

Kedah & Perlis



At the far northwestern corner of Peninsular Malaysia, the picturesque states of Kedah and Perlis are the rice bowls of Malaysia, producing more than half of the country's domestic supplies. Much of this agricultural region is covered by a panoramic sea of rice paddies towered over by limestone outcrops that burst from the terrain, although this part of the country sees relatively few tourists.

Kedah's top attraction, and Malaysia's number one holiday destination, is the beautiful island resort of Pulau Langkawi, with its long sandy beaches and jungle-clad hills. Although tourist development is forever forging ahead, it's still possible to get away from it all on a quiet beach. Langkawi's duty-free status also makes it a magnet for bargain-savvy Malaysian shoppers, who swing by for the cheap alcohol and tobacco on offer in the malls of the capital, Kuah, as much as the beach life elsewhere on the island.

Mainland Kedah is largely ignored by foreign visitors, although sights such as the Archaeological Museum in Lembah Bujang are still of interest for those with more time to spare.

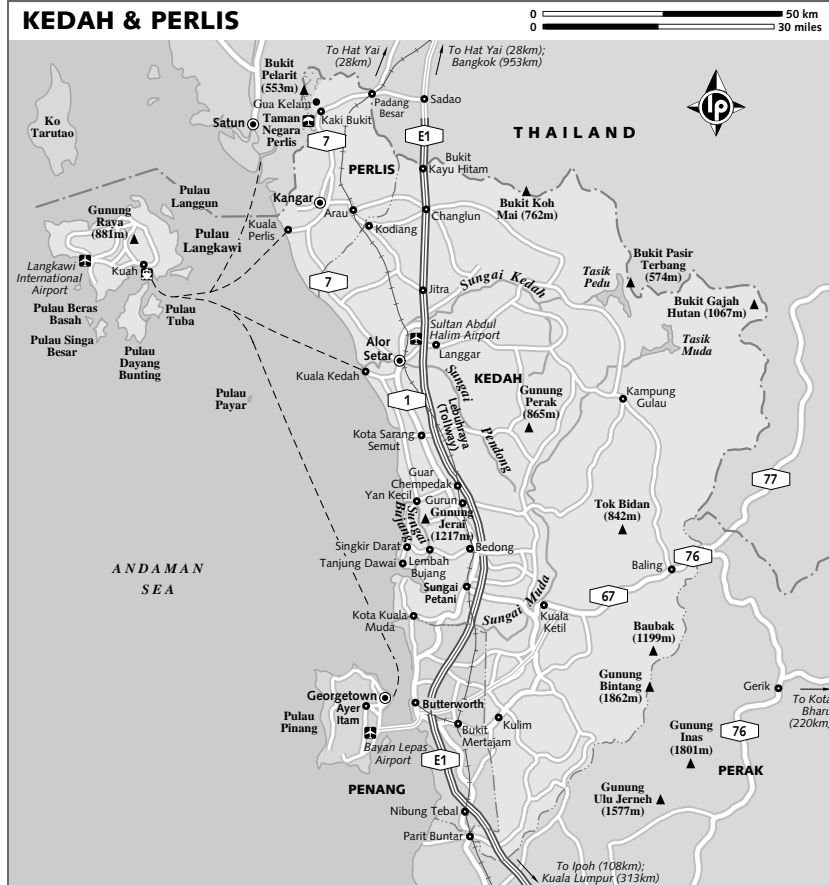
Perlis, once part of Kedah, is the smallest state in Malaysia (795 sq km), and both states are important gateways to Thailand. The main attraction in Perlis is the wild Taman Negara Perlis in the northwest, but you will need your own transport if you want to explore the state in any depth. This northern area is also strongly Islamic, and social attitudes are more conservative than elsewhere, so to avoid unnecessary hassle, travellers should behave appropriately. Women travellers should avoid skimpy clothing and refrain from topless sunbathing, for example. Public drunkenness won't endear you to the locals either.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Discovering Kedah's fascinating early history at the **Muzium Arkeologi** (p199) in Lembah Bujang
- Enjoying an aromatherapy massage at **Nawa Sari Spa** (p207) in Langkawi
- Relaxing on one of the stunning beaches of **Pulau Langkawi** (p208)
- Riding the cable car to the top of Langkawi's **Gunung Machinchang** (p207) to enjoy the spectacular views
- Swimming with the catfish in the clear lake waters of **Tasik Dayang Bunting** (p209)
- Hiking through the beautiful landscape of the **Taman Negara Perlis** (p217)



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 04 ■ POPULATION: 1.85 MILLION ■ AREA: 10,184 SQ KM



Climate

Kedah and Perlis both enjoy a typical tropical climate, with temperatures between 21°C and 32°C throughout the year. The wettest time of year is between April and October, when the odd tropical storm is expected, whereas there is intermittent rainfall and occasional downpours at other times. Pulau Langkawi tends to see less rain than the mainland. Humidity hovers at around 90%.

National Parks

The tiny state park of Perlis (Taman Negara Perlis) is a remote, 5000ha expanse of jungle running along the Thai border (see p217). For more details, contact the **Park Visitor Centre** (% 945 7898).

Dangers & Annoyances

Travellers crossing the land border into Malaysia from Thailand have reported a common scam practised by some travel operators. Foreigners are told that at the border crossing they need a certain amount of Malaysian ringgit (RM) to be allowed into the country (usually quite a high amount), and are then obliged to buy Malaysian currency at a highly disadvantageous rate. Don't be taken in by this con – it is not necessary to have a specified amount of Malaysian cash to cross the border.

Getting There & Away

The main train line and the **Lebuhraya** (North–South Hwy) run through Kedah and

Perlis, heading southwards to Butterworth and beyond, and northwards to the Thai border. Alor Setar, the state capital of Kedah, is the main transport hub, with bus connections to most major cities on the peninsula. It also has an airport, with regular flights to Kuala Lumpur (KL). Bukit Kayu Hitam in Kedah and Padang Besar in Perlis are the border crossings into Thailand.

Langkawi can be reached by air from KL, Georgetown and Singapore and by ferry from Penang, Kuala Kedah and Kuala Perlis and from Satun in Thailand.

Getting Around

Most of the big towns in Kedah and Perlis are easily reached by bus. Trains are infrequent, often leave at inconvenient times and are not particularly useful for travelling within the two states. There is no public transport on Langkawi, and you will have to use taxis to get around, unless you rent a car or motorbike.

KEDAH

Kedah is very much a Malay state. It was controlled or influenced by the Thais for much of the 19th century, and the British did not gain a foothold until well after they had established themselves in most other parts of the peninsula. With miles of flat rice-paddy plains, it still has a largely rural feel.

Very few travellers spend much time in mainland Kedah. The most important towns in the state are the scruffy capital, Alor Setar, and the small fishing port of Kuala Kedah, from where ferries operate to Langkawi. The small hill station of Gunung Jerai (Mt Jerai), the archaeological excavations at Lembah Bujang (Bujang Valley) and the remote but picturesque lakes of Tasik Pedu and Tasik Muda in the east are of minor interest for those with time to spare.

Kedah state's business hours differ from those of most of the peninsula. Banks and government offices are usually closed on Friday, but sometimes open a half-day on Saturday.

The website www.mykedah.com has some useful general information about the state.

History

Settlement in Kedah goes back to the Stone Age; some of the earliest excavated archaeological sites in the country are found near Gunung Jerai. More recent finds in Lembah Bujang date back to the Hindu-Buddhist period in the 4th century AD, and the current royal family can trace its line back directly to this time. Discoveries in Lembah Bujang show that it was the cradle of Hindu-Buddhist civilisation on the peninsula and one of the first places to come into contact with Indian traders.

During the 7th and 8th centuries, Kedah paid tribute to the Srivijaya Empire of Sumatra, but later fell under the influence of the Siamese until the 15th century, when the rise of Melaka led to the Islamisation of the area. In the 17th century Kedah was attacked by the Portuguese, who had already conquered Melaka, and by the Acehnese, who saw Kedah as a threat to their own spice production.

In the hope that the British would help protect what remained of Kedah from Siam, the sultan handed over Penang to the British in the late 18th century. Nevertheless, in the early 19th century Kedah once again came under Siamese control, where it remained, either directly or as a vassal, until early in the 20th century when Siam passed control to the British.

After WWII, during which Kedah (along with Kelantan) was the first part of Malaya to be invaded by the Japanese, Kedah became part of the Federation of Malaya in 1948, albeit reluctantly.

SUNGAI PETANI

☎ 04

The only reason to stop at this unremarkable town, often known simply as SP, on the highway between Butterworth and Alor Setar, is for transport connections to Gunung Jerai or the archaeology museum at Lembah Bujang.

If you get stuck, there are a few hotels in the centre of town. The best is the **Swiss Inn** (☎ 422 3333; www.swissgarden.com; 1 Jln Pahlawan; r/ste RM300/450; ☎ 5), a modern chain hotel with large, fresh rooms (nonsmoking) and great facilities. If you book online rates are half, or even less, of the published prices. Another good choice is the **Seri Malaysia Hotel** (☎ 423 4060; www.serimalaysia.com.my; 21 Jln

Pasar; r RM120; ☎), a big, three-storey place opposite the train station.

There are several Chinese and Malay food stalls in the lanes behind the HSBC Bank, just southwest of the clock tower.

Sungai Petani is on Malaysia's main train line, and there is one daily connection to KL (RM32, 10 to 11 hours) and one to Hat Yai, Thailand (RM16, four hours). The local bus station and taxi stand are on Jln Putri, a few hundred metres south of the clock tower and one block west of the main street. The long-distance bus station is also south of the clock tower, but a few blocks east across a small bridge. From there, express buses run to Alor Setar (RM4, hourly).

LEMBAH BUJANG

☎ 04

The area west of Sungai Petani was home to the most important Hindu-Buddhist kingdom on the Malay peninsula, dating back to the 4th century AD. By the 7th century AD it was part of the large Srivijaya Empire of Sumatra, and it reached its architectural peak in the 9th and 10th centuries. Hindu and Buddhist temples were scattered from Gunung Jerai south to Kota Kuala Muda, and in Lembah Bujang alone 50 archaeological sites have already been excavated.

The kingdom traded with India and the Khmer and Srivijaya kingdoms, and was visited by the well-travelled Chinese monk I-Tsing in AD 671. In 1025 Srivijaya and Bujang were attacked by the Cholas of India, but the Lembah Bujang kingdom later forged an alliance with the Cholas against the waning Srivijaya Empire. The region continued to trade, but by the 14th century its significance had faded and the temples were deserted with the coming of Islam. They remained buried in the jungle until excavated by British archaeologist HG Quaritch-Wales in 1936.

Along the banks of Sungai Bujang, the **Muzium Arkeologi** (Archaeological Museum; ☎ 457 2005; admission free; 11 8am-4.15pm Sun-Thu, 8am-noon & 2.45-4.15pm Fri) chronicles the excavations, and displays stone carvings, pottery and other artefacts. However, most of the carvings have been lost, and only a handful of items are on display, such as a fragment of a wall frieze and a statue of the elephant god Ganesh. Most numerous are the Shivaite yoni fertility stones.

Though of enormous archaeological significance, the displays are not well labelled and it's difficult to fully appreciate the site as it is presented today. The most interesting exhibits are the partially restored *candi* (temples) behind the museum, but only the bases of most remain. The largest and most significant temple is 1000-year-old Candi Bukit Batu Pahat.

The archaeological museum is off the Tanjung Dawai road, 2km north of the village of Merbok. From Sungai Petani, take a taxi (RM50) or one of the buses that run roughly every hour to Tanjung Dawai, get off at Merbok (RM2) and walk the 2km to the museum.

GUNUNG JERAI

At 1217m, forest-clad Gunung Jerai dominates the surrounding flat plains. It was a sacred mountain in the ancient Hindu period and a landmark for ships sailing from India and Indonesia.

From the base of the mountain, a steep and narrow road snakes its way 13km through a forest recreation park to a sleepy hill resort. From here there are expansive views north across the rice paddies of Kedah and over to Langkawi.

There are few opportunities for hiking or exploring away from the paved road, although a guide can be arranged at the sole resort here. The road itself continues 3km past the resort to the peak and the remains of Candi Telaga Sembilan, a 6th-century Hindu bathing shrine, but the area is the property of the defence ministry and is off limits.

A few kilometres downhill from the resort is a tiny forestry museum with exhibits on native trees and their uses, but little on the mountain's flora and fauna. The highlight is an enormous fossilised elephant dropping. From the museum a paved trail leads through the forest to a waterfall and bathing pools.

Sleeping & Eating

Peranginan Gunung Jerai (☎ 04-423 4345; s & d/f RM60/110; ☎) The only place to stay, this is a low-key resort with accommodation divided between 20 dated rooms and six larger, and more preferable, chalets. All have hot water and TVs. There's also a restaurant at the resort and a basic shop.

Getting There & Away

Gunung Jerai is 30km north of Sungai Petani, and the turn-off is 3km north of Gurun just before Guar Chempedak. From the car park at the bottom of the mountain, minibuses run up to the resort approximately every 45 minutes from 8.30am to 5pm (RM5). Private vehicles can also use the road.

Although the local bus 2 between Sungai Petani and Alor Setar passes right by the car park on Hwy 1, the express services use the Lebuhraya instead. From Sungai Petani you could also take a taxi or a local Guar Chempedak bus to the car park.

ALOR SETAR

¼ 04

Also known as Alor Star, the capital of Kedah state is 93km north of Butterworth, on the main road to the Thai border. It's the turn-off point to Kuala Kedah, for ferries to Pulau Langkawi. Few travellers stay longer than it takes to pick up the next bus connection, but it's a handy stopover on the way to or from Langkawi, and the city has some interesting architecture to ponder.

Alor Setar was founded in 1735 as the seat of the sultan. Its long association with Thailand is evident in the Thai temples scattered around the city, but it's the area around the Padang, the old colonial town square, that draws most attention. Here you'll find some grand historic buildings, including the Masjid Zahir (Zahir Mosque) and the Balai Besar hall.

Since Alor Setar was under Siamese suzerainty until the 1909 Anglo-Siamese Treaty transferred rights to the British, the city shows few signs of Western colonial influence, and it's very much a Malay town, with fewer Chinese and Indians than other west-coast cities. The modest Chinatown, situated where Sungai Anak Butik flows into Sungai Kedah, is crammed with old-style shophouses.

Information

There are numerous internet cafés in City Point Plaza; all charge around RM3 per hour.

Maybank (Jln Sultan Badlishah)

Tourist Information Office (¼ 731 2322;

mtpbkdh@tourism.gov.my; Kompleks Pelancongan Negeri Kedah, Jln Raja; ¼ 8am-1pm & 2-4.45pm Sun-Wed, to 4.30pm Thu) Just south of the town centre.

United Overseas Bank (Jln Raja)

Sights

THE PADANG

The large town square has a number of distinctive buildings. The open-sided Balai Besar (Royal Audience Hall) was built in 1898 and is still used by the sultan of Kedah for royal and state ceremonies, though it is not open to the public. Supported on tall pillars topped with Victorian iron lacework, it also shows Thai influences in its decoration.

Next to the Balai Besar is the Muzium Di Raja (Royal Museum), which served as the royal palace for the sultan and other members of the family from 1856. It has been closed for renovations for years, though you can still wander round the courtyard and admire the buildings.

At the southern edge of the square is the Balai Seni Negeri, built in 1893 as a courthouse. Today it houses the State Art Gallery and displays contemporary Malaysian art, although it was closed at the time of research.

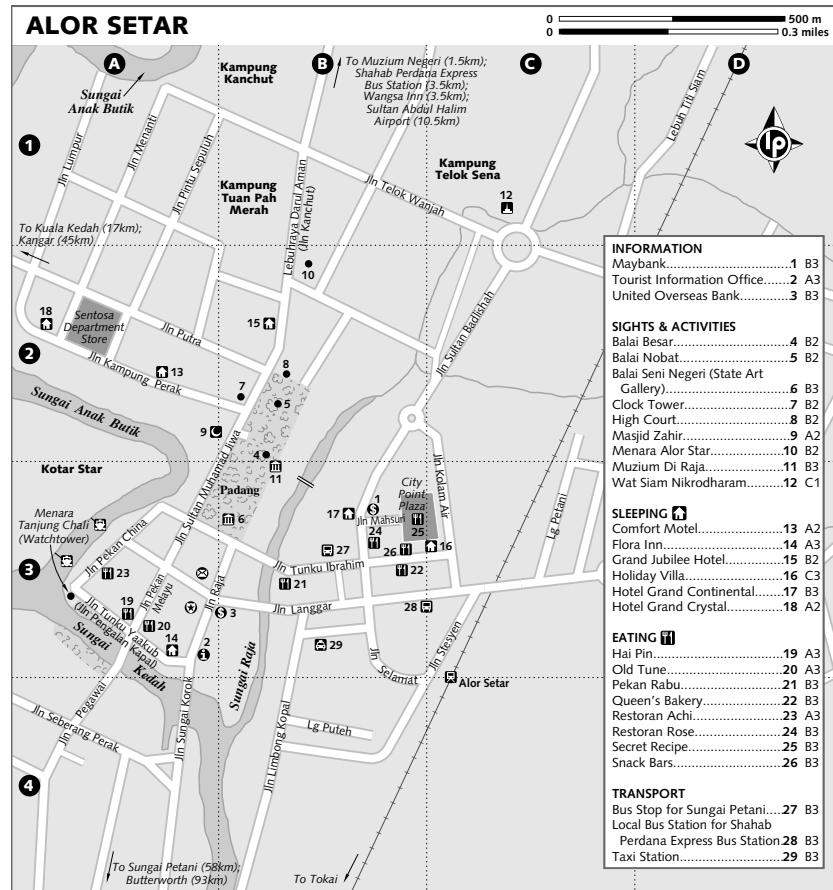
To the north, the Balai Nobat (Hall of Drums; 1906) is a striking octagonal tower topped by an onion-shaped dome. It's the repository of the *nobat* (royal orchestra), principally composed of percussion instruments, and the drums in this orchestra are said to have been a gift from the sultan of Melaka in the 15th century. It isn't open to the public, and the instruments are brought out only on ceremonial occasions eg royal weddings.

Just behind the Balai Nobat is the High Court, a classical white colonial building erected in 1922.

On the western side of the square is the Masjid Zahir, the state mosque. It is one of the largest and most beautiful mosques in Malaysia, and with its Moorish domes and Mogul minarets, it looks like a vision from *The Thousand and One Nights*.

On the opposite side of the lane, the decorative clock tower, painted in the same yellow and white livery as the Balai Nobat, was erected in the early 1900s so that the muazzin at the neighbouring mosque would know when to call the faithful to prayer.

Further north stands the Menara Alor Star (Telekom Tower; ¼ 720 2234; www.menaraalorstar.com; Lebuhraya Darul Aman; adult/child RM10/2; ¼ 9.30am-10pm) which, at 165.5m, is the tallest structure in town. A glass-sided lift will take you to the observation deck for giddy views over town. There's a revolving restaurant at the top, though it's not always open.



WAT SIAM NIKRODHARAM

This Thai Buddhist temple was built mostly by donations from the local Chinese community. There's an elaborate sculpture garden, and a golden Garuda hovers over the entry to the main hall, inside which sits an image of the Buddha in the 'subduing Mara' posture. Along the outer walls of the temple grounds are inscriptions of the Buddha's teaching in three languages.

MUZIUM NEGERI

The Muzium Negeri (State Museum; ¼ 733 1162; Lebuhraya Darul Aman; admission free; ¼ 10am-6pm) is 2km north of the Padang. The small collection includes early Chinese porcelain, artefacts from archaeological excavations

at Lembah Bujang, and dioramas of royal and rural Malaysian life.

Most local buses from town to the express bus station pass by the museum. A taxi from the town centre costs RM5.

Sleeping

Most of Alor Setar's accommodation options are found within the compact city centre, though many are both dated and overpriced. There are a couple of decent budget hotels, along with some better midrange choices.

BUDGET

Flora Inn (¼ 732 2376; 8 Kompleks Medan Raja, Jln Pengkalan Kapal; s/fRM19/65; a) Overlooking the river south of the centre, this well-maintained

budget place has a variety of rooms, some with two double beds, others with one double and one single. They are located over a small food court.

Comfort Motel (☎ 734 4866; 2C Jln Kg Perak; s RM25-40, d RM35-50; a) Good-value Chinese hotel, in a recently renovated wooden house across the road from the mosque. The rooms all have gleaming tiled floors and TVs, though only the higher-priced ones have private bathrooms.

Grand Jubilee Hotel (☎ 733 0055; 429 Lebuhraya Darul Aman; r RM44-55; a) This slightly drab, white concrete box is set back from the road north of the Padang. Rooms are bare but clean and come with either fan or air-con.

MIDRANGE

Wangsa Inn (☎ 735 1688; 54 Jln Shahab 5; s & d/tr RM68/78; a) Directly opposite the express bus station, this basic place is convenient for late arrivals or early departures, but there's no other reason to stay way up here.

Hotel Grand Crystal (☎ 731 3333; 40 Jln Kg Perak; s/d RM120/160; a s) Smaller sister hotel of the Grand Continental, located down a scruffy side street near a mosque. Rooms are looking worn, but staff are friendly and the location isn't bad.

Hotel Grand Continental (☎ 733 5917; www.gihotels.com.my; 134 Jln Sultan Badlishah; r from RM138; a) Big and brassy high-rise chain hotel offering the usual midrange business traveller comforts. Promotional rates are often available.

Holiday Villa (☎ 734 9999; www.holidayvilla.com.my; 162 Jln Tunku Ibrahim; r from RM195; a s) This towering hotel adjoining the City Point Plaza shopping mall is easily the best place in town. It has spacious, tastefully furnished rooms and a range of facilities including a gym, a sauna and a few restaurants.

Eating

QUICK EATS

Queen's Bakery (☎ 731 9400; 33 Jln Tunku Ibrahim; mains from RM3; h breakfast, lunch & dinner) Busy little café serving up basic Western dishes such as fish and chips as well as the usual rice and noodle options. There's also a bakery at the front.

Hai Pin (Jln Tunku Yaakub; mains from RM4; h lunch & dinner) This typically dilapidated Chinese coffee shop is a lively and atmospheric spot for a quick bite and a beer.

Pekan Rabu (Wednesday Market; Jln Langgar; h breakfast, lunch & dinner) This goes on all day, every day, until late at night. Ground-floor outlets offer snack food and drinks while upstairs market stalls sell local products such as *dodol durian* (a gelatinous local sweet made from sticky rice, coconut and durian). The rest of the market is given over to clothes shops.

There are some simple snack bars (Jln Tunku Ibrahim) at the front of City Point Plaza, where you can get noodles and coffee.

RESTAURANTS

Restoran Achi (☎ 730 6651; 18 Jln Pekan China; mains from RM4; h lunch & dinner) North and South Indian fare is the order of the day at this little place. They specialise in cheap and filling banana-leaf meals, both vegetarian and nonvegetarian.

Restoran Rose (☎ 731 3471; Jln Sultan Baldishah; mains from RM4; h lunch & dinner) Long-running Indian restaurant serving up a range of curries, roti and biryani dishes.

Old Tune (☎ 730 5188; 40 Jln Pekan Melayu; mains from RM6; h lunch & dinner) Potted ferns, photos of bygone Chinese music stars on the walls and vintage songs playing in the background add a touch of class to this restaurant. The usual range of Chinese chicken, fish and beancurd dishes is on the menu, and it also serves wine and beer.

Secret Recipe (☎ 731 8218; www.secretrecipe.com.my; ground fl, City Point Plaza; mains from RM11; h 10am-10pm) Very popular chain restaurant-cum-coffee bar offering mostly Western dishes such as pasta, lamb chops and roast chicken, as well as a few noodle options. It also serves the best cakes in town.

Getting There & Away

Alor Setar is 48km from the Bukit Kayu Hitam border to Thailand. Frequent buses go to the border, from where minibuses taxis go to Hat Yai (see Bukit Kayu Hitam, p214, for this border crossing). A direct train via the Padang Besar border may be quicker and is certainly more convenient.

AIR

Sultan Abdul Halim Airport is 11km north of town just off the Lebuhraya. **Malaysia Airlines** (☎ 731 1106) flies four times daily to Kuala Lumpur (RM185) and Air Asia offers a weekly service to the capital (from RM112).

BUS

The tiny bus station on Jln Langgar handles only local buses, including the regular shuttle service to the Shahab Perdana express bus station on Jln Mercong, 4km north of the town centre (90 sen). A taxi costs RM6. All long-distance buses leave from here.

Frequent buses depart throughout the day for Bukit Kayu Hitam (RM3.20), Kangar (RM3.80) and Kuala Kedah (RM1). There are also regular coaches, operated by several different companies, to KL (RM30), Ipoh (RM19.70), Butterworth (RM6.30), Melaka (RM37.70) and Johor Bahru (RM55), as well as to east-coast destinations including Kuantan (RM42), Kuala Terengganu (RM38) and Kota Bharu (RM28).

Bus services to Sungai Petani (RM3.70, one hour) make a stop on Jln Tunku Ibrahim opposite the Pekan Rabu market. Some buses from the express bus station stop here too.

TAXI

Rates for a four-passenger taxi from the taxi station include RM25 to Bukit Kayu Hitam, RM48 to Butterworth, RM20 to Kangar, RM12 to Kuala Kedah and RM30 to Padang Besar.

TRAIN

The **train station** (☎ 731 4045; Jln Stesyen) is southeast of the town centre. There is one daily northbound train to Hat Yai in Thailand (from RM12, three hours), and one southbound to KL (from RM35, 1½ hours).

KUALA KEDAH

☎ 04

This busy fishing village 11km from Alor Setar is the southern gateway to Langkawi. **Kota Kuala Kedah** is a fort, built around 1770, opposite the town on the far bank of Sungai Kedah. Constructed to protect this main port from Siam, the fort fell to the Siamese in 1821. On show here are the walls, cannons and gateway of the partially restored fort.

Ferries to Langkawi leave approximately every half-hour (1½ hours from April to October, the wet season) from 7am to 7pm (RM18).

PULAU LANGKAWI

☎ 04

Malaysia's best-known holiday destination, Langkawi is one of those places whose name alone summons up images of tropical romance and carefree days under swaying coconut palms. In the Andaman Sea 30km off the coast from Kuala Perlis, it is made up of a group of 99 islands, accessible by boat from Georgetown, Kuala Perlis, Kuala Kedah and Satun, Thailand, or by air from Georgetown in Penang, KL and Singapore.

Only the main island, the 478.5 sq km Pulau Langkawi, has any real settlement. Fringed with long, sandy beaches and with an interior of jungle-clad hills and picturesque paddy-fields, it's easy to see why this is Malaysia's most heavily promoted tourist hotspot. Since Langkawi was declared a duty-free zone in 1986, the island has received yet more visitors, many intent solely on carting off cheap booze. Other tourist developments are ongoing, including the recently completed marina at Telaga Harbour Park. Shopping complexes dominate the main town, Kuah, while luxury resorts occupy isolated bays.

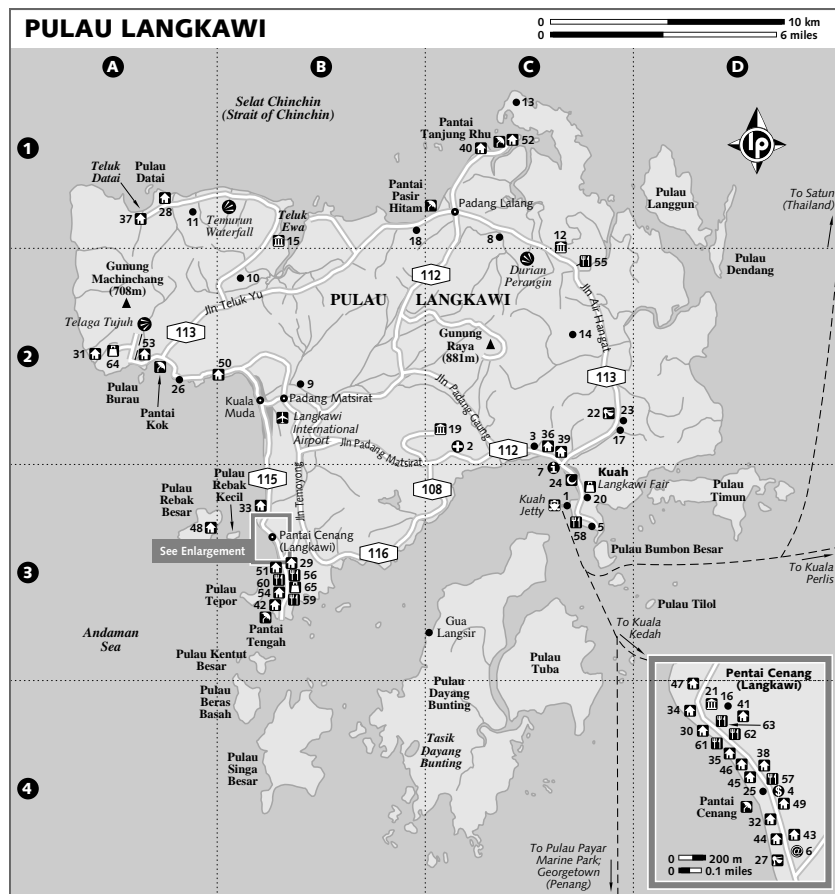
Langkawi also hosts some major events including the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace (LIMA) exhibition around November, the Langkawi Arts and Crafts Festival (LACRAF) in December, the Langkawi International Water Festival in April and the biennial Langkawi International Festival of Arts (LIFA). Away from the built-up areas Langkawi is still a rural Malay island of small villages, rice paddies, water buffaloes and natural beauty.

Orientation

Kuah, in the southeast corner of the island, is the main town and the arrival point for the ferries, but the beaches are elsewhere.

On Langkawi's west coast, the most developed beach is Pantai Cenang, crammed with mostly budget to midrange hotels and restaurants. Pantai Tengah is a southerly continuation of Pantai Cenang. The beach at Pantai Kok is reputedly one of the best on the island, and is lined with a string of luxury resorts and a modern marina.

The airport is on the island's central-west coast near Kuala Muda. There are a few isolated resorts here, but the beach is pretty poor.



Situated along the north coast of the island are the more upmarket resorts, two at Teluk Datai in the west and one at Tanjung Rhu in the east. Tanjung Rhu is a beautiful beach with white sand, turquoise waters and a panoramic view of rock islands off the coast.

Information

EMERGENCY

Langkawi Hospital (☎ 966 3333; Jln Bukit Tengah, Kuah)

INTERNET ACCESS

TCY International (☎ 955 2466; Pantai Cenang; per hour RM2.90) One of the cheaper internet cafés.

INTERNET RESOURCES

www.langkawi-online.com A comprehensive source of island information.

www.mylangkawi.com.my Also worth a look.

MONEY

The only banks to be found on the island are at Kuah, although you will find there are ATMs located at the airport and at Telaga Harbour Park. Travellers will also find moneychangers tucked into and around the duty-free shops. There are also a couple of moneychangers at Pantai Cenang but elsewhere most travellers will have to rely on the resort hotels, and the hotels might not change money if you are not a guest at the hotel.

INFORMATION

Bayu Adventures.....1 C3
East Marine.....(see 5)
Hospital.....2 C2
Legend Admire Travel & Tours...3 C2
Moneychanger.....4 D4
Post Office.....(see 21)
Royal Langkawi Yacht Club.....5 C3
TCY International.....6 D4
Tourism Malaysia.....(see 24)
Tourist Information Centre.....7 C3
Travel Shop.....(see 45)

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Air Hangat Village.....8 C1
Anna & The King Gallery.....(see 64)
Burnt Rice Area.....9 B2
CHOGM Park.....(see 24)
Crocodile Adventureland.....10 B2
Datai Bay Golf Club.....11 A1
Galeria Perdana.....12 C1
Gua Cerita.....13 C1
Gunung Raya Golf Resort.....14 C2
Ibrahim Hussein Museum.....15 B1
Kedah Marble.....17 C2
Kompleks Kraf Langkawi.....18 B1
Kota Mahsuri.....19 C2
Lagenda Langkawi Dalam Taman.....20 C3
Laman Padi.....21 D4
Langkawi Bird Paradise.....22 C2
Langkawi Cable Car.....(see 64)
Langkawi Crystaal.....23 C2

Masjid Al-Hana.....24 C3
Nawa Sari Spa.....(see 21)
Pro Dive.....(see 44)
Shops.....25 D4
Telaga Harbour Park.....26 A2
Underwater World.....27 D4

SLEEPING

Andaman Resort.....28 A1
Aseania Resort.....29 B3
Beach Garden Resort.....30 D4
Berjaya Langkawi Beach & Spa Resort.....31 A2
Best Star Resort.....32 D4
Bon Ton Resort.....33 B3
Casa del Mar.....34 D4
Cenang Rest House.....35 D4
City Bayview Hotel.....36 C2
Crocodile Adventureland.....37 A1
Debbie's Place.....38 D4
Eagle Bay Hotel.....39 C2
Four Seasons Resort.....40 C1
Gecko Guesthouse.....41 D4
Holiday Villa.....42 B3
Lagenda Permai Chalet.....43 D4
Lagapura Beach Resort.....44 D4
Langkawi Baron Hotel.....(see 36)
Malibest Resort.....45 D4
Melati Tanjung Motel.....46 D4

DRINKING

Offshore.....(see 51)
Regae Bar.....(see 51)

Sheraton Langkawi Beach Resort.....50 B2
Sunset Beach Resort.....51 B3
Tanjung Rhu Resort.....52 C1
Tanjung Sanctuary Langkawi.....53 A2
Tropical Resort.....54 B3

EATING

Barn Thai.....55 C2
Boom Boom Corner.....56 B3
Champur-Champur.....57 D4
Charlie's Place.....58 C3
Fat Mum's.....59 B3
Krathong.....(see 64)
Lighthouse.....60 B3
Little India Cuisine.....(see 51)
L'Osteria.....(see 65)
Orkid Ria.....61 D4
Padi Cuisine & Café.....(see 21)
Restoran Haji Ramli.....62 D4
Sun Café.....(see 65)
Yang Dynasty Seafood Restaurant.....63 D4

DRINKING

Offshore.....(see 51)
Regae Bar.....(see 51)

SHOPPING

Oriental Village.....64 A2
Sunmall.....65 B3
Zon Duty Free Shopping Centre.....(see 27)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourism Malaysia (☎ 966 7789; Jln Persiaran Putra, Kuah; 11am-1pm & 2-6pm) Comprehensive information on the whole island.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Bayu Adventures (☎ 955 6237; 1-18 Jetty Point Complex, Kuah) Arranges day and package trips to Thailand.
Legend Admire Travel & Tours (☎ 966 9116; 50 Psn Bunga Raya, Kuah) This leading tour operator runs a variety of trips around the island and to Pulau Payar.
TCY International (☎ 955 2466; Pantai Cenang) Runs tours round Langkawi and Perlis.
Travel Shop (☎ 955 8829; Pantai Cenang) Attached to the Malibest Resort, this place can book an array of island tours.

Sights & Activities

KUAH & AROUND

The port of Kuah is the island's main town. Apart from the plethora of duty-free outlets and souvenir shops, there's little to stop you proceeding to the beaches. There are several hotels in Kuah, and the town centre, just over a kilometre from the jetty, is the only place on the island where you'll find banks.

Next to the jetty, the **Lagenda Langkawi Dalam Taman** (☎ 966 4223; Jln Persiaran Putra; admission free; 11am-7pm) is an attractively landscaped 'folklore theme park' stretching along the waterfront. Colourful statues dotted amid the lakes illustrate several Langkawi legends – with signboards in English – and there's also a narrow strip of beach. It's a popular spot for joggers too.

Just to the west is the picturesque **Masjid Al-Hana**. Its golden dome and Moorish arches rise above the palm trees of **CHOGM Park**, which, as a plaque proudly states, was the site of the first-ever international coconut-tree climbing championship in 1987 (won by Sri Lanka).

The international-standard **Gunung Raya Golf Resort** (☎ 966 8148; www.golfr.com.my; Jln Air Hangat; 9/18 holes RM100/150; 11am-7pm) is around 8km north of town, in a spectacular location in the foothills of Langkawi's highest mountain. Just south of the golf club is **Langkawi Crystaal** (☎ 966 1555; www.langkawicrystaal.com; 1804 Jln Kisap; demonstration room adult/child RM5/2; 11am-6pm), Malaysia's only glass-blowing works, and, next door, the **Kedah Marble quarry**. Both are open to

visitors, and are popular with stop-and-shop tour buses.

In the same area you'll find **Langkawi Bird Paradise** (☎ 966 5855; 1485 Jln Kisap; adult/child RM15/8; 11 9am-6pm), an attractive tropical garden where you can see 150 species of exotic birds, including toucans, hornbills and flamingos.

A little further on is **Galeria Perdana** (☎ 959 1498; Mukim Air Hangat; admission RM5; 11 9am-5pm), established by former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir to display hundreds of eclectic gifts bestowed on the state by foreign nations. Porcelain, crystal, textiles, musical instruments and kitsch paintings are among the gaudy hoard.

KOTA MAHSURI & PADANG MATSIRAT

These historic sites are west of Kuah, a few kilometres off the road leading to the west-coast beaches and to the airport. Mahsuri was a legendary Malay princess, unjustly accused of adultery and sentenced to death. Her magical powers were so great that all attempts to execute her failed until the indignant Mahsuri agreed to die, but not before issuing the curse that 'there shall be no peace or prosperity on this island for seven generations'. Now known as **Kota Mahsuri** (Mahsuri's Fort; ☎ 955 6055; Mukim Ulu Melaka; adult/child RM3/1.50; 11 8am-6pm), this historical complex includes Mahsuri's Shrine, which is just a fenced-in slab of white stone, as well as a re-creation of a traditional house, a theatre and some simple food outlets. Occasional music performances take place here too.

A result of Mahsuri's curse can still sometimes be seen in the 'field of burnt rice' at nearby **Padang Matsirat**. There, villagers once burnt their rice fields rather than allow them to fall into the hands of Siamese invaders. It is said that heavy rain still sometimes brings traces of burnt grains to the surface.

PANTAI CENANG

This 2km-long beach strip lies at the south-western corner of Langkawi, 25km from Kuah. Pantai Cenang is where almost all of Langkawi's beach chalets are concentrated. It has a good selection of restaurants, bars and shops, though outside peak season it's a fairly quiet and relaxed place.

A sandbar appears at low tide, allowing you to inspect the local sea life. Between November and January you can walk across this sandbar to the nearby island of **Pulau Rebak Kecil**, but only for two hours around low tide. Another nearby island is **Pulau Tepor**, which can be reached by hired boat from Pantai Cenang.

At the southern end of Pantai Cenang is the Zon duty-free shopping centre and **Underwater World** (☎ 955 6100; www.edenzil.com/uvw.html; adult/child RM38/28; 11 10am-6pm), Malaysia's largest aquarium, featuring 200 different species of marine and freshwater creatures. Harbour seals, rockhopper penguins, sharks, giant rays and the enormous Amazonian arapaima – the biggest freshwater fish in the world – are on view, and there's also a theatre showing nature documentaries.

LEGENDARY LANGKAWI

The name Langkawi combines the old Malay words *helang* (eagle) and *kawi* (strong). Classical Malay literature claims the island as one of the resting places of Garuda, the mythological bird that became Vishnu's vehicle. The whole island is steeped in legends, and the favourite story is of Mahsuri, a maiden who was wrongly accused of infidelity. Before finally allowing herself to be executed, she put a curse on the island for seven generations. As proof of her innocence, white blood flowed from her veins, turning the sands of Langkawi's beaches white. Her mausoleum can be seen near Kuah (above).

Another legend concerns the naming of places around the island. Pulau Langkawi's two most powerful families became involved in a bitter argument over a marriage proposal. A fight broke out and all the kitchen utensils were used as missiles. The *kuah* (gravy) was spilt at Kuah and seeped into the ground at Kisap, which means 'to seep'. A pot landed at Belanga Perak (Broken Pot) and finally the saucepan of *air panas* (hot water) came to land where Air Hangat village is today. The fathers of these two families got their comeuppance for causing all this mayhem – they are now the island's two major mountain peaks. You can learn more at the intriguing *Legenda Langkawi Dalam Taman* (p205).

At the northern end right opposite the Casa del Mar hotel is the **Laman Padi** (Rice Garden; ☎ 955 4312; admission free; grounds 11 7am-midnight, museum 11 9am-5pm), an 'ecotourism' complex with picturesque rice paddies populated by water buffaloes and ducks. There's also a museum dedicated to the history of rice cultivation, a couple of restaurants, a post office and the **Nawa Sari Spa** (☎ 955 4168; Laman Padi; 11 10am-11pm), which offers relaxing views of the rice paddies as you're pummelled and oiled by Thai masseurs. Three-hour spa packages, including massage, hair treatment, facial cleansing and body scrub cost RM369.

A different experience can be had at **Indian Ayurvedic Massage** (☎ 955 9078; www.nithi.com.my), in an unassuming hut 200m off the main road in Pantai Cenang. Try traditional Indian massages such as *shirodhara*, where a continual flow of warm herbal oil is poured over your forehead as your head and shoulders are massaged.

Thai Spa (☎ 019-426 3718; 11 11am-11pm), attached to the Malibest Resort, offers shiatsu and aromatherapy massages, as well as body waxing and after-sun treatments.

All the spas have lengthy menus of treatments, with one-hour massages costing around RM100 upwards, and most provide a free pick-up service.

PANTAI TENGAH

Pantai Tengah is just south of Pantai Cenang after the road skirts around a small rocky point. There are a few big, all-inclusive resorts here, popular with young families, as well as some more basic chalets. There are also some excellent restaurants.

Langkawi Classic Spa (☎ 012-517 4180; Pantai Tengah; 11 10am-11pm) Hair treatments, body scrubs, herbal baths and various massages can be sampled at this small spa opposite the Aseania Resort. Three-hour packages start at RM320.

PANTAI KOK

On the western part of the island, 12km north of Pantai Cenang, Pantai Kok fronts a beautiful bay surrounded by limestone mountains and jungle. On the waterfront at Teluk Burau is the modern **Telaga Harbour Park** (www.telagaharbour.com), a yachting marina with a string of shops, bars and restaurants, plus a petrol station, bank and post office.

Heading inland from Pantai Kok, you'll come across the Oriental Village shopping complex, where you'll find the station for the **Langkawi Cable Car** (☎ 959 4225; adult/child RM15/10; 11 10am-6pm Mon-Thu, 10am-7pm Fri-Sun). It will take you on a vertiginous trip to the top of the majestic Gunung Machinchang (708m), affording some magnificent views over Langkawi and the Andaman Sea. Remember that temperatures on the top of the mountain will be 4°C to 5°C lower than at sea level.

Oriental Village is also the venue for the **Anna & The King Gallery** (☎ 959 2300; adult/child RM5/3; 11 10am-6pm), displaying props and costumes from the 1999 film starring Jodie Foster, which was partly shot at Pantai Kok.

TELAGA TUJUH

Telaga Tujuh is a 2.5km walk inland from Pantai Kok, just north of Oriental Village. Water cascades nearly 100m down a hillside through a series of seven (*tujuh*) wells (*telaga*). You can slide down from one of these shallow pools to another near the top of the falls – the stone channels are very smooth.

You can also get there by rented car, motorbike or taxi; drive to the end of the road, about 1km past Pantai Kok, then turn along with the road to the right until you reach the car park. From here it's a steady 10-minute climb through the rainforest (stay to the right) to the wells at the top of the falls.

TELUK DATAI

The beaches and jungle around Teluk Datai are some distance off the main road around the island. Here you'll find Langkawi's most exclusive resorts and the **Golf Club Datai Bay** (☎ 959 2700; www.dataigolf.com; 9/18 holes RM250/350), said to be among Malaysia's top 10 courses. The resorts' beautiful beaches are for guests only. The road continues past the resorts to a headland where a short trail takes you through the jungle and down to the sea.

On the way to Teluk Datai is **Crocodile Adventureland** (☎ 959 2559; adult/child RM15/10; 11 9am-6pm), where you can view a gathering of saltwater crocodiles, with twice-daily shows and hourly feedings. The 'stunt' shows and the shop selling crocodile-skin products won't be to everyone's taste, however.

Further along where the road turns west along the coast to Teluk Datai is the **Ibrahim Hussein Foundation Museum** (☎ 959 4669; www.ihmcf.org; adult/child RM12/free; 11 10am-6pm),

BEST BEACHES

Langkawi's beaches are among the best in Malaysia, and there are plenty to choose from. The busiest is the 2km-long strip of sand at **Pantai Cenang**, which has the biggest concentration of hotels, and is popular with everyone from 20-something backpackers to the older package-tour crowd. There are water-sport activities at hand, and the water is good for swimming, but jellyfish are common here, so you might feel a bit tingly when you go for a dip. To the south, **Pantai Tengah** is a quieter beach with a more family-friendly atmosphere, and is also popular with honeymooning couples. The beaches at **Pantai Kok** on the west coast are again popular with family groups, but many of the best ones are inside the luxury resorts and inaccessible to nonguests, as are the beautiful sands at **Teluk Datai** on the north. The beach on **Pulau Beras Basah** is one of the best for children. It's a small, clean shallow beach, great for swimming and for snorkelling. There's a narrow man-made beach inside the Lagenda Langkawi Dalam Taman park in Kuah; it's not good for swimming but it's a very quiet place for a seaside stroll.

which displays the abstract and multimedia works of its founder, Ibrahim Hussein.

Temurun Waterfall is halfway between the museum and the resorts. The high falls are worth a look; the turn-off is just east of a huge concrete archway spanning the road.

PANTAI PASIR HITAM

Further eastwards along the north coast, this beach is noted for its black sand, although it's not a real black-sand beach – it only has streaks of black caused by a spring that deposits mineral oxides. The beach is only a couple of metres wide and is at the foot of a 5m drop, so you can't walk along it.

Before reaching the beach, you'll pass the **Kompleks Kraf Langkawi** (☎ 959 1913; admission free; 10am–6pm), an enormous handicrafts centre where you can watch demonstrations of traditional crafts and buy a wide range of Malaysian products, including batik, pewter, basketware and woodcarvings. There are also a couple of small museums devoted to local legends and wedding ceremonies.

TANJUNG RHU

Just beyond Pasir Hitam at the village of Padang Lalang there's a roundabout with a turn-off to the north to Tanjung Rhu, while the main road continues back to Kuah.

Tanjung Rhu has one of Langkawi's wider and better beaches. The water is shallow, and at low tide you can walk across the sandbank to the neighbouring islands, except during the monsoon season. The water swirls across the bank as the tide comes in. There are mangrove cruises, and kayaks can be hired.

Around the promontory, accessible by hired boat, is the **Gua Cerita** (Cave of Legends).

Along the coast for a couple of kilometres before the beach, the tiny fish known as *ikan bilis* (anchovies) are spread out on mats to dry in the sun.

GUNUNG RAYA

The tallest mountain on the island (881m) can be reached by a snaking, paved road through the jungle. It's a spectacular drive to the top with views across the island and over to Thailand. At the top there's a lookout point and a small tearhouse with spectacular views, when it's not fogged over. Access to the mountain may occasionally be restricted by the government; the gate at the foot of the mountain will be lowered.

AIR HANGAT VILLAGE

This village (☎ 959 1357; admission free; 10am–6pm) is towards the north of the island, not far from the turn-off to Tanjung Rhu, and features hot springs. Apart from watching the water gushing along artificial channels and buying souvenirs, there's not much to do, although 'cultural shows' take place occasionally – contact the tourist office to see if anything is lined up. As with so many places on Langkawi, the springs are associated with an intriguing legend (see the box, p206).

DURIAN PERANGIN

Roughly 15km north of Kuah is the turn-off to these waterfalls, which are 3km off the main road. The swimming pools, 10 minutes' walk up through the forest, are always refreshingly cool, although the falls are best seen at the end of the monsoon season: late September and early October. In the dry season, naturally, they are not so spectacular.

PULAU DAYANG BUNTING

Tasik Dayang Bunting (Lake of the Pregnant Maiden) is located on the island of the same name. It is a freshwater lake surrounded by craggy limestone cliffs and dense jungle, and is good for swimming. You can also rent a pedalo for a spin round the lake, or just sit on the edge of the jetty and have your toes nibbled by the resident catfish.

A legend states that a childless couple, after 19 years of unsuccessful effort, had a baby girl after drinking from this lake. Since then it has been a popular pilgrimage destination for those hoping for children. Legend also says that the lake is inhabited by a giant white crocodile.

Also on Pulau Dayang Bunting north of the lake is **Gua Langsir** (Cave of the Banshee), which is inhabited by thousands of bats. The island is best visited on one of the island-hopping tours.

PULAU PAYAR MARINE PARK

This marine park, 35km or 19 nautical miles south of Langkawi and around 32 nautical miles from Penang, incorporates a number of tiny islands, the largest of which is 2km-long Pulau Payar. A large floating platform is moored off the island and includes an underwater observation chamber for viewing the reef. From here you can go snorkelling and diving, or rent glass-bottom boats. Inquire about the water conditions before you go, as it can be murky.

Langkawi Coral (☎ 966 7318; www.langkawicoral.com; Lot 1-21 Jetty Point Complex, Kuah) is the main tour operator for Pulau Payar. Trips including snorkelling/diving cost RM230/290. You can also book tickets to the park from Penang (see p181). **East Marine** (☎ 966 3966; www.eastmarine.com.my; Royal Langkawi Yacht Club, Jln Pantai Dato Syed Omar, Kuah) offers the same trip for RM180/280, as does **Pro Dive** (☎ 955 3739; Pantai Cenang), which also offers four-day PADI open-water courses (RM1400).

Langkawi Diving & Sport (☎ 955 4500; www.butangislands.com) operates trips to the Thai island of Ko Lipe, north of Langkawi. Prices for snorkelling (adult/child RM380/280) and diving (RM590) include transfer from your hotel, immigration formalities and lunch. Boats, carrying a maximum of 12 people, depart from Telaga Harbour.

Tours

There are travel agents in Kuah, along Pantai Cenang and at most upmarket resorts that organise tours (see Travel Agencies, p205). The most popular day trip is the island hopping tour, offered by most companies (adult/child RM35/25). The tour usually takes in Pulau Dayang Bunting, Pulau Beras Basah and a cruise around the mangroves for a look at the local eagles. Pulau Singa Besar may also be visited, with its resident population of mousedeer and crotchety monkeys.

Eagle feeding tours (adult/child RM90/70) give an opportunity to see Langkawi's famous brahminy kites and sea eagles up close, and usually include a trip to the mangroves and stopovers at a couple of caves. During the monsoon season from July to mid-September, the seas are usually too rough and unpredictable for boat trips.

There are several cruise operators in Langkawi, including **Crystal Yacht Holidays** (☎ 955 6544; www.crystal yacht.com). Its sunset dinner cruise (adult/child RM200/100) is a popular excursion.

More active trips are run by **Langkawi Canopy Adventures** (☎ 955 4744; www.langkawi travel.net) including abseiling through the rainforest (RM180) and quad-biking tours (RM290).

Full-day trips to the tiny state of Perlis are offered by **TCY International** (☎ 955 2466; Pantai Cenang; RM199; 1 Tue & Fri). The price includes transfers from your hotel, the ferry to the mainland and a tour by car round the main attractions, which include a snake farm, a sugar plantation, a cigar factory and the market at Padang Besar.

Fishing trips are also available, costing from around RM280 for four hours, though prices will depend on when, and for how long, you want to go.

Diving trips normally concentrate on Pulau Payar (left).

Sleeping

Langkawi is Malaysia's top tourist destination, so there's no shortage of accommodation of all kinds, from budget beach huts to the most sybaritic five-star resorts. Budget accommodation is available only on the southwest coast at Pantai Cenang and Pantai Tengah. Luxury resorts are situated on spectacular private bays on the west and north coasts of the island.

During school holidays and the peak tourist season from November to February, Pulau Langkawi can become crowded, though something can usually still be found. At other times of the year supply far outstrips demand.

KUAH

Kuah has plenty of hotels, mainly catering to Asian shopping-spree tourists, but unless you arrive late, or want to catch an early ferry, there's little reason to hang about here. Most hotels are strung out along the waterfront.

Langkawi Baron Hotel (☎ 966 2000; langkawi@baron@yahoo.com; 2 Jln Lencongan Putra 3; dm/r from RM20/120; a) Modern and centrally located, this hotel has plain but comfortable rooms and a restaurant. Dorms are bright and clean, and sleep between 12 and 22, though you'll need to be in a group of at least six to book in unless they're already partly occupied.

Eagle Bay Hotel (☎ 966 8585; www.eaglebay.com.my; 33 Jln Persiaran Putra; s and d/f RM85/155; a) Right opposite CHOQM Park is this smart hotel which provides the usual three-star comforts and has various package deals.

City Bayview Hotel (☎ 966 1818; cbvlgk@tm.net.my; 1 Jln Pandak Mayah; r/ste from RM170/380; a i s) A reliable choice is this high-rise chain hotel in the centre of town, with stylish rooms and excellent facilities, including a gym, sauna and rooftop pool.

PANTAI CENANG

Pantai Cenang is the liveliest beach strip, and accommodation here ranges from budget backpacker chalets to top-end resorts, though most places are midrange. They straggle along the 2km of beach between the turn-off to Kuah at the northern end and Pantai Tengah to the south. Note, though, that many places are on the opposite side of the road from the beach and don't have sea views.

Budget

Gecko Guesthouse (☎ 019-428 3801; rebecca@fiott@hotmail.com; dm RM10, r RM25-50; a) Recommended by several readers, this sleepy place signposted up a dirt track from the main road is a simple collection of fan and air-con huts grouped around an open TV lounge. Saturday evenings see a bit more action with barbecues and live music.

Cenang Rest House (☎ 955 9928; r RM35-65; a) A clean, basic choice offering fair value for your money, with fan and dearer air-con doubles on the sand. All options include attached bathrooms.

Melati Tanjung Motel (☎ 955 1099; s & d/tr from RM45/95; a) This quiet place has a range of modern chalet accommodation to choose from. The cheapest only have fans while only the pricier beachfront chalets have hot water, though all rooms come with minifridges for keeping those bargain beers cool.

Legenda Permai Chalet (☎ 955 3007; www.legendapermai.cjb.net; r RM50-100; a) A welcoming, borderline budget place across the road from the beach, with neat fan and air-con chalets. The pricier ones have minifridges and TVs. Family chalets (RM130) sleep up to four.

Midrange

Sandy Beach Resort (☎ 955 1308; s & d/tr from RM88/99; a i) Despite the name, the bulk of the accommodation is located across the road from the beach and consists of large but rather musty concrete chalets. It has a holiday-camp feel and is most popular with Malaysian families.

Langkapuri Beach Resort (☎ 955 1202; s & d/f from RM95/160; a) Pleasant clutch of chalets at the southern end of the beach, near the Zon shopping complex. The chalets are small but clean and comfortable, and the pricier ones have a sea view.

Best Star Resort (☎ 955 1808; r/ste from RM110/165; a) This modern two-storey hotel rises higher than most places along here. The large, comfortable suites have great beach views, while standard rooms overlook the gardens. Prices rise at weekends.

Malibest Resort (☎ 955 8222; malibestgk@yahoo.com.my; r RM100-230; a) Malibest is a friendly place with a great variety of rooms set among the palm trees right on the sand. These range from slightly older but still comfortable wooden chalets to more modern brick chalets and impressive 'treetop' chalets, sitting atop tall wooden pylons and enjoying uninterrupted sea views. There's an onsite Indian restaurant.

Beach Garden Resort (☎ 955 1363; www.beachgardenresort.com; s/d from RM165/187; a s) Near the northern edge of the beach, this small, attractive place with just a dozen rooms is secluded and relaxed. It also has a very nice beachfront bar.

Top End

Bon Ton Resort (☎ 955 6787; www.bontonresort.com.my; r/ste from RM450/750; a i s) Pantai Cenang's northernmost resort, Bon Ton is one of Langkawi's real gems. It's a uniquely stylish place consisting of just seven antique Malay stilt houses of varying sizes, set amid coconut palms around a pool. Each of the spacious houses has its own design and character, some with private sun decks and outdoor bathrooms, and all beautifully furnished in a traditional style. The largest sleeps up to six people. The onsite Nam Restaurant serves an excellent menu of Western and Asian cuisine, and the resort even has its own vintage yacht if you fancy a leisurely cruise along the coast.

Casa del Mar (☎ 955 2388; www.casadelmar-langkawi.com; r/ste from RM510/730; a i s) Directly opposite the Laman Padi, this is a sumptuous, Spanish villa style place on a lovely stretch of beach. Several package deals are available, and prices vary dramatically according to occupancy.

Pelangi Beach Resort (☎ 952 8888; www.pelangibeachresort.com; r/ste from RM770/1550; a i s) This rambling resort towards the northern end of the beach has tastefully furnished chalets in vast, landscaped grounds. It's a family-oriented resort with a full programme of kids' activities and sports, restaurants and every imaginable luxury – even electric buggies to take you to your room.

PANTAI TENGAH

Larger, midrange resorts dominate Pantai Tengah, though it's still less built up than Pantai Cenang, and is popular with young families.

Tanjung Malie (☎ 955 1891; tanjungmalie@msn.com; r RM40-60; a) This is a quiet collection of fan and air-con huts and chalets set well back from the road. Family rooms start at RM90, or RM120 if you want to see the sea.

Tropical Resort (☎ 955 4075; r RM80; a) A huddle of modern chalets is set among palm trees in this quiet spot at the back of the beach, just a few minutes' walk from the seashore.

Sunset Beach Resort (☎ 955 1751; www.sunsetbeachresort.com.my; r RM130-190; a) This is a more upmarket resort, with comfortably furnished chalets surrounded by lush

tropical gardens, but they don't have sea views. All rooms have TVs, minibars and hot showers.

Aseania Resort (☎ 955 2020; aseania@tm.net.my; r/ste from RM210/450; a i s) At the road intersection at the southern end of Pantai Cenang is this huge pink palace. Looking like a Las Vegas incarnation of ancient Rome, it has bright, spacious rooms, a good restaurant and a spectacular outdoor pool (allegedly the longest in Malaysia at 154m) with an artificial waterfall.

Holiday Villa (☎ 955 1701; www.holidayvilla.com.my; s/d/ste from RM360/380/850; a i s) A vast, modern complex, with tennis courts, a gym, several restaurants and an indoor pool 'exclusively for ladies'. Rooms are airy and brightly furnished, and look out over the lawns and the soft white-sand beach.

PANTAI KOK

Oriental Village Inn (☎ 959 2300; www.oriental-inn.com; r/ste RM140/400; a) Located within the Oriental Village shopping compound inland from Pantai Kok, this modern hotel has large, neatly furnished rooms with the usual mod-cons such as minibars and satellite TVs. However, it's overpriced considering the distance from the sea.

Tanjung Sanctuary Langkawi (☎ 955 2977; www.tanjung-sanctuary-langkawi.com; r RM250-400; a i s) Built on a forested, rocky headland with its own small beach and a restaurant built on stilts over the water, Tanjung Sanctuary is a stylish and relatively small resort offering 32 large, tastefully furnished bungalows with balconies.

Berjaya Langkawi Beach & Spa Resort (☎ 959 1888; www.berjayaresorts.com; r/ste from RM450/1000; a i s) Past the headland at the north-western end of the beach, the oversized Berjaya has some 500 rooms spread over a vast area; guests are ferried between reception and their chalets in minibuses. The waterfront suites are the most attractive, while others look out onto the lush rainforest. A wide range of sports facilities is on hand, along with a spa.

Sheraton Langkawi Beach Resort (☎ 955 1901; r/ste from RM462/1100; a i s) To the south-east of the other resorts, the Sheraton Langkawi has all the usual five-star amenities in an attractively secluded setting on a forested headland by the sea. It's popular with young families.

PULAU REBAK BESAR

Rebak Marina Resort (% 966 5566; www.rebakmarina.com; s & d/f from RM350/610; a i s) Lying just off Pantai Cenang, the small island of Rebak Besar plays host to this exclusive resort, which offers spacious and elegant chalets in beautifully landscaped grounds. It has all the facilities you would expect, including a gym, spa, tennis courts and restaurants. Transfers from Langkawi airport are included in the price, and there are several different package deals available, as well as regular promotions. The island also has an international-standard yachting marina.

TELUK DATAI

Andaman Langkawi (% 959 1088; www.ghmhotels.com; r/ste from RM900/1950; a i s) Just past the Golf Club Datai Bay in a grand wooden Malay-style building within the rainforest is this luxurious retreat with a gym, spa, tennis courts and its own private beach. There's also a kids' club and a babysitting service.

Datai Langkawi (% 959 2500; www.ghmhotels.com; r/ste from RM1390/2340; a i s) The island's most exclusive beach resort, where you can choose between rainforest villas and roomy seafront chalets, many built on stilts over the water. There's a spa, tennis courts and three restaurants, and the resort also has a knowledgeable jungle trekking guide on its staff. Guests can enjoy preferential rates at the attached Datai Bay Golf Club.

TANJUNG RHU

Tanjung Rhu Resort (% 959 1033; www.tanjungrhu.com.my; s & d RM1300-2700; a i s) Tucked into a secluded cove on the north coast, this is the best place to escape to on the island. It has a glorious golden beach, and the resort's tasteful buildings are arranged around a central courtyard. There are three excellent restaurants, an English-style tea-room and a reading room. The top suite comes with two lounges and a Jacuzzi, and a variety of package deals is available. This serene, ecoconscious resort is within walking distance of the public beach, with its food stalls and boat hire for day trips.

Four Seasons Resort (% 950 8888; www.fourseasons.com/langkawi; r from RM1635; a i s) Occupying a superb location overlooking the Andaman Sea, the Four Seasons is a truly luxurious resort offering 91 'pavilions' and villas with

all the indulgent comforts and mod-cons you would expect from this international chain. The villas come with large, open lounges, marble bathrooms, plasma TVs and gorgeous sea views, while rooms in the two-storey pavilions look onto the gardens. There are organised activities for children, and various package deals are available.

Eating**KUAH**

Kuah is hardly a gastronomic goldmine, but there are numerous cheap Chinese restaurants scattered around, including **Asia Restaurant** (% 966 6788; 3A Jln Persiaran Putra; mains from RM6; h lunch & dinner), which serves seafood and vegetarian dishes on the ground floor of the hotel of the same name.

There are several branches of Western fast-food chains in Kuah, as well as a couple of more upmarket restaurants in the Langkawi Fair shopping mall.

About 500m uphill from the jetty at the yacht club is the breezy **Charlie's Place** (% 966 4078; www.langkawiyaachtclub.com; Jln Pantai Dato Syed Omar; mains from RM20; h 9am-11pm), which has a great harbour view to complement its Western and Asian menu.

On the island's east coast, 9km north of Kuah, is **Barn Thai** (% 966 6699; Mukim Kisap; mains from RM20; h lunch & dinner), an upmarket Thai restaurant with live jazz on some nights (reservations advisable). It's accessible via a 450m-long raised walkway through a mangrove forest reserve.

PANTAI CENANG

Many of the hotels at Pantai Cenang have restaurants, though the quality is variable. Among the best are the **Beach Garden Resort** (mains from RM29), which serves excellent Western and Asian meals, and the **Pelangi Beach Resort** (set dinner RM60-70).

Overlooking the rice fields inside the Laman Padi is the **Padi Cuisine & Café** (% 955 2386; mains from RM14.50; h 9am-11pm). The eclectic menu covers everything from fish and chips and Thai curry to lamb Provençal and lobster thermidor. It's a photogenic spot, and the lime-water fingerbowls are a nice touch.

Just south of the Laman Padi, **Yang Dynasty Seafood Restaurant** (% 012-477 7283; mains from RM12; h lunch & dinner) serves excellent Chinese seafood, including abalone and sea cucumbers if you're feeling adventurous.

Its 'sizzling beancurd' is particularly good. Nearby is **Restoran Haji Ramli** (% 955 4160; mains from RM3; h lunch & dinner), a busy place serving great-value Malay food of the chicken, rice and noodle variety.

On the opposite side of the road, **Orkid Ria** (% 955 4128; mains from RM12; h lunch & dinner) is a popular seafood restaurant offering squid, crab and a huge variety of fish dishes.

Champor-Champor (% 955 1449; mains from RM18; h 7pm-1am) is a superb place for tasty home-cooked food, serving up imaginative regional cuisine such as pan-fried bamakoise (a local fish) with banana, tofu satay and coconut-crust calamari. The menu descriptions are particularly intriguing – such as the Thai green curry 'with an exotic taste that makes you kinky' – and the tranquil, open-air garden filled with sweet incense and surrounded with plants and native carvings provides a romantic setting to while away a tropical evening.

Further south, the tiny **Little India Cuisine** (% 955 7308; mains from RM14; h 7-11pm), in a converted garage, is a good place for authentic North Indian food, plus vegetarian set meals.

PANTAI TENGAH

Pantai Tengah also has some very good places to eat. **Lighthouse** (% 955 2586; mains from RM30; h 11am-2am) occupies a splendid location overlooking the beach and serves top-class Malaysian and Mediterranean food, though prices are a little high.

Boom Boom Corner (% 012-473 7167; mains from RM4; h 5pm-late) at the northern end of the strip is a bustling food court serving great-value Malay and Pakistani food. Heading south you'll come upon a string of more upmarket cafés and shops known as the Sunmall: **Sun Cafe** (% 955 8300; Sunmall 8; mains from RM12; h lunch & dinner) is a smart spot for mostly Western food including pizza and grills, while **L'Osteria** (% 012-494 9235; mains from RM10; h noon-midnight) is the place to go for Italian cuisine.

Further on, towards Holiday Villa, **Fat Mum's** (% 012-470 7863; Jln Teluk Baru; mains from RM8; h 4pm-midnight) serves up Chinese dishes.

PANTAI KOK

The Oriental Village shopping complex has a handful of restaurants, including **Kra-thong** (% 959 2336; mains from RM8; h lunch & dinner

Wed-Mon), a quiet Thai restaurant offering traditional curries and fish dishes.

On the seafront, the Telaga Harbour Park is home to a few trendy restaurants, including **Bom Brazil Churrascaria** (% 959 1826; Perdana Quay; mains from RM15; h lunch & dinner), serving barbecued Brazilian fare, and **Zabinsa's USSR Restaurant** (% 012-432 7408; Perdana Quay; mains from around RM12; h noon-midnight), featuring some vaguely Russian specialities.

Drinking

Nearly all hotels have bars, and most restaurants serve alcohol. As Langkawi is a duty-free island, prices are normally cheaper than elsewhere in Malaysia; beer served in restaurants costs about half what you would pay on the mainland, and is cheaper still when bought from shops. You can get a beer in any of the Chinese coffee shops in Kuah, and there are a couple of flashy bars at Telaga Harbour Park. Opposite the Malibest Resort on Pantai Cenang, **Debbie's Place** (% 966 8700; h 5pm-late) is a so-called 'Irish pub', but apart from the big green shamrock outside, there's nothing noticeably Hibernian going on. It's a pleasant place for a few beers, though, and there's food in the evenings. Further south, **Offshore** (h noon-late) is another popular spot which presents live TV sports coverage to go with your cold Tiger beer. **Reggae Bar** (h noon-2am Sat-Thu) on the beach is a more rough-and-ready affair hosting live bands in season.

If you'd prefer to sip a cocktail in more sophisticated surrounds, try the bar at the Beach Garden Resort at the beach's northern end.

Shopping

Langkawi is promoted as a duty-free shopping haven, and there are certainly big savings to be made on alcohol and tobacco. Otherwise, though, the range of goods on offer isn't that exciting and seems to consist largely of mountains of chocolate, unremarkable clothes, luggage and, for some reason, piles of kitchenware and tableware. If you're searching for things made out of coconut shells, or garish fridge magnets, then you've come to the right place.

Kuah is the main place to shop on Langkawi, and there are countless stores here, all selling a similar range of cheap alcohol. Duty-free shops can also be found at the ferry terminal, the airport, the Zon

shopping centre at Pantai Cenang and Sun-mall at Pantai Tengah. Some resorts also have small shopping plazas. The Langkawi Fair mall near the jetty has the best variety of shops, selling clothes, shoes, souvenirs, cosmetics and some better-quality arts and craftwork. There's also a supermarket, duty-free outlets and restaurants.

Oriental Village is a very pretty though somewhat sterile purpose-built shopping complex just north of Pantai Kok. There are 30 separate outlets grouped around a lake, most selling virtually the same selection of souvenirs and sarongs, and there's also a small branch of the Zon duty-free chain.

Langkawi Crystaal's glassware and marble souvenirs are significant locally made goods, and are best bought at the production sites on the road north from Kuah.

Legally, visitors must stay on the island for 48 hours before they are entitled to purchase duty-free items, but no-one checks.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Malaysia Airlines (☎ 966 6622; 1 Sat-Thu), at the Langkawi Fair shopping mall, and Air Asia (☎ 955 7752) have two or three flights daily between Langkawi and KL (RM200/105), and Malaysia Airlines also flies to Penang (once daily, RM120). Silk Air has three weekly flights to Singapore (RM580).

BOAT

All passenger ferries to/from Langkawi operate out of Kuah. From about 8am to 6.30pm, regular ferries operate roughly every hour in either direction between Kuah and the mainland port of Kuala Perlis (one hour, RM15) and every 30 minutes to and from Kuala Kedah (1½ hours, RM18).

Two companies, Langkawi Ferry Services (LFS; ☎ 966 9439) and Ekspres Bahagia (☎ 966 5784), operate two daily ferries between Kuah and Georgetown on Penang (RM45/85 one way/return, 2½ hours). Boats depart from Georgetown at 8.30am and 8.45am and leave Kuah at 2.30pm and 5.30pm.

Ferry to Thailand

From the Kuah jetty, LFS makes runs four times a day, between 9.30am and 4pm, to Satun on the Thai coast (RM25, one hour). From the port you can take a taxi to Satun town for connections to Hat Yai or Phuket.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Taxi destinations from the airport include Kuah jetty or Pantai Cenang (RM16), Pantai Kok (RM15), Tanjung Rhu (RM26) and Teluk Datai (RM40). Buy a coupon at the desk before leaving the airport terminal and use it to pay the driver.

CAR

Cars can be rented cheaply, and touts from the travel agencies at the Kuah jetty will assail you upon arrival. Rates start at around RM60 per day, but drops with bargaining. Cars and Jeeps can also be rented more expensively at the upmarket beach resorts.

MOTORCYCLE & BICYCLE

The easiest way to get around is to hire a motorbike for around RM35 per day. You can do a leisurely circuit of the island (70km) in a day. The roads are excellent, and outside Kuah it's very pleasant and easy riding. Motorbikes can be hired at stands all over the island. A few places also rent mountain bikes for RM15 per day.

TAXI

As there is no public transport available, taxis are the main way of getting around, but fares are relatively high. There is a taxi station at the Langkawi Fair mall and at the jetty (☎ 966 5249). From the Kuah jetty, sample set fares include: RM5 to Kuah town, RM20 to Pantai Cenang/Pantai Tengah and RM26 to Pantai Kok. A taxi between Pantai Cenang and Pantai Kok will cost you RM22.

BUKIT KAYU HITAM

☎ 04

This is the main border crossing between Malaysia and Thailand. 48km north of Alor Setar. The Lebuhraya handles the vast majority of road traffic between the two countries, and all the buses to Hat Yai, Thailand, come this way so immigration processing on both sides of the border can become jammed. Taking the train via Padang Besar is almost always a quicker and more convenient alternative.

At the border post there are a few restaurants, private car-parking facilities and a Tourism Malaysia Office (☎ 922 2078; 1 9am-5pm). The easiest way to cross the border is to take a through bus all the way to Hat

Yai (though when the border opens in the morning, the lines can be horrendous). Buses and taxis from Alor Setar run right up to the Malaysian customs post. From here you can walk the roughly 2km to the border crossing. Taxis on the other side run to Sadao, from where there are buses on to Hat Yai.

If arriving from Thailand, ensure that your passport is stamped by the Malaysian border police – otherwise you may be fined for 'illegal entry' when you leave Malaysia.

There is no accommodation on the Malaysian side. Even with the expense of shelling out for a taxi, you'll end up saving money (and headaches) by proceeding immediately to your next destination.

Once in Malaysia, you'll find taxis (RM30) and regular buses (RM3) to Alor Setar, from where frequent buses go to Kuala Kedah (for Langkawi), Butterworth, KL and destinations across the peninsula. Kuala Perlis, the other departure point for Langkawi, is more difficult to reach – first take a bus to Changlun, another to Kangar and then another to Kuala Perlis.

PERLIS

The tiny state of Perlis, bordering Thailand in the northwestern extremity of Malaysia, tends to be neglected by foreign visitors. Apart from a sugar refinery, cement factory and Malaysia's only cigar factory, its economy is still dominated by agriculture, and Perlis is primarily a transit state on the way to and from Thailand. Kuala Perlis is one of the access ports for Langkawi, and Padang Besar is the main border town if arriving by train from Thailand. If you have time, the small but beautiful Taman Negara Perlis state park is worth exploring.

In recent years, the state government's hard-line Islamic policies have caused controversy throughout Malaysia, not least the relaxing of rules governing polygamy (see the boxed text, p216). Being a predominantly Muslim state, Perlis observes the same business hours as neighbouring Kedah.

History

Perlis was originally part of Kedah, though it variously fell under Thai and Acehnese

sovereignty. After the Siamese conquered Kedah in 1821, the sultan of Kedah made unsuccessful attempts to regain his territory by force until, in 1842, he agreed to accept Siamese terms. The Siamese reinstalled the sultan, but made Perlis into a separate vassal principality with its own raja.

As with Kedah, power was transferred from the Thais to the British under the 1909 Anglo-Siamese Treaty, and a British Resident was installed at Arau. A formal treaty between Britain and Perlis wasn't signed until 1930. During the Japanese occupation in WWII, Perlis was 'returned' to Thailand, and then after the war it again returned to British rule until it became part of the Malayan Union, and then the Federation of Malaya in 1957.

KANGAR

☎ 04

Kangar, 45km northwest of Alor Setar, is the state capital of Perlis. It's a dusty modern town surrounded by rice paddies and has little to warrant exploration. There are a few banks and countless restaurants and shops in the vicinity of the bus station. If you have a long wait between bus connections, you can do as the locals do and relax with a coffee at one of the many *kedai kopi* (coffee shops) around town.

Sights

Kangar's sole attraction is the Muzium Negeri Perlis (National Museum; ☎ 977 1366; Kompleks Warisan Negeri, Jln Kolang; admission free; 1 9am-4pm Sun-Thu, 9am-noon Sat), with dry exhibitions on the history of the state and the royal family.

Around 7km southwest of Kangar, the modern Muzium Kota Kayang (☎ 977 0027; admission free; 1 10am-5pm) houses more displays on local history, including Neolithic tools, royal regalia and ceramics. Also on the site are the modest mausoleums of two 16th-century sultans of Kedah. You'll need to catch a taxi from Kangar to get here (RM10).

Sleeping & Eating

Malaysia Hotel (☎ 976 1366; 65 Jln Jubli Perak; s & d/tr from RM35/50; a) Opposite the express bus station is this very simple though convenient option, above a Malay coffee shop. Rooms are a bit worn, but OK for a one-night stop.

Hotel Ban Cheong (☎ 976 1184; 79 Jln Kangar; s/d RM35/60; a) This old Chinese hotel in the town centre has basic singles with fan and shared bathrooms and air-con doubles with private facilities. It's a reasonable budget option for an overnight stay.

Federal Hotel (☎ 976 6288; 104-B Psn Jubli Emas; r RM35-70; a) Located just behind a small Malay food court, this place has a choice of accommodation ranging from basic fan rooms with shared bathrooms up to more comfortable air-con rooms with satellite TVs.

Putra Palace (☎ 976 7755; www.putrapalace.com; 135 Psn Jubli Emas; r/stg from RM140/280; a i s) This huge, blocky edifice around 1km east of the town centre is Kangar's top hotel. Rooms are furnished to a high standard and have the usual mod-cons, and there's an excellent restaurant and a gym.

There are many cheap restaurants and cafés sprinkled around the bus station, including **Kedai Kopi Malaysia** (Jln Jubli Perak), attached to the hotel of the same name, and **Embassy** (Jln Jubli Perak), a food court a few doors along, serving standard Chinese fare and beer.

Getting There & Away

The express bus station is on the southern edge of town, off Jln Jubli Perak. There are departures to KL (RM33, two daily), Butterworth (RM10.90, one daily), Alor Setar (RM3.80, several daily), Ipoh (RM19.70, two daily), Kota Bharu (RM26.60, one daily) and Johor Bahru/Singapore (RM58, one daily, 12 hours), as well as regular buses to Kuala Perlis (RM1.20). Infrequent buses to Kaki Bukit (RM3.20) and Padang Besar (RM3.20) leave from the chaotic local bus station on Jln Tun Abdul Razak.

If you're impatient to get to Langkawi, a taxi to Kuala Perlis from the bus station costs RM12.

KUALA PERLIS

☎ 04

This small port town in the extreme northwest of the peninsula is visited mainly as a departure point for Langkawi. It is also the closest access port to the island from Thailand. The main part of Kuala Perlis consists of a couple of streets with a bank, several restaurants and shops, and a couple of hotels. The older part of town has interesting houses and mosques built on stilts over the mangrove swamps.

Sleeping & Eating

Pens Hotel (☎ 985 4122; Jln Kuala Perlis; s & d from RM75; a) Probably the best place in town, with neat, comfortable rooms. Along the same street are a few grotty, dirt-cheap hostels.

Near the jetty are several Malay food stalls serving Kuala Perlis' famous special laksa, as well as a few Chinese restaurants.

Getting There & Away

The bus and taxi station is a short walk from the jetty towards town. The frequent bus 56 to Kangar (RM1.20) swings by the jetty before terminating at the station. Less-frequent direct buses depart for Butterworth, Alor Setar, KL and Padang Besar. From the bus station or the jetty, taxis go to Kangar (RM12) and Padang Besar (RM25).

Ferries to Kuah, on Pulau Langkawi, leave at least hourly between 8am and 6pm (RM15).

POLYGAMY IN PERLIS

Although polygamy is permitted under Islamic law – as long as the husband can prove he is financially able to support another wife – it remains extremely rare in mainstream Malaysian society. So when the ultra-conservative state of Perlis abolished the legal requirement for men to seek their first wife's written permission before taking a second or even third wife, there was an outcry from women's groups and the press, who expressed concerns about the possible harmful effects to family life. Of the 112,000 marriages recorded in Malaysia in 2004, 650 were polygamous, and one-fifth of these took place in Perlis. It has been estimated that the state receives around 200 applications each month from men living elsewhere in Malaysia who wish to marry again here. The federal government wants the laws governing marriage to be standardised throughout Malaysia, and in 2005 introduced an amendment to the Islamic Family Law Bill granting financial protection to women whose husbands wish to take another wife. However, Perlis (along with Penang) has so far failed to implement the ruling.

PADANG BESAR

☎ 04

On the Thai border 35km northeast of Kangar, Padang Besar itself is nothing special, but it's a popular destination for Malaysians because of the duty-free markets in the neutral territory between the two countries. Near the large roundabout are a few banks that will change travellers cheques. Money-changers will give you even better rates for bank notes (foreign or Thai baht) and have the added advantage of being open longer hours than banks, and open every day.

If arriving from Thailand ensure that your passport is stamped by the Malaysian border police – otherwise you may be fined for 'illegal entry' when you leave Malaysia.

There's some accommodation on the Malaysian and Thai sides of the border, but you're better off avoiding these mostly dingy budget hotels and heading straight for Kangar or beyond.

Malaysian buses stop near the large roundabout around a kilometre from the large border-crossing complex on the Malaysian side. There are regular buses to/from Kangar (RM3.20) and, less frequently, to Kaki Bukit. The taxi stand is on the left before you reach the bus stop, and fares are posted for destinations, including Kaki Bukit (RM10) and Kangar (RM15).

Very few people, if any, walk the more than 2km of no-man's land between the Thai and Malaysian sides of the border. Motorcyclists shuttle pedestrian travellers back and forth for about RM5 each way, though bargaining is possible.

There is one daily train connection between Padang Besar and Hat Yai (RM9, 50 minutes). All passengers must disembark to clear customs and immigration (both Thai and Malaysian) before reboarding.

TAMAN NEGARA PERLIS

The small state park of Taman Negara Perlis in the northwest of the state runs for 36km along the Thai border, covering about 5000 hectares. It comprises the Nakawan Range – the longest continuous range of limestone hills in Malaysia – and the Mata Ayer and Wang Mu Forest Reserves.

Information

The Park Visitor Centre (☎ 945 7898; psp@pd.jar.ing.my; Jln Kaki Bukit; 11 9am-noon & 2-4pm Mon-Fri) is

signposted 3km from the small town of Kaki Bukit. All visitors must register here, and entry to the park is RM2 per day. Guides (RM30 for four hours) can also be hired at the centre, and are obligatory for many areas.

Sights & Activities

Taman Negara Perlis has heavily forested slopes and numerous cave systems, such as **Gua Wang Burma**, which has intriguing limestone formations. The park is the country's only semideciduous forest, and is rich in wildlife; this is the only habitat in Malaysia for the stump-tailed macaque. White-handed gibbons and a rich array of birds can also be found here.

Just outside the park, **Gua Kelam** (Cave of Darkness; admission RM1; 11 9am-6pm) is a 370m-long cavern gouged out in tin-mining days; today it's the state's top tourist attraction. A river runs through the cave and emerges in a cascade at a popular swimming spot and a landscaped park. The old tin mine is a short walk from the far end of the cavern. Listen for motorcycles that may be rushing through, and watch out for exploding guano (the build-up of phosphates is highly flammable). The cave is a 1km walk from Kaki Bukit.

Other attractions include the **Wang Kelian Sunday Market**, which straddles the Malaysia-Thailand border. Fruit, vegetables and clothes from both countries are for sale, and no passport is needed, provided you stay in the market area. The Malaysian side of the market is open every day.

Sleeping

The modern wooden chalets in the **Park Visitor Centre** (dm RM10, chalets RM50-80; a) are very comfortable. You can pitch a tent for RM1.

Getting There & Away

There is no public transport to the park. The nearest town is Kaki Bukit, from where a winding mountain road leads to the tiny village of Kampung Wang Kelian. The Park Visitor Centre is signposted 3km further on.

A taxi to the park from Kangar will cost around RM50 to RM60. Taxis may be harder to find in Kaki Bukit. If you can find one, a taxi from Kaki Bukit to the park will cost roughly RM20 to RM30, but you may be able to negotiate.

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