

A Malaysian Sojourn



Comments 4



pallavibarua 6 December 2010 23568 views

Once one lands in Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA), it makes one realize why Malaysia has the distinction of having the world's best airport. The accomplishments of this small country in South East Asia is to be seen. Being on a strategic sea route position in the tropics, Malaysia has seen different groups of people trade and travel enroute its shores. In Ptolemy's map, ancient Malaysia was shown as "Golden Khersonese". In 2010, it looks so, prosperous and improving constantly.

Malaysia has a tropical climate, if it shines in the morning, afternoon awaits rain. It was late in the evening when we reached Kuala Lumpur. Roads and the road-sides, all well-kept. Kuala Lumpur is an organized, well-laid city. It is growing, growing in an organized way. The harmonious blend of urban infrastructure and greenery gives a pleasant look to Kuala Lumpur.

Present day Malaysia is a far cry from the race riots of 1969. Things have changed drastically with the ascendancy of Mahathir bin Mohamad as the prime minister of the country in 1981. Malaysia experienced economic growth from 1980s. There was a marked shift in the pattern of economy, that is from an agriculture-based economy to one based on manufacturing in areas related to computers and consumer electronics. There were other changes too. Some landmark projects were taken up which now associate with the image of Malaysia worldwide. The construction of the Petronas Twin Towers (the tallest twin building as of now in 2010), Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA), the North-South Expressway, and the coming up of the new federal administrative capital Putrajaya. The successive Prime Ministers seems to have kept Dr. Mahathir's expectations alive. The government's objective is for Malaysia to become a developed country by 2020. This also encompasses a better standard of living among one and all in Malaysia.

One of the measures which Mahathir took after the breaking out of race riots was to instill confidence among the Malays. He accused his fellow Malays (or, 'Bumiputra's - "sons of the soil") of being complacent and unwilling to work hard, and urged them to be competent. Economic domination by the Chinese and Indian migrants brought into Malaysia by the British colonial rulers and their rise in population contributed to the alienation of the native Malays. Though these migrants became Malaysians by birth in the country, but their absorption into Malay ethos was not a reality. Mahathir knew that economic, administrative and political empowerment of Malays in Malaysia was the key to restore confidence among those who felt marginalized in their own soil. He worked on these areas. Unlike in the Chinese or Indian language schools, Bahasa Malaysia or the standardized Malay language was promoted as the common language in Malaya or Malaysia.



Genting Highlands The wonders achieved by Malaysia since the last couple of decades is amazing. Mention must be made of the highland resort of Genting Highlands. Today it is one of the major tourist attractions in the country. Our informative tour guide Kalaiyanasi, a Malaysian lady of Tamil origin related the story behind the coming up of the magnificent world class resort. It is the brain child of late Tan Sri Lim Goh Tong, a Malaysian of Chinese origin. On an evening stroll, he came across an idea of developing a mountaintop resort in Malaysia to provide some respite city dwellers seeking an escape from the tropical heat. He passed away during the construction of the resort. His dream was realized by his wife. She made sure that Genting Highlands becomes a reality. Nestled on a mountain peak of elevation 1760 (2000 m approximately), within the Titiwangsa mountains, there lies the mountain resort of Genting Highlands. The delightful resort is a one hour journey by car from Kuala Lumpur city. It is also accessible by a cable car called Genting Skyway (3.38 km), which is one of the world's fastest and South East Asia's longest gondola lift. The theme park is full of attractions and would make a child of a grown-up. There is a huge hotel which gives a picturesque view of overlying mountainous terrain.



at Batu Caves The resort has been publicly traded and the ownership now lies with the Genting Group. Genting holds the only license to operate a casino in the country. Nowhere else casinos are allowed in Malaya (Malaysia). The visitors are asked to be dressed in a dignified manner adhering to the Malayan (Malaysian) standards of decorum.

Another attraction of multi-cultural Malaysia is the Batu caves. It houses the temple of the deity. A huge gold painted statue of the deity stands at the foothills. 272 steps take you to the 113 year old main temple, dedicated to Lord Subramaniam (Karttikeya), lodged in a cave about 400 feet above ground level. Since 1892, the Thaipusam festival in the Tamil month of 'Thai'(which falls around late January and early February) has been celebrated there. The word Thaipusam is derived from the month name Thai and Pusam, which refers to a star that is at its highest point during the festival. Apart from the Tamil descendents in Malaysia, the event sees the convergence of thousands of Hindu devotees from Tamil Nadu and other parts of the world.



On our visit to the Batu caves, the sun was in full charge and we got umbrellas to shield ourselves during the climb of stairs. A lively Malaysian girl helped us select designs and colours which echoed Malaysia. One umbrella cost MYR (Malaysian Ringgit) 15.

1 MYR = 14.3259 INR (Indian Rupee).

In Indian Rupee value, the purchase of an umbrella involved shelling out Rs. 215 (approximately) from the pocket.

We were thirsty. A Malay man treated us with cool coconut water. The coconut in Malaysia is large and light green in colour. There is much water and it tastes refreshingly sweet. The sun is quite bright. Rains are in the offing in the afternoon. It is October. Nevertheless, this is the climate of tropical Malaysia all year round.



The Petronas Twin Towers is one of the marvels of modern day architecture of Malaysia. It houses the headquarter of PETRONAS, that is, Petroliaam Nasional Bhd, Malaysia's national petroleum corporation. The premises houses offices of some renowned corporations of the world. Situated in Kuala Lumpur, it looks most magnificent at night. With all the splendor of lights, the twin towers overpowers everyone and everything below. One of the striking features of the buildings is that they are eco-friendly structures. The Petronas Twin Towers looks out and out a structure basically made of steel and glass. Unlike all concrete structures, the conduction of heat all around is limited. The palce where the Twin Towers stand today was once the site of Kuala Lumpur's race track. Completed in 1998 after a seven year construction, they are the tallest twin towers till date.

If you are in Kuala Lumpur, the best shopping destination is the Sungei Wang Plaza. It is a seven floor shopping mall with hundreds of retail outlets. When it comes to shopping, tourists have outnumbered localites. I could see few Malaysian customers. Most of the people who flock into this mall are tourists. Also Kuala Lumpur is an ideal shopping destination for neighbouring countries like Indonesia, Phillipines, Thailand, Cambodia. Some buy goods in huge quantity to sell them off in their markets back home. The quality of the products is fine and the price reasonable for 'shopper-tourists', the ones who come to Kuala Lumpur only for shopping. There are several branded eateries, but if you want to taste Malaysian, Vietnamese or Indonesian cuisine at an easily affordable rate, try the ones at the ground floor or the basement. There is a lively restaurant, less shiny in appearance and more into sumptuous food. Rice forms the staple. Fish is a prominent place in the culinary scene. Seafood is popular. Smoked, grilled, steamed dishes are a part of Malaysian cuisine. Sea trade since ancient times introduced Malaysians to spice. Some local dishes try the dash of spice and prove to be pungent. Coconut also finds its due place in various preparations. Nasi kerabu is a rice based dish served with coconut milk, fish flakes and desiccated coconut.



The condition of roads in Kuala Lumpur speaks of the sincerity of the people in authority. In spite of a tropical climate which brings in much rain, the roads are well-maintained. The side-ways are neat and abound in well-planned vegetation. Trimmed shrubs and flower plants speak of the aesthetic sense of the people at large. Nowhere did I see a garbage dump, or an overflowing garbage bin. Everything is cleaned before dawn and the day starts afresh without any stink here and there. The credit goes to efficient and well-equipped town councils which keep an eye over the aspect of cleanliness. Tourists are asked to maintain cleanliness. Malaysian children are taught the importance of cleanliness in their schools. It shows in their public life.

Malaysia recognizes Islam as the official religion. But all other religions are practiced freely. Islam in Malaysia is subtle, sober and emanates positive and constructive aspects of the faith. The structures of the mosques in Malaysia is unique. It is a blend of Islamic architecture and traditional Malaysian structures. I was surprised to see the structure of the dome of the National Mosque of Malaysia. Unlike in mosques we see in different countries, the dome was shaped like a folded umbrella! In some rural areas, the roofs of the mosques resemble that of the Assam-type houses we have back home. Islam in Malaya didn't spread by conquest. It came along with traders from India. Islamic missionaries built some mosques in Malay villages with the help of locals. A unique fusion evolved in the process.



Both men and women in Malaysia maintain decent standards of dressing. Malaysian women and girls dress modestly. The influence of Islam permeates in this respect, in a subtle way. You will find Malay Muslim girls and women cover their head and chest with a scarf. However, there is no strict mandate for those who donot want to put on a scarf over their head. An instance of a Malay woman wearing burqa is rare. If you find anyone in burqa, the lady might be a tourist from Arabia, but unlikely to be a Malay Muslim.

Most males in South-East Asian countries have effeminate looks. Malay males defy this convention. They look masculine physically as well as in attitude. Compared to their counterparts in Thailand, Cambodia etc., Malay men are handsome; broad-shouldered, tall, tanned, and well-dressed. They look smart when dressed in trousers, shirts and T-shirts rather than their traditional dress. (This I feel holds true for men world over).

Our guide Kalayan (as she was called in short), took us to the Thean Hou temple. This is the first time I went to a Chinese temple. This temple has been built by the Hainanese community living in Kuala Lumpur and is dedicated to Goddess Tian Hou, The Heavenly Mother. Hainans are a group of people from South China. Hainans are not as huge in number as the Hans who are the mainland Chinese and most dominant among Chinese peoples. The temple is a confluence of elements of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. The premises of the temple has a tortoise pond. The Chinese associate tortoise with longevity. There is a collection of statues of animals which are representations of the twelve animals of Chinese astrology. The Thean Hou temple houses a fortune wheel which is believed to foretell one's future. The process involved is simple. There are long sticks placed in a wheel. Each carries a number. You have to hold them in a bundle. Lift the bundle a little and let it fall freely into the wheel. Pick up the one which sticks out at the highest level. There are small drawers all around the fortune wheel. The drawers are numbered. Pull out the drawer which carries the same number as on the stick. Pick up one of the many chits of paper enclosed in the drawer you come upon. My stick was numbered '17'. I picked up my chit of paper from the allotted drawer. This is a general activity and might not turn out to be true for one. Of the things written in the chit I picked, my mother was pleased to read the line on matrimony, "Will eventually tie the knot."



We were taken to the Cocoa Boutique, a chocolate enclave in Kuala Lumpur. Tourists are taken to a plethora of Malaysian chocolates. The salespersons would give you thin slices of chocolates to taste, so that you decide which variety you would like to take home. It is nice to see how Malaysia is exploring different avenues to create opportunities in a surging economy. Once the country was used by the British trading empire for the cultivation of tropical cash crops like tapioca, gambier, pepper, coffee, rubber, and the mining of tin and gold. Today Malaysia is exploring newer opportunities for itself. The country has developed itself into a centre of Islamic banking. Malaysia has the highest numbers of female workers in Islamic banking sector. There has been an expansion in knowledge based services as in health and education. World class medical infrastructure has seen the rise of health tourism in Malaysia. The capital city Kuala Lumpur has also become a real estate investment location. The boom in sale of real estate can be felt when one sees boards and banners put up on apartments and office spaces advertising sale and the phone number which needs to be contacted for the purpose. Kuala Lumpur or KL is emerging as one of the best cities in Asia, a city which is experiencing planned growth. The maintenance of green cover in Kuala Lumpur in spite of the rapid urban growth is an aspect worth appreciation.

Some forest areas have been turned into recreational forest zones where tourists can indulge in jungle trekking, bird watching, river cruising and such pursuits. However, these are kept in check so that gross marketing doesn't lead to pollution and decay of environment.

We left Malaysia by road. The Express Highway is a testimony to the quality of construction in the country. There are no settlements on either sides of the road. No houses, no shops, no restaurants or hotels. Instead it is well kept grass lawns, trimmed hedge and shrubs and flowering plants all along. The journey by bus felt like a ride on a smooth runaway in an airport. I didn't come across a single bump in a pothole nor was there any mound of stones or asbestos for road construction. On the way, some small roads diverge on the sides leading to habitation away from the highway, to the interiors. Improved road connectivity has improved the lifestyle of rural Malaysia. There was an afternoon shower. No potholes full of water. No poodle was to be seen on the road. I left Malaysia with a hope of coming back again.

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BY PALLAVIBARUA

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