

Kuala Lumpur:

Futuristic City With Attractions For Everyone

> By Dominick A. Merle

This country usually gets the short end of the tour, if any at all, from most North Americans and Europeans. Travellers usually hopscotch the glamour cities of Hong Kong, Singapore and Bangkok. If they touch down here at all, it's usually for a quick pit stop. And that's a downright shame, for Malaysia has an exotic buffet awaiting tourists that can match, and even excel in some areas, those other red-hot destinations. All it needs is a chance to prove itself. Once it does, one visit is not enough.

Consider the kaleidoscope of attractions, beginning at the southwest in Malacca, where Malaysia was believed to have been founded in 1400 by a Sumatran prince. Malacca was subsequently conquered by the Portuguese in 1511, followed by the Dutch in 1641 and the British in 1824. Consequently, all of these foreign influences have transformed the state into a cultural melting pot.

North by northwest lies the storied island of Penang, the first British trading post in the Far East which remained under British rule until 1957. Some tourists swear that Penang looks more like Singapore than Singapore. Attractions here include the Butterfly Farm, Orchid Garden, Spice Garden, many colorful temples, including the so-called Snake Temple, a sanctuary for the poisonous pit vipers. Years ago numerous vipers could be seen coiled trance-like around the beams and pillars, believed rendered harmless by the smoke of the burning incense. But because of new construction around the temple, most of the vipers have now moved to other terrain. Still further north, near the Thai border lies the island of Langkawi. There are beautiful beaches here and unique rock formations jutting out of the sea that stir the imagination and baffle the mind. This is what nearby Phuket looked like before it was commercialized to the zenith. Langkawi officials are proceeding cautiously ▶



Batu Caves

كهوف باتو



Muslim food stall in Kelantan

أكلات إسلامية في كلانتان



Tasty Satay street snacks

وجبات خفيفة شهية في شارع ساتاي

with growth, hoping to attract more and more tourists but at the same time preserving the natural beauty of Langkawi. It's a delicate and formidable task.

To the northeast lies the state of Kelantan, where time seems frozen. Residents here are performing the same tasks and indulging in the same pastimes as they have done for centuries. I made two visits here 15 years apart and was practically able to pick up where I left off. The cultural center features giant top-spinning and kite-flying competitions. Both the central market and Muslim market are a photographer's and foodie's delight.

South of Kelantan is Terengganu where giant Leatherback turtles clamber ashore between May and September each year to lay eggs. Some of the turtles weigh as much as 375 kg. Terengganu has a long coastline endowed with white-sand beaches. It has excellent dive sites and its superb coral reefs abound with an amazing diversity of marine life.

Not enough? Then hop across the South China Sea to the fabled island of Borneo and visit two more Malaysian states, Sabah and Sarawak. You've got it all here---plants that eat meat, snakes that fly, pigs with beards, full-grown deer the size of dogs, the

world's largest Orangutan Rehabilitation Center and a few headhunter villages, occupied today by non-practicing descendants. However, one hut did have a cluster of skulls attached to the ceiling. From a distance they looked like coconuts. Which brings us to the capital city of Kuala Lumpur with its futuristic look. From the jungles of Sabah and Sarawak to Kuala Lumpur is one major culture shock.

Twin Towers

Kuala Lumpur has a number of sights, sounds and smells to offer. The sci-fi Petronas Twin Towers which soar majestically over the city's skyline were within walking distance of our hotel, the Times Square.

The towers were the tallest building in the world until they were topped by Taipei's 101 Tower a few years ago, which has been subsequently topped twice by (where else?) oil-rich Dubai. In fact, Dubai isn't taking any chances. Their No. 1 building has been constructed in such a way that it can easily be extended even higher in case someone tries to top it.

Places of worship

The National Mosque or Masjid Negara is

the most distinguished mosque in the city with its unique star-shaped dome. The Masjid Wilayah Persekutuan mosque boasts 22 beautiful domes, and the Masjid Jamek mosque is the city's oldest surviving mosque and served as the principal mosque until the opening of the National Mosque in 1965. Chinese temples include Thean Hou with its golden roofed pagodas and strings of lanterns, and the Sze Ya Taoist temple which dates back to 1864.

We also visited the new Islamic Arts Museum--the only one of its kind in Asia--- featuring Islamic manuscripts, ceramics and glassware, metalwork, textiles and coins.

China Town

Other attractions reachable on foot or the city's monorail include Kuala Lumpur's sprawling Chinatown off Petaling Street, which undergoes a major transformation daily. By day it's a foodie's delight. There are oodles of noodles of all shapes, colors and sizes. The tantalizing aroma from huge woks filled with seafood and meat intermingle with the odor of incense from a nearby temple...and yes, the smell of the street itself.

Shortly after 5 p.m. the vendors begin to arrive and the area becomes a shopper's

paradise if you can avoid the pitfalls. There are pirated goods from all parts of the world, good and poor quality copycat watches and purses, and DVDs of movies that haven't even been released yet. Bargain with a smile, but boldly. Vendors often ask tenfold the price they would sell the same item to locals, so if their opening price is 100 and you offer 50, they're already way ahead of you. Decent copycat watches can be purchased for \$5; real good ones for \$15.

Little India

You'll know you're in Little India off Masjid Street when you smell the spices and hear the sitar music. Try some typical Indian sweets and snacks, or a sit-down feast with curries and vegetables served on banana leaves.

Batu Caves

Just north of the city are the Batu Caves, a major devotional site for Hindus. A strange and somewhat shocking ritual called Thaipusam takes place there each January or February. Devotees walk the 15 kilometers from Kuala Lumpur. Then they climb 272 steps, pulling heavy objects attached by ropes or chains to the hooks, enter the main cave and give thanks.

It is believed they go into a trance that wards off both pain and injury. The ritual is often shown on documentary television ▶



Batu Caves

كهوف باتو



Kuala Lumpur skyline

أفق كوالالمبور

programs. Aside from the spacious main cave, there is a smaller one called "Dark Cave" which is restricted because a number of poisonous vipers dwell there. Finally Kuala Lumpur is a modern, futuristic looking city. It really never was Third World, even during my first visit here some 25 years ago. Yet it remains a mystery to a majority of North Americans, as does the entire country of Malaysia. Its time in the sun appears imminent. ■

(Dominick A. Merle is Canadian Director of the International Travel Writers Assn. He is based in Monstreal, Quebec)

IF YOU GO

It's about as far as you can travel from North America before automatically heading back. Figure on three days travelling time round-trip if you're starting from the east coast, two days from the west.

We flew China Airlines from Vancouver with a change of planes in Taipei to Kuala Lumpur. Service was very good throughout. The airline was offering the lowest fare at the time and as a bonus, because it was oversold, we were upgraded to its Dynasty Class.

No visas or immunization shots are required for North Americans, only a passport valid for at least six months.

Kuala Lumpur and all of Malaysia has a warm tropical climate. Pack light, comfortable clothing.

There are several things frowned upon. Point with your thumb not your finger, do not show the soles of your shoes while sitting and avoid touching anyone on the head. I'm not quite sure of the origins, and some natives aren't either, but it's just not done.

Also, the right hand is used while eating, as well as receiving or giving objects.

For further information on Kuala Lumpur and Malaysia, try the website www.tourismmalaysia.gov.my



Kuala Lumpur skyline

أفق كوالالمبور



A mosque in Kuala Lumpur

مسجد في كوالالمبور