

## A Tale of Two Countries

By Dena Braun / Photos by John T. Braun

Malaysia is a small country in Southeast Asia that, while eclipsed in popularity by its neighbors, Thailand to the North, and Singapore to the South, is truly the melting pot of Asia. Comprised of Malays, Indians and Chinese, Malaysia gives the adventurous traveler the opportunity to experience and explore three distinct cultures that are so different than our own.

I arrived in Malaysia during Chinese New Year and was struck by the fact that Malaysia itself is like the Chinese concept of Yin and Yang—two opposites coming together to form a whole. The Malaysia found in its capital Kuala Lumpur is what the entire country is striving to become—a modern metropolis filled with opportunity, the basics found in any first world nation, and pockets of extreme luxury. On the other end of the spectrum is most of the rest of the country where it's clear the 51-year-old nation is still struggling with third world problems and poverty. However, if you dig a little deeper you'll soon see that these outlying areas contain the heart, soul and exotic culture that is the essence of Malaysia.

While some places impress you with a host of must-see museums highlighting history, art and culture, in Malaysia simply walking the streets absorbing the sights, sounds, smells and rituals of the people will tell you more about the country than any structured exhibit ever could.

For a trip that combines the luxurious

creature comforts of home, with the chance to experience the authentic Malaysia, I suggest basing yourself in Kuala Lumpur and taking overnight trips to Penang on the west coast and Kota Bhura on the east coast.

For me, if Malaysia were to be summed up in one city, it would be Penang. An original settlement of the British, Penang is alive with color, culture and new experiences at every turn. Malaysia touts the fact that its diverse people have lived in peace for over 200 years, and walking down Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling, otherwise known as "Harmony Street" because a church, mosque and Chinese temple all reside here, the convergence of culture is in full play. Because I'm here on the first day of the 15-day Chinese New Year, The Goddess of Mercy Temple is a chaotic, crowded scene filled with festive rituals I've never seen before. The air is heavy and heady from the bright pink, six-foot incense sticks burning in the courtyard and the ash produced is swirling throughout the sky. The ground is littered with prosperity envelopes (the Chinese put small amounts of money in envelopes to give to friends and family). Ironically, several Indian panhandlers sit amongst these tattered envelopes. Chinese families are lining up to purchase a caged bird to release. Doing so is supposed to bring you good luck in the upcoming year. Taken as a whole, the scene is a wonderful example of how a typical Chinese Malaysian rings in the New Year.

Walking about two blocks from the temple, I feel like I'm entering a different





**TOWERING CULTURE:** The Petronas Towers are a site in Kuala Lumpur that can't be missed. So too is the architecture, culture and the vibrant beauty of the Malaysian people.



world as our guide, Rahman, steers us into Little India. Here the streets are teeming with people, the storefronts beckon with jewel-toned saris and the pungent smells of curries, cumin and turmeric soon set my stomach rumbling. Navigating the labyrinth of streets, Rahman guides us to the unassuming Sri Ananda Bahuan restaurant. As we seat ourselves, Rahman moves the container of forks away and says we must eat like a local—with our hands. We're each given a large banana leaf to put rice, and an array of unknown chicken, fish and vegetable dishes onto. Rahman instructs us to put a bit of vegetable or protein and some sauce onto a bit of rice, pick up with our fingers and enjoy. The food was the best Indian cuisine I've ever experienced. In fact, it was so good, my husband and I begged Rahman to take us back for dinner!

Modern-day Penang is a juxtaposition between the old and new; the rich and the poor. My four-star hotel had a view of what could best be described as a shantytown. According to Rahman a strange law decreeing that no pre-WWII

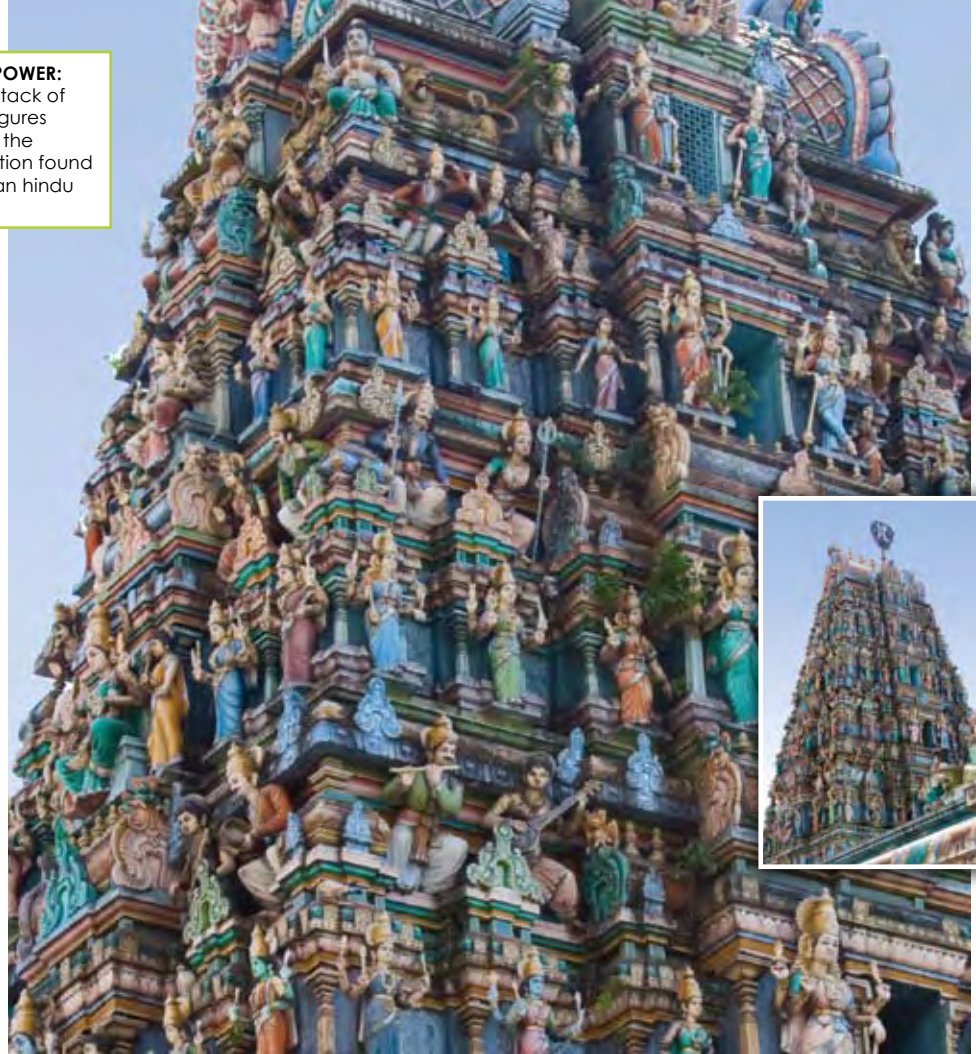
**TOWER OF POWER:**  
An ornate stack of porcelain figures is typical of the ornamentation found on Malaysian Hindu temples.

building can be torn down shackles the city. This difference in affluence was also evident as we traced Penang's history during the afternoon. Along the water, groups of Chinese built floating houses on stilts to get around the British taxation on land. Today, there are seven different clans still residing here in homes ranging from open-air shacks to three-room houses with air conditioning and satellite TV. It's hard for me to imagine living in such cramped, fishy smelling quarters. Across the city in Georgetown the wealth and power of Cheong Fatt Tze, a captain of industry in the early 1900s, is on display in his UNESCO restored Blue Mansion. Now an intimate guesthouse, with tours twice a day, this opulent residence was built on the principles of Feng Shui. As our tour guide regales us with stories of Tze and the mansion's unique architecture, she tells us that the bed and breakfast is where people come to "chi out".

For me, I have to settle for relaxing on Batu Feringgi Beach about 20 miles out of Georgetown. Penang has several beautiful beaches and resorts in the same vicinity that provide a quiet respite after a day of sight seeing.

While Penang is the heart of China in Malaysia, Kota Bhura is the center for Malays, accounting for over 90 percent of the local population, and creating the most Muslim part of the country. By law, any Malay born in the country is Muslim. Here you won't see young women in the skimpy denim skirts that dominate the fashion landscape in Kuala Lumpur; instead the style is colorful traditional batik outfits and headscarves. Our guide, Mayee, explains that strict Muslim women wear simple black or white scarves, while those wearing colorful and beaded styles are doing it more to fit into the culture.

At the Siti Khadijah Market I discover stall after stall of gorgeous silk-printed batik in every shade of the rainbow. The material is sold in four-meter lengths and women take it to a tailor to create



custom outfits. The batik industry is booming thanks to a new law requiring all government employees in the city to wear batik every Thursday. With high quality material starting at \$20, and tailoring adding another \$60, I'm shocked that women can afford one outfit, much less the one a month Mayee tells me most women acquire. (The average Malaysian salary amounts to about \$8000/year).

The rest of the market is dedicated to a dizzying array of Malay, Indian and Chinese food products. If you have a hankering for fish chips, fish floss, shrimp cookies or Durian treats, this is the place to come. For myself, I find it more interesting to see all the exotic foods on display rather than try any of the more palate challenging offerings. On the ground floor produce stands are manned by the woman of the family (a fact that surprises me). From above, the bright reds, greens and oranges look fresh and

appealing, but up close, it's hard to work up an appetite as I watch women wielding sticks with a plastic grocery bag tied to one end lose a never ending battle swatting flies away from the food.

Traditional performances and games are popular in Kota Bhura and the Gelanggang Seni Cultural Centre is the place to experience everything from demonstrations of Malaysian martial arts, to performances on the rebana drums to top spinning. Audience members have the chance to join a musical performance or try their hand at Gasing Pangkab, a game where one person tries to knock the other person's top off the playing field. My husband John is the only spectator able to do it.

To celebrate his victory, we plan a shopping spree at Wakaf Che Yeh Night Market. Mayee tells us that the market is the social hub for the city. With bars and nightclubs taboo for Muslims, the

night market serves as a place for people to meet up with friends and simply hang out. We arrive early (around 9 pm) when the crowd is still light and dominated by families. Selling everything from batiks, sari tops, produce and a dizzying array of counterfeit goods, the night market offers something for everyone. I'm amused by the very bad knock-off Coach purses, and the fact that there are counterfeit Dickie brand workpants. Mayee tells me that this market is the only place in Malaysia to get second-hand shoes. Apparently footwear is very expensive and somehow discarded shoes from America find their way here. Despite being full from a large dinner, I find I can't resist the countless samples of variety after variety of mango I'm offered, each one tasting sweeter than the one before. I can't believe how much better the fruit tastes than the bland red mangos available at home.

While Malaysia's smaller cities and towns gave me the most realistic window on Malaysian life, I must admit, I liked the modern amenities of Kuala Lumpur. Kuala Lumpur, or KL as its known to locals,

appears to be known for three things—the mesmerizing Petronas Towers, luxury shopping and theme parks.

While I didn't check out any theme parks during my visit, my hotel in the Golden Triangle area of the city was the perfect place to see how far Malaysia has come in its quest to achieve first-world status by 2020. The KL Pavilion mall is next to my hotel and the Star Hill Gallery is just across the street, and both malls make the stores in Scottsdale Fashion Square look pedestrian. Walking into either of these new, multi-story malls, I'm greeted with boutiques like Gucci, Prada, Dior, Chanel and every high-end watchmaker you can name. While the malls are buzzing with activity, few shoppers are carrying any packages, making me really wonder who actually purchases things here. The one area of the KL Pavilions where people are making countless purchases is the Food Republic. This is a 30,000 square-foot space dedicated to bringing Malaysia's famous hawker stands together in one spot with sanitary regulations enforced. For just a few dollars you can try traditional

Malay, Singapore, Vietnamese, Taiwanese, Chinese and Japanese dishes. It's a spot I keep coming back to for a quick, interesting and inexpensive lunch.

If one structure symbolizes a country, in Malaysia it would definitely be the Petronas Twin Towers. They were the tallest buildings in the world until 2003, and are still the tallest twin towers in the world. Their architecture is based on Islamic geometric formations of interlocking squares that result in an eight-point star. I go up to the double-decker sky bridge (the tallest and highest in the world) to get a fantastic view of the city and to cringe at the sight of the man washing the windows outside.

While there aren't a lot of American tourists in Malaysia, I found the locals to be extremely friendly towards me. The minute I smiled at someone, I received an even larger grin back. The friendliness of the people, the affordability of the destination and the opportunity to immerse yourself in a culture much different than our own make Malaysia an exotic locale destined to be a hit for the intrepid traveler. ✨

*Janice Brewster*

*First Impressions*  
Elegant Interior Design  
Scottsdale, AZ  
480.991.5512  
www.firstimpressionsinterior.com

**FEATURED IN PARADISE MAGAZINE!**