



THE ROUGH GUIDE TO

MALAYSIA

SINGAPORE & BRUNEI



INSIDE THIS BOOK

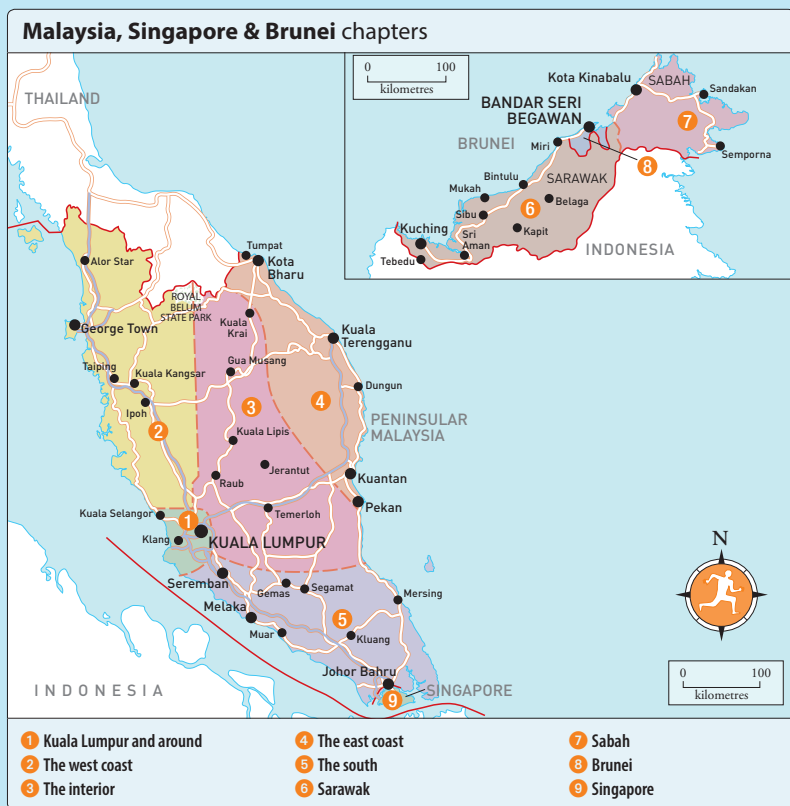
INTRODUCTION What to see, what not to miss, itineraries and more

BASICS Pre-departure tips and practical information

THE GUIDE Comprehensive, in-depth guide to the region, with area highlights and full-colour maps throughout

CONTEXTS History, peoples, wildlife, environmental development and religion, plus recommended books and a useful language section

We've flagged up our favourite places – a perfectly sited hotel, an atmospheric café, a special restaurant – throughout the Guide with the ★ symbol



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THE ROUGH GUIDE TO

MALAYSIA

SINGAPORE & BRUNEI

This ninth edition updated by

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Charles Young





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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

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.

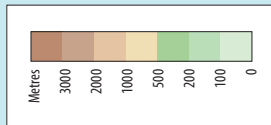
Where to go

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







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



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.



SHOPHOUSES

A standard feature of local townscapes is rows of **shophouses** – two- or three-storey buildings traditionally containing a shop at street level, with residential quarters behind and above. For visitors, their most striking feature is that at ground level the front wall is usually set back from the street. This creates a so-called “**five-foot way**” overhung by the upper part of the house, which shelters pedestrians from the sun and pelting rain.

Shophouses were fusion architecture: facades have **Western** features such as shuttered windows and gables, while inside there might be an area open to the sky, in the manner of **Chinese** courtyard houses. Some, especially from the early part of the last century, are bedecked with columns, floral plaster motifs and beautiful tilework, while later properties feature simpler Art Deco touches. Sadly, shophouses went out of favour in the 1980s, and recent ones tend to be bland, functional affairs; older buildings, however, have won a new lease of life as swanky restaurants and boutique hotels.

and Western standards of hygiene – though prices are likewise at Western levels. The island has fascinating Chinese and Indian quarters, excellent historical museums and a smattering of colonial architecture as well as great shopping, all of which will keep you occupied for several days. Singapore also rightly holds a reputation as one of Asia’s **gastronomic capitals**, where you can just as readily savour fantastic snacks at simple hawker stalls or an exquisite Chinese banquet in a swanky restaurant.

For those who venture into the tiny kingdom of **Brunei**, enveloped by Sarawak’s two most northerly divisions, the capital **Bandar Seri Begawan** holds the entrancing Kampung Ayer, a sprawling stilt village built out over the Brunei River, plus a handful of interesting museums and mosques. In the sparsely populated Temburong district, you can visit unspoiled rainforest at the **Ulu Temburong National Park**, where abundant wildlife roams.

When to go

Temperatures vary little in Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei, hovering constantly at or just above 30°C by day, while humidity is high year-round. Showers occur year-round too, often in the mid-afternoon, though these short, sheeting downpours clear up as quickly as they arrive.

The major distinction in the seasons is marked by the arrival of the northeast monsoon (ushering in what is locally called the **rainy season**). This particularly affects the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia and the western end of Sarawak, with late November to mid-February seeing the heaviest rainfall. On the Peninsula’s west coast and in Sabah, September and October are the wettest months. Monsoonal downpours can be heavy and prolonged, sometimes lasting two or three hours and prohibiting more or less all activity for the duration; boats to most islands in affected areas won’t attempt the sea swell at the height of the rainy season. In mountainous areas like Cameron Highlands, the Kelabit Highlands and in the hill stations and upland national parks, you may experience more frequent rain as the high peaks gather clouds more or less permanently.

The **ideal time** to visit most of the region is between March and early October, when you will avoid the worst of the rains and there’s less humidity, though both ends of this period



can be characterized by a stifling lack of breezes. Despite the rains, the months of January and February are rewarding, and see a number of significant **festivals**, notably Chinese New Year and the Hindu celebration of Thaipusam. Visiting just after the rainy season can afford the best of both worlds, with verdant countryside and bountiful waterfalls, though there's still a clammy quality to the air. In late May and early June, a **rice harvest** festival takes place in both Sabah (where it's called Kaamatan) and Sarawak (Gawai). It's an excuse for extended merry-making, with much quaffing of rice wine, music and dancing – all best witnessed in longhouses, although Kota Kinabalu hosts more formal celebrations.

AVERAGE DAILY TEMPERATURES AND RAINFALL

	Jan	Feb	Mar	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
KOTA BHARU												
Max/min °C	29/22	30/23	31/23	32/24	33/24	32/24	32/23	32/23	32/23	31/23	29/23	29/23
Rain (mm)	163	60	99	81	114	132	157	168	195	286	651	603
KOTA KINABALU												
Max/min °C	30/23	30/23	31/23	32/24	32/24	31/24	31/24	31/24	31/23	31/23	31/23	31/23
Rain (mm)	153	63	71	124	218	311	277	256	314	334	296	241
KUALA LUMPUR												
Max/min °C	32/22	33/22	33/23	33/23	33/23	32/23	32/23	32/23	32/23	32/23	31/23	31/23
Rain (mm)	159	154	223	276	182	119	120	133	173	258	263	223
KUCHING												
Max/min °C	30/23	30/23	31/23	32/23	33/23	33/23	32/23	33/23	32/23	32/23	31/23	31/23
Rain (mm)	683	522	339	286	253	199	199	211	271	326	343	465
SINGAPORE												
Max/min °C	32/23	32/23	32/24	32/24	31/24	31/24	31/23	31/23	31/23	31/23	31/23	31/23
Rain (mm)	70	93	141	214	240	170	208	235	341	380	246	107

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things not to miss

It's not possible to see everything that Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei have to offer in one trip – and we don't suggest you try. What follows is a selective taste, in no particular order, of their highlights: natural wonders, stunning buildings and colourful heritages. Each entry has a page reference to take you straight into the Guide, where you can find out more. Coloured numbers refer to chapters in the Guide section.





1 NIAH NATIONAL PARK

Page 368

This compact park is the site of a cave system holding important archeological remains, and also offers the chance to see edible swiftlet nests being harvested at certain times of year.

2 GEORGE TOWN

Page 148

A bustling, Chinese-dominated town with historic temples, colonial-era mansions and a blossoming cultural scene.

3 LANGKAWI

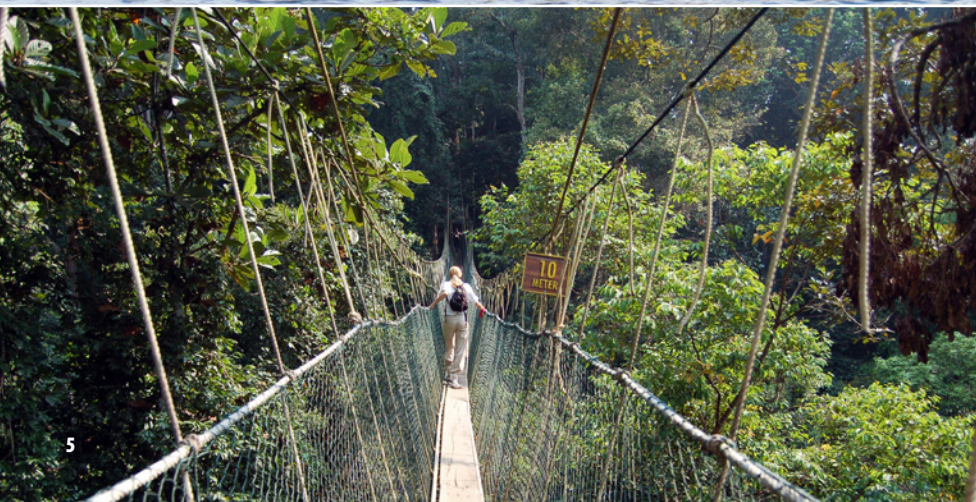
Page 175

Luxurious resorts on sublime beaches pretty much sums up this west-coast island, close to the Thai border.





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7

4 KAMPONG AYER

Page 459

Take a boat ride around this wooden village in the middle of the Brunei River.

5 TAMAN NEGARA

Page 191

Peninsular Malaysia's premier national park, Taman Negara is one of the world's oldest rainforests, with hides for wildlife-spotting, treetop walkways and many trekking options.

6 ADVENTURE TOURISM

Page 48

Whitewater rafting, caving and jungle trekking are among activities widely available in Malaysia.

7 SINGAPORE'S ARTS SCENE

Page 546

As befits the largest city in the region, Singapore offers a dynamic range of artistic activities – catch anything from Chinese street opera to indie rock gigs.

8 KELABIT HIGHLANDS

Page 378

These remote uplands offer excellent walks and hikes, plus encounters with friendly tribal communities along the way.



8



9 LITTLE INDIA, SINGAPORE

Page 490

On Serangoon Road you can almost believe you're in downtown Chennai – the area has all the sights, sounds and smells of the Indian subcontinent.

10 THE PERHERNTIAN ISLANDS

Page 231

A popular pair of islands off the east coast, with beautiful beaches, great snorkelling and accommodation for all budgets.

11 GUNUNG MULU NATIONAL PARK

Page 372

A view of razor-sharp limestone pinnacles reward the challenging haul up Mount Api, and the park also boasts underground caves that teem with wildlife.

12 MELAKA

Page 274

The city's complex historical heritage is evident in its Portuguese, Dutch and British buildings and Peranakan ancestral homes.





13 THE PETRONAS TOWERS

Page 74

KL's iconic towers not only hold your gaze from all angles but also house one of the city's best shopping malls.

14 THE KINABATANGAN RIVER

Page 434

Boat trips here are brilliant for spotting proboscis monkeys, hornbills and, if you're lucky, elephants and orang-utans.

15 MALIAU BASIN

Page 449

Billed as Sabah's "Lost World", this forest conservation area has excellent multi-day treks to remote waterfalls, plus decent wildlife-spotting opportunities.

16 TRADITIONAL CRAFTS

Page 51

Malaysia boasts a wide range of crafts, from batik and *songket* (brocade) to rattan baskets and *labu*, gourd-shaped ceramic jugs.

17 FOOD

Page 38

Simple stalls in markets and malls and on the street serve up mouthwatering noodles, snacks and desserts.









18 LONGHOUSES IN SARAWAK

Page 345

Large communal dwellings, home to members of indigenous tribes, are found along rivers and in remote mountain locations.

19 PROBOSCIS MONKEYS, BAKO

Page 339

These odd-looking creatures roam *kerangas* forest and mangrove swamps in the national park, not far from Kuching.

20 RAINFOREST MUSIC FESTIVAL

Page 338

Held annually near Kuching, this world music festival is an opportunity to see indigenous performers alongside musicians from across the globe.

21 MOUNT KINABALU

Page 417

Watch dawn over Borneo from the summit of one of Southeast Asia's highest peaks.

22 DIVING AT SIPADAN

Page 441

Off southeast Sabah, Sipadan and neighbouring islands are world-renowned for their dive sites and astonishing marine life.





Itineraries

Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei cover such a spread-out area that it would be impossible to see everything in one trip, but each of the following routes makes a great way to spend two or three weeks in the region. While the Peninsula Circuit is the most varied, you can head east to Borneo if you prefer an outdoor-focused option. Singapore is more of a long-weekend destination, but a stay here could easily be tacked onto a wider trip north up into Peninsular Malaysia.

PENINSULA CIRCUIT

For a straightforward taster of everything the region has to offer, try this three-week circuit.

➊ **Kuala Lumpur** Malaysia's capital offers shiny malls, showcase architecture and a mix of Muslim, Chinese and Hindu districts, with some of the best street food in the country. **See p.66**

➋ **Cameron Highlands** This former retreat for colonial administrators is now a rural idyll of tea plantations and forest walks. **See p.138**

➌ **Pangkor Island** Kick back at this low-key resort island that's a favourite with Malaysian families. **See p.125**

➍ **Penang** Packed with historic guildhalls and streets, eccentric temples, surprisingly wild gardens and its own national park. **See p.146**

➎ **Kota Bharu** One of the few places where you can see shadow-puppet performances of the Hindu epics. **See p.221**

➏ **Perhentian islands** Superb tropical hangouts with gorgeous beaches and splendid snorkelling and scuba diving. **See p.231**

➐ **Jungle Railway** This slow-moving commuter train chugs past languid towns, tiny kampungs and market gardens along the way. **See p.204**

➑ **Taman Negara** One of the world's oldest rainforests features superlative wildlife-spotting and jungle treks lasting up to a week or more. **See p.191**

SINGAPORE AND MELAKA

You can pack this round-up of the region's great food and centuries-old history into a week.

➊ **Little India, Singapore** Charismatic area of temples and shops selling gold and saris with the liveliest market in Singapore. **See p.490**



② **Chinatown, Singapore** Amid the modern shophouses, restaurants and markets, don't miss the Buddha Tooth Relic Temple, full of dynamic statuary and the tooth itself. **See p.496**

③ **Night Safari, Singapore** The highlight of Singapore Zoo's superbly displayed collection of native wildlife, the Night Safari section lets you see creatures such as tigers, leopards, elephants and rhinos. **See p.514**

④ **Bukit Timah, Singapore** The last patch of real rainforest left in Singapore offers an easy, leech-free introduction to jungle trails and colourful birdlife. **See p.513**

⑤ **Eating, Singapore** Indulge in one of the world's gastronomic capitals, with varied menus of Indian, Chinese and Malay dishes. **See p.536**

⑥ **Istana Kesultanan, Melaka** An exquisite Malay palace, built without nails and founded during the fifteenth century. **See p.277**

⑦ **Baba-Nyonya Heritage Museum, Melaka** An elegant row of traditional houses decorated with the tiles, lanterns and woodcarvings of the Chinese-Malay Peranakan culture, now – aside from its cuisine – virtually extinct. **See p.279**

⑧ **Bukit China, Melaka** Hilltop covered in many crescent-shaped Chinese graves, some dating to the seventeenth century. **See p.281**

SARAWAK AND MT KINABALU

Allow at least three weeks for this adventurous trip into Malaysia's least-developed corners.

① **Kuching** Find your bearings in Sarawak's small, likeable capital: the museum's ethnological collection is worth a browse, and the Semenggoh orang-utan sanctuary makes a rewarding day-trip. **See p.321**

② **Bako** Sarawak's oldest national park, this small patch of well-preserved coastal forest is home to waterfalls, proboscis monkeys and bizarre pitcher plants. **See p.339**

③ **Batang Ai** Take a boat through spectacular riverine forest in this often overlooked national park, and visit traditional longhouse communities such as Nanga Sumpa. **See p.345**

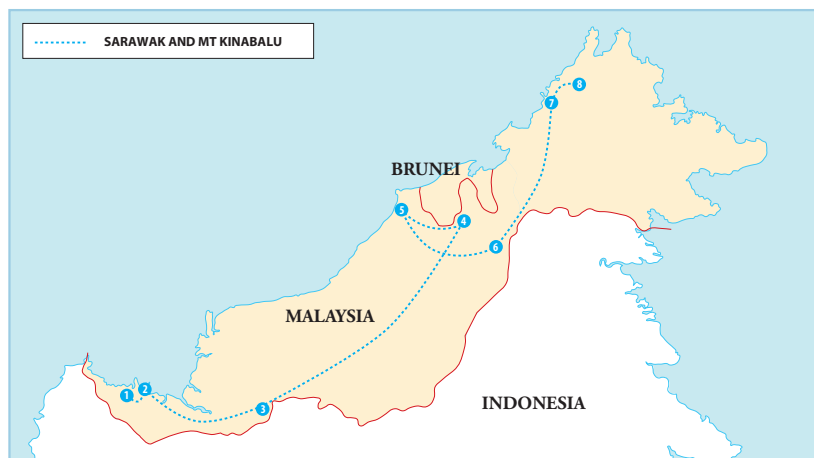
④ **Gunung Mulu National Park** Offers jungle scenery, particularly on the three-day trek out to a clutch of limestone towers and a network of rugged caverns. **See p.372**

⑤ **Miri** A stepping stone to the more remote corners of Sarawak and to Sabah. Don't miss the caves at Niah National Park, inhabited by humans over 40,000 years ago. **See p.362**

⑥ **Bario** Set out on some demanding multiday trekking via remote Kelabit longhouses or up Mount Murud. **See p.380**

⑦ **Kota Kinabalu** Sabah's capital has lively markets, a district of traditional houses built over the water and an interesting indigenous museum. **See p.393**

⑧ **Kinabalu Park** This small reserve surrounds wind-seared Mount Kinabalu, which hosts one of the toughest hikes in all of Malaysia. **See p.417**





TRISHAW

Basics

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Getting there

Located at the heart of Southeast Asia, on the busy aviation corridor between Europe and Australasia, Malaysia and Singapore enjoy excellent international air links. Singapore is served by many more flights than Kuala Lumpur (KL), but can also be slightly more expensive to fly into. Of Malaysia's regional airports, those in Kota Kinabalu, Kuching and Penang have the most useful international connections, albeit chiefly with other East Asian cities. If you're heading to Brunei, you'll most likely have to stop over elsewhere in the region or in the Middle East.

During the **peak seasons** for travel to Southeast Asia – the Christmas/New Year period, typically from mid-December until early January, and July and August – prices can be fifty percent higher than at other times of year, though you can often avoid the steepest fares by booking well **in advance**. Fares also rise at weekends and around major local festivals, such as Islamic holidays and the Chinese New Year. Sample fares given here are for **round-trip** journeys and include taxes and current fuel surcharges. If you're thinking of visiting on a **package trip**, note that it's generally cheaper to book one after you've arrived than with a tour operator in your home country.

From the UK and Ireland

London Heathrow has daily **nonstop** flights to KL with Malaysia Airlines (✈malaysiaairlines.com), and to Singapore with British Airways (✈britishairways.com) and Singapore Airlines (✈singaporeair.com). At the time of writing, the low-cost carrier Norwegian (✈norwegian.com) had launched a competing nonstop Singapore flight from London Gatwick. From Manchester, Singapore Airlines departs several times a week nonstop to Singapore. On these routes, reckon on the journey time being twelve to thirteen hours. Flying with any other airline or from any other airport in the UK and Ireland involves a change of plane in Europe, the Middle East or elsewhere in Asia. The very best **fares** to KL or Singapore are around £450/€500 outside high season, with nonstop flights always commanding a premium.

From the US and Canada

In most cases the trip from North America, including a stopover, will take at least twenty hours if you fly the **transatlantic** route from the eastern seaboard, or nineteen hours minimum if you cross the **Pacific** from the west coast. It is, however, possible to fly nonstop from San Francisco to Singapore on Singapore Airlines (✈singaporeair.com), and from Los Angeles to Singapore on United (✈united.com), with trips lasting around seventeen hours. From Honolulu, there's also the option of flying with Scoot (✈flyscoot.com), Singapore Airlines' low-cost-arm, to Singapore.

The quickest route isn't always the cheapest: it can sometimes cost less to fly westwards from the east coast, stopping off in Northeast Asia en route. **Fares** start at around US\$800 or Can\$1100 for flights from major US or Canadian airports on either coast.

Plenty of airlines operate to East Asia from major North American cities. If your target is Borneo, it's worth investigating connecting with one of the east Asian airlines – Kota Kinabalu, for example, has flights from Hong Kong, Shanghai and Seoul.

From Australia and New Zealand

Geographical proximity means there's a good range of flights from Australia and New Zealand into Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei, including a useful link between Melbourne and Borneo with Royal Brunei Airlines (✈flyroyalbrunei.com). **Budget flights** include services from Australia to KL with AirAsia (✈airasia.com) and Malindo Air (✈malindoair.com), and to Singapore with Jetstar (✈jetstar.com) and Scoot (✈flyscoot.com), and from Christchurch in New Zealand to KL (AirAsia) and Singapore (Jetstar).

If you're flying from, say, Perth to Singapore or KL, expect **fares** to start at as little as Aus\$450 return in low season, while Melbourne to Singapore will set you back at least Aus\$550. Christchurch to KL or Singapore generally starts at NZ\$1000 return.

From South Africa

The quickest way to reach Malaysia or Singapore from South Africa is to fly with **Singapore Airlines** (✈singaporeair.com), which offers nonstop flights to Singapore from Cape Town (11hr) via Johannesburg; reckon on ten hours' flying time. That said, it's often cheaper to book a ticket that involves

changing planes en route, usually in the Middle East. If you're lucky you may land a fare of around R8000 return, including taxes, though it's not uncommon to have to pay R1000–2000 more.

From elsewhere in Southeast Asia

Budget airlines make it easy to explore Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei as part of a wider trip through Southeast Asia. The most useful no-frills carriers for the three countries covered in this book are Malaysia's AirAsia (✉airasia.com), Firefly (✉fireflyz.com.my) and Malindo Air (✉malindoair.com), and Singapore's Scoot (✉flyscoot.com) and Jetstar Asia (✉jetstar.com). Though fuel surcharges and taxes do take some of the shine off the fares, prices can still be good, especially if you book well in advance.

You can, of course, reach Malaysia or Singapore from their immediate neighbours by means other than flying. There are **road** connections from Thailand and from Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo); **ferries** from Indonesia and from the southern Philippines, and **trains** from Thailand. Below is a round-up of the most popular routes.

From Thailand

A daily Special Express **train** service leaves Hualamphong station in Bangkok at 3.10pm on the 1000km journey south to the Malaysian border town of Padang Besar, where travellers can change for Malaysian ETS trains on the west-coast line (see p.32). The train calls at (among others) Hua Hin, Surat Thani and Hat Yai before reaching Padang Besar at 9am Thai time (10am Malaysian time). Also useful is the Thai rail service from Hat Yai across to Sungai Golok on the east coast of the Kra isthmus, close to the Malaysian border crossing at Rantau Panjang, from where buses run to Kota Bharu.

As regards **flights**, plenty of services connect Bangkok, Chiang Mai and Thai resorts with Malaysian airports and Singapore. Some are run by the low-cost airlines, while others are provided by Bangkok Airways (✉bangkokair.com) and Singapore Airlines subsidiary SilkAir (✉silkair.com).

A few scheduled **ferry** services sail from the most southwesterly Thai town of Satun to the Malaysian west-coast town of Kuala Perlis (30min) and to the island of Langkawi (1hr 30min). If you're departing from Thailand by sea for Malaysia, ensure your passport is stamped at the immigration office at the pier to avoid problems with the Malaysian immigration officials when you arrive. Another option is the ferry from the southern Thai town of Ban Tabu to the Malaysian town of Pengkalan Kubor, where frequent buses run to Kota Bharu, 20km away. Buses connect Ban Tabu with the provincial capital, Narathiwat (1hr 30min).

The easiest **road** access from Thailand is via Hat Yai, from where buses, minivans and a few shared taxis run to Butterworth (4hr) and nearby George Town on Penang Island, with some buses continuing right to KL or Singapore. From the interior Thai town of Betong, there's a road across the border to the Malaysian town of Pengkalan Hulu, from where Route 67 leads west to Sungai Petani; share taxis serve the route. You can also get a taxi from Ban Tabu for the few kilometres south to Kota Bharu.

From Indonesia

Plenty of **flights**, including many operated by the low-cost airlines, connect major airports in Java and Sumatra, plus Bali and Lombok, with Malaysia and Singapore. There's also a service between Manado in Sulawesi and Singapore with Singapore Airlines' subsidiary SilkAir (✉silkair.com). As for Kalimantan, AirAsia (✉airasia.com) operates between Balikpapan and KL, and

THE EASTERN & ORIENTAL EXPRESS

Unlike some luxury trains in other parts of the world, the **Eastern & Oriental Express** (✉belmond.com) isn't a re-creation of a classic colonial-era rail journey, but a sort of fantasy realization of how such a service might have looked had it existed in Southeast Asia. Employing 1970s Japanese rolling stock, given an elegant old-world cladding with wooden inlay work and featuring Thai and Malay motifs, the train travels between Bangkok and Singapore, with the option of starting or ending the trip in KL, at least monthly. En route there are extended stops at Kanchanaburi for a visit to the infamous bridge over the **River Kwai**, and at **Kuala Kangsar**. An observation deck at the rear of the train makes the most of the passing scenery. The trip doesn't come cheap, of course: the two-night Bangkok–KL segment costs around £2000/US\$2600 per person in swish, en-suite Pullman accommodation, including meals – and alcohol costs extra.

Malaysia Airlines' subsidiary MASwings (maswings.com.my) operates between Pontianak and Kuching, and also between Tarakan and Tawau in southeastern Sabah.

It's possible to reach Sarawak from Kalimantan on just one **road route**, through the western border town of Entikong and onwards to Kuching. The bus trip from the western city of Pontianak to Entikong takes seven hours, crossing to the Sarawak border town of Tebedu; stay on the same bus for another three hours to reach Kuching.

As for **ferries**, Dumai, on the east coast of Sumatra, has a daily service to Melaka (2hr), with more sailings from Dumai and Tanjung Balai further south to Port Klang near Kuala Lumpur (3hr). There are also a few services from Bintan and Batam islands in the Riau archipelago (accessible by plane or boat from Sumatra or Jakarta) to Johor Bahru (30min) or Singapore (30min), and there's a minor ferry crossing from Tanjung Balai to Kukup (1hr), just southwest of Johor Bahru. Over in Borneo, ferries connect Tawau in Sabah with Nunakan (1hr) and Tarakan (3hr).

From the Philippines

A weekly ferry service operates between Zamboanga in the southern Philippines and Sandakan in Sabah, and Philippine budget airline Cebu Pacific (cebupacificair.com) was considering launching a flight on the same route at the time of writing. Other low-cost **flights** include from Clark to KL and Kota Kinabalu (both AirAsia; airasia.com), from Clark and Manila to Singapore (JetStar Asia; jetstar.com), and from Boracay and Cebu to Singapore (Scoot; flyscoot.com). Full-cost airlines provide additional links, including Manila to Bandar Seri Begawan (Royal Brunei Airlines; flyroyalbrunei.com).

TRAVEL AGENTS AND TOUR OPERATORS

Adventure Alternative UK [028 7083 1258](tel:+4412870831258),

adventurealternative.com. A superb range of off-the-beaten track Borneo tours.

Adventure World Australia [1300 295049](tel:+6131300295049), adventureworld.com.au; New Zealand [0800 238368](tel:+610800238368), adventureworld.co.nz. Short Malaysia tours, covering cities and some wildlife areas.

Allways Dive Expedition Australia [1800 338239](tel:+611800338239), allwaysdive.com.au. Dive holidays to the prime dive sites of Sabah.

Asia Classic Tours US [1800 717 7752](tel:+118007177752), asiaclassictours.com. Malaysia tours, lasting ten days or more, taking in various parts of the country and sometimes Singapore, too.

Audley Travel US & Canada [1855 838 2120](tel:+118558382120), UK [01993 838000](tel:+441993838000), Ireland [1800 992198](tel:+3531800992198), audleytravel.com. Luxury tours concentrating on East Malaysia.

Bestway Tours US & Canada [1800 663 0844](tel:+118006630844), bestway.com.

A handful of cultural and wildlife tours featuring East Malaysia and Brunei, plus the peninsula and Singapore.

Borneo Tour Specialists Australia [07 3221 5777](tel:+61732215777), borneo.com.au. Small-group, customizable tours of all of Borneo, covering wildlife, trekking and tribal culture.

Dive Adventures Australia [1300 657420](tel:+6131300657420), diveadventures.com.au. Sabah and Labuan dive packages.

Eastravel UK [01473 214305](tel:+441473214305), eastravel.co.uk. Bespoke Malaysia trips.

Exodus Travels US [1844 227 9087](tel:+118442279087), UK [020 3553 6240](tel:+44102035536240), adventurecenter.com. Several packages, mainly focused on East Malaysia, plus tailor-made trips.

Explore UK [01252 883618](tel:+4410252883618), explore.co.uk. A handful of Malaysia tours.

Explorint US [1800 785 1233](tel:+118007851233), explorint.com. Malaysia and Singapore packages, including both city and jungle breaks.

Intrepid Travel US [1800 970 7299](tel:+118009707299), Canada [1855 299 1211](tel:+118552991211), UK [0808 274 5111](tel:+44108082745111), Australia [1300 854500](tel:+611300854500), New Zealand [0800 600 610](tel:+610800600610); intrepidtravel.com. Several Malaysia offerings, mainly focused on Borneo or taking in Thailand and Singapore as well.

Jade Tours Canada [1800 387 0387](tel:+118003870387), jadetours.com. Borneo and Peninsular Malaysia trips.

Lee's Travel UK [0800 811 9888](tel:+44108008119888), leestavel.com. Far Eastern flight deals, including discounted Malaysia and Singapore Airlines tickets.

Namaste Travel UK [020 7725 6765](tel:+44102077256765), namaste.travel. Half a dozen varied Malaysia packages.

Pentravel South Africa [087 231 2000](tel:+270872312000), pentravel.co.za. Flight deals plus city breaks that combine Singapore with Bangkok or Hong Kong.

Peregine Adventures US [1855 832 4859](tel:+118558324859), UK [020 7408 9021](tel:+44102074089021), Australia [1300 854455](tel:+611300854455); peregineadventures.com. Experienced operator with a handful of East Malaysia packages.

Premier Holidays UK [0844 493 7531](tel:+4408444937531), premierholidays.co.uk. Tours of East Malaysia, plus holidays in Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore.

Reef & Rainforest US [1800 794 9767](tel:+118007949767), reefrainforest.com. Sabah dive packages based in resorts or a liveaboard.

Rex Air UK [020 7439 1898](tel:+44102074391898), rexair.co.uk. Specialist in discounted flights to the Far East, with a few package tours to boot.

Sayang Holidays US [1888 472 9264](tel:+118884729264), sayangholidays.com. City- or resort-based Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore tours, plus Borneo.

STA Travel US [1800 781 4040](tel:+118007814040), statravel.com; UK [0333 321 0099](tel:+44103333210099), statravel.co.uk; Australia [134782](tel:+61134782), statravel.com.au; New Zealand [0800 474400](tel:+610800474400), statravel.co.nz; South Africa [0861 781781](tel:+270861781781), statravel.co.za. Worldwide specialists in low-cost flights for students and under-26s; other customers also welcome.

Symbiosis UK [0845 123 2844](tel:+4408451232844), symbiosis-travel.com. Diving, trekking and longhouse stays in various Malaysian locations.

Tour East Canada [1877 578 8888](tel:+11877578888), toureast.com. A couple of excursions throughout Malaysia, with the option of taking in Singapore, too.

ADDRESSES AND PLACE NAMES

Place names in Malaysia present something of a linguistic dilemma. **Road signage** is often in Malay only, and some colonial-era names have been deliberately changed to Malay ones, but since **English** is widely used in much of the country, local people are just as likely to say "Kinta River" as "Sungai Kinta", or talk of "Northam Road" in George Town rather than "Jalan Sultan Ahmad Shah", and so on. The Guide mostly uses English-language names, for simplicity. The Glossary includes Malay terms for geographical features like beaches, mountains and so forth (see p.601).

Traillfinders UK ☎ 020 7368 1200, 🌐 traillfinders.com; Ireland ☎ 01 677 7888, 🌐 traillfinders.ie. Flights and a few tours, including major Malaysian cities, Borneo and Singapore.

Travel Masters US ☎ 512 323 6961, 🌐 travel-masters.net. Dive packages at Sipadan, Mabul and Kapalai in Sabah.

USIT Ireland ☎ 01 602 1906, 🌐 usit.ie. Student and youth travel.

Visas and entry requirements

Nationals of the UK, Ireland, US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa do not need visas in advance to stay in Malaysia, Singapore or Brunei, and it's easy to extend your permission to stay.

That said, check with the relevant embassy or consulate, as the rules on **visas** are complex and subject to change. Ensure that your passport is valid for at least six months from the date of your trip, and has several blank pages for entry stamps.

Malaysia

Upon arrival in **Malaysia**, citizens of Australia, Canada, the UK, Ireland, US, New Zealand and South Africa receive a passport stamp entitling them to a ninety-day stay. Visitors who enter via **Sarawak**, however, receive a thirty-day stamp.

It's straightforward to **extend** your permit through the Immigration Department, who have offices (listed in the Guide) in Kuala Lumpur and major towns; you can also find details of visa

requirements for various nationalities on their website, 🌐 www.imi.gov.my. Visitors from the aforementioned countries can also cross into Singapore or Thailand and back to be granted a fresh Malaysia entry stamp.

Tourists travelling from the Peninsula to **East Malaysia** (Sarawak and Sabah) must be cleared again by immigration. Visitors to Sabah can remain as long as their original entry stamp is valid, but Sarawak maintains its own border controls – a condition of its joining the Federation in 1965 – which means you are always stamped in and given a thirty-day Sarawak visa even when arriving from other parts of Malaysia. For a full list of Malaysia's embassies and consulates, see 🌐 kln.gov.my.

MALAYSIA EMBASSIES AND CONSULATES

Australia 7 Perth Ave, Yarralumla, Canberra ☎ 02 6120 0300.

Brunei 61, Junction 336, Jalan Duta, Bandar Seri Begawan ☎ 02 381095.

Canada 60 Boteler St, Ottawa ☎ 613 241 5182.

Indonesia Jalan H.R. Rasuna Said, Kav. X/6, No. 1–3 Kuningan, Jakarta South ☎ 021 522 4947.

Ireland Shelbourne House, Level 3A–5A, Shelbourne Rd, Ballsbridge, Dublin ☎ 01 667 7280.

New Zealand 10 Washington Ave, Brooklyn, PO Box 9422, Wellington ☎ 04 385 2439.

Singapore 301 Jervois Rd ☎ 6235 0111.

South Africa 1007 Francis Baard St, Arcadia, Pretoria 0083 ☎ 012 342 5990.

Thailand 33–35 South Sathorn Rd, Bangkok 10120 ☎ 02 629 6800.

UK 52 Bedford Row, London ☎ 020 7242 4308.

US 3516 International Court, NW Washington DC ☎ 202 572 9700.

Singapore

Singapore reserves the term "visa" for permits that must be obtained in advance. Travellers from many countries, however, are granted a **visit pass** on arrival. Although the duration of the pass can vary at the discretion of immigration officials, citizens of the UK, Ireland, US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa are usually given at least thirty days. There is a formal procedure for extending it, but it's usually much easier to simply do a day-trip by a bus to Johor Bahru just inside Malaysia and be given a fresh pass on returning to Singapore.

For details of nationalities that require visas, along with how to apply and how to extend a visit pass, see 🌐 ica.gov.sg. Full details of Singapore's embassies abroad are at 🌐 mfa.gov.sg.

SINGAPORE EMBASSIES AND CONSULATES

Australia 17 Forster Crescent, Yarralumla, Canberra, ACT 2600

☎ 02 6271 2000.

Brunei 8 Junction 74, Jalan Subok, Bandar Seri Begawan

☎ 02 262741.

Indonesia Block X/4 Kav No. 2, Jalan H.R. Rasuna Said, Kuningan, Jakarta South ☎ 021 2995 0400.

Ireland 2 Ely Place Upper, Dublin ☎ 01 669 1700.

Malaysia 209 Jalan Tun Razak, Kuala Lumpur ☎ 03 2164 1013.

New Zealand 17 Kabul St, Khandallah, Wellington

☎ 04 470 0850.

South Africa 980–982 Francis Baard St, Pretoria ☎ 012 430 6035.

Thailand 129 South Sathorn Rd, Bangkok 10120 ☎ 02 348 6700.

UK 9 Wilton Crescent, Belgrave, London ☎ 020 7235 8315.

US 3501 International Place NW, Washington DC ☎ 202 537 3100.

Brunei

UK and US nationals are allowed to stay in **Brunei** for up to ninety days on arrival; Australian and New Zealand passport holders are granted thirty days; and Canadians get fourteen days. South African citizens need to apply for a visa in advance. Once in Brunei, extending your permission to stay is usually a formality; apply at the Immigration Department in Bandar Seri Begawan. For full details of Brunei's embassies, see ☎ mofat.gov.bn.

BRUNEI EMBASSIES AND CONSULATES

Australia 10 Beale Crescent, Deakin, Canberra ☎ 02 6285 4500.

Canada 395 Laurier Ave East, Ottawa ☎ 613 864 5654.

Indonesia 3 & 5 Jalan Patra Kuningan 9, Jakarta South

☎ 021 2911 0242.

Malaysia 2 Jalan Diplomatik 2/5, Putrajaya ☎ 03 8888 7777.

Singapore 325 Tanglin Rd ☎ 6733 9055.

South Africa c/o the embassy in Singapore.

Thailand 12 Soi Ekamai 2, 63 Sukhumvit Rd, Bangkok

☎ 02 714 7395.

UK 19–20 Belgrave Square, London ☎ 020 7581 0521.

US 3520 International Court NW, Washington DC ☎ 202 237 1838.

Customs allowances

Malaysia's duty-free allowances are 200 cigarettes or 225g of tobacco, and one litre of wine, spirits or liquor. Entering **Singapore** from anywhere other than Malaysia (with which there are no duty-free allowances), you can bring in up to three litres of alcohol duty-free; duty is payable on all tobacco.

Visitors to **Brunei** may bring in 200 cigarettes, 50 cigars or 250g of tobacco, and 60ml of perfume; non-Muslims over seventeen can also import two bottles of liquor and twelve cans of beer for

DRUGS: A WARNING

In Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei, the possession of **illegal drugs** – hard or soft – carries a hefty prison sentence or even the death penalty. If you are arrested for drugs offences you can expect **no mercy** from the authorities and little help from your consular representatives. The simple advice, therefore, is not to have anything whatsoever to do with drugs in any of these countries. Never agree to carry anything through customs for a third party.

personal consumption (any alcohol brought into the country must be declared upon arrival).

Getting around

Public transport in Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei is reliable and inexpensive. Much of your travelling, particularly in Malaysia, will be by bus, minivan or, occasionally, long-distance shared taxi. Budget flights are a good option for hopping around the region, especially given that no ferries connect Peninsular and East Malaysia. The Peninsula's rail system is now partly upgraded, slashing journey times.

Sabah and Sarawak have their own travel peculiarities – in parts of Sarawak, for instance, you're reliant on boats or light aircraft. The chapters on Sarawak, Sabah, Brunei and Singapore contain specific information on their transport systems; the focus in this section is largely on Peninsular Malaysia.

The transport system is subject to heavy pressure during any nationwide **public holiday** (see p.56) – particularly Muslim festivals, the Chinese New Year, Deepavali, Christmas and New Year. A day or two before each festival, whole communities embark upon **balik kampung**, which literally means a return to the village (or hometown) to be with family. It's worth buying tickets at least one week in advance to travel at these times; if you're driving, steel yourself for more than the usual number of jams.

And finally, bear in mind that **chartering** transport – longboats, or cars with drivers – to reach some off-the-beaten-track national park or island is always pricey for what it is.

By bus

Malaysia's **bus network** is fairly comprehensive, at least in terms of serving major cities and towns. However, buses rarely stray off main roads to reach rural sites of the kind that tourists might want to get to – nature reserves, caves, hill resorts and so forth. In such instances, the best you can do is to ask the driver if you can get off at the start of the turning for your destination, after which you're left to your own devices.

Long-distance (express) buses

The **long-distance bus network** borders on the anarchic: a largish town can be served by a dozen or more express bus companies. **Timetabling** is a mess, too: every bus station has signs above a zillion ticket booths displaying a zillion routes and departure times, but these may be out of date, as may even the websites of the biggest bus companies. Given this, the route details in this Guide are a general indication of what you can expect; for specifics, you will need to call the bus company's local office (stations do not have central enquiry numbers) or ask in person.

At least the plethora of companies means you can often find **tickets** at the station for a bus heading to your destination within the next two hours. However, it can be worth booking a day in advance for specific departures or on routes where services are limited (in between, rather than along, the west and east coasts for example). **Online booking** is possible, either on the websites of the biggest operators or on recently launched umbrella websites (such as www.easybook.com) representing multiple firms, but there is nothing as reliable as buying a ticket at the bus station itself.

Most intercity buses are comfortable, with **air conditioning** and curtains to screen out the blazing sun, though seats can be tightly packed.

BUS COMPANIES

A handful of well-established bus companies give reliable service in Peninsular Malaysia. The largest is **Transnasional** (www.transnasional.com.my) and its slightly pricier subsidiary **Plusliner** (www.plusliner.com.my), whose services have the entire Peninsula pretty well covered. Among many competitors are **Sri Maju** (www.srimaju.com) and **Konsortium Bas Eクスプレス** (www.kbes.com.my), both strong on the west coast.

There are rarely toilets on board, but longer journeys feature a rest stop every couple of hours, with a short meal stopover if needed. On a few plum routes, notably KL–Singapore and KL–Penang, additional **luxury** or “executive” coaches charge up to twice the regular fares and offer plush seats, greater legroom plus on-board movies.

Local buses

In addition to express buses, the Peninsula has a network of simple, somewhat sporadic **local buses** serving small towns on routes that can stretch up to 100km end to end. Local buses are organized at the **state level**, and this means that many services do not cross into adjacent states even when the same firm is active on both sides of the border. **Tickets**, usually bought on board from the driver or conductor, cost a few ringgit, reaching RM10 only on the longest routes. Note that services typically run only during **daylight hours**, winding down by 8pm if not earlier.

By train

For years, Malaysian trains were a laughing stock – antiquated and generally much slower than buses. Now, after belated investment, the trains are once again a competitive option in parts of the country, and even bigger changes are in the pipeline, with plans to build a high-speed rail link between Kuala Lumpur and Singapore by the mid-2020s as well as a new, metro-like shuttle service between Johor Bahru and Singapore.

The Peninsula's rail service is operated by **KTM** (short for Keretapi Tanah Melayu, literally “Trains of the Malay Land”; ☎ 03 2267 1200, www.ktmb.com.my). Its network is shaped roughly like a Y, with the southern end anchored at Johor Bahru and the intersection, for historical reasons, at the small town of Gemas. The northwest branch links up with Thai track at the border town of Padang Besar via KL, Ipoh and Alor Setar; the northeast branch cuts up through the interior to terminate at Tumpat, beyond Kota Bharu on the east coast. KTM also runs a useful **Komuter** rail service in the Kuala Lumpur area (see p.86) and the northwest (see p.116).

Trains are at their best on the west-coast line, which is electrified and double-tracked right from Gemas up to Padang Besar, enabling the modern, fast (and thus much in demand) **Electric Train Service (ETS)** to run. The fly in the ointment is that although there were at least a dozen services north of KL daily at the time of research, services between KL and Gemas were still sparse. The ETS should

eventually be extended all the way to Johor Bahru, possibly by 2020.

Intercity (*Antarabandar*) services make up the rest of the network, between Johor Bahru and the east via the interior. These remain backward and single-tracked, meaning a handful of slow, often basic, trains run in one direction each day – journeys can be mind-numbing and are often delayed. Even so, trains can still be the quickest way to reach some settlements here, and the **Jungle Railway** stretch is also entertaining in parts (see p.204). Unfortunately, there were no direct services between KL and the east coast at the time of research, although these may return in the near future; in the meantime, passengers from KL and the west coast need to change at Gemas for the east-coast line.

Seats and fares

ETS trains have no **seat classes**, but fares still vary depending on whether you travel on a “platinum” (faster, with fewer stops) or “gold” service; KL to Butterworth, for example, costs around RM80 in platinum (4hr), RM60 in gold (4hr 30min). On intercity trains, seats theoretically divide into premier (first), superior (second) and economy (third) class, although not all trains feature all three; **sleeper services** are limited to the overnight trains between Johor Bahru and Tumpat, and are also split into three theoretical classes. As an indication of fares, a seat from Johor Bahru all the way to Wakaf Bharu (near Kota Bharu) costs RM45, a sleeper berth just a few ringgit more.

Tickets and timetables

You can buy **tickets** at stations via KTM's website or their KTMB MobTicket app; for ETS trains, it's best to book at least a couple of days in advance.

Note that as KTM is continually upgrading and maintaining its lines, it has made frequent, often radical changes to its **timetables** and routes over the past few years – it's a good idea to check the latest details on the company's website before you travel.

By long-distance taxi

Long-distance taxis are fading away somewhat, but still run between some cities and towns, and are especially useful in Sabah. They can be a lot quicker than buses, but the snag is that they operate on a **shared** basis, so you have to wait for enough people to show up to fill the vehicle. In practice, you're unlikely to make much use of them

THE MALAYSIAN RAIL NETWORK



Malaysian long-distance rail services

Express Train Service (ETS)

KL Sentral to Ipoh
Gemas to Butterworth
Gemas to Padang Besar (mostly bypassing Butterworth)

Intercity (Antarabandar)

JB Sentral to Pulau Sebang/Tampin
JB Sentral to Tumpat
JB Sentral to Singapore

Thai Railways Special Express

Padang Besar to Bangkok

This map shows stations served by most express/intercity trains. There are also local services on stretches of the JB–Tumpat line, calling at minor stations. Komuter rail services in the KL and Butterworth areas are detailed in chapters 1 & 2

KERETA SAPU AND MINIVANS

In rural areas of Malaysia, notably in East Malaysia, private cars, minivans and (on rough roads) four-wheel-drives fill in handily for the lack of buses along certain routes. Sometimes called **kereta sapu** in Malay, or “taxis” as a shorthand, they may not be as ad hoc as they sound, even running at fixed times each day in some places.

Minivans also operate on a more formal level: travel agencies run them to take backpackers to destinations such as the Perhentians and Taman Negara, or just across the border to Hat Yai in Thailand.

unless you’re travelling in a group or you want to travel to a destination that’s off the beaten track. **Fares** usually work out at double the corresponding bus fare; official prices are usually chalked up on a board at the taxi rank or listed on a laminated tariff card (*senarai tambang*), which you can ask to see.

Some taxi operators assume every tourist who shows up will want to charter a taxi; if you want to use the taxi on a shared basis, say “*nak kongsi dengan orang lain*”.

By ferry or boat

Regular **ferries** serve all the major islands, from Penang to Labuan off the coast of Sabah. Within Sarawak, there are scheduled boat services between Kuching and Sibu and up the Rejang River to Belaga. Vessels tend to be narrow, cramped affairs – imagine being inside an aircraft, only on water – and some may be no more than speed-boats or motorized *penambang* (fishing craft). It’s best to book in advance when there are only a few sailings each day; otherwise, just turn up and buy tickets at the jetty. Boat travel also often comes into play in **national parks** and in a few rural areas, where you may need to charter one to travel between coastal beaches or to reach remote upriver villages. Details are given in the text of the Guide where relevant.


By plane


It’s easy to fly within Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei. Most state capitals have **airports** (though some have only one or two flights a day), and there

are also regional airports at Langkawi, Labuan, Redang and Tioman islands, and scattered around Sabah and Sarawak – for example, at Mulu for Mulu National Park. You can fly either with the established national airlines or with a variety of low-cost operators, though there may be little to choose between them price-wise if you book late.

Fares can be remarkably cheap, especially for early-morning or late-night departures, or when booked some way in advance. The ninety-minute flight from KL to Kuching, for example, can cost as little as RM100 one way including tax with a budget airline, though two or three times that is more typical. Note also that any trip involving Singapore or Brunei will be more expensive than the distance might suggest, as it will count as an international flight.


DOMESTIC AIRLINES AND ROUTES

AirAsia  airasia.com. The airline that pioneered the local low-cost market offers a comprehensive service throughout Malaysia and also serves Singapore and Brunei.

Firefly  fireflyz.com.my. Malaysia Airlines’ discount subsidiary has some useful flights out of KL’s Subang airport, Penang and Ipoh, serving other Peninsula cities and Singapore.


Jetstar Asia  jetstar.com. Budget flights from Singapore to KL and Penang.

Malindo Air  malindoair.com. Part-owned by the Indonesian budget airline Lion Air, this has a good range of flights throughout Peninsular Malaysia and also serves Singapore.

MASwings  maswings.com.my. A subsidiary of Malaysia Airlines, MASwings operates on many routes, largely rural, within Borneo, often using nineteen-seater propeller-driven Twin Otter planes that are a lifeline for isolated communities.

Malaysia Airlines (MAS)  malaysiaairlines.com. Flies between KL and many state capitals, plus Langkawi, Labuan, Singapore and Brunei.

Scoot  flyscoot.com. Singapore’s Airlines’ low-cost wing serves major Peninsular destinations, plus Kuching, from Singapore.

SilkAir  silkair.com. Singapore Airlines’ non-budget subsidiary operates between Singapore and KL, Penang, Langkawi, Kuching and Kota Kinabalu.

By car

The roads in **Peninsular Malaysia** are good, making driving a viable prospect for tourists – though the cavalier local attitude to road rules takes some getting used to. It’s mostly the same story in **East Malaysia** and **Brunei**, though here major towns tend to be linked by ordinary roads rather than wide highways. **Singapore** is in another league altogether, boasting modern highways and a built-in road-use charging system that talks to a black-box gizmo fitted in every car. All three countries **drive on the left**, and wearing seat belts

FARE COMPARISONS

Journey	By bus	By train	By plane
KL–Penang	RM45; 4hr 30min	RM22; 4hr (to Butterworth)	RM120; 45min
Ipoh–Johor Bahru	RM65; 8hr	RM80; 8hr	RM180; 1hr 20min

is compulsory in the front of the vehicle (and in the back too, in Singapore). To **rent a vehicle**, you must be 23 or over and will need to show a clean driving licence.

The rest of this section concentrates on **Malaysia**. For more on driving in Singapore and Brunei, see the respective chapters in the Guide.

Malaysian roads

Malaysian highways – called **expressways** and usually referred to by a number prefixed “E” – are a pleasure to drive; they’re wide and well maintained, and feature convenient **rest stops** with toilets, shops and small food courts. In contrast, the streets of major cities can be a pain, regularly traffic-snarled, with patchy signposting and confusing one-way systems. Most cities and towns boast plenty of **car parks**, and even where you can’t find one, there’s usually no problem with parking in a lane or side street.

Speed limits are 110km per hour on expressways, 90km per hour on the narrower trunk and state roads, and 50km per hour in built-up areas. Whatever road you’re on, keep to the speed limit; speed traps are not uncommon and fines hefty. If you are pulled up for a traffic offence, note that it’s not unknown for Malaysian police to ask for a bribe,

which will set you back less than the fine. Never offer to bribe a police officer and think carefully before you give in to an invitation to do so.

All expressways are built and run by private concessions and as such attract **tolls**, generally around RM20 per 100km, though on some roads a flat fee is levied. At toll points (signed “Tol Plaza”), you can pay in cash (cashiers can dispense change) or by waving a stored-value **Touch ‘n Go** card (touchngo.com.my) in front of a sensor (see p.86). Get in the appropriate lane as you approach the toll points: some lanes are for certain types of vehicle only.

Once out on the roads, you’ll rapidly become aware of the behaviour of quite a few Malaysian motorists, which their compatriots might term *gila* (Malay for “insane”). Swerving from lane to lane in the thick of the traffic, overtaking close to blind corners and careering downhill roads are not uncommon, as are tragic press accounts of pile-ups and road fatalities. Not for nothing does the exhortation “*pandu cermat*” (drive safely) appear on numerous highway signboards, though the message still isn’t getting through.

If you’re new to driving in Malaysia, the best approach is to take all of this with equanimity and drive conservatively; concede the right of way if

MALAY VOCABULARY FOR DRIVERS

The following list should help decipher road signage in Peninsular Malaysia and parts of Brunei, much of which is in Malay.

Utara	North	Kawasan rehat	Highway rest stop
Selatan	South	Kurangkan laju	Reduce speed
Barat	West	Lebuhraya	Expressway
Timur	East		/highway
Di belakang	Behind	Lencongan	Detour
Di hadapan	Ahead	Pembinaan di hadapan	Road works ahead
Awas	Caution	Pusat bandar/ bandaraya	Town/city centre
Berhenti	Stop	Simpang ke...	Junction/ turning for...
Beri laluan	Give way		
Dilarang meletak kereta	No parking	Zon had laju	Zone where speed limit applies
Dilarang memotong	No overtaking		
Had laju/jam	Speed limit /per hour		
Ikut kiri/kanan	Keep left/right		
Jalan sehala	One-way street		

you're not sure of the intentions of others. One confusing local habit is that some drivers flash their headlights to claim the **right of way** rather than concede it.

Car and bike rental

Car rental rates with the national chains start at around RM150 per day for a basic 1.2-litre Proton, although you may find better deals with local firms. The rate includes unlimited mileage and collision damage waiver insurance; the excess can be RM1500 or more, but can be reduced by paying a surcharge of up to ten percent on the daily rental rate. Both petrol and diesel cost around RM2.30 per litre at the time of writing.

Motorbike rental tends to be informal, usually offered by Malaysian guesthouses and shops in more touristy areas. Officially, you must be over 21 and have an appropriate driving licence, though it's unlikely you'll have to show the latter; you'll probably need to leave your passport as a deposit. Wearing helmets is compulsory. Rental costs around RM20 per day, while **bicycles**, useful in rural areas, can be rented for a few ringgit a day.

LOCAL CAR RENTAL AGENCIES

Hawk ☎ 03 5631 6488, 🌐 hawkrentacar.com.my.

Mayflower ☎ 1800 881 688, 🌐 mayflowercarrental.com.my.

Orix ☎ 03 9284 7799, 🌐 orixauto.com.my.

Transport in cities and towns

The companies that run local buses in each state also run city and town buses, serving urban centres and suburbs. Fares seldom exceed RM5, though schedules can be unfathomable to visitors (and even locals). KL also has an MRT and LRT metro system, plus local rail and monorail systems.

Outside the largest cities, **taxis** do not ply the streets looking for custom, so using one means heading to a taxi rank, typically outside big hotels and malls. Malaysian taxis are notorious for being **unmetered** except in a few big cities, notably KL, so it's worth asking locals what a fair price to your destination would be and haggling with the driver before you set off. At a few taxi ranks, notably at airports and train stations, you buy a voucher for your destination at a sensible price. In a few areas it can be worthwhile **chartering** a taxi for several hours, for example to reach a remote nature park and perhaps collect you when you're done; prices will depend on the area and your bargaining skills.

The good news for taxi users is that in a handful of big cities, you can now book a ride using the

homegrown **Grab app** (🌐 grab.com.my) as well as Uber (🌐 uber.com). Grab is particularly useful: fares are distance-based and can work out a third cheaper than using an unmetered taxi, and drivers will pick you up from wherever you are.

Trishaws (bicycle rickshaws), seating two people, are seen less these days, but they're still part of the tourist scene in places like Melaka, Penang and Singapore. You're paying for an experience here, not transport as such; details are given in the relevant sections of the Guide.

Accommodation

Accommodation in Malaysia is good value: mid-range en-suite rooms can go for as little as RM120 (£22/US\$30). Details of accommodation in Brunei and Singapore are given in the relevant chapters of the Guide.

The cheapest form of accommodation is offered by hostels, guesthouses and lodges, which usually have both dorms and simple private rooms, sharing bathrooms. These places exist only in well-touristed areas, whether urban or rural. Elsewhere, you'll need to rely on hotels, which range from world-class luxury affairs to austere concrete blocks with basic rooms.

Advance reservations are essential to be sure of securing a budget or mid-range room during major festivals or school breaks (see p.56). The East Asian accommodation specialist 🌐 wagoda.com has a wide selection of hotels in all three countries. In addition to "conventional" accommodation, it's also possible to find apartments in cities using the likes of Airbnb (🌐 airbnb.com).

Air conditioning is standard in all but the cheapest hotels, and is fairly common in guesthouses too. **Wi-fi** is practically standard, although a few (usually pricey) hotels charge extra for it – we have indicated where this is the case in the Guide. Baby cots are usually available only in more expensive places.

Guesthouses, hostels and lodges

The mainstay of the travellers' scene in Malaysia are **hostels** and **guesthouses** (also called backpackers or lodges – all these terms are somewhat interchangeable). These can range from basic affairs to smartly refurbished shophouses with satellite TVs and games consoles. Almost all offer **dorm beds**,

starting at around RM20, though you can pay double that in fancy establishments. Basic double rooms are usually available for RM50 to RM100 a night, often with mere plywood partitions separating them from adjacent rooms. **Breakfast** is usually available – a simple self-service affair of coffee or tea and toast.

Hotels

Malaysia's **cheapest hotels** tend to cater for a local clientele and seldom need to be booked in advance. Showers and toilets may be shared and can be pretty basic, although most places have some en-suite rooms. Another consideration at cheap and even some mid-range hotels is the **noise** level, as doors and windows offer poor sound insulation. Note that some cheap hotels also function as brothels, especially those that allow rooms to be paid for by the hour.

Mid-range hotels can be better value. Prices start at around RM120 in cities, and less in rural areas and towns, for which you can expect air conditioning, en-suite facilities and relatively decent furnishings, as well, sometimes, a refrigerator, in-room safe and access to a restaurant.

High-end hotels are as comfortable as you might expect, and many have state-of-the-art facilities, including a swimming pool, spa and gym. Some may add a touch of class by incorporating grand extrapolations of kampung-style architecture, such as saddle-shaped roofs with woodcarving. Although rates can be as low as

CHALETS

Banish all thoughts of Alpine loveliness when it comes to Malaysian **chalets**: these are guesthouse and resort rooms in the form of little self-contained wooden or concrete cabins. They're mostly to be found in rural areas, especially at nature reserves and beaches. Chalets range from cramped, stuffy A-frames – sheds named for their steeply sloping roofs, sometimes with a tiny bathroom at the back – to luxury en-suite affairs with a veranda, sitting area, minibar and the like; prices vary accordingly.

RM250 per night, in big cities they can rocket above the RM400 mark.

In the major cities, look out for **boutique hotels**, usually set in refurbished shophouses or colonial-era office buildings. They are the most characterful places to stay, offering either retro-style decor or über-hip contemporary features – although never at budget prices.

Hotel **breakfasts**, where available, are either Asian/Western buffets with trays of noodles next to beans and eggs, or simpler affairs where you order off a menu. They're usually included in the rate except at four- and five-star places, where the spread is so elaborate that there are two room rates – with and without breakfast. In the Guide listings, we have indicated when breakfast is included in the price.

ACCOMMODATION PRICING AND TAXES

Many mid-range hotels in Malaysia have a published tariff or rack rate and a so-called **promotional rate**, generally around a third less. What's important to realize is that the promotional rate is the de facto price, applying all year except, perhaps, during peak periods such as important festivals. To be sure of getting the promotional rate, either book online or call in advance of your arrival.

Top-tier and some mid-range hotels, plus some hostels, have a different strategy: their online booking engines constantly adjust prices according to demand. This means the best rates usually go to those who book early, although some last-minute discounts may also pop up.

Note that mid-range and pricey hotels levy a **service charge** (usually ten percent) and that most hotels levy **GST** (six percent; see p.53). Unless otherwise stated, the accommodation prices **quoted in the reviews** in this Guide include such surcharges and are based on promotional rates or, at luxury hotels, typical rates.

Finally, there's the matter of the **tourism tax**. Introduced in 2017, it essentially requires foreigners to have to pay an additional RM10 per room per night. Naturally, this hits people staying in cheap hotels or in private rooms in hostels especially hard, though dorm occupants may find the tax is divided by the number of beds or even absorbed by the hostel owner. When booking online, if the tax isn't added you will probably have to pay it upon checking in.

Camping

There are few official opportunities for **camping** in Malaysia, perhaps because guesthouses are so reasonably priced, and because the heat and humidity, not to mention the copious insect population, make camping something only strange foreigners would willingly do. Where there are **campsites**, typically in nature parks, they are either free to use or entail a nominal fee; facilities are basic and may not be well maintained. A few lodges and camps have tents and other equipment for rent, but you generally need to bring your own gear (see box, p.49).

If you go trekking in very remote regions, for example in the depths of Taman Negara and the Kelabit Highlands in Sarawak, camping is about your only option. Specialist tour operators or local guides can often provide gear.

Longhouses

A stay in a **longhouse**, *de rigueur* for many travellers visiting Sarawak (and also possible in Sabah), offers the chance to experience tribal community life, do a little trekking and try activities such as weaving and using a blowpipe. It used to be that visitors could simply turn up and ask the *tuai rumah* (headman) for a place to stay, paying only for meals and offering some gifts as an additional token of thanks. While some tourists still try to work things like this, these days most longhouse visits are invariably arranged through a **tour operator** and can therefore be a little pricey. *Gawai* (see p.48) is the most exciting time of year to stay.

More expensive packages put visitors up in their own section of the longhouse, equipped with proper beds and modern washing facilities; meals will be prepared separately rather than shared with the rest of the community. More basic trips generally have you sleeping on mats or in hammocks rather than beds, either in a large communal room or on the veranda, and the main washing facilities may well be the nearest river. For meals, the party will be divided up into smaller groups, and each will dine with a different family.

Homestays

In many rural areas especially, **homestay programmes** offer the chance to stay with a Malaysian family, paying for your bed and board. The arrangement is an appealing one on paper, giving you a chance to sample home cooking and

local culture. In practice, however, hosts may not be able to speak much English, a situation that effectively cuts foreign guests off from them and the community. As a result, homestays often end up being used by Malaysian travellers rather than foreigners. Tourist offices can usually furnish a list of local homestays on request, but be sure to raise the above issues if pursuing the idea.

Food and drink

One of the best reasons to come to Malaysia and Singapore (even Brunei, to a lesser extent) is the food, comprising two of the world's most venerated cuisines, Chinese and Indian, and one of the most underrated – Malay. Even if you think you know two out of the three pretty well, be prepared to be surprised: Chinese food here boasts a lot of the provincial diversity that you don't find in the West's Cantonese-dominated Chinese restaurants, while Indian food is predominantly southern Indian, lighter and spicier than the cuisine of the north.

Furthermore, each of the three cuisines has acquired more than a few tricks from the other two – the Chinese here cook curries, for example – giving rise to some distinctive fusion food. Add to this cross-fertilization a host of regional variations and specialities, plus excellent seafood and unusual tropical produce, and the result can be a dazzling gastronomic experience.

None of this need be expensive. From the ubiquitous food stalls and cheap street diners called **kedai kopis**, the standard of cooking is high and food everywhere is remarkably good value. Basic noodle- or rice-based one-plate meals at a stall or *kedai kopis* rarely cost more than a few ringgit or Singapore dollars. Even a full meal with drinks in a fancy restaurant seldom runs to more than RM50 a head in Malaysia, though expect to pay Western prices at quite a few places in Singapore. The most renowned culinary centres are Singapore, George Town, KL, Melaka and Kota Bharu, although other towns have their own distinctive dishes too.

Food stalls and food courts

Some of the cheapest and most delicious food available in Malaysia and Singapore comes from **stalls**, traditionally wooden pushcarts on the

roadside, surrounded by a few wobbly tables with stools. Most serve one or a few standard **noodle** and **rice dishes** or specialize in certain delicacies, from oyster omelettes to squid curry. One myth to bust immediately is the notion that you will get food poisoning eating at stalls or cheap diners. Standards of hygiene are usually good, and as most food is cooked to order (or, in the case of rice-with-toppings spreads, only on display for a few hours), it's generally pretty **safe**.

Many stalls are assembled into user-friendly **medan selera** (literally "appetite square") or **food courts**, also known as **hawker centres** in Singapore. Usually taking up a floor of an office building or shopping mall, or housed in open-sided market buildings, food courts feature stall lots with menus displayed and fixed tables, plus toilets. You generally don't have to sit close to the stall you're patronizing: find a free table, and the vendor will track you down when your food is ready (at some Singapore food centres you quote the table number when ordering). Play it by ear as to whether you pay when ordering, or when the food is delivered.

Stalls open at various times from morning to evening, with most closing well before midnight except in the big cities. During the Muslim fasting month of **Ramadan**, however, Muslim-run stalls don't open until mid-afternoon, though this is also when you can take advantage of the **pasar Ramadan**, afternoon food markets at which stalls sell masses of savouries and sweet treats to take away; tourist offices can tell you where one is taking place. Ramadan is also the time to stuff yourself at the massive fast-breaking buffets laid on by most major hotels.

EATING ETIQUETTE

Malays and Indians often eat with the **right hand**, using the palm as a scoop and the thumb to help push food into the mouth. **Chopsticks** are, of course, used for Chinese food, though note that a spoon is always used to help with rice, gravies and slippery food such as mushrooms or tofu, and that you don't pick up rice with chopsticks (unless you've a rice bowl, in which case you lift the bowl to your mouth and use the chopsticks as a sort of shovel). **Cutlery** is universally available; for local food, it's best to eat mainly with a spoon, using a fork to get food on to it.

Kedai kopis

Few downtown streets lack a **kedai kopis**, sometimes known as a *kopitiam* in Hokkien Chinese. Although both terms literally mean "coffee shop", a *kedai kopis* is actually an inexpensive diner rather than a café. Most serve noodle and rice dishes all day, often with a *campur*-style spread (see below) at lunchtime, sometimes in the evening too. Some *kedai kopis* function as miniature food markets, housing a handful of vendors – perhaps one offering curries and griddle breads, another doing a particular Chinese noodle dish, and so on.

Most *kedai kopis* open at 8am to serve breakfast, and don't shut until the early evening; a few stay open as late as 10pm. Culinary standards are seldom spectacular but are satisfying all the same, and you're unlikely to spend more than small change for a filling one-plate meal. In some Malaysian towns, particularly on the east coast, the Chinese-run *kedai kopis* are often the only places where you'll be able to get **alcohol**.

Restaurants, cafés and bakeries

Sophisticated **restaurants** only exist in the big cities. Don't expect a stiffly formal ambience, however – while some places can be sedate, the Chinese, especially, prefer restaurants to be noisy, sociable affairs. Where the pricier restaurants come into their own is for **international food** – anything from Vietnamese to Tex-Mex. The chief letdown is that the service can be amateurish, reflecting how novel this sort of dining experience is for many of the staff.

Most large Malaysian towns feature a few attempts at Western **cafés**, serving passable fries, sandwiches, burgers, shakes and so forth. It's also easy to find **bakeries**, which can offer a welcome change from the local rice-based diet – though don't be surprised to find chilli sardine buns and other Asian Western hybrids, or cakes with decidedly artificial fillings and colourings. For anything really decent in the café or bakery line, you'll need to be in a big city.

Cuisines

A convenient, cheap way to get acquainted with local dishes is to sample the spreads available at many *kedai kopis*, particularly at lunchtime. The concept is pretty much summed up by the Malay term **nasi campur** ("mixed rice"), though Chinese and Indian *kedai kopis*, too, offer these arrays of stir-

fries, curries and other savouries in trays. As in a cafeteria, you tell the person behind the counter which items you want, and a helping of each will be piled atop a mound of rice. If you don't like plain rice, ask for it to be doused with gravy (*kuah* in Malay) from any stew on display.

Nasi campur is not haute cuisine – and that's precisely its attraction. Whether you have, say, *ikan kembang* (mackerel) deep-fried and served whole, or chicken pieces braised in soy sauce, or bean sprouts stir-fried with salted fish or shrimp, a *campur* spread is much closer to **home cooking** than anything served in formal restaurants.

Nasi campur and noodle dishes are meals in themselves, but otherwise eating is generally a **shared** experience – stir-fries and other dishes arrive in quick succession and everyone helps themselves to several servings of each, eaten with rice, as the meal progresses.

Breakfast can present a conundrum in small towns, where rice, *roti canai* and noodles may be all that's easily available. If you can't get used to the likes of rice porridge at dawn, you'll find that many a *kedai kopis* offers *roti bakar*, toast served with butter and **kaya**. The latter is a scrumptious sweet coconut curd jam, either orange or green, not unlike English lemon curd in that egg is a major ingredient.

Malay food

In its influences, **Malay cuisine** looks to the north and east, most obviously to China in the use of noodles and soy sauce, but also to neighbouring Thailand, with which it shares an affinity for such ingredients as lemongrass, the ginger-like galangal and fermented fish sauce (the Malay version, *budu*, is made from anchovies). But Malay food also draws on Indian and Middle East cooking in the use of spices, and in dishes such as *biriyani* rice. The resulting cuisine is both spicy and a little sweet. Naturally there's an emphasis on **local ingredients**: *santan* (coconut milk) lends a sweet, creamy undertone to many stews and curries, while *belacan*, a pungent fermented prawn paste (something of an acquired taste), is found in chilli condiments and sauces. **Herbs**, including curry and kaffir lime leaves, also play a prominent role.

The cuisine of the southern part of the Peninsula tends to be more *lemak* (rich) than further north, where the Thai influence is stronger and *tom yam* stews, spicy and sour (the latter by dint of lemongrass), are popular. The most famous Malay dish is arguably **satay** (see p.41), though it can be hard to find outside big cities. Also quintessentially Malay,

rendang is a dryish curry made by slow-cooking meat (usually beef) in coconut milk flavoured with galangal and a variety of herbs and spices.

For many visitors, one of the most striking things about Malay food is the bewildering array of **kuih-muih** (or just *kuih*), or sweets, on display at markets and street stalls. Often featuring coconut and sometimes *gula melaka* (palm-sugar molasses), *kuih* come in all shapes, sizes and colours (often artificial nowadays) – rainbow-hued layer cakes of rice flour are about the most extreme example.

Chinese food

The range of **Chinese cooking** available in Malaysia and Singapore represents a mouthwatering sweep through China's southeastern seaboard, reflecting the historical pattern of emigration from **Fujian**, **Guangzhou** and **Hainan Island** provinces. This diversity is evident in dishes served at hawker centres and *kopitiams*. Cantonese *char siew* (roast pork, given a reddish honey-based marinade) is frequently served over plain rice as a meal in itself, or as a garnish in noodle dishes such as *wonton mee* (*wonton* being Cantonese pork dumplings); also very common is Hainanese chicken rice, comprising steamed chicken accompanied by savoury rice cooked in chicken stock. Fujian province contributes dishes such as *hae mee*, yellow noodles in a rich prawn broth; *yong tau foo*, from the Hakka ethnic group on the border with Guangzhou, and comprising bean curd, fishballs and assorted vegetables, poached and served with broth and sweet dipping sauces; and *mee pok*, a Teochew (Chaozhou) dish featuring ribbon-like noodles with fishballs and a spicy dressing.

Restaurant dining tends to be dominated by **Cantonese** food. Menus can be formulaic, but the quality of cooking is usually high. Many Cantonese places also offer great **dim sum**, at which small servings of numerous savouries such as *siu mai* dumplings (of pork and prawn), crispy yam puffs and *chee cheong fun* (rice-flour rolls stuffed with pork and drenched in sweet sauce) are consumed. Traditionally, these would be served in bamboo steamers and ordered from waitress-wheeled trolleys, but these days you might well have to order from a menu.

Where available, take the opportunity to try **specialities** such as **steamboat**, a sort of fondue that involves dunking raw vegetables, meat and seafood into boiling broth to cook, or **chilli crab**, with a spicy tomato sauce. A humdrum but very commonplace stomach-filler is **pow**, steamed buns containing a savoury filling of *char siew* or chicken, or sometimes a sweet red bean paste.

SIX OF THE BEST

The dishes listed below are mostly easy to find, and many of these cut across ethnic boundaries as well, with each group modifying the recipe slightly to suit its cooking style.

Nasi lemak Rice fragrantly cooked in coconut milk and served with fried peanuts, tiny fried anchovies, cucumber, boiled egg and spicy *sambal*.

Roti canai Basically Indian paratha (indeed it's called *roti prata* in Singapore), a delicious griddle bread served with a curry sauce. It's ubiquitous, served up by Malay and Indian *kedai kopis* and stalls.

Nasi goreng Literally, fried rice, though not as in Chinese restaurants; Malay and Indian versions feature a little spice and chilli, along with the usual mix of vegetables plus shrimp, chicken and/or egg bits.

Char kuay teow A Hokkien Chinese dish of fried tagliatelle-style rice noodles, often darkly coated in soy sauce and garnished with egg, pork and prawns. The Singapore version is decidedly sweet. Malay *kuay teow goreng* is also available and tends to be spicier.

Satay A Malay dish of chicken, mutton or beef kebabs on bamboo sticks, marinated and barbecued. The meat is accompanied by cucumber, raw onion and *ketupat*, cubes of sticky rice steamed in a wrap of woven leaves. All are meant to be dipped in a spicy peanut sauce. Chinese pork satay also exists.

Laksa A spicy seafood noodle soup, Nyonya in origin. Singapore *laksa*, served with fishcake dumplings and beansprouts, is rich and a little sweet thanks to copious use of coconut milk, while Penang's *asam laksa* features flaked fish and a tamarind tang.

Nyonya food

Named after the word used to describe womenfolk of the Peranakan communities (see p.575), **Nyonya food** is a product of the melding of Penang, Melaka and Singapore cultures. A blend of Chinese and Malay cuisines, it can seem more Malay than Chinese thanks to its use of spices – except that pork is widely used.

Nyonya **popiah** (spring rolls) are very common: rather than being fried, the rolls are assembled by coating a steamed wrap with a sweet sauce made of palm sugar, then stuffed mainly with stir-fried *bangkwang*, a crunchy turnip-like vegetable. Another classic is **laksa**, noodles in a spicy soup with the distinctive *daun kesom* – a herb fittingly referred to in English as *laksa* leaf. Other well-known Nyonya dishes include **asam fish**, a spicy, sour fish stew featuring tamarind (the *asam* of the name), and **otak-otak**, fish mashed with coconut milk and chilli paste then put in a narrow banana-leaf envelope and steamed or barbecued.

Indian food

The classic southern Indian dish is the *dosai* or *thosai*, a thin rice-flour pancake. It's usually served accompanied by *sambar*, a thin vegetable and lentil curry; *rasam*, a tamarind broth; and perhaps small helpings of other curries. Also very common are *roti* griddle breads, plus the more substantial *murtabak*, thicker than a *roti* and stuffed with egg, onion and minced meat, with sweet banana versions

sometimes available. At lunchtime many South Indian cafés turn to serving *daun pisang* (literally, banana leaf) meals comprising rice heaped on a banana-leaf "platter" and small, replenishable heaps of various curries placed alongside. In some restaurants you'll find more substantial dishes such as the popular fish-head curry (don't be put off by the idea – the "cheeks" between the mouth and gills are packed with tasty flesh).

A notable aspect of the eating scene in Malaysia is the "**mamak**" *kedai kopis*, run by Muslims of South Indian descent (and easily distinguished from Hindu Tamil places by the framed Arabic inscriptions on the walls). *Mamak* establishments have become de facto meeting places for all creeds, being halal and open late, often round the clock. Foodwise, they're similar to other South Indian places, though with more emphasis on meat.

The food served in **North Indian** restaurants (found only in big cities), is richer, less fiery and more reliant on mutton and chicken. You'll commonly come across **tandoori** dishes – named after the clay oven in which the food is cooked – and in particular tandoori chicken, marinated in yoghurt and spices and then baked. Breads such as *nan* also tend to feature rather than rice.

Borneo cuisine

The diet of the indigenous groups living in settled communities in **East Malaysia** can be not dissimilar to Malay and Chinese cooking. In remoter regions,

SPECIAL DIETS

Malay food is, unfortunately, a tough nut to crack for **vegetarians**, as meat and seafood are well blended into the cuisine. Among the standard savoury dishes, vegetarians can only really handle *sayur lodeh* (a rich mixed-veg curry made with coconut milk), *tauhu goreng* (deep-fried tofu with a peanut dressing similar to satay sauce) and *acar* (pickles). Chinese and Indian eating places are the best bets, thanks to the dietary influence of Buddhism and Hinduism. Chinese restaurants can always whip up veg stir-fries to order, and many places now feature **Chinese vegetarian** cuisine (usually also good for **vegans**), using textured veg protein and gluten mock meats – often uncannily like the real thing, and delicious when done right.

Strict vegetarians will want to avoid **seafood derivatives** commonly used in cooking. This means eschewing dishes like *rojak* (containing fermented prawn paste) and the chilli dip called *sambal belacan* (containing *belacan*, the Malay answer to prawn paste). Oyster sauce, often used in Chinese stir-fries, can easily be substituted with soy sauce or just salt. Note also that the gravy served with **roti canai** often comes from a meat curry, though some places offer a lentil version, too.

If you need to **explain in Malay** that you're vegetarian, try saying "*saya hanya makan sayuran*" ("I only eat vegetables"). Even if the person taking your order speaks English, it can be useful to list the things you don't eat; in Malay you'd say, for example, "*saya tak mahu ayam dan ikan dan udang*" for "I don't want chicken or fish or prawn". Expect a few misunderstandings; the cook may leave out one thing on your proscribed list, only to put in another.

HALAL FOOD

Halal food doesn't just feature at Malay and *mamak* eating places. The catering at mid-range and top-tier Malaysian hotels is almost always halal (or at least "**pork-free**"), to the extent that you get turkey or beef "bacon" at breakfast. Of course, the pork-free billing doesn't equate to being halal, but many local Muslims are prepared to overlook this grey area.

In areas where the population is largely Muslim, such as **Kelantan** and **Terengganu**, halal or pork-free food is the norm, even at Chinese and Indian restaurants. In largely Chinese **Singapore**, most hawker centres have a row or two of Muslim stalls.

however, or at festival times, you may have an opportunity to sample indigenous cuisine. Villagers in **Sabah's** Klias Peninsula and in **Brunei** still produce *ambuyat*, a gluey, sago-starch porridge; then there's the Lun Bawang speciality of *jaruk* – raw wild boar, fermented in a bamboo tube and definitely an acquired taste. Sabah's most famous dishes include *hinava*, raw fish pickled in lime juice. In **Sarawak**, Iban and Kelabit communities sometimes serve wild boar cooked on a spit or stewed, and served with rice (perhaps *lemang* – glutinous rice cooked in bamboo) and jungle ferns. River fish is a longhouse basic; the most easily available, tilapia, is usually grilled with pepper and herbs, or steamed in bamboo cylinders.

Desserts

Given the steamy climate, stalls offer a range of desserts that often revolve around **ice** milled down to something resembling slush. More jarringly, desserts often include ingredients such as **pulses**, **sticky rice** or even **yam** and **sweet potato**, all of which can be turned into a sweet stew or porridge.

At their best, local desserts are certainly a lot more interesting than most ice-cream sundaes ever get. Easy to find and worth trying is **eis kacang** (also known as *air batu campur* – "mixed ice" – or ABC), comprising a small helping of aduki beans, sweetcorn and bits of jelly, covered with a snowy mound doused in colourful syrups. Even better, though high in cholesterol, is **cendol**, luscious coconut milk sweetened with *gula melaka* and mixed with green threads of mung-bean-flour jelly. You'll even find delicious red-bean ice cream on sale, its flavour dominated by coconut milk rather than the beans.

Drinks

While **tap water** is generally safe to drink, **bottled water** is widely and cheaply available. Among freshly squeezed **juices**, watermelon, orange and carrot are pretty common, as is the faintly sappy but invigorating sugar cane, extracted by pressing the canes through mangles. Lychee and *longan* drinks can also be good, made with diluted tinned juices and served with some of the fruit at the bottom.

Sweetened soya milk in cartons or – much tastier – freshly made at stalls is another popular local choice, as is the refreshing, sweet *chin chow*, which looks like cola but is in fact made from a seaweed and comes with strands of seaweed jelly.

Tea (*teh*) and **coffee** (*kopi*) are as much national drinks as they are in the West, and locals adore them served **tarik**, literally “pulled” – which means frothing the drink by repeatedly pouring it between mugs in each hand. If ordered with milk, they’ll come with a generous dollop of the sweetened condensed variety or sometimes evaporated milk (only large hotels and smarter Western-style cafés have regular milk). If you don’t have a sweet tooth, either ask for your drink *kurang manis* (“lacking in sweetness”), in which case less condensed milk will be added, or have it black. Note that there can be

even more intricacies involved when ordering drinks (see p.600).

Alcohol

Alcohol is not generally hard to find in **Malaysia**. Most big cities have a bar scene, though in Malaysian towns drinking is limited to non-Muslim eating places, food courts (drink stalls usually have beer and perhaps stout) and Chinese-run bars – sometimes little more than tatted-up *kedai kopis*, the walls plastered with posters of Hong Kong showbiz poppets. However, in strongly Muslim areas, particularly Kelantan and Terengganu, only a handful of establishments, usually Chinese, sell alcohol. **Brunei** is officially dry (see p.457), and different rules again apply for details of **Singapore** drinking (see p.543).

TROPICAL FRUIT

Markets throughout the region feature a delightful range of locally grown **fruit**, though modern agricultural practices are leading to a decline in some varieties. Below are some of the more unusual fruits to watch out for.

Bananas (*pisang*) Look out for the delicious *pisang mas*, small, straight, thin-skinned and aromatically sweet; *pisang rastali*, slightly bigger, with dark blotches on the skin and not quite so sweet, and green- and even red-skinned varieties.

Cempedak This smaller version of the *nanika* (see jackfruit, below) is normally deep-fried, enabling the seed, not unlike a new potato, to be eaten too.

Ciku Looks like an apple; varies from yellow to pinkish brown when ripe, with a soft, pulpy flesh.

Durian One of Southeast Asia’s most popular fruits, durians are also, for many visitors, the most repugnant thanks to their smell. In season (May–Aug & Nov–Feb), they’re the size of footballs and have a thick green skin covered with sharp spikes. Inside, rows of large seeds are coated with squidgy yellow-white flesh, whose flavour has been likened by some to vomit-flavoured custard.

Jackfruit Like a giant grenade, the jackfruit (*nanika*) grows up to 40cm long and has a coarse greenish-yellow exterior, enclosing large seeds whose sweet flesh has a powerful odour like overripe pineapple. The unripe fruit, stir-fried, is a bit like bamboo shoots.

Langsat Together with its sister fruit, the *duku*, this looks like a small, round potato, with juicy, segmented white flesh containing small, bitter seeds.

Longan Not unlike the lychee, this stone fruit has sweet, juicy translucent flesh inside a thin brown skin.

Mangosteen Mangosteens have a segmented white flesh with a sweet, slightly tart flavour. Be warned: the thick purple rind can stain clothes indelibly.

Pomelo Much grown in Perak, this pale green citrus fruit is slightly smaller than a soccer ball and, at its best, is juicier and sweeter than grapefruit. Slice away the rind with a knife, then separate and peel the giant segments with your hands.

Rambutan The shape and size of chicken eggs, rambutans have a soft, spiny exterior that gives them their name – *rambut* means “hair” in Malay. To get at the sweet translucent flesh coating the stone inside, simply make a small tear in the peel with your nails and twist open.

Salak Teardrop-shaped, the *salak* has a skin rather like a snake’s and a bitter taste.

Soursop Inside the bumpy, muddy-green skin is smooth white flesh that Margaret Brooke, wife of Sarawak’s second rajah, Charles, described as “tasting like cotton wool dipped in vinegar and sugar”.

Starfruit Also called carambola, this yellow-green fruit, star-shaped in cross section, is said to be good for high blood pressure – though it can be insipid to taste.

Anchor and Tiger **beer** (lager) are locally produced and easily available, and you can get Western and Thai beers as well as the Chinese Tsingtao and various **stouts**, including Guinness. More upmarket restaurants and bars serve beer on draught, cocktails and (generally pricey) imported **wine**. In the longhouses of East Malaysia, you will probably be invited to sample *tuak* (Sarawak) or *tapai* (Sabah), a rice wine that can be potent or weak and as sickly as sweet sherry.

At a food court or *kopitiam*, a 330ml can of Tiger, say, will cost up to RM8, a 640ml bottle up to RM15 – slightly above what they sell for at a supermarket or convenience store. Proper bars may charge up to fifty percent more, except during **happy hour** (which could last from opening time until 8pm), when prices are sharply lower. While some bars open from lunchtime, most tend to open from early evening until the small hours.

Health

No inoculations are required for visiting Malaysia, Singapore or Brunei, although the immigration authorities may require a yellow-fever vaccination certificate if you have transited an endemic area, normally Africa or South America, within the preceding six days. Though levels of hygiene and medical care in Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei are higher than in much of Southeast Asia – with any luck, the most serious thing you'll go down with is an upset stomach – it's a wise precaution to visit your doctor no less than two months before you leave to check that you are up to date with your polio, typhoid, tetanus and hepatitis inoculations.

Heat problems

Travellers unused to tropical climates may suffer from sunburn and **dehydration**. The easiest way to avoid this is to restrict your exposure to the midday sun, use high-factor sun screens, wear sunglasses and a hat. You should also drink plenty of water and, if you do become dehydrated, keep up a regular intake of fluids. **Heat stroke** is more serious and can require hospitalization: its onset is indicated by a high temperature, dry red skin and a fast pulse.

Stomach problems

The most common complaint is a stomach problem, which can range from a mild dose of

diarrhoea to full-blown dysentery. The majority of stomach bugs may be unpleasant, but are unthreatening; however, if you notice blood or mucus in your stools, then you may have amoebic or bacillary dysentery, in which case you should seek medical help.

Stomach bugs are usually transmitted by contaminated food and water, so steer clear of raw vegetables and shellfish, always wash unpeeled fruit, and stick to freshly cooked foods, avoiding anything reheated. However careful you are, food that's spicy or just different can sometimes upset your system, in which case, try to stick to relatively bland dishes and avoid fried food.

Tap water is drinkable in Singapore and in parts of Malaysia and Brunei, although in rural areas it's best to buy bottled water, which is widely available.

Air quality

In general, **air quality** is not a major health issue. However, the region is occasionally blanketed by what's locally called "the haze", most recently in 2015 when peat forest fires in Indonesia burned out of control for months. Schools had to be closed and major outdoor events were cancelled, while local people ventured out wearing surgical-style masks. If and when the haze returns (keep a close eye on the weather forecasts), people with respiratory problems should seek medical advice and try to avoid the worst-hit areas – or even postpone the trip.

Cuts, bites and stings

Wearing protective clothing when swimming, snorkelling or diving can help avoid sunburn and protect against any sea stings. **Sea lice**, minute creatures that cause painful though harmless bites are the most common hazard; more dangerous are **jellyfish**, whose stings must be doused with vinegar to deactivate the poison before you seek medical help.

Coral can also cause nasty cuts and grazes; any wounds should be cleaned and kept as dry as possible until properly healed. The only way to avoid well-camouflaged sea urchins and stone fish is by not stepping on the seabed: even thick-soled shoes don't provide total protection against their sharp spines, which can be removed by softening the skin by holding it over a steaming pan of water.

As for **mosquitoes**, you can best avoid being bitten by covering up as much as is practical, and applying repellent to exposed flesh. Note that most repellents sold locally are based on **citronella**; if you want one containing **DEET**, which some say is more effective, buy it at home as it's not sold locally.

Rural or beachside accommodation often features **mosquito nets**, and some places also provide slow-burning **mosquito coils** that generate a little smoke that can deter the insects.

For many people, the ubiquitous **leech** – whose bite is not actually harmful – is the most irritating aspect to jungle trekking (see below). Venomous **snakes** are not that common, and any that you might encounter will usually slink away. If you are unlucky enough to be bitten then remain still and call for an ambulance, or get someone else to summon help. If one of your limbs has been bitten, ideally a pressure bandage should also be applied to slow the spread of any venom.

Dengue fever, Zika and malaria

The main mosquito-borne disease to be aware of – and the chief reason to take measures to avoid being bitten (see p.44) – is **dengue fever**. It is caused by a virus spread by the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito (identifiable by the white markings on its legs) and outbreaks occur. A new vaccine, not widely available, is recommended only to prevent reinfection in those who have already had dengue. Symptoms include severe headaches, pain in the bones, fever and often a fine rash over the body. There's no specific treatment, just plenty of rest, an adequate fluid intake and painkillers when required.

The **Zika** virus is spread by the same mosquito species and a number of cases have been reported in Malaysia and Singapore. Symptoms are mild, flu-like and can involve rashes, but the

infection can affect foetal development so pregnant women should postpone travelling or seek medical advice on the latest risks.

Although the risk of catching **malaria** is fairly low, you should consider taking antimalarial tablets if you think you might be staying in remote jungle areas of **Borneo** for some time. Bear in mind you have to start taking the tablets before you arrive in a malarial zone – ask your doctor for the latest advice.

Altitude sickness

Altitude sickness (or acute mountain sickness) can occur if you ascend above around 3500m. In Malaysia it's only likely to be relevant to those climbing **Mount Kinabalu** (4095m), and those affected usually report only mild symptoms at this altitude. Those symptoms include dizziness, headache, shortness of breath and nausea; severe cases can be life-threatening. Painkillers and other over-the-counter drugs may bring symptomatic relief in mild cases, but you must descend to lower altitude if symptoms drag on after a day or two or are severe.

Pharmacies, clinics and hospitals

Medical services in Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei are excellent; staff almost everywhere speak English and use up-to-date treatments. Details of pharmacies and hospitals are in the "Directory" sections of the Guide for cities and major towns.

COMBATING LEECHES

Leeches are gruesome but pretty harmless creatures, related to earthworms, which almost all trekkers will encounter – especially after rain, when you can rely upon them to come out. Slender, muscular tubes with teeth at one end, they lie dormant in rainforest leaf litter until, alerted by footfalls and body heat, they make strange, darting movements towards you, latching onto your boot, then climbing until they find a way through socks and trousers and onto your skin. Their bites are painless, so you may not notice you've been bitten until you see a growing red stain on your clothes – formed by the trickle of blood that continues for several minutes. That said, the bite of the larger, orange-striped tiger leech can hurt or be felt as a slight itching sensation.

If you see one beginning to bite, you can use your fingernail or a credit card to gently dislodge its head end. Otherwise salt or a quick dose of mosquito repellent will cause it to let go rapidly, as will scorching it with a cigarette lighter.

Of course it's best to **avoid being bitten** in the first place. Some nature guides recommend simply wearing open shoes and shorts, so that you can see any leeches – an approach that requires an advanced jungle mentality. Most people prefer, at the very least, to wear trousers tucked into their socks. Better still, tuck your trousers into **leech socks**. The size of Christmas stockings and made from calico, they have a string at the top that you tie tight at the knee; you can buy them in specialist stores and at some Malaysian nature parks. For an additional deterrent, spray socks and boots with insect repellent.

Pharmacies stock a wide range of medicines and health-related items, from contraceptives to contact lens solution; opening hours are the same as for other shops. The two big local chains are Watsons and Guardian, found in most towns. Only the largest pharmacies have **pharmacists**. If you need a **prescription drug**, you should see a doctor at a clinic, at whose discretion the clinic's own dispensary may be able to provide it. That said, in Malaysia at least, lax regulation means some pharmacies will sell such drugs over the counter.

Private **clinics** can be found even in small towns – your hotel or the local tourist office will be able to recommend one. In Malaysia a consultation costs around RM30, not including the cost of any treatment or medication; keep the receipts for insurance-claim purposes. Finally, the emergency department of each town's general hospital will see foreigners for a small fee, though obviously costs rise rapidly if continued treatment or overnight stays are necessary.

The media

Both Malaysia and Singapore boast plenty of newspapers, TV channels and radio stations serving up lively reportage of events, sports and entertainment, though don't expect to come across hard-hitting or healthily sceptical coverage of domestic politics. The major media organizations in each country are at least partly owned by the establishment; in Singapore, most newspapers have actually been herded into a conglomerate in which the state has a major stake.

Furthermore, the media are kept on their toes by a legal requirement that they must periodically renew their licence to publish. Thus the *Sarawak Tribune* was suspended indefinitely in 2006 after it reproduced the controversial Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad; only in 2010 did it resume publication as the *New Sarawak Tribune*.

Given these circumstances, it's no surprise that the **Press Freedom Index** issued annually by the pressure group Reporters Without Borders, regularly puts Malaysia and Singapore in the bottom third of the world's nations. Brunei, also languishing low down in the table, has a much less well-developed media sector, and its newspapers are packed with anodyne stories about the latest deeds of the sultan and other royals.

Foreign newspapers and magazines are sold in the main cities, and international TV channels are available via satellite and cable. That said, issues of foreign magazines containing pieces that displease the authorities have occasionally been banned, while Singapore's leaders have a long history of winning defamation suits against foreign publications in the island's courts.

If this all seems a bleak picture, it should be said that coverage of Malaysia's opposition parties has increased since they have become more of a force to contend with in recent elections. Added to that, the advent of independent domestic **news websites** and **blogs** has been a breath of fresh air in both Malaysia and Singapore. It's also possible to turn up **YouTube** clips of discussion forums and interviews with activists, offering an alternative take on local issues.

Newspapers, magazines and online news

Both Malaysia and Singapore have English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil newspapers, while Brunei's papers appear in English and Malay. Though Malaysia's national dailies are available in towns in East Malaysia, locally published English-language papers such as the *Borneo Post* in Sarawak (theborneopost.com) and the *Daily Express* in Sabah (dailyexpress.com.my) are more popular there.

MALAYSIA

Aliran Monthly aliran.com. Campaigning magazine with an avowed pro-human-rights stance.

Free Malaysia Today freemalaysiatoday.com. Non-partisan coverage of Malaysian politics and society, with a dedicated East Malaysia section.

Malaysia Insight themalaysianinsight.com. Considered more moderate than some of its online counterparts, the *Insider* provides intelligent news and commentary.

Malaysiakini malaysiakini.com. Invigorating reportage and opinion with an anti-establishment slant.

New Straits Times nst.com.my. Closely linked to the UMNO party, this offshoot of Singapore's *Straits Times* was created after the island separated from the Federation.

Sarawak Report sarawakreport.org. Not a Malaysian site – it's run out of London – but worth a look for its hard-hitting coverage of issues such as logging, native peoples' rights and the probity of Sarawak's government.

The Star thestar.com.my. Founded by the MCA party, *The Star* is Malaysia's best-selling English daily and carries a broad range of local news, arts reviews and so forth.

SINGAPORE

The Online Citizen 🌐 theonlinecitizen.com. An alternative and rather less sanguine view of Singapore affairs than you find in the island's mainstream media.

Straits Times 🌐 straitstimes.com. This venerable broadsheet was founded in 1845, though sadly its pedigree isn't matched by the candour of its journalism; it's not bad on foreign news, however.

Today 🌐 todayonline.com. A free online-only paper from the state-owned broadcaster Mediacorp. *Today* is generally less blandly pro-establishment than the *Straits Times* and carries worthwhile commentaries at the weekend.

TR Emeritus 🌐 trememritus.com. Formerly the Temasek Review, this website offers independent-minded reporting of the island's affairs.

BRUNEI

Borneo Bulletin 🌐 borneobulletin.com.bn. Pleasant enough but hardly the most challenging of reads.

Television and radio

TV and radio in Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei are dominated by the state-owned broadcasters **RTM**, **Mediacorp** and **RTB** respectively, putting out programmes in several languages. Terrestrial **television** features an unexceptional mix of news, documentaries and dramas made locally and abroad, cookery and talk shows, Islamic discussions and so forth; **radio** is even less original and tends to be dominated by pop music and talk shows. Various foreign TV channels, including CNN, BBC World, National Geographic, ESPN Sports and Al-Jazeera (which has its East Asian base in KL), are available on cable and satellite in Malaysia, and on cable in Singapore (where ownership of satellite dishes is banned). Note that Malaysian broadcasts are easily picked up in Singapore, and Singapore broadcasts in southern Johor.

MALAYSIA

Cats FM 🌐 catsfm.my. Kuching-based FM station offering music plus Sarawakan news; see the website for frequencies around the state.

RTM1 & RTM2 🌐 www.rtm.gov.my. Malaysia's staple state-owned TV channels, with some programming in English, Chinese and Tamil. News in English is broadcast on RTM2 at 8pm daily.

Traxx fm 🌐 traxxfm.rtm.gov.my. Established RTM station with a mix of news and music in English, available on various frequencies around the country.

TV3 🌐 www.tv3.com.my. English and Malay news, drama and documentaries, plus some Chinese programmes. It's part of the same conglomerate as the *New Straits Times*.

SINGAPORE

BBC World Service 🌐 bbcworldservice.com. 88.9FM, 24hr.

Channel News Asia 🌐 channelnewsasia.com. Mediacorp's CNN-like diet of rolling TV news, via cable.

Channel 5 🌐 5mediacorp.sg. The main terrestrial channel for English programming, with plenty of imported shows.

BRUNEI

Radio and Television Brunei (RTB) 🌐 rtb.gov.bn. Locally made dramas, religious programmes and news, interspersed with dramas and soaps from as far afield as Korea.

Festivals

With so many ethnic groups and religions represented in Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei, you'll be unlucky if your trip doesn't coincide with some sort of festival. Religious celebrations range from exuberant family-oriented pageants to blood-curdlingly gory displays of devotion. Chinese religious festivals are the best times to catch free performances of Chinese opera, or wayang, featuring crashing cymbals, clanging gongs and stylized singing. Secular events might comprise a parade with a cast of thousands, or just a local market with a few cultural demonstrations laid on.

Bear in mind that the major festival periods may play havoc with even the best-planned travel itineraries, and that some festivals are also public holidays (see p.56).

A festival and events calendar

The dates of many festivals change annually according to the lunar calendar. The Islamic calendar in particular shifts forward relative to the Gregorian calendar by about ten days each year, so that, for example, a Muslim festival that happens in mid-April one year will be nearer the start of April the next. We've listed rough timings; actual dates can vary by a day or two in practice depending on the sighting of the new moon.

JANUARY & FEBRUARY

Ponggal (mid-Jan) A Tamil harvest and New Year festival held at the start of the Tamil month of Thai. *Ponggal* translates as "overflow", and the festival is celebrated by boiling sugar, rice and milk together in a new claypot over a wood fire till the mixture spills over, symbolizing plenty.

Thaipusam (late Jan/early Feb) Entranced Hindu penitents carry elaborate steel arches (*kavadi*), attached to their skin by hooks and skewers, to honour Lord Subramaniam. The biggest processions are at

Kuala Lumpur's Batu Caves and from Singapore's Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple to the Chettiar Hindu Temple.

Chinese New Year (late Jan/early to mid-Feb) At which Chinese communities settle debts, visit friends and relatives and give children red envelopes (*hong bao/ang pao*) containing money; Chinese operas and lion- and dragon-dance troupes perform in the streets, while markets sell sausages and waxed ducks, pussy willow, chrysanthemums and mandarin oranges. Singapore and the major towns of west coast Malaysia see Chingay parades, featuring stilt-walkers, lion dancers and floats.

Chap Goh Mei (Feb) The fifteenth and climactic night of the Chinese New Year period, and a time for more feasting and firecrackers; women who throw an orange into the sea at this time are supposed to be granted a good husband.

Brunei National Day (Feb 23) The sultan and tens of thousands of Bruneians watch parades and fireworks at the Sultan Hassanah Bolkiah National Stadium, just outside Bandar Seri Begawan.

MARCH–MAY

Easter (March/April) Candlelit processions are held on Good Friday at churches.

Qing Ming (April) Ancestral graves are cleaned and restored, and offerings made by Chinese families at the beginning of the third lunar month, signifying the start of spring and a new farming year.

Ramadan (mid-May in 2018) Muslims spend the ninth month of the Islamic calendar fasting in the daytime, and breaking their fasts nightly with delicious Malay sweetmeats served at stalls outside mosques.

Vesak Day (May) Saffron-robed monks chant prayers at packed Buddhist temples, and devotees release caged birds to commemorate the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and attainment of Nirvana.

Kaamatan (May 30 & 31) The Kadazan/Dusun version of Sarawak's Iban *gawai* rice-harvest festival, Kaamatan is marked all over Sabah (and Labuan Island), most notably with week-long festivities at the Kadazan/Dusun Cultural Association in Kota Kinabalu.

JUNE–AUGUST

Hari Raya Puasa/Aidilfitri (June) Muslims celebrate the end of Ramadan by feasting and visiting family and friends; this is the only time the region's royal palaces are open to the public.

Gawai Dayak (June) Sarawak's people, especially the Iban and Bidayuh, celebrate the end of rice harvesting with extravagant longhouse feasts. Aim to be in a longhouse on the Rejang or Batang Ai rivers, or around Bau.

Feast of St Peter (June 24) Melaka's Eurasian community decorate their boats to honour the patron saint of fishermen.

Dragon Boat Festival (June/July) Rowing boats, bearing a dragon's head and tail, race in Penang, Melaka, Singapore and Kota Kinabalu, to commemorate a Chinese scholar who drowned himself in protest against political corruption.

George Town Festival (July/Aug) One of the best arts festivals in Malaysia sees the historic streets and buildings of Penang given over to music recitals, art exhibitions and the like, over a month.

Sultan of Brunei's Birthday (July 15) Starting with a speech by the

sultan on the padang, celebrations continue for two weeks with parades, lantern processions, traditional sports competitions and fireworks.

Singapore National Day (Aug 9) Singapore celebrates its independence with a huge show featuring military parades and fireworks.

Hari Raya Haji/Aidiladha (Aug) Muslims gather at mosques to honour those who have completed the haji, or pilgrimage, to Mecca; goats are sacrificed and their meat given to the needy.

Festival of the Hungry Ghosts (late Aug) Held to appease the souls of the dead released from purgatory during the seventh lunar month. Chinese street operas are staged, and joss sticks, red candles and paper money are burnt outside Chinese homes.

Merdeka Day (Aug 31) Parades in KL's Merdeka Square and other cities mark the formation of the state of Malaysia.

SEPTEMBER–DECEMBER

Moon Cake Festival (Sept) Also known as the Mid-Autumn Festival, this is when Chinese people eat and exchange moon cakes, made from sesame and lotus seeds and sometimes stuffed with a duck egg. Essentially a harvest festival.

Yang di-Pertuan Agong's Birthday (Sept) Celebrates the birthday of Malaysia's king, elected every five years by the Peninsula's nine sultans from among their number.

Malaysia Day (Sept 16) Commemorates the establishment of Malaysia in 1963, when Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak joined with already-independent Malaya.

Navarathri (Sept–Oct) Hindu temples devote nine nights to classical dance and music in honour of the consorts of the Hindu gods, Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma.

Thimithi (Oct/Nov) Hindu firewalking ceremony in which devotees prove the strength of their faith by running across a pit of hot coals; best seen at the Sri Mariamman Temple in Singapore.

Deepavali (Oct/Nov) Also known as Diwali, this Hindu festival celebrates the victory of Light over Dark: oil lamps are lit outside homes to attract Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity, and prayers are offered at all temples.

Christmas (Dec 25) Shopping centres in major cities compete to create the most spectacular Christmas decorations.

Sports and outdoor activities

With some of the world's oldest tropical rainforest and countless beaches and islands, Malaysia offers plenty of opportunities for trekking, snorkelling and scuba diving, and rafting, tubing, abseiling and paragliding – among others – are available in certain locations.

If you intend to take up any of these pursuits, check that they are covered by your insurance policy.

Watersports

The crystal-clear waters and abundant tropical fish and coral of Malaysia make snorkelling and diving a must for any underwater enthusiast. This is particularly true of the islands of southeast Sabah – Sipadan, Mabul and their neighbours boast some of the world's best dive sites – and the Peninsula's east coast, with islands like the **Perhentians, Redang, Kapas and Tioman**.

Dive shops offer all-inclusive, internationally recognized certification courses, ranging from a beginner's open-water course (around RM1300), right through to the dive-master certificate (RM2200). If you're already qualified, expect to pay at least RM150 for dive trips, although prices vary depending on the locality.

Most beachside guesthouses rent snorkelling equipment for around RM20 per day. Some popular **snorkelling** areas mark out lanes for motorboats with buoy lines – stay on the correct side of the line

to avoid a nasty accident. If you're not sure where it's safe to swim or snorkel, always seek local advice. Never touch or walk on coral as this will cause irreparable damage – besides which, you risk treading on the armour-piercing spines of sea urchins, or a painful encounter with fire coral.

Jetskiing and **parasailing** are also on offer at many popular beaches. **Windsurfing**, however, has yet to take off except at a few, usually pricey, resorts, as well as at Cherating on the east coast, where the open bay and shallow waters provide near-perfect conditions during the northeast monsoon.

Whitewater rafting and tubing

Whitewater rafting has become a popular activity in Sabah, where there are several rivers in the vicinity of Kota Kinabalu that tour operators organize regular trips to, notably the Padas River. Opportunities for rafting in **Peninsular Malaysia** are limited and hard to reach, with the notable

CHECKLIST OF CAMPING AND TREKKING EQUIPMENT

As camping and trekking are not especially popular with Malaysians, you need to bring your own **gear** if possible – especially core items like tents and sleeping bags – or take your chances with locally sold products, which are generally inexpensive and sometimes correspondingly short-lived. Hiking boots and shoes may not be that easy to find, especially in larger sizes, though local people, including trekking guides, often swear by plain, slip-on **rubber shoes** (*kasut gatah*), sold everywhere. Available in sizes up to about 40 for just RM15, they are surprisingly versatile, offering a decent grip on the forest floor and suitable for fording streams as they can't soak up water. That said, you may find them less suitable for multiday trekking in difficult terrain.

There are small (and very expensive) "proper" outdoor gear stores in major cities; you might also be able to rent some of what you'll need on site, especially at Taman Negara, or have it supplied as part of a hiking package.

ESSENTIALS

Backpack
Breathable shirts/T-shirts
First-aid kit (basic)
Insect repellent
Lightweight, quick-drying trousers
Pocket knife
Poncho or rainproof coat

Sandals or rubber shoes (for wading through streams)
Sun block
Toilet paper
Toiletries
Torch (and/or head torch)
Trekking shoes/boots
Water bottle

OTHER USEFUL ITEMS

Binoculars
Compass
Emergency snack food
Fleece jacket (if at altitude)
Hat, cotton, with brim (for exposed terrain)
Heavy-duty refuse bag (to rainproof your pack)
Insulation mat

Leech socks
Lip balm
Mosquito net
Sewing kit
Sleeping bag
Sunglasses (UV protective)
Tent (if sleeping out)
Towel, small
Water purification tablets

exception of Gopeng (see p.124); here, it's best to go with an operator such as Nomad Adventure (📞nomadadventure.com) or River Bug (📞riverbug.asia). Prices vary depending on the location. A few nature parks also offer the chance to go **tubing** down jungle rivers.

Trekking

The majority of **treks** in Malaysia require forethought and preparation. In addition to the fierce sun if you're not in the jungle, the tropical climate can unleash torrential rain without warning, which rapidly affects the condition of trails or the height of rivers – what started out as a ten-hour trip can end up taking twice as long. That said, the time of year is not a hugely significant factor when planning a trek, although in the rainy season (Nov–Feb) trails can be slow going (or even closed for safety reasons) and the parks and adventure tours will be less busy.

Treks in national parks almost always require that you go in a group with a **guide**; solo travellers can usually join a group once there. Costs and conditions vary between parks; each park account in the Guide contains details, while tour operators in Kuala Lumpur, Kuching, Miri and Kota Kinabalu (listed throughout the relevant sections in the Guide) can also furnish information on conditions and options.

For inexperienced trekkers, **Taman Negara** is probably the best place to start, boasting a good range of walks, many of which can be done without a guide, while **Bako National Park** in southwest Sarawak offers fairly easy, day-long hikes. For more experienced walkers, other parks in Sarawak, especially **Mulu National Park**, should offer sufficient challenges for most tastes, while Sabah's **Maliau Basin** is at the demanding end of the scale. **Kinabalu Park** in Sabah is in a class of its own, the hike to the top of the mountain a demanding but highly rewarding combination of trekking and climbing. Equally challenging, although lesser in stature, is **Mount Trus Madi**, also in Sabah.

Culture and etiquette

Despite their obvious openness to influences from around the globe, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei remain fairly conservative and conformist places.

Behaviour that departs from cultural norms – basically, anything that draws attention to the individuals concerned – is to be avoided.

Foreigners are generally cut some slack, but until you acquire some familiarity with where the limits lie, it's best to err on the side of caution. Get the balance right and you'll find locals helpful and welcoming, while respectful of your need for some privacy.

Dress

For both men and women, exposing lots of bare flesh is generally a no-no, and the degree to which you should **cover up** can seem surprisingly prim. Islamic tradition suffuses the dress code for locals, Muslim or otherwise, and dictates that both men and women should keep torsos covered; shirt sleeves, if short, should come down to the elbow (for women, long-sleeved tops are preferable), while shorts or skirts should extend down to the knee (long trousers are ideal). Figure-hugging clothes are often frowned upon, particularly for women. All of this said, dress codes are more liberal in most cities (especially Singapore), on the beach, and when doing sports or other activities.

Note that in Muslim tradition, the soles of **shoes** are considered unclean, having been in contact with the dirt of the street. Thus before entering any home (Muslim or otherwise), it's almost universal practice to remove footwear at the threshold or before stepping onto any carpeted or matted area.

Body language

Two things to **avoid** are public shows of affection (holding hands is OK, kissing is not) and drinking alcohol in the street, i.e. outside the confines of a bar or hawker centre. In a situation where you need to make a **complaint**, the most effective approach is not to raise your voice but to go out of your way to appear calm while stating your case.

As for body language, note that **touching someone's head**, be they Muslim or otherwise, is to be avoided as the head is considered sacred. Handshakes are fairly commonplace when meeting someone; Muslims often follow this by touching the palm of the right hand to their own chest. Some Muslims may be reluctant to shake hands with the opposite sex; however, in this case a smile, nod and that same right-hand-palm gesture will

THE STATUS OF MALAY WOMEN

Malay women are among the most **emancipated** in the Islamic world. They often attain prominent roles in business, academia and other areas of public life and are very much the lynchpin of the family.

Although the more conservative tide running through the Islamic world has had relatively little impact on this situation, many Malay women now wear a *tudung* (headscarf). Sometimes this merely indicates an acceptance of the trappings of the religion – it's not unusual to see Malay women at a gig or club partying away in headscarf, T-shirt and jeans.

suffice. Muslims and Indians also avoid using their left hand for human contact or eating.

Visiting places of worship

It's common to see various temples and mosques happily existing side by side, each providing a social as well as a religious focal point for the corresponding community. Some shrines are among the oldest structures you're likely to see in the region and are worth a look around.

In theory all **mosques** are open to visitors outside prayer times, though in conservative areas they may not welcome tourists. Male visitors should wear long trousers and a shirt or top with sleeves coming down to the elbows (long sleeves are even better); women will also have to don a long cloak and headdress, which is provided by most mosques. You'll be required to remove your shoes before entering. Most Chinese and Hindu **temples** are open from early morning to early evening; devotees go in when they like, to make offerings or to pray. Hindu temples also expect visitors to remove shoes.

Even if there are no signs barring **photography**, staff at some temples don't take kindly to it; if in doubt, ask.

Women travellers

Women who respect local customs and exercise common sense should have few problems travelling alone or with other women, though some Western women have been known to find the atmosphere in largely **Muslim areas**, such as Kelantan or Terengganu, off-putting. Arriving there from Thailand or from a more cosmopolitan part of Malaysia, you may be stared at or subjected to wolf-whistles or lewd gestures, even if you are dressed more conservatively than some local Chinese or Indian women. If it's any consolation, this sort of thing is quite random, and the reason local non-Muslim women might get away with a bit more is that there is an unspoken understanding as to how Malaysia's various communities can behave in public.

Shopping

Southeast Asia can offer bargain shopping, with electrical equipment, cameras and fabrics all selling at competitive prices. What's more, the region's ethnic diversity means a range of unusual souvenirs and handicrafts to choose from.

One point to be aware of is that a lot of the crafts on sale in Malaysia are in fact made elsewhere in the region, particularly in Indonesia. Worthwhile buys, especially domestically made ones, are highlighted throughout the Guide. Also be aware that prices in small outlets such as family-run shops tend to be negotiable, and **bargaining** is expected. Asking for the "best price" is always a good opening gambit; from there, it's a question of technique, though be realistic – shopkeepers will soon lose interest if you offer an unreasonably low price. If you buy any electrical goods, it can be worth ensuring you get an international guarantee, endorsed by the shop.

Fabrics

Batik cloth is made by applying hot wax to a piece of cloth with either a pen or a copper stamp; when the cloth is dyed, the wax resists the dye and a pattern appears, a process that can be repeated many times to build up colours. Note that some vendors try to pass off printed cloth as batik. Make sure the brightness of the pattern is equal on both sides – if it's obviously lighter on one side, it is likely the cloth is printed.

Batik is used to create shirts, skirts, bags and hats, as well as traditional **sarongs**. The exquisite gold-threaded brocade known as **songket**, used to make sarongs, headscarves and the like, is a big step up in price from batik; RM200 for a sarong-length of cloth is not uncommon, and prices soar for the finest pieces.

Unique to Sarawak is **pua kumbu** (in Iban, "blanket"), a textile whose complex designs are

created using the *ikat* method of weaving (see p.327). The cloth is sold in longhouses as well as in some souvenir outlets. Sabah's tribes have their own woven fabrics, some of which are sold by Sabah Tourism's Kadaiku subsidiary (📞kadaiku.com).

Woodcarving

Woodcarving skills, once employed to decorate the palaces and public buildings of the early sultans, are today used to make less exotic articles such as mirror frames. However, it's still possible to see statues and masks created by the Orang Asli. As animists, Orang Asli artists draw upon the natural world – animals, trees, fish, as well as more abstract elements like fire and water – for their imagery. Of particular interest are the carvings of the Mah Meri of Selangor, which are improvisations on the theme of *moyang*, literally “ancestor”, the generic name for all spirit images. In Borneo, look out for tribal face masks and rectangular shields adorned with intricate motifs. It's also possible to buy hardwood blowpipes, though these are drilled rather than carved.

Metalwork

Of the wealth of metalwork on offer, **silverware** from Kelantan is among the finest and most-intricately designed; it's commonly used to make earrings, brooches and pendants, as well as more substantial pieces. Selangor is known for its **pewter** – a blend of tin, antimony and copper – which can be used in elegant vases, tankards and ornaments.

Other souvenirs

Rattan, cane, **bamboo** and *mengkuan* (pandanus) are traditionally used to make baskets, bird cages, mats, hats and shoulder bags. The best items make surprisingly impressive accessories, and in Borneo it's possible to find baskets and bags bearing traditional motifs, too. Another unusual raw material is **breadfruit bark**; in Sarawak it's pressed to produce a “cloth” that makes excellent hats and jackets, as well as a canvas for paintings.

Malay pastimes throw up some interesting purchases: leather *wayang kulit* (shadow play) **puppets**, portraying characters from Hindu legend, are attractive and light to carry; equally colourful but impractical to cart around are Malay **kites** (*wau*), which can be a couple of metres long.

DUTY-FREE GOODS

Malaysia has no duty on cameras, watches, cosmetics, perfumes or cigarettes. Labuan, Langkawi and Tioman are duty-free islands, which in practice means that goods there (including alcohol) can be a third cheaper than on the Malaysian mainland, though it's not as though a particularly impressive range of products is on sale. Duty-free products in Singapore include electronic and electrical goods, cosmetics, cameras, clocks, watches, jewellery, precious stones and metals.

Pottery, though sometimes mass-produced, can be a worthwhile decorative acquisition. Examples include the Malay *labu*, a gourd-like slender-necked water jug (it's made in, among other places, Perak) and Sarawak pots and jars bearing tribal motifs. Finally, it's possible to buy some fine examples of **beadwork** – from pricey Peranakan beaded slippers to Kelabit jackets from the northern highlands of Sarawak.

Travel essentials

Costs

Anyone entering Malaysia from Thailand will find that costs are noticeably higher. Travelling in a group naturally helps keep costs down. The region affords some savings for senior citizens, and an ISIC student card (📞isic.org) might occasionally pay dividends.

Note that **bargaining** is routine throughout Malaysia and Singapore when buying stuff in markets or small shops, though you don't haggle for meals or accommodation.

Malaysia

In **Peninsular Malaysia** you can scrape by on £12/US\$17/RM70 per day staying in dorms, eating at hawker stalls and getting around by bus. Double that and you'll be able to exist in relative comfort without worrying about occasionally treating yourself. Over in **East Malaysia**, everything tends to cost that little bit extra – partly due to archaic regulations that require imported goods to be sent via Peninsula ports rather than arriving directly; here, expect to spend about ten percent more. Of

course, if you do any ticketed sightseeing or book tours – especially pricey to reach remote nature parks – then costs will shoot up, wherever you are.

Singapore and Brunei

Costs in **Singapore** are at Western levels, with a minimum budget of around £30/US\$45/S\$60 per day. Upgrading your lodgings to a private room in a guesthouse, eating one daily meal in a cheap restaurant, and having a beer or two could require £50/US\$65/S\$90 per day.

Like-for-like costs in **Brunei** are perhaps ten to twenty percent less than in Singapore, though note that budget accommodation in the capital is limited. Otherwise, costs can spiral as you'll have to rely on taxis or package trips to reach outlying places of interest, notably Ulu Temburong National Park.

Crime and personal safety

If you lose something in Malaysia, Singapore or Brunei, you're more likely to have someone run after you with it than run away. Nevertheless, don't become complacent, as petty crime is an issue in Malaysia at least. Sensible **precautions** include carrying your passport and other valuables in a concealed money belt, and using the safety deposit box provided by many guesthouses and hotels. Take a photocopy of the relevant pages of your passport, too, in case it's lost or stolen. If you have to report a crime, be sure to get a copy of the police report for insurance purposes.

It's worth stating here on no account should you have anything to do with **illegal drugs** of any description in Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei (see p.31).

SALES TAXES AND SERVICE CHARGES

Top-end and many mid-range hotels and restaurants in Malaysia and Singapore levy two surcharges: a **service charge** (usually ten percent) and a **goods and services tax** (GST; six percent in Malaysia, seven percent in Singapore). Always check if prices quoted – including those on online booking sites – include these charges (they are "nett" prices, in local parlance) or exclude them; the presence of "++" after a price indicates that you need to add them. GST also applies to goods sold in shops.

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

MALAYSIA

Fire brigade ① 994
Police/Ambulance ① 999

SINGAPORE

Fire Brigade/Ambulance ① 995
Police ① 999

BRUNEI

Ambulance ① 991
Fire Brigade ① 995
Police ① 993

Malaysia

Pickpockets and **snatch-thieves** can be a problem in Malaysian cities, although violent crime is relatively rare; horrific incidents like the alcohol-fuelled murder of two British students in central Kuching in 2014 are quite out of the ordinary.

Restrictions on contact between people of the opposite sex (such as the offence of *khalwat*, or "close proximity") and eating in public during daylight hours in the Ramadan month apply to Muslims only.

Singapore

Singapore is known locally as a "fine city". Substantial **fin**es can be levied to punish misdemeanours like littering, jaywalking – defined as crossing a main road within 50m of a designated pedestrian crossing – and so forth, though these penalties are seldom enforced as the populace has become compliant over the years. Bear in mind that **chewing gum** – despite what you may hear – is not illegal in Singapore. Although it isn't on sale there, on the grounds that used gum can foul the streets, you can bring in gum for your own consumption.

Electricity

Mains voltage in Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei is **230 volts**, so any equipment using 110 volts will need a converter. The plugs in all three countries have three square prongs like British ones.

Insurance

A typical travel insurance policy usually provides cover for the loss of bags, tickets and – up to a certain limit – cash or cheques, as well as cancellation or curtailment of your journey. Some policy

premiums include dangerous sports; in Malaysia, for example, this can mean scuba diving, whitewater rafting or paragliding. Always ascertain whether medical coverage will be paid out as treatment proceeds or only after return home, and whether there's a 24-hour medical emergency number. When securing baggage cover, make sure that the per-article limit will cover your most valuable possession. If you need to make a claim, you should keep receipts for medicines and medical treatment, and in the event you have anything stolen, you must obtain an official statement from the police.

Internet

The explosion of smartphones and wi-fi has put paid to most Malaysian **internet** cafés. Those that still exist tend to be found in malls or in upstairs premises along central streets; they charge a few ringgit an hour to get online, but now make most of their money as gaming parlours. For details of internet access in Brunei and Singapore, see the relevant chapters of this Guide. Throughout, we have indicated whether accommodation, eating or drinking establishments have wi-fi using a symbol at the end of reviews.

If you like being online constantly, it's worth buying a local **SIM card** and getting a data plan with it (see p.57).

Laundry

Most Malaysian towns have laundries (*dobi*) where you can have clothes washed cheaply and quickly, according to weight (typically RM4 a kilo), picking them up later in the day or early the next day. Some hostels and guesthouses have washing machines that guests can use for a small charge. Coin-operated **launderettes** are becoming increasingly common, too, and are less tricky to use than might appear at first, with machines that dispense change and detergent. Dry-cleaning services are less

common, though any hotel of a decent standard will be able to oblige.

LGBT+ travellers

Though Malaysia's largest cities, plus Singapore, have long had a discreet LGBT+ scene, its public profile was until recently still summed up by the old 'don't ask, don't tell' maxim. However, cyberspace has helped galvanize LGBT+ people by providing a virtual refuge within which to socialize and campaign. Hitherto strait-laced **Singapore** now permits exploration of gay themes in the arts, hosts the hugely successful annual rally Pink Dot (see p.546) and for a time even played host to popular outdoor rave parties. Although the environment in **Malaysia** is always going to be more conservative, the Malaysian government has no obvious appetite, Islamically inspired or otherwise, to clamp down on the existing, limited LGBT+ nightlife.

For all the general loosening up over the years, it's very much a case of two steps forward and one step back, however. In 2007, following an extraordinary parliamentary debate, Singapore MPs finally agreed to repeal **colonial-era laws** criminalizing anal and oral sex, though they retained the injunction on such activity between men. The same colonial legislation remains on the statute book in Malaysia, and what LGBT+-related campaigning exists tends to be channelled into the relatively uncontentious issue of HIV and AIDS. Meanwhile, Singapore has consistently declined to give official recognition to its **gay lobby** group, People Like Us, and now bars tourists from attending Pink Dot (as well as multinational firms from sponsoring it). Needless to say, all this makes legal recognition of LGBT+ partnerships a distant prospect in either country.

This mixed picture shouldn't deter LGBT+ visitors from getting to know and enjoy the local scene, such as it is. A small number of LGBT+ establishments are reviewed in this Guide.

ROUGH GUIDES TRAVEL INSURANCE

Rough Guides has teamed up with WorldNomads.com to offer great travel insurance deals. Policies are available to residents of over 150 countries, with cover for a wide range of adventure sports, 24hr emergency assistance, high levels of medical and evacuation cover and a stream of travel safety information. Roughguides.com users can take advantage of their policies online 24/7, from anywhere in the world – even if you're already travelling. And since plans often change when you're on the road, you can extend your policy and even claim online. Roughguides.com users who buy travel insurance with WorldNomads.com can also leave a positive footprint and donate to a community development project. For more information go to roughguides.com/travel-insurance.

Living in Malaysia and Singapore

Opportunities for non-residents to find short-term **employment** in Malaysia and Singapore are few and far between. Helpers are often required in guesthouses; the wages for such tasks are low, but board and lodging are often included. On a more formal level, both Singapore and KL in particular hold large communities of skilled expats with work permits, secured by their employer. In Malaysia expats might still expect elevated salaries, but this perk is increasingly rare in Singapore, where pay is already at Western levels.

English-teaching qualifications are in demand by language schools in both countries, while qualified **diving instructors** can also find work in Malaysia. There are also a few **volunteer schemes**, mainly focusing on nature conservation fieldwork, though some require you to pay to join.

STUDY AND WORK PROGRAMMES

AFS Intercultural Programs 🌐 afs.org/countries/malaysia.

Community service schemes in Malaysia.

Ape Malaysia 🌐 apemalaysia.com. Opportunities to do wildlife conservation work, and not just with orang-utans – they have projects at the Sun Bear Conservation Centre near Sandakan, for example.

Camp Borneo 🌐 campsinternational.com. Blurs the distinction between ecotourism and volunteering, with a range of trips that take in Sabah's top nature sights with stints spent doing conservation or community projects.

Fulbright Program 🌐 macee.org.my. Regular opportunities for US citizens to spend several months teaching English in rural Malaysia, without requiring teaching experience.

Turtle Conservation Society 🌐 turtleconservationsociety.org.my. Lists organizations offering volunteer conservation work schemes in Peninsular Malaysia.

Workaway 🌐 workaway.info. Voluntary work – maintenance, gardening, sometimes language teaching – at guesthouses, farms and even art galleries, in return for free or discounted accommodation.

Mail

Malaysia has a well-organized postal service operated by Pos Malaysia (📞 1300 300 300, 🌐 pos.com.my), whose website details postage rates, express mail and courier (PosLaju) services and so forth. Expect airmail delivery to take one to two weeks depending on the destination.

In **Brunei**, post offices are open Monday to Thursday and Saturday between 8am and 4.30pm, while some may open part of Friday as well. Postal services in **Singapore** are detailed in the Singapore chapter of the Guide (see p.472).

Maps

Online mapping of Malaysia offered by the usual internet giants sometimes contains **inaccuracies**, especially when it comes to road names. The best printed maps of Malaysia are the city and regional maps published by the Johor Bahru-based World Express Mapping, although these are harder to find in bookshops than they once were. Most Malaysian **tourist offices** have their own free maps of the local area, but these are often of poor quality and offer little that the maps in this Guide don't already include. Whichever maps you use, be aware that the high rate of road construction and development in rural and urban areas alike means that maps can be a little out of date as soon as they appear. Singapore maps are covered in the Singapore chapter of this Guide (see p.527).

Money

Malaysia's currency is the **ringgit** (pronounced *ring-git* and abbreviated to "RM", and sometimes informally called "dollar"), divided into 100 sen. Notes come in RM5, RM10, RM20, RM50 and RM100 denominations. Coins are currently minted in 5 sen, 10 sen, 20 sen, 50 sen and RM1 denominations. At the time of research, the **exchange rate** was around RM4 to US\$1 and RM5.40 to £1.

Singapore's currency is the **Singapore dollar**, written simply as \$ (or S\$ in this book to distinguish it from other dollars) and divided into 100 cents. Notes are issued in denominations of S\$2, S\$5, S\$10, S\$20, S\$50 and S\$100, with a couple of larger notes, rarely seen; coins come in denominations of 1, 5, 10, 20 and 50 cents, and S\$1. At the time of research, the **exchange rate** was around S\$1.80 to US\$1, S\$2 to £1. Confusingly, some coins in Singapore are very similar in size and appearance to some of their Malaysian counterparts, so it's best to keep them separate.

Brunei's currency, the **Brunei dollar**, is divided into 100 cents; you'll see it written as B\$, or simply as \$. The Brunei dollar has parity with the Singapore dollar and both are accepted by banks and larger businesses in either country. Notes come in B\$1, B\$5, B\$10, B\$50, B\$100 and rare larger denominations; coins come in denominations of 1, 5, 10, 20 and 50 cents.

Banks

Major banks in **Malaysia** include Maybank, HSBC, Citibank, Standard Chartered, RHB and CIMB, most with ATMs; those of Maybank and HSBC, to name

two, seldom have problems with foreign bank cards, but other banks' machines vary. In rural parts of Malaysia – for example, in the interior of Sabah or Sarawak, plus some coastal areas – banks can be scarce, so here it's a wise idea to carry a fair amount of cash, in smallish denominations.

Licensed **moneychangers'** kiosks, found in bigger towns all over the country, tend to open later than banks, until around 6pm; some open at weekends and until 9pm, too. Some hotels will exchange money at all hours. Exchange rates tend to be more generous at moneychangers, though anyone still depending on travellers' cheques should note that moneychangers don't generally exchange them.

Singapore banks are detailed in the relevant chapter of the Guide (see p.551). Banks represented in **Brunei** include the International Bank of Brunei, Citibank, Standard Chartered Bank and the Overseas Union Bank.

Plastic

Credit and debit cards are only accepted by larger businesses in Malaysia and Brunei – you won't, for example, be able to use your Visa card at a *kedai kopi*, though a café chain in a big city may well accept it. In Singapore many companies accept card payments, but small firms may only do so for larger payments.

Opening hours and public holidays

In **Malaysia**, shops are open daily from around 9.30am to 7pm, though outlets in shopping centres and malls are typically open later. Government offices tend to work Monday to Friday from 8am to 4.15pm or 9am to 5pm, with an hour off for lunch, except on Friday when the break lasts from 12.15 to 2.45pm (or 11.45 to 2pm in East Malaysia) to allow Muslims to attend prayers. Banking hours are generally Monday to Friday 9.30am to 4pm and Saturday 9.30 to 11.30am (closed on every first and third Saturday of the month), except in the states where Friday is the day off: Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, Terengganu and to a lesser extent Johor. In these states, the working week runs from Sunday to Thursday, with Friday and Saturday as days off.

In **Singapore**, offices generally work Monday to Friday 8.30am to 5pm and sometimes on Saturday mornings. Shop hours vary, but malls are typically open from 10am to 10pm.

Brunei **banking hours** are Monday to Friday 9am to 3pm and Saturday 9 to 11am.

Opening hours for temples and mosques are given in the text of the Guide where they keep to a formal schedule (often not the case).

Public and school holidays

The list of public holiday dates (see below) is a guide only – government websites issue new lists for each year a few months in advance. Note that Muslim holidays (marked with an asterisk) move earlier by ten or eleven days each year, and that precise dates depend on the sighting of the new moon, which determines when each month of the Muslim calendar begins. Note also that each Malaysian state has its own additional holidays, which could be to do with its sultan's birthday or an Islamic (in states with a largely Muslim population) or tribal event, such as the *gawai* in June in Sarawak. Some holidays below are marked by special festivities (see p.47).

It pays to be aware of not just public holidays but also local **school holidays**, as Malaysian accommodation can be hard to come by during these periods. In Malaysia, schools get a week off in mid-March and late August, and two weeks off at the start of June, with a long break from mid-November to the end of the year. Singapore school breaks are almost identical, except that the June holiday lasts the whole month, and kids get a week off in early September rather than late August.

MALAYSIAN PUBLIC HOLIDAYS

Jan 1 New Year's Day

Jan/Feb Chinese New Year

May 1 Labour Day

May/June Vesak Day

May/June Hari Raya Aidilfitri*

Aug Hari Raya Haji*

Aug 31 National Day

Sept 9 Yang Dipertuan Agong's Birthday

Sept 16 Malaysia Day

Aug/Sept Awwal Muharram (the Muslim New Year)*

Oct/Nov Deepavali

Nov Birthday of the Prophet Muhammad*

Dec 25 Christmas

SINGAPORE PUBLIC HOLIDAYS

Note that Singapore has designated dates for Islamic festivals and does not adjust them to fit sightings of the new moon.

Jan 1 New Year's Day

Jan/Feb Chinese New Year

March/April Good Friday

May 1 Labour Day

May/June Vesak Day

May/June Hari Raya Puasa*

Aug 9 National Day

Aug Hari Raya Haji*

Oct/Nov Deepavali

Dec 25 Christmas

BRUNEI PUBLIC HOLIDAYS

Brunei observes the same Muslim festivals as Malaysia, plus New Year, Chinese New Year, Christmas and the following:

February 23 National Day

March/April Israk Mikraj (the night when the Prophet ascended to heaven)*

April/May First day of Ramadan*

May 31 Armed Forces' Day

May/June Anniversary of Revelation of the Koran*

July 15 Sultan's Birthday

Phones

Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei all have a comprehensive **mobile network**. There are many outlets selling mobiles (known locally as "hand phones"), even in the smallest of towns. If your own phone is unlocked and GSM compatible, you can use a local SIM card from phone shops and 7-Eleven stores. You can top up your balance at the same outlets; you either get a receipt with a pin number on it for you to dial and activate the recharge, or the shop staff will do this for you. It's worth looking out for low-priced SIMs aimed at

INTERNATIONAL CALLS

To make international calls to any of the countries below, dial your international access code (00 in Malaysia and Brunei, usually 001 in Singapore) then the relevant country code from the list, then the number (including any area code, but excluding any initial zero). From Singapore, you can call Malaysia by dialling 020, then the area code (omitting the initial zero), then the number.

IDD COUNTRY CODES

Australia 061
 Brunei 0673
 Ireland 0353
 Malaysia 060
 New Zealand 064
 Singapore 065
 South Africa 027
 UK 044
 US & Canada 01

tourists, loaded with a small amount of credit for voice calls and a data balance that should be good for a week or two of moderate online use.

Malaysia

The two big players in the **mobile phone** market are Maxis (which uses the Hotlink brand for its SIM cards; 0hotlink.com.my) and Celcom (aka XPax; 0celcom.com.my), with the smaller DiGi (0digi.com.my) and Tune Talk (0tunetalk.com.my) bringing up the rear. Cellular coverage in Peninsular Malaysia is fairly good, though expect it to be patchy or nonexistent in rural areas. Sabah and Sarawak coverage is variable, focusing on urban areas, major roads and populated river valleys. Tariffs can be complex, though you can expect calls made to other Malaysian numbers to cost no more than RM0.50 per minute.

Local calls from a landline are very cheap at just 10 sen for three minutes, but for long-distance calls, it can be more convenient to buy a **phonecard**, available from service stations, 7-Eleven outlets and newsagents. Your best bet is to use a card such as iTalk (0tm.com.my; from RM10), which enables you to make discounted calls from the line in your hotel room as well as from payphones.

Singapore

Three companies, Singtel (0singtel.com), Starhub (0starhub.com) and M1 (0m1.com.sg) dominate the mobile phone market in Singapore (and some also sell phonecards for surviving payphones). Their **SIM cards** (from S\$10) are available from post offices and 7-Eleven stores, though note that your passport will be scanned as a form of registration of any SIM purchase. Two more things to note are that old **2G phones** do not work in Singapore, and that you pay not only to make mobile calls but also to receive them.

Local calls cost 10¢ per minute from a mobile (10¢ for three minutes from a payphone). The island has no area codes – the only time you'll punch more than eight digits for a local number is if you're dialling a toll-free (01800) or special-rate number. For directory enquiries, call 0100 (0104 for international enquiries).

Brunei

International calls can be made from cardphones. To call collect, substitute 001 for the usual 000 international code, then dial the number as though making an ordinary international call; this brings the number up on the operator's system.

OPERATOR AND DIRECTORY SERVICES

MALAYSIA

Business number online searches
 📞yellowpages.com.my
 Local directory enquiries 📞 103
 Operator-assisted calls (including international collect/reverse charge) 📞 101

SINGAPORE

Business number online searches
 📞yellowpages.com.sg
 Local directory enquiries 📞 100
 Operator-assisted international calls 📞 104

BRUNEI

Local directory enquiries 📞 113

Phonecards start at \$10 and can be bought from post offices. **SIM cards** can be obtained from outlets of the mobile provider DST Communications (📞dst.com.bn).

Time

For administrative convenience, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei are all **eight hours** ahead of Universal Time (GMT), all year. This close to the equator, you can rely on dawn being around 6.30am in the Peninsula and Singapore, dusk at around 7.30pm; in Borneo both happen half an hour to an hour earlier. Not taking into account daylight saving time elsewhere, the three countries are two hours behind Sydney, thirteen hours ahead of US Eastern Standard Time and sixteen hours ahead of US Pacific Standard Time.

Tipping

Tipping is seldom necessary in Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei. That said, when eating out at a proper restaurant, it's customary to tip if a **service charge** isn't included, though you are never required to tip in *kedai kopis* or *kopitiams*. It's not necessary to tip taxi drivers either, unless they have gone out of their way to be helpful. Otherwise you might want to offer a modest tip to a hotel porter or hairdresser, or a tour guide who has been exceptional.

Tourist information

Most Malaysian state capitals have a tourist office run by the national agency **Tourism Malaysia**

(📞tourism.gov.my) and may boast a second tourist office, sometimes called the **Tourism Information Centre**, run by the state government; details are given in the Guide. Where these state-level tourist offices exist, they are generally better informed than the local Tourism Malaysia branch.

Whichever tourist office you deal with, bear in mind that staff always have plenty of glossy brochures to hand out, but their practical knowledge can be patchy – reflecting the hopelessly incoherent way information circulates in Malaysia. To find out about out-of-the-way attractions, you may be better off contacting local accommodation – calling is best, as emails often elicit slow responses.

Singapore is another proposition altogether. A huge amount of generally reliable information on everything from bus times to museum exhibitions is available in print and online. Tourist information is put out by the **Singapore Tourism Board**, which has a comprehensive website (📞visitsingapore.com), and operates several downtown **Visitor Centres**. Brunei's official tourism website is 📞bruneitourism.travel.

Travellers with disabilities

Of the three countries covered in this guide, **Singapore** is the most accessible to travellers with disabilities; tax incentives are provided for developers who include disabled access features into new buildings. In contrast, Malaysia and Brunei make few provisions.

Across the region, life is made a lot easier if you can afford to stay in the more upmarket hotels, which usually have disabled provisions, and to shell out for taxis and the odd domestic flight. However, few tour operators in the region are similarly accommodating.

Singapore is certainly making a concerted effort to improve: the **MRT** metro system has lifts on most, if not all, of its stations, and many bus routes have wheelchair-accessible vehicles, though these operate only at certain times of day (see 📞mytransport.sg for details). Most major **taxi** companies have accessible vehicles available to book, too.

In Malaysia, wheelchair users will have a hard time negotiating the uneven pavements in most towns and cities, and find it difficult to board buses, trains, ferries and the LRT system in Kuala Lumpur, although the new MRT is meant to be accessible. The situation is similar if not worse in

East Malaysia and Brunei, with little provision for disabled travellers.

CONTACTS FOR TRAVELLERS WITH DISABILITIES

Caring Fleet 📞 caringfleet.com. Transport services in Singapore for people with disabilities.

Disabled People's Association Singapore 📞 6791 1134, 🌐 dpa.org.sg. Nonprofit organization whose website has an FAQ section for tourists, with details of accessible taxis and local buildings.

Handicaps Welfare Association 🌐 hwa.org.sg. Transport services for people with disabilities in Singapore.

Malaysian Confederation of the Disabled 📞 03 7931 9038. A member of Disabled Peoples International, working for equal opportunities for disabled people in Malaysia.

Silveray Transport Services 🌐 silveray.com.sg. Transport services for people with disabilities in Singapore; also tours within the city.

Travelling with children

Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei are child-friendly countries in which to travel. Disposable nappies and powdered milk are easy to find (fresh milk is sold in supermarkets), and bland Chinese soups and rice dishes, or bakery products, are ideal for children unaccustomed to spicy food. Many restaurants and the slicker *kedai kopis* have high chairs, though only upmarket hotels provide baby cots or a baby-sitting service. However, rooms in the cheaper hotels can usually be booked with an extra bed for little extra cost. Children under 12 get into many attractions for half the price and enjoy discounts on buses and trains.



A nighttime aerial photograph of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, showing a dense urban landscape with numerous illuminated skyscrapers and buildings. The Petronas Twin Towers are prominent in the center. The city is set against a backdrop of dark mountains under a twilight sky with soft purple and blue hues.

Kuala Lumpur and around

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