

ABOUT MALAYSIA

Malaysia is a harmonious land of races and religions in which Malays, Indians, Chinese and other ethnic groups live harmoniously in a tropical paradise. Multiculturalism has made Malaysia a model society, a gastronomic paradise and home to a wealth of art, culture and hundreds of colourful festivals that represent the rich cultures of these ethnic groups. Visitors have a wealth of opportunities and fascinating destinations to choose from including endless white sandy beaches, world class golf courses, mountain retreats and modern cities with an abundance of shopping, dining and nightlife choices. Geographically, Malaysia is as diverse as its vibrant culture. It is divided into 13 states and three federal territories, separated by the South China Sea, with 11 states and two federal territories (Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya) across Peninsular Malaysia, and two states and one federal territory (Labuan) in East Malaysia. The country provides travellers with a wealth of tourism experiences, including an abundance of Malay, Chinese and Indian influences on Peninsular Malaysia, whereas Borneo offers a complete contrast of wildly differing fauna and flora, including the famed orang-utans, towering granite peaks and lush jungles.

FAST FACTS

AIRPORTS

Malaysia's main international gateway is Kuala Lumpur International Airport 75-km south of the city. Asian Trails provides fast and efficient transfers from the airport to the capital and other resort destinations. The main international airport, called KLIA 1, covers all the national carriers. In 2014, to cope with the growing demand of low-cost carriers, KLIA 2 opened its doors and is purely dedicated to operate low cost carriers. The KLIA Express runs between both airports with a frequency of every 20 minutes.

ARRIVAL / DEPARTURE INFORMATION

To enter Malaysia, visitors must have a passport that is valid for at least six months beyond the date of entry. Citizens of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States do not need visas for tourism and business visits and upon entry are granted a Social/Business Visit Pass that always stays for up to three months. For other countries, consult the nearest Malaysian consulate before your trip for visa regulations. Visitors from EU countries are granted a tourist visa upon entrance up to 3 months.

All the above information may change without prior notice. It remains the traveler's responsibility to check visa requirements before traveling.

BUSINESS HOURS

Government offices are open from 8-am to 12.45-pm and 2 to 4.15-pm Monday to Thursday, and Friday from 8-am to 12:15 pm and 2:45 pm to 4:15 pm. Department stores and shops in malls tend to open later, about 10.30-am until 10:00 pm throughout the week. Note that in the states of Kelantan, Terengganu, and Kedah, the working week runs from Sunday to Thursday, with the weekend holiday period on Friday and Saturday. Normal banking hours are from Sunday to Wednesday from 9.15-am to 4.30-pm and Thursdays from 9.15-am to 4.00-pm.

BANKS

Banks are open from 9.30-pm to 4-pm, Monday to Friday. Currency can be changed at banks and hotels, but visitors will get a more favourable rate at one of the moneychangers in shopping centres and stores. ATMs are found throughout the country, especially in cities and major towns. They will be harder to find on smaller islands and in remote beach destinations. Debit cards from MasterCard, Cirrus or Visa are almost always accepted at Maybank, with at least one branch in every major town. Cash is dispensed in ringgit and calculated at the daily international exchange rate.

CLOTHING

Comfortable lightweight fabric such as cotton is the most suitable clothing for traveling in tropical Malaysia. The dress code is fairly casual but it is advisable to cover arms and legs in the evenings against mosquito bites when outside in provincial areas. A lightweight raincoat is a good idea if visiting the country during the rainy season as the deluge can be very heavy. Warm clothing is needed when visiting areas such as the Cameron Highlands as the temperature drops considerably in the higher elevation areas. Visitors should not wear shorts, short skirts or similar clothing when visiting religious sites. Asian Trails recommends bringing a light jacket or thin sweater with you when entering air-conditioned places such as shopping malls and public transport.

CURRENCY

Malaysia's currency is the Malaysian ringgit. Prices are marked as RM. Notes are issued in denominations of RM1, RM2, RM5, RM10, RM20, RM50, and RM100. One ringgit is equal to 100 sen. Coins come in denominations of 5, 10, 20, and 50 sen.

CUSTOM ALLOWANCES

The following goods may be imported into Malaysia without incurring a customs duty:

- One liter of alcohol.
- One carton of cigarettes.

Visitors can bring in as many foreign currency notes or traveler's checks as they like, but amounts exceeding RM10, 000 or its equivalent in foreign currency has to be declared

MALAYSIA (Do's and Don'ts)

Malaysia is renowned as a welcoming country with tolerant people but some common courtesies are as follows:

Dos in Malaysia

- Although handshakes are generally acceptable for both men and women, some Muslim women may acknowledge introductions to men by merely nodding and smiling. A handshake should only be initiated by ladies. The traditional greeting or 'salam' resembles a handshake with both hands, but without the firm grasp.
- It is polite to call before visiting a home.
- Shoes must always be removed when entering a Malaysian home.
- Drinks, especially water, are generally offered to guests. It is polite to accept.
- The right hand is always used when eating with one's hand or giving and receiving objects.
- Shoes must be removed when entering places of worship such as mosques and temples. Some mosques provide robes and scarves for female visitors.
- Taking photographs at places of worship is usually permitted but always ask permission beforehand.

Don'ts in Malaysia

- Hugging and kissing is considered inappropriate behaviour in public so it is good protocol to avoid this behaviour.
- It is rude to cross your legs when you sit down in front of the host, particularly for women.
- Do not touch the head of an adult and don't point the bottom of your feet at anyone.
- When entering a religious site, dress respectfully (no bare shoulders, exposed legs or backless shoes).
- Malaysians have a philosophy of keeping their cool and not losing their temper. To raise one's voice and lose one's temper is considered bad form and confrontation is to be avoided. Even if you experience some form of minor trouble, it is better to smile and not show aggression.
- Do not sunbathe nude and females should wear suitable swimwear including a covered top.

ELECTRICITY

The voltage used in Malaysia is 220 to 240 volts AC (50 cycles). Three-point square plugs are used, so buy an adapter if you plan to bring any appliances. Larger hotels can usually provide adapters upon request.

ENTERTAINMENT AND NIGHTLIFE

Unsurprisingly, Kuala Lumpur offers the liveliest action with a good selection of reputable nightclubs and music venues, most belonging to big hotels. Changkat Bukit Bintang is a lively nightlife spot and has a good selection of alfresco bars and coffee shops. Penang is also lively at night; larger hotels offer cocktail lounges, dancing venues and cultural shows. A car-free street called One Penang Road in George Town offers an abundance of upmarket restaurants, bars and clubs. There are also excellent lively night markets in most towns nationwide.

FOOD

Malaysia's culinary tradition reflects the waves of immigration, settlement and assimilation that brought uniquely delicious flavors from its multicultural Malay, Indian, Chinese and Eurasian population. Primarily consisting of Malay, Chinese and Indian influences, Malaysian cuisine also has its hybrids derived from cross cultural influences such as Mamak (Indian-Muslim) and Nyonya (the Malay-Chinese mix). A Malay meal always revolves around rice, accompanied by curries, fried chicken or fish, vegetable dishes, and small portions of condiments, called sambal. Probably one of the most famous Malay dishes is satay; delicious barbecued skewers of marinated chicken, beef, or mutton dipped in a peanut sauce. Another culinary favorite is ikan bakar; fish covered in chilli sauce and grilled in foil over an open flame. Nasi Lemak is a mainstay on the menu and is made with rice cooked in coconut milk and served with fried chicken, prawn crackers, dried anchovies, egg and a dark, sweet chilli sauce.

HEALTH

No inoculations or vaccinations are required unless traveling from, or passing through, areas infected with yellow fever. Various biting bugs, leeches, parasites and venomous snakes are found in Malaysia's rugged jungles so use insect repellent, don't walk barefoot and take sensible precautions to avoid bites and stings if you embark on a jungle adventure. The standard of medical facilities at private hospitals is world class and Malaysia has a growing medical tourism industry. All hotels and resorts have qualified physicians on call who speak English. These doctors will come directly to guest rooms for treatment.

HOTELS

The standards of accommodation are excellent with categories to fit all budgets. Kuala Lumpur and the large beach resort destinations have an abundance of luxury properties with all the main global hotel chains represented. Peak months of the year for hotels in western peninsular Malaysia are December through to February; and July through to September. For the East Coast, the busy times are July through to September. You will need to make reservations well in advance to secure your room during these months. Asian Trails' booking system can help with these arrangements. The larger hotels offer a wide variety of restaurants, bars, swimming pools and other recreational facilities. Most of the staff at key positions (front office, reception, restaurants etc.,) speak excellent English. During check-in you will be asked to complete a registration card. The hotel will also ask for an imprint of your credit card as a guarantee for extra services such as meals, drinks, etc. Ask the cashier to return this slip upon checkout. Please check that you receive meal coupons (where applicable) when given the room key. General check-in is from 2pm and check out time is 12.00 noon. If you require a late check-out (extra costs may apply) check with reception beforehand.

INSURANCE

It is advisable to take out a medical insurance policy before traveling as treatment will not be administered without proof of payment, or evidence of a comprehensive travel insurance policy.

INTERNET

Major Internet cafes are widespread in major towns and cities. Besides computer use that is timed by the minute, users can also purchase pre-paid international phone cards to make international calls. Wi-Fi hotspots are widespread in hotels, shopping malls and fast food outlets and cafes. Most hotels have business centres with PCs connected to the Internet or in-room broadband access. Convenience stores sell local pre-paid and top-up SIM cards that offer cheaper rates.

LANGUAGE

Bahasa Malaysia is the national language. Cantonese, Hokkien and Mandarin are the main dialects of the Chinese community and Tamil is widely spoken by the Indian sector of the population. English is generally understood throughout the country.

PEOPLE

Malaysia's unique wow factor is its diversity; Malay Muslims, Chinese Taoists and Buddhists, Indian Hindus, a large number of indigenous people, plus an assortment of Peranakans, Eurasians, and other races and religions all call themselves Malaysian. The country's long history is the story of how original Malays have accepted newcomers from Arabia, India, China and further afield and fused differing cultures into a national identity.

PUBLIC HOLIDAYS

Most religious Malaysian festivals have no fixed dates but change annually according to the lunar calendar. Prominent among these is Chinese New Year in January-February which is celebrated with hong bao (red packets filled with lucky money), fire crackers and the exchange of mandarin oranges. Mid-year, the Gawai Festival is celebrated by the Iban and Bidayuh people in Sarawak at the end of the rice harvest with much merry-making, dancing and the drinking of tuak, a potent rice wine. The San Pedro Fiesta is celebrated in June when Melaka's Portuguese communities decorate their boats to honor the patron saint of fishermen. The closure of tourist sites can occur at short notice on public holidays and our Asian Trails guides will give guests advice about this situation. The dates of national holidays may change every year.

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

Peninsular Malaysia has an excellent bus system. Public buses do local runs and a number of privately operated bus companies handle the longer trips. Local and regional buses often operate from one station and long-distance buses from another. Driving in Peninsular Malaysia is quite easy compared to most other Asian countries as the roads are generally of a high quality and the standards of driving are generally high. However, motorists should be constantly aware of the hazards posed by stray animals and numerous motorcyclists. Peninsular Malaysia has a modern, comfortable and economical railway service that has basically two lines. One runs from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur, to Butterworth and then onto Thailand. The other line, which is known as the "Jungle Railway," and cuts through the interior of Malaysia, has been closed down until further notice. There are still references made to the existence of this line via online travel sites and in guide books, yet is not operational any longer until further notice. Within towns and cities, taxis are metered. Heritage destinations such as George Town and Malacca still have rickshaws for hire and these are a great way to get around the capital of Penang's narrow streets.

RELIGION

Malaysia is a multicultural society with Islam as the dominant religion, with 61 per cent of the population adherents of this faith. The constitution guarantees religious freedom for many other faiths and relations between different religious groups are harmonious and tolerant. Christmas, Chinese New Year and Deepavali have all been declared national holidays alongside Islamic holidays. The large Chinese population practices a mixture of beliefs, with influences from traditional religions followed in China such as Buddhism and Daoism. Hinduism is followed by many of Malaysia's Indians.

SAFETY

Serious crimes against foreigners are very rare but travelers should remain vigilant for petty theft, especially in areas off the beaten tourist track. As a global rule, never leave belongings unattended and always maintain a firm grip on cameras and shoulder bags. Leave expensive valuables at home and always use hotel safety deposits boxes or in-room safes for valuables.

SHOPPING

Malaysia is a genuine shopper's paradise; the capital Kuala Lumpur already has well over 20 large malls with most of them concentrated within the "Golden Triangle", near to Bukit Bintang. Best buys include the latest designer brands and electronic hardware to elegant Malay garments and meticulously hand-crafted wooden baskets. The best places to do modern shopping are Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Langkawi while those after cultural handicrafts should visit Malacca and the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia. Visitors can shop without paying taxes on products at the following duty-free zones: Langkawi Island, Tioman Island and Labuan Island.

STREET STALLS AND MARKETS

Like many countries in South East Asia, Malaysia is home to thriving markets. Traditional markets, also called wet markets, are a great source for fresh meats, fruits and vegetables, spices, and other basic local ingredients. It is best to shop at these in the morning – the earlier the fresher. For handicrafts and souvenirs, the best buys are batik, pottery, t-shirts, painted tiles, traditional dolls and brassware.

TELEPHONE

Most hotels have IDD phones but for a more inexpensive option head to the abundance of Internet cafes for cheaper phone rates and buy pre-paid international calling cards at convenience stores.

TIME ZONE

Malaysia is GMT 8+ and does not operate on a daylight-savings system.

TIPPING

Tipping for good service is not expected but is always appreciated. Tipping the guide and driver on your transfers and tours should depend on how satisfied you are with the excursion. Hotel porters should be tipped for carrying bags to the room. In other cases, it is totally up to the individual when and how much to tip.

WATER

Water in Kuala Lumpur is supposed to be potable, but most locals boil the water before drinking it. All hotels provide complimentary bottles of local mineral water. Ice cubes are generally okay in hotels and restaurants but it is best to avoid them at street stalls. Twenty four hour convenience stores are everywhere in major cities and provincial towns and these sell an abundance of water and soft drink items.

WEATHER

The climate is tropical, with high humidity. Temperatures remain around 30C (86F) throughout the year. The rainy season, which affects mainly the east coast of the peninsula, the north-eastern parts of Sabah and the western part of Sarawak, lasts from November to February.

EMERGENCY CONTACT NUMBERS

Call 999 for all emergencies.

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