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OPPOSITE PYROPS CANDELARIA, GUNUNG MULU NATIONAL PARK **PREVIOUS PAGE** MOUNT KINABALU



Introduction to Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei

Populated by a blend of Malays, Chinese, Indians and indigenous groups, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei boast a rich cultural heritage, from a huge variety of annual festivals and wonderful cuisines, to traditional architecture and rural crafts. There's astonishing natural beauty to take in too, including gorgeous beaches and some of the world's oldest tropical rainforest, much of which is surprisingly accessible. Malaysia's national parks are superb for trekking and wildlife-watching, and sometimes for cave exploration and river rafting.

As part of the Malay archipelago, which stretches from Indonesia to the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei share not only similarities in their ethnic make-up but also part of their **history**. Each became an important port of call on the trade route between India and China, the two great markets of the early world, and later became important entrepôts for the Portuguese, Dutch and British empires. Malaysia has only existed in its present form since 1963, when the federation of the eleven Peninsula states was joined by Singapore and the two Bornean territories of Sarawak and Sabah. Singapore didn't last even two years inside Malaysia, becoming an independent city-state in 1965; Brunei chose to stay outside the federation and only became independent of the British in 1984.

Since then, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei have been united in their **economic predominance** among Southeast Asian nations. While Brunei is locked into a paternalistic regime, using its considerable oil wealth to guarantee its citizens a respectable standard of living, Singapore has become a giant in commerce, having transformed itself from a strategic port. Malaysia, always competitive with its southern neighbour, is pursuing a similarly ambitious goal, to which end the country is investing heavily in new infrastructure, from highways to ports and factories.

Today, the dominant cultural force in the region is undoubtedly **Islam**, adopted by the

ABOVE PERHENTIAN ISLANDS **OPPOSITE** ORANG-UTAN, SEPILOK

Malays in the fourteenth century, though in Chinese-dominated Singapore, **Buddhism** and **Taoism** together hold sway among half the population. But it's the religious plurality – there are also sizeable Christian and Hindu minorities – that is so attractive, often providing surprising juxtapositions of mosques, temples and churches. Add the colour and verve of Chinese temples and street fairs, Indian festival days and everyday life in Malay kampungs (villages), as well as the indigenous traditions of Borneo, and it's easy to see why visitors are drawn into this celebration of ethnic diversity; indeed, despite some issues, both Malaysia and Singapore have something to teach the rest of the world when it comes to building successful multicultural societies.

Where to go

Malaysia's capital, **Kuala Lumpur** (usually referred to as KL), is the social and economic driving force of a nation eager to better itself, a fact reflected in the relentless proliferation of air-conditioned shopping malls, designer bars and restaurants in the city, and in the continuing sprawl of suburbia and industry around it. But KL is also firmly rooted in tradition, where the same Malay executives who wear suits to work dress in traditional clothes at festival times, and markets and food stalls are crowded in among high-rise hotels and bank towers, especially in older areas such as Chinatown and Little India.

Just a couple of hours' drive south of the capital lies the birthplace of Malay civilization, **Melaka**, its historical architecture and mellow atmosphere making it a must on anybody's itinerary. Much further up the **west coast**, the island of **Penang** was the site of the first British settlement in Malaysia. Its capital, **George Town**, still features beautifully restored




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2000
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100
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Hat Yai
Pattani
THAILAND
Yala
Narathiwat
Langkawi
Alor Star
ULU MUDA
Tumpat
Kota Bharu
Perhentian
Redang
ROYAL BELUM
George Town
Penang
Kuala Krai
Kuala Terengganu
Taiping
Kuala Kangsar
Gua Musang
Kenyir Lake
Mount Tahan (2187m)
Dungun
Ipoh
CAMERON HIGHLANDS
TAMAN NEGARA
EAST COAST HIGHWAY
PENINSULAR MALAYSIA
(MALAYSIA)
BANJARAN TITIWANGSA
Pangkor
Kuala Lipis
Jerantut
Fraser's Hill
Raub
Kuantan
Pekan
Kuala Selangor
Klang
KUALA LUMPUR
Temerloh
Bera Lake
Tioman
Seremban
Segamat
ENDAU ROMPIN
Gemas
Mersing
Melaka
Muar
Kluang
SUMATRA
(INDONESIA)
Dumai
Johor Bahru
SINGAPORE
Batam
Bintan
THAILAND
Penang
PENINSULAR MALAYSIA
KUALA LUMPUR
INDONESIA
Johor Bahru
INDONESIA
SINGAPORE
BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN
BRUNEI
SABAH
SARAWAK
INDONESIA
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kilometres


Metres
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PHILIPPINES
Banggi
Kudat
Mount Kinabalu (4101m)
Kota Kinabalu
Sandakan
Labuan
Beaufort
Tenom
Kinabatangan River
Lahad Datu
BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN
BRUNEI
Lawas
SABAH (MALAYSIA)
Bunguran
Limbang
Miri
Semporna
Sipadan
Tawau
MULU NATIONAL PARK
Mount Murud (2438m)
NIAH NATIONAL PARK
Baram River
KELABIT HIGHLANDS
Long Akah
Long Akah
Tarakan
Bintulu
Subi
Mukah
Belaga
INDONESIA
Sibu
Rejang River
SARAWAK (MALAYSIA)
Kanowit
Rejang River
Kapit
Baleh River
Sematan
Kuching
KALIMANTAN (INDONESIA)
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FACT FILE

• **Malaysia** is a federation of nine **sultanates**, plus the states of Penang, Melaka and, on the island of Borneo, Sabah and Sarawak.

• **Peninsular Malaysia**, where the federal capital Kuala Lumpur is located, and **East Malaysia**, the northern section of Borneo, are separated by more than 600km of the South China Sea.

• In terms of **population**, Malays make up just over half of Malaysia's 32 million people, ethnic Chinese around 22 percent, indigenous Orang Asli and Borneo tribes together 12 percent, and ethnic Indians 7 percent.

• Tiny **Singapore**, just 700 square kilometres in size, is a wealthy city-state cramming in 5.5 million inhabitants, including a sizeable minority of expats.

• Made up of two enclaves in eastern Sarawak, **Brunei** is nearly ten times the size of Singapore, but holds less than one tenth of the population.

• Both Malaysia and Singapore are British-style **parliamentary democracies**, the former with a ceremonial head of state known as the Yang di-Pertuan Agung (the post rotates among the sultans of the federation). Brunei is ruled by its **sultan**.

• The world's largest flower, **Rafflesia**, is a Malaysian rainforest plant measuring a metre across and smelling of rotten meat. It's named after the naturalist and founder of Singapore, Sir Stamford Raffles.

• Malaysia's **economy**, historically dominated by agriculture and mining, now features a healthy manufacturing sector, as does Singapore, where shipping and financial services are also key industries. Brunei profits handsomely from its reserves of oil and gas.

colonial buildings and a vibrant Chinatown district, and is, together with Melaka, recognized for its cultural and architectural diversity as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The former hill station **Cameron Highlands** has lost most of its colonial atmosphere, but its cooler temperatures and lush countryside provide ample opportunities for walks, birdwatching, rounds of golf and cream teas. North of Penang, Malay, rather than Chinese, traditions hold sway at **Alor Star**, the last major town before the Thai border. This far north, the premier tourist destination is **Langkawi**, an island with international-style resorts and picture-postcard beaches.

The Peninsula's **east coast** is much more rural and relaxing, peppered with rustic villages and stunning islands such as **the Perhentians** and **Tioman**, busy with backpackers and package tourists alike. The state capitals of **Kota Bharu**, near the northeastern Thai border, and **Kuala Terengganu**, further south, still showcase something of the Malay traditions, craft production and performing arts.

Crossing the Peninsula's mountainous **interior** by road or rail allows you to venture into the majestic tropical rainforests of **Taman Negara**. The national park's four thousand square kilometres hold enough to keep you occupied for days: trails, salt-lick hides for animal-watching, aerial forest-canopy walkways, limestone caves and waterfalls. Here you may well also come across the **Orang Asli**, the Peninsula's indigenous peoples, a few of whom cling to a semi-nomadic lifestyle within the park.

Across the sea from the Peninsula lie the east Malaysian states of Sarawak and Sabah. For most travellers, their first taste of **Sarawak** comes at **Kuching**, the old colonial capital, and then the Iban **longhouses** of the Batang Ai river system. **Sibu**, much further north on the Rajang River, is the starting point for trips to less touristed Iban, Kayan and Kenyah longhouses. In the north, **Gunung Mulu National Park** is the principal

OPPOSITE FROM TOP NIGHT MARKET, KUALA LUMPUR; KELABIT HIGHLANDS





destination; many come here to climb up to view its extraordinary razor-sharp limestone pinnacles, though spectacular caves also burrow into the park's mountains. More remote still are the **Kelabit Highlands**, further east, where the mountain air is refreshingly cool and there are ample opportunities for extended treks.

More so than any other part of Malaysia, **Sabah** draws visitors with its wildlife. The state's surviving forests are well enough protected to host elephants, orang-utans, proboscis monkeys, hornbills and rare creatures such as the clouded leopard, while its southeastern islands, notably **Sipadan**, are home to some of the world's most cherished dive sites, which teem with stunning marine life. Perhaps the best-known attraction, though, is the 4095m granite peak of **Mount Kinabalu**, which needs no special gear or skills to hike up – though it's a pricey experience. The mountain is easily reached from the modern, lively capital Kota Kinabalu.

An easy entry-point for first-time visitors to Southeast Asia, **Singapore** is exceptionally safe, organized and accessible, thanks to its small size, excellent modern infrastructure

WILDLIFE

Peninsular Malaysia, Borneo and Singapore are a paradise for wildlife-spotters, harbouring over 600 types of birds and 200 mammal species – including Asian elephants, sun bears, tigers, tapirs, barking deer, gibbons, hornbills and pythons. Borneo's speciality is the **proboscis monkey**, so-called because of its bulbous, drooping nose. The island is also one of only two natural habitats (with Sumatra) for **orang-utans** – indeed, the name is Malay for "man of the forest". **Marine life** is equally diverse: divers can swim with white-tip sharks, clownfish and barracuda, not to mention green and hawksbill **turtles**, which drag themselves ashore in season to lay their eggs by night. Even cosmopolitan Singapore maintains a pocket of primary rainforest that's home to long-tailed macaques.



Author picks

Our authors have traversed every corner of Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei, from KL's shopping malls and Sarawak's longhouses to the jungles of Taman Negara and the summit of Mount Kinabalu. Here are some of their favourite experiences.

Wildlife-spotting Hornbills and long-tailed macaques are widespread, and you can see elephants at the Kinabatangan River (see p.434), proboscis monkeys at Bako (see p.339) and orang-utans at Sepilok (see p.431) and Semenggoh (see p.342).

Tastiest laksa Compare famous variations of the region's signature seafood soup in Penang (p.161), Singapore (p.543) and Kuching (p.331).

Shadow puppets Experience the magical Malay tradition of *wayang kulit* at Kota Bharu's Cultural Centre (p.224).

Amazing caves Sarawak has major cave systems which are both spectacular – especially at Gunung Mulu National Park (p.372) – and of archeological significance, as in the case of Niah (p.368).

Eccentric desserts Satisfy your sweet tooth with ABC – shaved ice drenched in condensed milk and luridly coloured fruit syrups (p.42).

Turtle beaches Stay up late to catch marine turtles laying their eggs at Sabah's Turtle Islands Park (see p.433).

Glittering cityscapes Admire the night lights from atop Menara KL (p.78) and *Marina Bay Sands*' SkyPark in Singapore (p.506).

Rowdiest festival You can't beat the crowds and slightly gory celebrations surrounding the Hindu festival of Thaipusam at KL's Batu Caves (p.106).

Bizarre blooms Discover the weird *Rafflesia* flower, whose scent mimics rotting meat, at the Royal Belum State Park (p.136), Gunung Gading (p.343) or Tambunan (p.447).

Our author recommendations don't end here. We've flagged up our favourite places – a perfectly sited hotel, an atmospheric café, a special restaurant – throughout the guide, highlighted with the ★ symbol.





OPPOSITE ELEPHANTS **FROM TOP** ABC; SHADOW PUPPETS