

# Kelantan

## The state that preserved Malay culture in its diversity and simplicity

By DOMINICK MERLE

KELANTAN, Malaysia — I'm often reluctant to return to a destination that has given me so many warm memories over the years, for fear that they will be shattered by the winds of change. More often than not, they usually are. That was my mindset as I set out on my revisit to the Malaysian state of Kelantan after an absence of 17 years. Would it have the same charm? Would I be able to even find some of the scenes captured in my photo album back home?

Much to my surprise and delight, it proved to be as comfortable as slipping on an old favorite sweater. There still are a few places left in the world that you can return to after a number of years and pick up practically where you left off, and Kelantan might be at the very top of that short list.

Oh, it's put on a little population around the middle and shows a few more roadlines since my last visit here in 1987, but time should be so kind to all of us.

Roughly the size of New Hampshire, Kelantan inches along almost grudgingly into the 21st Century as it clings tenaciously to roots that date back to 8000 to 3000 B.C. when

the territory first established trading links with the Chinese Empire.

A stone's throw from the Thai border and the South China Sea, Kelantan is often referred to as the cradle of Malay culture. Because of its geographical position in the northeast corner of the country, it has been isolated through the centuries.

As a result, the "Keltanese" way of life has not been watered down through foreign and colonial influences, and Malay culture has been preserved in all its traditional richness



An attractive display of fruit in the local market.

عرض جذاب للفاكهة في السوق المحلي.

and splendor. If Malaysia remains pretty much of a mystery to many North Americans, Kelantan itself is just as mysterious to many Malaysians. At times, it seems much like a country unto itself.

Grown men still spin tops and fly kites here, and it's far from fun and games. Bird singing competitions are also deadly serious—the prize warbler can cost as much as a new Mercedes! There are tiny seaside villages where every resident is involved in a common endeavor, be it boatbuilding, cooking, weaving or a number

of other crafts.

No one seems certain as to how or when many of these traditions began, but they had not changed one iota since my first visit and show no signs of ever vanishing into history books.

I stayed in the capital city of Kota Bahru, situated a few miles inland from the South China Sea. Except for a few fast-food franchises, it had a welcome familiarity about it. The same nondescript parking lot in the center of the city continues to transform itself each night into a festive Muslim food market. The aromas of the various foods are almost intoxicating. Rice comes in all colors here, including blue.

Just up the street is the Central Market, open each day from dawn to dusk, where fruits and vegetables come in all shapes and sizes. One can easily spend a day in this one-block area—when Central Market begins to close, the Muslim food vendors are just beginning to arrive.

We attended a demonstration of top spinning and kite flying the next day at Kota Bahru's cultural center. The top spinners, who can only be found in Kelantan, performed first.

The giant tops are made of wood and tin, shaped like flying saucers and weigh ➤

approximately 15 to 20 pounds. Instead of a string looped around a finger as with a conventional top, ropes are wound around these supertops and the ends of the ropes wound once again around the competitors' wrists.

The spinners resemble discus throwers in their stance and toss. With a whiplike motion, they fling the tops onto an elevated platform about 4-feet square. Great strength is required. For a maximum spin, they must jerk back the instant the top lands.

Any top that falls off the platform is eliminated. The successful tops are scooped up on a thin wooden board and, while still spinning, placed in a metal cylinder that looks like a horseshoe peg. There they rotate while an official timer looks on.

This is no fast-action competition. The tops can often spin for up to two hours!

Again, no one is certain how this particular event began, but most agree that it's been going on for at least 500 years to celebrate the end of the harvest season.

The kite flyers were in a nearby park practicing for the annual competition that takes place each spring and attracts entries from throughout Asia and parts of Europe. At 6 feet, the kites are often taller than the men who control them. They come in various shapes simulating that of a cat, a peacock, a bird etc.

Made from bamboo and colored paper applied with rice paste, the kites soar to 500 feet or more. The weight and balance are so carefully calculated that if a piece of bamboo is shaved too thin, the kite cannot be launched, let alone fly. Bird singing competitions are held weekly in various parts of Kelantan, usually on Fridays, and we witnessed one the next morning in the countryside near the Thai border. The dovelike birds were in gilded cages adorned with velvet cage covers and carpets in regal shades of red and purple.

The cages were hoisted by a type of pulley rope to the tops of 15-foot poles. The birds began singing noisily, while judges moved from one pole to another, making critical notes on loudness, pitch and melody. The winners advance from state to state and once a year the finalists compete for the top prize in all of Malaysia. These are the birds that are often bought and sold for the price of a luxury car.

Our final stop was to a small village of about 3,000 residents called Kampung Laut which

roughly translates to "Village by the Sea." It was, in effect, one huge bakery. I visited this same village 17 years ago and it now felt like I had been whisked back in time. It was exactly as I remembered it.

For hundreds of years, the women of the village have been making cakes and pastries in huge brass pots 40 inches wide and about 2 feet deep. Now, I was watching perhaps the sons and daughters of the men and women I saw perform this operation on my first visit. Each day, they bring their cakes to the open market by boat. There were no signs that this tradition and way of life would ever disappear, and throughout the area there are many other small villages where residents concentrate solely on one product.

And so, the traditions, culture and lifestyle of Kelantan are alive and well. And that's refreshing in this age of one-upmanship and change for change's sake. Kelantan will do it in its own sweet time.

*(Dominick Merle is a travel writer and consultant based in Montreal)*

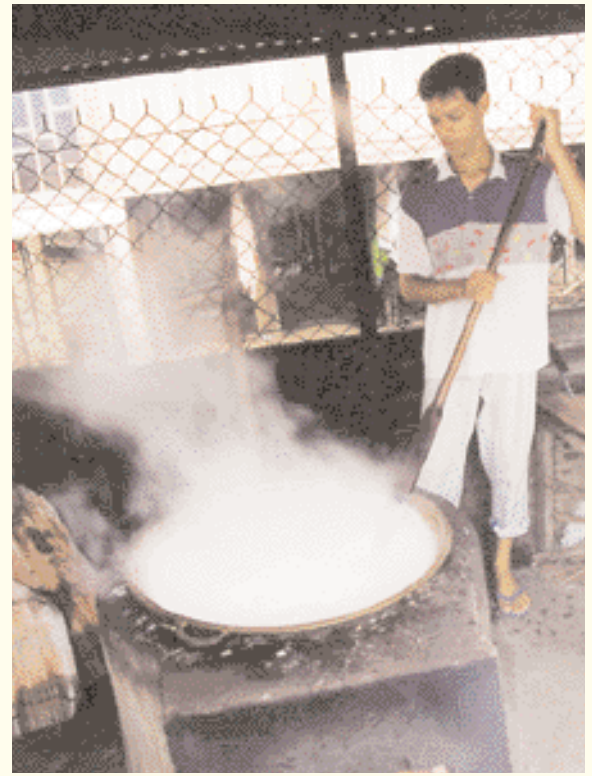
### IF YOU GO:

We flew Malaysia Airlines from Newark to Kuala Lumpur with a stop in Dubai. From Kuala Lumpur to Kota Bahru is about 90 minutes by air.

The weather throughout Malaysia is generally hot and humid year round, with the heavy rain season from November through January.

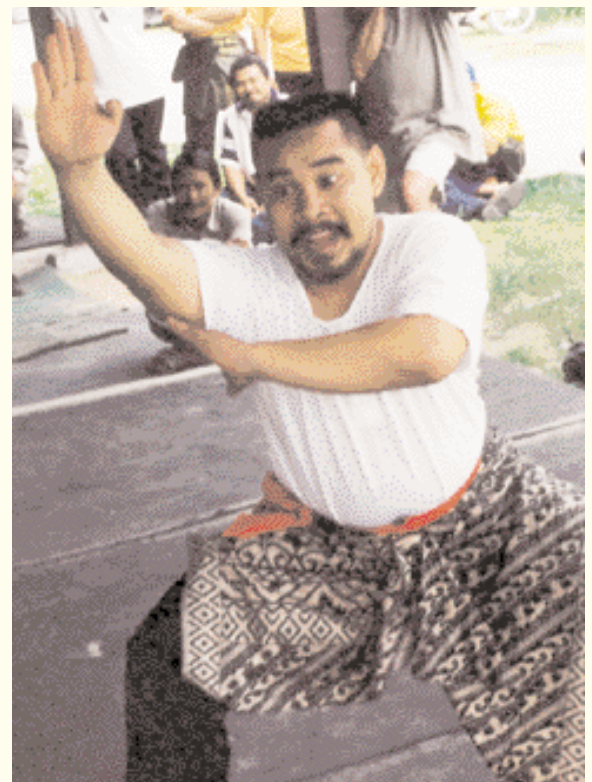
Kelantan is one of the strictest Islamic states in Malaysia. Alcohol is prohibited in restaurants and hotels and can be purchased in only a few selected stores for home use. Drinking in public and loud talking are frowned upon. Dress should be casual but conservative.

For further information on Kelantan, contact the Malaysia Tourist Promotion Board at 120 E. 56th St. Suite 810, New York, NY 10022, e-mail [mtpb.ny@tourism.gov.my](mailto:mtpb.ny@tourism.gov.my), or visit the website [www.visitmalaysia.com](http://www.visitmalaysia.com)



شاب يطبخ في قرية المعجنات.

Young boy stirring pot in "pastry village".



راقص من كلانتان وهو في غاية الإنفعال.

Kelantan dancer working himself into a trance-like state.