3rd fl, 108 Johor Bahru City Sq, Jln Wong Ah Fook; dishes around RM32; 𠄎 lunch & dinner) Wood-fired roast chicken.

Marina Seafood Restaurant (☎ 224 1400; Straits View Hotel, 1-D Jln Scudai; meals RM30; 𠄎 lunch & dinner)

TGI Friday's (☎ 221 3380; Unit L2-01, Bangunan Jotic; meals RM25-30; 𠄎 lunch & dinner) Burgers and Western dishes, endless soft drink refills and ESPN sports TV.

QUICK EATS

The shopping malls about town are littered with food courts. Try the **Kompleks Tun Abdul Razak** (Komtar; Jln Wong Ah Fook) and the upper level of the **Plaza Kota Raya** (Jln Ungku Puan) shopping centre. The basement of **Johor Bahru City Square** (108 Jln Wong Ah Fook) is stuffed with Chinese, Japanese and Western restaurants and cafés; for coffee, Starbucks (wifi zone) and Coffee Bean are on the ground floor.

Shopping

JB promotes itself as a major shopping destination. Singaporeans do come across for some shopping – petrol and groceries – but for most goods Singapore has better prices and a far better range. Branches of Jusco and Carrefour are in the north of town.

Major shopping centres in central JB are **Plaza Kota Raya** (Jln Ungku Puan), the flashier **Johor Bahru City Sq** (Jln Wong Ah Fook) and **Kompleks Tun Abdul Razak** (Komtar; Jln Wong Ah Fook). Other large malls to the north of the city centre include **Plaza Pelangi** (Jln Tebrau), **Holiday**

Plaza (Jln Dato Sulaiman) and **Best World** (Jln Tun Abdul Razak).

Designed specifically to cater to Singaporeans, the **Kompleks Bebas Cukai** (88 Jln Ibrahim Sultan, Stulang Laut) duty-free shopping centre is about 2km east of the Causeway (locals refer to it by its English name, Free Zone Complex). The complex also incorporates a ferry terminal (see below).

Getting There & Away

AIR

JB is served by the **Senai International Airport** (☎ 599 4500; www.senaiairport.com) in Senai, 32km northwest of JB.

Airline Offices

Air Asia (☎ 1300 889 933; www.airasia.com) Has low-cost flights to KL, Ipoh, Penang, Kota Bharu, Kuching, Kota Kinabalu and other destinations.

Kartika Airlines (Senai International Airport, Senai) Flies from JB to Surabaya (Thursday).

Malaysia Airlines (☎ 334 1011/331 0036; 1st fl, Menara Pelangi Bldg, Jln Kuning, Taman Pelangi) Flights to Kuala Lumpur, Kuala Terengganu, Kuantan, Kuching, Ipoh, Penang and Kota Kinabalu. Prices are much lower than from Singapore.

Riau Airlines (☎ 599 4500; www.riau-airlines.com; Senai International Airport, Senai) Flies from JB to Palembang (Saturday) in Sumatra.

BOAT

Ferries leave from the **Kompleks Bebas Cukai**, about 2km east of the Causeway. **Sriwani Tours & Travel** (☎ 221 1677; Kompleks Bebas Cukai, 88 Jln Ibrahim Sultan, Stulang Laut) handles tickets to most destinations.

There are daily departures to Batu Ampar (one way RM57) and Tanjung Pinang (one way RM82), both on Sumatra in Indonesia. Additional boats depart from Kukup, southwest of JB, to Tanjung Balai, also in Sumatra (see Kukup, p254).

BUS

Frequent buses run between Singapore's Queen St bus terminal and JB's Larkin bus station, inconveniently located 5km north of the city (a taxi to/from the Causeway should cost RM8). Most convenient is the Singapore–Johor Bahru Express (from JB/from Singapore RM2.40/SS2.10, 6.30am to midnight, every 10 minutes). At Larkin, buy your ticket at counter 37 at the rear, facing the bus departure park. The regular SBS (city bus)

170 also runs between Larkin and Ban San terminal (RM1.70/SS1.30) in Singapore every 10 minutes between 5.21am and 12.44am, departing from stand 13 in Larkin. Tickets can be purchased on the bus. You can board just before the Causeway (after clearing immigration). In central JB, buy tickets from the agents facing the train station on Jln Tun Abdul Razak and board the bus after clearing Malaysian immigration just before the Causeway. For either bus, disembark with your luggage as you may not board the same bus after clearing immigration; hang on to your ticket, too, to avoid having to pay for another one.

At Larkin bus station – a frantic sprawl of hawkers stalls, restaurants, clothes shops and other outlets – numerous bus companies run services to Melaka (RM14.50, 2½ hours), Kuala Lumpur (RM24, four hours, nonstop), Ipoh (RM38, eight hours), Seremban (RM25, 3½ hours), Mersing (RM20, two hours), Pekan (RM25, 2½ hours), Kuantan (RM25, five hours) and Kuala Terengganu (RM36, eight hours). There are also buses to Kota Tinggi (RM3.80, 45 minutes) and Desaru (RM6.30, two hours). In central JB, you can buy tickets from the Merlin Tower's ground-floor agents opposite the train station on Jln Tun Abdul Razak.

There is a left-luggage counter (per bag RM2; 𠄎 7am-11pm) at Larkin bus station.

ON FOOT

It's possible to walk across the Causeway in both directions (25 minutes one way). As well as being free of charge, this is the fastest way across when traffic clogs the road.

TAXI

JB's main long-distance taxi station (☎ 223 4494) – blue cabs travel outside town, red within town – is at the Larkin bus station (5km north of town); a handier terminal is on Jln Wong Ah Fook near the Sri Mariamman Temple. Regular taxi destinations and costs (share taxi with four passengers) include Desaru (RM120), Kukup (RM60), Melaka (RM200), Kuala Lumpur (RM280), Kuantan (RM270) and Mersing (RM100).

Registered taxis to Singapore depart from the **Plaza Seni Taxi Terminal** (Jln Trus) in the centre of town, with taxis to Orchard Rd or Queen St terminal costing around RM30. Local city taxis cannot cross the Causeway.

TRAIN

The old train station will become defunct if and when the huge Gerbang Selatan Bersepadu project – the new Customs, Immigration and Quarantine complex – is completed and the new station, JB Sentral, is built. At press time, three daily express trains run to KL (9.23am, 1.54pm and 11.34pm) from the old train station (☎ 223 4727; www.ktmb.com.my; 𠄎 booking office 8.30am-9pm). The line passes through Tampin (for Melaka), Seremban, KL Sentral, Tapah Rd (for Cameron Highlands), Ipoh, Taiping and Butterworth. The line bifurcates at Gemas so you can board the 'jungle train' for Jerantut (for Taman Negara), Kuala Lipis and Kota Bharu. Trains also run to Singapore (55 minutes), but it's more convenient to take a bus or taxi.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

JB's **Senai International Airport** (☎ 599 4500; www.senaiairport.com) is 32km northwest of town, linked to the city centre by regular shuttle buses (RM8, 45 minutes) that run from the new **City Airport Lounge** (Kotaraya II terminal, Jln Trus). A taxi from the City Airport Lounge to central Singapore costs around RM30; alternatively jump on the Causeway Link Yellow Bus from City Lounge to Kranji MRT (RM1) or the SBS (city bus) 170 from City Lounge to Queen Street or Woodlands Rd in Singapore (RM1.70).

A taxi between the airport and JB is RM35, taking 30 to 45 minutes, depending on traffic.

BUS

Local buses operate from several stops around town, the most convenient being the stop in front of the post office on Jln Ibrahim.

CAR

Car hire in JB is considerably cheaper than in Singapore, but check that the hire firm allows cars to enter Singapore. Car hire prices begin at around RM168 per day (per month RM1900) for a Proton Wira 1.5l automatic; prices are inclusive of insurance and tax. **Avis** (☎ 224 4824; G1, Tropical Inn, 15 Jln Gereja) **Hertz** (☎ 223 7520; Podium 1-1 C, Menara Ansar 65, Jln Trus) In a tower block behind Ruofo Temple. **Mayflower** (☎ 224 1357; www.mayflowercarrental.com.my; Level 2A, Plaza Seni, Jln Trus) **Orix** (☎ 224 1215; G9, Tropical Inn, 15 Jln Gereja)

TAXI

Taxis in JB have meters, and drivers are legally required to use them. Flagfall is RM2, with an average trip costing RM7. Taxis can be hired at around RM25 per hour for sightseeing.

AROUND JOHOR BAHRU**Kukup**

☎ 07

About 40km southwest of JB, on the Strait of Melaka, the fishing village of Kukup is known for its seafood (most notably prawns and chilli crab), which are consumed in open-air restaurants set on stilts over the water. Singaporeans, fired up by the prospect of seafood munchies, arrive en masse at weekends. The food is good, but it's no secluded idyll and the golf course draws a stratum of business types.

To reach Kukup, take bus 3 from JB to Pontian Kecil (RM5, 2½ hours), and then take a taxi (RM10). A chartered taxi (for four persons) all the way to/from JB costs RM60.

Ferries run daily between Kukup's ferry terminal and Tanjung Balai (one way/return RM50/70) in Indonesia. For more details call the ferry operator Agensi Feri Kukup (☎ 696 1888).

JOHOR BAHRU TO MELAKA

Roads north to Melaka run through a productive region of palm oil, rubber and pineapple plantations. The coast road is fairly scenic and passes a series of quaint *kampung* (villages).

Muar

☎ 06

A lethargic riverside town, languorously Malaysian in mood and with the feel of a bustling Chinatown, Muar was historically an important commercial centre. It makes for an interesting stop between Melaka and Johor Bahru. A large Chinese Christian community is evident in the town's sizeable crop of churches.

An internet café is located in the Wetex Parade shopping mall in the centre of town. On Jln Maharani, which runs along the Muar River, there is an HSBC branch with a 24-hour ATM (MasterCard, Maestro, Cirrus, Plus and Visa), near the bus station.

The graceful colonial district by the river turns up several buildings of note.

Walk around the area and look out for the customs house, the courthouse, the high school (built in 1914) and Masjid Jamek, a Victorian fantasy in much the same style as JB's Sultan Abu Bakar Mosque.

SLEEPING

Hotel Leewah (☎ 952 1605; 44 Jln Ali; d RM35-40; a) Budget travellers may have to fall back on this very simple hotel.

Riverview Hotel (☎ 951 3313; 29 Jln Bentayan; d RM96; a) Has modern, clean rooms (and discounts).

Hotel Classic (☎ 953 3888; 69 Jln Ali; s/d RM105/125; a s) Next to the Wetex Parade shopping mall, this smart hotel has a crisp finish and helpful service. Rooms have complimentary newspaper, coffee- and tea-making facilities and satellite TV.

EATING

Delikateza Café (☎ 952 0409; 33-1 Jln Ali; i) Across the way from Kampung Nyonya, Delikateza serves up buns, cheese sticks (RM1), cheese-and-ham buns (RM1.50) and coffee. Internet access per hour is RM2.50.

Kampung Nyonya (☎ 954 0088; 39 Jln Sayang; meals RM10-15; 11 10.30am-3pm & 5.30-10pm) This clean place serves a range of seafood and Nonya favourites, including Baba curry chicken (RM5), *chap chai* soup (mixed vegetable soup; RM3), *tomato telur* (tomato and egg; RM2.50) and delicious *sayur goreng* (green vegetables and garlic; RM4). Look for the wooden doors.

Wetex Parade shopping mall (Jln Ali; 11 10am-10pm) A good food court and a supermarket can be found in this mall.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Regular buses to JB (RM11.70, 2½ hours) and KL (RM12.30, 2½ hours) depart from the Muar long-distance bus station by the river. Less-frequent buses run to Seremban (RM11.80, two hours), Butterworth (RM42, eight hours), Mersing (RM17.50, four hours) and Singapore (RM15, three hours). Buses to/from Melaka (RM3, one hour), and Gunung Ledang/Segamat (RM3, one hour) operate from the local bus station. The taxi station is just to the right of the bus station.

The **ferry terminal** (68 Jln Maharani) is where you get ferries for Dumai (one way/return RM80/150, 8.30am).

Gunung Ledang

According to legend, the highest mountain in Johor, Gunung Ledang (formerly Mt Ophir; 1276m), is the fabled home of Puteri Gunung Ledang, a mythical princess whose presence is said to still permeate the jungle slopes. Many visitors climb part-way up the mountain to admire the falls, but a very demanding two-day round trip (there are camp sites along the way) can take trekkers to the summit. This climb is a good introduction to tropical mountaineering and is recommended for those travellers who don't have time for longer treks in Taman Negara.

The **Gunung Ledang Resort** (☎ 06-977 2888; www.ledang.com; sales office: BT 28, Jln Segamat, Sagil, Tangkak; cabins RM50, tw standard/deluxe RM150/200; a s) at the base of the mountain has accommodation and good facilities, and organises expeditions and programs relating to the mountain, as well as guides. Serious climbers should aim to get hold of a copy of John Briggs' *Mountains of Malaysia*, published by Longman Malaysia in 1985, which contains a detailed trail.

To get there, take Segamat-bound bus 65 (RM3, 30 minutes) from Muar and ask to be let off at Gunung Ledang (there's a large 'Gunung Ledang' sign near the bus stop). It's a 1km walk in from the main road to the start of the falls. On your return to Muar, wait at the bus stop on the opposite side of the main road; the last bus to Tangkak leaves at 5.30pm and from Tangkak there are further connections. If staying at the Gunung Ledang Resort you can take the train to Segamat and the resort can arrange transfer from there.

MERSING

☎ 07

A peripheral fishing village on the east coast of Johor, Mersing would be an inconsequential blip on the road to Kuantan were it not the hopping-off point for boats to Pulau Tioman and other islands of the Seribu Archipelago. Travellers passing through Mersing barely register their whereabouts, but the town is more than a transit area and makes for a pleasant and relaxing stopover. The river bustles with fishing boats, and kittens and cats scamper about the streets (indigenous Malaysian cats all have a kink in their tails). There are some good restaurants

and you can even knock back a few beers without feeling distinctly out of place.

Orientation

From the north or south, you enter Mersing at the town's main roundabout on Route 3. Jln Abu Bakar branches from here to the east and leads to the jetty. Jln Ismail similarly forks east from the roundabout. The lion's share of hotels, restaurants and banks are clustered on or between these two streets as they diverge, forming the town's centre of gravity.

Information**EMERGENCY**

Police (☎ 799 2222; Jln Sultanah)

INTERNET ACCESS

Easy Internet Café (Jln Abu Bakar; per hr RM2.50; 11 9am-11pm)

Eddy Internet Café (12 Jln Dato Timor; per hr RM2; 11 8.30am-midnight)

MONEY

Bank Bumiputra (Jln Ismail) This bank can cash travellers cheques.

Maybank (Jln Ismail) Can cash travellers cheques.

Public Bank (21-22 Jln Sulaiman) Has a 24-hour ATM (MasterCard, Maestro, Cirrus, Visa, Plus).

POST

Post Office (Jln Abu Bakar)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Mersing Tourist Information Centre (Metric; ☎ 799 5212; Jln Abu Bakar; 11 8am-1pm & 2-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 8am-noon & 2.45-4.30pm Fri, 8am-12.45pm Sat)

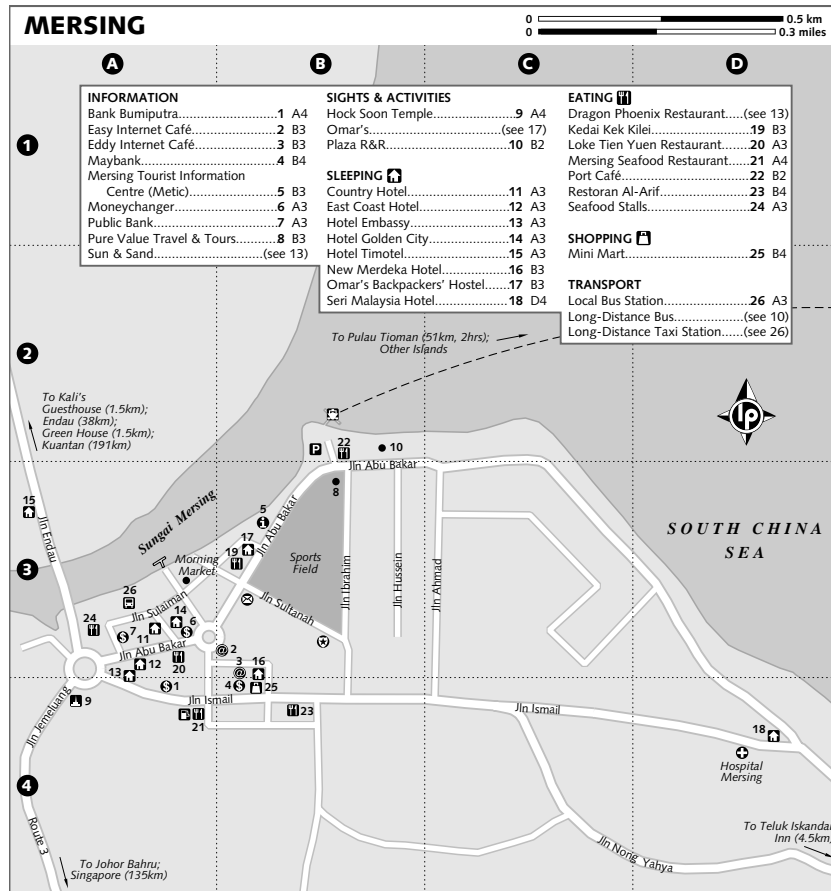
TRAVEL AGENCIES

Sun & Sand (☎ 799 4995; 3 Jln Ismail; 11 9am-5pm) Adjacent to the Hotel Embassy.

Pure Value Travel & Tours (☎ 799 6811; 7 Jln Abu Bakar) Opposite the jetty.

Sights & Activities

There is little to see in Mersing itself. The Hock Soon Temple (Fushun Temple) is a 95-year-old Taoist and Buddhist temple. At the rear of the shrine is a splendid, gilded statue of Guanyin (Goddess of Compassion) called a Qianshou Guanyin (1000-arm Guanyin), although the effigy here sports only eight upper limbs. To the goddess' right, and below some Chinese characters announcing 'Holy



Mother Tianhou', stands Tianhou (Queen of Heaven) herself, worshipped by fishing folk and those whose lives are connected with the sea. Women hoping for children entreat the effigy of Zhusheng Niangniang, placed to the left of Guanyin.

Tours

Omar's (☎ 799 5096, 019-774 4268; Jln Abu Bakar) day-long island-hopping speedboat tour (the cost per person is RM50, with a minimum of four people required) takes you to three islands of the Seribu Archipelago and includes transport and snorkelling equipment. Omar's Overland Tour (per person RM360, minimum two people) is a one-night, two-day tour, complete with

transport, guide, insurance, permit, food and accommodation, to Endau-Rompin National Park. Omar also runs a RM50 local trek through jungle and stops at palm oil and rubber plantations. See also Omar's Backpackers' Hostel.

Ferry tickets to the islands can be purchased at most travel agents and guesthouses around town and little distinguishes the competition. You can also buy tickets at the ticket counter near the main jetty. **Plaza R&R** (Jln Abu Bakar) houses the offices of most of the island resorts (you can book packages to some of the smaller islands here), as well as long-distance bus ticket offices. For other tour operators in Mersing, see Travel Agencies, p255.

Sleeping

Boats head to the islands only at high tide. Rough weather (during the monsoon season) can play havoc with sailings, so many spend a night or two in Mersing. There are good options to suit different budgets.

BUDGET

Omar's Backpackers' Hostel (☎ 799 5096, 019-774 4268; Jln Abu Bakar; dm/d RM10/20) A frugal, cheap and popular pit stop en route to the islands. Rooms are clean and there's a balcony, and knowledgeable advice concerning the islands and the local area is much forthcoming. Jump aboard the namesake island-hopping tour (April onwards) or try the overland treks (see Omar's tours, opposite). Reservations are recommended during the peak season.

Hotel Golden City (☎ 799 5028; 1st fl, 23 Jln Abu Bakar; s RM10, d RM25-35; a) At the no-frills end of budget, Golden City has no-nonsense prices and basic rooms.

New Merdeka Hotel (☎ 799 3506; 27-A Jln Ismail; r RM25-35; a) On two floors, the Chinese-run New Merdeka is a frugal choice, but the owners are pleasant.

East Coast Hotel (☎ 799 3546, 012-762 4983; rockyanwar2002@hotmail.com; 43A Jln Abu Bakar; dm/s/d RM10/15/25; i) Travellers have chirpy things to say about this friendly and relaxed backpacker-oriented hotel. Clean and well kept, there are cheap four-bed dorms here, on-site café, internet (per hour RM4) and rooftop sitting area. Informative and helpful owners (Rocky and Anwar) give advice on trips and treks, and offer packages to Endau-Rompin National Park and Pulau Tioman. Door shuts at midnight.

Country Hotel (☎ 799 1799; 11-E, Jln Sulaiman; d RM30-50; a) Its staff is dour, but rooms are large (albeit tatty) and come with balcony at this simple hotel.

Hotel Embassy (☎ 799 3545; 1st & 2nd fl, 2 Jln Ismail; d RM30-50, air-con tr/q RM55/65; a) The air-con doubles are bright, have cable TV, efficient air-con and clean showers, although the hot/cold water mix can take a bit of practise if you want to avoid a scalding. There's a good range of rooms and a handy Chinese restaurant downstairs.

MIDRANGE

Avoid arriving in Mersing during the Chinese New Year and other holiday periods, as midrange hotels can be booked solid.

Kali's Guesthouse (☎ 799 3613; Kampung Sri Lalang 12E; d/f RM30/85; a) A well-cultivated garden setting drenched in greenery and a coconut's throw from the beach makes this a choice alternative to the hotels in town. Run by the affable Kali, the pace is relaxed with accommodation comprising attractive chalets on stilts and bungalows (all with attached shower) among the potted plants, bamboo and towering trees in full leaf. Western grills are served up at Kali's corner opposite (open from 6.30pm to midnight Thursday to Tuesday). It's 1.5km north of town (reached by taking a bus bound for Endau). Look for the signpost on the main road and walk down a side road for 100m to reach the guesthouse.

Seri Malaysia (☎ 799 1876; smmsg@serimalaysia.com.my; Lot TTB 641 Jln Ismail; d RM120; a s) Average branch of the Seri Malaysia chain. This has a small kidney-shaped pool, karaoke and a shuttle bus service to the jetty, but it's stranded in the east of town.

Teluk Iskandar Inn (☎ 799 6037; 1456 Jln Sekakap; s/d with breakfast RM130; a) With a lovely garden sloping all the way down to the beach, and just the sound of the sea on the breeze, this well-groomed spot is quiet and secluded, 4.5km south of town. The two-person rooms are large and airy (all with shower). The owners can prepare Malay meals by arrangement. The hotel, on the left side of the road as you head away from Mersing, is easy to miss as there is no sign until you are upon it.

Hotel Timotel (☎ 799 5888; www.timotel.com.my; 839 Jln Endau; s/d with breakfast RM150; a) Just across the bridge over the river, this is a good value, quality hotel. Doubles are clean, well-furnished and spacious. The hotel can arrange early breakfasts if you have an early boat.

Eating

Kedai Kek Kilei (Jln Abu Bakar; snacks RM3; 11-8am-7pm) Opposite the post office, this is a Chinese-owned inexpensive coffee and cake shop that can set you up with doughnuts, sardine puffs, coffee and crisps.

Restoran Al-Arif (44 Jln Ismail; meals RM8; 11 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Serving up *roti canai* (flaky, flat bread; 60 sen), *roti telur* (roti with an egg; RM1.40), *nasi goreng* (fried rice; RM3) and scrummy Indian food, this is one of the most popular places in town.

Green House (☎ 799 7601; 38 Jln Endau, Kg Sri Lalang; meals RM10; 11 dinner) Not far from Kali's Guesthouse, Green House serves appetising

Thai dishes, with long views out to sea over the beach.

Mersing Seafood Restaurant (56 Jln Ismail; meals RM13; 𠄎 lunch & dinner) One of several Chinese restaurants specialising in seafood, this place offers good-value dishes, including fish slice and vegetable soup, prawns with coconut sauce and spicy Sichuan dishes such as *mapo dou fu*.

Port Café (Jln Abu Bakar; meals RM30; 𠄎 lunch & dinner) This breezy café next to the jetty offers mixed grills, pizza, pasta and Malay dishes. There's music and it keeps late hours.

For Chinese fare similar to Mersing Seafood Restaurant:

Dragon Phoenix Restaurant (2 Jln Ismail; meals RM15; 𠄎 lunch & dinner)

Loke Tien Yuen Restaurant (55 Jln Abu Bakar; meals RM13; 𠄎 lunch & dinner) Mersing's oldest Chinese restaurant.

Plaza R&R (Jln Abu Bakar) is full of cheap restaurants. Large supermarkets can be found on Jln Ismail, and seafood stalls congregate on the corner of Jln Sulaiman.

Getting There & Away

Long-distance buses depart from **Plaza R&R** (Jln Abu Bakar), near the jetty, which is where tickets are sold. Destinations include KL (RM23, 5½ hours, four per day), Singapore (RM13.50, three hours, twice daily), Johor Bahru (RM8.80, 2½ hours, twice daily), Kuantan (RM15, three hours, twice daily), Melaka (RM17.50), Kota Bharu (RM35, 10 hours, twice daily) and Kuala Terengganu (RM25, seven hours, twice daily). For buses to Cherating, travel first to Kuantan.

The local bus and long-distance taxi station is on Jln Sulaiman, near the river. Taxi destinations and costs (per car) include Johor Bahru (RM120), Kuantan (RM120), Endau (RM20) and Pekan (RM80). Local buses run to Endau (RM3, 45 minutes). For boats to Sibul Island, take a taxi to Tanjung Leman (RM50).

SERIBUAT ARCHIPELAGO

% 07

The Seribuat Archipelago, made up of a cluster of 64 isles scattered off the east coast of Johor, is a constellation of some of Malaysia's most beautiful islands. The largest and most popular of these islands, airstrip-equipped Pulau Tioman, actually belongs

to Pahang, but is typically (albeit not exclusively) reached from Mersing in Johor, along with the archipelago's other islands. The smaller islands of the archipelago may not aspire to the stunning natural scenery of Tioman, but they can offer more tranquillity, a relaxing sense of solitude, persuasively seductive beaches and – it may go without saying – excellent snorkelling and diving.

Divers can expect to see excellent coral and a startling array of marine life, from butterfly fish and parrot fish, to young barracudas, giant clams, giant cockles and more. The waters around the archipelago are frequently whipped into foam during the monsoon from November to February, so ferry services can be patchy, especially during the high monsoon (November and December).

In addition to the islands listed below, there are other islands in the archipelago that are harder to reach and subsequently less-visited. If you want to see as many islands as possible, join Omar's island hopping tour (p256) in Mersing.

Pulau Tioman may have a regularly scheduled ferry service, but many other islands are largely the domain of private resorts and dive operators. To visit these islands it is generally necessary to book a package with one of the resorts, which will arrange private transport to the island from Mersing.

It is, however, possible to bide your time in Mersing and wait for a place on a boat heading to the resorts, otherwise phone ahead to the resort because many run their own boats. Alternatively, chartering a boat is an (expensive) option. To shop around and compare prices for packages, scout around the resorts' offices in Mersing's **Plaza R&R** (Jl Abu Bakar).

Visitors to the Seribuat Archipelago (and Pulau Tioman) are requested to purchase a Marine Parks entry ticket (adult/child RM5/2), sold at the jetty in Mersing.

Pulau Besar

% 07

Its western shore fringed with an attractive white-sand beach and its isolated east coast laying claim to a couple of secluded beaches, Pulau Besar is lapped by clear, azure waters where reefs of fine coral

thrive. One of the closest islands to Mersing, Pulau Besar is 4km long and 1km wide and was once known as Pulau Babi Besar (Big Boar Island), but the wild swine that used to snort and crash through its jungle have vanished.

Most of the resorts are situated along the beach on the west of the island. **D'Coconut Island Resort** (% 603-4252 6686; www.dcoconut.com; chalets RM175; a s) is one of the best resorts on the island, with a pool, bar and restaurant; rooms come with hot water. **Nirwana Resort** (% 799 5979/29; A-frames RM30-40; chalets RM120; a) has simple chalet-style accommodation and its own jetty (boat to Mersing RM30); note that air-con is not available around the clock.

Pulau Sibul

% 07

A cluster of several islands (**Pulau Sibul Besar**, **Pulau Sibul Kukul**, **Pulau Sibul Tengah** and **Pulau Sibul Hujung**), Pulau Sibul is a highly popular archipelago destination, especially with Singaporean visitors. The island terrain may not be as arresting as other islands, but there are some fine beaches and good coral. Tiny Pulau Sibul Tengah, which happened once to be a Vietnamese refugee camp, is now home to sea turtles that crawl ashore in July to lay their eggs. The island has some superb coral on its northern side. Around 7km and 1km wide, Pulau Sibul Besar has a good choice of well-equipped accommodation options, including these recommended chalets: **Sea Gypsy Village Resort** (% 799 3124; s/d chalets with full board RM240/180), return boat transfer is RM60; the secluded **Rimba Resort** (% 010-714 7495; s/d chalets with full board RM207/161), single (one-way) boat transfer is RM25; and **Sibul Island Cabanas** (% 331 7216; tw/tr chalets RM170/205; a), return boat transfer is RM55.

Most resorts offer diving trips (at added cost) and diving courses. On Pulau Sibul Tengah, the **Sibul Island Resort** (% 223 1188; s/tw RM255/185; a s) is a complete resort operation with pool and 121 chalets with rooms all equipped with phone (IDD access), minibar and colour TV. Note that prices for most accommodation go up on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Ferries for Pulau Sibul do not depart from Mersing, but from the jetty at Tanjung Leman around 30km south of town.

Pulau Rawa

% 07

Edged by a fine white-sand beach, and luring bands of sunseekers and snorkellers, the tiny island of Rawa pokes out of the sea 16km from Mersing.

Rawa Safaris Island Resort (% 799 1204; www.rawasfr.com; tw hillside/beachfront chalets RM230/RM420; a) has a variety of accommodation scattered over the hillsides and on the beachfront, including longhouse and chalets; there's a restaurant, diving shop and a wide range of facilities and activities. Packages are on offer, with round-trip ferry transfers from Mersing to Rawa costing around RM60; chartering a speedboat will cost you about RM250 (one way). The resort can arrange diving trips (RM80) to two nearby islands, Pulau Harimau and Pulau Mensirip (a private island belonging to a member of the Johor royal family). Outside the monsoon, Pulau Rawa is connected to Mersing by a daily ferry (RM35).

Pulau Tinggi

% 07

Thirty-seven kilometres southeast of Mersing, jungle-clad Tinggi is an impressive sight when seen from a distance – it's an extinct volcano (tinggi means 'tall').

The island supports three village populations, at Kampung Tanjung Balang, Kampung Pasir Panjang and Kampung Sebirah Besar. Accommodation is largely resort-style, although some locals may supply budget accommodation. **Dreamz Island Inn** (% 65-8103 1319 in Singapore; tw RM160-180; a) has good-quality chalets and bungalows, a Jacuzzi and a restaurant. It's next to a turtle hatchery. To reach Pulau Tinggi, take a ferry or speedboat from Mersing or the jetty at Tanjung Leman, 30km south of town.

Pulau Aur & Pulau Dayang

% 07

Eighty kilometres from the mainland, Pulau Aur has crystal-clear azure water and excellent coral. With sunken wrecks off its coast, Pulau Aur boasts good open-water dive sites, including Rayner's Rock, Pulau Pinang and the Pinnacles. On Pulau Aur, several chalet and resort operations include the **Friendly Water Chalets** (% 65-6557 0016), **Bluewater**

Holiday Resorts (96 799 4072) in Kampung Berhala and **Aur Holiday Resort** (96 799 5696), with a variety of lodging options. A cross-island walk (approximately one hour) takes you to the far side of Pulau Aur. Accommodation on Pulau Dayang, across the channel from Pulau Aur, is available at the scenic beach at **Dayang Island Resort** in Kampung Pasir Putih.

Pulau Pemanggil

Forty-five kilometres east of Mersing – or around five hours by boat – and capped by the distinctive peak of Batu Buau, beautiful Pulau Pemanggil supports a sparse population divided between three small villages: Kampung Buau, Kampung Pak Kelah and Kampung Pontianak (the last named after a female vampire who feasts on the blood of newborn children). Needless to say, the water is beautiful, enticing snorkellers and sightseers alike.

Pak Mazlan's Chalet (96 799 1649; r RM45) offers simple longhouse lodgings (fan and attached shower) at Kampung Pak Kelah. Near Kampung Pak Kelah, **Lanting Resort** (96 799 3793; 3-day & 2-night package RM268) has a variety of chalet, longhouse and suite accommodation. At Kampung Buau, **Dagang Chalets** (dm RM10) has cheap longhouse beds.

ENDAU-ROMPIN NATIONAL PARK

Straddling the Johor-Pahang border, the 260 million-year old, 870-sq-km Endau-Rompin is the second-largest park on the peninsula after Taman Negara. The park's lowland forests are among the last in Peninsular Malaysia and have been identified as harbouring unique varieties of plant life. Of these, enormous umbrella palms, with their characteristic fan-shaped leaves, and *Livingstonia endanensis*, a species of palm with serrated circular leaves, are evident.

The park is also Malaysia's last refuge of the Sumatran rhinoceros, although they roam only the park's remote areas. Endau-Rompin is also a tiger habitat, but they are rarely spotted. The waters of the Sungai Endau sustain *kelisa* (*scleropages formosus*; Dragon Fish), an endangered and highly prized ornamental freshwater fish; periodic fishing bans allow stocks of other fish to recuperate. For more information on endangered species, see p63. Among birds that you are likely to see or hear are the Red Jungle Fowl, the Black Hornbill and the Grey Wagtail.

Exploring Endau-Rompin National Park

The vast majority of travellers arrive on tours arranged by private operators. It is possible to make an independent visit,

ON THE TRAIL OF JOHOR'S SNAGGLE-TOOTHED GHOST

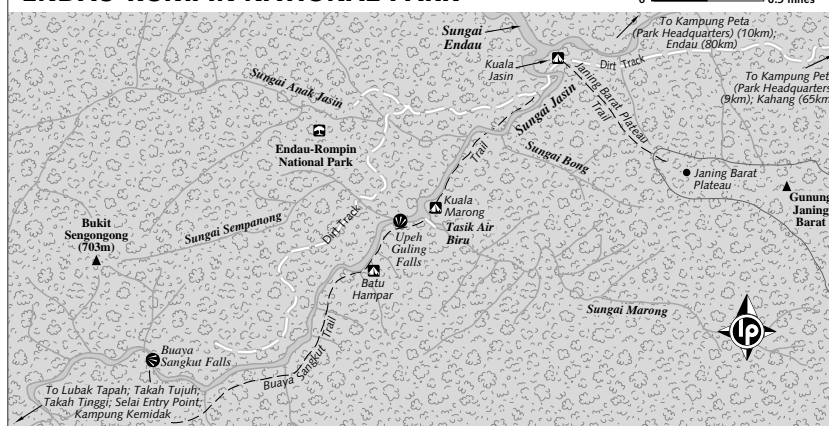
Recent sightings of a tall, hairy biped have resuscitated efforts to track down Johor's famed *hantu jarang gigi* (Snaggle-toothed Ghost). The camera-shy creature, a primate possibly stuck in the same evolutionary cul-de-sac as the elusive Yeti or Sasquatch, was spotted in 2005 near a river in the jungle around Kota Tinggi, when an entire family of primates was reportedly glimpsed by labourers.

The primate has been tracked unsuccessfully for decades, but recent Orang Asli sightings of the 3m-tall brown-haired 'missing link' – as well as the discovery of outsized footprints – have zoologists placing motion-sensitive cameras deep within the jungle of Johor and Pahang. So far, expeditions to uncover the woolly hominid have returned empty-handed, so the creature continues to flourish in the oxygen of anecdote and hearsay.

Undeterred by the dearth of concrete evidence, wildlife experts continue to marshal resources in tracking down the lost Yeti tribe that they believe is being coaxed out of hiding by the shrinking jungle. Frequent sightings have been made on the slopes of Gunung Pantu, Gunung Sisek and Gunung Muntaha, while claims by a zoologist that a Bigfoot was shot dead around Gunung Tahan (Taman Negara) in 2001, but its remains were destroyed by loggers, have further fuelled feverish hopes.

In March 2006 came news of the alleged capture of a baby Bigfoot in Kota Tinggi. The Johor government has since announced total state-heritage protection for the creature, winning the praise of the US-based Bigfoot Research Organisation. Cynics see nothing but hype and a gullible public, but note: if you encounter a fugitive Yeti-like creature stumbling from the bushes, have your camera ready – and *no sudden movements*.

ENDAU-ROMPIN NATIONAL PARK



provided you have your own camping gear, but it won't necessarily work out any cheaper and the isolated location can make transport to the park inconvenient to arrange.

Most visitors explore the park along the banks of Sungai Endau and one of its tributaries, Sungai Jasin. Trips to the park usually involve treks along the banks of these rivers, with stops at two impressive waterfalls along the way and the four-hour return trip up to the Janing Barat plateau, near the Kuala Jasin base camp. Treks from Lubuk Tapah base camp in the west of the park follow the Sungai Selai to explore waterfalls along the river, including the splendid falls at Takah Tujuh and Takah Tinggi. It's worth noting there is no way of traversing the forest between Lubuk Tapah base camp or the Selai Entry point and the Kuala Jasin base camp, so you either enter Endau-Rompin at Kampung Peta in the east or at Selai in the west, and stick to the sights in each respective area.

Officials of the **Johor National Parks Corporation** (96 07-788 2812; www.johorparcs.com) generally require that you hire a guide to explore the park. Guides can be hired for RM50 per day at the park headquarters at Kampung Peta, or at its **Selai office** (96 07-922 2875) in Kampung Kemidak (which is about a 40-minute drive from Bekok). A park entry permit (RM10; extra for camping) is also required. Further charges include fishing-rod permit (RM20) and further (daily) permits to travel within the park to destinations including

the Buaya Sangkut and Upeh Guling waterfalls, and the Janing Barat plateau.

The park is shut during the rainy monsoon season (November to February). See the boxed text, p486, for advice on preparing yourself for a trek.

Walks

JANING BARAT PLATEAU

The Janing Barat plateau is a 500m-high sandstone plateau southeast of Kuala Jasin base camp. The trail starts at the dirt track behind the camp; look for it heading into the woods opposite the path to the camp.

The trail climbs gently for the first 100m or so, then steepens into a challenging uphill slog. Soon after starting the climb, the first *Livingstonia endanensis* are visible on either side of the trail. Once on the plateau, the terrain levels out and becomes marshy; keep an eye out for pitcher plants, many of which sprout from the forest floor. There is nothing to mark the high point of the trail; simply walk across the plateau for a few hundred metres and then turn around. The return to base camp from the plateau is a quick one-hour downhill hike.

WALKING THE TRAIL TO BUAYA SANGKUT FALLS

The main walk in the park follows the Sungai Jasin from Kuala Jasin base camp. Those with time for three nights in the park can usually reach the highest waterfall on the river, Buaya Sangkut; those with time for only two nights

must usually turn around at Batu Hampar rocks or the falls at Upeh Guling.

After a night at Kuala Jasin base camp, the first day's hike crosses Sungai Jasin to follow the level terrain along the river bank through jungle for two hours to Kuala Marong (also known as Lembah Marong), a camp site at the confluence of Sungai Jasin and the much smaller Sungai Marong. The impressive falls at Upeh Guling are a further 10-minute hike up Sungai Jasin. From Upeh Guling, it's a gentle 40-minute hike to the flat rocks and camp site of Batu Hampar. Along the way you'll see some huge umbrella palms and dipterocarp trees. If you reach Batu Hampar before noon and are very fit, it's possible to continue on to the Buaya Sangkut and return all the way to Kuala Jasin in one day. Otherwise, camp at Batu Hampar or at Buaya Sangkut. Note that it is at least 4km from Batu Hampar to the falls at Buaya Sangkut. Because the path is quite faint, only attempt this hike with a guide.

The hike from Batu Hampar to Buaya Sangkut is a challenging three-hour slog over several ridges to the top of the spectacular 40m drop of the main falls. You can work your way down the side of the falls for a better view, but use extreme caution as the rocks can be treacherous. There is room to camp in the clearing above the falls. Your guide may know a way to the bottom of the falls other than the one described here. From the falls, retrace your steps to return to the base camp at Kuala Jasin.

Sleeping

You can camp at Kuala Jasin, Kuala Marong, Batu Hampar and at Upeh Guling. Of these, Buaya Sangkut is the nicest and most remote location. A lightweight tent is the preferred option, but you can spread a ground sheet under the covered picnic platforms at Kuala Jasin and Kuala Marong – just be sure to bring some mosquito coils.

There are fan dorms and chalets, in good condition, available in Kampung Peta (dorm bed RM10, chalet RM60 to RM120) and

simple A-frames at Kuala Jasin. At Selai, simple chalet accommodation is available at Lubuk Tapah base camp, with a camping site at Lubuk Merekek.

Getting There & Away

The main entry point to Endau-Rompin from Johor is along Route 50 in Johor to a turn-off 5km east of the small town of Kahang (the turn-off is at mile marker 26 – 'Batu 26' in Bahasa Malaysia – from where it's a 56km drive over rough roads (4WD is advisable) to Kampung Peta, the park's visitor centre. At Kampung Peta, you can hire a boat (RM22 per person for five persons or more, RM120 per boat for under five persons; 45 minutes) to take you the final 10km upriver to the base camp at Kuala Jasin or you can walk the 15km (around three hours).

For visitors coming from the west, it is possible to enter a different region of the park via the Selai entry point. Take a train to Bekok station, followed by transport to the park site office (for registration) at Kampung Kemidak (☎ 07-922 2875), before entering the park at Selai, in the foothills of Gunung Tiong.

If driving, take the exit at Yong Peng on the Lebuhraya (North-South Hwy) and drive to Bekok via Chaah. From Bekok you can drive onto Selai, but if you want to take your vehicle to the park camp sites at Lubuk Merekek and the base camp at Lubok Tapah, you will need a 4WD.

The park is also accessible from Kuala Rompin in Pahang along a paved road to Seladang, and then by following a 26km dirt track to Kuala Kinchin on the park boundary.

Because of the difficulties in arranging your own transport into the park, most travellers go on a tour. Mersing is the best place to arrange this; Omar's Backpackers' Hostel (☎ 07-799 5096, 019-774 4268) can arrange tours (see p256) and permits. Prices per person for all-inclusive two-night trips are around RM400; three-night trips cost around RM500.

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