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## **The towers and the glory**

By **Matt Jones**

Back in 1993, when I last visited Malaysia, the tourist literature proudly boasted of the world's tallest flagpole, its largest pewter factory and one of the highest bars in Asia – not a swish 88th storey affair, but a street level, colonial-era watering hole with a counter made high enough to accommodate the elbows of British plantation owners. The height of “Malaysia's achievement”, as celebrated in advertising jingles on local radio, was the Proton Saga, a modest family saloon car.

Ten years on, while the 100-metre flagpole in Kuala Lumpur's Merdeka Square is still hailed here as the tallest, while Royal Selangor's pewter factory in Setapak Jaya still claims to be the largest, and while the near legendary Coliseum Café and Hotel, built in 1921 and little changed since then, continues to do a roaring trade for those with time for a Tiger and the house special sizzling steak, the height of Malaysia's achievement now stands at a towering 452 metres.

With the 452-metre, 88-storey Petronas Towers, inspired by the Five Pillars of Islam, built on the geometric principles of Islamic architecture and completed in 1998, Malaysia has made the world sit up and take note of just how far it has progressed under Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. The world's tallest flagpole is one thing, but at the turn of the millennium, Malaysia alone boasted the world's tallest building, the modern cityscape accessory of choice for every self-respecting resurgent economy (Taipei's 101 Tower recently took top honours).

Not that the tallest, largest or highest of anything could add to the underlying appeal of this south-east Asian nation of 22.7 million people. Happily, while so much of the Kuala Lumpur skyline has changed after a decade of economic development (the 421 metre Menara Kuala Lumpur tower is another addition, opened in 1996), the things that drew me back to Malaysia time after time in the 1980s and early '90s remain the same: its people are ever-welcoming, their cuisine remains one of the best kept secrets in Asia, and the cosmopolitan culture that arises from the harmonious mingling of the country's Malay, Chinese and Indian citizens is still unique in the region.

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There's a buzz about Malaysia. Not the usual tourist tinnitus created by the big budget marketers behind ad campaigns on satellite TV. It doesn't come from the country's gentle, easy-going citizens, who are nonetheless proud of its progress and delighted with the international attention that accompanied the 1998 Commonwealth Games and that comes annually with the Formula 1 Grand Prix, another of the decade's developments (the Sepang International Circuit, south of Kuala Lumpur, is hailed by F1 drivers as one of the world's best venues).

No, the current buzz about Malaysia comes from increasing numbers of holidaymakers who, after numerous visits to Phuket and Bali, have finally given Malaysia "a go", only to wonder why on earth they hadn't thought of coming here years ago.

When it comes to tropical beaches, romantic island retreats, downtown temples and even big city nightlife, not only has Malaysia emerged from neighbouring Thailand's shadow, it offers visitors a more refined experience.

As a destination it can be undeniably fun – even a short visit to the Genting Highlands "playground in the sky" will confirm that – but with parameters set by the state religion, Islam, and severe penalties for the sort of activities that have tarnished Thailand's reputation, Malaysia is never anything less than the perfect family destination. You feel safe here in the home of "Rasa Sayang" – the land of the loving feeling.

For most travellers, Kuala Lumpur is the entry point to a country that combines East and West, old and new, foreign and familiar. Commonly called "KL", the "Garden City Of Lights" is the capital of the Federation of Malaysia, which consists of Peninsular Malaysia, dangling appendix-like from the belly of the Asian continent, and the states of Sabah and Sarawak on the island of Borneo.

Home to 1.5 million people, KL began as a mining settlement in the late 1800s after tin was discovered at the confluence of the Klang and Gombak rivers, where the Masjid Jamek mosque now stands.

Independence from Britain, or "Merdeka", was declared on the sports field between KL's Royal Selangor Club and the onion-domed Sultan Abdul Samad Building in 1957 and the area, Merdeka Square, remains the nation's focal point for independence day celebrations every August 31st.

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In the half century since independence, Malaysia has enjoyed significant advances in trade and commerce, banking and finance, manufacturing, transportation, information technology and tourism.

But for all the progress, skyscrapers and new mega malls, it's the oriental street life and the patina of a colonial past that make KL's streets such interesting places to explore.

Chinatown, east of the railway station, between Jalan Cheng Lock and Jalan Maharajalela, with its old shophouses, hawker stalls and lively night market on Jalan Petaling, is a hive of activity.

Some of the city's best-known landmarks are a legacy of British rule. The Masjid Jamek mosque – dating back to 1909 and with its onion domes, arched colonnades and marble floor, a striking example of Indian Muslim architecture – was in fact designed by a British architect AB Hubbocks, whose other work of note is KL's Moorish inspired railway station, completed in 1910 and surely one of the most beautiful station buildings in the world.

The Sultan Abdul Samad Building, now the venue of Malaysia's Supreme Court and High Court, was formerly the Secretariat building for the British administration. Designed by British architect AC Norman and built between 1894 and 1897, it is a stunning example of Victorian and Moorish architecture.

Then there's the Coliseum Café and Hotel, a short walk north from Merdeka Square along Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman (open daily from 8am-10pm). Stepping through the door is like stepping back in time, to the late 1940s and early '50s, when Malaysia was "Malaya" and Communist insurgents terrorised the plantations of the men who would come here to drink. In the faded grandeur of the dining room, waiters with starched white jackets recall a bygone era.

The Malaysia Tourist Information Complex (MATIC, open daily from 9am-6pm) is a tourist destination in itself. Located on Jalan Ampang, not far from the Petronas Towers, the building was constructed in 1935 as the residence of Eu Tong Seng, a prosperous miner and planter. During the Second World War, it served first as the war office of the British Army and then as headquarters for the Japanese Army. After the war, it was the venue for the first sitting of the Malaysian Parliament and for the installation ceremonies of several Malaysian kings.

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For an extended taste of the colonial lifestyle, you might consider staying in the former mansion of the British Governor of the Malay States. Positioned on a verdant hillside above Lake Gardens, to the southwest of Merdeka Square, Carcosa Seri Negara is arguably KL's most luxurious hotel, having opened in 1989 following the stay of Britain's Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip. Prices for rooms in the 100-year-old mansion range from US\$297 a night for a Standard Suite to US\$946 a night for a Grande Deluxe Suite (both room only).

The cosmopolitan make up of KL's citizens is a legacy of its pioneer origins and colonial past. That the city, indeed the country as a whole, has become a cultural melting pot of three distinct people groups – indigenous Malay, Chinese and Indian – is partly down to the tin rush of the 1800s, which brought the Chinese up river from the coast, and colonial rule by the Portuguese, Dutch and British, the latter of whom brought Indians to Malaya to work in rubber plantations.

While the history books record periods of unrest and a difficult transition to Merdeka, modern Malaysia is a peaceful, multi-cultural society with a unique blend of religions and religious celebrations, cultural activities, traditions, dress and food.

As well as mosques there are churches – the AC Norman-designed St Mary's Cathedral is across the road from the Sultan Abdul Samad Building – and Hindu temples, the most colourful and impressive of which is Sri Maha Mariammam, on Jalan Tun HS Lee.

The cultural melting pot has also cooked up a marvellous cuisine. As well as Malay speciality dishes such as satay and Nasi Lemak – rice steamed in coconut milk with a selection of curried chicken, beef or squid with sambal, a traditional accompaniment of ground chilli, prawn paste and condiments – visitors will delight in coming across Indian restaurants with Nasi Kandar, a meat curry dish, stalls selling Roti Canai, a pancake with dhal or meat curry, and Chinese restaurants serving the regional specialty Hainanese Chicken Rice.

Shoppers will delight in the variety of arts and crafts on offer in Central Market, KL's Covent Garden, half way between the railway station and Masjid Jamek (open daily from 10am-10pm). In particular, visitors should look out for Asli Craft, a stall selling products made by the Orang Asli, Malaysia's aborigines.

There's so much more to Malaysia than its capital city, however. History buffs will not want to miss Malacca, 144 kilometres south of KL – a good day trip. Its historic buildings date back to 1511, and nowhere else in the country is the Portuguese and Dutch influence more evident.

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Penang, an island off the northwestern coast of Peninsular Malaysia, some 370 kilometres north of KL, offers visitors an attractive combination of history, culture and beaches. Founded by the British East India Company in 1786 and known as “The Pearl of the Orient”, modern Penang’s main attractions are the magnificent Kek Lok Si Buddhist temple and the beach at Batu Feringhi, on the north shore.

Visitors in search of the ultimate island getaway should look further north, however, to Langkawi, or better still head for Tioman, on Peninsular Malaysia’s often overlooked east coast. With its hills, waterfalls, large swathes of dense jungle and offshore coral reefs, Tioman is a South Pacific paradise. Indeed, the island’s Mukut area, accessible only by boat, was one of the locations for the 1958 film *South Pacific*. After the hustle and bustle of downtown KL, it is the perfect spot to while away some enchanted evening.

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Emirates offers flights from Dubai to Kuala Lumpur daily except Fridays. Its direct flight, EK 346, departs Dubai at 02.50 on Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays. EK 336, via Dhaka, Bangladesh, departs Dubai at 02.55 on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays. An Economy class return ticket costs Dhs2,150 (plus tax).

Malaysia is also an Emirates Holidays destination. Among the special packages available are “Romantic Getaway to Langkawi” and “Honeymoon in Penang”. Malacca features on the company’s list of recommended excursions and short tours.

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