

Malaysia

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Taman Negara** – exploring the steamy, ancient jungle by riverboat and on foot (p472)
- **Pulau Perhentian** – hiking along coastal trails to dreamy, Crusoe-esque beaches to snorkel with psychedelically hued fish (p466)
- **Mt Kinabalu** – climbing the 4095m summit to watch the sunrise over northern Borneo (p484)
- **Pulau Penang** – gorging on Indian curries, laksa, rojak, spicy Chinese dishes, and more (p444)
- **Gunung Mulu** – plunging into caves then climbing Gunung Api to see the bizarre Pinnacles formations (p506)
- **Off the beaten track** – trekking from longhouse to longhouse in Bario and the Kelabit Highlands, where the only way in or out is by small plane (p507)

FAST FACTS

- **Budget** US\$15 a day
- **Capital** Kuala Lumpur (KL)
- **Costs** dorm bed RM10, three basic meals RM20, two beers RM18, four-hour bus ride RM24
- **Country code** ☎ 60
- **Languages** Bahasa Melayu (official), Chinese (Hakka and Hokkien dialects), Tamil, English
- **Money** US\$1 = RM3.50 (ringgit)
- **Phrases** *selamat pagi* (good morning), *terima kasih* (thank you)
- **Population** 24,821,300
- **Time** GMT + eight hours
- **Visas** people of most nationalities visiting Malaysia are presented with a 30- to 90-day visa on arrival



TRAVEL HINT

Malaysia is a Muslim country. Both men and women should dress appropriately by covering (at least) everything to the knees and over the shoulders; never bring alcohol or non-halal food to a guesthouse without the owner's permission.

OVERLAND ROUTES

From Peninsular Malaysia, you can head into Thailand and Singapore. From Sarawak, you can enter Indonesia (Kalimantan) and Brunei. Brunei can also be entered from Sabah.

Malaysia's reputation as a benign country makes some people think that it's going to be boring. It's true, pushy touts are rare, natural disasters only seem to happen across the border and the multi-ethnic population gets along well. What to do without the hassles? Why not stroll around Penang where wafts of Chinese incense mingle with sour durian while Bollywood tunes blast from an Indian shop. Next head to the Cameron Highlands where you can visit tea plantations in the cool air; or, on the east coast islands, snorkel through coral gardens and lounge on a mind-poppingly perfect beach. Put on your leech-proof boots to track elephants in Taman Negara, and how about delving into the depths of Sarawak and Sabah on mythical Borneo where you can see wild orang-utans and climb massive Mt Kinabalu? Unexciting? We think not.

CURRENT EVENTS

Speculators predict that Malaysia's Prime Minister Abdullah bin Ahmad Badawi will call an election in 2008 instead of waiting for the scheduled election in 2009. While the country's economy is strong, Abdullah has not been able to keep his pre-election promises to curb official corruption and cronyism or to increase freedom of the press. Critics hail that Islamic conservatism and racial tension has increased under Abdullah's leadership. Nevertheless, he remains very popular.

Abdullah's most outspoken critic is former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim who was controversially jailed in 1998 by then prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad on sodomy and corruption charges. Anwar was released in September 2004, the sodomy charges overturned, and he has now announced that he will run for parliament in 2008. While most people don't believe that Anwar's party, the People's Justice Party, has much chance of gaining seats from the current majority party, his bold statements on multiracism are bringing up issues that are often glazed over in the current arena of leadership.

HISTORY

Early Influences

The earliest evidence of human life in the region is a 40,000-year-old skull found in Sarawak's Niah Caves. But it was only around 10,000 years ago that the aboriginal Malays, the Orang Asli (see p416), began moving down the peninsula from a probable starting point in southwestern China.

By the 2nd century AD, Europeans were familiar with Malaya, and Indian traders had made regular visits in their search for gold, tin and jungle woods. Within the next century Malaya was ruled by the Funan empire, centred in what's now Cambodia, but more significant was the domination of the Sumatra-based Srivijayan empire between the 7th and 13th centuries.

In 1405 the Chinese admiral Cheng Ho arrived in Melaka with promises to the locals of protection from the Siamese encroaching from the north. With Chinese support, the power of Melaka extended to include most of the Malay Peninsula. Islam arrived in Melaka around this time and soon spread through Malaya.

European Influence

Melaka's wealth and prosperity attracted European interest and it was taken over by the Portuguese in 1511, then the Dutch in 1641 and the British in 1795.

In 1838 James Brooke, a British adventurer, arrived to find the Brunei sultanate fending off rebellion from inland tribes. Brooke quashed the rebellion and in reward was granted power over part of Sarawak. Appointing himself Raja Brooke, he founded a dynasty that lasted 100 years. By 1881 Sabah was controlled by the British government, which eventually acquired Sarawak after WWII when the third Raja Brooke realised he couldn't afford the area's up-keep. In the early 20th century the British brought in Chinese and Indians, which radically changed the country's racial make-up.

Independence to the Current Day

Malaya achieved *merdeka* (independence) in 1957, but it was followed by a period of instability due to an internal Communist uprising and an external confrontation with neighbouring Indonesia. In 1963 the north Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak, along with Singapore, joined Malaya to create Malaysia. In 1969 violent interracial riots broke out, particularly in Kuala Lumpur, and hundreds of people were killed. The government moved to dissipate the tensions, which existed mainly between the Malays and the Chinese. Present-day Malaysian society is relatively peaceful and cooperative.

Led from 1981 by outspoken Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia's economy grew at a rate of over 8% per year until mid-1997, when a currency crisis in neighbouring



DID YOU KNOW?

Malaysia is obsessed with world records and publishes its own *Malaysia Book of World Records* once a year. Successes include the most days spent inside a box with 6069 scorpions and creating the highest stack of cans in 15 minutes.

Thailand plunged the whole of Southeast Asia into recession. After 22 momentous years, Dr Mahathir Mohamad retired on 31 October 2003. He handed power to his anointed successor, Abdullah bin Ahmad Badawi, who went on to convincingly win a general election in March 2004. Since this win, the new prime minister has increasingly been criticised by Mahathir for degrading the freedom of the press and for scrapping projects such as a new bridge between Malaysia and Singapore that would have replaced the existing causeway.

THE CULTURE

The National Psyche

From the ashes of the interracial riots of 1969 the country has forged a more tolerant multicultural society, exemplified by the coexistence in many cities and towns of mosques, Christian churches and Chinese temples. Though ethnic loyalties remain strong and there are undeniable tensions, the concept of a much-discussed single 'Malaysian' identity is gaining credence and for the most part everyone coexists harmoniously. The friendliness and hospitality of Malaysians is what most visitors see and experience.

Moving from the cities to the more rural parts of the country, the laid-back ethos becomes stronger and Islamic culture comes more to the fore, particularly on the peninsula's east coast. In Malaysian Borneo you'll be fascinated by the communal lifestyle of the tribes who still live in jungle longhouses (enormous wooden structures on stilts that house tribal communities under one roof; see also p500). In longhouses, hospitality is a key part of the social framework.

Lifestyle

The *kampung* (village) is at the heart of the Malay world and operates according to a system of *adat* (customary law) that emphasises collective rather than individual responsibility. Devout worship of Islam and older spiritual beliefs go hand in hand with this.

However, despite the mutually supportive nature of the *kampung* environment, and growing Westernisation across Malaysia, some of the more conservative attitudes refuse to yield. A recent example of this occurred in August 2004, when parliament heard a proposal to make marital rape a crime. The response of one of Malaysia's senior Islamic clerics was to oppose the move, asserting that women must obey their husband's desires.

The rapid modernisation of Malaysian life has led to some incongruous scenes. In Sarawak, some ramshackle longhouses and huts sport satellite dishes and have recent-vintage cars parked on the rutted driveways out front. And almost everywhere you go people incessantly finger mobile phones as if they're simply unable to switch them off.

Population

Malaysians come from a number of different ethnic groups: Malays, Chinese, Indians, the indigenous Orang Asli (literally, 'Original People') of the peninsula, and the various tribes of Sarawak and Sabah in Malaysian Borneo.

It's reasonable to generalise that the Malays control the government while the Chinese dominate the economy. Approximately 85% of the country's population of nearly 25 million people lives in Peninsular Malaysia and the other 15% in Sabah and Sarawak.

There are still small, scattered groups of Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia. Although most of these people have given up their nomadic or shifting-agriculture techniques and have been absorbed into modern Malay society, a few such groups still live in the forests.

Dayak is the term used for the non-Muslim people of Borneo. It's estimated there are more than 200 Dayak tribes in Borneo, including the Iban and Bidayuh in Sarawak and the Kadazan in Sabah. Smaller groups include the Kenyah, Kayan and Penan, whose way of life and traditional lands are rapidly disappearing.

MUST SEE

Puteri Gunung Ledang (Princess of Ledang Mountain) is a big-budget Malaysian epic directed by Saw Teong Hin that brings to celluloid life a complicated Malaysian legend involving (among other things) a magic-wielding princess and a power-hungry sultan.

RELIGION

The Malays are almost all Muslims. But despite Islam being the state religion, freedom of religion is guaranteed. The Chinese are predominantly followers of Taoism and Buddhism, though some are Christians. The majority of the region's Indian population comes from the south of India and are Hindu and Christian, although a sizable percentage are Muslim.

While Christianity has made no great inroads into Peninsular Malaysia, it has had a much greater impact in Malaysian Borneo, where many indigenous people have been converted and carry Christian as well as traditional names. Others still follow animist traditions.

ARTS

It's along the predominantly Malay east coast of Peninsular Malaysia that you'll find Malay arts and crafts, culture and games at their liveliest. Malaysian Borneo is replete with the arts and crafts of the country's indigenous peoples.

Arts & Crafts

A famous Malaysian Bornean art is *pua kumbu*, a colourful weaving technique used to produce both everyday and ceremonial items.

The most skilled woodcarvers are generally held to be the Kenyah and Kayan peoples, who used to carve enormous, finely detailed *kelir-ient* (burial columns) from tree trunks.

Originally an Indonesian craft, the production of batik cloth is popular in Malaysia and has its home in Kelantan. A speciality of Kelantan and Terengganu, *kain songket* is a handwoven fabric with gold and silver threads through the material. *Mengkuang* is a far more prosaic form of weaving using pandanus leaves and strips of bamboo to make baskets, bags and mats.

Dance

Menora is a dance-drama of Thai origin performed by an all-male cast dressed in grotesque masks; *mak yong* is the female version. The upbeat *joget* (better known around

MUST READ

Into the Heart of Borneo by Redmond O'Hanlon is the account of this cheerfully ill-prepared naturalist's journey into the remote interior of the island, accompanied by several idiosyncratic guides and a perpetually bewildered British poet.

ARTS WEB TIP

The best source of information on what's currently going on in the Malaysian arts scene is www.kakiseni.com.

Melaka as *chakuncha*) is Malaysia's most popular traditional dance, often performed at Malay weddings by professional dancers.

Rebana kercing is a dance performed by young men to the accompaniment of tambourines. The *rodai* is a dance from Terengganu and is accompanied by the *tar* drum.

Music

Traditional Malay music is based largely on the *gendang* (drum), of which there are more than a dozen types. Other percussion instruments include the *gong*, *cerucap* (made of shells), *raurau* (coconut shells), *kertuk* and *pertuang* (both made from bamboo), and the wooden *celampang*.

Wind instruments include a number of types of flute (such as the *seruling* and *serunai*) and the trumpet-like *nafiri*, while stringed instruments include the *biola*, *gambus* and *sundatang*.

The *gamelan*, a traditional Indonesian gong-orchestra, is also found in the state of Kelantan, where a typical ensemble will comprise four different gongs, two xylophones and a large drum.

ENVIRONMENT**The Land**

Malaysia covers 329,758 sq km and consists of two distinct regions. Peninsular Malaysia is the long finger of land extending south from Asia and is mostly covered by dense jungle, particularly the mountainous northern half. The peninsula's western side has a large fertile plain running to the sea, while the eastern side is fringed with sandy beaches. Malaysian Borneo consists of Sarawak and Sabah; both states are covered in thick jungle and have extensive river systems. Sabah is crowned by Mt Kinabalu (4095m), the highest mountain between the Himalayas and New Guinea.

Wildlife

Malaysia's ancient rainforests are endowed with a cornucopia of life forms. In Peninsular Malaysia alone there are over 8000 species of flowering plants, including the world's tallest tropical tree species, the *tualang*. In Malaysian

Borneo, where hundreds of new species have been discovered since the 1990s, you'll find the world's largest flower, the rafflesia, measuring up to 1m across, as well as the world's biggest cockroach. Mammals include elephants, rhinos (extremely rare), tapirs, tigers, leopards, honey bears, *tempadau* (forest cattle), gibbons and monkeys (including, in Borneo, the bizarre proboscis monkey), orang-utans and scaly anteaters (*pangolins*). Bird species include spectacular pheasants, sacred hornbills and many groups of colourful birds such as kingfishers, sunbirds, woodpeckers and barbets. Snakes include cobras, vipers and pythons. Once a favourite nesting ground for leatherback turtles, recorded landings now hover around 10 per year.

National Parks

Malaysia's 19 national parks cover barely 5% of the country's landmass. The country's major national park is Taman Negara, on the peninsula, while Gunung Mulu and Kinabalu are the two main parks in Sarawak and Sabah respectively. Especially on Borneo, the rarity and uniqueness of local flora and fauna is such that scientists – from dragonfly experts to palm-tree specialists – are regular visitors and vocal proponents of new parks and reserves both on land and in the surrounding waters. There are also 13 marine parks in Malaysia, notably around Pulau Perhentian, Tioman and Sipadan, although enforcement of protection measures is very loose.

Environmental Issues

When it comes to environmental faux pas, Malaysia has done it all. Logging is believed to have destroyed more than 60% of the country's rainforests and generates some US\$4.5 billion per year for big business. Another growing phenomenon, particularly in Sabah, is the palm-tree plantation, where vast swathes of land are razed and planted with trees that yield lucrative palm oil. But the crown of eco and social irresponsibility goes to the construction of the controversial Bakun Dam in Sarawak, scheduled to become Southeast Asia's biggest dam in late 2007. The dam will drown approximately 700 sq km of virgin rainforest and will have forced up to 10,000 indigenous people from their homes. In equally bad environmental news, much of the power generated at Bakun looks likely to go to a giant aluminium smelter in Sarawak.

Responsible ecotourism is the traveller's best weapon in a country where cold cash is fiercer than tigers. See p515 for more information.

TRANSPORT

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

The gateway to Peninsular Malaysia is the city of Kuala Lumpur, although Pulau Penang and Johor Bahru (JB) also have international connections. Singapore is a handy arrival/departure point, since it's just a short trip across the Causeway from JB and has more international connections. Malaysia Airlines is the country's main airline carrier although Air Asia flights are much cheaper. At the time of writing Air Asia was planning services to Europe, India and China.

There are weekly flights between Kuching and Pontianak in Kalimantan (Indonesia), and between Tawau in Sabah and Tarakan in Kalimantan.

The following are some airlines servicing Malaysia; numbers beginning with ☎ 03 are for Kuala Lumpur.

Aeroflot (code SU; ☎ 03-2161 0231; www.aeroflot.ru/eng)

Air Asia (code AK; ☎ 03-8775 4000; www.airasia.com)

Air India (code AI; ☎ 03-2142 0166; www.airindia.com)

British Airways (code BA; ☎ 1800 881 260; www.britishairways.com)

Cathay Pacific Airways (code CX; ☎ 03-2035 2788; www.cathaypacific.com)

China Airlines (code CI; ☎ 03-2142 7344; www.china-airlines.com)

Garuda Indonesian Airlines (code GA; ☎ 03-2162 2811; www.garuda-indonesia.com)

Japan Airlines (code JL; ☎ 03-2161 1722; www.jal.com)

Lufthansa (code LH; ☎ 03-2161 4666; www.lufthansa.com)

Malaysia Airlines (code MH; ☎ 1300 883 000, 03-2161 0555; www.malaysiaairlines.com)

Qantas (code QF; ☎ 1800 881 260; www.qantas.com)

Royal Brunei Airlines (code BI; ☎ 03-2070 7166; www.bruneiair.com)

Singapore Airlines (code SQ; ☎ 03-2692 3122; www.singaporeair.com)

Thai Airways International (THAI, code TG; ☎ 03-2031 2900; www.thaiairways.com)

Vietnam Airlines (code VN; www.vietnamairlines.com)

Virgin Atlantic (code VS; ☎ 03-2143 0322; www.virgin-atlantic.com)

DEPARTURE TAX

The RM40 airport departure tax is always included in the ticket price.

BRUNEI

You can fly from KL and Kota Kinabalu to Bandar Seri Begawan. Because of the difference in exchange rates, it's cheaper to fly to Brunei from Malaysia than vice versa.

CAMBODIA

Flights between KL and Phnom Penh are available with Malaysia Airlines, Air Asia and Royal Phnom Penh Airways. Air Asia also flies from KL to Siem Reap.

INDONESIA

It's a short hop from Pulau Penang to Medan in Sumatra. To Java, the cheapest connections are from Singapore. There are also weekly flights between Kuching and Pontianak in Kalimantan (Indonesia), and between Tawau in Sabah and Tarakan in Kalimantan.

PHILIPPINES

You can fly with Malaysia Airlines or Air Asia from KL to Cebu/Manila. Air Asia also has flights to Manila from Kota Kinabalu.

SINGAPORE

Malaysia Airlines and Singapore Airlines have frequent services to KL. Malaysia Airlines also connects Singapore to Langkawi and Penang.

THAILAND

There are flights between Bangkok and KL or Kota Kinabalu, and between Phuket and Koh Samui with Penang.

VIETNAM

Malaysia Airlines and Vietnam Airlines operate flights from KL to Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. Air Asia runs flights from KL to Hanoi.

Land

BRUNEI

You can catch buses and taxis between Miri in Sarawak and Kuala Belait in Brunei (see p506). Kuala Belait has easy bus connections with Bandar Seri Begawan; you can also

cross from Lawas to Bangar (in Brunei), and then head on to Limbang (see p509).

INDONESIA

In Borneo, regular buses run between Kuching and the Indonesian city of Pontianak via the Tebedu–Entikong crossing (see p498).

SINGAPORE

At the southern tip of Peninsular Malaysia you can cross into Singapore via Johor Bahru by bus (see p456). Taking the train from JB is less convenient.

THAILAND

On the western side of Peninsular Malaysia, you can travel by bus from Alor Setar to the border crossing at Bukit Kayu Hitam (p453). There are also two trains passing through Alor Setar to Padang Besar and then continuing north into Thailand (see p453); the first stops at Hat Yai, while the second terminates in Bangkok. Some visitors may not feel safe travelling through Hat Yai, which has been a hot spot for Muslim and Buddhist clashes in Thailand.

On the peninsula's eastern side you can bus it from Kota Bharu to the border town of Rantau Panjang but at the time of writing this was not a safe place to cross due to violence in this area of southern Thailand; if the situation changes, see p470 for border-crossing information.

There is also a border crossing between Keroh (Malaysia) and Betong (Thailand), but at the time of writing it was extremely inadvisable to travel here due to the violence in Yala Province, Thailand.

Sea

There are no services connecting the peninsula with Malaysian Borneo.

BRUNEI

You can travel by sea between Bandar Seri Begawan (Muara Port), Brunei, and Pulau Labuan, Sabah (see p484). You can also travel by boat between Limbang in Sarawak and Brunei (see p508).

INDONESIA

The main ferry routes between Peninsular Malaysia and Sumatra are Georgetown–Medan and Melaka–Dumai.

The popular crossing between Georgetown (on Pulau Penang) and Medan has services most days of the week. The boats actually land in Belawan in Sumatra, and the journey to Medan is completed by bus (included in the price). See p451 for full details of this route.

Twice-daily high-speed ferries run between Melaka and Dumai in Sumatra. Dumai is now a visa-free entry port into Indonesia for citizens of most countries. See p438 for details.

You can also take a boat from the Bebas Cukai ferry terminal in JB direct to Pulau Batam and Pulau Bintan, both in the Riau Islands (see p456).

Boats head between Tawau in Sabah and Tarakan in Kalimantan daily except Sunday. There are also daily boats between Tawau and Nunukan in Kalimantan, most of which continue on to Tarakan (see p492).

PHILIPPINES

Passenger ferries run twice weekly between Sandakan in Sabah and Zamboanga in the Philippines (see p488).

THAILAND

Regular daily boats run between Pulau Langkawi and Satun in Thailand; see p455. There are customs and immigration posts here, but it's an expensive entry/exit point.

GETTING AROUND

Air

With all airlines, it pays to check websites for specials.

Malaysia Airlines (code MH; ☎ 1300 883 000; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my) is the country's main domestic operator, linking major regional centres on the peninsula and on Pulau Langkawi and a network of Bornean flights, including a rural air service. Economical, five-city Discover Malaysia air passes are valid for 28 days but can only be purchased with an international Malaysia Airlines ticket.

Firefly (code FY; ☎ 03-7845 4543; www.fireflyz.com), a subsidiary of Malaysia Airlines that began services in April 2007, has budget flights from Pulau Penang to Pulau Langkawi, Kuala Terengganu, Kuantan and Kota Bharu, and to Phuket and Koh Samui in Thailand. Services are expected to expand.

Air Asia (code AK; ☎ 03-8775 4000; www.airasia.com) is a no-frills airline offering super-

cheap flights. Air Asia flies to/from KL, Johor Bahru, Penang, Kota Kinabalu and Kuching as well as a handful of smaller Malaysian cities.

Tiny **Berjaya Air** (code J8; ☎ 03-2145 2828; www.berjaya-air.com) has flights between KL, Pulau Tioman and Pulau Pangkor.

Boat

Boats and ferries sail between the peninsula and offshore islands. If a boat looks overloaded or otherwise unsafe, do not board it. There are no ferry services between Malaysian Borneo and the peninsula. Travel on the larger rivers, such as the Rejang and Baram in Borneo, is accomplished in fast passenger launches known by the generic term *ekspres*, which carry around 100 people. Travel on smaller, squezier Bornean waterways is mainly by costly motorised longboat. It's best to organise a group to share costs.

Bus

Peninsular Malaysia has an excellent bus system. Public buses do local runs and a variety of privately operated buses generally handle the longer trips. In larger towns there may be several bus stations. Local and regional buses often operate from one station and long-distance buses from another; in other cases, KL for example, bus stations are differentiated by the destinations they serve.

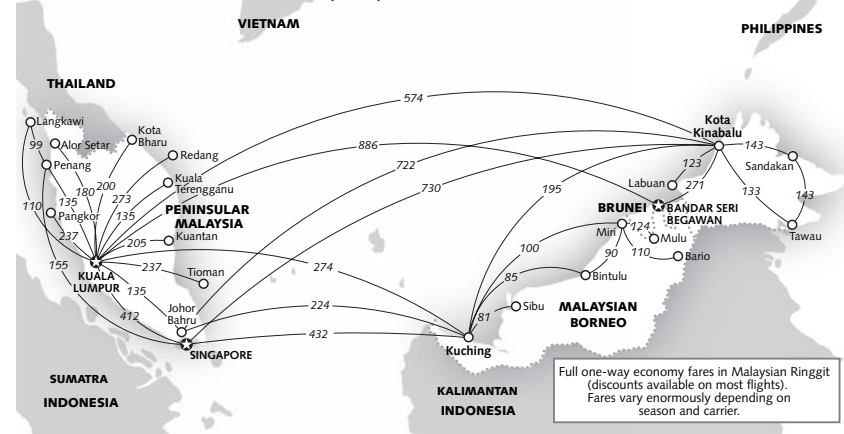
Buses are an economical form of transport, reasonably comfortable and on major runs you can often just turn up and get on the next bus. On many routes there are air-conditioned buses, which usually cost just a few ringgit more than regular buses.

Ekspres, in the Malaysian context, often means indeterminate stops. To make up this time many long-distance bus drivers tend to think of the *lebuhraya* (highway) as their personal Formula One track.

The main highway routes in both Sabah and Sarawak are well served by buses. The main road in Sarawak winds from Kuching to the Brunei border and, although sealed, can be rough in parts. Roads in Sabah are better, but have unmarked hazards.

The main destinations in Sabah are linked by a reasonable system of roads. You can travel between Sabah and Sarawak by road via Brunei, but there are several immigration stops and no public transport on some sections – we recommend travelling by boat

MALYSIAN AIR FARES (RM)



between Kota Kinabalu and Bandar Seri Begawan via Pulau Labuan for this section (see p482).

Car & Motorcycle

Driving in Peninsular Malaysia is a breeze compared to most other Asian countries; the roads are generally high quality, there are plenty of new cars available and driving standards aren't too hair-raising. Road rules are basically the same as in Britain and Australia. Cars are right-hand drive and you drive on the left side of the road. However, you should be constantly aware of the hazards posed by stray animals and numerous motorcyclists.

Unlimited-distance car-rental rates cost from around RM145/920 per day/week, including insurance and collision-damage waiver.

Be aware that insurance companies will most likely wash their hands of you if you injure yourself driving a motorcycle without a licence.

Hitching

Hitching is never entirely safe in any country and we don't recommend it. True, Malaysia has long had a reputation for being an excellent place to hitchhike but, with the ease of bus travel, most travellers don't bother. On the west coast, hitching is quite easy but it's not possible on the main *lebuhraya*. On the east coast, traffic is lighter and there may be long waits between rides.

Local Transport

Local transport varies but almost always includes local buses and taxis. In many Peninsular Malaysian towns there are also bicycle rickshaws. While these are dying out in KL, they are still a viable form of transport in a few towns. Indeed, in places such as Georgetown, with its convoluted and narrow streets, a bicycle rickshaw is the best way of getting around.

Taxi

Good luck finding a taxi with an operational meter in Malaysia. Except where pre-purchased coupons are involved or where drivers have agreed on a standard route fare, you will inevitably have to negotiate with the driver about fares. On their worst days, taxi drivers will charge extortionate amounts. Don't be afraid to turn down a fare you think is too high and walk over to the next taxi to negotiate a fairer price. Even better, ask at your hotel or a visitors centre about reasonable fares.

Compared to buses, long-distance (or share) taxis are an expensive way to travel around Malaysia. The taxis work on fixed fares for the entire car and will only head off when a full complement of passengers (usually four people) turns up. Between major towns you will have a reasonable chance of finding other passengers without having to wait around too long; otherwise, you'll probably have to charter a whole taxi at four times the single fare.

REAR VIEWS

Glance out the window of your bus and you'll look down on plastic flower gardens flourishing along a car's back shelf, mini-shrines to favourite deities on the dashboard or platoons of cartoon characters such as Garfield stuck fast to passenger-side windows. But it's in the garnishing of rear-view mirrors that Malaysians really outdo themselves. Following is just some of the stuff we saw dangling in front of drivers:

- fluffy dice the size of bricks
- large plastic skulls
- orchards of plastic fruit
- baby dummies
- chattering dolls
- CDs
- old sunglasses

Train

Peninsular Malaysia has a modern, comfortable and economical railway service that has basically two lines. One runs from Singapore to KL, then to Butterworth and on into Thailand. The other line, known as the Jungle Railway, cuts through the interior of Malaysia linking Gemas, Taman Negara with Kota Bharu, a transit town for Pulau Perhentian.

In Sabah on Borneo there's a narrow-gauge railway line that runs from Kota Kinabalu south to Beaufort and then through Sungai Pegas gorge to Tenom.

Peninsular Malaysia has three main types of rail services: express, limited express and local trains. Express trains are air-conditioned and generally 1st and 2nd class only, and on night trains there's a choice of berths or seats. Limited express trains may have 2nd and 3rd class only but some have 1st, 2nd and 3rd class with overnight sleepers. Local trains are usually 3rd class only, but some have 2nd class.

The privatised national railway company, **Keretapi Tanah Melayu** (KTM; ☎ 03-2267 1200, 2773 1430; www.ktmb.com.my), offers a tourist Rail Pass for five days (adult US\$35), 10 days (adult US\$55) and 15 days (adult US\$70). This pass entitles the holder to unlimited travel on any class of train, although it does not include sleeping-berth charges. Rail

Passes are available only to foreigners and can be purchased at KL, JB, Butterworth, Pelabuhan (Port) Klang, Padang Besar and Wakaf Baharu train stations. You have to do an awful lot of train travel to make it worthwhile.

KUALA LUMPUR

☎ 03 / pop 1.5 million

In Kuala Lumpur (KL) Malaysia's melody of cultures is played out in the most modern theatre. The streets from Chinatown to Little India and the Malay quarter of Kampung Baru are as congested with humans as the roads are with cars. High-rises frame the sky above Chinese shops, towering mosques and Indian temples. Around the sparkling twin Petronas Towers the city spreads into manicured parks, air-conditioned deluxe megamalls and fine restaurants.

From being only a tiny tin town some 150 years ago, KL has advanced at lightning pace – a feat that's best shown through its cutting-edge international airport and rail system. Yet even with all the crowds and technology, KL remains undeniably humane, culturally fascinating and an easy landing pad for anyone not yet ready to tackle Southeast Asia's harsher capitals.

ORIENTATION

Merdeka Sq is the traditional heart of KL. Southeast across the river, the banking district merges into Chinatown, popular with travellers for its budget accommodation and lively night market.

East of Merdeka Sq is Masjid Jamek, at the intersection of the Star and Putra Light Rail Transit (LRT) lines. Jl Tun Perak, a major trunk road, leads east to the long-distance transport hub of the country, the Puduraya bus station.

To the east of Puduraya bus station, around Jl Sultan Ismail, the Golden Triangle is the modern, upmarket heart of the new KL.

The transport-hub KL Sentral station (which holds the KL City Air Terminal, from where you catch the KLIA Ekspres to the international airport) is in the Brickfields area, southeast of the centre.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

Kinokuniya (Map p429; ☎ 2164 8133; 4th fl, Suria KLCC Shopping Complex)

MPH Bookstores (Map p429; ☎ 2142 8231; Ground fl, BB Plaza, Jl Bukit Bintang) Also a branch at Mid Valley Megamall (off Map pp424-5).

Emergency

Fire (☎ 994)

Police & ambulance (☎ 999)

Immigration Offices

Immigration office – city centre branch (Map pp424-5; ☎ 2698 0377; Kompleks Wilayah, cnr Jl Dang Wangi & Jl TAR)

Main immigration office (off Map pp424-5; ☎ 2095 5077; Block I, Pusat Bandar Damansara) For visa extensions; it's 1km west of Lake Gardens.

Internet Access

Internet cafés turn over frequently but are usually replaced by another nearby. Try Jl Sultan or the streets surrounding Kota Raya shopping centre in Chinatown (both on Map p426). Rates per hour start at RM2.

Libraries

National Library of Malaysia (Map pp424-5; ☎ 2687 1700; www.pnm.my; 232 Jl Tun Razak)

Medical Services

Kuala Lumpur General Hospital (Map pp424-5; ☎ 2615 5555; Jl Pahang)

Twin Towers Medical Centre (Map pp424-5; ☎ 2382 3500; Lot 401 F&G, 4th fl, Suria KLCC Shopping Complex)

GETTING INTO TOWN

The efficient KLIA Ekspres (adult one way/return RM35/65, 28 minutes, every 15 to 20 minutes from 5am to midnight) spirits you to/from the international airport (KLIA) to the KL City Air Terminal, located in KL Sentral train station. This is without doubt the easiest way to travel to/from the airport.

If you have more time than money, catch the express bus (RM14, 45 minutes, hourly from 7am to 9pm) from the KLIA bus terminal (ground level, Block C of the covered car park) to Chan Sow Lin station on the Star Light Rail Transit (LRT) line, which will deliver you to various central KL destinations. Build in a lot of time for traffic.

For transport die-hards, airport coaches (RM20) also connect KLIA to Chan Sow Lin station on the Star LRT (about one hour). These buses depart for the airport every 30 minutes from 5am to 10.30pm and 6.15am to 12.30pm in the opposite direction.

Taxis from KLIA operate on a fixed-fare coupon system. Purchase a coupon from a counter at the arrival hall and use it to pay the driver. Standard taxis cost RM60 to RM70.

Money

Banks and ATMs are concentrated around Jl Silang at the northern edge of Chinatown. Moneychangers are located in shopping malls, along Lebuhr Ampang and near Klang bus station on Jl Sultan (see Map p426).

Post

Main post office (Map p426; Jl Raja Laut; ☎ 8.30am-6pm Mon-Sat) The office is closed on the first Saturday of the month.

Telephone

Phonecards are widely available in KL but finding a compatible public phone is a challenge, especially if you leave KL. Shops in Chinatown and on Jl Bukit Bintang, in the Golden Triangle, have pay-per-call IDD-STD phones. Call ☎ 103 for local directory inquiries and ☎ 108 for the international operator.

Telekom Malaysia (Map p426; Jl Raja Chulan; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-12.30pm Sat) Calls can be made here.

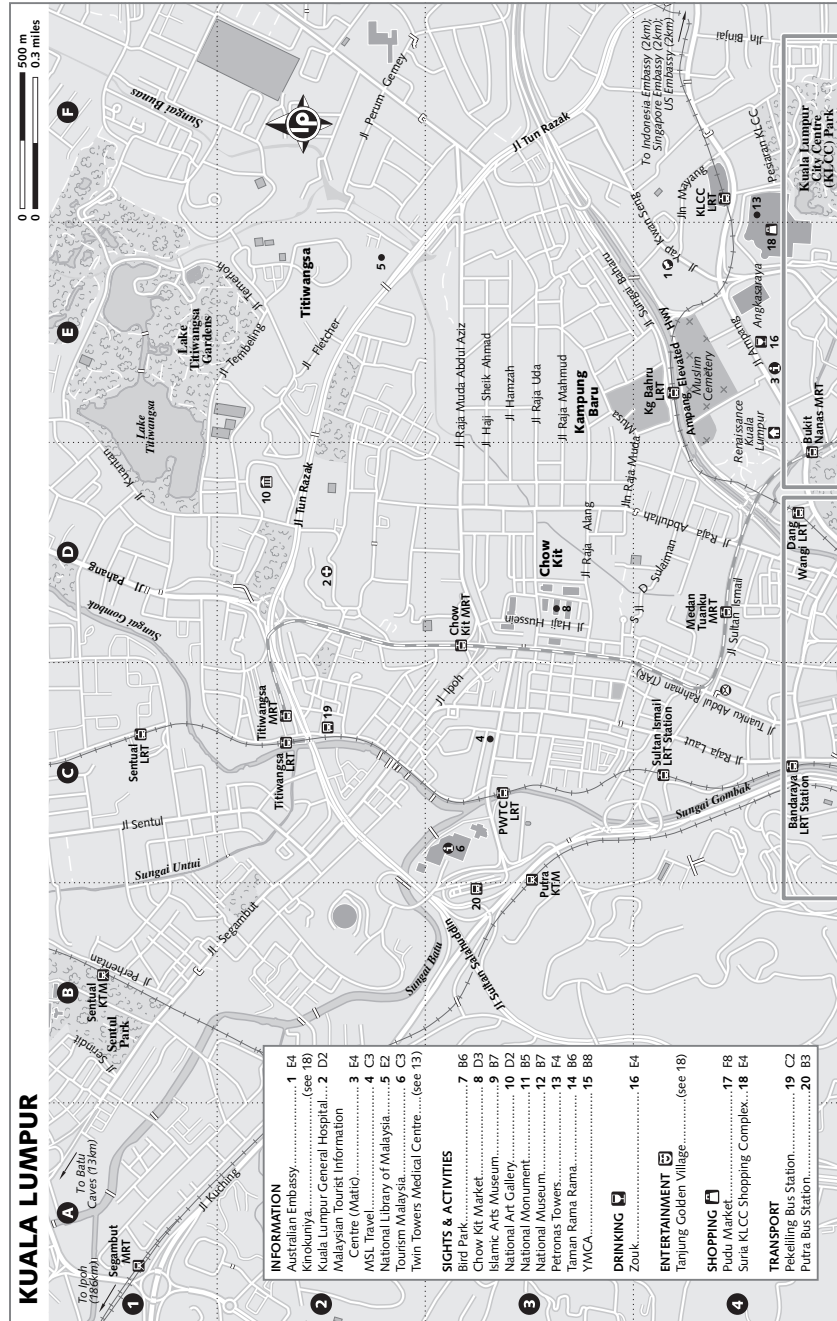
Tourist Information

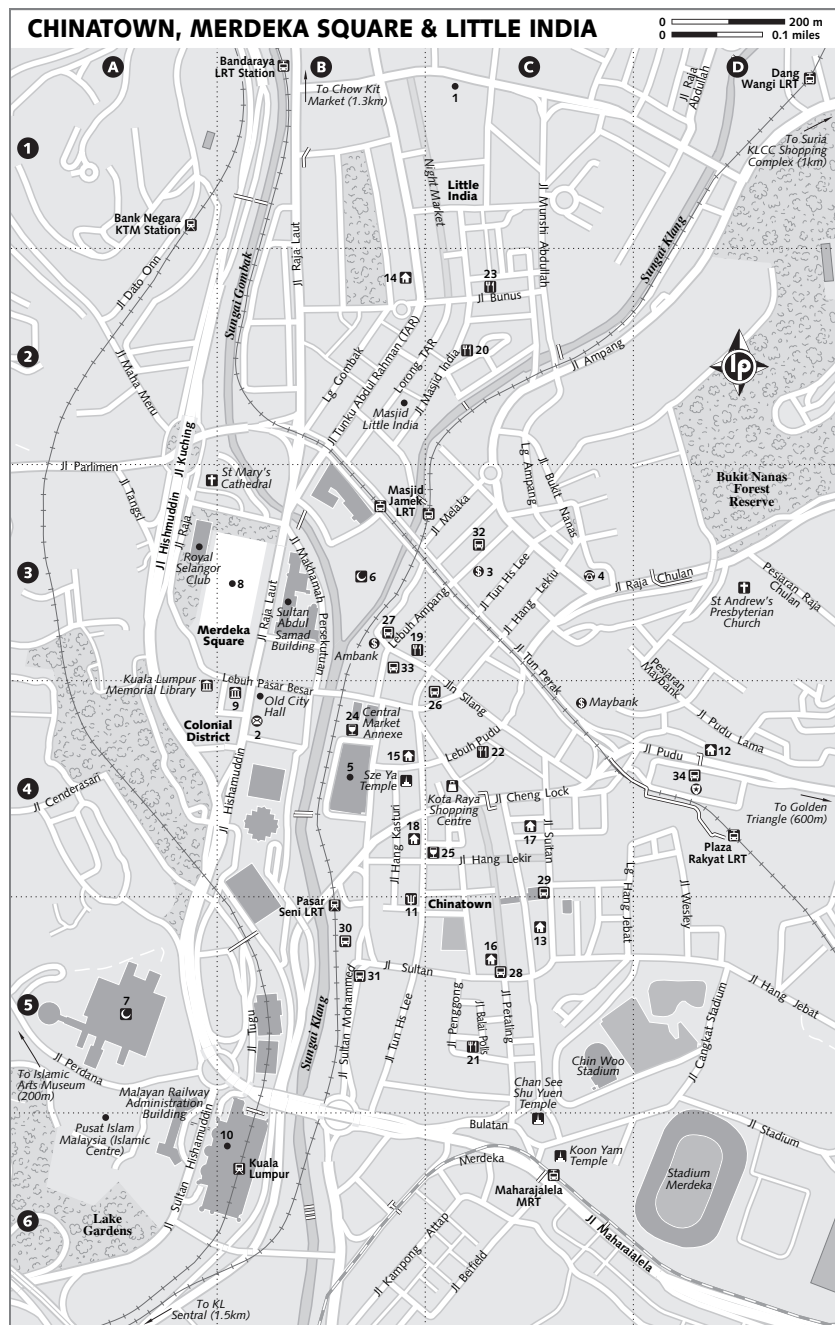
Malaysian Tourist Information Complex (Matic; Map p429; ☎ 2164 3929; 109 Jl Ampang; ☎ 9am-midnight) KL's largest and most useful tourist office; it also holds regular cultural performances.

Tourism Malaysia (Map pp424-5; ☎ 03-2615 8188; www.tourism.gov.my; 17th fl, Putra World Trade Centre, 45 Jl Tun Ismail) Has good maps of Malaysia.

Travel Agencies

For discount airline tickets, long-running and reliable student-travel agencies include the following:





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MSL Travel (Map pp424-5; ☎ 4042 4722; msl@po.jaring.my; 66 Jl Putra)

STA Travel (Map p429; ☎ 2143 9800; stakul@po.jaring.my; Lot 506, 5th fl, Plaza Magnum, 128 Jl Pudu)

SIGHTS Colonial District

Hugging Sungai Klang (Sungai River) between Jl Tun Perak and Jl Kinabalu is Kuala Lumpur's colonial district (Map p426). The symbolic heart is **Merdeka Square** (Jl Raja Laut), a formal parade ground around which dutifully pose the architectural legacies of Malaysia's successive conquerors, both Islamic and European. Fittingly, the nation's independence was proclaimed here in 1957.

Further south is the **old railroad station** (Jl Hishamuddin), a fanciful castle of Islamic arches and spires.

The **National History Museum** (☎ 2694 4590; 29 Jl Raja Laut; admission free; ☎ 9am-6pm) will instill a sense of Malaysian pride in a new arrival, plus the 2nd-floor view of Merdeka Sq is stunning.

Masjid Jamek (Jl Tun Perak; admission free; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 2.30-4pm) is a tranquil creation built in 1907 and set in a grove of palm trees; headscarves and robes are provided at the gate. It's closed during Friday prayers (11am to 2.30pm).

Masjid Negara (National Mosque; Jl Perdana; admission free; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 5-6.30pm) is one of Southeast Asia's largest mosques. The main dome is an 18-pointed star, symbolising the 13 states of Malaysia and the five pillars of Islam. You should dress conservatively and remove your shoes.

The colonial district is served by the Pasar Seni LRT station to the south and the Masjid Jamek station to the north.

Chinatown

Circuitous streets and cramped chaos create a pressure-cooker of sights and sounds in Chinatown (Map p426). **Jl Petaling** is a bustling street market selling souvenirs, such as 'authentic' Paul Frank and cheap Birkenstocks and Levis; it opens around 10am and shuts late at night. Chinatown is accessed on the Putra LRT to Pasar Seni station or on the KL Monorail to Maharajalela station.

Chinese **coffee shops** are along Jl Penggong and Jl Balai Polis. You'll spot temples and shophouses in the side streets – check out KL's principal Hindu temple, **Sri Mahamariamman Temple** (Jl HS Lee).

Near the city's original market and gambling sheds is **Central Market** (Jl Cheng Lock; ☎ 10am-10pm), a refurbished Art Deco building that sells Malay crafts and art.

Little India

Little India (Map p426) has all the feel of a bazaar. The sari shops and the women shopping along **Jl Masjid India**, the district's main street, are swathed in vibrant sherbets, turquoise and vermilion. Meanwhile Indian pop blasts through tinny speakers, and musky incense and delicious spices flavour the air. The district swings into full spectacle during the Saturday *pasar malam* (night market). Little

India is best reached on the Star or Putra LRT to Masjid Jamek station.

Golden Triangle

A forest of high-rises, the Golden Triangle is central KL's business, shopping and entertainment district. Several nightspots hang out along Jl Sultan Ismail and Jl Ramlee.

Sitting on a forested hill, **Menara Kuala Lumpur** (Kuala Lumpur Tower; Map p429; ☎ 2020 5448; Jl Punchak; adult/child RM20/10; ⌚ 9am-10pm, last tickets 9.30pm) is the fourth-highest telecommunications tower in the world. Visitors can ride the lift right up to the viewing deck (276m) for superb panoramic views, superior to those from the Petronas Towers. Take the KL Monorail to Bukit Nanas station.

Formerly the world's tallest skyscrapers (until Taipei 101 took the title in 2004), the twin **Petronas Towers** (Map pp424-5; www.petronas.com.my/petronas; Jl Ampang; admission free; ⌚ 9am-1pm & 2.30-4.45pm Tue-Sun) serve as the elegant headquarters of the national petroleum company. This steel-and-glass monument weaves together traditional Islamic symbolism with modern sophistication. First-come, first-serve tickets are available for visiting the 41st-floor Skybridge that connects the two towers; tickets are issued from 8.30am and 15-minute visits start at 10am. Arrive around 8am to start queuing if you're particular about the time you want to go up, but tickets are often available until around 11am. To get here, take the Putra LRT to KLCC station.

Lake Gardens & Around

Escape from the heat and concrete to this inner-city garden district (Map pp424-5) at the western edge of central KL. From Chinatown, Intrakota bus 21C from the Jl Sultan Mohammed bus stop, or buses 21B, 22, 48C

and F3, will take you there. It is also a 20-minute walk from Masjid Jamek.

The gardens contain a host of attractions such as the **Bird Park** (☎ 2273 5423; adult RM28; ⌚ 9am-7.30pm) and **Taman Rama Rama** (Butterfly Park; adult RM15; ⌚ 9am-6pm). You can take a leisurely stroll around them, or catch the shuttle bus (adult RM1; operating 9am to 6pm Thursday to Saturday and noon to 3pm Friday) that does a loop of the area.

At the edge of the Lake Gardens, the **National Museum** (Muzium Negara; ☎ 2282 6255; Jl Damansara; adult RM2; ⌚ 9am-6pm) boasts colourful displays on Malaysia's history, economy, arts, crafts and culture.

Near Lake Gardens, the **Islamic Arts Museum** (Muzium Kesenian Islam Malaysia; ☎ 2274 2020; Jl Lembah Perdana; adult RM12; ⌚ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) has scale models of the world's most famous mosques and a full-scale interior reproduction of a typical Muslim room of the Ottoman Empire.

Northern KL

In the characterless expanse of Chow Kit is the claustrophobic, covered **Chow Kit Market** (Map pp424-5; Jl TAR; ⌚ 8am-8pm) for sundries by day and food by night. Take the KL Monorail to Chow Kit station for this place. See p432 for more details

Further north near Lake Titiwangsa, the **National Art Gallery** (Map pp424-5; Balai Seni Lukis Negara; ☎ 4025 4990; Jl Temerloh, off Jl TAR; admission free; ⌚ 10am-6pm) displays works by contemporary Malaysian and international artists. Take any Len Seng bus from Lebu Ampang (north of Central Market) in Chinatown or from along Jl Raja Laut; get off at the hospital stop.

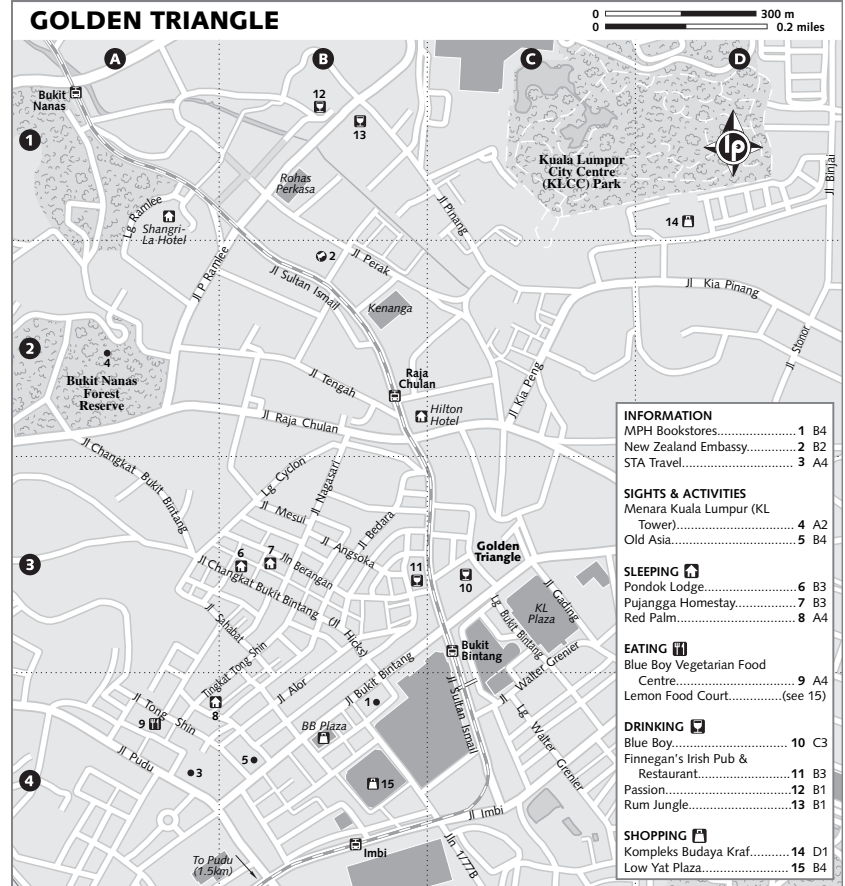
ACTIVITIES

There's a concentration of **Chinese massage** and reflexology places along Jl Bukit Bintang,

BATU CAVES

Get closer to KL's Indian culture by visiting the **Batu Caves** (admission free; ⌚ 8am-8pm), a system of three caves 13km northwest of the capital. The most famous is Temple Cave, because it contains a Hindu shrine reached by a straight flight of 272 steps, guarded by a 43m-high Murga statue, the highest in the world. About a million pilgrims come here every year during Thaipusam (January/February) to engage in or watch the spectacularly masochistic feats of the devotees.

From Chinatown, take Intrakota bus 11D (RM1.20, 30 minutes) from the stop in front of the Bangkok Bank (next to Le Village) on Jl Tun HS Lee, or Cityliner bus 69 (RM1.20) from Medan Pasar, near the HSBC bank. Bus 11D also stops along Jl Raja Laut in the Chow Kit area. During Thaipusam special trains and buses run to the caves.



south of BB Plaza. The going price is usually RM65 for a one-hour full-body massage, but try bargaining for RM50. Expect to pay about RM25 for 30 minutes of foot reflexology. **Old Asia** (Map p429; ☎ 2143 9888; 14 Jl Bukit Bintang; ⌚ 10am-10pm), one of the more reliable and pleasantly designed places, offers a 20% discount between noon and 7pm.

If you'd rather be the one pounding your hands, you can join the **Tugu Drum Circle** at the National Monument (Map pp424-5) in the Lake Gardens from 5.30pm to 8.30pm every Sunday.

COURSES

Actors Studio Academy (Map p426; ☎ 2697 2797; www.theactorsstudio.com.my; Lot 19, Plaza Putra)

This academy in the underground Plaza Putra at Merdeka Sq has workshops on everything from modern choreography and classical Indian dance to Chinese orchestral music.

YMCA (Map pp424-5; ☎ 2274 1439; 95 Jl Padang Belia) This Brickfield hotel and community centre offers a variety of short- and long-term language classes in Bahasa Malaysia, Hindi, Thai, Mandarin, Cantonese and Japanese, as well as courses in martial arts.

SLEEPING

Vibrant Chinatown is your best hunting ground for rock-bottom crash pads and is an easy walk from the Puduraya bus station. Unfortunately, at the time of writing it was swarming with bed bugs. The Golden Triangle area's budget options are pricier

but cleaner and in a more low-key (and arguably less exciting) neighbourhood. Unless otherwise noted, all the options listed share bathrooms.

Chinatown & Little India

If arriving from the airport or a long-distance bus station other than Puduraya, these guesthouses (all on Map p426) can be reached via the Star LRT to Plaza Rakyat, Putra LRT to Pasar Seni or the KL Monorail to Mahara-jalela station. Unless otherwise noted, the following places were bed bug-free when we stopped in.

Lee Mun Guest House (☎ 2078 0639; 5th fl, 109 Jl Petaling; dm/s RM9/20, d RM25-35; 📶) Try this skeletal cheapie for an 'authentic' Chinatown experience. The rooms are built of cardboard-like materials but are tidy – dorms are icky. Sweat out a meal in the busy Chinese café below.

Backpackers Travellers Inn (☎ 2078 2473; backpacker_inn@hotmail.com; 60 Jl Sultan; dm RM10, r RM25-50; 📶) Lots of tours and info are offered at this somewhat bland backpacker giant that attracts a clean-cut crowd. More expensive rooms have private bathrooms.

Le Village (☎ 2026 6737; 99A Jl Tun HS Lee; dm/r RM10/30) A bohemian place with natural light and lots of couches, Le Village is one of Chinatown's cosiest options. We've received complaints about parasitic bedfellows and the management but it was glowing when we passed.

Wheeler's Guest House (☎ 20701386; szezrxin_guider@hotmail.com; 131-133 Jl Tun HS Lee; dm/d RM12/30) The entrance is squalid but, inside, the rooms are clean and well ventilated, and the staff are friendly. Character comes from potted plants, fish and murals and there's even a rooftop garden.

Red Dragon Backpacker's Hostel (☎ 2078 9366; 83 Jl Sultan; dm RM12, r RM40-60; 📶) Everything from the cavernous entrance to the internet station is supersized at this megalith – except the rooms and the welcome. Some rooms have private bathrooms. Try the 3rd floor if you want a window. Grab a cheap beer and catch a movie on one of the common area TVs.

Anuja Backpackers Inn (☎ 2026 6479; anuja@sgsmc.com; 1st-3rd fl, 28 Jl Pudu; r RM25-40; 📶) There's hardly room to change your mind, but this reliably clean and friendly place is convenient for early departures or late arrivals from the Puduraya bus station.

Coliseum Hotel (☎ 2692 6270; 100 Jl TAR; s/d RM28/38; 📶) With its famous old planters' restaurant and bar downstairs, the Coliseum has a disintegrating colonial charm. Rooms are huge, without bathrooms (some have sinks), and come with heritage-style furnishings. Though shabby, it's a KL institution.

Golden Triangle

These guesthouses (Map p429) can be reached via the KL Monorail to Bukit Bintang station.

Pujangga Homestay (☎ 2141 4243; www.pujangga.homestay.com; 21 Jl Berangan; dm/d RM20/35; 📶) This tiny guesthouse (there's only room for 11 people) lacks that thoroughfare feeling of many KL backpackers. Facilities aren't lacking however: there's internet, air-con and a cosy DVD lounge.

Red Palm (☎ 2143 1279; www.redpalm-kl.com; 5 Jl Tengkat Tong Shin; dm/d RM25/35) Couches galore, a communal kitchen and piles of DVDs make this a laid-back place to chill in otherwise hectic KL.

ourpick Pondok Lodge (☎ 2142 8449; pondok@tm.net.my; 3rd fl, 20 Jl Changkat Bukit Bintang; dm/s/d RM20/45/55; 📶) A spacious, mellow retreat, the Pondok has airy common lounges, a rooftop sitting area and a real 'home' feel. The price includes a basic breakfast.

EATING

All the food groups – including Indian, Chinese, Malay and Western fast food – abound in the Malaysian capital.

Chinatown & Little India

In the morning, grab a marble-topped table in one of the neighbourhood's *kedai kopi* (coffee shops) for a jolt of joe spiked with condensed milk. The midday meal can be slurped down at the stalls that line Jl Sultan serving all the you-name-it noodles, from prawn or *won ton mee* (Chinese-style egg noodles served with stuffed wontons) to *laksa lemak* (white rounded noodles served with coconut milk, also called curry laksa). Jl Petaling market is closed to traffic in the evenings and Chinese restaurants set up tables beside all the action.

Little India is your best hunting ground for a slap-up Indian curry sopped up with flaky *roti canai* (Indian-style flaky flat bread, also known as 'flying dough'). All places are on Map p426.

GAY & LESBIAN KUALA LUMPUR

Check out Prince World KL at www.prince.worldkl.com for upcoming dance parties around KL.

Liquid (Map p426; ☎ 2078 5909; Central Market Annexe; admission RM10; 🕒 5pm-3am Wed-Sun) This relaxed riverside bar heats up Saturday nights when the 2nd-floor disco opens up. It attracts a mixed, sophisticated crowd and lots of couples.

BlueBoy (Map p429; ☎ 2142 1067; 54 Jl Sultan Ismail; 🕒 5pm-3am) Malaysia's oldest gay club is a gritty pick-up joint with karaoke-singing lady boys and grimy toilets.

Restoran Wilayah Baru (29 Lebu Pudu; meals RM2-5; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner) An excellent eatery with cheap Indian-Malay food.

Restoran Yasin (☎ 2698 2710; 141 Jl Bunus; meals RM3.50-7; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner) A locals' institution serving incredibly tasty South and North Indian fare.

Fatt Yan Vegetarian Restaurant (☎ 2070 6561; cnr Jl Tun HS Lee & Jl Silang; meals RM18; 🕒 lunch & dinner) Herbivores will approve of this Buddhist Chinese restaurant that eschews meat but cooks up some awfully good substitutes.

Old China Café (☎ 20725915; 11 Jl Balai Polis; meals RM25-40; 🕒 dinner) Granted it's a tourist spot, but one that nails the 1920s Sino fantasy of shadow-casting ceiling fans, time-worn antiques and a soundtrack of sparrow sopranos. Spicy dishes of the Baba Nonya (descendants of Chinese Straits settlers who intermarried with Malays) are a speciality.

A busy **food court** (Jl Masjid India) gobbles up a big block. Little India's Saturday night market, at the north end of Lorong TAR, has sensational tucker and a great atmosphere.

Golden Triangle & KLCC

Jl Nagasari, off Jl Changkat Bukit Bintang (Map p429), is lined with Malay food stalls and open-air restaurants. Jl Alor, two streets northwest of Jl Bukit Bintang, has a carnival-like night market of Chinese hawkers stalls. When it's hot outside, head to central KL's air-con shopping centres for international and local food. Take the KL Monorail to Bukit Bintang to reach these.

Lemon Food Court (Map p429; Low Yat Plaza; meals RM4-8; 🕒 lunch & dinner) Lemon Food Court has sizzling hot plates, mouth-watering aromas

and a more proletarian ambience than hoity-toity KLCC. It's in the basement of Low Yat Plaza (see p432).

Blue Boy Vegetarian Food Centre (Map p429; ☎ 2144 9011; Jl Tong Shin; meals RM5-10; 🕒 7.30am-9.30pm) Get all your meat and fish substitutes prepared local style at this spotless, backstreet eatery.

Suria KLCC Shopping Complex (Map pp424-5; ☎ 2382 2828; Jl Ampang; meals RM10-20; 🕒 lunch & dinner) This upscale shopping centre has a modern 2nd-floor food court with everything from sushi and pizza to Malaysian cuisine.

DRINKING

Drinking in Malaysia is no budget activity (around RM10 per bottle of beer) and drinks at 'proper' bars are nearly double in price. The cheapest places to imbibe are Chinese eateries or open-air hawker stalls.

The intersection of Jl Sultan Ismail and Jl P Ramlee forms a Texas-sized watering-hole complex with lots of freshly pressed patrons.

Reggae Bar (Map p426; ☎ 2272 2158; 158 Jl Tun HS Lee) Here you'll find Bob Marley tunes, drink promotions and a lot of backpackers.

Finnegan's Irish Pub & Restaurant (Map p429; ☎ 2284 9024; 6 Jl Telawi Lima) This is a first-rate place for a knees up with live ESPN sports coverage, enthusiastic staff, stout and a decent menu.

Rum Jungle (Map p429; ☎ 2148 0282; cnr Jl P Ramlee & Jl Pinang) Take a trip on the wild side with the other party animals who roam this sprawling complex of thatched huts.

CLUBBING

Check out the latest club news in **Klue** (www.klue.com.my; RM5) or **Juice** (www.juiceonline.com; free). Clubs usually open Wednesday to Sunday and charge a RM20 to RM30 cover charge Thursday to Saturday. The whole scene is very premillennial.

Zouk (Map pp424-5; ☎ 2171 1997; www.zoukclub.com.my; 113 Jl Ampang) There's a theme for everyone here from the small and edgy Loft Bar, to a plastic palm-fringed main venue and sophisticated Velvet Underground (including entry to Zouk RM45).

Passion (Map p429; ☎ 2141 8888; www.poppy-collection.com; 18-1 Jl P Ramlee; cover RM25) R&B and house music literally have the floors shaking at this very popular club right in the epicentre of the Golden Triangle party zone.

ENTERTAINMENT

Tanjung Golden Village (Map pp424-5; ☎ 7492 2929; www.tgv.com.my; 3rd fl, Suria KLCC Shopping Complex) The latest Bollywood and Hollywood blockbusters can be viewed in the arctic atmosphere of KL's most convenient multiscreen cinema.

Actors Studio Theatre (off Map pp424-5; ☎ 2694 5400; www.theactorsstudio.com.my; 3rd fl, New Wing, Bangsar Shopping Centre, 285 Jl Maarof; tickets RM25-45) This well-regarded company hosts contemporary Malaysian plays and adaptations of classic theatre performances. Workshops are also offered – see p429.

Regular cultural performances and shows are held at the **Malaysian Tourist Information Complex** (Matic; Map pp424-5; ☎ 2164 3929, 2163 3667; 109 Jl Ampang; adult RMS; ☎ 2-2.30pm Tue, Thu, Sat & Sun) and the **Central Market** (Map p426; ☎ 2274 6542; admission free; ☎ available from information desk).

SHOPPING

Jl Petaling in the heart of Chinatown is a noisy, writhing mass of people and outdoor stalls selling cheap clothes, fruit, pirated CDs and a smattering of crafts; bargain very, very hard. More everyday items can be found at the tightly jammed **Chow Kit Market** (Map pp424-5; Jl TAR; ☎ 8am-8pm); also see p428 for details. For produce and weird meats from stingray to pig's penises, go to KL's largest wet market, the frenetic **Pudu Market** (Map pp424-5; ☎ 6am-2pm). The best *pasar malam* are on Saturday nights along Lorong TAR in Little India (Map p426) and Jl Raja Muda in Kampung Baru (Map pp424-5), southeast of Chow Kit. The Jl Masjid India in Little India is the place

STREET FASHION

The diversity of Malaysian fashion makes Western wardrobes look like government-issued uniforms. Walking the streets, you might pass a Muslim woman framed by a tropically coloured headscarf and a flowing full-length skirt and blouse (*baju kurung*). Turn a corner and you pass a Chinese woman wearing a catwalk miniskirt and a tank top. Following close behind is an older Indian woman wrapped tight in a sari. She and her daughter, in jeans and flip-flops, both wear *bindis* (the Hindu forehead dot). In just one block, the street fashions have spanned continents and no one has given another a disapproving look.

to shop for saris, Indian silks, carpets and other textiles.

Low Yat Plaza (Map p429; ☎ 2148 3651; 7 Jl 1/77 off Bukit Bintang) Go here for all your digital and electronic needs.

Kompleks Budaya Kraf (Map p429; ☎ 2162 7459; Jl Conlay; ☎ 10am-6pm) This place has a large selection of handicrafts.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Kuala Lumpur is Malaysia's principal international arrival gateway and it forms the crossroads for domestic bus, train and taxi travel.

Air

For details of international airlines, see p418.

Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA; off Map pp424-5; ☎ 8777 8888; www.klia.com.my; Pengrus Besar) is a flamboyant structure, located 75km south of the city centre at Sepang. Many airlines service this airport, but the country's international airline, **Malaysia Airlines** (☎ 1300 883 000; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my), is the major carrier. **Air Asia** (code AK; ☎ 8775 4000; www.airasia.com) flights arrive and depart from the nearby **Low Cost Carrier Terminal** (LCCT; off Map pp424-5; ☎ 1300 889 933) while **Berjaya Air** (code J8; ☎ 2145 2828; www.berjaya-air.com) flights use **Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah Airport** (off Map pp424-5; ☎ 7845 8382) in Subang, about 20km west of the city centre. See p421 for information on domestic routes and costs.

Bus

Most long-distance buses operate from the **Puduraya bus station** (Map p426; Jl Pudu), situated just east of Chinatown. A few travellers have reported being robbed late at night, so stay alert while in the area. The tourist police and information counters are right inside the main entrance. The left-luggage office is at the back. From Puduraya, buses go all over Peninsular Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. The only long-distance destinations that Puduraya doesn't handle are Kuala Lipis and Jerantun, which leave only from Pekeliling bus station.

Pekeliling (Map pp424-5; ☎ 4042 7256; Jl Tun Razak) and **Putra** (Map pp424-5; ☎ 4042 9530; Jl Putra) bus stations in the north of the city handle a greater number of services to the east coast than Puduraya. Buses at these stations often have seats available when Puduraya buses are fully booked.

Typical fares and journey times travelling from KL:

Destination	Fare (RM)	Duration (hr)
Cameron Highlands	20	3½
Georgetown (Penang)	24	5
Ipoh	14	3
Johor Bahru	24	4
Kota Bharu	30	10
Kuala Terengganu	30	7
Kuantan	17	4½
Lumut	19	4
Melaka	10	2½
Mersing	20	5½
Singapore	30	5½

Taxi

The long-distance taxi stand is on the 2nd floor of the **Puduraya bus station** (Map p426; Jl Pudu). Fixed whole-taxi fares include: Cameron Highlands (RM200), Melaka (RM150) and Penang (RM360). Do your homework on prices before dealing with taxi drivers who are unscrupulous about ripping-off tourists.

Train

KL is the hub of the **KTM** (☎ 2267 1200; www.ktmb.com.my) national railway system. The long-distance trains depart from KL Sentral (Map pp424-5). The **KTM information office** (☎ 10am-7pm) in the main hall can advise on schedules. There are departures for Butterworth, Alor Setar, Wakaf Baharu, Johor Bahru, Singapore and Thailand. Express-train seats can be booked up to 60 days in advance.

Not to be confused with the intercity long-distance line is the KTM Komuter, which runs from KL Sentral, linking central KL with the Klang Valley and Seremban.

GETTING AROUND

KL has an extensive public transport system. See p423 for details of getting to the city centre from KLIA airport. The only transport option to Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah Airport is a taxi; expect to pay RM50 to RM80.

Bus

Of the many local bus companies, **Intrakota** (☎ 7727 2727) and **Cityliner** (☎ 7982 7060) are the largest. Local buses leave from many of the bus terminals around the city, including **Puduraya bus station** (Map p426; Jl Pudu), near Plaza Rakyat LRT station, and Klang bus station (Map p426), near Pasar Seni LRT station. The maximum fare is usually RM1 for des-

tinations within the city limits; try to have the correct change ready when you board.

Taxi

Taxis in KL have meters but drivers refuse to use them so you have to bargain. Ask at your hotel about approximate fares before heading to a taxi stand, since the price skyrockets when a tourist approaches. Watch out for drivers who use the meter only when traffic is heavy – in this case the fare might be double (or more) the bargained rate. Trips around town are about RM5 to RM10.

Train

KL's pride and joy is the user-friendly **Light Rail Transit** (LRT; ☎ 1800 388 288; www.rapidkl.com.my) system, which is composed of the Ampang/Sentul Timur, Sri Petaling/Sentul Timur and Kelana Jaya/Terminal Putra lines. Fares range from RM1 to RM2.80 and trains run every six to 10 minutes from 6am to 11.50pm (11.30pm Sunday and holidays).

The **KL Monorail** (☎ 2273 1888) is a 16km elevated single-track train convenient for hops between Chinatown and the northern areas of Bukit Bintang and Chow Kit. Fares are RM1.20 to RM2.50 and trains run every 15 minutes from 6am to midnight.

KTM Komuter (☎ 2272 2828), not to be confused with the long-distance KTM service (see left), links Kuala Lumpur with outlying suburbs and the historic railway station.

KL Sentral station (Map pp424-5), in the Brickfields area, is the central transit station for all train travel in KL. Other interchange stations include Masjid Jamek (Map p426), for transfer between Star and Putra LRT; Hang Tuah and Titiwangsa (Map pp424-5), for transfer between KL Monorail and Star LRT; Bukit Nanas (Map p429), transfer between KL Monorail and Putra LRT; and Tasik Selatan, for transfer between KTM Komuter and Star LRT.

PENINSULAR MALAYSIA – WEST COAST

Malaysia's multiculturalism is best viewed along the west coast. Nestled against the Straits of Melaka, protected, for the most part, against swells and tsunamis, this part of the peninsula has entertained foreign

visitors since the days of early traders. Such a convenient shipping route has, over the centuries, created a cosmopolitan populace, well-schooled in English. The beaches and islands of this coast don't compare to those in the east or in other areas of Southeast Asia, but offer a laid-back opportunity to experience an authentic Malay way of life.

MELAKA

☎ 06 / pop 648,500

Lovers of beauty and food will become instantly intoxicated by the sultry charms of Melaka. The narrow streets of Chinatown exude small-town calm yet every cosmopolitan necessity is here, from funky cafés and eclectic art galleries to a diverse collection of restaurants and a congenial drinking scene. Beyond Chinatown, Melaka loses its soul to traffic, cement and over-sized shopping malls.

Historically Melaka has been one of the most sought-after havens in the region. In the 14th century Parameswara, a Hindu prince from Sumatra, chose Melaka as a favoured port for resupplying trading ships. From this time, Melaka became protected by the Chinese in 1405, then dominated by the Portuguese in 1511, then the Dutch in 1641 and then finally ceded to the British in 1795. The intermingling of peoples created the Peranakan people (also called Baba Nonya) who are descended from Chinese settlers who intermarried with Malays, the Chitties who are of mixed Indian and Malay heritage and Eurasians born of Malay and Portuguese love affairs.

Orientation

Chinatown is undoubtedly Melaka's most interesting and scenic area. Town Sq, also known as Dutch Sq, is the centre of a well-preserved museum district. Further to the northeast is Melaka's tiny Little India. Most of the backpacker guesthouses are in the newer, less charming part of town off Jl Melaka Raya.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

MPH (Ground fl, Mahkota Parade Shopping Complex; Jl Merdeka)

EMERGENCY

Tourist Police (☎ 285 4114; Jl Kota)

IMMIGRATION OFFICES

Immigration office (☎ 282 4958; 2nd fl, Wisma Persekutuan, Jl Hang Tuah)

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet Centre (Jl Bunga Raya)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Southern Hospital (☎ 283 5588; 169 Jl Bendahara)

MONEY

Moneychangers are scattered about town, especially near the guesthouses off Jl TMR and Chinatown.

HSBC (Jl Hang Tuah) With 24-hour ATMs that accept international cards.

OCBC Bank (Lorong Hang Jebat) Has a 24-hour ATM at a branch just over the bridge in Chinatown.

POST & TELEPHONE

Post office (Jl Laksamana) A small post office can be found off Town Sq.

Telekom Malaysia (☎ 8am-5pm) East of Bukit St Paul.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist office (☎ 281 4803; www.melaka.gov.my; Jl Kota; ☎ 8.45am-5pm, closed 12.15-2.45pm Fri) West of Town Sq.

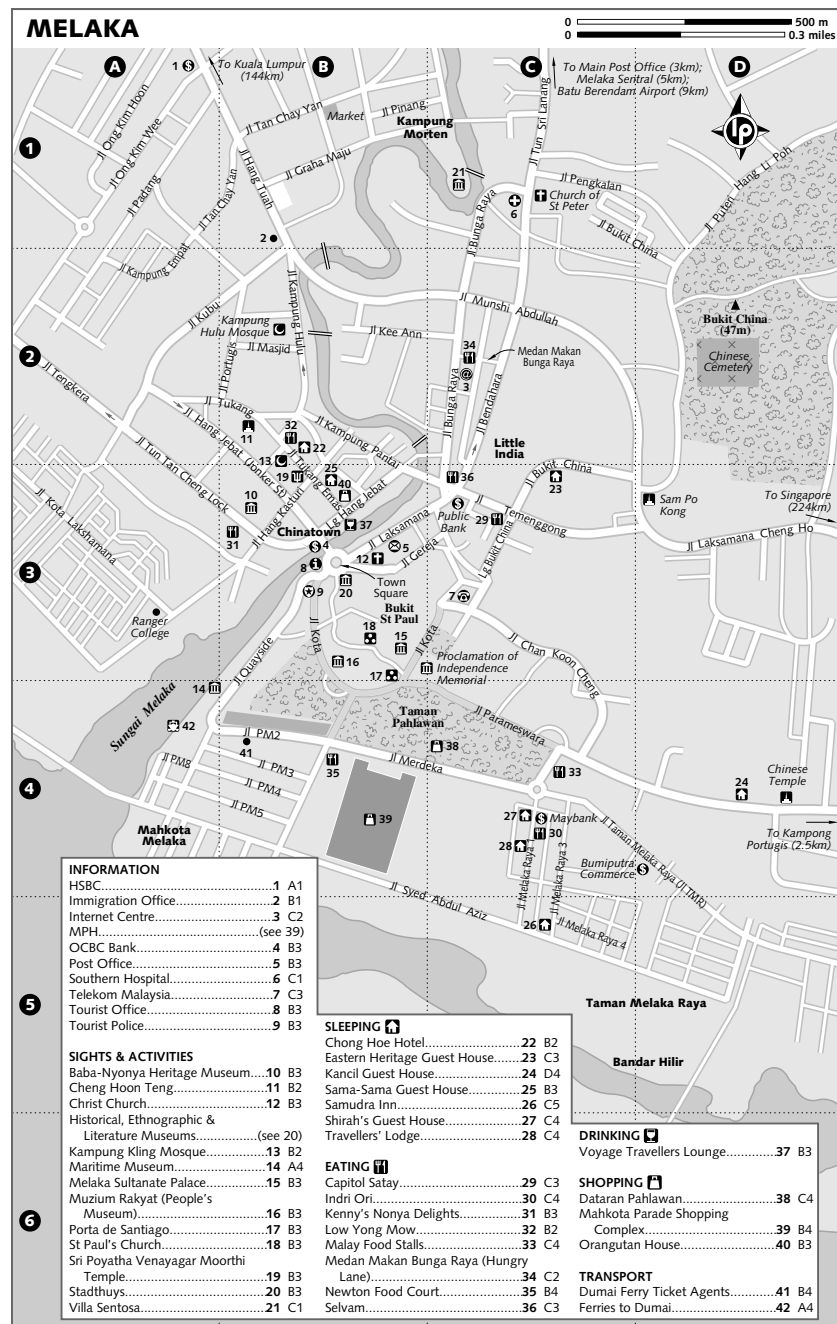
Sights

TOWN SQUARE & BUKIT ST PAUL

The most imposing relic of the Dutch period in Melaka is **Stadthuys** (Town Sq; adult RM5; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Sat-Thu, 9am-12.15pm & 2.45-5.30pm Fri), the massive red town hall and governors' residence. Believed to be the oldest Dutch building in the East, it now houses the **Historical, Ethnographic & Literature Museums**, which is included in the price of admission and exhaustively recounts Malaysian history and literary development. Facing the square is the bright-red **Christ Church** (1753), completing the geographic and cultural fantasy that this is just another Dutch village beside a tamed river.

From Stadthuys, steps lead up Bukit St Paul, which is a hill topped by the ruins of **St Paul's Church**, built in 1521 by a Portuguese sea captain, and overlooking the famous Straits of Melaka.

It took the Portuguese a month to divide and conquer Melaka's sultan rulers. After the siege ended, the Portuguese ousted the city's Muslim traders, tore down the primary mosque and replaced it with a fort named A Famosa ('The Famous'). Later, Dutch and



English invaders followed the Portuguese paradigm and attacked mercilessly from the sea. The sole surviving relic of the old Portuguese fort is **Porta de Santiago**, at the foot of Bukit St Paul; more remains of the wall have recently been uncovered at a site behind the tourist office.

Along Jl Kota are a string of cultural museums, the most interesting being the **Muzium Rakyat** (People's Museum; ☎ 282 6526; adult RM2; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sun). In this buffet collection of Malaysia's social and economic development is the 3rd-floor Beauty Museum, which explores different cultures' obsessions with mutilating themselves in order to look good.

A short walk east of Bukit St Paul is the **Melaka Sultanate Palace** (☎ 282 7464; adult RM2; ☎ 9am-6pm Wed-Mon), which houses a massive wooden replica of a Melaka sultan's palace.

Further west on the quayside is the **Maritime Museum** (☎ 283 0926; admission RM2; ☎ 9am-6pm Wed-Mon), housed in a re-creation of the Portuguese sailing ship, the *Flora de la Mar*, which sank off the coast while transporting Malayan booty back to Europe.

CHINATOWN

Melaka's Chinatown is wonderfully preserved; perhaps a little pickled in parts. Jl Tun Tan Cheng Lock is lined with ornate mansions built by Peranakan (Baba Nonya) rubber tycoons. But the primary tourist attraction is Jl Hang Jebat (Jonker St), which is lined with antique stores, a weekend night market and clan houses where the neighbourhood's senior citizens come to show off their karaoke prowess. Wander the small side streets where family shophouses are linked by veranda walkways, creating dramatically framed views of street life: a bare-bellied patriarch in his warehouse-living room, a wizened trishaw driver blaring outdated dance hits from his portable radio, or an earth-toned Chinese temple decorated with sensual dragons.

Baba-Nonya Heritage Museum (☎ 283 1273; 48-50 Jl Tun Tan Cheng Lock; adult RM8; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 2-4.30pm Wed-Mon) is a captivating museum of the Nonya culture set in a traditional Peranakan townhouse in Chinatown.

Cheng Hoon Teng (Qing Yun Ting, Green Clouds Temple; Jl Tukang) is Chinatown's most famous temple, dating back to 1646. It's Malaysia's oldest Chinese temple and all materials used in its building were imported from China.

VILLA SENTOSA

After sampling Melaka's Chinese and European heritage, don't overlook the city's Malay family tree. **Villa Sentosa** (☎ 282 3988; www.travel.to/villasentosa; 138 Kampong Morten; admission by donation; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Sat-Thu, 2.45-5pm Fri) is a private museum on the Melaka River in Kampung Morten. Tours led by family members include a visit to the ancestral *kampung* home, dating from the 1920s, filled with Malay handicrafts and interesting architectural adaptations for surviving the tropics before air-conditioning.

Sleeping

JL TAMAN MELAKA RAYA (JL TMR)

Melaka's guesthouse ghetto occupies the western end of Jl Taman Melaka Raya (Jl TMR), a charmless complex of shophouses about five- to 10-minute's walk to Chinatown. From the Melaka Sentral, take town bus 17 (60 sen) or a taxi (RM15 to RM20).

Many places are Muslim-run and owners strongly request that no pork or non-Halal Chinese food is brought onto the premises. Obviously beer IS not for sale, but most guesthouses allow BYO and drinking on the premises; ask first, however. Most backpacker-oriented places have a choice of shared or private bathrooms.

Shirah's Guest House (☎ 286 1041; 207-209 Jl Melaka Raya 1; dm/s/d RM10/15/20; 📶) Lots of Mediterranean colours and a gentle Malay vibe make Shirah's a particularly cosy backpackers. The three-bed dorm is a humane alternative to the usual bunker. The doubles are excellent value.

Samudra Inn (☎ 282 7441; 3488 Jl Taman Melaka Raya 3; dm RM10, r RM30-45; 📶) The owners at the very quiet Samudra run a tight ship and go above and beyond standard service to make sure guests are comfortable. It's a homestay atmosphere with chirping birds and satellite telly at night.

Travellers' Lodge (☎ 226 5709; 2148 Jl Melaka Raya 1; s RM14-20, d RM27-54; 📶) With an enticing elevated sitting area that has mats on the floors, a plant-filled rooftop terrace and good rooms – some which have lofts – this is a great choice. It's spotless and a good place to meet other travellers.

Kancil Guest House (☎ 281 4044; kancil@machinta.com.sg; 177 Jl Parameswara; s/tw/d RM18/28/30) It's a bit out of the way, but the Kancil is a distinctive family-run guesthouse with heaps of sitting

THE CULINARY PROWESS OF BABA NONYA

Fusion cuisine isn't a new phenomenon. In Melaka, Chinese-Malay cooking is called Nonya food, after the Peranakan women, known as Nonya, who did most of the cooking (men are Baba); the two cuisines merged back in the days when most people still believed the Earth was flat. Dishes here favour sweet flavours of coconut, coriander and dill due to an Indonesian influence. Penang also has Nonya food but the flavours tend to have more Thai-inspired sour and spicy notes. A few must-tries are:

Chicken Kapitan Chicken curry with tamarind juice, candlenut, turmeric and shrimp paste.

Popiah Spring rolls with meat, tofu, chilli, garlic and shallots.

Kangkung Belacan Water spinach stir-fried in a blend of chilli and shrimp paste.

areas and a lush garden at the back. Over its 15 years, travellers from far-flung destinations have painted murals on the walls. Laundry services and bike hire are available.

CHINATOWN

Melaka's most scenic section of town is a truly delightful place to stay. Because of preservation restrictions, however, the following places only have shared bathrooms. Take town bus 17 from Melaka Sentral to Town Sq (70 sen). A taxi should cost RM15 to RM20.

Eastern Heritage Guest House (☎ 283 3026; 8 Jl Bukit China; dm RM8, s/d/tr RM22/26/33; 📶) In a 1918 building, Eastern Heritage has polished wood floors, ancient tiles and an antique look from lots of eroding paint. The dorm is airless but the rooms are brightened up with murals – it's an all-round social place. Take a dip in the plunge pool on a hot day.

Sama-Sama Guest House (☎ 012 305 1980; www.sama-sama-guesthouse.com; 26 Jl Tukang Besi; r RM15-35) Scatterbrained Sama-Sama has big, creaky rooms arranged around an interior courtyard of water lilies and cool breezes. Downstairs lazy cats and the odd human snooze to a soundtrack of reggae; the neighbourhood characters assemble here after sunset.

Chong Hoe Hotel (☎ 282 6102; 26 Jl Tukang Emas; r RM25-45; 📶) This Chinese-run hotel is straightforward basic but you can't beat the location.

Eating

Melaka's most famous cuisine is Nonya food (see boxed text, above). In Melaka the Portuguese might have wreaked havoc on civic order, but they built up a tradition for cakes and seafood, most obvious in the Eurasian dish of devil's curry. Then there are the immigrant contributions of Indian curries and the versatile Chinese noodle dishes.

Hawker stalls around the lively Jl TMR roundabout are a good bet for the regional version of laksa.

Low Yong Mow (32 Jl Tukang Emas; dim sum RM1-3; ☎ 5am-noon Wed-Mon) A bustling Chinese favourite for a traditional dim sum breakfast and famed for its giant *pao* (pork buns).

Indi Ori (☎ 282 4777; 236 & 237 Jl Melaka Raya 1; dishes RM1-15; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Get delicious Indonesian Padang food here – it's just like the real thing but without the flies. Order plates of food from the counter and enjoy them family style with rice. Other favourites include avocado juice with chocolate sauce (RM4.50), and Sekotang (hot ginger with egg yolk, sweet cream and peanut dumplings; RM5.80).

Kenny's Nonya Delights (Jl Tun Tan Cheng Lock; meals RM1.50-5; ☎ breakfast & lunch Tue-Sun) The best place for Nonya food on a budget, Kenny's whips up an excellent *nasi lemak* (RM1.50) at breakfast and *popiah* (spring rolls; RM4) and laksa (RM3) at lunch. The owners bottle some of their sauces, which are a great, if heavy, souvenir.

Medan Makan Bunga Raya (btwn Jl Bunga Raya & Jl Bendahara; dishes RM2-6; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) When you hear the sound of the meat cleaver, you've reached 'Hungry Lane', known for Indian-style curry-pork rice and *gula melaka* (palm sugar) during the day. At night more stalls pop up.

Newton Food Court (Jl Merdeka; meals RM3-15; ☎ lunch & dinner) Get Chinese in the main hall and halal food at the back of this new food court under an elegant Malay-style roof and bordered by palms.

Ourpick Capitol Satay (☎ 283 5508; 41 Lorong Bukit China; meals RM5-10; ☎ Tue-Sun) Capitol is enough to make you move to Melaka. It's famous for satay *celup* (a Melaka adaptation of satay steambowl). Stainless-steel tables have a bubbling vat of satay sauce in the middle, which

is regularly replenished. You dunk skewers of okra (ladies' finger) stuffed with fish, tofu, Chinese sausage, chicken, pork, prawns, bok choy, and side dishes of pickled egg with pickled ginger.

Selvam (☎ 281 9223; 3 Jl Temenggong; meals RM7; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Melakans love this Little India banana-leaf smorgasbord. There's a choice range of tasty and cheap curries and roti, plus a Friday afternoon vegetarian special with 10 tasty dishes for only RM6.

Kampong Portugis (☺ dinner) In the eastern part of the city, 3km from Town Sq, is a small community claiming mixed Portuguese-Indian ancestry. Often hyped as a mini-Lisbon, this otherwise nondescript neighbourhood caters to the curious tourists with food stalls and a few clunky Eurasian restaurants. On weekend evenings, Restoran de Lisbon (meals RM30) is known for its chilli crabs and devil curry. At any other time of the week, Medan Portugis has food stalls, serving many of the same dishes at seaside tables. Take town bus 17 to Kampong Portugis and walk towards the sea; coming back to town, hop off the bus at Mahkota Parade Shopping Complex before it speeds onto the flyover.

Drinking

During the weekend night market on Jonker St, the happening bar strip on Jl Hang Lekir turns into a street party closed off to traffic. Medan Portugis, in Kampong Portugis (see above), has cheap beers and sunset views. The alleys in the backpacker ghetto off Jl TMR have lots of watering troughs.

Voyage Travellers Lounge (40 Lorong Hang Jebat; ☑) Melt into a wicker chair with a snack and a beer and chat with the friendly regulars. Movie night is 9.30pm Wednesday and patrons can use the internet for half an hour for free.

Shopping

A wander through Chinatown will have you wishing for more room in your pack with its quality assortment of clothing, trinket and antique shops. **Dataran Pahlawan** (Jl Merdeka) and **Mahkota Parade Shopping Complex** (Jl Merdeka) are Melaka's two megamalls, the former being the larger, more fashion-conscious and the latter being better for practical needs such as a pharmacy or camera shop.

Orangutan House (☎ 282 6872; www.charlescham.com; 59 Lorong Hang Jebat) Doubling as an art gal-

GETTING TO INDONESIA

High-speed ferries make the trip from Melaka to Dumai, in Sumatra, twice daily at around 9.30am and 3pm (one way/return RM80/129, 1¼ hours). **Madai Shipping** (☎ 06-284 0671; Jl PM2) and **Tunas Rumpat Express** (☎ 06-283 2506; Jl PM2) have ticket offices near the jetty (which is on Jl Quay-side). Travellers will need a visa to enter Dumai (for more information, see p341).

See p267 for information on doing the trip in reverse.

lery, this place sells colourful works by very hip local artist Charles Cham.

Getting There & Away

Melaka is 144km southeast of KL.

Melaka's local bus station, express bus station and taxi station are all combined into the massive **Melaka Sentral** (Jl Panglima Awang), roughly 5km north of Town Sq. Because Melaka is a popular weekend destination, make advance bus reservations for Singapore and Kuala Lumpur.

The following long-distance destinations can be reached from Melaka: KL (RM10, two hours, hourly from 8am to 7.30pm), Georgetown (RM35, eight hours, two daily), Ipoh (RM25, five hours, two daily), Jerantut (RM16.50, five hours, one daily), Johor Bahru (RM15, three hours, hourly 8am to 11am and 1pm to 6pm), Kota Bharu (RM32, 10 hours, five daily), Kuala Terengganu (RM34, nine hours, five daily), Kuantan (RM19, five hours, two daily), Mersing (RM14.80, 4½ hours, two daily) and Singapore (RM16, 4½ hours, hourly 8am to 6pm).

If you're hustling back to KL International Airport, you can bypass KL by taking a Seremban-bound bus (RM5, 1½ hours, every 30 minutes) and then catch a local bus (RM6) to KLIA; give yourself plenty of time, though.

Getting Around

Bus 17 runs frequently from the Melaka Sentral bus station to Town Sq, Mahkota Parade Shopping Complex, Taman Melaka Raya (50 sen) and Medan Portugis (80 sen).

Melaka is a walking city. Bicycles can be hired at some guesthouses for around RM10 per day; there are also a few bike-hire outfits around town.

A trishaw should cost around RM10 for any one-way trip within town, but you'll have to bargain. Taxis charge around RM8 to RM10 within a 5km radius with a 50% surcharge between 1am and 6am.

CAMERON HIGHLANDS

☎ 05

A winding road east of Hwy 1 leads into the cool mountains of forest-clad Cameron Highlands, which demurely blankets an area 1300m to 1829m above sea level. In a suspended state of British colonial calm, altitude-loving tea fields dress the undulating hills in an emerald-coloured corduroy scattered with strawberry and honeybee farms. All this is in the middle of a biodiverse jungle where trail-eating tree roots get you clambering on all fours and carnivorous flowers swig insects.

Overdevelopment has been an ongoing problem and deforestation is held responsible in a marked rise in temperature recently. Moreover, there have been severe water shortages and contamination problems. Use water sparingly while in the highlands and take care to create as little waste as possible (in the form of drink cans, plastic packaging etc). A new water booster system in Kuala Terlah began operating in March 2007 but water shortages still remain. To help with projects including trash removal and recycling go to www.reach.org.my.

Orientation & Information

The Cameron Highlands stretches along the road from the town of Ringlet, through to the main highland towns of Tanah Rata, Brinchang and beyond to smaller villages in the northeast.

Tanah Rata is the main highland town for budget accommodation and other essentials. Most guesthouses offer internet access for around RM3 an hour.

Maybank (Jl Mentigi) The only bank/moneychanger in Tanah Rata.

Tourist Information Centre (☎ 519 7246; mctic@tm.net.my; off Jl Dayang Endah; ☺ 8.30am-1pm & 2-5pm)

Very helpful with maps and trail information.

Sights & Activities

Taking in a jungle stroll is often the best way to reach some of the area's other tourist attractions. Most walks and sights can be accessed by the local bus, a rattler that chugs up and down the main highway.

Visiting one of the tea plantations is another must. The rolling hills are carpeted with hectares of green and occasionally speckled with tea pickers wading between the rows snipping the tender green tips. **Sungai Palas Boh Tea Estate** (Gunung Brinchang Rd, Brinchang; admission free; ☺ 8.30am-4.30pm Tue-Sun) is the easiest plantation to visit on your own. Tours are free and the tea rooms out the back offer grand vistas. Take the local bus north from Tanah Rata bus station past Brinchang towards Kampong Raja. In between is a tourist strip of strawberry and butterfly farms; hop off at the roadside vegetable stalls and follow the intersecting road.

Boh Tea Estate (Boh Rd Habu, Ringlet; admission free; ☺ 8.30am-4.30pm) below Tanah Rata, 8km from the main road, is also open to the public. It's only a 45-minute walk from the end of jungle Trail 9A, which you can pick up outside of Tanah Rata.

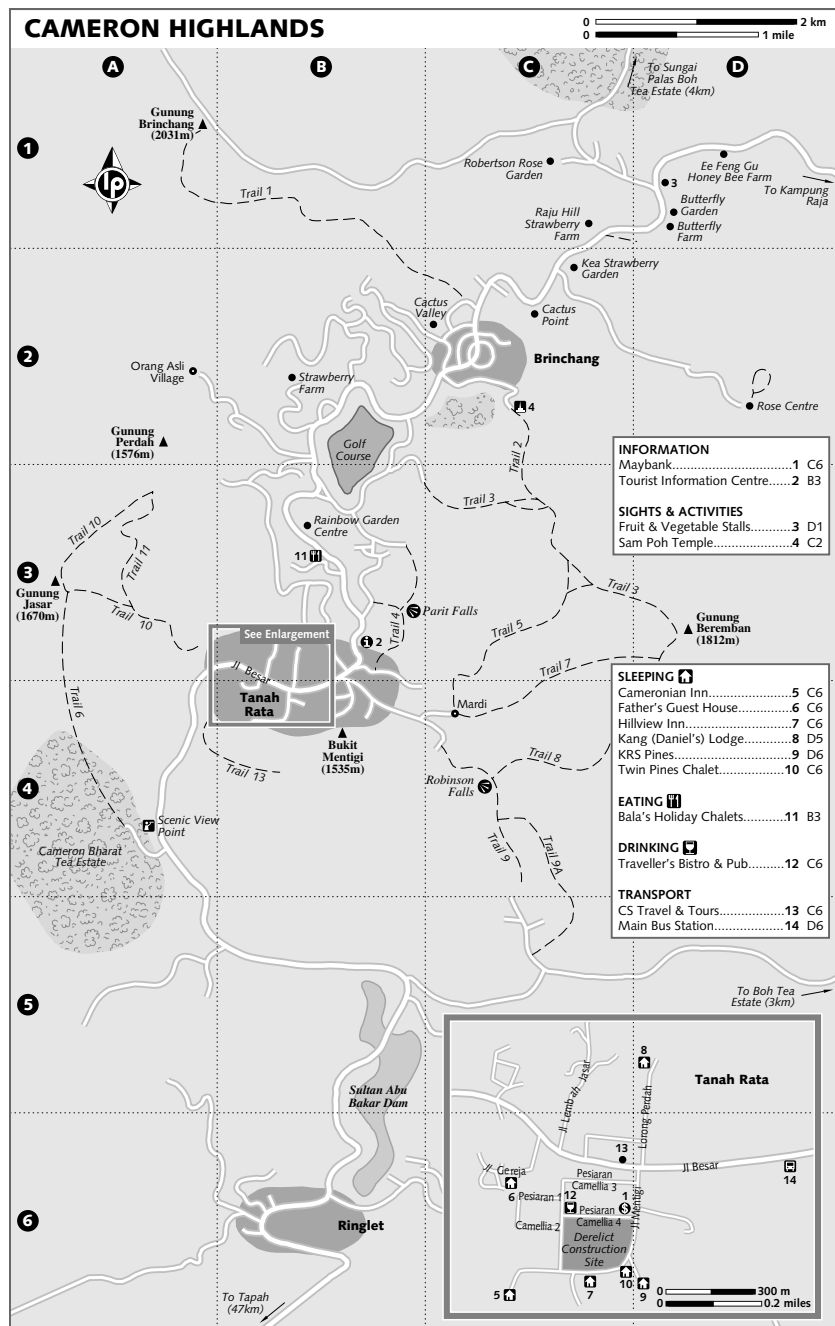
Sam Poh Temple (Brinchang; admission by donation; ☺ 8.30am-6pm) is a typically Chinese kaleidoscope of Buddha statues, stone lions and incense burners. It's accessible from Tanah Rata – take Trail 3, near the golf course, and then connect to Trail 2.

When you head out on a trail, go in pairs, take lots of drinking water and rain gear. Check with the Tourist Information Centre about the state of the trails and recommended walks. Guesthouses in Tanah Rata often employ informal guides who lead daily walks. Inexperienced walkers are advised to employ a guide on the longer trails; in recent years, several people have become lost. Single women have also been attacked in remote areas. At the time of writing there was an 'exhibitionist' showing his goods near and around Robinson's Falls.

Four operators in Tanah Rata offer a variety of day trips that include a visit to a tea plantation, strawberry farm, flower and cactus nursery, honey farm and butterfly farm for around RM25 per person. Tours operating out of Father's Guest House include a good jungle-flora trip perfect for plant nerds.

Sleeping

Book early during peak holiday periods (April, August and December). Most guesthouses have a mix of rooms with shared and private bathrooms, and all have hot water. Many also have libraries, video lounges, laundry, internet access and trekking information.



Kang (Daniel's) Lodge (☎ 491 5823; daniel@lonelyplanet.com; 9 Lorong Perdah; dm/s/d/tr/q RM8/30/40/50/60) Home to the bamboo-clad Jungle Bar, Daniel's is set up for partying. The cosy front terrace doubles as a sociable lounge area good for chilling out after a night at the bar. Concrete rooms are clean and tiled but dark and dank. The 'F**k the Lonely Planet' sign at the reception desk enhances the lodge's rowdy attitude.

Twin Pines Chalet (☎ 491 2169; www.twinpines.com; 2 JI Mentigi; dm/d/tr/q RM8/25/35/45) Another social place where nights are spent around a bonfire, watching films in the lounge or sipping tea with other travellers on the patio. Room walls actually seem to enhance the sounds from the exterior but it's a clean and well-cared for place.

Cameronian Inn (☎ 491 1327; 16 JI Mentigi; dm/s/d/f RM8/20/40/60) Take tea and scones on the Tudor-style patio of this place, which is nestled among English gardens. The rooms aren't as appealing as the exterior and are mostly the standard, windowless variety. Paying more ups the standards.

our pick **Father's Guest House** (☎ 491 2484; www.fathers.cameronhighlands.com; PO Box 15, Tanah Rata; dm/s/d RM9/20/45) Perched on a flower bedecked butte, Father's excellent reputation is earned from its tip-top management and cheerful setting. Garden-side rooms have doors that open onto a flower-filled patio, the old bunker-style Nissen huts are surprisingly comfortable and the dorm has a summer-camp camaraderie. It's a family-run business and is a couple of minutes' walk from JI Besar.

KRS Pines (☎ 491 2777; 7 JI Mentigi; dm/d/tr RM30/50/80) Run by the Twin Pines gang, this brand-new blocklike cement structure has spotless rooms reminiscent of a college dorm. Rooms without private bathroom are windowless and essentially closets – sliding doors and all – while the dorm is bright and cheerful.

Hillview Inn (☎ 491 2915; hillview_inn@hotmail.com; 17 JI Mentigi; d RM55-88) Carpeted, spacious rooms, all with attached bathroom go above and beyond backpacker standards. Most rooms have their own terrace looking out over the hills; there's a very relaxed vibe and a prevalent sense of brightness and space.

Eating & Drinking

Eating in Tanah Rata is a no-brainer. There are three blocks' worth of options – Malay, Indian and Chinese. The cheapest food in

town is found at a row of Malay stalls along JI Besar, near the bus station. Keep an eye out for locally produced strawberry ice cream.

Bala's Holiday Chalet (☎ 491 1660; ☎ lunch & dinner) A local highlands tradition is taking tea with the requisite scones and jam; many guesthouse in town offer this midday meal but this place, between Tanah Rata and Brinchang, is worth checking out because of its historic and wooded setting.

Traveller's Bistro & Pub (68A Prsn Camelia 3; ☎ 4pm-2am) The only bar in Tanah Rata besides the Jungle Bar at Kang Lodge (see left) pumps cheesy jazz over its sidewalk-side terrace and serves cocktails as well as beer. It ain't Vegas but it's not a bad place for a drink.

Getting There & Around

From Tanah Rata, buses go to/from KL (RM20, four hours, six daily between 8am and 4.30pm). Another bus leaves Tanah Rata bound for Ipoh (RM7.90, two hours, five daily) and Georgetown (RM23). Buses also go to Singapore (RM95, six hours, one daily). Book tickets at the bus station. For east coast destinations, connect through Ipoh.

CS Travel & Tours (☎ 491 1200; 47 JI Besar) sells tickets for daily minibuses to Kuala Besut (RM60, six hours) to catch a boat to Pulau Perhentian (see p467 for details) or Kuala Tahan (Taman Negara; RM85, eight hours). You can also take these minibuses partway and get off at Gua Musang to catch the Jungle Railway (see p471).

Local buses run from Tanah Rata to Brinchang (RM1, every 1½ hours from 6.30am to 6.30pm) and less frequently on to Kampung Raja (RM2.40), passing butterfly attractions and the turn-off to Sungai Palas Boh.

Taxi services from Tanah Rata include Ringlet (RM15), Brinchang (RM6), Sungai Palas Boh Tea Estate (RM20) and Boh Tea Estate (RM25). For touring around, a taxi costs RM25 per hour, or you can go up to Gunung Brinchang and back for RM80.

IPOH

☎ 05 / pop 710,800

Ipoh (ee-po) is a convenient transit link to the Cameron Highlands, Pulau Pangkor and beyond that does little else to entice a longer stay. It's dubbed the 'Bougainvillea City', and although it's blessed with a spacious *padang*

(town square) and some decent architecture, it's not exactly exploding with flowers. If you do hang around, stick to the 'Old Town' area at night since the 'New Town' has a reputation for prostitution.

Orientation & Information

Many of Ipoh's streets have been renamed, but some may still be known by their old names. These include Jl CM Yussuf (formerly Jl Chamberlain), Jl Bandar Timah (formerly Jl Leech), Jl Dato Maharajah Lela (formerly Jl Station), Jl Sultan Idris Shah (Jl Clarke), and Jl Panglima Bukit Gantang Wahab (Jl Kelab). Ipoh's 'Old Town' is west of Sungai Kinta, New Town is east.

The two banks listed here are near the clock tower.

HSBC (Jl Dato Maharajah Lela)

Perak Tourist Information Centre (☎ 241 2957;

Jl Tun Sambanthan; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 8am-12.15pm & 2.45-4.30pm Fri, 8am-1pm Sat)

Standard Chartered Bank (Jl Dato Maharajah Lela)

Sights

Ipoh's **Old Town** showcases elegant colonial architecture and the **train station** (known locally as the 'Taj Mahal') is magnificent.

There are spiritual Buddhist cave-temples on the outskirts of the city, including **Perak Tong** (☎ 8am-6pm), 6km north on the road to Kuala Kangsar, and **Sam Poh Tong** (☎ 8am-4.30pm), a few kilometres to the south. Both are easily accessible by local bus.

Sleeping & Eating

Ipoh's culinary specialities include *kway teow* (rice-noodle soup) and a regional variation of curry laksa merging Chinese barbecue pork with an Indian-style curry.

Decent budget places are in short supply in Ipoh.

Sun Golden Inn (☎ 243 6255; 17 Jl Che Tak; r RM50; ☎) This simple spot has a fashion-fearless owner who will be eager to bargain over rates.

New Caspian (☎ 255 1221; Jl Ali Pritchay; r RM55) One of the town's better options, the New Caspian is run by a nice couple and rooms have TV and mould-free bathrooms. Don't confuse it with its less appealing namesake on Jl Jubilee.

Grand View Hotel (☎ 243 1488; 36 Jl Horley; r RM70-80; ☎) One of the smarter midrange places, with clean, brightly furnished rooms in a quiet

area near the city centre; the hotel is aptly named.

FMS Bar & Restaurant (☎ 253 7678; 2 Jl Sultan Idris Shah; dishes from RM7; ☎ lunch & dinner) It's an excellent Chinese restaurant in a beautifully restored colonial building on the edge of the *padang*. Seafood and bean-curd dishes are winners and there's a small saloon-style bar downstairs.

Medan Selera Dato Tawhil Azar (Jl Raja Musa Aziz; ☎ dinner) This large open-air food stall around a small square is a good spot for a Malay meal in the evening.

Getting There & Away

Ipoh is 205km north of KL and 164km south of Butterworth. The **long-distance bus station** (Medan Gopeng) is south of the train station and the city centre; a taxi ride from the main hotel area should be around RM10.

Destinations and standard fares: Alor Setar (RM17, four hours, two daily), Butterworth (RM10.70, three hours, five daily), Hat Yai in Thailand (RM35, nine hours, one daily), Johor Bahru (RM37, eight hours, two daily), Kota Bharu (RM25.40, seven hours, one daily), KL (RM14, three hours, hourly), Lumut (RM6.50, two hours, frequent), Melaka (RM22.70, five hours, three daily) and Tanah Rata (RM7.90, two hours, frequent). There is also an Ipoh-KLIA (KL International Airport) express service (RM48, three hours, four daily). From the airport, the Ipoh-bound bus makes four trips from 7.30am to 6.30pm.

The local bus station is northwest of the long-distance station on the other side of the roundabout. Local buses depart from here for outlying regions close to Ipoh, such as Kuala Kangsar (RM4.70) and Lumut (RM6.50).

Ipoh's **train station** (☎ 254 7987) is on the main Singapore-Butterworth line. The train to KL (*ekonomi*/2nd class RM10/18) leaves after midnight, arriving early morning; in the opposite direction, a daily train heads to Butterworth (*ekonomi*/2nd class RM9/17) after midnight, arriving early morning, before continuing to Hat Yai in Thailand.

LUMUT

☎ 05

Lumut is the departure point for Pulau Pangkor. **Tourism Malaysia** (☎ 683 4057; Jl Sultan Idris Shah; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1.45pm Sat) is midway between the jetty and the bus station. Next door you'll find a moneychanger offering better

rates than on Pulau Pangkor, and Maybank further down the street.

If you get marooned in town, head straight to **Era Backpackers Hotel** (7-9 Jl Raja Muda Musa; dm RM15, r RM25-60) directly across from the bus station, which was being remodelled when we passed and has a helpful and knowledgeable owner. Some rooms have private bathrooms.

Direct buses run to/from KL (RM16, four hours, eight daily), Butterworth (RM15, five hours, three daily), JB (RM48, 10 hours, two daily), Kota Bharu (RM30.90, eight hours, four daily) and Melaka (RM31, eight hours, two daily). There are no direct buses from Lumut to the Cameron Highlands; take a bus to Ipoh (RM7.50, two hours, hourly), then transfer to Tanah Rata. Try to get on a bus going to the Medan Gopeng bus station in Ipoh or you'll have to hop on a shuttle bus from the city bus station (1RM, frequent) to connect with Tanah Rata buses.

The Pulau Pangkor pier is an easy walk from the bus station. Boats run every 30 minutes and cost RM10.

PULAU PANGKOR

☎ 05 / pop 25,000

Pulau Pangkor is more of a girl-next-door island as opposed to the supermodels of the east coast and Langkawi. That said, it feels good to get away from the glitz and settle into an honest *kampung* with a lazy island atmosphere. The jungle is swarming with monkeys and hornbills and you can dine nightly on fresh fish while watching the sunset. Only a half-day from KL, it's a great place to burn up a few days before a flight.

Pangkor's piece of history, the foundations of a **Dutch fort** dating from 1670, is 3km south of Pangkor Town at Teluk Gedong.

Ferries from Lumut first stop on the eastern side of the island at Sungai Pinang Kecil (SPK) and then go to Pangkor Town, where you'll find banks, restaurants and shops.

Sights & Activities

The main beaches are on the west coast. Travellers, especially women, should take care on empty stretches at the island's northeastern side and south of Pangkor Town.

Five minutes' walk north of Teluk Nipah, **Coral Bay** is the best beach on this side of the island, with clear, emerald-green water, due to the presence of limestone.

Pasir Bogak is a swimming beach favoured by holidaying Malaysians, and gets crowded during holidays when it also gets trashed. It's narrow, with white sand and mostly midrange accommodation.

A popular backpacker haven, **Teluk Nipah** is north of Pasir Bogak. This is a scenic beach with offshore islands, a variety of budget accommodation and a lively atmosphere.

Sleeping

TELUK NIPAH

Most accommodation is set on access roads between the beachfront road and the jungle – a blessing in disguise when the local kids start racing their motorcycles along the main drag. Inexpensive A-frame huts have shared bathrooms.

Nazri Nipah Camp (☎ 685 2014; rozie1982@hotmail.com; dm RM10, r RM30-45) Hugging the jungle, this reggae-vibed, bamboo-clad, back-to-nature spot gets two thumbs up for ambience and will get your feet up for some serious chilling. Chess sets and a garden common area inspire social get-togethers.

D'Lima Chalets (☎ 567 6923; r RM30) Clean, basic rooms with fan and TV are similar to a slew of other places except the price is lower and the welcome more friendly. Go figure.

Ombak Inn (☎ 685 5223; r RM40-70; ☎) Get an exceptionally warm Malay welcome at this collection of A-frame ovens and cheery air-conditioned rooms set in a cat-filled garden. The price includes a generous breakfast.

Sunset View Chalet (☎ 685 5448; sunsetvu@tm.net.my; r RM50-70; ☎) Rows of tidy wooden bungalows are linked by a bright bougainvillea archway. At around 6.45pm the owner attracts local hornbills by feeding them bread. Anyone can come by and try tossing crumbs in the air to be caught by the swooping birds.

PASIR BOGAK

The atmosphere here is lacking compared to Teluk Nipah; the place tends to be strewn with litter – fewer overseas travellers stay here. If you choose to get away from the 'scene', try **Pankor Village Beach Resort** (☎ 685 2163; dm/r from RM25/145; ☎) at the cleaner western end of the beach. Besides the dorm and comfortable rooms, you can also rent tents (RM14).

Eating & Drinking

Several of Teluk Nipah's guesthouses have restaurants, though outside the high season

(November to March), these often close down. Most restaurants serve alcohol. There are also some basic food stalls at the beach.

Ashraff Tom Yam Thai Corner (Teluk Nipah; whole fish RM35; ☎ lunch & dinner) Everyone in Pangkor will tell you to go here for fresh fish – listen to 'em! A whole fish prepared to your liking feeds two people and accompaniments cost extra. Tables are right on the beach and perfectly situated for sunsets. There's also cheaper Malay fare such as fried rice and noodles (RM4).

Nipa' Nipa' Beach Cafe (Teluk Nipah; ☎ lunch & dinner) Open till 'silly hours', this stylish, outdoor pub-café at the southern end of the beach has cool (as in from this decade) music, a pool table, beer (10RM), cocktails (from RM12) and quality Western food.

Getting There & Away

Berjaya Air (code J8; ☎ 685 5828; www.berjaya-air.com) flies to/from KL's Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah Airport (RM237), daily except on Tuesday and Thursday.

In the high season, ferries (return RM10, 45 minutes, every 30 minutes from 7am to 8pm) run to and from Lumut and Pangkor Town.

Getting Around

There are no public buses but pink mini-bus taxis operate between 6.30am and 9pm. Fares are set for the entire vehicle to/from the jetty in Pangkor Town and go to Pasir Bogak (RM4), Teluk Nipah (RM10) and around the island (RM35 to RM45).

Motorcycles (RM30) and bicycles (RM15) can be rented in Pangkor town and at main beaches.

BUTTERWORTH

This mainland town is the jumping-off point for Pulau Penang. The Butterworth–Penang ferry jetty (RM1.20, every 20 minutes from 5.30am to 12.30pm) is conveniently located next to the train and bus stations. Fares for the ferry are charged only for the journey from Butterworth to Georgetown (on Penang); returning to Butterworth is free.

Buses depart from Butterworth to the following destinations: Johor Bahru (RM49, 12 hours, six daily), KL (RM26, five hours, hourly), Kota Bharu (RM27.90, seven hours, two daily), Kuala Terengganu (RM40, 10 hours), Kuantan (RM43, 12 hours, six daily), Melaka (RM36, 12 hours, two daily) and Singapore (RM53, nine hours, two daily).

There is a nightly train to KL (economy/2nd class/berth RM17/38/48) from the **train station** (☎ 323 7962) that arrives the next morning. Heading north, there are two daily trains to Hat Yai, Thailand (economy/2nd class/berth RM19/27/68); one leaves early morning and arrives mid-morning Thai time (one hour behind), and the other leaves early afternoon and arriving in Hat Yai in the evening. The latter service continues to Bangkok arriving at around noon the next day. Times and fares vary.

PULAU PENANG

Back when the distinction between governments, armies and companies was less precise, the British-based East India Company sailed into Penang harbour and took over the 28-sq-km island as its first settlement on the Malay peninsula, a move intended to break Dutch Melaka's monopoly of the spice trade.

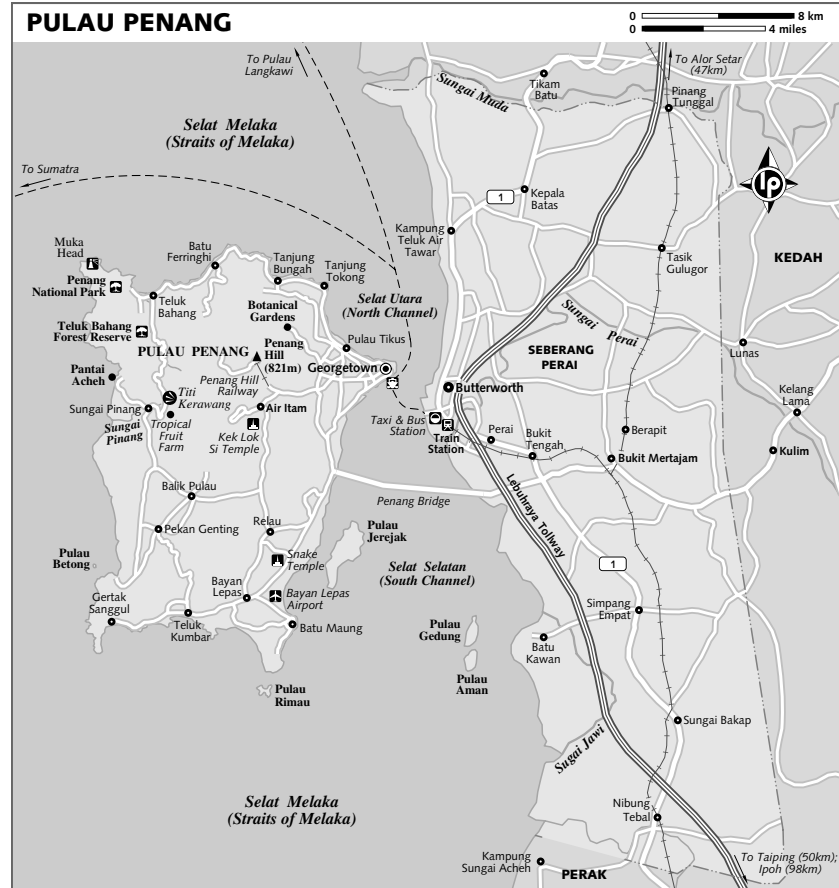
What evolved on the formerly unpopulated 'Betel Nut Island' was a bustling port. Entrepreneurs of every imaginable ethnicity, most notably Chinese, flocked to this new land, creating wealth and cultural hybrids. Like many company settlements, Penang wilted after the collapse of the British Empire. Today it's become the 'Silicon Valley' of Malaysia although this high-tech world is scarcely noticeable to the casual traveller.

Beyond Georgetown's heat and decay are beach resorts, such as Batu Ferringhi, and the sleepy Malay fishing village of Teluk Bahang.

Georgetown

☎ 04

It's full of car exhaust and has a marked lack of sidewalks, but Georgetown is able to woe even the most acute cityphobe with its never-ending cultural surprises. Dodge traffic while strolling past Chinese shophouses where folks might be roasting coffee over a fire or artistically sculpting giant forms of incense for a ceremony. Little India is like a street party at night with its twinkling lights and blaring Bollywood music while the serious white buildings of the Colonial District sit mutely along the waterfront. It's a grazing city, showcasing the culinary offspring of the island's unique cultural intermingling. Off the island, Georgetown is often referred to as Penang (Pinang).



ORIENTATION

Georgetown is at the northeastern corner of Pulau Penang. Central Georgetown is compact and easily navigated on foot. Many of the town's oldest mosques, temples and churches can be found at, and around, Lebuhraya Pitt (also called Jl Masjid Kapitan Keling). Following Jl Penang southwest, you'll reach Kompleks Komtar (Kompleks Tun Abdul Razak), the island's transport hub and shopping centre.

INFORMATION

Branches of major banks and 24-hour ATMs are concentrated around Kompleks Komtar and around Lebuhraya Pantai and Lebuhraya Downing, near the main post and Telekom offices.

Internet access is widely available on Lebuhraya Chulia (rates start at RM1 per minute). You can stock up on reading supplies at the host of secondhand bookshops.

General Hospital (☎ 229 3333; Jl Residenji) About 2km west of Kompleks Komtar.

HS Sam Book Store (☎ 262 2705; 473 Lebuhraya Chulia)

Immigration Office (☎ 261 5122; 29A Lebuhraya Pantai)

Loh Guan Lye Specialist Centre (☎ 228 8501; 19 Jl Logan)

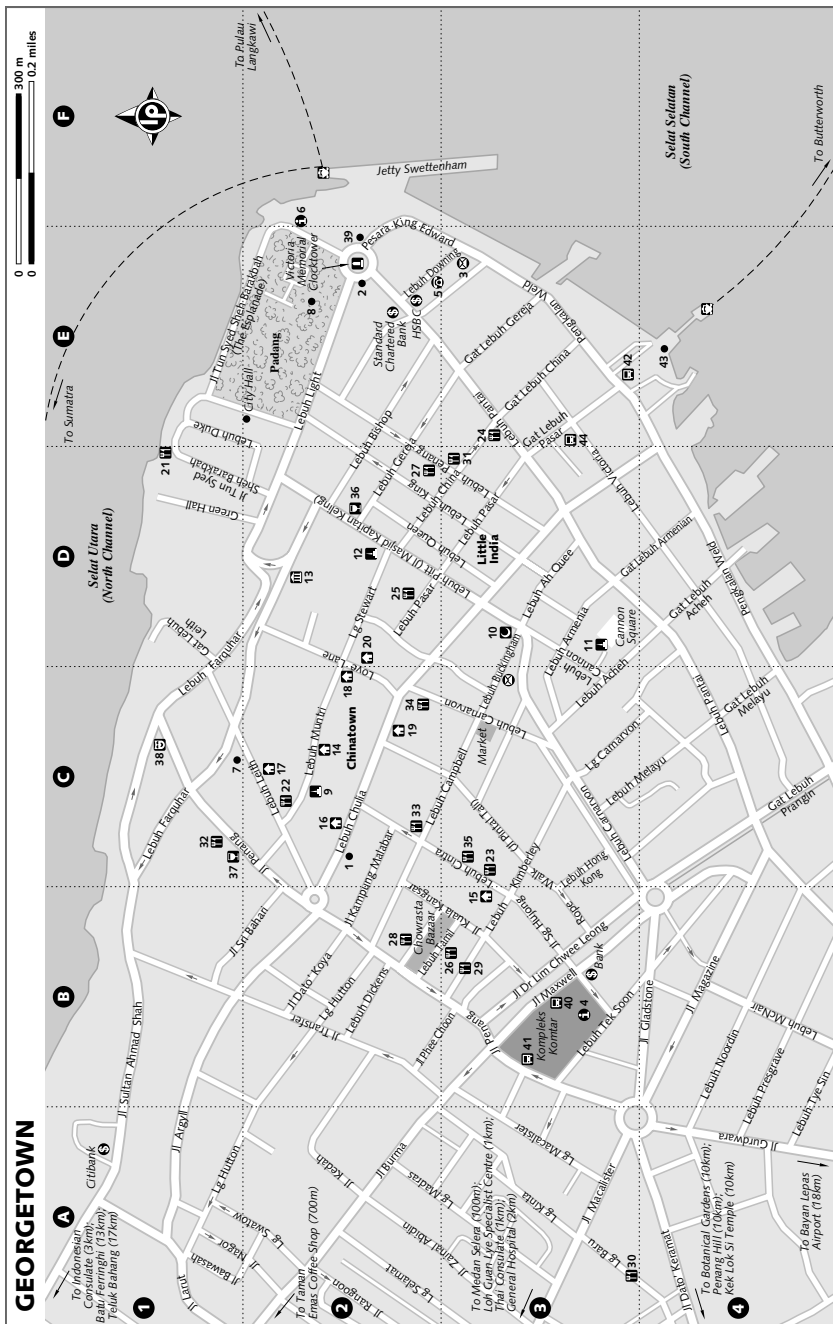
Medical services, 1km west of Kompleks Komtar.

Penang Tourist Guides Association (☎ 261 4461; 3rd fl, Kompleks Komtar, Jl Penang; ☎ 10am–6pm Mon–Sat)

Excellent tourist office, but hard to find; look for signs near the McDonald's on the 3rd floor.

Popular Bookshop (☎ 263 6122; Kompleks Komtar)

Tourism Malaysia (☎ 262 0066; 10 Jl Tun Syed Sheh Barakbah; ☎ 8am–5pm Mon–Fri)



DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

While generally a safe place to wander around, Georgetown has its seamy side. Travellers have been mugged at Love Lane and other dimly lit side streets, so take care around this area if you're out late, and take a taxi or trishaw to your accommodation. Motorcycle snatch thieves are also a problem, so take care of shoulder bags and purses. Women get hassled a lot here; dressing conservatively eases, but doesn't erase, the problem.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion

A magnificent periwinkle-blue mansion, **Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion** (☎ 262 5289; Lebuhs Leith; adult RM10; 🕒 tours 11am & 3pm Mon-Fri, 11am Sat & Sun) was built in the 1880s by Cheong Fatt Tze, a local Hakka merchant-trader who left China penniless and eventually established a vast financial empire, earning himself the sobriquet 'Rockefeller of the East'.

The 38-room mansion blends Eastern and Western influences and promotes good feng shui by sitting on a 'dragon's throne' – a mountain (Penang Hill) behind, and water (the Channel) in front. The mansion doubles as a luxurious **bed and breakfast** (www.cheongfatttze mansion.com; r from RM250).

Heritage Trail

You can follow the Heritage Trail walking tours that take in Georgetown's historic colonial architecture and some temples and mosques in Chinatown – pick up a pamphlet showing the routes at the tourist offices.

There's also a free **shuttle bus** (🕒 7am-7pm Mon-Fri, 7am-2pm Sat) that runs between the jetty and Kompleks Komtar, winding its way through Georgetown's colonial core. Pick up a copy of the route at the **Penang Tourist Guides Association** (☎ 261 4461; 3rd fl, Kompleks Komtar, Jl Penang; 🕒 10am-6pm Mon-Sat).

Temples & Mosques

In honour of the goddess of mercy, good fortune, peace and fertility, the **Kuan Yin Teng** (Lebuhs Pitt; admission by donation; 🕒 9am-5pm) was built in the early 19th century by the first Hokkien and Cantonese settlers in Penang. It's usually buzzing with worshippers burning paper money.

Dedicated to Mar Chor, the patron saint of seafarers, **Hainan Temple** (Lebuhs Muntri; admission by donation; 🕒 9am-5pm) was completed in 1895. Remodelling in 1995 has refreshed its distinctive swirling dragon pillars and brightened the ornate carvings.

Built by Penang's first Indian-Muslim settlers, the yellow **Kapitan Keling Mosque** (Lebuhs Pitt) has a single minaret in an Indian-influenced Islamic style. This building is best appreciated from the street.

Khoos Kongsi (Lebuhs Cannon; adult RM5; 🕒 9am-5pm) is Penang's finest *kongsi* (clan house), and is decorated with a colourful mix of dragons, other statues, paintings, lamps, coloured tiles and carvings. A *kongsi* is a building that's used partly as a temple and partly as a meeting hall for Chinese people of the same clan or surname. This building dates from 1906.

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SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

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GETTING INTO TOWN

Penang's Bayan Lepas International Airport is 18km south of Georgetown. The U307 and U401 buses run to/from the airport (RM3, one hour) every half-hour from 6am to 11pm. Buses stop at Komtar and terminate at Weld Quay.

If arriving via the Butterworth–Penang ferry, exit towards Pengkalan Weld and catch any Kompleks Komtar-bound bus (RM1.50, 15 minutes) to reach accommodation in Chinatown.

Other Sights

Fort Cornwallis (Lebuh Light; adult RM3; ☎ 9am–7pm) was built on Georgetown's cape, the historic landing of the city's founder Captain Francis Light in 1786. A visit involves lots of panel reading.

Penang Museum (☎ 261 3144; Lebuh Farquhar; adult RM1; ☎ 9am–5pm Sat–Thu) is one of the best-presented museums in Malaysia. In front is a bronze statue of Captain Light, and excellent exhibits on the ground floor illustrate the customs and traditions of Penang's various ethnic groups with impressive appreciation for diversity. Upstairs is the history gallery.

SLEEPING

Georgetown has plenty of cheap accommodation, mainly clustered in Chinatown along bustling Lebuh Chulia and quieter Love Lane. During holidays, most notably Chinese New Year (January/February), hotels fill up very quickly and prices soar. Cheaper rooms have shared bathrooms.

75 Travellers' Lodge (☎ 262 3378; 75 Lebuh Muntri; dm RM7, s RM15–18, d RM18–40; ☎) Mr Low is an exceptionally friendly and helpful owner and it's easy to be social over a beer or coffee on the balcony. It was spiced and span when we passed but we've received the odd grumble about this place.

Blue Diamond Hotel (☎ 261 1089; 422 Lebuh Chulia; dm/s/d RM8/20/30; ☎) Barflies apply here; even staff have stiff drinks in hand by 11am and the place is dominated by its sidewalk-side beer garden. The Chinese clunker of a building is graced with natural light, some lovely old carvings and high ceilings but the rust-stained tubs and grotty staircase take away from the charm. Still, the large rooms are enticingly old world.

our pick 100 Cintra Street (☎ 264 3581; 100 Lebuh Cintra; dm/s/d RM10/25/38) Housed in a sometimes-operating museum in a semirestored Peranakan mansion, this is by far and away Penang's most atmospheric budget option. You get a (very thin) mattress on a wooden platform with a fan and a mosquito net for that Eastern colonial experience. Dorm beds are on an open landing and have absolutely zero privacy.

Love Lane Inn (☎ 412 9002; 54 Love Lane; s/d/tr RM16/30/40; ☎) Pastel colours brighten this otherwise basic, but well-serviced hostel. While owner Jimmy gets rave reviews from travellers we've heard complaints about his staff. There's a little on-site café.

SD Guesthouse (☎ 264 3763; 16 Love Lane; www.sdguesthouse.com.my; s/d RM18/25) Clean, modern, windowless rooms line bright corridors and a sweet little garden. Baths get all the proper scrubbing. This would be one of the quietest places in town were it not for the 'bird hotel' (for collecting nests for bird's-nest soup) next door. Luckily the squawkers slumber around 9pm.

New Banana (☎ 262 6171; 355 Lebuh Chulia; d without/with air-con RM25/30; ☎) It's not just an appellation, this place actually really is new – which makes it stand out against the paint-chipped competition. No windows as usual but carpeting makes a change and bathrooms are sparkling. There's a big café-bar downstairs that promises to become a traveller favourite.

Cathay Hotel (☎ 262 6271/6272; 22 Lebuh Leith; r RM50–70; ☎) Recapture the romance of the colonial era in this ageing diva of a hotel. Once grand, high-ceilinged rooms now have one too many mould stains but with a touch of imagination you could feel quite sophisticated staying here. You may remember seeing the hotel in the 1995 film *Beyond Rangoon*.

EATING

Penang cuisine is legendary: Indian, Chinese and Malay purveyors jostle with one another for affection from a constantly snacking populace. Along with Melaka, Penang boasts the indigenous fusion of Baba Nonya cuisine (see p437). If you'd rather rest the tastebuds with a sandwich or shepherd's pie, head to **Green Hut** (102 Lebuh Muntri; ☎ breakfast & lunch Wed–Sun), which is also a great place for travellers' information.

Chinese

In the morning an umbrella village of food stalls sets up across from Chowrasta Bazaar near the market along Jl Kuala Kangsar (from 6am to noon daily). Here you'll find vendors dexterously folding and stuffing slippery *chee cheong fun* (broad rice noodles filled with prawns or meat). Wander this lush market to dine or snack on fruit and Chinese baked goods.

Lebuh Cintra is lined with bustling Chinese noodle and dim sum joints.

Tho Yuen Restaurant (92 Lebuh Campbell; RM1–5; ☎ breakfast & lunch Wed–Mon) The best of the dim sum joints around Lebuh Cintra with a staff who speak enough English to explain what's what to clueless Westerners. Beyond dumplings, try the meat and mushroom sticky rice (RM2.20) or fresh savoury baked goods with a chaser of Chinese tea.

Wen Chang (63 Lebuh Cintra; meals RM2–5; ☎ breakfast & lunch) This is an extremely popular chicken-and-rice spot with enthusiastic staff. Steamed white rice and tender chicken cooked and flavoured in Hainanese style is served with a herbal broth.

Hsaing Yang Fast Food (97 Lebuh Cintra; meals RM2–6; ☎ breakfast & lunch) Point and choose from the array of seafood, meat and vegetarian fare tantalisingly displayed in stainless steel trays. It's best to arrive noon-ish when the dishes are fresh.

Hui Sin Vegetarian Restaurant (11 Lebuh China; meals RM3–6; ☎ breakfast & lunch Mon–Sat) Pick from an

excellent buffet of veggie and tofu dishes at great prices.

our pick Teik Sen (Lebuh Carnavan; meals RM8–24; ☎ lunch & dinner Wed–Mon) It looks like just another hole in the wall Chinese place so why is everyone so dressed up? After trying the food here such as crispy chicken with plum sauce (RM12) or curry prawns (RM6), you'll understand. Come early if you don't want to wrestle the locals for a table.

Malay & Nonya

You'll have to venture outside of Chinatown to Jl Nagor to sample Penang's Baba Nonya cuisine. Lorong Baru, just off Jl Macalister, has a row of food stalls whipping up satay; however, things don't start sizzling until nightfall.

Taman Emas Coffee Shop (1W Jl Gottlieb; laksa RM2.50; ☎ breakfast & lunch) You might need a taxi or a helpful local to be able to find this place off Jl Burma, but this is hands down the most phenomenal laksa you'll ever taste.

Esplanade Food Centre (Jl Tun Syed Sheh Barakbah; meals RM3–6; ☎ dinner) This is Penang's best hawker centre, as much for the delightful sea breezes as the Malay stalls serving *laksa asam*, *rojak* (a fruit and veggie salad topped with a sweet and spicy gravy) and radioactive-coloured bowls of ABC and cendol. The more restaurant-like Chinese section features seafood and icy-cold cheap beer.

Sup Hameed (Jl Penang; meals RM4–6; ☎ lunch & dinner) Sprawling well beyond the actual restaurant

PENANG MUST EATS

Penang is known as the hawker capital of Malaysia and most of the city's specialities – claiming mixed Malay and Chinese extraction – are best fetched from a portable cart or food centre.

Cendol Garishly coloured green strands (made from sweetened pea flour) are layered with crushed ice, coconut milk and brown-sugar syrup. The related dessert of ABC is the shepherd's pie of sweets, with shaved ice, ice cream, flavoured sugar water, beans and tapioca balls.

Char kway teow Medium-width rice noodles are stir-fried with egg, vegetables, shrimp and Chinese sausage in a dark soy sauce.

Chee cheong fun A popular dim sum dish, these are broad, paper-thin rice noodles that are steamed and rolled around a filling of prawns served with an oily, chilli dipping sauce.

Curry mee Curly egg noodles (*mee*) are served in a spicy coconut-curry soup, garnished with bean sprouts, prawn, cuttlefish, cockles, bean curd and mint.

Hokkien mee A busy and spicy pork-broth soup crowded with egg noodles, prawns, bean sprouts, *kangkong*, egg and pork.

Laksa asam Also known as Penang laksa, this is a fish-broth soup spiked with a sour tang from tamarind paste (*asam*) and a mint garnish; it's served with thick, white rice noodles (laksa).

Rojak A fruit and vegetable salad tossed in a sweet-tamarind-and-palm-sugar sauce and garnished with crushed peanuts, sesame seeds and chillies.

like a trail of busy ants down the sidewalk, diners at this ultrapopular smorgasbord at the north end of Jl Penang sample everything from spicy *sup* (soup!), *nasi kandar* (mixed dishes to go with rice) and *roti canai* (flaky pancakes).

Indian

Georgetown's Little India is along Lebuh Pasar, Lebuh China and the side streets between Lebuh Penang and Lebuh Pitt. Lebuh Tamil, off Jl Penang by Chowrasta Bazaar, is an easy-going alley for a shady respite of Indian and Malay dishes or a cup of *teh tarik* ('pulled tea'; tea with frothy milk).

Madras New Woodlands Restaurant (60 Lebuh Penang; meals RM2.50-6; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The street-side glass display case of traditional Indian sweets tempts you into this fabulous vegetarian eatery. Here you can have your pudding without eating your meat, but don't pass up the delicious *thosai masala* (spicy potatoes wrapped in a crepe) and the mango lassi.

Sri Ananda Bhawan (☎ 264 4204; 55 Lebuh Penang; meals RM3-6; ☺ breakfast & dinner) A neighbourhood favourite for banana-leaf meals. You can be cheap and vegetarian with the basic fare or add a few side dishes such as pepper chicken. Chase away the fire in your belly with a lassi and call yourself a lucky eater.

Krsna Restaurant (☎ 264 3601; 75 Lebuh Pasar; meals RM5-10; ☺ breakfast & dinner) Sweaty and busy, this vegetarian South Indian spot does a great *oothaban*, which is like a veggie-filled pizza you eat with your hands (your right hand, that is).

DRINKING

Jl Penang is a renovated string of ancient shophouses where nouveau bars and bistros show off their multilingual sophistication. The cheapest beer can be found at Esplanade Food Centre (see p449) while Lebuh Chulia has plenty of waterholes that cater specifically to Westerners, and locals looking for lonely foreign friends.

Pitt Street Corner (94 Lebuh Pitt) Sit back with a beer to the sounds of Bollywood at this very friendly Wild West-style saloon in Little India.

Soho Free House (50A Jl Penang) This place starts rocking out early (80s music anyone?) with a mostly Chinese clientele who nosh bangers and mash (RM13.50) and swill pints like good Brits.

CLUBBING

Lush (The Garage, 2 Jl Penang) This is a contemporary nightclub with slick minimalist design in stark tones of red, grey and black. DJs and nightly promotions are a fun diversion to the usual backpacker night sweats.

Slippery Senioritas (SS; The Garage, 2 Jl Penang) In the same complex as the Lush, Slippery Senioritas is brasher but is still good for a laugh, and the Tom Cruise *Cocktailesque* show put on by the bar staff is mesmerising.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

See Butterworth (p444) for information about reaching Penang from the mainland, and for long-distance train and bus travel from the mainland.

Advance bookings on long-distance trains can be made at the **Railway Booking Office** (Pengkalan Weld), near the Butterworth–Penang ferry jetty.

Air

Airlines with services to Pulau Penang:

Air Asia (code AK; ☎ 644 8701; www.airasia.com) Flies to and from KL one way/return RM56/112.

Firefly (code FY; ☎ 03-7845 4543; www.fireflyz.com.my) To Phuket or Koh Samui, Thailand one way RM70.

Malaysia Airlines (code MH; ☎ 262 0011; www.malaysiaairlines.com) To KL one way RM135.

Singapore Airlines (code SQ; ☎ 226 6211; www.singaporeair.com) To Singapore one way RM255.

Thai Airways International (THAI, code TG; ☎ 226 6000; www.thaiair.com) To/from Bangkok RM937.

Boat

All the offices for the ferry service between Pulau Langkawi or Belawan (Sumatra, Indonesia) and Penang are clustered together near the tourist office, and all put you on the same boats.

For information about ferries to Belawan see opposite. There are daily ferries from Georgetown to Langkawi (one way/return RM50/90, 2½ hours). Boats leave at 8.15am (direct) and 8.30am (one stop at Pulau Paya), returning from Langkawi at 2.30pm and 5.30pm. Check the times the day before, as schedules vary. Note that Langkawi ferries depart the jetty off Pesara King Edward near the clock tower.

Bus

Buses to all major towns on the peninsula leave from both Georgetown and Butterworth. Several long-distance bus services leave from

GETTING TO INDONESIA

Travellers can skip over to the Indonesian island of Sumatra from Pulau Penang via ferry. There are several ferries each way in the morning, and times can change, but generally ferries depart Georgetown at 8.30am and return at 10.30am (one way/return RM150/250); the trip takes 4½ to five hours. The boats leave from Georgetown's Swettenham jetty and land in Belawan where the remaining journey to Medan is completed by bus (included in the price). Buy tickets the day before to verify departure times. Upon arriving at Belawan port, most nationalities will need to pay a US\$25 per person fee for a 30-day Indonesian visa.

See p262 for information on doing the trip in reverse.

Kompleks Komtar; some leave from the long-distance bus offices, while others leave from the local bus stop. Buy tickets direct from the bus companies as we've received letters and talked to travellers whose agent-bought tickets from Georgetown only got them partway to where they were going.

There are daily buses to Ipoh (RM14, three hours, hourly), Tanah Rata in the Cameron Highlands (RM25, six hours, five daily), KL (RM27, five hours, hourly), Kuantan (RM42, eight hours, one daily), Melaka (RM35, seven hours, two daily), and Singapore (RM50, nine hours, two daily).

There are also bus and minibus services to Thailand: Hat Yai (RM22), Phuket (RM60) and Ko Samui (RM55). The minibuses usually don't go directly to some destinations so there are significant waiting times. The train from Butterworth is usually quicker.

GETTING AROUND

Penang has a good public transport system that connects Georgetown with the rest of the island.

Bus

There are several local bus stops in Georgetown. Kompleks Komtar and Pengkalan Weld, in front of the Butterworth–Penang jetty, are two of the largest stops. Most of the buses also have stops along Lebuh Chulia. Fares within Georgetown are RM1.50 to RM3,

points beyond are RM1 to RM3 depending on the destination (exact change required). See boxed text, below, for destinations.

For around RM6 you can do a circuit of the island by public transport.

Motorcycle & Bicycle

You can hire bicycles from shops at Lebuh Chulia, Batu Ferringhi (13km northwest of Georgetown) and some guesthouses. Bicycles cost RM10, and motorcycles start at RM30 per day. Remember that if you don't have a motorcycle licence, your travel insurance probably won't cover you in the case of an accident.

Taxi

You'll need to bargain for a reasonable fare. Typical taxi rates around town are RM5 to RM10. Other fares include Batu Ferringhi (RM30), Penang Hill/Kek Lok Si Temple (RM20) and Bayan Lepas airport (RM38).

Trishaw

Bicycle rickshaws are an ideal way to negotiate Georgetown's backstreets and cost around RM1 per kilometre but, as with taxis, agree on the fare before departure. For touring around, the rate is about RM35 per hour.

Penang Hill

Once a fashionable retreat for the city's elite, Penang Hill (800m) provides cool temperatures and spectacular views. There are pretty gardens, an old-fashioned kiosk, a restaurant and a hotel, as well as a lavishly decorated Hindu temple and a mosque at the top. Penang Hill is particularly wonderful at dusk as Georgetown, far below, starts to light up.

From Kompleks Komtar, or at Lebuh Chulia in Georgetown, you can catch one

USEFUL BUSES ON PULAU PENANG

Penang has streamlined its bus system to be very simple. Destinations include the following:

Air Itam U201, U202 or U203

Batu Ferringhi U105 or U101

Bayan Lepas International Airport U307 or U401

Penang Hill U204

Snake Temple U302

Teluk Bahang U101

of the frequent local buses (U201, U202 or U203) to Air Itam. From Air Itam, walk five minutes to the funicular railway (adult/child RM4/3, 30 minutes, every 15 to 30 minutes from 6.30am to 9.30pm) where long queues may await. The energetic can get to the top by an interesting three-hour trek, starting from the Moon Gate at the Botanical Gardens.

Kek Lok Si Temple, the largest Buddhist temple in Malaysia, stands on a hilltop at Air Itam. Construction started in 1890, took more than 20 years and was largely funded by donations. To reach the entrance, walk through the souvenir stalls until you reach the seven-tier, 30m-high **Ban Po Thar** (Ten Thousand Buddhas Pagoda; admission RM2). The design is said to be Burmese at the top, Chinese at the bottom and Thai in between.

Batu Ferringhi

☎ 04

Following the coastal road east will lead you to Batu Ferringhi, Penang's best beach area, which is lined with resorts at one end and guesthouses at the other. While it doesn't compare with Malaysia's east coast beaches or those on Langkawi, the sleepy village ambience at the eastern end of the beach is a lovely respite. The 2004 tsunami grazed this portion of Penang, causing minimal property damage and flooding. Locals say the beach sands got a much-needed polish from the hungry waves.

SLEEPING

Low-key guesthouses are clustered together opposite the beach, and most will give discounts for multiday stays.

ET Budget Guest House (☎ 881 1553; 47 Batu Ferringhi; s/d RM25/30; 🚻) A laid-back double-storey Chinese house with basic rooms, most with a common bathroom. The pricier rooms come with air-con, TV and shower.

Baba Guest House (☎ 881 1686; 52 Batu Ferringhi; r RM35-55; 🚻) This big Chinese family home with plain rooms (most with shared bathrooms) is a hive of activity with sister at reception, grandma doing laundry, dad fixing the plumbing and so on. They can help organise tours and transport around and beyond Penang.

Ali's Guest House (☎ 881 1316; alisferringhiquesthouse@cnetmyne.com; 53 Batu Ferringhi; s/d/f RM50/60/130; 🚻) With the antique-style balcony, comfy sitting area and lots of leafy accompaniments,

this place has more style than the competition and is priced accordingly.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Bus U101 or U105 from Kompleks Komtar takes around 40 minutes to reach Batu Ferringhi and costs RM2.50.

Teluk Bahang

☎ 04

If you're looking to get off the beaten path, head east of Batu Ferringhi to Teluk Bahang, a sleepy Malay fishing village that has faded away from the backpacker radar. There isn't a lot to do in Teluk Bahang and that's the point.

The road ends at blissfully deserted Penang National Park where you can hike to white, sparkling beaches that are devoid of humans but popular with monkeys. Start at the **Penang National Park Office** (☎ 881 3500; end of Jl Hassan Abbas; 🕒 8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon & 2-4pm Sat & Sun) for maps and suggestions. Guides cost RM100 per day but might be hard to rustle up.

If you want to stay the night, stop at **Miss Loh's Guest House** (☎ 885 1227; 159 Jl Teluk Bahang; dm/s/d with shared bathroom from RM8/15/30; 🚻), which is set amid a fruit orchard. This is the kind of place where you can put down roots, as some travellers do, and stay on for months.

Bus U101 runs from Georgetown every half-hour all the way along the north coast of the island to just beyond the roundabout in Teluk Bahang.

ALOR SETAR

☎ 04

For transport reasons, if you're in Kedah state you'll pass through its capital. Alor Setar (all-star) is north of Butterworth on the main road to the Thai border and is the transfer point to Kuala Kedah, the main port town for ferries to Pulau Langkawi. This region is conservative and not accustomed to seeing shockingly white foreigners. To better fit in with Islamic dress norms, wear clothes that cover your elbows and knees.

Flora Inn (☎ 732 2376; 8 Kompleks Medan Raja; s/f RM20/65; 🚻) is a well-maintained place that overlooks the river and is above a small food court.

To reach Langkawi, take a local Kuala Kedah bus (RM1, 15 minutes, frequent) to the ferry jetty. A shuttle bus (90 sen) connects the town centre with the bus station; a taxi will

GETTING TO THAILAND

There are several options for crossing the Malay-Thai border on the west coast; see also p455.

To Sadao

Frequent buses go from Alor Setar to the Bukit Kayu Hitam-Sadao border crossing (RM4), which is open from 7am to 7pm daily. You'll have to take a minibus on the Thai side of the border to the transport hub of Hat Yai.

See p784 for information on doing the trip in reverse.

To Kanger

Trains travelling south and north pass through the border towns of Padang Besar and Kanger, linking the towns along the train line (including Penang-Butterworth) to the border. Trains leave Alor Setar in the morning and arrive in the currently dodgy transport hub town of Hat Yai (2nd class/berth RM27/45) three hours later; travellers can also catch an international express that leaves Alor Setar in the late afternoon, arrives in Hat Yai in the evening and continues on to Bangkok, arriving around midday the next day. The border is open 7am to 10pm daily.

See p784 for details on travelling from Thailand to Malaysia.

cost RM8. From about 7am to 7pm, regular ferries operate roughly every hour in either direction between Kuala Kedah and Kuah on Langkawi (RM18, one hour).

The bus station is 3.5km outside the town centre. Buses serve the following destinations: Ipoh (RM19.70, three daily, four hours), Johor Bahru (RM55, 10 hours, one daily), Kota Bharu (RM28.60, two daily, six hours), Kuala Lumpur (RM30, hourly, six hours), Kuala Terengganu (RM38, 10 hours, one daily), Kuantan (RM42, 10 hours, one daily) and Melaka (RM38.70, eight hours, two daily).

The **train station** (☎ 731 4045; Jl Stesyen) is a 15-minute walk southeast of town. There are two daily northbound trains that head across the Thailand-Malaysia border; see above for details. Heading south, the train to KL (economy/2nd class/berth RM20/35/43) departs in the evening, reaching the capital 12 hours later. The express train leaves Alor Setar around midday and terminates in Butterworth two hours later (economy/2nd class RM31/45). Times are variable so check the schedule.

KUALA PERLIS

☎ 04

This small port town in the extreme northwest of the peninsula is a departure point for ferries to Pulau Langkawi. Your least-groty sleeping option if you stop to sample the region's special laksa is **Pens Hotel** (☎ 985 4122; Jl Kuala Perlis; r RM75; 🚻).

Ferries depart for Kuah, on Pulau Langkawi (RM15, every hour between 8am and 6pm).

The bus and taxi stations are behind the row of shophouses across from the jetty. A limited number of destinations are served from Kuala Perlis' bus station; these include Butterworth (RM9, four daily), Kuala Lumpur (RM20, frequent) and Kuantan (RM32, one daily). For other destinations, take a taxi (RM12) to the larger bus station in Kangar, which has buses bound for Alor Setar (RM3) and the border town of Padang Besar (RM2.50).

PULAU LANGKAWI

☎ 04

Visiting Langkawi is almost like taking a vacation from the rest of Southeast Asia. While you can still grab some *nasi lemak* (rice boiled in coconut milk and served with sides of beef and a hard-boiled egg) for breakfast, the wide roads, cleaned-up beaches and duty-free shopping complexes give the island a Western resort feel; exploring beyond the main tourist areas, though, will bring you back to Malaysia. The island itself is out of a daydream, with knife-edged peaks that float in dark vegetation and beaches so bright you've gotta wear shades. Besides the tax-free beer, everything else here will cost you.

Vacationing Malaysians are Langkawi's primary fan base and former prime minister Dr Mahathir even lobbied to move the state capital from Alor Setar to Langkawi.

Orientation

The Langkawi archipelago comprises 99 islands, of which Pulau Langkawi is the largest and most visited. It sits 30km off the coast from Kuala Perlis and 45km from the Thai border town of Satun. In the southeast corner of Langkawi is Kuah, the major town and the arrival point for ferries. On the west coast are Pantai Cenang (cha-*nanang*), a lively beach strip with shops and restaurants, and also adjacent Pantai Tengah, which is a bit quieter and a short walk to Pantai Cenang. During the monsoons (May to October) and sometimes beyond, jellyfish make swimming a problem.

Information

The only banks are at Kuah, and are open Monday to Friday. Moneychangers are tucked in and around the duty-free shops at Kuah. **Tourism Malaysia** (☎ 966 7789; Jl Persiaran Putra, Kuah; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm) offers comprehensive information and advice about the island.

Sleeping

Rates drop considerably in the off season between March and October. Upon arriving in Langkawi, touts swarm the disembarking ferry passengers; their commission, if you choose to follow them, will be built into your nightly rate.

PANTAI CENANG

The following places are grouped on either side of the main road and are listed here in north-to-south order. Most budget options are across the road from the beach.

Gecko Guesthouse (☎ 019 428 3801; dm RM10, r with shared bathroom RM25-50; 🍷) Travellers love the friendly vibe and island-bamboo style of this place so it books up fast. Friday and Saturday nights hop with barbecues and live music.

Shirin Guesthouse (☎ 955 5991; s/d/tr RM25/40/36; 🍷) The Japanese and Iranian owners have built a rainbow of tidy bungalows in a little garden across from the beach.

our pick Malati Tanjung (☎ 955 1099; r RM40-100) It has ultracomfy doubles with beach views (RM70) that are worth the splurge. Sheets are hospital-clean, all rooms have attached bathrooms and the Malay owners are lovely.

AB Motel (☎ 955 1300; abmotel@hotmail.com; r RM60-120; 🍷) A buzzing complex with a restaurant, internet café and motorbike rental. The cheapest of the bland rooms look over the main road.

PANTAI TENGAH

Pantai Tengah is less built-up and popular with Malay families.

Zackry Guesthouse (☎ 019 447 0490; zackryghouse@gmail.com; s/d/tr RM25/35/50) Off the main tourist drag towards Kuah, this funky and social Chinese-style backpackers is about 150m from the beach. It's close to the best of Langkawi's duty-free watering holes.

Tanjung Malie (☎ 955 1891; r RM40-60) Near Pantai Cenang, this cluster of little beach huts is within sunstroke-stumbling distance of the beach. Only the priciest rooms have private bathrooms.

Eating

Pantai Cenang has the most eating options. Langkawi's proximity to Thailand means that the Thai penchant for fiery chillies has found its way into local dishes.

Tomato Nasi Kandar (meals RM1-6; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Actually a group of restaurants, you'll find cheap and tasty *tosei* (pancake with a curried potato filling; from RM1.20) and other Indian food in the open-air area by the road, halal food in the air-conditioned restaurant and pricier Western food just behind the building in a little makeshift on-the-beach café.

Warung Tenggek (meals RM3-5; 🍷 breakfast & lunch) Snag a plastic table for the best and cheapest breakfast in town. *Roti canai* and *nasi lemak* (coconut rice wrapped in banana leaf) are the locals' favourites, but there are also pancakes, and American egg breakfasts (RM5).

Warung Kita (meals RM3.50-4; 🍷 dinner) Swarming with locals, Kita's whips up *roti canai* (60 sen to RM1.80) and standard Malay noodle and rice dishes. It's just north of Underwater World across from the beach.

Artisans Pizza Shop (☎ 955-1231; pizzas from RM12; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Rest the tastebuds with a generously topped pie at this roadside eatery.

Champor-Champor (meals RM15-25; 🍷 lunch & dinner) With an emphasis on Thai food, this splurge-worthy option serves Asian-Western cuisine, including vegetarian options, in a Bali-style garden setting with twinkling fairy lights.

Drinking

Nearly all the hotels have bars and most restaurants serve alcohol.

Big Joe's Bar (Pantai Tengah) In front of Zackry Guesthouse, quirky Joe's serves the cheapest beer we found in Malaysia (RM2) and is set up for live music.

Reggae Café (Pantai Tengah) A free shuttle (hourly from 9.30pm to 11.30pm) that stops just south of AB Motel whisks Pantai Cenang residents to bum-shaking action.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Malaysia Airlines (code MH; ☎ 966 6622; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my), to/from KL RM275, and **Air Asia** (code AK; ☎ 955 7751), to/from KL RM110, have 10 flights every day. **Firefly** (code FY; www.fireflyz.com.my) also flies to/from Pulau Penang (RM99, daily).

SilkAir (code MI; ☎ 955 9771; www.silkair.com) flies to/from Singapore (RM453, four times a week).

BOAT

All passenger ferries to/from Langkawi operate out of Kuah. Coupon-fare taxis run to/from Kuah jetty to Pantai Cenang (RM20).

From about 7am to 7pm, regular ferries operate roughly every hour in either direction between Kuah and the mainland ports of Kuala Perlis (RM15, 45 minutes) and Kuala Kedah (RM18, one hour).

Daily ferries also run between Kuah and Georgetown on Pulau Penang (one way/return RM50/90, 2½ hours), departing from Georgetown at 8am and 8.30am and departing Kuah at 2.30pm and 5.30pm. Check at the jetty as times do vary.

Getting Around

There is no public transport. Car hire is excellent value starting at RM50 per day for a Kancil or RM20 for a motorbike. A few places also rent mountain bikes for RM15 per day.

Otherwise, taxis are the main way of getting around. Fixed fares for the entire vehicle (which can be split between passengers) cost the following from the Kuah jetty: Kuah town (RM6), Pantai Cenang (RM20) and Pantai Tengah (RM22).

PENINSULAR MALAYSIA – EAST COAST

Less wrapped up in history, less multicultural but still refreshingly Malay, the peninsula's east coast is an entirely different experience from the mobile-phone obsessed, traffic-clogged west coast. Head-

GETTING TO THAILAND

Langkawi Ferry Services (LFS; ☎ 04-966 1125) has ferries from Kuah on Pulau Langkawi to Satun (one way/return RM27/54, 1¼ hours) four times daily.

See p803 for information on doing the border crossing in the opposite direction.

scarves, skullcaps and the hauntingly melodious call to prayer are as ubiquitous here as the white-sand beaches that fringe the sunrise-drenched coasts and jewel-like islands. Wooden *kampung* houses squat amid coconut groves and rubber plantations and everyone seems to be smiling about how wholesome life can be.

JOHOR BAHRU

☎ 07

You'll pass through the state capital of Johor Bahru (known as JB) if you're travelling to/from peninsular Malaysia and Singapore. Most Malaysian buses only service Johor Bahru, where you'll need to transfer to a local Singapore-bound bus, stopping for border formalities en route. Johor Bahru is connected to Singapore by the 1038m-long Causeway.

There is little reason to hang around, unless you are a fan of dodgy transport-hub towns. The immigration office is across from Merlin Tower, which is surrounded by a walkable downtown of midrange hotels, food shops and banks.

Tourism Malaysia (☎ 222 3590; www.johortourism.com.my; 5th fl, Jotic Bldg, 2 Jl Air Molek; ☎ 8am-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 8am-12.15pm & 2.45-4.30pm Fri, 8am-12.45pm Sat) is walking distance from Merlin Tower; ask for directions to the Jotic Building.

The finest museum of its kind in Malaysia, **Muzium Diraja Abu Bakar** (☎ 223 0555; adult US\$7; ☎ 9am-5pm Sat-Thu) conveys the wealth and privilege of the sultans. Tickets are payable in ringgit at a bad exchange rate; the ticket counter closes at 4pm.

Sleeping & Eating

There's little reason to stay in JB since hopping on any bus would bring you somewhere with better sleeping options.

JB Hotel (☎ 223 4989; 80-A Jl Wong Ah Fook; d RM40-50; 🍷) It's central and clean which is about the best you can hope for around here.

Gateway Hotel (☎ 223 5029; 61 JI Meldrum; r RM70; ☎) Probably the best-value place in this price bracket in the city centre. All rooms have attached bathrooms.

Make the best of your time in JB by eating at the excellent hawker venues, including the daily **Pasar Malam** (Night Market; JI Wong Ah Fook) outside the Hindu temple. The **Tepian Tebrau food centre** (JI Abu Bakar) is famous for its *ikan bakar* (grilled fish).

Getting There & Away

AIR

JB is well served by Malaysia Airlines and flights to other places in Malaysia are much cheaper than from Singapore. But most domestic flights connect through KL, a four-hour bus ride away. **Malaysia Airlines** (☎ 334 1011; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my) is 2.5km north of the city centre.

JB's airport is 32km northwest of town at Senai.

BOAT

Ferries leave Johor Bahru for Singapore and Indonesia; see below for more information on the service.

BUS & TAXI

Most people travel from Johor Bahru to Singapore by bus; see below for further information on the trip.

Johor Bahru's long-distance bus station is Larkin station, located 5km north of the centre. Buses run to and from Larkin to all parts of the country, including Melaka (RM14, three hours, hourly), Kuala Lumpur (RM24, four hours, hourly), Ipoh (RM45, seven hours, one daily), Butterworth (RM49, 12 hours, one daily), Mersing (RM8.80, three hours, four daily), Kuantan (RM20.40, five hours, four daily), Kuala Terengganu (RM32, nine hours, two daily) and Kota Bharu (RM49, 10 hours, two daily). Long-distance taxis also leave from Larkin (there's a price list at the stand).

A taxi across the Causeway to the Queen St terminal in Singapore should cost about RM30. A taxi from central JB to the bus station should cost RM8.

TRAIN

Daily trains depart Johor Bahru (2nd class/berth RM33/37) four times per day for Kuala Lumpur. It is also possible to change

at Gemas (RM21 to RM38) and hop aboard the 'jungle train' for connections to Jerantut (for Taman Negara) and Kota Bharu. See p471 for further information on the Jungle Railway.

MERSING

☎ 07

Fishing boats are everywhere in Mersing, while stray cats seem to have been drawn into town from far and away by tasty smells fresh from the sea. Mersing is a kick-back place with some good cheap eats but is most renowned as the main port for boats to Pulau Tioman.

The **Mersing Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 799 5212; JI Abu Bakar; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 8am-noon & 2.45-4.30pm Fri, 8am-12.45pm Sat) provides information about both Mersing and Pulau Tioman.

Sleeping & Eating

East Coast Hotel (☎ 799 3546; rockyanwar2002@hotmail.com; 43A JI Abu Bakar; dm/s/d with shared bathroom RM10/15/25) If you're looking for a friendly welcome in Mersing, this efficient and backpacker-oriented hotel gets the thumbs up – cheap beds, informative and helpful staff and a relaxed ambience.

Omar's Backpackers' Hostel (☎ 799 5096, 019 774 4268; JI Abu Bakar; dm/d with shared bathroom RM10/20) This is a cheap and popular travellers' den. Doubles with fan and four-bed dorms are clean, there's a balcony and the owners can offer local knowledge. Phone ahead in peak season (June to September).

Restoran Al-Arif (44 JI Ismail; meals RM7) This place serves tasty Indian food, but you should expect very slow service.

There are several places around town for *roti canai* and *kopi* (coffee).

Getting There & Away

Long-distance buses depart from Plaza R&R (where there are ticket booths), located near the jetty. Destinations include Kuala Lumpur (RM23, six hours, five daily), Johor Bahru (RM8.80, three hours, two daily), Butterworth (RM52.30, 11 hours, one daily), Kuantan (RM12.60, five hours, two daily), Kuala Terengganu (RM26.20, nine hours, two daily) and Ipoh (RM39.40, nine hours, one daily).

See p459 for information on ferries to/from Pulau Tioman.

PULAU TIOMAN

☎ 09

Pulau Tioman is a scattering of cheery Malaysian villages dripping in a decidedly Polynesian lushness. The beaches aren't as voluptuous as those on Langkawi or the Perhentians, but it's not a hardship to saunter past crystalline rivers and rows of hibiscus to find a patch of sand between the rocky stretches. The proximity to Singapore and the availability of upscale digs has made Tioman relatively touristy but somehow the locals don't seem affected. Diving through the coral gardens to find turtles, sharks and some billions of fish are what most people come here for although there's plenty of jungle trekking for land-lubbers.

During the east-coast monsoon, from about November to March, boat services to the island are infrequent or suspended. If you plan to visit Tioman during this time, call the tourist office in Mersing for weather conditions and ferry schedules as the monsoon season often varies.

Orientation & Information

Most budget accommodation is clustered on Air Batang (ABC) and Salang on the northern end of the west coast. Salang has wider stretches of sand and the mood is decidedly 'spring break' with oiled up bodies and all-day beer swilling. In sharp contrast, ABC is like a charming Malay village with one narrow, flower-bedecked footpath linking family businesses to each other.

Connected to ABC by a footpath over a rocky headland, Tekek is the island's main village, where you'll find a bank, telephones and a post office. The duty-free shop at the airport in town sells beer cheaper than water.

On the east coast of the island, Juara is a stunning beach and affordable accommodation, but is difficult to reach on the cheap.

Sights & Activities

According to one guesthouse operator, you come to Tioman for what's under the water, not above – since the land is jaw-dropping gorgeous, this says a lot for the diving. Most places rent snorkelling gear and you can join day trips to Pulau Tulai, better known as Coral Island, where you can swim with nibbling fish and aloof sharks.

Open-water dive courses cost around RM820, and two dives with equipment rental

GETTING TO SINGAPORE & INDONESIA

To Singapore

There are frequent buses between JB's Larkin bus station, 5km north of the city, and Singapore's Queen St bus station. Most convenient is the air-conditioned Singapore–Johor Bahru Express (RM2.40, one hour, every 10 minutes from 6.30am to midnight). Alternatively, there's the slower city bus 170 (RM1.70). Both buses stop at the Malaysian and Singapore immigration checkpoints; disembark from the bus with your luggage, go through immigration and reboard on the other side (keep your ticket). There's also a bridge that connects Tanjung Kupang in Malaysia with the suburb of Tuas in Singapore, but it's a minor entry point and most traffic will use the Causeway.

There are also trains to Singapore, but it's more convenient to take a bus or taxi. You can also walk across the Causeway; the trip takes 25 minutes.

See p654 for details on doing the trip in the opposite direction.

To Indonesia

The Johor Bahru International Ferry Terminal at Kompleks Bebas Cukai, about 2km east of the Causeway, has services heading to Indonesia. The easiest way to get to the jetty is by taxi (RM8) or take city bus 170 from Larkin to the city centre and then transfer to a Stulang/Duty Free Zone bus. At the duty-free complex, **Sriwani Tours and Travel** (☎ 07-221 1677; Kompleks Bebas Cukai, 88 JI Ibrahim Sultan, Stulang Laut) handles tickets to most destinations. There are departures to Batam Centre (adult one way RM57, hourly from 7.50am to 6.40pm) and Sekupang (RM57, 8.30am and 12.20pm departures), both port towns on the Indonesian island of Batam. Boats also go to Tanjung Pinang (adult one way RM82, hourly from 8.15am to 5.30pm), a port town on the Indonesian island of Bintan. Both Indonesian arrival ports have connecting services to mainland towns on other islands.

See p267 for information on doing the trip in reverse.



around RM180. There are nearly more dive shops than accommodation options so shop around for the best deal.

There's a fantastic 7km hike that crosses the island's waist from Tekek to Juara (carry plenty of water). It takes around 2½ hours, is steep in parts and starts about 1km north of the jetty in Tekek. Near the top of the hill, you pass a small waterfall and the jungle is awesome.

Power Batik (www.welcome.to/rikkipower; ABC), a tiny batik workshop, is run by Rikki Power,

a Malaysian artist with a fine-art background. Sarongs cost from RM65.

Sleeping & Eating

From June to August, when the island swarms with visitors, accommodation becomes tight. Either side of these months it's a buyer's market.

Most restaurants, with similar menus, are attached to chalet operations. ABC, Tekek and Salang all have small convenience stores.

AIR BATANG (ABC)

The far north and southern ends of the beach here have the best sand while some in-between areas are rocky and marshy. Places here are listed from north to south.

ABC Bungalows (☎ 419 1154; chalet RM35-120; 🏠) With gardens that look like something out of a Balinese landscaping book, the tidy bungalows here nab the best location in north ABC.

Nazri's II (☎ 419 1375; s RM25-30, d RM50-80; 🏠) Nazri's seems to be trying to get the best garden award from ABC Bungalows and it almost has it. Hillside chalets have sea views and the beachfront café is sublime for watching sunsets.

Johan's Resort (☎ 419 1359; dm RM10, r RM25-120; 🏠) Well-maintained bungalows grace a rocky beach while shabbier ones hide in the background. The two five-bed dorms are great value.

South Pacific (☎ 419 1176; chalets RM20-35) Just north of the jetty, this bright and friendly place sprawls along to a frangipani-scented Malay graveyard.

My Friend's Place (☎ 419 1150; r from RM25) Busy and social, the basic bungalows are well looked after.

Mokhtar's Place (RM25-50; 🏠) Mokhtar's has funky but passable rooms and a particularly

TIOMAN SCAMS

Oh those tenacious entrepreneurs have cooked up a good one for Tioman-bound travellers arriving in the port town of Mersing. The Mersing-bound bus is supposed to stop at the bus station near the jetty, but instead foreigners are 'advised' to get off at a travel agent office in town. The agent sells standard boat tickets (no loss to the traveller here), but accommodation rates can often be doubled, turning what would otherwise be a great budget hut into an overpriced disappointment. If you're worried about finding accommodation, call the guesthouse yourself to reserve a room.

If you don't want to get off at the travel agency, simply tell the bus driver that you want to go to the bus station. Depending on the driver, you might get resistance so just say you are visiting Mersing for the day.

good on-site restaurant that might be the only place in Malaysia serving Canadian poutine (cheesy chips with gravy).

SALANG

The small bay at the south of Salang has a beautiful beach and swimming area backed by a murky river that's teeming with giant monitor lizards. At night everyone who slept on the beach all day is keen to indulge in duty-free beer till the wee hours of the morn. Ugly it might be, but the Medan Selera food court serves the best cheap eats in town. Accommodation is listed here from north to south.

Salang Hut (chalets RM30) At the very quiet north end of the beach, these new huts are a steal with attached bathroom, fan and mosquito net.

our pick Ella's Place (☎ 419 5005; chalets RM25-60; 🏠) Ella's has all the attributes of Salang Hut but is directly on a sublime white beach, has a small café, an air-con option and a lovely family-run ambience.

Salang Indah Resort (☎ 419 5015; r RM25, chalets RM50-150; 🏠) Sprawling north of the jetty, this mosquelike resort is the biggest of the bunch, with a huge restaurant, a bar, a shop and a wide variety of mediocre accommodation options.

Salang Pusaka (☎ 419 5317; salangpusaka@yahoo.com; chalets RM45-100; 🏠) Formerly Khalid's Place, this complex is tucked behind the lagoon. The garden is attractive, but the rooms are showing some age.

JUARA

For now, Juara's divine beach is practically deserted during the shoulder seasons. There's little to do except swim and snooze under the coconut trees or take a gander into the jungle. If the interior road is ever finished (and this is questionable), town criers say that Juara is destined for high-rolling resort life.

Rainbow Chalets (☎ 419 3109; r RM30) Traveller-recommended Rainbow Chalets lives up to its name with multicoloured bungalows brightly fronting a turquoise sea. The affiliated Bushman Café is a great place to grab a meal after hiking through the jungle and to meet up with the other three or four travellers who might be staying in Juara.

Mizani's Place (chalets RM30) Dilapidated huts make you feel like a bona fide beach bum.

Getting There & Away

Berjaya Air (code J8; ☎ 419 1303; www.berjaya-air.com), with offices at Berjaya Tioman Beach Resort (about halfway up the west coast) and at the airstrip, has daily flights to/from KL (one-way/return RM237/474) and Singapore (RM305/610).

Mersing is the ferry port for Tioman. Several companies run boat services to the island; tickets can be bought around Mersing town or at the jetty near R&R Plaza. There are usually five to six departures throughout the day between 7am and 5pm, but specific departure times vary with the tides. Regular ferries (RM35, two to three hours) leave from the Mersing jetty and drop off passengers in south to north order on the island. Speedboats (RM45, 1½ hours) make a white-knuckled ride from the same jetty. Many green-faced arrivals swear they'll never set foot on another speedboat and promptly book a return trip on the regular boat.

Getting Around

Getting around the island is, for the moment, problematic. You can walk from ABC to Tekek in about 20 minutes. But you'll need to charter a boat through a guesthouse or restaurant to travel between ABC and Salang (RM20).

Boats from Mersing don't travel to Juara; you'll have to get off at Tekek and then hire a 4WD (RM100 for four people). From Juara it's possible to hire a motorbike up the hill (RM30) then you can hike downhill pack-on-back to Tekek (about one hour).

KUANTAN

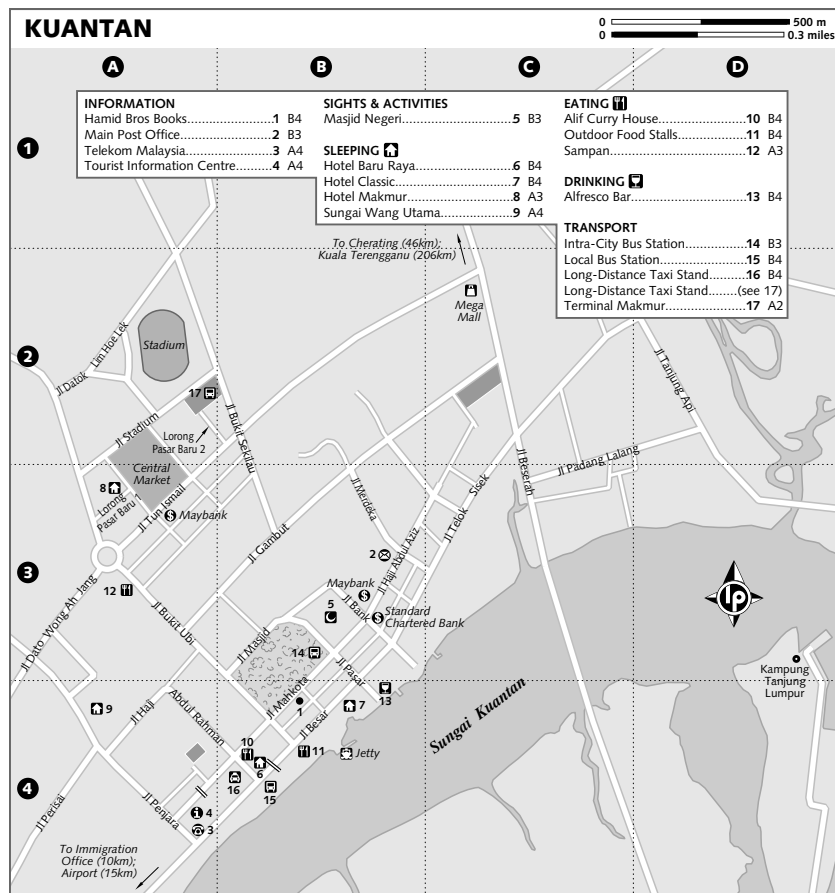
☎ 09

Many travellers find themselves on an overnight stopover in Kuantan, the pious and functional state capital, as it's the main transit point between Taman Negara and Pulau Tioman. Kuantan's star attraction is **Masjid Negeri**, the east coast's most impressive mosque, which presides regally over the *padang*. At night it's a magical sight with its spires and lit turrets.

Information

Banks are clustered at Jl Bank and there are plenty of ATMs around Jl Haji Abdul Aziz (the continuation of Jl Mahkota). Internet can be found along Jl Haji Abdul Rahman.

Hamid Bros Books (☎ 516 2119; 23 Jl Mahkota) Licensed moneychanger and English-language bookseller.



Immigration office (☎ 573 220; Kompleks Khedm, Bandar Indera Mahkota) About 10km south of town.

Main post office (Jl Haji Abdul Aziz) Near the soaring Masjid Negeri.

Telekom Malaysia (☎ 513 9191; 168 Jl Besar)

Tourist information centre (☎ 516 1007; Jl Mahkota; ☎ 9am-10pm Mon-Thu, 2.45-5pm Fri, 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Sat) One of Malaysia's most helpful.

Sleeping

Kuantan would be an OK place for a stop-over if it had any good budget options. It doesn't.

Sungai Wang Utama (☎ 514 8273; 16 Jl Penjara; r RM15-35; ☎) The vibe is a little sleazy but the windowless, cleanish rooms here are the best value around.

Hotel Makmur (☎ 514 1363; 1st & 2nd fl, B14 & 16, Lorong Pasar Baru 1; r RM28-68; ☎) It's got an institutional feel but, in this town, hospital cleanliness is a godsend. There's a friendly reception and it's an easy pack-haul from the long-distance bus station.

Hotel Baru Raya (☎ 513 9746; 134-136 Jl Besar; r RM35-60) You could spend hours here just contemplating the origins of the astounding variety of stains on the walls. It's friendly and near the local bus station.

Hotel Classic (☎ 516 4599; 7 Jl Besar; r RM75-85; ☎) A true class act, the Classic offers a punch of elegance for relatively few ringgit. There are terrific views of Masjid Negeri from the balcony, freshly painted walls and crisp sheets. Rates include breakfast.

Eating & Drinking

Our pick **Alif Curry House** (☎ 514 1415; 19 Jl Mahkota; meals RM1.20-6; ☎ 24hr) Dine on amazingly cheap curries in air-conditioned bliss. There's an exceptional variety of *roti canai* on offer including ones stuffed with pineapple or durian (1RM).

Sampan (Jl Bukit Ubi; meals RM2-4; ☎ lunch) A group of Chinese food stalls serving restorative herbal drinks plus all-day Chinese breakfast treats such as chicken or century egg porridge (RM2.50).

Food stalls can be found along the riverbank across from Hotel Baru Raya, and at the **central market** (Jl Bukit Ubi).

Kuantan is a very Muslim town, so drinking venues close down more often than they open up. Your best bet for a beer is the **Alfresco Bar** (Mega View Hotel, Lot 567, Jl Besar) on the riverfront.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Malaysia Airlines (code MH; ☎ 531 2123; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my) has direct flights to KL (RM205, three daily). **Kuantan airport** (Lapangan Terbang Sultan Ahmad Shah; ☎ 538 2923) is 15km from the city centre; take a taxi (RM25).

BUS & TAXI

There are three bus stations in Kuantan. Long-distance buses operate from **Terminal Makmur** (Jl Stadium). Services include KL (RM16.90, 4½ hours, hourly), Mersing (RM12.60, 3½ hours, three daily), JB (RM20.40, five hours, frequent), Kuala Terengganu (RM13.50, three hours, frequent), Kota Bharu (RM24.20, seven hours, frequent), Jerantut (RM12.30, 3½ hours, five daily), Melaka (RM19, five hours, three daily) and Butterworth (RM39, eight hours, four daily).

Northbound local buses operate out of a **local bus station** (Jl Besar) near the river, including services between Cherating (RM3) and Marang (RM8). There is also an **intra-city bus station** (cnr Jl Pasar & Jl Mahkota) for destinations within Kuantan town.

There are two long-distance taxi stands – one on Jl Stadium in front of the long-distance bus station, and the other on Jl Mahkota near the local bus station. Destinations and costs (per car) include Mersing (RM160), Cherating (RM50) and Jerantut (RM150).

TASIK CHINI

☎ 09

Delve into one of Peninsular Malaysia's most legend-enshrouded regions, Tasik Chini, where you can find out about Malaysia's own version of the Loch Ness Monster. A series of 12 linked lakes surrounded by thick jungle and fringed with pink lotus blossoms (blooming from June to September), the lake is home to the Jakun people, an Orang Asli (indigenous) tribe. Located inland from Kuantan, it's not that easy to reach scenic Tasik Chini; however, it is a popular domestic attraction, so to avoid the crowds try to arrive during the week. You can also visit the lakes as part of a group tour from Cherating for around RM70 per person.

Across the lake at Kampung Gumum, **Rajan Jones Guest House** (rind 3 meals RM22.50) is about 10 minutes' walk up the main road and offers extremely basic accommodation. Rajan speaks excellent English, is knowledgeable about the Orang Asli and can arrange a spectrum of activities. Grab a brochure with directions to the guesthouse from the Kuantan tourist information centre (opposite).

The best way to get to Tasik Chini is to take a bus from Kuantan's **local bus station** (Jl Mahkota) to Felda Chini (Chini Village; RM5, two hours, six daily from 8.30am to 5.30pm) or Pekan (RM3.60, four daily from 11am to 5.45pm). From Felda Chini, hire a private car or motorcycle (around RM5, 10 minutes).

A taxi direct from Kuantan is around RM70 to Kampung Gumum.

CHERATING

☎ 09

At first glance Cherating looks like it's dying. Shops, restaurants and guesthouses line the main road, monkeys have taken over an old shack or two, but where are the people? Cherating's faded past as a travellers' pick-up scene gives the village a sense of melancholy but there's still a huge draw here: the effortless mingling of the locals and foreigners. Cherating invites you in, makes you feel like an old friend then pampers you with its lazy beach and fresh seafood.

During the monsoon season (November to March), storms kick up surfable waves, especially good for beginners as there are no underwater head-splitters. There's a friendly collection of Malay surfers who hang out year-round.

Batik workshops are enormously popular, and part of the Cherating experience. **Matahari Chalets** (☎ 581 9835) has the largest artists' studios, but other workshops have sprung up along the same road. A batik sarong starts at around RM40.

There are also myriad adventures on the river – kayaking, spotting monkeys and river otters, fishing trips etc.

Information

There are no banks in Cherating; **Travelpost** (☎ 581 9796; ☎ 9am-11pm) arranges bus and air ticketing, bicycle and vehicle hire, internet, tourist information, nature tours and will change travellers cheques and cash at a poor rate.

Sleeping

Cherating has a 'strip' where most of the restaurants and guesthouses congregate.

Maznah's Guest House (☎ 581 9072; chalets RM15-30) Some of Maznah's large bungalows were under renovation at the time of writing but even the older ones still look good. Little English is spoken, half-naked kids run laughing through the garden with a few stray chickens and *nasi lemak* (RM1.50) is served for breakfast.

Shadow of the Moon at Half-Past Four (☎ 581 9186; dm 18, r RM35-50) This dark place has resident characters who suspiciously seem like escapees from the pages of a well-worn novel. Rickety, moulding chalets and dorms hide amid the trees, with nocturnal monkeys and wild boars. Most people spend their time here in the central bar – common area of the Deadly Nightshade Bar, drinking and listening to tales of the owner's adventures.

Matahari Chalets (☎ 581 9835; chalets RM20-25) On the road between the beachfront and the main highway, the Matahari has fan-only weathered wood chalets with a balcony, fridge and mosquito net.

our pick **Mimi's Guest House** (☎ 019 904 5251; r RM30-50) If the village of Cherating doesn't inspire you to extend your stay, this place might. Impromptu barbecues and a regular crowd of surfing locals and travellers who never went home make you feel like you joined up with long lost friends. The bungalows and garden are tiny but bursting with artistic flair and all have attached bathrooms and TVs.

Payung Guest House (☎ 019 917 1934; r RM45-70) Absurdly popular Payung stands out for its

tip-top management. Solid bungalows with attached bathrooms line up to salute a standard regulation garden; some of the best tours originate from here.

Eating & Drinking

At the western tail-end of the strip are a row of concrete food stalls, serving *roti canai* and Malay specialities. Most of the Chinese-run restaurants serve beer and there are a handful of bars in town.

Restoran Duyong (☎ 581 9578; dishes RM3-10; ☎ lunch & dinner) Although this spot looks like a family-style place, there's enough beer swilling going on to give it a frat-boy edge. Dine on Western, Thai or Malay food, including adventurous dishes such as chicken-feet salad (RM10), while gazing out over Cherating's famous surf.

Matahari Restaurant (meals RM5-6; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Directly across from the Malay food stalls, this is where the region's best seafood comes in fresh and is then barbecued in front. Pick your fish (priced by the kilo at market rates) and watch it sizzle. Breakfasts are Western.

Rhana Pippins Bar (☎ dinner) A local expat hang-out right on the beach, this is a lively spot to make friends.

Deadly Nightshade Bar (☎ lunch & dinner) This is the restaurant and bar portion of the Shadow of the Moon guesthouse where all the guests converge at a communal table to feast over devil curry (a Eurasian speciality) made of wild boar and drink whisky.

Getting There & Away

Cherating doesn't have a bus station, but any Kuantan–Terengganu bus will drop off passengers at the turn-off to the village road, which will involve a short stroll. To go south from Cherating you'll need to wave down the local bus bound for Kuantan that runs every 30 minutes (RM3, 1¼ hours); for Kuala Terengganu book long-distance bus tickets (RM13, three hours, frequent) through **Travelpost** (☎ 581 9796; ☎ 9am-11pm).

MARANG

☎ 09

Marang, a fishing village at the mouth of Sungai Marang, was once a favourite stop-over for travellers making their way along the east coast. Unfortunately, because of poor development strategy, all that you'll

find nowadays is a dingy strip of ramshackle houses and roadside stalls up against a deserted beach. The main reason to come to Marang is to catch a ferry to Pulau Kapas, located 6km offshore. Both Marang and Pulau Kapas can be explored as day trips from Kuala Terengganu.

If you're around on Sunday, check out the excellent **Sunday Market**, which starts at 3pm near the town's jetties.

Directly across the jetty to Pulau Kapas is **Nusantara Hostel** (☎ 013 980 7385; dm RM20, r RM35-45), a colourful backpackers with a friendly owner and plenty of travel info.

There are regular local buses to/from Kuala Terengganu (RM1.80). For long-distance buses, there's a **ticket office** (☎ 618 2799; Jl Tanjung Sulong Musa) near the town's main intersection. There are buses to/from Kuala Lumpur (RM30.40, two daily), Johor Bahru (RM34, two daily), and Kuantan (RM13.90, two daily) via Cherating.

PULAU KAPAS

☎ 09

Kapas is the kind of place you could melt into and forget to leave. Not that there's much going on, but that's the beauty of the place – it's a beach without the scene. Outside July, August and a few holiday weekends expect to have the scorching white beaches, and aquamarine waters to yourself. All accommodation and the few restaurants are clustered together on two small beaches on the west coast, but you can walk around the headlands to quieter beaches.

Note that accommodation on the island shuts down during monsoon season (November to March).

There is only one budget-accommodation option on Kapas, **Lighthouse** (☎ 019 215 3558; dm/d with shared bathroom RM20/50), an elevated jungle longhouse with Che posters, hammocks and Nora Jones tunes.

It is also possible to camp on some of the isolated beaches at the northern and southern ends of the island, but bring your own food and water.

Six kilometres offshore from Marang, Kapas is reached by boats in mere minutes from Marang's main jetty. Tickets (slow boat RM20, speedboat RM30) can be purchased from any of the agents nearby. Boats depart when four or more people show up. Be sure to arrange a pick-up time when you purchase

your ticket. You can usually count on morning departures from 8.30am.

KUALA TERENGGANU

☎ 09

As the capital of Malaysia's oil producing region, Kuala Terengganu has money and has used it to tastefully redecorate. Large brick sidewalks and elegant mosque-like shopping complexes have gussied the place up yet the soul of the former fishing village has been maintained.

Kuala Terengganu is a convenient staging post to nearby attractions such as Tasik Kenyir, Pulau Kapas and Pulau Redang. Note that official business in Terengganu is closed on Friday and Saturday in observance of the Islamic faith.

Information

Jl Sultan Ismail is the commercial hub of the town and home to most of the banks. Internet shops are along Jl Tok Lam.

Hospital Terengganu (☎ 623 3333; Jl Sultan Mahamud)

Immigration office (☎ 622 1424; Wisma Persekutuan, Jl Sultan Ismail)

Mr Dobi Laundry (☎ 622 1671; Jl Masjid Abidin) Around RM3.50 per kilogram.

Ping Anchorage (☎ 626 5020; www.pinganchorage.com; 77A Jl Sultan Sulaiman) Organises accommodation to nearby resort islands (see p465) and sightseeing tours.

State Tourist Office (☎ 622 1553; Jl Sultan Zainal Abidin; ☎ 9am-5pm Sat-Thu)

Tourism Malaysia (☎ 622 1433; Menara Yayasan Islam Terengganu, Jl Sultan Omar; ☎ 9am-5pm Sat-Thu)

Sights

Kuala Terengganu's compact **Chinatown** is situated along Jl Kampung Cina (also called Jl Bandar). It's a colourful array of hole-in-the-wall Chinese shops, hairdressing salons and restaurants, as well as a sleepy **Chinese temple** and some narrow alleys leading to jetties on the waterfront.

The **central market** (cnr Jl Kg Cina & Jl Banggol; ☎ 8am-5pm Sat-Thu) is a lively place to graze on exotic snacks, and the floor above the fish section has a wide collection of batik and *kain songket* (handwoven fabric). Across from the market is a flight of stairs leading up to **Bukit Puteri** (Princess Hill), a 200m hill with city vistas and the remains of a fort. **Istana Maziah** (Sultan's Palace; Jl Masjid Abidin) and **Zainal Abidin Mosque** (Jl Masjid Abidin) are not camera shy.

Kompleks Muzium Negeri Terengganu (Terengganu State Museum; ☎ 622 1444; adult RM5, ⏰ 9am–5pm) claims to be the largest museum in the region, and it attractively sprawls over landscaped gardens along the banks of the Sungai Terengganu. Traditional architecture, fishing boats and textiles comprise the bulk of the collection. The museum is 5km south of Terengganu; to get there take minibus 10 (RM1).

In the middle of Sungai Terengganu, **Pulau Duyung Besar** carries on the ancient boat-building tradition handed down for generations; the village is good for a day of wandering and snacking. Take the local ferry (60 sen) from the jetty near the Immigration Office across Bukit Puteri.

Sleeping

Awi's Yellow House (☎ 624 5046; dm/d with shared bathroom RM6/15) This is a unique guesthouse built on stilts over Sungai Terengganu, on Pulau Duyung Besar, a 10-minute ferry ride across the river from Terengganu. It may be a little rustic for some, but it's a friendly and relaxed place.

Travellers Inn (☎ 626 2020; 77A Jl Sultan Sulaiman; dm RM8, r with shared bathroom RM18–36; 🏠) This is the only budget option in town, affiliated with the attached Ping Anchorage; it's clean and secure but distinctly unhelpful. You can also grab a mediocre Western-style breakfast or beer from its Travellers Cafe.

Hotel Grand Paradise (☎ 622 8888; 28 Jl Tok Lam; r RM60–80; 🏠) It's a far cry from Paradise but

this worn, friendly spot is good value for the price.

Eating & Drinking

Terengganu has several regional specialties, such as *nasi dagang* (glutinous rice cooked with coconut milk and served with fish curry) and *keropok lekor* (deep-fried fish crackers), that draw food enthusiasts from across the country.

Batu Buruk Food Centre (Jl Pantai Batu Buruk; 🍽 lunch & dinner) This is a great outdoor food centre near the beach; don't leave without trying its famous *ais-krim goreng* (fried ice cream).

Restoran Golden Dragon (☎ 622 3034; 198 Jl Kg Cina; dishes RM3–6; 🍽 lunch) Point and choose from delicious green-bean and chilli salad, roast pork, spinach salad and tofu dishes. This place serves beer and the staff are tickled by foreign clients.

Sahara Tandoori (☎ 623 7777; Jl Air Jernih; dishes RM3–7; 🍽 lunch) Tasty snacks such as banana fritters and *roti canai* are served at the popular Sahara. Be sure to try *abok abok*, a glutinous rice treat sweetened with coconut sap and wrapped in a banana leaf.

There's a night market at the beachfront every Friday evening, and Chinatown's outdoor hawker centre, divided into Chinese and Malay sections, is also worth a graze.

Getting There & Away

For details on getting to/from Pulau Redang, see right.

AIR

Malaysia Airlines (code MH; ☎ 622 1415; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my) has direct daily flights to/from Kuala Lumpur (RM135). **Air Asia** (code AK; ☎ 631 3122; www.airasia.com) also has flights to KL (from RM50, two daily). A taxi to/from the **airport** (☎ 666 3666), located 13km northeast of the town centre, costs around RM30.

BUS & TAXI

The **main bus station** (Jl Masjid Abidin) serves as a terminus for all local buses. Some long-distance buses depart from here as well, but most use the **express bus station** (Jl Sultan Zainal Abidin), in the north of town.

At the main bus station, there are services to/from Marang (RM2, 30 minutes, every half-hour from 6.30am to 6.30pm) and Kuala Besut (RM10, 2½ hours, hourly).

From the express bus station, there are regular services running to/from Johor Bahru (RM34, nine hours, two daily), Ipoh (RM37, 10 hours, two daily), Kuala Lumpur (RM30, seven hours, frequent), Melaka (RM33.20, nine hours, one daily), Mersing (RM26.20, seven hours, two daily) and Kota Bharu (RM11, three hours, seven daily).

The main taxi stand is at Jl Masjid Abidin across from the main bus station.

MERANG

☎ 09

The main gateway to Pulau Redang, the sleepy little fishing village of Merang (*mer-ang*; not to be confused with Marang, further south) is one of the few remaining villages to have escaped development. There is little of interest to do in the village other than to descend into the slowness of harvesting coconuts, repairing fishing nets and gossiping about neighbours.

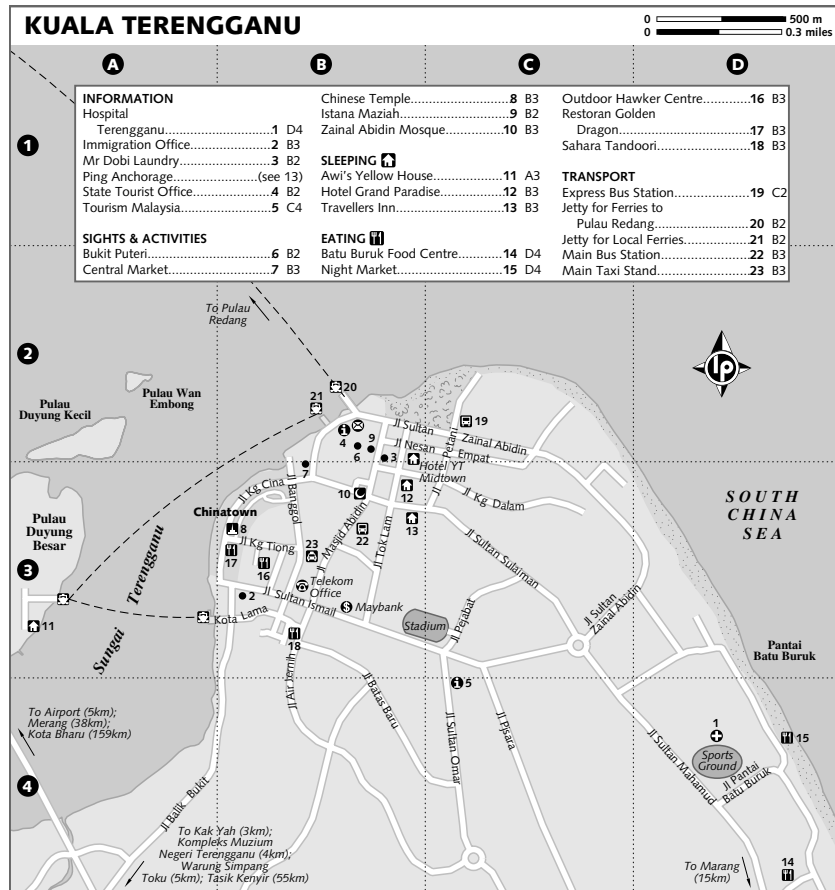
The best place to stay is friendly **Kembara Resort** (☎ 653 1770; kembararesort@hotmail.com; dm/d/chalets from RM10/30/60; 🏠 🍽 🚿), about 500m south of the village (follow the signs from the main road).

There are daily buses from the main bus station in Kuala Terengganu to Merang (RM2). There are no regular public ferries between Merang and Pulau Redang; rather, the island's resorts have boats that make the trip. See below for details.

PULAU REDANG

Pulau Redang is one of nine islands that form a protected marine park, and it is considered one of the best dive spots in the world thanks to its ancient coral gardens and good visibility. Hawksbill and green turtles nest on parts of the island and leatherbacks are occasionally spotted feasting on jellyfish. Accommodation options range from international-class hotels to air-conditioned chalets and are nearly exclusively booked on all-inclusive package tours.

Luckily **Ping Anchorage** (☎ 626 5020; www.pinganchorage.com) in Kuala Terengganu acts as a clearinghouse for unsold rooms, offering three-day, two-night packages (including transfer to/from the island, all meals and an activity or two) from RM320 to RM500 per person. Prices are lowest off season and mid-week and go down even lower if you book four people to a room. While you could go to



Redang on your own by hopping on one of the resort's boats, you'll end up paying considerably more for room and board.

KUALA BESUT

The primary jetty town for boats to Pulau Perhentian is Kuala Besut (bee-su), south of Kota Bharu. It is a sleepy fishing village with a handful of collaborating boat companies and a small bus station.

Some taxi drivers get paid commission to take travellers to the upstart jetty of **Tok Bali**, just across the river. The Symphony boat company operates out of Tok Bali. Ferries here aren't quite – but are nearly as frequent – as Kuala Besut based boats; unless you are set on a certain departure time, this shouldn't pose a problem. For more details see opposite.

Most Kota Bharu guesthouses arrange shared taxis to Kuala Besut (RM35) or Tok Bali (RM30); the fare can be split between four people. There is also local bus 639 (RM4.50, 2½ hours, two daily) and taxis pick up passengers at the Wakaf Baharu train station (RM40).

From Kuala Besut's small bus station, you can travel to Kuala Lumpur (RM30, eight hours, two daily) and to the transport hubs of Jerneh (RM2, every 20 minutes) and Pasir Puteh (RM2, every 20 minutes). For Kuala Terengganu (RM7, 2½ hours, hourly) buses wait at **Restaurant Petani Jaya** (☎ 697 4517; 779 Jl Semarak), a short walk away from the jetty.

The agent at Kuala Besut's jetty also sells minibus tickets to the Cameron Highlands (RM60, six hours) and Taman Negara (RM85, eight hours), which leave at 10am daily.

PULAU PERHENTIAN

☎ 09

Long Beach on Pulau Kecil of the Perhentian Islands is one of Malaysia's most popular backpacker congregation spots. The near-perfect crescent of white sand is clogged with guesthouses (but no cars!) and has a burgeoning litter problem but the jungle setting and fiesta vibe are hypnotically soothing, the turquoise water utterly sublime. Coral Beach, also on Kecil, is a touch classier than Long Beach, while the digs on Pulau Besar verge on the resortlike.

The best time to visit is from March to mid-November. The Perhentians close for the monsoon season, but usually reopen around

Chinese New Year in February. Dates vary depending on the whim of the monsoons.

There are no banks on the Perhentians. Generators are the source of power and are run during limited hours. There are no public phones but mobile phones work. If you're desperate you can make international calls from one of the little internet-café-cum-shacks on Long Beach for a heart-stopping RM15 per minute.

Activities

Dive operators on the island contend that the Perhentians offer all the underwater delights of the east coast of Thailand without the 'dive-factory' feel. Classes are smaller and more relaxed than the dive diva of Ko Tao. A four-day open-water course starts at RM850 and is pro-rated for various initiation steps. For the surface skimmers, guesthouses arrange snorkelling trips around the island (RM30 to RM50).

Sleeping & Eating

On Pulau Kecil (Small Island), Long Beach has the biggest range of budget chalets and 'nightlife' (that means two beachfront bars). In the high season (usually from late May to early September), finding accommodation here can be tough, so book ahead or arrive early. Accommodation on Pulau Besar (Big Island) is more upmarket and usually includes air-con and an attached bathroom; but the beaches aren't as pretty as on Kecil.

Alcohol is available in a few bars and hotel restaurants on both islands, though it's not openly displayed and you will have to ask for it. The best hunting grounds for a beer are the more popular Long Beach cafés and Watercolours Resort on Pulau Perhentian Besar.

PULAU PERHENTIAN KECIL

A trail over the narrow waist of the island leads from Long Beach to smaller Coral Bay (sometimes known as Aur Bay) on the western side of the island. It's a 15-minute walk along a footpath through the jungle interior (watch for monitor lizards). Coral Bay has a more chilled ambience and gear rentals and excursions are slightly cheaper; it also faces the west for an uninterrupted view of the brilliant sunsets and has calm swimming. The surf can get rather big on Long Beach and several places along the beach rent boogie boards (RM15 per

hour) and old clunky surfboards (RM30 per hour) but bargain for better rates.

There are a number of small bays around the island, each with one set of chalets, and often only accessible by boat.

Rock Garden (Long Beach; r with shared bathroom RM15) Slap-up shacks on the rocky headland above Lemon Grass Chalet have a bed, a mosquito net and a view.

Chempaka Chalets (☎ 010 985 7329; Long Beach; r RM20-30) Yet another group of bungalows in a bland but tidy garden, Chempaka gets extra points for cleanliness and its beach-bum vibe.

Panorama Chalets & Restaurant (☎ 010 934 0123; Long Beach; r RM25-150) This is a social place with a jungle-groovy atmosphere, a good café and nightly movies. Rooms are a little flimsy for the price and the shared bathrooms are less than luxurious.

Matahari Chalets (☎ 019 956 5756; Long Beach; chalets RM35-65) The spacious longhouse rooms and A-frame huts are in much better condition than those of the competition. They ramble around a well-kept but shadeless garden off the beach.

Butterfly Chalets (Coral Bay; r RM30-40) Ageing huts look out over uninterrupted sea views and are tucked in by hibiscus flowers. To get here, clamber up the hill at the far end of the beach beyond Suria Beach Resort.

Aur Bay Chalets (☎ 010 985 8584; Coral Bay; r RM30-40) This well-groomed but fading place feels like a mini *kampung* with its sweet Malay owners and kids jump-roping in the sand.

Maya Beach Resort (☎ 019 937 9136; Coral Bay; r RM35-45) British-run Maya is neat, trim and a good place for friendly advice.

our pick **Petani Beach** (Pasir Petani; r RM30-50) On a secluded south coast beach, the driftwood naturalistic décor here is set off by bows of magenta bougainvillea. We've had very enthusiastic traveller recommendations for the quality of the bungalows, the service and the food.

D' Lagoon Chalets (☎ 019 985 7089; Teluk Kerma; r RM25-50) This place fronts a gorgeous but often agitated bay on the northeastern side of the island. There are longhouse rooms and chalets, as well as a more unusual tree house (RM25) for a more Tarzan experience.

Mira Chalets (☎ 010 964 0582; r RM30-50) Mira, on the west coast, was scheduled to reopen when we passed. Sea-weathered, rustic huts with mosquito nets are perched over a beach

so deserted and perfect, you'll think you're hallucinating. There's one rather adventurous jungle toilet for everyone to share.

PULAU PERHENTIAN BESAR

Of the three main beaches, the sand surrounding the Perhentian Island Resort is the rockiest, heading south the sand is less cluttered, and finally Teluk Dalam, a secluded bay with a long stretch of shallow beach, is just silken. An easily missed track leads from behind the second jetty over the hill to Teluk Dalam.

It's possible to camp on the beach south of the Government Resthouse; this area is busy at long weekends.

The options here are listed from north to south.

Watercolours Resort (☎ 010 911 3852; www.watercoloursworld.com; r RM60-80; ☎) It's a bit of a factory here with lots of comings and goings, staff everywhere and divers heading to the water like lemmings. The bungalows are musty but the restaurant is the best in the islands.

ABC Guesthouse (☎ 019 906 4823; r RM30; ☎) Over the headland from Watercolours there's another stretch of beach that's also the main ferry stop so there's lots of boat activity. Elevated above the smooth sands is this big, bright, Wild West-looking longhouse. Rooms are basic, but a bargain.

Abdul's (☎ 010 983 7303; r RM40-80) Clambering over the next headland brings you to a quiet beach where you'll find this popular place with fan chalets and attached bathrooms. Unfortunately, a giant government pier was under construction here at the time of writing so the calm may not last.

Everfresh Beach Resort (☎ 697 7620; Teluk Dalam; r RM20-40) Rooms here are tatty and dark but who cares when you've got a beach like this one out front.

Flora Bay Resort (☎ 697 7266; www.florabayresort.com; Teluk Dalam; r RM50-150; ☎) A huge range of rooms, a restaurant, movies at night and super helpful staff make this a good choice although the rooms could use some sprucing up.

Getting There & Around

Pulau Perhentian is 21km off the coast. Both speedboats (RM70 return, 30 minutes) and slow boats (RM50 return, 1½ hours) run several times a day from Kuala Besut to the Perhentians, from 8am to 3pm. In the other direction, speedboats depart from the islands daily at around 8am, noon and 4pm; slow

boats leave hourly from 8am to noon. Note that you can board a speedboat going in either direction with a slow-boat ticket if you pay the RM10 fare difference. See p466 for more information about the competing jetty of Tok Bali.

When the waves are high on Long Beach, you'll be dropped off or picked up on the other side of the island at Coral Bay. Also, guesthouse operators on Kecil now charge RM2 per person for ferry pick-ups and drop-offs.

The easiest way to island (or beach) hop is by boat. Posted fares and boat operators usually camp out under a shady coconut tree. From island to island, the trip costs RM12.

KOTA BHARU

☎ 09

Just because it's a state capital doesn't mean it's a sprawling metropolis. Kota Bharu is a shy, manageable town and a convenient base to explore Malay and Islamic culture. While some visitors just pass through en route to Pulau Perhentian, the cultural centre demonstrations and lip-smacking night market should not be missed by the culturally inclined.

Information

Banks and ATMs are scattered around town; the Maybank moneychanger (near the corner of Jl Padang Garong and Jl Mahmud), near the central market, is usually open till 7pm. Internet shops can be found in the alleys between Jl Doktor and Jl Kebun Sultan.

General Hospital (☎ 748 5533; Jl Hospital)

Immigration office (☎ 748 212; Jl Temenggong)

Tourist Information Centre (☎ 748 5534; Jl Sultan Ibrahim; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-4.30pm Sun-Thu)

Sights & Activities

Kota Bharu's main attraction is its **central market** (Jl Padang Garong), housed in a modern octagonal building where traders sell fresh produce, spices, basketware and other goods. You might come to observe the locals, but the locals are more than happy to look at you.

For a dose of Malay tradition, don't miss the cultural centre, **Gelanggang Seni** (☎ 744 3124; Jl Mahmud; admission free; ☎ 3.30-5.30pm Mon, Wed & Sat, 9pm-midnight Wed & Sat), for top spinning, *seni silat* (martial arts), shadow puppetry, kite making etc. Check with the tourist information centre, as opening and performance times vary.

Exhibits at the **Muzium Negeri Kelantan** (☎ 748 2266; Jl Hospital; adult RM2; ☎ 8.30am-4.45pm Sun-Thu) combine an eclectic array of artefacts, including traditional instruments, kites and shadow puppets.

Other museums are clustered around Padang Merdeka (Independence Sq). **Istana Jahar** (Royal Customs Museum; ☎ 748 2266; Jl Hilir Kota; adult RM3; ☎ 8.30am-4.45pm Sun-Thu) exhibits royal rites of passage and traditional ceremonies, such as circumcision and engagement, from birth to death; this may not sound that engaging, but wandering around the scenic building gives a glimpse into Malay Muslim architecture. **Muzium Islam** (☎ 744 0102; Jl Sultan; admission free; ☎ 8.30am-4.45pm Sun-Thu) is also worth a look and **Istana Batu** (☎ 748 7737; Jl Hilir Kota; adult RM2; ☎ 8.30am-4.45pm Sun-Thu) has displays on royal history.

Sleeping

Central city crash-pads are convenient for late central bus station drop-offs, but wandering just minutes away brings you to more charming options. The backpacker places listed here have shared-bathroom and private-bathroom (read: pricier) options.

Zeck's Travellers' Inn (☎ 743 1613; www.zeck-traveller.com; 70886 Jl Sri Cemerlang; dm/s/d RM7/15/20; ☎) An oasis just 10 minutes' walk from the city, Zeck's is relaxed, clean (it was being painted when we passed) and over-the-top hospitable. Many travellers on a short stop stay on longer just because of this place. The turn-off from Jl Sri Cemerlang is easy to miss; keep an eye out for the roadside shack selling fresh fritters.

Ideal Travellers' Guest House (☎ 744 2246; www.ugoideal.com; 3954f Jl Kebun Sultan; dm/s/d/q RM7/15/25/35; ☎) Down an alley off Jl Pintu Pong, the Ideal is a deservedly popular place of happy, mingling backpackers. Spacious rooms are airy and have lots of natural light. Bathrooms get a regular scrub down and there's a shady backyard reading area.

KB Backpackers Lodge (☎ 747 0125; 1872A Jl Padang Garong; dm/s/d/q RM7/15/22/40; ☎) This is a good choice for a dark and dorny night on a good mattress. It's right in the heart of town.

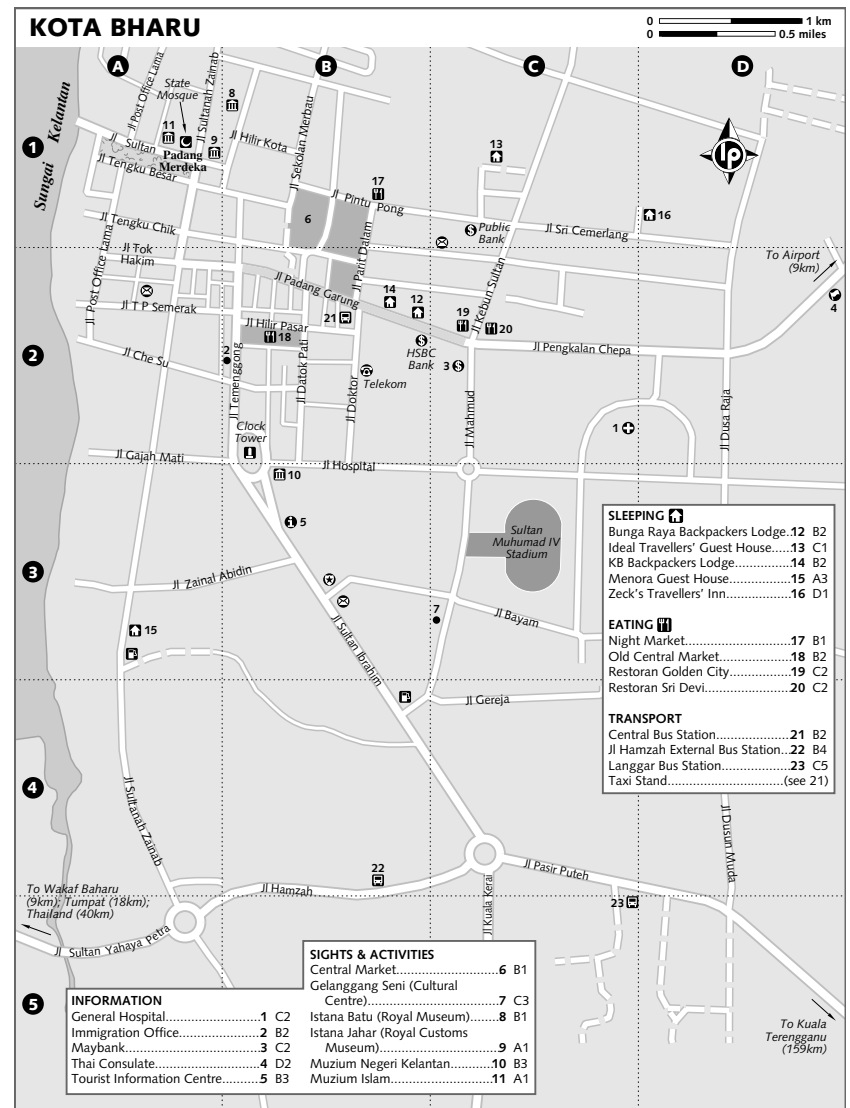
Bunga Raya Backpackers Lodge (☎ 748 9866; 2981B Jl Padang Garong; dm/s/d RM8/15/28; ☎) Central and spanning three floors of an apartment complex, this is a social, city-feeling place with a good common area and bright basic rooms. Dorms are cramped and the communal bathrooms have seen better days.

Menora Guest House (☎ 748 1669; 3338D Jl Sultanah Zainab; r RM15-38; ☎) Menora's prime attraction is its rooftop garden with views of the city, Sungai Kelantan and beyond. There's one room on the rooftop that has its own open-air shower. Inside, there are a variety of clean rooms. Note that the gate is locked at 11.30pm.

Eating & Drinking

Kota Bharu is a conservative Muslim city so alcohol is not widely available; head to Chinese restaurants if you're hankering for a beer.

our pick **Night Market** (cnr Jl Datok Pati & Jl Pintu Pong; ☎ dinner) For a bonanza of regional Malay and Indian specialities at hawker prices, head to this vibrant market. Here you will find *ayam*



percik (marinated chicken on bamboo skewers), *nasi kerabu* (rice tinted blue with herbs, mixed with coconut, fish, vegetables and spices), squid-on-a-stick, sweet banana and savoury *murtabak* (thick Indian pancake stuffed with onion, egg, chicken, mutton or vegetables), and a bewildering array of cakes. Prayer always pulls rank over food and at prayer time (roughly between 7pm and 7.45pm) everyone is chased out of the market.

Old Central Market (Cnr Jl Datok Pati & Jl Hilir Pasar; meals RM2-4; ☺ breakfast & lunch) The old market has blocks worth of food vendors with mouth-watering trays of premade curries and stir-fries. Just point and enjoy.

Restoran Sri Devi (☎ 746 2980; 4213F Jl Kebun Sultan; dishes RM3-6; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) As popular with locals as with tourists, this is a great place for banana-leaf curry, *roti canai* and mango lassi. There are plenty of vegetarian options.

Restoran Golden City (Jl Padang Garong; mains from RM5; ☺ lunch & dinner) Besides being an excellent spot for Chinese noodles, steamed fish and tofu dishes, you'll be able to wash it all down with the Cooled Tiger.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Malaysia Airlines (code MH; ☎ 744 7000; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my) has direct flights to/from KL (RM200). **Air Asia** (code AK; ☎ 746 1671; www.airasia.com) has flights to KL from RM81. The **airport** (Lapangan Terbang Sultan Ismail Petra) is 9km east of town. You can take bus 9 from the **Old Central Market** (Jl Hilir Pasar); a taxi costs RM15.

BUS

There are three bus stations in Kota Bharu. Local buses depart from the **central bus station** (Jl Padang Garong), also known as the state-run SKMK bus station. Most long-distance buses will drop off passengers near here, but do not depart from here. All long-distance companies serving Kota Bharu have ticket agents nearby. When buying your ticket, verify which long-distance terminal the bus departs from. Most Transnational long-distance buses depart from **Langgar bus station** (☎ 748 3807; Jl Pasir Puteh), in the south of the city. All the other long-distance bus companies operate from the external **bus station** (Jl Hamzah).

A few handy local buses include bus 639 to Kuala Besut (for boats to Pulau Perhentian; RM4, 2½ hours, two daily), bus 9 to Kota Bharu airport (RM1, every 20 minutes), and

GETTING TO THAILAND

It's not advised to cross the border here due to violence and instability on this coast of southern Thailand. If you must risk it, take local bus 29 from Kota Bharu (RM3, one hour, every 30 minutes) to the Malaysian border town of Rantau Panjang. From here, you can walk across the border (open 6am to 5pm) to the Thai town of Sungai Kolok. There is also a Bangkok-bound train that crosses here, although services have sometimes been suspended due to violence in the area. See p786 for information on doing the trip in the reverse direction.

buses 19 and 27 to Wakaf Baru (RM1). Note that some of these routes may be identified by destination rather than number.

Long-distance destinations include Butterworth (RM27.90, seven hours, one daily), Ipoh (RM25.40, eight hours, five daily), JB (RM35, 10 hours, five daily), Kuala Lumpur (RM30.80, 10 hours, hourly), Kuala Terengganu (RM10.90, three hours, two daily) and Kuantan (RM24, seven hours, five daily).

TAXI

The taxi stand is on the southern side of the central bus station. Destinations and costs per car (which can be split between four passengers) include Wakaf Baru (RM15), Kota Besut (RM35) and Tok Bali (RM30). Taxi drivers in Kota Bharu are uncharacteristically aggressive; do your homework on fares. Most guesthouses arrange shared taxis, especially for early morning departures.

TRAIN

The nearest **train station** (☎ 719 6986) to Kota Bharu is at Wakaf Baru, on the Jungle Railway line (see opposite). There is also a train to Bangkok, although services have sometimes been suspended due to violence in southern Thailand.

PENINSULAR INTERIOR

A thick band of jungle buffers the two coasts from one another. Within the middle is Taman Negara, the peninsula's most famous national park, and the Jungle Railway, an engineering feat.

JUNGLE RAILWAY

This line trundles into the mountainous, jungle-clad interior, stopping at every ramshackle *kampung*, packing in chattering school children and headscarfed women lugging oversized bundles. Travellers' reports range from sheer awe of the natural splendour and amusement with the local camaraderie to boredom and irritation with faulty air-conditioning in the carriages and dirty windows. If you're in good company and have a lot of time, then there are worse ways to travel between Pulau Perhentian and Taman Negara.

The northern terminus is Tumpat, but most travellers start/end at Wakaf Baru, the closest station to the transport hub of Kota Bharu. The train departs from Wakaf Baru on its southbound journey around 6am. It reaches Jerantut, the jumping-off point for Taman Negara, anywhere from eight to 11 hours later (RM14.60). The train continues south to Gemas (RM21.20), meeting the Singapore-KL train line.

There are also express trains that travel at night, but that would defeat the purpose of seeing the jungle. There is a daily express train that leaves Wakaf Baru at 6pm and arrives in KL at 7.25am the following day. There is also a daily express train to Singapore (RM35) leaving at 7pm and arriving at 9am the following day.

Northbound trains leave Gemas at 7.45am, reaching Jerantut at noon and arriving at Wakaf Baru at 9.30pm.

Note that the KTM railway company changes its schedule every six months, so it pays to double-check departure times.

JERANTUT

☎ 09

Jerantut is the first of several stepping stones to Taman Negara. It's a friendly, easy town, where you can pick up supplies, change money or stay overnight to break up your trip. Most guesthouses are affiliated with travel agencies that offer transfers to Kuala Tembeling jetty (where boats leave for Taman Negara national park), ferry services to Kuala Tahan (the base-camp village for the national park) and park tours.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Sri Emas (☎ 266 4499; www.taman-negara.com; Jl Besar; dm RM8, r RM15-64; ☺) This place is

backpacker central, and it can make full arrangements for your trip to Taman Negara (although just organising transport should generally be enough). Rooms are average and the use of some cleaning products wouldn't go astray.

Greenleaf Guesthouse (1st fl, Jl Diwangsa; dm RM10, r with shared bathroom RM20-30; ☺) Another backpacker favourite, the Greenleaf is open 24 hours, and has free pick-up and drop-off to the train and bus stations, luggage storage etc. It is across from the bus station near the AM Finance bank.

Hotel Chet Fatt (☎ 266 5805; 177 Jl Diwangsa; dm/d with shared bathroom RM10/20; ☺) This is near the bus station and has spacious, window-lit rooms, free filtered water and friendly service.

The food stalls situated between the market and Jerantut's train station are excellent. Cheap *kedai kopi* can be found along Jl Besar and in the buildings across from the bus station.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

Motor-run canoes make the scenic journey between Kuala Tembeling, 16km north of Jerantut, and Kuala Tahan. Several ferry companies sell tickets at the jetty, if you arrive independent of arranged transport from Jerantut. In most cases, though, travel agents sell combination tickets that include transfer from Jerantut to the jetty and ferry to Kuala Tahan.

For more information on ferries to Kuala Tahan, see p475.

BUS & TAXI

The bus station and taxi stand are in the centre of town.

Most people arriving in Jerantut want to head directly to the Kuala Tembeling jetty (where boats leave for Taman Negara). The easiest way to do this is to follow the representative from Hotel Sri Emas, who meets arriving buses and trains and organises mini-bus transfers (RM5) from Jerantut to Kuala Tembeling.

If you want to resist the herding, there is a local bus between Kuala Tembeling and Jerantut bus station (signed as 'Kerambit'; RM1.50, 45 minutes, with 8.15am, 11.15am, 1.45pm and 5.15pm departures), but the times are not pegged to boat departures or arrivals (see p475

for ferry times); the return bus leaves Kuala Tembeling at 10am, 1pm and 3.30pm.

You can also skip the boat journey and hop on a Kuala Tahan-bound bus (signed as 'Latif'; RM6, one to two hours, four daily); Kuala Tahan is the base-camp village for Taman Negara.

Alternatively, you can hire a taxi to Kuala Tembeling (RM16 for the entire car) or to Kuala Tahan (RM60).

Beware of touts at the train and bus stations who tell you there are no boats running from Tembeling to the park; they're only trying to get you to take their very expensive alternatives.

When you are ready to get the hell out of Jerantut, there are six daily buses to/from KL's Pekeliling bus station (RM12.80, 3½ hours, four daily) via Temerloh. If you miss the bus to KL, buses go every hour to Temerloh (RM5, one hour), from where there are more connections to KL and other destinations; the last bus to Temerloh leaves at 6pm. If you're itching to get to Pulau Tioman, you'll have to catch a bus to Kuantan (RM12.40, 3½ hours, three daily) and then a bus to Mersing.

You can also take a bus from Jerantut to Melaka (RM16.70, five hours, one daily). Long-distance taxis go to Temerloh (RM30), KL (RM120) and Kuantan (RM100).

TRAIN

Jerantut is on the Jungle Railway (Tumpat-Gemas line; see p471). The train station is off Jl Besar, just behind Hotel Sri Emas. For the famed jungle view, catch the northbound local train at 12.10pm (RM15). If you opt to skip the view, a daily northbound express train leaves Jerantut at 2am (RM17 to RM22, four hours).

For southbound trips, there is a midnight express train leaving Jerantut for Sentral KL (RM20 to RM24, seven hours), a 1am express train for Singapore (RM16 to RM22, seven hours) and an 8.40am local train for Singapore (RM11 to RM18, nine hours). Another local southbound train leaves at 3.30pm terminating at Gemas (RM9 to RM12, four hours), where you can catch an inconvenient 2am Singapore (RM28 to RM33) or KL train.

TAMAN NEGARA

☎ 09

A buzzing, leech-infested mass of primary forest over 130 million years old, Taman Ne-

gara sprawls across 4343 sq km. Trudge along muggy trails in search of (very) elusive wildlife, explore bat caves, balance on the creaky canopy walk or spend the night in a 'hide' where jungle sounds make you feel like you've gone back to the caveman days. Although you probably won't get to see any large beasts such as tigers or elephants, sightings of smaller critters such as snakes, 'small' big cats, flying squirrels and slow lorises are frequent. The most action is at night so either spend the night at a salt lick or take a night tour.

The best time to visit the park is in the dry season between February and September. During the wet season, or even after one good rainfall, leeches come out in force.

Orientation & Information

Kuala Tahan is the base camp for Taman Negara and has accommodation, minimarkets and floating-barge restaurants. Directly opposite Kuala Tahan, across Sungai Tembeling, is the entrance to the national park, Mutiara Taman Negara Resort and the park headquarters located at the Wildlife Department, behind the resort's restaurant.

You must pay a RM1 entrance fee and an optional RM5 camera permit at the **Wildlife Department** (☎ 266 1122; 📍 8am-10pm Sat-Thu, 8am-noon & 3-10pm Fri). The reception desk also provides basic maps, guide services and advice.

Internet access is painfully slow and expensive (per hour RM6). There are a handful of terminals at Tembling Riverview Hostel and a few more at an unnamed shop across from Teresek View Motel. There are no banks in Taman Negara.

Activities

HIDES & SALT LICKS

Animal-observation hides (*bumbun*) are built overlooking salt licks and grassy clearings, which attract feeding nocturnal animals. You'll need to spend the night in order to see any real action. There are several hides close to Kuala Tahan (Tabing and Kumbang hides being the most popular) and Kuala Trenggan that are a little too close to human habitation to attract the shy animals. Even if you don't see any wildlife, the jungle sounds are well worth it – the 'symphony' is best at dusk and dawn.

Hides (per person per night RM5) need to be reserved at the Wildlife Department and they are very rustic with pit toilets. Some travellers

PLANNING FOR TAMAN NEGARA

Stock up on essentials in Jerantut. If it's been raining, leeches will be unavoidable. Mosquito repellent, tobacco, salt, toothpaste and soap can be used to deter them, with varying degrees of success. A liberal coating of insect spray over shoes and socks works best. Tuck pant legs into socks.

Wear long sleeves and long pants when hitting the trails to protect you from insects and brambles. Take plenty of water, even on short walks, and on longer walks take water-purifying tablets to sterilise stream water.

Sturdy boots are essential; lightweight, high-lacing canvas jungle boots that keep out leeches can be hired from the camping-ground office. Camping gear can also be hired at Kuala Tahan jetty or Mutiara Taman Negara resort.

Taman Negara: Malaysia's Premier National Park, by David Bowden (available in the bigger bookshops of Kuala Lumpur or online), is an excellent resource, with detailed route maps and valuable background information.

hike independently in the day to the hides, then camp overnight and return the next day, while others go to more far-flung hides that require some form of transport and a guide; the Wildlife Department can steer you in the right direction. For overnight trips you'll need food, water and a sleeping bag. Rats on the hunt for tucker are problematic, so hang food high out of reach.

Some of the following hides can be reached by popular treks (see right):

Bumbun Blau & Bumbun Yong On Sungai Yong.

From the park headquarters, it's roughly 1½ hours' walk to Bumbun Blau (3.1km), which sleeps 12 people and has water nearby, and two hours to Bumbun Yong (4km). You can visit Gua Telinga along the way. Both hides can also be reached by the riverbus service (see p475).

Bumbun Cegar Anjing Once an airstrip, this is now an artificial salt lick, established to attract wild cattle and deer. A clear river runs a few metres from the hide. It's 1½ hours' walk from Kuala Tahan; after rain Bumbun Cegar Anjing may only be accessible by boat (per four-person boat RM40). The hide sleeps eight people.

Bumbun Kumbang From the park headquarters, it's roughly five hours' walk to Bumbun Kumbang. Alternatively, take the riverboat service from Kuala Tahan up Sungai Tembeling to Kuala Trenggan (per four-person boat RM90, 35 minutes), then walk 45 minutes to the hide. Animals most commonly seen here are tapirs, rats, monkeys and gibbons, and – rarely – elephants. The hide has bunks for 12 people.

Bumbun Tahan Roughly five minutes' walk from the park headquarters. There's little chance of seeing any animals, apart from monkeys and deer at this artificial salt lick.

Tabing Hide About 1½ hours' walk (3.1km) from park headquarters, this hide is near the river so it's also accessible by the riverbus service (p475). The best ani-

mal-watching (mostly rats, tapir and squirrels) here is at nightfall and daybreak.

TREKKING

There are treks to suit all levels of motivation, from a half-hour jaunt to a steep nine-day tussle up and down Gunung Tahan (2187m). It's unanimous that the guides are excellent.

Popular do-it-yourself treks, from one to five hours, include the following:

Bukit Teresik From behind the Canopy Walkway a trail leads to the top of this hill from which there are fine views across the forest. It's steep and slippery in parts. The return trip is about one hour.

Canopy Walkway (admission RM5; 🕒 11am-2.45pm Sat-Thu, 9am-noon Fri) Anyone who says walking isn't an adrenalin sport has never been suspended on a hanging rope bridge constructed of wooden planks and ladders elevated 45m above the ground; come early to avoid long waits in line.

Gua Telinga From the park headquarters, it's roughly a 1½-hour walk (2.6km). Think wet: a stream runs through this cave (with sleeping bats) and a rope guides you for the strenuous 80m half-hour trek – and crawl – through the cave. Return to the main path through the cave or take the path round the rocky outcrop at its far end. From the main path, it's 15 minutes' walk to Bumbun Blau hide or you can walk directly back to Kuala Tahan.

Kuala Trenggan The well-marked main trail along the bank of Sungai Tembeling leads 9km to Kuala Trenggan. This is a popular trail for those heading to Bumbun Kumbang.

Lubok Simpon This is a popular swimming hole. Near the Canopy Walkway, take the branch trail that leads across to a swimming area on Sungai Tahan.

Longer treks, which require a guide, include the following:

Gunung Tahan For the gung-ho, Gunung Tahan, 55km from the park headquarters, is Peninsular Malaysia's highest peak (2187m). The return trek takes nine days at a steady pace, although it can be done in seven. Guides are compulsory (RM550 per person for nine days if there are four people; prices vary depending on how many are in the group). Try to organise this trek in advance through the Wildlife Department (p472).

Rentis Tenor (Tenor Trail) From Kuala Tahan, this trek takes roughly three days. Day one: take the trail to Gua Telinga, and beyond, for about seven hours, to Yong camp site. Day two: a six-hour walk to the Renuis camp site. Day three: cross Sungai Tahan (up to waist deep) to get back to Kuala Tahan, roughly six hours' walk, or you can stop over at the Lameh camp site, about halfway.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Catch-and-release fishing is allowed along Sungai Keniam. The sport fish known locally as *ikan kelah* (Malaysian mahseer) is a cousin of India's king of the Himalayan rivers and is a prized catch. You'll need a fishing licence, transport and a guide to fish along the river; head to the **Wildlife Department** (☎ 266 1122; ☎ 8am-10pm Sat-Thu, 8am-noon & 3pm-10pm Fri) for more information. If that sounds too hard, you can fish along Sungai Tembling without a permit.

Tours

Guides who are licensed by the Wildlife Department have completed coursework in forest flora, fauna and safety and are registered with the department. But often the Kuala Tahan tour operators offer cheaper prices than the Wildlife Department, although there is no guarantee that the guide is licensed. Guides cost RM150 per day (one guide can lead up to 12 people), plus there is a RM100 fee for each night spent out on the trail.

There are popular night tours (RM25), which are on foot or by 4WD. You're more likely to see animals (such as slow loris, snakes, civets and flying squirrels) on the drives, which go through palm-oil plantations outside the park.

Many travellers sign up for tours to an Orang Asli settlement. Tribal elders give a general overview and you'll learn how to use a long blowpipe and start a fire. While local guides insist that these tours provide essential income for the Orang Asli, most of your tour money will go to the tour company. A small handicraft purchase in the village will help spread the wealth.

Consider booking tours *after* you arrive in Kuala Tahan. Talk to fellow travellers about which tour operators are doing a good job since a recommendation by a certain guide-book can cause quality to deteriorate. Readers have also complained that certain tour operators will promise a particular tour, but may only be able to fulfil a portion of the planned itinerary upon arrival.

Sleeping & Eating

Guesthouses are listed here in south-to-north order. Malay food (dishes for around RM3 to RM10) is available from barge restaurants and at a couple of places attached to guesthouses. The barge restaurant furthest north serves delicious Indian banana-leaf meals (RM6). Kuala Tahan is dry, so if you're after a beer you'll have to cross over to **Mutiara Taman Negara Resort** (☎ 266 3500; beers RM8) where you can also dine on overpriced Western food (RM17 to RM55).

For details on staying at a hide, see p472.

KUALA TAHAN

Dakili Hostel (dm RM10) The Dakili is an immaculate block of white cement dorms that promise quiet nights and no bites. It's up the steps from the NKS restaurant and to the right.

Ekoton Chalets (☎ 266 9897; tamannegara@hotmail.com; dm RM13-20, r RM90; ☎) Rather pricey because of the air-con, this place is run by the same mob as Sri Emas (in Jerantut). Both rooms and dorms are in good condition and the gardens are soothing.

Tembling River Hostel & Chalets (☎ 266 6766; dm RM10, chalets RM35-50; ☎) Straddling the thoroughfare footpath, folks stay here to be close to the action, not for privacy. Everything from laundry to internet is right at your fingertips. Rooms are barrack basic.

Agoh (☎ 019 928 0414; d RM40) This place looks completely unenticing until you step past reception and into the shade of the garden. New flooring adds a clean spark to the standard chalets and the staff make the place even more peaceful.

Teresek View Motel (☎ 266 9177; dm RM10, r RM35-90; ☎) The small bungalows across from this motel's eye-sore of a main building are where you'll find the budget accommodation. Floors give way underfoot and beds are lumpy, but the place is spotless and is one of the better-value places in town. It's in the 'centre' of Kuala Tahan.

our pick **Tahan Guesthouse** (☎ 266 7752; dm RM10, r RM50) It feels like a happy preschool here with giant murals of insects and flowers all over the place along with catchy, feel-good phrases like 'why 1+1=2 not 11?' The airy concrete rooms are unsurpassed in comfort for Kuala Tahan and the four-bed dorms all have their own bathroom.

Durian Chalet (☎ 266 8940; r RM25-50) Go past Tahan Guesthouse, then past the rubber-tapping farm, and veer left just as you smell this chalet's namesake fruit. It is far enough from town that the silvery stars and moon bid you goodnight, and jungle noises rouse you from sleep. There's a restaurant with a simple Malay menu.

NUSA CAMP

Nusa Holiday Village (☎ 266 3043/2369; www.tamannegara-nusaholiday.com.my; camp sites RM5, 2-person tent rental RM15, dm RM15, r RM55-110) Fifteen minutes by boat up Sungai Tembling from Kuala Tahan, this 'jungle camp' has a range of deteriorating accommodation. Though much quieter than the main village, the same activities are available here but cost more because of the extra ferry trips. The staff's lack of English skills makes everything from eating at the restaurant to trying to go anywhere quite taxing.

Getting There & Away

Getting to Taman Negara involves a lot of transfers: taking a bus or train to Jerantut, then minibus to Kuala Tembeling, and river boat to Kuala Tahan. It is an all-day affair, but the languid boat ride up the undeveloped river will soothe any sweaty bus frustration. If you're pressed for time in either direction, you can also take a taxi or a minibus between Jerantut and Kuala Tahan; for more details, see p472.

BOAT

The river jetty for Taman Negara-bound boats is in Kuala Tembeling, 18km north of Jerantut.

Boats (one way RM25) depart Kuala Tembeling daily at 9am and 2pm (and an additional 2.30pm departure on Friday). On the return journey, boats leave Kuala Tahan at 9am and 2pm (and 2.30pm on Friday). The journey takes three hours upstream and two hours downstream. Note that the boat service is irregular during the November-to-February wet season.

BUS & TAXI

See p471 for details on buses and taxis from Jerantut to Kuala Tembeling.

There are several daily minibus shuttles direct from Kuala Lumpur to Kuala Tembeling jetty (RM35). NKS leaves from **Hotel Mandarin Pacific** (Jl Petaling, Chinatown, KL), and Nusa Camp leaves from **Swiss Inn** (Jl Sultan, Chinatown, KL). You can also book bus transfers from Kuala Tahan to the Cameron Highlands (RM55, eight hours) and to Tok Bali jetty for Pulau Perhentian (RM55, 10 hours) that leave at 8am daily.

A local bus travels from Kuala Tahan to Jerantut (RM6, one to two hours, four times daily). The bus stop is on the access road to the main highway, around the corner from the row of sundry stalls.

Getting Around

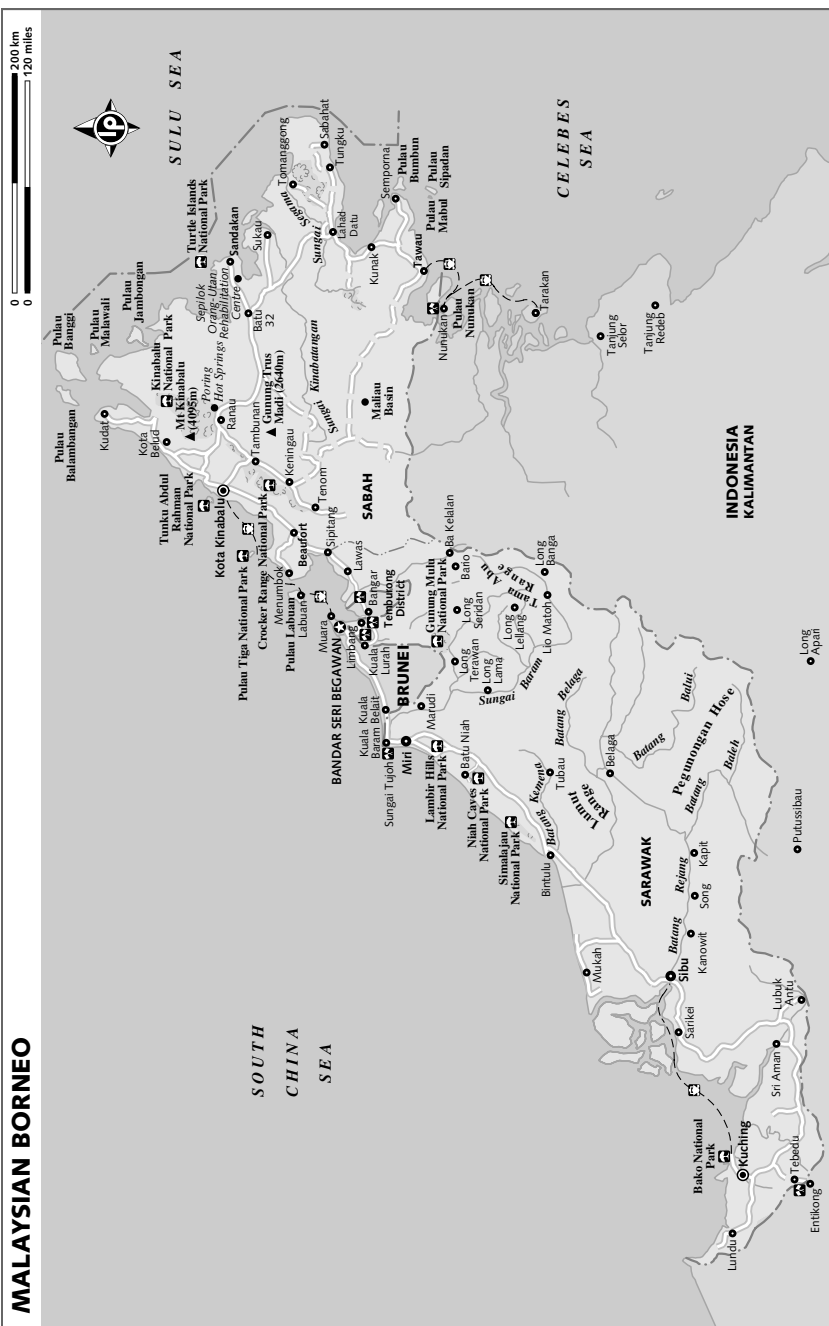
There is a frequent cross-river ferry (RM3) that shuttles passengers across the river from Kuala Tahan to the park and Mutiara Taman Negara Resort. It will also pick up and drop off people at the trailhead for Gua Telinga, across a small tributary from the resort.

Nusa Camp's floating information centre in Kuala Tahan runs scheduled riverboat (also called riverbus) services upriver to Bumbun Blau/Bumbun Yong (one way/return RM10/20, two daily) and Kuala Terengganu (RM20, two daily). Check with the information desk for times and prices, as they vary considerably by season. Keep in mind that these regularly scheduled riverboat services run pretty much on time during the peak season, but may be dropped entirely during the wet season.

In addition to the riverbus, you can also charter a boat for considerably more – Bumbun Blau (RM60) and Kuala Trengganu (RM90). You can arrange private boat trips at the Wildlife Department (p472), at the resort or at the restaurants in Kuala Tahan (the latter are usually 10% cheaper).

MALAYSIAN BORNEO – SABAH

The mere mention of the word Borneo conjures up a host of vivid images: thick jungle teeming with wildlife; wild rivers flowing through tunnels of overhanging trees;



orang-utans swinging through forest canopy; craggy mountains soaring above the steaming lowlands; remote longhouses inhabited by the descendants of head-hunters.

Incredibly, all of these images are accurate – you'll find all this and more in Malaysian Borneo – but you'll also find some things that may surprise you: prosperous cities with international restaurants; first-class resorts complete with spas and golf courses; efficient public transport and an increasingly extensive network of paved roads – even suburban sprawl and traffic jams to go with it.

The two states of Malaysian Borneo, Sabah and Sarawak, have their own distinct personalities and attractions. Sabah is a nature-lover's paradise, the place to see some of Borneo's famed wildlife: orang-utans in Sepilok, proboscis monkeys along the Kinabatangan, and hornbills just about anywhere there's jungle. It's also home to one of the world's best dive sites: Pulau Sipadan, the coral-fringed summit of an oceanic pinnacle in the South China Sea. And then there's Mt Kinabalu, that 4095m freak of a mountain that dominates northern Borneo with its peculiar crown of granite towers.

Sarawak, in contrast, offers boat trips up winding jungle rivers; visits to the longhouses of Borneo's indigenous peoples; vast cave chambers inside limestone mountains; and the historical and cultural attractions of Kuching, Sarawak's capital city. For more on Sarawak, see p492.

KOTA KINABALU

☎ 088 / pop 270,000

Sabah's prosperous capital city lies sandwiched between the green peaks of the Crocker Range and the waves of the South China Sea. It's a bustling boom town with a pleasantly varied ethnic mix: Chinese, Malays, Filipinos, Asian holidaymakers, and an increasing population of Western expats. This eclectic mix is almost as colourful as some of the coral reefs that lie right offshore in Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park.

Above all, KK (as it's universally known) is remarkable for its sunsets: the city faces straight west across the sea and each night the low clouds of the tropics come alive

with brilliant reds, oranges and purples. If these don't get you, the relentless smiles of the city's inhabitants surely will. And when you factor in the great seafood and thriving markets of the place, you'll see why KK is a great place to start your Borneo adventure.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Borneo Books I (ground fl, Phase 1, Wisma Merdeka; ☎ 538077; www.borneobooks.com; ☎ 10am-7pm)

Borneo Books II (ground fl, Phase 1, Wisma Merdeka; ☎ 538077; ☎ 10am-7pm) A brilliant selection of Borneo books, maps and a small used book section. There's free internet.

Iwase Books (ground fl, Phase 1, Wisma Merdeka; ☎ 233757; ☎ 10am-7pm) Iwase has a great selection of new titles as well as lots of Borneo titles.

EMERGENCY

Ambulance (☎ 999, 218166)

Fire (☎ 994, 214822)

Police (☎ 999, 212092; JI Dewan)

INTERNET ACCESS

Borneo Net (JI Haji Saman; per hr RM3; ☎ 9am-mid-night) This popular spot has around 20 terminals with fast connections. Just ignore the earsplitting heavy-metal music.

IT Point (2nd fl, Centre Point JI Pasar Baru; per hr RM3; ☎ 9.30am-9.30pm) If you need access while in Centre Point, this is a convenient spot.

Net Access (JI Pantai; per hr RM3; ☎ 9am-2am) Plenty of connections and less noise than other net places in KK. LAN connections are available for use of your own laptop.

IMMIGRATION

Immigration office (☎ 488700; Kompleks Persekutuan Pentadbiran Kerajaan, JI UMS; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Thu, 8-11.30am & 2-5pm Fri)

GETTING INTO TOWN

Kota Kinabalu International Airport (KKIA) is 7km southwest of the centre. Minivans leaving from the main terminal charge RM2, while minivans or local buses that pass the airport bus stop (turn right as you leave the terminal and walk for 10 minutes) charge RM1. Taxis heading from the terminal into town operate on a system of vouchers (RM20), sold at a taxi desk on the terminal's ground floor. In practice, you can usually just board a taxi and pay RM20 in cash.



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LAUNDRY

Mega Laundry (RM6 per kilo; 8am-8pm) Kompleks Sinsuran (☎ 238970; Ruang Sinsuran 2); Kampung Air (☎ 231970; Chinese Chamber of Commerce Bldg, Jl Laiman Diki) This fast laundry is one of the few open on Sunday. Ask staff not to write your name on your laundry.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Permai Polyclinic (☎ 232100; 4 Jl Pantai) A private outpatient clinic.
Queen Elizabeth Hospital (☎ 218166; Jl Penampang) Past the Sabah Museum.

MONEY

You'll find numerous moneychangers on the ground floors of Centre Point and Wisma Merdeka.
HSBC (☎ 212622; 56 Jl Gaya; 9am-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 9am-4pm Fri) Also has a 24-hour ATM.
Maybank (☎ 254295; 9 Jl Pantai; 9am-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 9am-4pm Fri) Has a 24-hour ATM.
Standard Chartered Bank (☎ 298111; 20 Jl Haji Saman; 9.15am-3.45pm Mon-Fri) Has a 24-hour ATM.

POST

Main post office (☎ 210855; Jl Tun Razak; 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) Western Union cheques and money orders can be cashed here.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Sabah Parks Office (☎ 211881; Lot 1-3, ground fl, Block K, Kompleks Sinsuran, Jl Tun Fuad Stephens;

8am-1pm & 2-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 8-11.30am & 2-4.30pm Fri, 8am-12.50pm Sat) Good source of information on the state's parks.

Sabah Tourism Board (☎ 212121; www.sabah tourism.com; 51 Jl Gaya; 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-4pm Sat, 9am-4pm Sun) An excellent source of information on all aspects of Sabah.

Sutera Sanctuary Lodges (☎ 243629; www.suterasanctuarylodges.com; Lot G15, ground fl, Wisma Sabah, Jl Haji Saman; 9am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4.30pm Sat, 9am-3pm Sun) Books accommodation in Kinabalu National Park (including Poring Hot Springs and Mesilau) and on Manukan Island in Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park.

Tourism Malaysia (☎ 248698; www.tourism.gov .my; ground fl, 1 Chester St; 8am-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 8am-noon & 1.30-4.30pm Fri) It's geared towards travel throughout Malaysia. The office is also open 8am to 2.45pm on the second and fourth Saturday of every month.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Airworld Travel & Tours (☎ 242996; airworld@tm .net.my; ground fl, block 2, Api-Api Complex, Jl Pasar Baru) This efficient travel agency is the place to go for domestic and international air tickets.

Sights

The main building of the **Sabah Museum** (☎ 253199; Jl Muzium; admission RM15; 9am-5pm Sat-Thu) is modelled on a Rungus longhouse and is a true ethnographic treat, exhibiting

traditional items such as ceramics and colourful wedding costumes from many of Sabah's 30 indigenous groups. In a separate building a little further along is the **Sabah Art Gallery**, which shows works by local artists, including oil paintings and sculptural works. Down the hill from the car park (opposite the main hall) is the museum's fascinating **Heritage Village**, with re-creations of long-houses. A road connects the main complex to the small but interesting **Museum of Islamic Civilization** (a 10-minute walk from the main hall). Bus 13 can drop you on Jl Penampang, where there's a footbridge and a path leading uphill to the museum, saving you a long walk around the corner – the footbridge gate is often locked for some reason, but it's easy to climb around.

Southwest of here is the **State Mosque**, which is a fine example of contemporary Islamic architecture.

The **Central Market** (Jl Tun Fuad Stephens; ☎ 8.30am–6pm) is in two sections: the waterfront area sells fish and the area bordering Jl Tun Fuad Stephens sells fruit and vegetables. Next door is the **Handicraft Centre** (Jl Tun Fuad Stephens; ☎ 8.30am–6pm), jammed with craft, textile and jewellery stalls. At the small adjacent **fruit market**, drain a coconut for RM2.50. A section of Jl Gaya is closed to traffic on Sunday morning to accommodate the stalls of KK's popular **Gaya St Fair** (☎ 7am–1pm Sun).

Sleeping

North Borneo Cabin (☎ 272800; www.northborneocabin.com; 74 Jl Gaya; dm with fan/air-con RM18/20, r with fan/air-con RM50/56; ☎ ☑) Right downtown, the Cabin offers large, well-lit rooms, clean showers and toilets and a spacious common area. It also offers free internet and luggage storage for while you're away in the jungle.

Backpacker's Lodge/Lucy's Homestay (☎ 261495; backpackerkk@yahoo.com; Lot 25, Lorong Dewan; dm RM18, r from RM42) The eponymous Lucy runs a friendly and homey backpacker joint that is fairly unique in offering cooking facilities. It's a little lived in, but clean enough and has a veranda for chilling out in the evening.

Summer Lodge (☎ 244499; www.summerlodge.com.my; Lot 120, Jl Gaya; dm RM18, r from RM55; ☎ ☑) The Summer is a large new hostel right on one of the main pedestrian malls of KK. It has a spacious and pleasant common area and free internet. You can't miss the bright yellow façade as you approach.

Borneo Backpackers (☎ 234009; www.borneobackpackers.com; 24 Lorong Dewan, Australia Pl; dm with fan/air-con RM20/25; ☎ ☑) This long-running backpackers is a little cramped but still popular. There's free internet but no cooking facilities. It's fairly clean and the location is good.

Akinabalu Youth Hostel (☎ 272188; akinabalu@yahoo.com; Lot 133, Jl Gaya; dm with fan/air-con RM20/23, r from RM50; ☎ ☑) With a big common area, clean showers and a friendly staff, the Akinabalu Youth Hostel (it's actually a backpackers) is another decent choice for budget travellers, although there are no cooking facilities.

our pick Step-In Lodge (☎ 233519; www.stepinlodge.com; Block L, Sinsuran Complex; dm with fan/air-con from RM25/35, r with fan/air-con from RM60/80; ☎ ☑) The best backpackers in town, the Step-In has a large and airy common area, clean rooms and bathrooms and very informative staff. It's a great place to meet other travellers and exchange information.

Ang's Hotel (☎ 234999; 28 Jl Bakau; s/d from RM60/65; ☎ ☑) We've got a fondness for clean, well-maintained simple Chinese hotels and Ang's is a perfect example. The deluxe rooms are light and spacious, if a little sparse. The standard windowless rooms are similar but not as appealing. This is a good-value choice.

City Park Lodge (☎ 257752; cplodge@streamyx.com; 49 Jl Pantai; d from RM60; ☎ ☑) The brand-new City Park Lodge tries hard to please and it does a good job. It's clean and well taken care of. The deluxe doubles (actually twins) are good value, and if you don't mind being up on the 4th floor or not having a window, you'll get the same type of room for RM5 less.

Pantai Inn (☎ 217095; 57 Jl Pantai; s/tw/f from RM67/73/88; ☎ ☑) There's a lot of competition in this price bracket in KK, but the Pantai still manages to rank near the top. With hot-water showers, neat and sunny rooms, it's great value and in a convenient spot.

Hotel Holiday (☎ 213116; www.hotelholiday.com.my; Block F, Kompleks Segama; s/d from RM70/80; ☎ ☑) The Holiday is a very friendly spot right downtown in the Segama Complex. It's showing its age, and hot water here is an on-again-off-again affair, but the folks at the front desk will make you feel at home.

Eating

Night Market Food Stalls (meals from RM2; ☎ dinner) Located off Jl Tun Fuad Stephens, the night market is the best, cheapest and most interest-

ing place in KK for dinner. You can choose between Malay *nasi campur* (buffet with rice), grilled chicken wings and fish, and the usual *mee goreng* (fried noodles) and *nasi goreng* (fried rice), among others. At the north end of the market, behind the Filipino Market, you'll find the excellent Filipino barbecued seafood section, which is the place for incredibly fresh grilled tuna, shrimp, crab and so on. Highly recommended.

Centre Point Basement Food Court (Basement, Centre Point Shopping Centre, Jl Pasar Baru; meals RM2–10; ☎ lunch & dinner) Your ringgit will go a long way at this popular and varied food court at Centre Point mall. There are Malay, Chinese and Indian places, as well as drink and dessert specialists.

Wisma Merdeka Food Court (6th fl, Jl Haji Saman; meals RM3; ☎ lunch & dinner) Not as large as the one in Centre Point mall, this simple food court is still a good option for a cheap meal up at the northern end of town.

Snack (Jl Gaya; drinks from RM3, sandwiches RM4; ☎ 8am–6.30pm Mon–Fri, 8am–3pm Sat) This hole-in-the-wall joint offers a tempting line-up of real espresso, fresh fruit juice and simple sandwiches – perfect for a break while exploring this part of KK.

Viet Café (Jl Haji Saman; meals RM5; ☎ lunch & dinner) This clean and bright Vietnamese place serves decent *pho* (noodles in soup), good fresh fruit juices, and tasty fresh and fried spring rolls.

Kedai Kopi Fatt Kee (28 Jl Bakau; dinner from RM15; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon–Sat) The woks are always busy at this popular semi-outdoor Chinese place next to Ang's Hotel. Unless you show up early or late for mealtimes, you may have to wait for a table, and even after you order, you may wind up waiting a while for your food – but the wait is always worth it. *Midin* (jungle fern) cooked in *belacan* (partially fermented shrimp paste) is a Borneo classic, and the salt and pepper prawns are great.

our pick Nishiki (☎ 230582; 59 Jl Gaya; set meals RM16; ☎ lunch & dinner) Operated by a Japanese expat, this authentic Japanese restaurant takes advantage of the good seafood available in this city. The atmosphere is pleasantly traditional, right down to the sushi counter. There are good-value set meals, sushi sets and plenty of à la carte choices.

Little Italy (☎ 232231; Jl Haji Saman; dinner from RM20; ☎ lunch & dinner) After an ascent of Kinabalu or a long jungle trek, why not reward yourself with a feed at this popular, casual Italian specialist?

It has good salads (RM10), pizzas (small/large RM18/24) and pasta from RM12.

Self-catering choices include:
7-11 (Jl Haji Saman; ☎ 24hr)
Millimewa Superstore (Jl Haji Saman)
Tong Hing Supermarket (Jl Gaya)

Drinking & Entertainment

While KK is filled with the usual Chinese, Malay and Indian *kedai kopi*, which always serve good coffee and tea, you'll have to hit one of the big foreign chains if you hanker for a latte or similar.

CAFÉS

Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf (ground fl, Wisma Merdeka, Jl Haji Saman; coffee from RM3; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner; ☑) Free wi-fi and proper coffee are the draws at this popular chain. In addition to this branch, there's another in the Waterfront Esplanade complex off Jl Tun Fuad Stephens.

Starbucks (Jl Tun Fuad Stephens; drinks from RM3; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) We assume you've heard of this place – you know, the one with the green sign.

BARS

KK has a surprisingly lively nightlife scene. There are two main centres for nightlife: the somewhat upscale Waterfront Esplanade complex, which has a variety of good restaurants and Western-style pubs, and the more backpacker-oriented Beach St, which has at least one good bar with indoor/outdoor seating. The following are some of the more reliable venues.

BB Café (Beach St) Pool tables, outdoor seating and a convenient location near many of KK's backpacker lodges make this an obvious place to start your evening.

Cocoon (Jl Tun Fuad Stephens) Three separate zones, all of them quite stylish, make this an interesting, if somewhat pricey, spot for a drink or three.

Q Bar (Jl KK Bypass) We like the style and the tunes at this gay-friendly bar at the north end of town.

Shenanigan's (Waterfront Esplanade, Jl Tun Fuad Stephens) This is one of several Western-style pubs in this complex. It's got sports on the tube, imported draught beer and occasional live music. If it doesn't suit, just walk to the next one.

Bed (Jl Tun Fuad Stephens) This cavernous club has live music most nights of the week. It can be pretty dead early in the evening.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Malaysia Airlines (code MH; ☎ 1-300-883000, 515555; www.malaysiaairlines.com) has regular flights to/from Kuching (RM195), Pulau Labuan (RM123), Lahad Datu (RM125), Sandakan (RM143) and Tawau (RM133). Standard Malaysia Airlines fares from Johor Bahru/KL are around RM722/574, but cheaper advance-purchase fares are usually available. The regular KK–Singapore fare is about double this, so it's usually better to fly from Johor Bahru.

FAX (Fly Asian Xpress, code D7; ☎ 03-877 4000; www.flyasianxpress.com) has cheap flights between KK and Pulau Labuan, Limbang, Lawas, Sandakan, Lahad Datu, Bintulu and Sibiu.

Air Asia (code AK; ☎ within Malaysia 03-8775-4000, outside Malaysia 60-3-8660-4343; www.airasia.com) has cheap fares to/from KL and Bangkok. The Air Asia counter at Terminal 2 of KKIA handles all bookings less than 24 hours prior to departure. It's open 8am to 7pm.

BOAT

Passenger ferries (RM31, three hours) depart KK for Pulau Labuan Monday to Saturday at 8am and 1.30pm. On Sunday they sail at 8am and 3pm. In the opposite direction, they depart Labuan for KK Monday to Saturday at 8am and 1pm, while on Sunday they depart at 10.30am and 3pm. From Labuan there are onward services to Brunei (see p484).

For information on boats to Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park, see opposite.

BUS & MINIVAN

Buses serving eastern Sabah destinations operate from the Inanam bus terminal, north of the town. Destinations, fares, durations and times include: Sandakan (RM35, six hours, departures at 7am, 8am, 10am, 12.30pm, 2pm and 8pm), Tawau (RM40, nine hours, 7am and 8am), Lahad Datu (RM50, 6½ hours, 7am, 9am and 8pm) and Semporna (RM50, 10 hours, 7.30am and 7.30pm). Fares include a meal.

Buses and minivans serving destinations on the west coast and northern Sabah operate from Merdeka Field bus station on Jl Padang. Destinations served from this terminal include Ranau (bus/minibus RM10/12, bus at 8am and minibuses 7am to 5pm on demand), Tenom (minibus RM16) and Keningau (minibus RM13). Buses and minibuses to Ranau will drop passengers at Kinabalu National

Park. If you're going to Poring Hot Springs, take a minibus to Ranau and switch to a Poring-bound minibus.

TAXI

Shared and private taxis operate from a terminal at Merdeka Field bus station on Jl Padang. Several shared taxis do a daily run between KK and Ranau, passing the entrance road to the Kinabalu National Park office. The fare to Ranau or Kinabalu National Park is RM20 or you can charter a taxi for RM80 per car (note that a normal city taxi will charge RM150 for a charter).

TRAIN

The North Borneo Railway between KK and Papar was closed for repairs at the time of writing, and it is unclear if or when it is going to reopen.

Getting Around

Minibuses marked 'Putatan' run regularly to the airport (RM2) from the minibus station (bay 17) opposite Wawasan Plaza; alternatively, the minibuses can drop you off at the airport access road (RM1.50), from where it's a five-minute walk to the airport. Local buses departing the local bus stand can also drop you off at the access road (RM1). Taxis head to the airport for RM20.

For more information on getting to/from the airport, see boxed text, p477.

Some members of KK's large taxi population are metered but most are not, in which case negotiate a fare before heading off. There are several hubs where taxis congregate, including outside the Milimewa Superstore on Jl Lintas. Most trips around town cost RM5 to RM8.

TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN NATIONAL PARK

Just a few kilometres off the KK waterfront is **Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park** (admission RM10). The park comprises five beautiful offshore islands: Gaya, Mamutik, Manukan, Sapi and Sulug, all of which can easily be visited as day trips from KK. These islands have some of Borneo's best beaches, crystal-clear water and some fairly healthy coral and tropical fish.

The three most interesting islands for travellers are Manukan, Mamutik and Sapi. **Mamutik** has the best snorkelling, with a healthy coral garden off its west side (ac-

cessible by a trail that starts just past the toilet block at the south end of the beach). It's also got a nice stretch of beach and some camp sites. **Manukan** has good beaches and some decent snorkelling off its southwest end. There is a resort here, which means things are a little busier. Tiny **Sapi** also has good beaches and decent snorkelling, and you can swim over to Gaya if you feel like a little adventure.

Note that all three islands are very popular with day-trippers on weekends. At other times, you'll find the islands very quiet and peaceful. You can rent snorkels on Sapi, Manukan and Mamutik or at the KK ferry terminal, but you'll want to bring your own equipment if you're a serious snorkeller.

The admission fee covers all the islands, so if you plan to visit more than one, save your receipt.

Sleeping & Eating

You can **camp** (camp sites per person RM5) on Sapi, Mamutik and at Teluk Malohom on Gaya. Park permits and camping fees are paid on arrival at each island. There are small, simple stores on these islands, but you'll want to bring your own food for cooking.

On Manukan, **Manukan Island Resort** (☎ 088 256637; www.suterasanctuarylodges.com.my; 4-person units from RM320) has pleasant huts and semi-detached chalets and rooms, as well as a proper restaurant.

Getting There & Away

Boats to the islands are arranged inside the waiting room at KK's ferry terminal (commonly known as 'the jetty' by locals and taxi drivers). Inquire at the counter for the next available boat. Sign up for your chosen destination and then take a seat until there are enough passengers (usually eight) to depart. Services run from 7am to 6pm daily but it's best to catch a boat in the morning, as it's much harder to make up boat numbers in the afternoon.

Return fares to Mamutik, Manukan and Sapi are RM17 to RM25, depending on which boat company you go with. You can also buy two-/three-island passes for RM33/43. The set fee for boat charter to one island is RM204, but you can negotiate a lower price. Try to deal directly with a boatman if you do this – don't deal with the touts who prowl the area. And don't consider paying until you return

to the dock for your trip. Note that there is an RM3 terminal fee added to all boat journeys.

PULAU LABUAN

☎ 087 / pop 76,000

About 115km southwest of KK and only 50km northeast of Bandar Seri Begawan (Brunei) is the small island of Labuan, which serves as the main transit point between Brunei and Sabah. This is the best route to travel between Sabah and Brunei and onward to Sarawak, as the overland journey is time-consuming and arduous. There's not much to detain you on Labuan, but if you get stuck between ferry sailings, you'll find it a pleasant spot to spend an evening.

Most of the island's most interesting sites are on the northwest coast, including a couple of decent shallow **beaches** and a **peace park** marking the spot where the Japanese surrendered to the Allies in WWII. Closer to town, you'll find a **WWII Memorial** commemorating the Australian soldiers who died in Borneo. Information on these is available at the **Tourism Malaysia office** (☎ 423445; cnr Jl Dewan & Jl Berjaya; ☎ 9am-5pm), off Jl Merdeka, near Labuan Sq.

Sleeping & Eating

Budget accommodation in Labuan is of poor quality. Midrange hotels are a better option.

Melati Inn (☎ 416307; Jl Perpaduan; s/d RM45/50; ☎) This is a peach-coloured place with rooms that are a little the worse for wear, but it's the only acceptable budget option. Jl Perpaduan runs inland from the waterfront, close to the wharf.

Ambassador Hotel (☎ 423233; Lot 0142, Jl Bunga Mawar; r from RM79; ☎) The well-run Ambassador is easily the best-value hotel in town, with clean rooms, comfortable beds, wi-fi and nice bathrooms. Jl Bunga Mawar is in the middle of town – follow Jl Bunga Raya inland from the ferry terminal and turn right at Hotel Pulau Labuan.

Kedai Kopi Fah Fah (cnr Jl Bunga Raya & Jl Bunga Melati; meals RM3-10; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) With indoor and outdoor seating, an English menu, tasty fresh juice and cheap beer, this simple Chinese restaurant is a good choice. We particularly liked the *kwai teow goreng* (fried *kwai teow* noodles).

Getting There & Away

Malaysia Airlines (code MH; ☎ 1-300-883-000; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my) has flights to KK (RM123).

GETTING TO BRUNEI

Eight express boats (RM35, one hour) go daily from Pulau Labuan to the Serasa Ferry Terminal in Muara Port, Brunei, the main port for Bandar Seri Begawan, some 25km away. There are departures between 9am and 4.30pm. For information on doing this route in the other direction, see p49.

Passenger ferries (RM31, three hours) depart KK for Labuan at 8am and 1.30pm. On Sunday they sail at 8am and 3pm Monday to Saturday. In the opposite direction, they depart Labuan for KK at 8am and 1pm Monday to Saturday, while on Sunday they depart at 10.30am and 3pm. There are also daily speed-boats from Labuan to Limbang in Sarawak (RM28, 2.30pm) and Lawas, also in Sarawak (RM33, 12.30pm).

KINABALU NATIONAL PARK

Sabah's main attraction is the highest mountain between the mighty Himalaya and New Guinea: **Mt Kinabalu**, which towers 4095m above northern Borneo. The mountain is quite unlike any other on Earth, rising almost twice as high as its Crocker Range neighbours and sporting a crown of granite towers that demand your attention.

Thousands of people of all ages climb Mt Kinabalu every year, but an ascent of the mountain is not to be taken lightly. The climb is like spending eight hours climbing steep flights of steps, in gradually thinning air (altitude sickness can strike as low as 3000m or even lower for some people), followed by an equally taxing descent. And it can be close to freezing near the summit.

If the weather is clear on your summit day, you'll be rewarded with an incredible view that starts with the otherworldly summit plateau and extends across all of northern Borneo and as far as the islands of southern Palawan, in the Philippines.

Even if you don't climb to the summit, a trip to the park is highly recommended, as there are some great trails around the park headquarters area, including the fine Liwagu River trail.

Information

The Kinabalu park headquarters is located 88km east of KK, on the KK–Ranau road. The

Sabah Parks office (☎ 7am–7pm), which handles permits and guides, and the **Sutera Sanctuary Lodges office** (☎ 7am–7pm), which handles accommodation at the base and on the mountain, are both to your immediate right as you enter.

PERMITS & GUIDES

Park entry costs RM15 for adults. A climbing permit (RM100) and insurance (RM7) are compulsory if you intend to climb Mt Kinabalu. Guides are also compulsory for the summit trek (RM70/74/80 per group for one to three/four to six/seven to eight climbers). Porters can be hired to carry a maximum load of 10kg; for one to three/four to six/seven to eight climbers the cost is RM60/80/90.

Pay all fees at the park headquarters before you climb and don't consider an 'unofficial' climb as permits are scrupulously checked at several points along the climb.

EQUIPMENT & CLOTHING

Temperatures can dip close to freezing at the summit and it's usually windy and occasionally rainy. You will need good walking shoes, light gloves, a wool or fleece hat, a fleece top, windproof pants, a shell jacket and a knapsack to carry all this. You will also need a headlamp for the predawn summit climb (don't bring a hand-held torch because you'll need your hands free to climb the ropes on the summit massif). A water bottle is also recommended, and you can fill this from tanks en route.

Sights & Activities

Climbing Mt Kinabalu is a two-day exercise for most people. The summit trail works upward through gradually thinning stands of coniferous and montane oak forests, into a subalpine zone populated by low shrubs and gnarled trees before traversing the granite slabs of the mountain's barren summit massif.

On the first day of the hike, take a mini-bus (RM15 per minibus, 10 minutes) from the park headquarters to Timphohon Gate (1866m), the official trailhead. Leave no later than 11am to cover the 6km to Laban Rata (3273m), the first day's stopping point. This section will take between 3½ and six hours depending on your fitness level.

The next morning, hit the trail at around 3.30am and spend the next 2½ to four hours scaling the 2.7km trail to the summit at Low's

Peak, ideally in time for sunrise, which happens around 6am in these parts. Then you pick your way back down to the park headquarters the same day.

The climb is uphill 99% of the way – an unrelentingly steep path up large dirt steps and over piled rocks. A couple of sections on the summit massif require that you haul yourself up using thick ropes. Every step can be a struggle as you suck oxygen from the thin air, and it is not unusual for people to give up within sight of the summit.

Your best chance of finding clear weather at the summit is if you get there around dawn, but there are plenty of mornings that see the summit wrapped in clouds. If it's raining when you wake at Laban Rata, you should consider abandoning your summit attempt, as the chance of it clearing that day is slim indeed and you'll freeze in the cold, wet weather.

Sleeping & Eating

Advance bookings through **Sutera Sanctuary Lodges** (☎ 088-243629; www.suterasanctuarylodges.com.my; Lot G15, ground fl, Wisma Sabah, Jl Haji Saman) in KK or online are essential for the huts at Laban Rata, and you won't be permitted to climb without a spot in one of the huts. Sutera handles bookings for all accommodation around park headquarters and at Laban Rata, Mesilau Nature Resort and Poring Hot Springs.

PARK HEADQUARTERS

Grace Hostel (dm RM46) and **Rock Hostel** (dm RM40) have dorm accommodation. Both are clean, comfortable and have drink-making facilities and a fireplace-warmed sitting area. Grace Hostel is the more appealing of the two, while Rock Hostel is somewhat institutional. In addition, there are a variety of cabins and private rooms available, the cheapest of which are the semidetached units of **Hill Lodge** (2-person unit RM135).

The canteen-style **Balsam Restaurant** (meals RM3-12; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) offers basic but decent fare and a nice outside deck with occasional views of the mountain.

LABAN RATA

Laban Rata Resthouse (dm RM69) has four- and six-bunk rooms equipped with heaters, and sporadic hot-water showers in shared bathrooms. You can also stay near the resthouse in unheated huts with basic cooking facilities.

The resthouse has a simple restaurant that serves meals and drinks starting at 2.30am.

Getting There & Away

Express buses and minivans travelling between KK and Ranau and Sandakan pass the park turn-off, from where it's 100m uphill to the park. Air-conditioned express buses (RM15, three hours) leave from KK's Inanam long-distance bus terminal six times daily, starting at 7am.

Shared taxis operate from the terminal at Merdeka Field on Jl Padang in Kota Kinabalu. Several shared taxis do a daily run between KK and Ranau, passing the entrance road to the Kinabalu National Park office. The fare to Ranau or Kinabalu National Park is RM20 or you can charter a taxi for RM80 per car (note that a normal city taxi will charge RM150 for a charter). Minivans (RM15) depart from the same station.

If you're heading back to KK from the park, minivans pass the park headquarters until mid-afternoon (stopping on the main road), but the best time to catch one is between 8am and noon. The park also operates three minibuses daily to KK (RM40) and one daily to Poring Hot Springs (RM25).

RANAU

☎ 088 / pop 49,800

Ranau is a collection of concrete shop blocks on the road between KK and Sandakan, or Kinabalu National Park and Poring Hot Springs. There's a busy Saturday **tamu** (night market). Otherwise, it's of interest mainly as a transport junction.

Bank Simpanan Nasional (Jl Kibarambang) has an ATM.

Sleeping & Eating

Rafflesia Inn (☎ 879359; 1st fl, Block E, Sedco Bldg; r from RM35; ☎) If you (or your wallet) prefer a budget place, this is a spartan but well-kept place. It's in the centre of town, above Koktas Restaurant.

Kinabalu View Lodge (☎ 879111; 1st fl, Tokogaya Bldg, Jl Lorong Kibarambang; r RM64-79; ☎) This is the best of an uninspiring lot in Ranau and is run by the same owners as the Rafflesia. It's a bit threadbare, but the rooms are clean and there are hot-water showers. If you stand on the back railing, you can catch views of Kinabalu. It's near the top of town – aim for the radio tower.

Restaurant Double Luck (☎ 879246; Jl Kibarambang; meals RM6-10; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This is not the cheapest eatery in town but has the best food, friendly staff and ice-cold beer. Ask for a filled omelette for breakfast or try the tofu claypot for a veggie treat.

Restoran Tanjung Putri (Jl Lorong Kibarambang; meals from RM3; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Diagonally opposite Kinabalu View Lodge, this simple Malay place does a great *sup ayam* (chicken soup), which really hits the spot after a climb up the mountain.

Getting There & Away

Minibuses operate from the blue-roofed shelter at the bottom of town, 100m in from the main roundabout on the main road. Destinations include KK (RM15), Kinabalu National Park (RM5) and Poring Hot Springs (RM5). You can charter a whole minibus or taxi to the park or Poring for RM30 if you negotiate.

Express buses to Sandakan (RM20, four hours, departures hourly between 9am and 1pm) stop on the main road in front of the church (roughly opposite the Shell station), 100m uphill from the main roundabout.

PORING HOT SPRINGS

These **hot springs** (admission RM15; ☺ visitors centre 9am-4.30pm) lie within Kinabalu National Park some 43km from the park headquarters and 19km north of Ranau. If you arrive here directly after climbing Mt Kinabalu, you can use your national-park entry ticket to gain admission to Poring (and vice versa).

Steaming, sulphurous water is channelled into pools and tubs in which visitors relax their tired muscles after summiting Mt Kinabalu. The outdoor tubs are free but are often either occupied or painfully slow to fill (test the taps before choosing one). Consider renting an indoor tub (per hour RM15); these fill quickly and give you private soaking time.

Note that the place is somewhat poorly maintained and there are no proper changing rooms, coin lockers or towel rental. Bring a bathing suit and towel and a bag to carry your wet things when you're done.

The other features here include **walking trails**, a **tropical garden** (admission RM3; ☺ 9am-4pm), a **butterfly farm** (admission RM4; ☺ 9am-4pm) and a 41m-high **canopy walkway** (admission RM5; ☺ 9am-4pm). The canopy walk was partially closed at the time of writing and it seems likely to remain so.

Rafflesia flowers sometimes bloom in the vicinity of the hot springs. Ask at the shops opposite the hot-springs entrance. If any are in bloom, villagers will lead you to them for RM20.

Sleeping & Eating

Reserve accommodation in advance through **Sutera Sanctuary Lodges** (☎ 088-243629; www.sutera-sanctuarylodges.com.my; Lot G15, ground fl, Wisma Sabah, Jl Haji Saman) in KK. The reception at Poring is on the right as you pass through the building above the parking lot.

Serindit Hostel (dm RM12) is clean enough, with six- and eight-person dorms and cooking facilities for rent (RM100). Otherwise, **Kelicap Lodge** (tw with shared bathroom RM150) has decent private rooms. A **camping ground** (camp sites RM6) is available for tent-equipped visitors.

The **Rainforest Restaurant** (meals RM6-20; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) is a proper sit-down restaurant near the hot springs. There are also inexpensive eating places located opposite the springs' entrance.

Getting There & Away

Kinabalu National Park has a minivan that departs the park headquarters at noon for Poring (RM25). In the opposite direction, the minivan departs Poring for the park headquarters at 2pm (and continues to KK).

From outside Poring Hot Springs visitors centre, minivans can be chartered for around RM30 to transport you to Ranau, where you can catch minivans onward to Kinabalu National Park or KK. Otherwise, nonscheduled minivans go to/from Ranau for RM5.

SANDAKAN

☎ 089 / pop 223,000

Once boasting the world's greatest concentration of millionaires, Sandakan is still a fairly prosperous place thanks to bird's nests, fish and palm oil. For travellers, Sandakan serves as the gateway to East Sabah's natural treasures and boasts some interesting attractions of its own between its green hills and picturesque bay.

Downtown Sandakan was once dominated by busy docks during the day and shuttered shops at night. But the wharves have moved to the outskirts of town, paving the way for waterfront redevelopment, including a new market and a nascent nightlife hub. Of course,

most travellers still use Sandakan primarily as a base for trips to the Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre and up Sungai Kinabatangan.

Information

EMERGENCY

Emergency (☎ 999)

Police (☎ 212222; Lebuh Empat)

INTERNET ACCESS

JazzCyber (1st fl, Centre Point, Jl Pelabuhan Lama; per hr RM4; ☺ 9am-8pm Mon-Sat, 9am-7pm Sun)

Sandakan Cyber Café (3rd fl, Wisma Sandakan, Lebuh Empat; per hr RM3; ☺ 9am-9pm)

MONEY

HSBC (Lebuh Tiga)

Maybank (Lebuh Tiga) In addition to being a full-service bank with ATM, a sidewalk currency-exchange window is open 9am to 5pm daily for cash and travellers cheques.

Wang Liu Chun Mii Moneychanger (Tung Seng Huat, 23 Lebuh Tiga; ☺ 8.30am-4.30pm) Changes cash only.

POST

Main post office (☎ 210594; Jl Leila)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist Information Centre (☎ 229751; pempt.j.ms@sabah.gov.my; Wisma Warisan; ☺ 8am-12.30pm & 1.30-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 8-11.30am & 2-4.30pm Fri)

Opposite the municipal offices (known as MPS) and up the stairs from Lebu Tiga. The garrulous staff are extremely helpful, dispensing advice on everything from regional attractions to local restaurants, and can also hook you up with fellow travellers for group excursions.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Jetliner (☎ 222737; Lebu Dua) Official Air Asia agent.

Sandakan Travel Service (☎ 218112; skantvl@steamyx.com; Lebu Tiga) Opposite Standard Chartered Bank, it offers accommodating, English-speaking help for domestic and overseas flights.

Sights

Sandakan Memorial Park (Taman Peringatan; admission free; ☺ 9am-5pm) marks the former site of an infamous WWII Japanese prisoner of war camp and the starting point of the 'death marches' to Ranau. These three marches took place early in 1945 when, in the face of the imminent arrival of the Allies, the Japanese forced their prisoners to walk 250km through jungle to Ranau. Out of the 1577 prisoners subjected

to the 'death marches', over half died on the walks and the rest – with the exception of a half-dozen Australians who escaped – were dead of disease, starvation or violence within six months. To get there, take any Batu 8 or higher-number bus (RM1.50); get off at the turn-off signposted 'Taman Rimba' and walk down Jl Rimba to reach the park. A taxi will cost about RM15.

On the hill above town overlooking Sandakan Bay, **Agnes Keith House** (Jl Istana; admission RM15; ☺ 9am-5pm) is a trip back to Sandakan's colonial heyday. Keith was an American who came to Sandakan in the 1930s and wrote several books about her experiences, most famously *The Land Below the Wind*. The two-storey wooden villa was destroyed during WWII and rebuilt identically when the Keiths returned. To reach the museum, follow Jl Singapura and turn right up the hill, or head up the shady Tanga Seribu (translated as 100 Steps, even though *seribu* means 1000) to Jl Residensi Dr and turn left.

Tours

Sandakan has many local and regional tour operators offering packages to Sungai Kinabatangan, Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre and other eastern Sabah attractions. Keep in mind that it's possible to visit many attractions independently, and in some cases, such as the Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre, this is probably preferable. Also note that tour prices differ massively, sometimes due to dorm versus room-accommodation occupants, sometimes for no good reason at all, so shop around.

Discovery Tours (☎ 274106; www.discoverytours.com.my; 9th fl, Wisma Khoo Siak Chiew, Lebu Empat)

MB Permai Tours (☎ /fax 671535; 1st fl, Sandakan Airport) Tours and car rental from RM100 per day (4WD from RM350).

Sepilok Tropical Wildlife Adventure (☎ 271077; www.stwadventure.com; 13 Lebu Tiga) Mid-priced tour specialist. Owners of Sepilok Jungle Resort and Bilit Adventure Lodge on Sungai Kinabatangan.

SI Tours (☎ 213502; www.sitoursborneo.com; 10th fl, Wisma Khoo Siak Chiew, Lebu Empat) This full-service agency opened Abai Jungle resort in December 2006 as a base for Kinabatangan tours. Also has an airport branch.

Wildlife Expeditions (☎ 219616; www.wildlife-expeditions.com; 9th fl, Wisma Khoo Siak Chiew, Lebu Empat) Tour options include its Sukau River Lodge on the Kinabatangan.

Sleeping

May Fair Hotel (☎ 219855; 24 Jl Pryer; s/d RM40/50; 📺 📺) This budget classic's large, tidy rooms come fully equipped, including its own big TV and DVD player with a massive library of movies available free in the lobby. Gruff but helpful owner Mr Lum knows where to find and how to get virtually anything done around town. Call ahead for bookings to avoid getting shut out.

Selangan Hotel (☎ 227733; fax 221001; 14 Lebu Dua; s/d/f RM50/60/80; 📺) Best of the budget choices honeycombed around downtown, this has fresh, completely furnished rooms with attractive bedding and hot-water showers. A good alternative if the May Fair is full.

Hotel London (☎ 219855; www.hlondon.com.my; 10 Lebu Empat; s/d/tr incl breakfast RM55/65/75; 📺 📺) Renovated up from its shoe-string roots, rooms are bright and comfortable. Guests love the rooftop sitting area overlooking the harbour where breakfast is served.

Eating

For no-frills food, try one of the stalls in the waterfront market next to the local bus station. A night market sets up outside the post office each evening and there are more Malay food stalls at the western end of Jl Coastal.

King Cheong (34 Lebu Dua; dishes RM2-12; 🍴 breakfast & lunch) The clatter of dim sum carts and chatter of local merchant diners will make you think it's Hong Kong. The menus on the wall are in Chinese, but feel free to point at what you see on other plates.

Fat Cat V (☎ 216867; 21 Lebu Tiga; dishes RM3-10; 🍴 lunch & dinner) This branch of a local chain has an air-con dining room with a broad menu of Malay, Chinese and Western food. Stop in at its bakery to take home something for breakfast or a late snack. Fat Cat is surrounded by fast-food places open past 9pm, a pocket of the nightlife downtown.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Malaysia Airlines (code MH; ☎ 1-300-883000; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my) flies direct to KK (RM143) and Tawau (RM143).

FAX (Fly Asian Xpress, code D7; www.flyasianxpress.com; ☎ 03-877-4000) has direct flights to KK.

Air Asia (code AK; ☎ 1-300-889933; www.airasia.com) has several direct flights daily between KL and Sandakan (RM100).

BUS

Buses to Kota Kinabalu, Lahad Datu, Semporna and Tawau leave from the long-distance bus station in a large parking lot at Batu 2½, 4km north of town, which is not a particularly convenient location. Most buses, and all minivans, leave in the morning. Get the latest schedule from hotels or the tourist office. To reach the bus station, catch a local bus (RM1) from the stand at the waterfront. A taxi from the station to town is around RM10.

Bus companies have booths at the bus station and touts abound. Most express buses to Kota Kinabalu (RM45, six hours) leave between 7.30am and 2pm, with a couple of evening services. All pass the turn-off to Kinabalu National Park headquarters (RM30).

Buses depart regularly for Lahad Datu (RM20, 2½ hours) and Tawau (RM30, 5½ hours). There's also a bus to Semporna (RM30, 5½ hours) at 8am. If you miss it, head to Lahad Datu, then catch a frequent minivan to Semporna.

Minibuses depart frequently throughout the morning from the bus station for Ranau (RM24, four hours) and Lahad Datu, some continuing to Tawau. Minibuses for Sukau (RM15) leave from a lot behind Centre Point Mall in town.

Getting Around

The airport is about 11km from downtown. The Batu 7 Airport bus (RM1.50) stops on the main road about 500m from the terminal. A coupon taxi from the airport to the town

centre costs RM22; going the other way, a cab should cost around RM20.

The local bus terminal is on Jl Pryer, in front of Gentingmas Mall. Buses run on the main road to the north, Jl Utara, and are marked by how far from town they go, ie Batu 8, and run from 6am to about 6pm. Fares range from RM1 to RM4.

Local minibuses depart from behind Centre Point Mall; the fares are from RM2. Use them for getting to the Pasir Putih seafood restaurants and the harbour area.

Taxis cruise the town centre, and wait near the main hotels. Many hotels will steer you towards a preferred driver, which isn't a bad thing. Short journeys around the town centre should cost RM5, and a trip out to Sepilok is RM35.

SEPILOK ORANGUTAN REHABILITATION CENTRE

☎ 089

Sepilok (SORC) is one of only four orangutan sanctuaries in the world and is one of Sabah's major tourist attractions. The apes are brought here to be rehabilitated into forest life and at feeding times (usually 10am and 3pm) some of these fascinating animals usually swing into view along suspended ropes and clamber onto a feeding platform. The surrounding reserve has **nature trails** varying in length from 250m to 5km.

The **Rainforest Discovery Centre** (RDC; ☎ 533780; admission MRS; 🕒 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, ticket window closed 12.30-2pm Mon-Thu, 11.30am-2pm Fri), about 1.5km away, offers an easy to swallow graduate level education in tropical flora and fauna. Outside the exhibit hall, a botanical garden presents samples of every tropical plant you've heard of and dozens more you haven't, with descriptions as vibrant as the foliage alongside them.

Information

Morning and afternoon programmes are posted at the **visitor centre** (☎ 531180; soutan@pojaring.my; admission RM30; 🕒 9am-noon & 2-4pm). The centre tries to charge an extra RM10 for use of cameras, which is annoying when you've already paid a hefty admission fee. However, this is practically impossible to enforce.

Informative videos are screened five times daily. There are free lockers for your valuables; orang-utans have been known to make off with tourists' belongings.

Sleeping & Eating

Unless you're planning to go the centre in the morning, there's little reason to stay in Sepilok. Budget lodging isn't great value and nightlife is nonexistent. All places below have restaurants on site, rates include breakfast (unless noted otherwise) and you're unlikely to venture elsewhere for dinner.

Sepilok Jungle Resort (☎ 533031; www.sepilokjungleresort.com; dm RM20, r RM50-130; 📺 📺) Everyone seems to stay here but it's awfully hard to see why; rooms in 1970s style are musty, and staff are indifferent, except in steering guests to better-kept, higher-priced digs.

Sepilok Resthouse (☎ 534900; sephse@tm.net.my; dm RM20, r RM50-130; 📺 📺) Mainly for volunteers and staff, this house is ideally situated right outside the centre. It's usually full, and staff lack enthusiasm for walk-in visitors. If you can get in, you'll get the inside scoop on the centre.

Sepilok B&B (☎ 534050; www.sepilokbednbreakfast.com; Jl Arboretum; dm RM22, r RM40-85; 📺) The dorms and budget rooms are recently renovated with pastel décor and bamboo accents at this welcoming inn. The deluxe rooms accommodate up to four people. The drawback here is the location, about 1km from SORC, but you can rent a bike to pedal around.

SORC Cafeteria (meals from RM4; 🕒 7am-4pm) Serves breakfast, sandwiches, noodle and rice dishes, snacks and drinks, though it's prone to run out of food.

Getting There & Away

To get directly to the rehabilitation centre from Sandakan, look for the blue bus marked 'Sepilok Batu 14' from the local bus stand next to the market on the waterfront (RM3.50, 30 minutes). Minivans also make the trip every hour or so. Returning, the last bus leaves for Sandakan at 4.30pm.

Regular buses (Batu 14 or a higher number) can drop you at the turn-off to Jl Sepilok, 2.5km from the orang-utan centre. Taxis wait to take you to a hotel or SORC (or both) for RM2.

Most of the B&Bs and guesthouses can organise transport to/from the bus station and the airport. A taxi should cost around RM30 one way.

SUNGGAI KINABATANGAN

The wide, muddy Sungai Kinabatangan is Sabah's longest river. Some stretches of the

GETTING TO THE PHILIPPINES

The boats operated by **Weesam Express** (☎ 089-212872; www.weesamexpress.com) from Sandakan take 13 hours to sail to Zamboanga in the Philippines, departing 7am Wednesday and Friday. Operating bigger, more comfortable boats on this route, but taking 16 hours, is **Timmarine** (☎ 089-224009), which sails at 5pm Tuesday and Friday. Both operators leave from Karamunting jetty, 4km west of town, where all the immigration formalities take place. Economy fares start around RM210.

For information on boats going the other way, see p635.

river, particularly the upper reaches, have been devastated by logging or the clearing of jungle for plantations. But elsewhere, its shallow depths and shores are teeming with wildlife.

Short of trekking into Borneo's interior, a visit to the Kinabatangan is one of the best ways to observe the island's wild animals close up. Visitors usually get to see orang-utans and elusive proboscis monkeys, crocodiles, bearded pigs, pythons, bats that sleep during the day in funnel-shaped leaves, monitor lizards, frogs, myriad bird species including kingfishers and hornbills, and of course the ubiquitous macaque. If you're very lucky, you may even encounter pygmy elephants.

You need experienced guides to show you around and point out the animals hiding in trees, bushes, on riverbanks, above your head and under your feet. A couple of Sandakan-based outfits transport you to jungle camps and lodges and from there take you on boat rides and hikes to meet the locals; see p487.

Sleeping

There are several accommodation and tour possibilities in Sukau, located on the Kinabatangan, 135km southeast of Sandakan.

Sukau B&B (☎ 230269; r per person RM20) This friendly family guesthouse provides meals, boat hire and transfers on request. It's 1km east of the village.

Uncle Tan's B&B (☎ 531639; www.undetan.com; Mile 16, Jl Gum Gum; dm 3 days & 2 nights RM320) This famed Kinabatangan jungle camp operator's simple bed and breakfast is fairly convenient to both Sepilok and the Kinabatangan. Uncle Tan's family lives there: some visitors relish the homey atmosphere while others find it lacks privacy. The price includes three meals a day plus transport to and from the SORC feeding platforms.

Getting There & Away

Minivans go to Sukau from Sandakan (RM15, two hours), or you can take a minivan to Lahad Datu and get out at the Sukau turn-off. Expect to wait a while for a minivan from here to Sukau (RM10, one to 1½ hours). If you're on a package tour, transport will be provided. The last 45km to Sukau are along a gravel road that becomes a mud track after rain. Public transport is often suspended when it's wet; 4WD transport is available from Sandakan or Lahad Datu, or perhaps through your accommodation.

If you're heading south from Sukau, ask to be dropped at the highway, where you can catch a minivan to Lahad Datu or possibly a bus to Semporna or Tawau to save repeating the long drive from Sandakan.

SEMPORNA & PULAU SIPADAN

☎ 089 / pop 91,900

Though not a particularly appealing town, Semporna does have a lively waterfront market and a mosque attractively framed against the waters of the Celebes Sea.

Most of Semporna's visitors are en route to/from Pulau Sipadan, a small island 36km offshore that's regarded as one of the world's best dive sites. Divers take exhilarating plunges off a 600m limestone wall, while snorkellers can expect to have sea turtles and other marine creatures glide under them.

Since the beginning of 2005, Sipadan has been under Parks & Wildlife management and there's no longer any accommodation or dive operators on the island. The number of divers allowed at Sipadan is limited to 120 per day and there have been some complaints that this isn't transparently or fairly enforced.

There's an ATM-equipped branch of Maybank opposite the mosque.

Activities

Most of the Semporna-based operators conducting diving and snorkelling tours to Sipadan, Mabul and nearby islands have offices located beside the entrance to Dragon Inn. Day trips involving three dives (usually two at Sipadan and one at Mabul) cost around RM300 (RM260 if you have your own equipment). All trips include lunch and can normally be arranged the day before, though sometimes groups book out available slots. Operators include:

Borneo Jungle River Island Tours (aka Uncle Chang;

☎ 781789; unclchang99@hotmail.com; SOTC; r incl meals & transport to island per person RM50) Budget lodge on Mabul island built on stilts, with good snorkelling off the pier, and diving options. The friendly staff get raves from travellers. Dive packages to Sipadan are RM300 from Semporna or Mabul, or RM210 to Mabul sites from the lodge.

North Borneo Dive (☎ 781788, 919128; www.northborneo.net; Jl Causeway) Reliable dive operator that also has a Tawau office. It offers transport from that airport. Dive packages are RM300 per day.

Scuba Junkie (☎ 785372; www.scuba-junkie.com; 36 Semporna Seafront; dm/r incl breakfast for diving

customers from RM15/40; ☎ ☎) This dive operator offers accommodation at good rates if you dive with it. The rooms are basic but adequate. Dive packages are RM300 per day including equipment. The restaurant (meals from RM7) downstairs serves a full English breakfast, and pizza at night.

Sleeping

Many dive operators also have their own accommodation (see opposite). If there is space, nondivers are usually welcome.

Dragon Inn (☎ 781088; www.dragoninnfloating.com.my; 1 Jl Kastam; dm/r from RM15/66; ☎ ☎) A popular place with crowded dorms and somewhat overpriced rooms.

Damai Travellers Lodge (☎ 782011; Jl Masjid; s/d from RM30/45; ☎ ☎) A clean budget hotel that's less than 10 minutes' walk from the seafront. The cheap 'economy' rooms are fan-cooled with an attached bathroom.

Eating

There are several good *kedai kopi* serving tasty fish and seafood dishes, and cold beer between Jl Shop Block and the main road. The food stalls at the market are great for breakfast.

Anjung Paghalian Cafe (Jl Kastam; meals RM3-5; ☎ dinner) Beside the Tun Sarakan Marine Park entrance sign, this indoor-outdoor place on a pier features fish, prawn, chicken, squid, venison sold by portion (for two or more people) and cooked in your choice of up to 12 different ways. It also serves Malay standards and even burgers.

Mabul Steak House (Semporna Seafront; meals from RM4.90; ☎ lunch & dinner) This place is renowned for ice-blended juices, a great aprés-boat thirst quencher; the servings are large and glacial. Set meals for RM4.90 and RM7.90 include soup, a main and fruit. The restaurant also serves seafood by weight, as well as steaks and chops.

Getting There & Away

Buses and minibuses leave from the town centre. Dayana Express runs air-conditioned buses to Kota Kinabalu (RM58.50, nine to 10 hours) at 7.30am and 7.30pm daily with stops in Kunak, Lahad Datu, Sandakan and Ranau. The ticket office on Jl Hospital is open all day. Other bus companies do this trip but Dayana is the only guaranteed departure.

Minibuses to Tawau (RM10, 2½ hours) leave from the town centre near the main road. Minibuses to Lahad Datu (RM10, 2½

hours) depart when full from the corner of Jl PG Jaji and Jl Masjid.

TAWAU

☎ 089 / pop 245,000

Tawau is the port for the boat trip to/from the Indonesian province of Kalimantan; see p492 for more details. The road trip to Tawau from either Lahad Datu or Semporna reveals how palm-tree plantations, harvested for palm-tree oil, are choking the landscape of eastern Sabah.

There's internet access at **City Internet Zone** (☎ 760016; 37 Kompleks Fajar, Jl Perbandaran; per hr RM2-3; ☎ 9am-midnight).

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Soon Yee (☎ 772447; 1362 Jl Stephen Tan; r RM25-40; ☎ ☎) This is an excellent budget hotel, and a much better bet than the lodging houses (mostly brothels) around the local bus station. There is no hot water in some of the upper rooms. Opt for a quieter back room.

Loong Hotel (☎ 778100; 3868 Jl Abaca; r RM45-60; ☎ ☎) Situated alongside wooden houses in a quiet street in the town's northwest. Standard rooms are nothing special but the family room (RM70) has four single beds and is ideal for a group. There's a decent *kedai kopi* downstairs with dim sum.

Tawau is famed for its fine, inexpensive Chinese seafood restaurants on Jl Chen Fook. Good View and Kam Ling are the most popular. Everything's sold by weight. It's best to go with a group and you should plan on around RM40 per head. Around the block, closer to the waterfront, there's a Malay seafood place with grilled fish meals for RM15.

Restoran Aul Bismillah (☎ 764675; Jl Bunga Tan Jung; meals RM2-6; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The Aul Bismilla is a cheerful, no-fuss restaurant that's good for catching the breeze coming in off the ocean. It serves good meals, such as tofu curry.

Getting There & Away

Malaysia Airlines (code MH; ☎ 761293, 1-300-883000; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my) has flights between Tawau and both KK (RM133) and Sandakan (RM143).

FAX (code D7; ☎ 761946, 749162) has four flights a week to Johor Baru and daily flights to Sandakan. The sales office opposite Heritage Hotel is a good alternative to hunting down an internet café or phoning.

GETTING TO INDONESIA

Boats leave the customs wharf (next to the fish market) for the Indonesian province of Kalimantan. Tickets can be purchased from a half-dozen booths and shops near the wharf entrance. There are several departures daily for Pulau Nunukan (RM25, 1½ hours), from where you can continue to the mainland Kalimantan town of Tarakan (150,000Rp, 2½ hours).

You must get your visa prior to crossing the border as Indonesia doesn't issue visas on arrival; there's an **Indonesian consulate** (☎ 089-752969; Jl Tanjong Batu; ☎ 8am-1pm Mon-Fri) in Tawau.

See p304 for information on doing the trip in the reverse direction.

Air-conditioned express buses to Kota Kinabalu (RM 45 to RM55, 10 hours) leave from lot on Jl Chen Fook. Most buses leave from 6.30am to 8am, with a handful of night buses. Land Cruisers also operate from this station.

Buses to Kunak (RM10, one hour), Lahad Datu (RM15, two hours) and Sandakan (RM32, six hours) leave from inside the block of Sabindo Sq diagonally east of the KK bus terminal, behind the big purple sign for Yassin Curry House. Minibuses also leave from there for Kunak (RM10) and Lahad Datu (RM17) from 6am to 1pm; and Semporna (RM10, 2½ hours) from 7am to 4pm.

MALAYSIAN BORNEO – SARAWAK

Rajah Brooke's former kingdom of Sarawak sprawls along the northwest coast of Borneo – a vast expanse of secondary forest and palm-oil plantations that gives rise to jungle-clad mountains along the border with Indonesian Kalimantan.

The main attractions of Sarawak include some of the world's most incredible caves: the huge chambers of Niah National Park would be the state's most impressive natural highlight if they weren't overshadowed by those of Gunung Mulu National Park. The mighty Batang Rejang is rightly called the Amazon of Borneo, and a trip upriver is the quintessential Borneo experience. Then there's the Kelabit

Highlands – Borneo's very own Shangri La – where you can trek from longhouse to longhouse through thick jungle. Finally, there's Kuching, a surprisingly cosmopolitan city with intriguing reminders of the White Rajahs and some excellent Chinese, Malay and Indian food.

All told, Sarawak has enough varied and interesting charms to keep anyone interested for a couple of weeks.

KUCHING

☎ 082 / pop 496,000

Sarawak's state capital is almost sure to surprise you, for who would expect to find a stylish, hip and progressive city perched on this corner of Borneo? It's easy to see why Rajah Brooke chose this city as his base of operations: overlooking the languid Sungai Sarawak, it seems the perfect gateway to both jungle and sea.

The most attractive part of the city is the old Chinatown area that merges into a neighbouring Little India area. The main artery of this area is Jl Carpenter, which runs between Jl Wayang and Jl Tun Abang Haji Openg. The area is punctuated by excellent little restaurants, craft shops and bustling wet and dry markets. The east side of the city is more modern, but not without its charms, including Jl Padungan, a strip of cool restaurants that you might expect to find in Melbourne, London or San Francisco. Additional attractions include a brilliant weekend market, some fine museums and a couple of well-preserved relics from the time of Brooke. All told, Kuching is one of the more character-filled cities in Southeast Asia.

Information BOOKSHOPS

Mohamed Yahia & Sons (☎ 416928; Basement, Sarawak Plaza, Jl Tunku Abdul Rahman; ☎ 9am-5pm) Has English-language fiction and books on Borneo, plus Sarawak maps.

Popular Book Co (☎ 411378; Level 3, Tun Jugah Centre, 18 Jl Tunku Abdul Rahman; ☎ 9am-7pm) This is a more modern and spacious bookshop with a good selection of international titles. There are fewer books of local interest, however.

EMERGENCY

Ambulance (☎ 999)

Fire (☎ 994)

Police (☎ 999)

IMMIGRATION

Immigration office (☎ 245661; 2nd fl, Sultan Iskandar Bldg, Jl Simpang Tiga) For visa extensions. It's located 3km south of the town centre.

INTERNET ACCESS

Cyber City (☎ 243680; per hr RM4; ☎ 10am-11pm Mon-Sat, 11am-11pm Sun) Easily the best internet café in town. It's off Jl Borneo.

LAUNDRY

City Laundry (per 2kg RM20; ☎ 7.45am-5pm Mon-Fri, 7.45am-12.30pm Sat) Overpriced compared to Mr Clean. It's off Jl Borneo.

Mr Clean (Jl Green Hill; per kilo RM6; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat, 8am-4pm Sun) Next to the Mandarin Hotel, it's reliable and economical.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Sarawak General Hospital (☎ 257555; Jl Ong Kee) For emergencies and major ailments only; it's 1km south of town.

Timberland Medical Centre (☎ 234991; Mile 3, Jl Rock) Private hospital with highly qualified staff.

MONEY

Everrise Money Changer (☎ 233200; 199 Jl Padungan; ☎ 9am-5pm) Has English-language fiction and books on Borneo, plus Sarawak maps.

Majid & Sons (☎ 422402; 45 Jl India) A licensed moneychanger dealing in cash only.

Maybank (☎ 416889; Jl Tunku Abdul Rahman;

☎ 9.15am-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 9.15am-4pm Fri, ATM 6am-midnight daily)

Mohamed Yahia & Sons (☎ 416928; Basement, Sarawak Plaza, Jl Tunku Abdul Rahman; ☎ 9am-5pm) Inside the bookshop.

Standard Chartered Bank (☎ 252233; Jl Padungan; ☎ 9.15am-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 9.15am-4pm Fri)

POST

Main post office (Jl Tun Abang Haji Openg; ☎ 8am-4.30pm Mon-Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Visitors Information Centre (☎ 410944; www.sarawaktourism.com; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jl Tun Abang Haji Openg; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat, Sun & holidays) Located in the old courthouse and with extremely helpful staff. Pick up the free *Kuching Tourist Map*.

Sights

WATERFRONT

Kuching's lovely paved waterfront makes for a fine stroll, especially when a cool evening

breeze blows off the river. At night the promenade is ablaze with colourful lights and is busy with people buying cheap dinners or snacks from the permanent riverside food stalls (the best of which can be found in front of the Hilton Hotel). While you're strolling the waterfront, be sure to have a look at the **Brooke Memorial**, in front of the Visitor Information Centre.

MUSEUMS

The **Sarawak Museum** (☎ 244232; www.museum.sarawak.gov.my/main.htm; Jl Tun Abang Haji Openg; admission free; ☎ 9am-6pm) has a fascinating collection of cultural artefacts and is a must for anyone wanting to learn more about the region's indigenous peoples. It consists of two buildings connected by an ornate footbridge. The Old Wing houses the main ethnology exhibits and is filled with tribal masks, totem poles, fetishes, explanations of tattooing and body art, and a walk-in longhouse. The New Wing (Tun Abdul Razak Hall) has temporary exhibits and is of less interest.

While you're at the Sarawak Museum, be sure to have a look at the museum's **Art Museum** and **Natural Science Museum**, both of which are just down the hill from the museum's Old Wing. The former houses both permanent and temporary exhibits, some of which are very good. The latter was not open at the time of writing, but was expected to open soon.

Over the hill from the Sarawak Museum is the **Islamic Museum** (☎ 244232; Jl P Ramlee;

VISAS & PERMITS

Sarawak is semiautonomous and treated in some ways like a separate country. If you travel from Peninsular Malaysia or Sabah into Sarawak, your passport will be checked on arrival in Sarawak and a new stay-permit issued, either for 30 days or for the same period as your original Malaysia entry visa. If you are travelling directly to Sarawak, you will usually be given a 30-day entry stamp on arrival. When you leave Sarawak, your passport will be checked and a departure stamp put in your passport. When you travel from Sarawak to Peninsular Malaysia or into Sabah, you do not start a new entry period, so your 30-day (or longer) permit from Sarawak remains valid.



INFORMATION		SLEEPING	
City Laundry.....	1 D3	B&B Inn.....	19 A3
Cyber City.....	2 D2	Borneo B&B.....	20 A3
Everrise Moneychanger.....	3 E3	Carpenter Guesthouse.....	21 C2
Main Post Office.....	4 C2	Mandarin Hotel.....	22 A3
Majid & Sons.....	5 B2	Singgahsana Lodge.....	23 C3
Maybank.....	6 E2		
Mohamed Yahia & Sons.....	(see 52)	EATING	
Mr Clean.....	7 A3	Benson's Seafood.....	24 E2
Popular Book Co.....	(see 53)	Bla Bla Bla.....	25 A3
Standard Chartered		Briyani Café.....	26 C2
Bank.....	8 D2	Chin Sa Barbeque Specialist.....	27 E3
Visitors' Information		Chinese Food Stalls.....	28 C2
Centre.....	9 B2	Deli Café.....	(see 50)
		Gallery Café.....	29 C2
		Green Hill Corner.....	30 A3
		Islamic Museum.....	31 B2
		Hawker Centre.....	32 D3
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		Life Café.....	34 C2
		Little Lebanon.....	35 B2
		Living Room.....	36 A3
		Oriental Park.....	37 B2
		Riverside Food & Drink	
		Stalls.....	38 D2
		Sin Mei Café.....	39 A3
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		Centre.....	41 E2
		DRINKING	
		Bing.....	42 E3
		Cat City.....	43 D2
		Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf.....	(see 52)
		Havana Café.....	44 A3
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		Biaramas Express.....	(see 49)
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		Teck Hua Motor.....	51 A3

admission free; ☎ 9am-6pm), with magnificent examples of Islamic interior decoration and architecture, including an intricate model of Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock inlaid with mother-of-pearl.

MARKET

Kuching has a wonderfully chaotic **weekend market** (Jl Satok; ☎ late afternoon Sat, 5am-noon Sun) held in the labyrinth of side streets along the southern edge of Jl Satok. The smells of fresh herbs, fruits and meats compete with the scent of delicious fried foods such as pancakes to pull you every which way. Saturday afternoon is the best time to visit, when throngs of locals snap up the freshest goods.

FORT MARGHERITA

Built by Charles Brooke in 1879, **Fort Margherita** (admission free; ☎ dawn-dusk) guarded the approach to Kuching against pirates. Now, the impressive whitewashed building has been left to rot under the Borneo sun. It seems the city fathers have decided that there's no point in maintaining the place, which is a shame, considering its historical significance. Now, all you can do is wander the weed-strewn grounds and look at the building from the outside. To get there, take a *tambang* (small passenger ferry; 80 sen) from the pier on the waterfront, opposite the Hilton, walk up through the *kampung*, bearing left, past the school, through the parking lot and into the grounds.

GETTING INTO TOWN

Kuching International Airport is 12km south of the city centre. Sarawak Transport Co's (STC) green-and-cream bus 12A does a circuit that takes in the airport (RM1.60), while Chin Lian Long's (CLL) blue-and-white bus 8A does a direct airport to city run (RM1.40). In Kuching, these buses stop on Jl Tun Abang Haji Openg, near the Padang Merdeka. To catch the bus from the airport, exit the terminal and turn right. Minivans also swing by the stop and can transport you to town for about RM3. A coupon-fare taxi between Kuching airport and the city centre costs RM17. Buy coupons at the counter outside the terminal entrance.

The express-boat wharf is 6.5km east of town in the suburb of Pending. CLL bus 1 (RM1.50, 40 minutes) connects the wharf with Kuching (the Kuching stop is on Jl Tunku Abdul Rahman just west of the Holiday Inn). Taxis cost RM20.

The express bus terminal is 5km southeast of the city centre. Numerous STC buses run between the terminal and city for 90 sen. A taxi costs RM15.

Courses

Bumbu Cooking School (☎ 256050; bumbucookingclass@hotmail.com; 57 Jl Carpenter; class per person RM70) is a great way to learn how to cook some of the dishes you've enjoyed in local restaurants. You start with a shopping trip to a local market, then you cook four dishes and sit down to enjoy them.

Tours

Travel agents and tour operators in Kuching can arrange trips to nearby attractions such as Bako National Park and the Batang Rejang. Tour operators include **Borneo Interland Travel** (☎ 413595; www.bitravel.com.my; 1st fl, 63 Main Bazaar).

Festivals & Events

The three-day **Rainforest World Music Festival** (www.rainforestmusic-borneo.com) unites Borneo's indigenous tribes with international artists for a musical extravaganza in the Sarawak Cultural Village outside Kuching. It's held annually in the middle of July.

Sleeping

B & B Inn (☎ 237366; bnbswk@streamyx.com; Jl Tabuan; dm RM16, s/d RM25/35; 📶 📺) Simple but clean rooms, a rooftop patio and a fairly convenient location make this a very good choice in the budget bracket.

Borneo B&B (☎ 231200; borneobedbreakfast@yahoo.com; 3 Jl Green Hill; dm RM17, s RM28-32, d RM34-36; 📶 📺) This homey place is popular with backpackers, although it's a little run-down and can be hot.

our pick **Mandarin Hotel** (☎ 418269; 6 Jl Green Hill; r from RM50; 📶 📺) This fine budget hotel is head and shoulders above the similarly priced joints located nearby. It's simple, clean and good value.

Carpenter Guesthouse (☎ 256050; www.carpenterguesthouse.com; 94 Jl Carpenter; dm RM28, r from RM60; 📶) In an old Chinese shophouse, this brand-spanking-new guesthouse has a great atmosphere and helpful owners. Rooms are on the small side and quite spartan, but the hotel is clean, well run and has wi-fi. It's also in a great location.

Singgahsana Lodge (☎ 429277; www.singgahsana.com; 1 Jl Temple; dm RM30, r from RM80; 📶 📺) This stylish and well-run guesthouse has an unbeatable location and nice common areas. It's a touch overpriced, but very popular with Western backpackers.

Eating

Oriental Park (noodles RM2.40; 🕒 5am-11.30am) Many Kuching Chinese start their day with a bowl of *kolo mee* (ramen-style egg noodles in soup). This friendly little place off Jl Mosque does a brilliant version of this dish, complete with savoury bits of pork and a wonderfully rich soup.

our pick **Chinese Food Stalls** (Jl Carpenter; meals from RM3; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner) There are some brilliant Chinese hawker stalls in the small covered courtyard across from Sang Ti Miao Temple. At the front on the right side there is a stall that does a sublime bowl of laksa (RM4; morning until lunchtime only). At the back on the left there is a stall that does a great ginger chicken in the evenings.

Hawker Centre (Jl Khoo Hun Yeang; meals from RM3; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner) There's a good hawker centre with Malay and Chinese sections at the west end of town near the state mosque. It's a good place for a cheap meal when exploring the markets of the area. There's another, less interesting hawker centre (off Jl Borneo; meals from RM3; open breakfast, lunch and dinner) in the shopping complex opposite the Hilton.

Top Spot Seafood Centre (Jl Padungan; meals RM4-35; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner) An excellent rooftop plaza with acres of tables and a good variety of stalls. Order anything from abalone to banana prawns or numerous varieties of fish, and chase it down with a cold bottle of Tiger. To get here, climb the stairs leading from Jl Padungan to Tapanga restaurant, and keep heading upstairs from there.

Deli Café (☎ 232788; 88 Main Bazaar; drinks from RM4, sandwiches RM5; 🕒 9am-6pm Tue-Sun; 📺) What's not to like about a place that serves proper coffee in cool air-conditioned surroundings, along with simple sandwiches and a good selection of desserts, with free wi-fi thrown in for good measure?

Briyani Café (16 Main Bazaar; meals from RM5; 🕒 8am-7pm) The oddly spelled Briyani Café is a good place for a morning roti or a hot cup of tea; just stay out of the bathroom – we rank it as Borneo's worst.

Life Café (Jl Carpenter; drinks from RM2, meals from RM5; 🕒 lunch & dinner) This atmospheric little tea house-Chinese eatery offers a wide range of mostly Chinese dishes, including several good vegetarian choices.

Junk (☎ 259450; 80 Jl Wayang; mains RM18-40; 🕒 dinner Wed-Mon) Bla Bla Bla's sister restaurant, Junk

is like a funky antique store that happens to serve whopping portions of Western comfort food. If you're ready for a break from *mee goreng*, this is a fascinating choice.

Bla Bla Bla (☎ 233944; 27 Jl Tabuan; main dishes from RM25; 🕒 dinner) Borneo's most stylish restaurant serves tasty fusion food in a cool indoor dining area that you access by traversing stepping stones across a carp pool under the watchful eye of a Buddha.

Living Room (☎ 233944; Jl Wayang; main dishes from RM25; 🕒 dinner) The same management also runs the impressively cool Living Room, where you can drink and dine in outdoor *salas* while soaking up the soothing ambience. You will no doubt find yourself wondering where you are: is this Borneo, Bali or Barcelona?

Benson Seafood (Jl Chan Chin Ann; meals from RM30; 🕒 dinner) Ignore the aircraft-hangar ambience and concentrate on the wonderful fresh Chinese seafood at this giant riverside eatery. The oyster omelettes are enough to make us want to hop on the next plane back to Kuching and the *midin* (jungle fern) stir-fried with *belacan* (shrimp paste) is a Sarawak classic.

Some other options:

Green Hill Corner (Jl Temple; meals RM2-4; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Several hawker stalls here crank out a variety of noodle and rice dishes, including a brilliant plate of *kway teow goreng* (fried *kway teow* noodles). Problem is, the creator of this dish only shows up when he damn well feels like it.

Chin Sa Barbeque Specialist (Jl Padungan; chicken & rice from RM3; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Eat in or take away at this popular Jl Padungan barbie joint, where savoury chicken or pork slices over rice are the speciality of the house.

Sin Mei Café (Jl Green Hill; meals from RM5; 🕒 breakfast & lunch) If you're staying in one of the Chinese cheapies nearby, you'll find this friendly little *kedai kopi* to be a great spot for your morning congee, noodles or toast and eggs.

Riverside Food & Drink Stalls (Waterfront Promenade; meals from RM5; 🕒 dinner) What could be better than an evening constitutional along the river followed by a fresh fruit juice and a few sticks of satay? It's opposite the Hilton Hotel.

Little Lebanon (☎ 247523; Sarawak Tourism Complex; mains from RM8; 🕒 lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) This simple restaurant is a pleasant spot for a drink or a snack while exploring the Chinatown/Little India area.

Zhun San Yen Vegetarian Food Centre (Jl Chan Chin Ann; meals from RM10; 🕒 lunch & dinner) If you find yourself in the east end of town in need of simple vegetarian food, this buffet-style restaurant is a decent choice.

Drinking

Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf (ground fl, Sarawak Plaza; drinks from RM3; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner; 📺) This popular chain coffee shop offers wi-fi and air-con.

Bing (☎ 421880; 84 Jl Padungan; drinks from RM4; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner; 📺) Bing is a stylish, dimly lit café in the heart of the Jl Padungan nightlife zone. It's equally good for an afternoon cuppa or an evening tippie.

The shopping complex across from the Hilton Hotel on Jl Borneo has a collection of bars and nightclubs that make for an easy pub crawl – if one isn't happening, just head next door. Bar-clubs are pretty casual and can get a little rowdy at times. The main players here are Cat City, Miami and Rainforest.

Jl Padungan is a more upscale and civilised affair, with a selection of cool nightspots that would be equally at home in New York. Two spots to check are Mojo and Soho.

Finally, there is an intriguing collection of restaurant-bars on Jl Tabuan, just south of the roundabout, including Bla, Bla, Bla, Living Room and Junk (see left). You'll also find Havana Café here, which is more of a straight-up bar.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Malaysia Airlines (code MH; ☎ 1-300-883000; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my) flies between Kuching and KL (RM274). There are also several flights daily from Kuching to Johor Bahru (RM224) and Singapore (RM432).

Within Malaysian Borneo, from Kuching there are regular flights to Sibul (RM81), Bintulu (RM85), Miri (RM100), Kota Kinabalu (RM195) and Labuan (RM120).

Air Asia (code AK; ☎ 1-300-889933; www.airasia.com) has numerous daily flights to KL at bargain-basement prices (from RM80).

BOAT

Express Bahagia (☎ 410076) boats run to and from Sibul (RM36, 4½ hours), departing from the express boat wharf in Pending at 8.30am daily. Note that this is an easier and faster trip to Sibul than the bus, which takes eight hours.

BUS

Long-distance buses depart the **express bus station** (Jl Penrissen), situated 5km southeast of the centre. There are regular services

GETTING TO INDONESIA

From the express bus terminal in Kuching, there are services to Pontianak (RM45, nine hours, four departures daily between 7am and noon) in Kalimantan. Buses cross at the Tebedu–Entikong crossing. Travellers making land crossings into Kalimantan are required to obtain a visa beforehand from the **Indonesian consulate** (☎ 082-241734; 6th fl, Bangunan Binamas, Jl Padungan, Kuching; ☎ 9am-1pm Mon-Thu, 9am-noon Fri), as the officials at border posts on the Kalimantan border do not issue visas on arrival. Fees and requirements differ from country to country; contact the consulate for more information.

See p310 for information on doing the trip in the opposite direction.

to Sibul (RM40, eight hours, 10 departures daily between 6.30am and 10pm), Bintulu (RM60, 10 hours, nine departures daily between 6.30am and 10pm), and Miri (RM80, 14 hours, eight departures daily between 6.30am and 10pm).

Petra Jaya bus 6 leaves from the open-air market to Bako National Park.

Getting Around

For information on travelling into Kuching from the airport, express boat wharf or express bus station, see boxed text, p495.

Tambang (80 sen) will ferry you across the Sungai Sarawak.

There are taxi ranks at the market and express bus terminal. Most short trips around town cost between RM6 and RM10.

AROUND KUCHING

Bako National Park

Lying between the mouths of the Sarawak and Batang rivers is the unspoilt promontory of **Bako National Park** (☎ 011-225049; admission RM10; ☎ park office 8am-5pm), an exceptionally beautiful spot where rocky headlands are indented with picturesque beaches.

Bako is famous for its wildlife, including long-tailed macaques, bearded pigs and the unusual proboscis monkey. The **Lintang Trail** (5.3km, three to four hours) is an undulating loop of the promontory's interior that links up with other trails – combine it with the side trail to **Telok Paku** (45 minutes return),

which offers your best chance of seeing the elusive proboscis.

In the evening, park rangers offer a guided night trek if there is enough interest from guests. This is an opportunity not to be missed, as the wildlife present at night is entirely different from that seen during the day. The rangers are also particularly good at spotting things that an ordinary traveller would miss. Inquire at the welcome desk to see if there is a trek on that night. The trek lasts between 1½ to two hours and costs about RM10 per person.

Register for the park (adult/child RM10/5) upon arrival at the boat dock in Bako Bazaar. From here it's a choppy 30-minute boat ride to the **park headquarters** (☎ 011-225049; Telok Assam), where you'll find accommodation, a cafeteria and the park office. The office is about 400m along a wooden boardwalk from the boat dock. Staff will show you to your quarters and can answer any questions about trails. There's a large trail map hanging outside the office; ask for a free copy. Storage lockers are available for RM5 per day.

SLEEPING & EATING

Book accommodation through the **Visitors Information Centre** (☎ 082-410944; www.sarawaktourism.com) in Kuching. There are hostels, chalets and a camping ground.

The **hostel** (dm/r RM15/40) has four beds with shared kitchen and bathroom. Various sized **chalets** (r RM50-100) are also available. Bookings are essential for the chalets and advisable for the hostel rooms, though you should be able to get a bed if you arrive on a weekday.

Camp sites (per person RM5) are available but the camping ground is a swamp for much of the year. There's a shower block, and lockers can be hired for RM5 per day. Bring your own utensils, sheets and sleeping bags.

The cafeteria at the park headquarters is open from 8am to 9pm. It sells cheap buffet noodle and rice meals. The adjoining shop sells a good variety of reasonably priced tinned and dried food, chocolate, biscuits, film and toiletries, although fresh bread and vegetables are not always available.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

To get to Bako from Kuching, first take a bus to Bako Bazaar in Kampung Bako, then charter a boat to the park. Petra Jaya bus 6 leaves from the open-air market in Kuching every

hour (approximately) from 7.20am to 6pm (RM2.50, 45 minutes). The last bus back to Kuching leaves Kampung Bako at 5pm.

A boat from Bako Bazaar to the park headquarters costs RM40 each way for up to five people, or RM8 per person for larger groups. The chances are that someone on the bus will be looking to share a boat, especially on a weekend; tourists sometimes wait at the boat dock for the same reason.

Take note of the boat's number and be sincere when you agree to a pick-up time. If you do want to share a different boat back, tell the staff at park headquarters your boat number – they are happy to call and cancel your original boat.

BATANG REJANG

The Batang Rejang has been called the Amazon of Borneo. Until the advent of 4WD roads and jungle airstrips, the river served as the main 'highway' into the interior of Sarawak. Even now, it sees a daily parade of express boats and barges moving people and goods along its muddy length. Though it's not the jungle-lined wilderness that many travellers imagine, it still retains some of its wild and romantic nature – and a journey up the river into the interior is a classic Borneo adventure.

Many of the indigenous people of the Batang Rejang area still live in communal dwellings known as longhouses. These are large structures raised above the ground on stilts that provide shelter for villagers under their long rooflines. For more on longhouses, see boxed text, p500.

The best time for a trip up the Rejang is in late May/early June. This is the time of **Gawai**, the indigenous Dayak harvest festival, when longhouses are busy with feasts and traditional dancing, and visitors are welcomed.

SIBU

☎ 084 / pop 201,000

Sibu is the gateway to the Batang Rejang, making it a major transit point for travellers and the nexus of trade between the coast and the upriver hinterland. It's a somewhat chaotic jumble of concrete buildings, with several large markets and a bustling Chinatown on the banks of the Rejang. While it's no rival for Kuching in terms of charm, it's certainly not a bad spot to spend a day before or after a trip upriver.

Information

Emergency (☎ 999)

Golden Horse Travel & Tours (☎ 323288; 62 Jl Kampung Nyabor; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Sat, 8am-noon Sun) This competent travel agency near Premier Hotel is the place to go for plane tickets etc.

Hospital (☎ 343333)

Police (☎ 336144)

Visitor centre (☎ 340980; www.sibu.com.my; 32 Jl Tukang Besi; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-12.50pm Sat, closed 1st & 3rd Sat of every month) This office provides information about upriver trips out of Song, Kapit and Belaga.

Wisma Sanyan (Jl Sanyan) There are several internet cafés on the 4th floor here.

Sights

Tua Pek Kong Temple (Jl Temple; admission free; ☎ dawn-dusk) is an interesting riverside Chinese temple where, if you're lucky, you'll find Mr Tan Teck Chiang in attendance. Mr Tan will give you a tour of the temple and explain (in lavish detail) his interpretation of Taoism and Buddhism. You can also scale the seven-storey pagoda to get a brilliant view over the town and the muddy Batang Rejang as it slowly makes its way towards the sea.

Sleeping

Most of the budget lodging in Sibu is of a very low standard. If you don't stay in the Hoover Lodging House, you should consider dropping a little extra cash to stay in a midrange place.

Hoover Lodging House (☎ 334490; Jl Pulau; dm/s/tw RM20/30/45; ☎) The accommodation offered in the administration building of the Methodist Church is excellent value for money. Most rooms have high ceilings and attached bathrooms. You can also safely store gear here while travelling upriver. It's about 200m north (inland) from Tua Pek Kong Temple.

Li Hua Hotel (☎ 324000; 1 Lorong Lanang; r RM45-80; ☎) On the riverfront, about 100m south (upriver) of the Swan Statue, you will find Sibu's best-value hotel, with spotless tile-floor rooms and good views from the upper floors.

Victoria Inn (☎ 320055; 80 Jl Market; r RM50-85; ☎) If the Hoover and the Li Hua are full, this centrally located budget hotel is a good choice. It's a tightly packed warren of rooms located about a block away from the high-rise Tamhamas Hotel.

THE BORNEO LONGHOUSE

Longhouses are the traditional dwellings of the indigenous peoples of Borneo. These communal dwellings are raised above the ground and may contain up to 100 individual family 'apartments' under one long roof. The most important area of a longhouse is the common veranda, which serves as a social area and sometimes as sleeping space.

It's fair to say that there are two types of longhouse: 'tourist longhouses' and 'residential longhouses'. The former, as you can guess, are set up for tourists and are often built using traditional materials and construction techniques. They look like you might imagine (or hope) a longhouse should look, but they're pretty much just for display purposes.

In contrast, residential longhouses are where people actually live. If you're expecting these longhouses to look like something out of the Rajah Brooke era, you might be disappointed: most residential longhouses these days are quite modern in construction, with electronic appliances in all the apartments, TV aerials, and parking lots out front. Still, this is where real life happens, and if you want to see how Borneo's modern-day indigenous peoples live, a visit to a longhouse is a must.

When visiting a longhouse, it is polite to wait outside until someone from the longhouse invites you in. Bringing a few gifts is always appreciated. Usually, if you are travelling upriver with a guide, your guide will take you to a longhouse where he or she has relatives or friends.

Eating

In the late afternoon a host of food stalls set up near the concrete **SMC Market** (Jl Channel). Some of the waterfront Chinese *kedai kopi* open around dawn, handy if you're catching an early boat.

Victorious Cafe (Jl Maju; meals RM3-8; ☺ breakfast, lunch & early dinner) Dine under the gaze of the Sibü swan at this popular, mostly Chinese, *kedai kopi* across the street from the Li Hua Hotel. There's a stall here that makes a smoky and wonderful plate of *kway teow*, which you can wash down with a nice iced lemon tea.

SCR (meals from RM3; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The name stands for Singapore Chicken Rice, and that's what packs 'em in here at this popular chain. Not much on ambiance, but it's tasty and cheap. It's off Jl Kampong Nyabor.

New Capital Restaurant (☎ 326066; meals around RM25; ☺ lunch & dinner) If you feel like a splurge, this brilliant Chinese eatery off Jl Kampong Nyabor is sure to satisfy, with excellent fish, meat and vegetable dishes. We recommend the butter prawns and stir-fried *midin* (jungle fern) washed down with a fresh fruit juice.

Getting There & Around

AIR

Malaysia Airlines (code MH; ☎ 1-300-883000; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my) has several flights daily from Sibü to Kuching (RM81), Miri (RM130), Kota Kinabalu (RM200) and KL (RM274). **Air Asia** (code AK; ☎ 1-300-889933; www.airasia.com) has dirt-cheap flights between Sibü and both KL and Johor Bahru.

BOAT

Boats leave from the River Express Terminal at the western end of Jl Bengkel (which is at the southwestern end of town). At least two companies run express boats to Kuching (RM40, 4½ hours, departures at 7.30am and 12.45pm daily). Ticket booths are inside the terminal.

Getting to Kapit is the first leg of the journey up the Batang Rejang. Several boats motor the 140km from Sibü to Kapit (RM17 to RM30, three hours, departures between 5.30am and 1pm). Some boats continue up to Belaga, but most terminate in Kapit. All boat companies have booths at the terminal and they display their next departure times with large clocks outside their booths, making choosing your boat a snap.

BUS

Bus companies have ticket stalls at the **long-distance bus station** (Sungai Antu) and around the local bus station on the waterfront. Starting from 7am, local buses run regularly from the long-distance station into town (80 sen). A taxi between town and the bus station should cost RM10.

Long-distance buses travel between Sibü and Kuching (RM40, eight hours, regular departures between 6.30am and 10pm), Miri (RM40, 7½ hours, departures roughly hourly from 6am to 10pm) and Bintulu (RM20, 3½ hours, departures roughly hourly from 5.30am to 6pm).

KAPIT

☎ 084 / pop 8200

The main upriver settlement on the Rejang, Kapit is a bustling trading and transport centre that dates back to the days of the white rajahs. The main activity here is wandering around the docks and market stalls to see what upriver people are buying and selling. Apart from this, you can visit **Fort Sylvia** (Jl Kubu; admission free; ☺ 10am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Sun), which dates back to 1880. Although Belaga is further upstream and seems to promise more authentic longhouse experiences, Kapit is in some ways better for this – it offers a wider choice of river systems and several interesting longhouses within easy reach by river or road.

Information

Good Time Cyber Centre (☎ 746303; 354 Jl Yong Moh Chai; per hr RM3) Internet access.

Hua Chiong Travel Service (☎ 796681; Jl Temenggong Koh) Airline tickets and local travel services.

Hyper Link Cyber Station (17 Jl Tan Sit; per hr RM3) Internet access.

KL Ling Moneychanger (☎ 796488; Jl Penghulu Gerinang) Changes cash and travellers cheques.

Lee Cyber Centre (Jl Tan Sit; per hr RM3) Internet access.

Maybank (☎ 790122; 73C Jl Penghulu Atan)

Sleeping & Eating

Ark Hill Inn (☎ 796168; 451 Jl Penghulu Gerinang; r RM35-70; ☺) This is about as close as you can get to riverfront accommodation in Kapit, although unfortunately the rooms don't have any riverfront views. It can be a bit noisy here, but it's usually bearable.

Kapit River View Inn (☎ 796310; krvinn@tm.net.my; 10 Jl Tan Sit Leong; r RM55-60; ☺) Small windowless but clean rooms, located directly on the town square and near the boat pier.

New Rejang Inn (☎ 796600; 104 Jl Teo Chow Beng; r RM60-75; ☺) Clean, tiled rooms with TV, phone and fridge, and a location a mere stone's throw away from the boat wharf make this the best-value accommodation option in town. The in-room cable TV is nice, as long as you're happy watching the same programme as the hotel staff in the lobby!

Kong Hua Café (1 Jl Wharf; meals RM2-5; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A fine example of the type of old-school Chinese coffee shop that Malaysia does so well. Breakfast here is not much more than sugary snacks though.

Syarikat Morshidi (Restaurant and Coffee Shop) (cnr Jl Teo Chow Beng & Jl Putena Jaya; dishes RM2-6;

☺ breakfast) If the thought of yet another breakfast of coffee and a sweet snack in a Chinese café makes your teeth hurt, stop by this tiny roadside café that serves a variety of Muslim breakfast specialities, including *nasi lemak* and milky tea.

Madam Ma's Kitchen (☎ 796119; Hotel Meligai, 334 Jl Airport; mains RM5-15; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Ma's is one of the only places in town with air-con, making it a refuge on a hot day (which is every day). The staff are friendly and speak some English and the chicken curry is pretty tasty. It has changing menus and special offers.

Kapit is packed with small restaurants and *kedai kopi*, but the best place to eat in the evening has to be the busy **night market** (dishes RM0.50-3.50), which is near the centre of town, roughly behind Ing Hing Cold Storage. In contrast to the rest of Kapit's dining scene, which is overwhelmingly Chinese, this market is almost exclusively Malay-Muslim. As such, the emphasis is on *satay* and other halal dishes.

Food stalls set up in the evening by the wet market at the western end of town. A triangular covered hall off Jl Penghulu Nyanggau has also food stalls.

Getting There & Away

Express boats leave for Sibü between 6.30am and 2.30pm. The trip takes 2½ to three hours and tickets are RM17 to RM20 for economy, or RM25 to RM30 for 1st class.

Boats depart for Belaga (RM30, 4½ hours) at 9am. When the river is low, express boats can't get past the Pelagus Rapids, and smaller speedboats are used instead. Fares for these boats start at RM50. If you want to do a day trip to Pelagus, ask around the wharf or at your hotel, as the express boats don't stop there.

Express boats bound for the Batang Boleh depart before noon and go as far as Rumah Penghilu Jambi (RM30, four to five hours), an Iban longhouse community. The last boat back to Kapit departs Rumah Penghilu Jambi at 12.30pm.

BELAGA

☎ 084 / pop 2500

Belaga is a small bazaar town and administrative centre located where the Rejang divides into the Belaga and Balui rivers. Its friendly population makes it an excellent base from which to explore the interior, and there are many Kayan and Kenyah **longhouses** along

the rivers nearby. If you speak with a local on the way upriver, you may end up being invited to stay at their longhouse. Otherwise, it shouldn't take long to find someone in Belaga with a suggestion of a longhouse to visit or an offer to guide you.

Boats will drop you at the bottom of a steep set of concrete steps leading up to the small town centre; all the town's facilities are found here, in the handful of blocks across from the small park. There's no bank here, but the Teck Hua Chan supermarket will change cash.

Tours

Longhouse visits typically last three days and two nights, and start at RM200 (minimum two people). The most prominent guide operating out of Belaga these days is Daniel Levoh; he can be found at **Daniel's Corner** (☎ 461997, 013-848 6351; daniellevoh@hotmail.com; Jl Teh Ah Kiong). A Kayah and former teacher, Daniel is friendly and knowledgeable, and gets good reviews from travellers. Mark, a licensed guide based out of Hasbee Enterprises, can also arrange longhouse visits, as can Belaga's District Office.

Sleeping & Eating

Belaga's accommodation is of the cheap and cheerful variety, but if you're doing the longhouse circuit you shouldn't really need to sleep here for more than a night or two.

Hotel Belaga (☎ 461244; 14 Main Bazaar; r RM20-35; 🍽️) A convenient location makes up for less-than-perfect standards at Belaga's principal dosshouse. The cheap beds here are on the verge of collapse, but the place is clean and the fellow running the place is helpful enough. There's a decent Chinese coffee shop downstairs that serves mediocre but filling food.

Jea Corner (meals from RM3; 🍽️ dinner) This tiny stall off Jl Ului Lian is literally the only place in Belaga still serving food after 6pm, and it serves up a small variety of decent Malaysian rice-based dishes. The friendly proprietor, Albert, will probably find you before you find him. He has a wealth of information about the surrounding area and its people and culture – just don't get him started on politics! It's near the District Office.

Kafetaria Mesra Murni (Jl Temengong Mat; dishes RM3-5; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This family-run Muslim restaurant can lay claim to having the only real riverfront dining in Belaga. Try the decent *mee goreng* or the exceptionally

refreshing *limau ais* (iced lime juice). It's past the park-playground.

Getting There & Away

Belaga's tiny airstrip is 20 minutes downriver of town by longboat (RM10). There are twice-weekly flights (Wednesday and Saturday) between Belaga and Bintulu (RM50, one hour). Contact **Malaysia Airlines** (code MH; ☎ 461512; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my).

Boats leave Kapit for Belaga (RM30, 4½ hours) at 9am. When the river is low you'll need to take a speedboat instead; fares start at RM50. Returning to Kapit from Belaga, express boats leave Belaga early (between 6am and 6.30am), from where you can catch onward boats downriver to Sibiu.

Boats go upriver from Belaga as far as the Bakun Dam area near Rumah Apan (RM10, one hour), from where you can explore the resettled river country north of the Rejang. It's possible to do a loop back to Bintulu this way along a recently paved road.

BINTULU

☎ 086 / pop 102,800

Bintulu is a busy little river town roughly midway between Sibiu and Miri. In the centre of town overlooking the river, you'll find the interesting **Pasar Utama Market** (Jl Main Bazaar; 🍽️ dawn-late afternoon), as well as **Tua Pek Kong** (Jl Main Bazaar; admission free; 🍽️ dawn-dusk), a colourful Chinese temple, about a block away. If you want a break from the city, hire a taxi (about RM10) for the 10km trip to **Tanjung Batu Beach**.

Information

Bintulu Hospital (☎ 331455) Off Lebu Raya Abang Galau.

HSBC (☎ 315928; 25 Jl Law Gek Soon; 🕒 9am-3pm Mon-Fri) The best bank in Bintulu; it has an ATM.

Star Internet (Jl Law Gek Soon; per hr RM3; 🕒 9am-11pm) Internet access; it's noisy, with slow machines.

Sleeping & Eating

Bakun Inn (☎ 311111; 7 Jl Law Gek Soon; r RM45-60; 🍽️) This simple hotel on the corner of Jl Law Gek Soon and Jl Keppel is arguably the best budget deal in town. The entrance is out back, near the parking lot.

Sunlight Inn (☎ 332577; 7 Jl Pedada; r RM68-78; 🍽️) Free wi-fi and a fairly central location make this clean and well-run hotel a good second choice after the Bakun Inn. It's opposite City Point Shopping Centre.

Kintown Inn (☎ 333666; 93 Jl Keppel; r RM69-80.50; 🍽️ 🍷) If you can spare a little bit of extra cash, this is a great choice. Rooms are clean and well appointed, with nice hot showers and good views from the upper floors. There's an also internet terminal in the lobby. The inn is situated on the corner of Jl Law Gek Soon and Jl Keppel.

Restoran PJ Corner (Jl Abang Galau; meals from RM3; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This friendly Malay place serves good fresh fruit juice, rotis, *nasi campur* and a nice plate of *mee goreng*. It's on the eastern end of Jl Abang Galau, roughly opposite the Regency Plaza Hotel.

Ban Kee Café (meals from RM10; 🍽️ lunch & dinner) Run, don't walk, to this brilliant indoor/outdoor Chinese seafood specialist. It doesn't look like much, but the food here is enough to make us want to head back to Bintulu as soon as possible. Try the butter prawns or the baby *kalian* (a Chinese vegetable similar to baby bok choy). It's located off Jl Abang Galau.

Finally, on the upper floor of the Pasar Utama, you'll find several **food stalls** (meals RM2-5; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & early dinner).

Getting There & Around

AIR

Bintulu airport is 24km west of the centre. A taxi there costs RM25.

Malaysia Airlines (code MH; ☎ 1-300-883000; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my) flies between Bintulu and Kota Kinabalu (RM271), Kuching (RM85), Miri (RM90) and Sibiu (RM85). Malaysia Airlines Twin Otters fly twice weekly to Belaga (RM50).

BUS

The long-distance bus station is 5km north of town. Travel between the two by local bus or taxi (RM8).

There are frequent daily services between Bintulu and Kuching (RM60, 10 hours), Miri (RM20, 4½ hours) and Sibiu (RM20, 3½ hours).

NIAH CAVES NATIONAL PARK

☎ 085

The vast caverns of **Niah Caves National Park** (☎ 737454; admission RM10; 🕒 park office 8am-5pm) are among Borneo's most incredible natural attractions. Located in the limestone hills about 3km north of Batu Niah town, the caves contain some of the oldest evidence of human habitation in Southeast Asia; rock art and

small canoe-like coffins (death ships) within the greenish walls of the **Painted Cave** indicate that it was once a burial ground, and carbon dating puts the oldest relics back 40,000 years ago.

The caves are 3.5km away from the park headquarters via a wonderful plankwalk through old-growth rainforest. First, you walk from the headquarters to the jetty on the Sungai Niah, then cross the river in a small boat (RM1, departs on demand), before climbing to a small **visitors centre** (admission free; 🕒 9am-5pm) where you can rent a torch for RM5 (check it works before setting out – you'll need it if you want to go any distance into the caves). The plankwalk is not well marked – when you reach the place where local villagers sell souvenirs, pass through the gate and climb up to the caves.

You'll pass under a limestone overhang before entering the aptly named **Great Cave**. Ascend up to your left here and make your way to the back of the cave. The trail disappears down into the castled gloom at the back of the cave, and you may find yourself thinking of Jules Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* or the city of Zion in the *Matrix* films. You then make your way through a dark passage known as the **Gan Kira**, or Moon Cave. It's not narrow enough to induce claustrophobia (unless you're severely affected), but it will certainly make you wonder what would happen if your torch suddenly died. You then emerge into the forest and traverse another section of boardwalk before arriving at the **Painted Cave**. To return, retrace your steps (taking the steps up to your left to close the loop in the Great Cave).

Sleeping & Eating

Niah Caves can be visited as a day trip from Miri or Bintulu, especially if you go by hire car all the way. If you would like to stay at or near the caves, the best choice is the park accommodation. Otherwise, there are a few simple hotels in Batu Niah town.

Niah Caves National Park (☎ 737454; camp sites RM5, r from RM45) There are simple and clean dorm rooms and private rooms at the park headquarters, along with a basic canteen. Camping is another option.

Niah Cave Hotel (☎ 737726; 155 Batu Niah Bazaar; r RM30; 🍽️) Set over a café, the simple rooms here with common bathroom are just barely acceptable.

Niah Cave Inn (☎ 737333; 621 Batu Niah Bazaar; r economy/standard from RM64/75; 🏠) Despite the unfortunate connotations of its name, this is the best hotel in town. The economy rooms aren't worth the price, but the standard rooms are decent.

There are several *kedai kopi* in town, including the **Friendly Café** (Batu Niah Bazaar; meals from RM3; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner), which serves the usual coffee shop fare. It's opposite the Niah Cave Inn.

Getting There & Away

Batu Niah, the gateway to the park, is 11km west of Niah Junction on the Miri-Bintulu highway. Some express buses travelling between Miri and Bintulu stop at Niah Junction (RM11, two hours to/from Bintulu; RM10, 1½ hours to/from Miri). When you buy your ticket in Miri or Bintulu, check that the bus stops in Niah Junction, as there are two highways between these two towns, and some buses do not go via Niah Junction.

From Niah Junction, you will have to hire a private car to Batu Niah town (RM10) or direct to the park (RM15). The latter is the better option unless you intend to spend the night at Batu Niah. From Batu Niah, you can walk to park headquarters by taking the path that starts behind the town near the Chinese temple and following the river. If you are not staying at the park, make prior arrangements with a car to pick you up and return you to Batu Niah or Niah Junction when you finish visiting the caves.

LAMBIR HILLS NATIONAL PARK

Although **Lambir Hills National Park** (☎ 085-491030; admission RM10; 🏠 park office 8am-5pm) doesn't have the spectacular scenery of Niah and Mulu, it is the most easily accessed primary rainforest in the Miri area. Activities include jungle walks and swimming.

The main trail here follows a small river past two attractive waterfalls to **Latuk Waterfall**, which has a picnic area and is suitable for swimming. It takes no more than 25 minutes to walk the 835m from the park headquarters to Latuk Waterfall. A path branches off just before the second falls and runs to **Tengkorong Waterfall**, which is a somewhat strenuous 2.6km walk (one way) from the park headquarters.

Although the national park is best visited as a day trip from Miri, there is comfortable

accommodation here for those travellers who want to stay the night. The park's fan-cooled **chalets** (r RM75) have two bedrooms, each with two beds. Air-conditioned **chalets** (r RM100) also have two bedrooms, which are equipped with either three single beds or one single and one double bed. There is also **camping** (RM5 per person). There is a simple canteen here as well.

The park office, canteen and accommodation are situated beside the highway 30km south of Miri. From Miri, any bus (RM3, 35 minutes) bound for Bekenu or Niah Junction can drop you here. A taxi from Miri costs RM40.

MIRI

☎ 085 / pop 177,800

An oil-rich boom town situated at the northern end of Sarawak, Miri is a major transport hub for travellers heading to/from Brunei, the Kelabit Highlands and three of Sarawak's national parks: Mulu, Niah Caves and Lambir Hills. The town itself is a somewhat poorly laid out jumble of big hotels, shops, restaurants and a surprising number of bars. While it's not the most prepossessing town in Borneo, it's still not a bad place to lay over for a day or two en route to or from the jungle.

Information

Cyber Corner (1st fl, Wisma Pelita, Jl Padang; per hr RM3)

Main post office (☎ 441222; Jl Post)

Maybank Bureau de Change (☎ 438467; 1271 Centre Point Commercial Centre; ☺ 9am-5pm) Dedicated exchange and cash advance facilities.

Miri City Medical Centre (☎ 426622; 918 Jl Hockien) Private medical centre.

Miri General Hospital (☎ 420033; Jl Cayaha) South of town, off the Miri bypass.

Planet Café (1st fl, Bintang Plaza, 1264 Jl Miri Pujut; per hr RM4)

Popular Book Store (☎ 439052; 2nd fl, Bintang Plaza, 1264 Jl Miri Pujut)

Standard Chartered Bank (☎ 434944; Jl Calliandra) Changes travellers cheques.

Tally Laundry Services (☎ 430322; Jl Merbau; per kilo RM7; ☺ 8am-6pm)

Unique Moneychanger (☎ 425757; 1328 Centre Point Commercial Centre; ☺ 7am-9pm) Cash only.

Visitors Information Centre (☎ 434181; 452 Jl Melayu; ☺ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun) At the southern end of the town centre.

Sights & Activities

The atmospheric old part of town begins around the southern end of Jl Brooke; this is the area most worth exploring. There's plenty of lively commerce around the Chinese shophouse blocks, the **central market** and the **Tamu Muhibbah**, where local Dayak come to sell their vegetables. The wide courtyard of the **Tua Pek Kong temple**, near the fish market, is a good spot to watch the river traffic float by. During Chinese New Year, virtually the whole of this area is taken over by a lively street fair, which crams the crowds in under red lanterns and gold foil.

About 3km south of town, Miri has a passable beach and recreation park at **Brighton Beach**, where the open-air **Taman Selera** (food centre) juts out into the sea for perfect sunset dining. Further on, **Hawaii Beach** is a clean, palm-lined stretch of sand about 15 minutes outside town by bus. To get to either of the beaches, take bus 11 or 13 (RM1.50) from the local bus station.

Sleeping

Highlands (☎ 422327; www.borneojungles.com; 1271 Jl Sri Dagang; dm RM25, r from RM40; 🏠 📺) The only proper backpacker-style option for miles around, Highlands is a clean and popular place with dorms and private rooms. This is a great place to meet other travellers and the staff are informative about travel in Sarawak. It's on the top floor of a block of shops on the west side of town beside the Sungai Miri, above Wheels Café/Bar. Look for the five-storey car park.

Brooke Inn (☎ 412881; brookeinn@hotmail.com; 14 Jl Brooke; s/d/tr RM43/48/53; 🏠 📺) While it stops short of midrange quality, the Brooke Inn is better than most of its competitors. It's a little noisy, but is decent value. It's on Jl Brooke, smack dab in the middle of town.

Palace Inn (☎ 421999; siewpoh@pc.jaring.my; Lot 192 Jl Kwangtung; s/d from RM70/75; 🏠 📺) The Palace is significantly more comfortable and better run than most others in this price range and free wi-fi sweetens the deal. The tiled floors are a good move in this swampy Borneo climate. It's roughly in the centre of town, opposite the much larger Somerset Hotel.

Eating

Central Market (Jl Brooke; meals from RM2; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The lively Central Market has a large hawker centre that covers all the bases

of Malay, Indian and Chinese food. This is easily the cheapest and best place to eat in Miri. Across the street, you'll find still more choices at the similar Unity Food Centre. It's not far from Yu Lan Plaza, the high building in the centre of town.

Khan's Bilal Restaurant (229 Jl Maju; meals from RM3; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This simple canteen is one of Miri's better Indian eateries, whipping up tasty treats such as tandoori chicken and *aloo gobi* (Indian potato-and-cauliflower dish), as well as the usual *roti canai* and a good biryani (rice baked with spices and meat, seafood or vegetables). The market is opposite Mega Hotel.

Apollo Seafood Centre (4 Jl South Yu Seng; meals from RM30; ☺ lunch & dinner) This deservedly popular Chinese seafood restaurant is the best place for a splurge in Miri. Just about anything you order will be delicious, and we recommend the crabs and the fried *midin* with *belacan*. If you are a big spender, you could always go for some lobsters straight from the tank.

Drinking

Pelita Commercial Centre (cnr Jl Miri Pujut & Sehati) Those keen on a pub crawl might consider catching a taxi (about RM8) to this warren of small bar-lined streets 3km north of the centre. Anyone with an aversion to disco glitter balls, karaoke and expats need not apply for the experience.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Miri is well served by **Malaysia Airlines** (code MH; ☎ 1-300-883000; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my), which has Twin Otter services to Bario (RM110), Lawas (RM70), Limbang (RM65), Marudi (RM50) and Gunung Mulu (RM90). Larger aircraft fly direct to Bintulu (RM90), Sibul (RM130), Kuching (RM100), Pulau Labuan (RM50) and Kota Kinabalu (RM70). Book flights to/from Bario (one flight daily) or Mulu (two flights daily) as far in advance as possible.

Air Asia (code AK; ☎ 1-300-889933; www.airasia.com) does cheap flights between Miri and both KL and Johor Bahru.

BUS

Buses run from the long-distance bus terminal to Bintulu (RM20, 4½ hours), Sibul (RM40, 7½ hours) and Kuching (RM80, 14 hours).

GETTING TO BRUNEI

The ticket office at the local bus station sells a combined ticket (RM13) for travel on bus 2 (departs 7am, 10am, 1pm and 3.30pm) from Miri to the border crossing at Sungai Tujoh, and then on another bus to Kuala Belait. Including the drudgerous immigration formalities, the Miri–Kuala Belait trip takes about 2½ hours.

For information on crossing the border in the other direction, see p50.

From the local bus station, beside the visitors centre, bus 1A (RM4, 45 minutes) takes you to the wharf in Kuala Baram for Marudi-bound boats.

Getting Around

At the time of writing, a new long-distance bus terminal was under construction and it's not certain which local bus will make the run between the city and the new terminal. Ask on arrival.

Taxis from the airport to the city centre run on a coupon system (RM14).

GUNUNG MULU NATIONAL PARK

Gunung Mulu National Park (☎ 085-433561; www.mulupark.com; admission RM10; ☎ park office 8am–5pm) may well be the single most impressive destination in all of Borneo. There are few parks in the world that pack so many natural marvels into such a small space. From some of the world's most incredible (and accessible) caves, to brilliant old-growth tropical rainforest, and some out and out natural oddities such as the Pinnacles formation on Mt Api, Mulu National Park is truly one of the world's great wonders.

Note that Mulu is only accessible by plane or an all-day river journey. Bring plenty of cash as there are no ATMs or credit card facilities.

Sights & Activities

Mulu's caves are its most popular attraction, and for good reason: they are awesome. The star of the lot is **Deer Cave**, which contains what's claimed to be the world's largest cave passage – over 2km in length and 174m in height. The cave is reached from the park headquarters by a fascinating 3km plankwalk. In an unfortunate bit of bureaucratic

overkill, the park requires that you join a guided tour to the cave (RM10 per person, tours depart the park headquarters at 1.45pm and 2.30pm). After visiting Deer Cave, your guide will take you to the adjoining **Lang's Cave**, which is smaller but has some fascinating limestone formations.

After visiting Deer and Lang's Caves, your guide may take you to a viewing area where you can observe the giant mouth of Deer Cave, from which millions of bats issue forth in the late afternoon to feed on jungle insects. Problem is, this is not a daily occurrence and, more likely than not, you'll find yourself spending an hour or more peering hopefully at the cave entrance only for the sun to go down and your guide to have to lead you back to headquarters along the plankwalk in near total darkness (actually, we kind of liked that part).

Next on the Mulu menu are two more so-called 'show caves': **Wind Cave** and **Clearwater Cave**. Like Deer and Lang's Caves, the park requires that you join a guided tour to visit these caves (RM10 per person, tours depart park headquarters at 9.45am and 10.30am). However, in this case, it's worth it, and the fee includes a great boat trip up the Sungai Melinau. Wind Cave, first on the tour, contains several chambers filled with phantasmagorical forests of stalactites and stalagmites.

Clearwater Cave, another 400m away by river or plankwalk, is said to be the longest cave in Southeast Asia (the tour only visits a tiny segment of the cave near one of its mouths). The real highlight of Clearwater Cave is the underground river that runs through the chambers – it's straight out of *King Solomon's Mines*. Bring a swimsuit, because there's a wonderful swimming hole outside the entrance to Clearwater Cave.

If you like, you can walk back from these caves to the park headquarters via a concrete path and plankwalk that winds through the narrow passage of **Moonmilk Cave**. This is a highly recommended variation, but be warned that there is a steep climb en route, and you'll need a headlamp for the cave.

The next highlight of the park is its brilliant new **Mulu Canopy Skywalk**, easily the best in Southeast Asia. Once again, the park requires that you traverse it as part of a guided walk (RM30 per person, walks depart at 7am, 8.30am, 10.30am, 1pm, 2pm and 2.15pm). Despite the relatively steep cost, we urge you

not to skip this attraction – every step of the 480m length is unforgettable. Climbing to the canopy is really the only way to see what a tropical rainforest is all about, since most of the action happens in the canopy, not on the ground.

Finally, if you've got more time, energy and money, you can climb to the 2376m summit of **Gunung Mulu**, a four-day excursion that will test anyone's stamina (guides are required and cost RM1000 for up to five people). Lesser mortals should consider the three-day trek to **the Pinnacles**, an incredibly bizarre collection of arrowhead-shaped limestone pinnacles that jut 50m out of the forest floor on the flank of Mt Api. Once again, a guide is needed for this strenuous climb (RM400 for up to five people).

Sleeping & Eating

Due to the park's popularity, it's best to book your accommodation in advance with **Mulu Park** (☎ 085-792300; enquiries@mulupark.com). You can also make bookings through the Visitors Information Centres in Kuching (p493) or Miri (p504).

Accommodation in the national park is in the form of a 21-bed **hostel** (dm RM20) and private **longhouse rooms** (r without/with air-con from RM50/80; ☎).

There are no cooking facilities. Simple but tasty meals are served at **Café Mulu** (meals RM4-9; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner). There's also a pair of café-bars across the suspension bridge from the park headquarters.

Getting There & Around

Malaysia Airlines (code MH; ☎ 1-300-883000; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my) flies in direct from Miri (one way/return RM100/200) and Kota Kinabalu (one-way/return from RM200/390). The park office is a half-hour walk from the airstrip, or minivans can shuttle you to/from the terminal for RM3/5.

It's also possible to travel to Mulu from Miri by river, but it's a long, long journey and it actually costs more than flying. First, you must take a taxi from Miri to the pier at Kuala Beram to catch the 8am river express to Marudi (RM30, 2½ hours). From Marudi, take the noon boat upriver to Long Terawan (destination plate reads 'Tutoh'; RM20, six hours). Once there, you must charter a boat for the final three-hour journey upriver to the park (RM250). It's best to call ahead to the

park to make sure that a boat will be available take you from Long Terawan to the park.

BARIO & THE KELABIT HIGHLANDS

☎ 085

A lovely hanging valley in eastern Sarawak, the Kelabit Highlands are tucked up against the Indonesian state of Kalimantan and ringed by jungle-covered mountains on all sides. The main population centre is the languid village of Bario, home to about 800 souls, mostly members of Borneo's indigenous Kelabit people. The main activity here, other than merely enjoying the clean, cool air, is trekking from longhouse to longhouse on mountain trails. The natural hospitality of the Kelabit people and the relatively unspoiled flora and fauna of the high jungle make any trip to the highlands a memorable experience, and we highly recommend it for those who have the time and energy.

There are no banks or credit-card facilities in the highlands so bring plenty of cash.

Activities

Guided treks range from overnight excursions to five-day slogs as far as distant villages such as Ba Kelalan. Every guesthouse and longhouse in Bario can arrange guides and accommodation, as well as transport to trailheads, if necessary. It's certainly possible to just turn up and make arrangements after you arrive, especially if you don't mind waiting a day or two in Bario before the start of your trek. If you're in a hurry, it makes sense to make arrangements by email or phone before you arrive.

The most popular trip is a two-night, three-day trek around the longhouses south of Bario, including Pa Dalih, Pa Ramadu and Pa Mada. This is sometimes called the Bario Loop, although it's less a loop than an out-and-back trek with a small loop at one end. Portions of this can be done by 4WD or riverboat. All three longhouses en route are welcoming, friendly places where you'll get a good glimpse into Kelabit life.

If you do intend to do some trekking, be sure to bring leech-resistant socks and proper footwear (light hikers or running shoes are better than heavy leather hiking boots). And be aware that the treks are fairly strenuous – you'll enjoy them a lot more if you get in shape before you arrive.

Going rates for guides (and porters if you need them) start at RM80 per day. To stay

overnight in a longhouse, expect to pay RM40 per person (including food). Some treks involve either river trips (highly recommended if the water is high enough) or 4WD trips, which, naturally, significantly increase the cost of the trek.

Sleeping & Eating

All Bario accommodation options give you a choice between a bed-only price and a package deal that includes all meals (utilising Bario's famous long-grain rice) and transport.

Bariew Backpackers Lodge (☎ 791038; bariewlodge@yahoo.com; r per person RM15-20, incl meals RM45-55) Perfectly placed in Bario town, a short walk from the shops past the old airstrip, this is an excellent family-run guesthouse frequented by sociable locals as well as visitors. The proprietor, Reddish, knows everyone in town and has close ties with the longhouses on the treks around the highlands. As well as basic fan rooms, tasty meals and evening barbecues, the lodge can arrange guides and activities.

De Plateau Lodge (deplateau@gmail.com; r per person RM20, full-board package RM60) This is another good choice, with comfortable rooms and nice common areas. The owner here can arrange treks, bird-watching and other activities. It's located in a white-timber house surrounded by a lovely garden, 2km east of Bario; stick left when the road forks.

Getting There & Away

The only practical way to Bario is by air and it's easily one of the most exciting flights in Southeast Asia. After crossing the lowlands of western Sarawak, you sweep by the dense rainforest of Brunei, followed by the brilliant peaks of Gunung Mulu National Park (you can peer right into the yawning maw of Deer Cave) before flying by the fantastic spire of 2046m Batu Lawii (all of these sights are only visible from the left side of the aircraft as you fly from Miri to Bario).

Malaysia Airlines (code MH; ☎ 1-300-883000; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my) has at least one flight daily between Miri and Bario (return flight RM145, 50 minutes). Communication between the Malaysian Airlines office in Bario and other offices elsewhere is haphazard, so reconfirm your flight out of Bario as soon as you arrive. Flights are often booked out well in advance and are dependent on the weather; cancellations aren't uncommon.

It takes 25 minutes to walk into Bario from the airport. You should turn left at the T-junction.

If the planes are grounded and you really need to get back to Miri from Bario, guesthouse operators can arrange 4WD transport on logging roads down to Miri, but you'll have to pay around RM500 (and your butt cheeks will pay even more dearly as you bounce your way down the hellish roads).

GETTING TO BRUNEI

To Bandar Seri Begawan

Boats between Limbang and Bandar Seri Begawan (BSB) in Brunei (RM20 or BS10, 30 minutes) are infrequent in either direction and may not run after early afternoon; they leave from the jetty outside the immigration hall, upstream from the market.

From outside the riverfront immigration post, a minivan departs when it has enough passengers for Kuala Lurah (RM5, 45 minutes) on the Bruneian border; from here you catch a local bus to BSB (BS1, 30 minutes). The minivan driver isn't always in attendance but stay near the vehicle and eventually he'll turn up. If you're the only passenger and you want to leave for the border immediately, the driver won't budge for less than RM20. This service is far preferable to using local taxis, which can charge upwards of RM40 for the trip to Kuala Lurah, and to the local Limbang-Kuala Lurah bus service, which runs infrequently.

For details on coming in from Brunei, see boxed text, p49.

To Bangar

It is possible to travel from Limbang to Bangar in Brunei, but the trip is fiddly and we don't recommend it. There's no public transport, so you'll have to hire a private taxi, which is both expensive and difficult. If you do decide to make the journey, border posts are open daily from 6am to 9pm.

See p51 for information on doing the trip in reverse.

LIMBANG

☎ 085 / pop 3700

Limbang is the centre of the section of Sarawak that divides Brunei into two parts. It's of limited interest to travellers, but you may find yourself passing through here en route between Brunei and Sabah. Those expecting to find a sleepy backwater will be surprised to discover a bustling and relatively prosperous town on the banks of the Sungai Limbang.

Sleeping & Eating

Being a port town, most of Limbang's cheaper places are a little sleazy, with hourly rates and grotty rooms. You'll escape the sleaze by paying a bit more for midrange accommodation.

Metro Hotel (☎ 211133; Lot 781, Jl Bangkita; r from RM50; ☺) If you can't be bothered to walk up to the Royal Park, the Metro is a just barely acceptable option in the middle of town. It's a little smoky and threadbare, but it's within easy walking distance of the jetty and the bus station.

Royal Park Hotel (☎ 212155; Lot 1089, Jl Buagsiol; r from RM60; ☺) Much better value than the budget fleabags in the centre of town, it's worth the walk to get to this clean, well-run hotel. From the town centre, walk north (downstream) along the river. It's about 400m north of Limbang town centre, just in from the river.

There are food stalls on the 1st floor of the waterfront market, at the bus station and along the river. Basic Malay and Chinese food is served in *kedai kopi* in the town centre.

Getting There & Around

AIR

Malaysia Airlines (code MH; ☎ 1-300-883000; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my) has flights to Miri (RM65) and Kota Kinabalu (RM75). The airport is situated 4km south of the town centre, a RM10 taxi ride.

BOAT

The express boat to Pulau Labuan in Sabah leaves at 8.30am daily (RM25, two hours). When sufficient passengers turn up (you may find yourself waiting quite a while) speedboats go to Lawas in Sarawak (RM25, one hour) and to Bandar Seri Begawan in Brunei; see opposite for more details. Boats leave from the jetty outside the immigration hall on the river, just upstream from the large pink building housing the market (Bengunan Tamu Limbang).

GETTING TO BRUNEI

The road trip from Lawas to Bangar in Brunei's remote Temburong district will likely entail an expensive taxi ride. If you do decide to take this route, the border posts are open 6am to 9pm daily. From Bangar, it's a 45-minute boat trip to Bandar Seri Begawan.

For information on crossing the Malaysia-Brunei border in the other direction, see p51.

LAWAS

☎ 085 / pop 1080

Lawas is a transit point in the sliver of Sarawak pinched between Sabah and the Temburong district of Brunei. There is little of interest to travellers, but you might find yourself here while en route between Sabah and Brunei. There is a branch of Maybank in the centre of town.

Hotel Perdana (☎ 285888; Lot 365 Jl Punang; r from RM46; ☺) is the best economy hotel in town, although it's a little frayed round the edges. To get there, start with your back to the main market (Pasar Baru Lawas) and go left, following the main road out of town. The hotel will be on your right after about 300m.

There are several **Malaysia Airlines** (code MH; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my) flights each week to/from Miri (RM70). The airport is 2km from town.

A boat to Limbang (RM28, one hour) leaves at 9am daily but Thursday. A boat to Pulau Labuan (RM33, two hours) leaves at 7.30am every day except Tuesday and Thursday. Boats leave from the jetty on the west side of town, just downstream from the Shell station.

Buses head to Kota Kinabalu in Sabah (RM20) at 7am and 1pm daily.

MALAYSIA DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Accommodation in Malaysia costs slightly more than elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Be aware that you'll pay more for a place to stay in Malaysian Borneo than in Peninsular Malaysia, and that beach and island

accommodation is generally more expensive than other mainland digs.

The cheapest accommodation is found at hostels and guesthouses (or backpackers) that cluster around tourist hot spots. These places often book tours and offer laundry services and transport.

A dorm bed costs anywhere from RM7 to RM30, fan-only rooms with a shared bathroom RM17 to RM40, and rooms with air-con and attached bathroom RM40 to RM60. Bathrooms are often a hand-held shower above a toilet with cold water.

In cities, most backpackers are on the top floors of multistorey buildings where lifts are about as conspicuous as a Bornean rhino. At beaches and smaller towns, accommodation ranges from A-frame chalets with a fan and attached bathroom to rooms in a private house.

For hotels, Chinese-run places are the cheapest, offering spartan rooms. The showers and toilets (sometimes Asian squat-style) may be down the corridor but are usually clean. Ultrabudget options will only have a *mandi* (dip shower, ie bucket and water).

Budget hotels can sometimes be terribly noisy as they're often on main streets and the walls rarely reach the ceiling – the top is simply meshed or barred in, which is great for ventilation but terrible for privacy.

Note that in Malaysia, 'single' often means one bed, as opposed to one person, and 'double' means two beds, or what we would call a twin. If you're after a double bed, just say 'one big bed'.

Check-out times are usually 11am or noon for hostels and guesthouses and from around noon until 3pm for hotels. See opposite for a warning about theft in guesthouses.

Many of Malaysia's national parks have camping grounds, and will also permit camping at nondesignated sites once you are into the back country. There are also many lonely stretches of beach through Malaysia, particularly on the peninsula's east coast, which are ideal for camping. Likewise, it is possible to camp on uninhabited bays on many of Malaysia's islands.

In Malaysia there's a 5% government tax (+; plus) that applies to hotel rooms. Additionally, there's a 10% service charge (++; plus plus) in more expensive places. Cheap Malaysian hotels generally quote a net price inclusive of the government tax, but double-check the total price before checking in.

Longhouses are the traditional dwellings of the indigenous peoples of Borneo, though some have been built just for tourists. The most important area of a longhouse is the common veranda, which serves as a social area and sometimes as sleeping space. If you want to see how Borneo's modern-day indigenous peoples live, a visit to a longhouse is a must. See p500 for more information on longhouses.

ACTIVITIES

Caving

Malaysia's limestone hills are riddled with caves. Some are easily accessible and can be visited without any special equipment or preparation, while others are strictly for experienced spelunkers. There are caves on the peninsula and dotted around Malaysian Borneo, including one of the world's premier caving destinations: Gunung Mulu.

Climbing

Sabah's Mt Kinabalu is an obvious choice for those interested in mountain climbing, but it isn't the only Malaysian mountain worth climbing. Sarawak's Gunung Mulu is a challenging four-day climb and, on the peninsula, there are overnight climbs in Taman Negara National Park.

Cycling

Peninsular Malaysia is one of the better places in Southeast Asia for bike touring but there is little in the way of organised tours. The most popular route heads up the east coast via relatively quiet, flat roads – Malaysian Borneo and the peninsular interior are more hilly while the west coast of the peninsula has more traffic. Wherever you go expect little road shoulder, fast and careless buses, high temperatures and rain. Carry lots of water. Rental bikes aren't usually of high standard so it's best to bring your own.

Diving & Snorkelling

Malaysia has many beautiful dive sites, decorated with shipwrecks, intricate coral formations and gloriously colourful marine life. It's also one of the cheapest places in the world to learn how to dive, with a four-day open-water course costing around RM850. Including boat and equipment hire, snorkelling costs from RM180 and three dives cost from RM280. Prime spots include Pulau Perhentian, Pulau

Redang and Pulau Tioman, but the best site of all is the spectacular limestone abyss off Pulau Sipadan.

Trekking

Despite intense logging, Malaysia is still home to some of the world's most impressive stands of virgin tropical jungle. Almost all of Malaysia's national parks offer excellent jungle trekking, including Taman Negara and the Cameron Highlands on the peninsula, and Gunung Mulu National Park in Sarawak.

BOOKS

Lonely Planet's *Malaysia, Singapore & Brunei* has all the information you'll need for extended travel to these countries. Lonely Planet also publishes the *Malay Phrasebook*, an introduction to the Malay language.

Although *Lord Jim* is based on the exploits of absconding seaman AP Williams, Joseph Conrad's tale of derring-do on the South China Sea also recalls the real-life story of Raja Brooke of Sarawak. Wallow in tales of life in Malaysia (and Singapore) during colonial times by reading *Malaysian Stories*, penned by short-story master Somerset Maugham.

For glimpses of traditional village life, try to track down the translations of fine Malaysian writers offered in the paperback series, Oxford in Asia: Modern Authors.

A work of contemporary Malaysian fiction (in English) that's wholeheartedly recommended is KS Maniam's *The Return*. Maniam shines a light on the Indian Malaysian experience through his character's search for a home on returning from being educated abroad. For more modern Malaysian fiction, including plays and poetry, keep an eye out for books published by KL-based **Silverfish Books** (www.silverfishbooks.com).

Budding explorers should read *Stranger in the Forest*, Eric Hansen's account of a remarkable half-year journey across Borneo on foot, and Redmond O'Hanlon's marvellous *Into the Heart of Borneo*. Essential reading for anyone intending to do a lot of local mountain walking is *Mountains of Malaysia – A Practical Guide and Manual*, by John Briggs.

BUSINESS HOURS

Usual business hours in Malaysia:

Banks 10am to 3pm Monday to Friday, 9.30am to 11.30am Saturday

Department stores 10am to 8pm

Government offices 8am to 12.45pm and 2pm to 4.15pm Monday to Thursday, 8am to 12.15pm and 2.45pm to 4.15pm Friday, 8am to 12.45pm Saturday

Shopping malls 10am to 8pm

Shops 9am to 6pm Monday to Saturday

In the more Islamic-minded states of Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Terengganu, government offices, banks and many shops close on Friday and on Saturday afternoon.

Exceptions to these hours are noted in individual reviews.

CLIMATE

Malaysia is hot and humid year-round. The temperature rarely drops below 20°C, even at night, and usually climbs to 30°C or higher during the day.

It rains throughout the year. Peninsular Malaysia gets heavier rainfall from September to March, with the east coast bearing the full brunt of the monsoon rains from November to February. Rainfall on the west coast peaks slightly during the May to October monsoon. Malaysian Borneo also gets the northeast and southwest monsoons, but they are less pronounced and rain tends to be variable.

See p916 for more information.

CUSTOMS

When arriving in Malaysia, note that you are legally entitled to carry 1L of alcohol and 200 cigarettes. Other restrictions limit you to only one pair of shoes and three items of clothing, but this is unlikely to be enforced. Trafficking of illegal substances can result in the death penalty – don't do it.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

In general Malaysia is very safe, with violent attacks being uncommon. However, the usual travel precautions apply, such as restraining your urge to go wandering around seedy areas alone late at night. Credit-card fraud is a growing problem so only use your cards at established businesses and guard your credit-card numbers. The snatching of bags by thieves on motorcycles is a recurring crime in KL and Penang's Georgetown, so keep bags away from the roadside in these areas. In seedy areas such as Ipoh and KL's Golden Triangle, male travellers may be harassed to buy pirated porn DVDs, drugs or the services of prostitutes.

A disturbingly high incidence of theft occurs in guesthouse dorms. Sometimes this involves an outsider sneaking in and other times it involves fellow travellers. Don't leave valuables or important documents unattended, and carry a small padlock.

See p516 for issues specific to women travellers.

Rabies is an ever present problem in Malaysia – you should treat any animal bite very seriously. Leeches can be a nuisance after heavy rain on jungle walks; see p473 for tips on discouraging them.

DRIVING LICENCE

A valid overseas driving licence is required for vehicle rental.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Embassies & Consulates in Malaysia

Embassies and consulates are in Kuala Lumpur unless otherwise indicated. Most embassies are located east of the city, along Jl Ampang (off Map pp424–5). For information on visas see p516.

Australia Kuala Lumpur (Map pp424-5; ☎ 03-2146 5555; 6 Jl Yap Kwan Seng); Kota Kinabalu (☎ 088-267151; Suite 10.1, 10th fl, Wisma Great Eastern Life, 65 Jl Gaya)

Brunei (off Map pp424-5; ☎ 03-2161 2800; 19-01 Tingkat 19, Menara Tan & Tan, Embassy Row)

Canada (☎ 03-2718 3333; 7th fl, Plaza OSK, 172 Jl Ampang)

France (☎ 03-2162 0671; Pesuruhjaya Tinggi Perancis, Jl Ampang)

Germany (off Map pp424-5; ☎ 03-2175 1666; Menara Tan & Tan, Jl Tun Razak, Embassy Row)

Indonesia Kuala Lumpur (off Map pp424-5; ☎ 03-2142 1151; 233 Jl Tun Razak); Georgetown (☎ 04-227 4686; 467 Jl Burma); Kuching (☎ 082-241734; 111 Jl Tun Abang Haji Openg); Kota Kinabalu (☎ 088-218600; Jl Kemajuan); Tawau (☎ 089-752969; Jl Tanjong Batu)

Ireland (☎ 03-2161 2963; 5th fl, The Ampwalk, 218 Jl Ampang)

Japan (☎ 03-2142 7044; 11 Persiaran Stonor)

Netherlands (☎ 03-2161 0148; 7th fl, The Ampwalk, 218 Jl Ampang)

New Zealand (Map p429; ☎ 03-2078 2533; 21st fl, Menara IMC, 8 Jl Sultan Ismail)

Philippines (☎ 03-2148 9989; Jl Changkat Kia Peng)

Singapore (off Map pp424-5; ☎ 03-2161 6277; 209 Jl Tun Razak)

Thailand Kuala Lumpur (☎ 03-2148 8222; Jl Ampang); Kota Bharu (☎ 09-744 0867; Jl Pengkalan Chepa); Georgetown (☎ 04-226 8029; 1 Jl Tunku Abdul Rahman)

UK (☎ 03-2148 2122; 185 Jl Ampang)

USA (off Map pp424-5; ☎ 03-2168 5000; 376 Jl Tun Razak)

Malaysian Embassies & Consulates Abroad

For a full list of Malaysian embassies and consulates abroad, check out www.tourism.gov.my.

Australia (☎ 02-6273 1543; mwcnbera@aucom.com.au; 7 Perth Ave, Yarralumla, ACT 2600)

Brunei (☎ 238 1095; mwbrunei@brunet.bn; 61 Simpang 336, Jl Kebangsaan, Bandar Seri Begawan BS 4115)

Canada (☎ 613-241 5182; mwottawa@istar.ca; 60 Boteler St, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 8Y7)

France (☎ 01 45 53 11 85; mwparis@wanadoo.fr; 2 bis, rue Benouville, 75116 Paris)

Germany (☎ 030-885 7490; mwberlin@compuserve.com; Klingelhofstrasse 6, 10785 Berlin)

Indonesia (☎ 21-522 4947; mwjakarta@indosat.net.id; 1-3 Jl HR Rasuna Said, Jakarta 12950)

Japan (☎ 03-3476 3840; mwtokyo@malaysia.or.jp; 20-16, Nanpeidai-cho, Shibuya-ku, Tokyo 150 0036)

Netherlands (☎ 070-350 6506; mwthe Hague@euro.net.nl; Rustenburgweg 2, 2517 KE, The Hague)

New Zealand (☎ 04-385 2439; mwwelton@xtra.co.nz; 10 Washington Ave, Brooklyn, PO Box 9422, Wellington)

Singapore (☎ 6235 0111; 30 Hill St 02-01)

Thailand (☎ 02-679 2190; mwbangkok@smart.co.th; 35 5th Sathorn Rd, Tungmahamek Sathorn, Bangkok 10120)

UK (☎ 020-7235 8033; mwlonon@btInternet.com; 45-46 Belgrave Sq, London SW1X 80T)

USA (☎ 202-572 9700; malwash@kln.gov.my; 3516 International Court NW, Washington, DC 20008)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

There are many cultures and religions co-existing in Malaysia, which means there are many occasions for celebration throughout the year. Some holidays (see opposite) also involve festivities.

A few of the major events:

January/February

Thaipusam (January/February) One of the most dramatic Hindu festivals, in which devotees honour Lord Subramaniam with acts of amazing physical resilience. Self-mutilating worshippers make the procession to the Batu Caves outside KL.

May–August

Gawai Dayak (late May/early June) Festival of the Dayaks in Sarawak, marking the end of the rice season. War dances, cock fights and blowpipe events take place.

Dragon Boat Festival (June to August) Celebrated in Penang.

September

Moon Cake Festival (September) Chinese festival celebrating the overthrow of Mongol warlords in ancient China with the eating of moon cakes and the lighting of colourful paper lanterns.

October/November

Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods (October) Involves nine days of Chinese operas, processions and other events honouring the nine emperor gods.

Fire-walking Ceremonies (October/November) Held in KL and Penang.

Deepavali (November) The Festival of Lights, in which tiny oil lamps are lit outside Hindu homes, celebrates Rama's victory over the demon King Ravana.

Ramadan is the major annual Muslim event, connected with the 30 days during which Muslims cannot eat, drink, smoke or have sex from sunrise to sunset. The dates of Ramadan change every year; in 2008 it begins on 1 September, and in 2009 it begins on 21 August.

FOOD & DRINK

Food

Mealtime in Malaysia is a highly social event and the food strongly reflects the country's Malay, Chinese and Indian influences. You can feast at hawker stalls for RM1 to RM3. A meal in a restaurant costs around RM4 to RM15.

There are less culinary choices outside the cities, where staple meals of *mee goreng* (fried noodles) and *nasi goreng* (fried rice) predominate. Vegetarian dishes are usually available at both Malay and Indian cafés, but are hardly sighted at *kedai kopi* (coffee shops). You can also find an excellent selection of fruits and vegetables at markets.

Roti canai (flaky flat bread dipped in a small amount of dhal and potato curry) is probably the cheapest meal (from 80 sen) in Malaysia but don't let price completely limit your diet. Try a bit of everything, from seafood laksa to the freshly caught and cooked wild cat or mouse deer you may be offered at a longhouse. Speaking of sweets, halfway between a drink and a dessert is *ais kacang*, something like an old-fashioned snow-cone; however, the shaved ice is topped with syrups and condensed milk, and it's all piled on top of a foundation of beans and jellies (sometimes corn kernels). It sounds and looks gross but tastes terrific.

Drink

Tap water is safe to drink in many cities but check with locals if you're unsure.

With the aid of a blender and crushed ice, delicious juice concoctions are whipped up in seconds. Lurid soybean drinks are sold at street stalls and soybean milk is also available in soft-drink bottles. Medicinal teas are a big hit with the health-minded Chinese.

Alcohol isn't popular with the Muslim population and incurs incredibly high taxes. A mug of beer at a *kedai kopi* will cost around RM6, and around RM12 to RM15 at bars and clubs. Anchor and Tiger beers are popular, as are locally brewed Carlsberg and Guinness. Indigenous people have a soft spot for *tuak* (rice wine), which tends to revolt first-timers but is apparently an acquired taste. Another rural favourite is the dark-coloured spirit *arak*, which is smooth and potent.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Conservative political parties and religious groups make a regular habit of denouncing gays and lesbians in Malaysia, a country where Muslim homosexuality is punishable by imprisonment and caning. Fortunately, these groups remain on the fringe and outright persecution of gays and lesbians is rare. Nonetheless, while in Malaysia, gay and lesbian travellers (particularly the former) should avoid behaviour that attracts unwanted attention. Personal accounts from gays and lesbians living in Malaysia are provided on www.utopia-asia.com/tipsmala.htm and www.utopia-asia.com/wommala.htm.

HOLIDAYS

Although some public holidays have a fixed annual date, Hindus, Muslims and Chinese follow a lunar calendar, which means the dates for many events vary each year. Chinese New Year is the year's most important celebration for the Chinese community and is marked with dragon dances and street parades. Families have an open house, unmarried relatives (especially children) receive *ang pow* (money in red packets), businesses traditionally clear their debts and everybody wishes you a *kong hee fatt choy* (a happy and prosperous new year).

The major holiday of the Muslim calendar, Hari Raya Puasa marks the end of the month-long fast of Ramadan with three days

of joyful celebration; in 2008 and 2009, this will fall in September or October.

During Hari Raya Puasa and Chinese New Year, accommodation may be difficult to obtain. At these times, many businesses may also be closed and transport can be fully booked.

National holidays:

New Year's Day 1 January

Chinese New Year January/February

Birth of the Prophet March

Wesak Day April/May

Labour Day 1 May

Agong's (King's) Birthday 1st Saturday in June

National Day 31 August

Hari Raya Puasa September/October

Deepavali November

Hari Raya Haji December

Awal Muharam December

Christmas Day 25 December

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet access is widespread and available at numerous internet cafés, backpacker hang-outs and shopping malls, generally on fast broadband connections. In cities, rates range from RM2 to RM4 per hour; on islands and in remote areas, rates skyrocket (and speed plummets) to around RM6 to RM10 per hour.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Succinct summaries on travelling to Southeast Asia, and the Thorn Tree bulletin board; including the Travel Links site for other useful travel resources.

Malaysiakini (www.malaysiakini.com) Practically Malaysia's only independent daily news source, with uncensored features and commentaries.

Tourism Malaysia (www.tourism.gov.my) The official government site for tourist information, with events calendars, regional links, background information and listings of domestic and international tourist offices.

LEGAL MATTERS

In any of your dealings with the local police, it pays to be deferential. Minor misdemeanours may be overlooked, but don't count on it and don't offer anyone a bribe.

It's simply not worth having anything to do with drugs in Malaysia: drug trafficking carries a mandatory death penalty, and even possession of tiny amounts of drugs for personal use can bring about a lengthy jail sentence and a beating with the *rotan* (cane).

MAPS

The best map for Peninsular Malaysia is the 1:650,000 *West Malaysia* map produced by Nelles Verlag. Nelles also produces *Malaysia*, which shows both Peninsular Malaysia and Malaysian Borneo. Periplus produces an excellent series of Malaysia city and state maps, including *Johor*, *Kuala Lumpur*, *Melaka*, *Penang*, *Sabah* and *Sarawak*.

Tourism Malaysia's *The Map of Malaysia* has useful distance charts and inset maps of many major cities.

MEDIA

The government tightly controls the main media outlets, and will often pursue its critics through the courts. The main newspapers tend to parrot the official line and the less said about news on Malaysian TV channels, the better.

Newspapers

Malaysia has newspapers in English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil. The *New Straits Times* is the main English-language publication, while *Borneo Post* focuses more on issues relevant to Sabah and Sarawak. Foreign magazines are widely available.

Radio

There's a variety of radio stations in Malaysia broadcasting in Bahasa Malaysia, English and various Chinese and Indian languages and dialects. The number of English stations is highest around KL, while radio-wave pickings are scarce in Malaysian Borneo.

TV

Malaysia has two government TV channels (RTM 1 and 2) and two commercial stations. Programmes range from local productions in various languages to Western imports.

MONEY

For information on basic costs, see Fast Facts (p413).

The Malaysian ringgit (RM) consists of 100 sen. Coins in use are one, five, 10, 20 and 50 sen, and RM1; notes come in RM1, RM2, RM5, RM10, RM50 and RM100. Locals sometimes refer to the ringgit as a 'dollar'.

The ringgit, pegged to the US dollar until 2005, now floats against an undisclosed basket of currencies. At the time of writing, US\$1 was RM3.50.

Bargaining & Tipping

Bargaining is not usually required for everyday goods in Malaysia, but feel free to bargain when purchasing souvenirs, antiques and other tourist items, even when the prices are displayed. Transport prices are generally fixed, but negotiation is required for trishaws and taxis around town or for charter.

Tipping is not common in Malaysia.

Exchanging Money

The US dollar is the most convenient currency to take to Malaysia, but you'll have no problems changing other major currencies either.

Banks are efficient and there are plenty of moneychangers in the main centres. Credit cards are widely accepted and many ATMs accept international key cards, Visa and MasterCard. Some banks are also connected to networks such as Cirrus, Maestro and Plus.

Exchange rates at the time of press:

Country	Unit	Ringgit (RM)
Australia	A\$1	2.90
Brunei	B\$1	2.35
Canada	C\$1	3.35
Euro zone	€1	4.85
Indonesia	10,000Rp	3.75
Japan	¥100	3.10
New Zealand	NZ\$1	2.45
Philippines	P100	7.55
Singapore	S\$1	2.30
Thailand	100B	10.90
UK	UK£1	7.15
USA	US\$1	3.50

POST

There are poste restante services at all major post offices, which are open from 8am to 5pm daily except Sunday and public holidays (also closed on Friday in Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu districts).

Aerograms and postcards cost 50 sen to send to any destination. Letters weighing 10g or less cost 90 sen to Asia, RM1.40 to Australia or New Zealand, RM1.50 to the UK and Europe, and RM1.80 to North America.

You can send parcels from any major post office, although the rates are fairly high (from RM20 to RM60 for a 1kg parcel, depending on the destination).

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Malaysia has a serious rubbish problem, so try to create as little waste as possible by drinking tea or fresh juice instead of packaged drinks and eating locally grown food; if possible, bring your own water filter to avoid buying water in plastic bottles. When diving and snorkelling never touch or walk on coral and avoid tour operators who practise poor ecological habits such as dropping anchor on coral. Try to buy local handicrafts and souvenirs in preference to mass-produced items, so that the money goes back to local communities. It might seem obvious, but never buy butterflies or any products made from endangered species.

STUDYING

Several of Malaysia's cultural centres offer classes in traditional Malaysian handicrafts. Kota Bharu and Cherating are the best places to get a hands-on feel for batik, puppet making and kite making, while Kuala Lumpur is the place to study Bahasa Malaysia. Cooking courses are occasionally offered in Kuala Lumpur and Penang.

See p429 for some options in KL, or ask at local tourist offices to see what's on offer when you're in town.

TELEPHONE

International direct dial (IDD) phone calls and operator-assisted calls can be made from any private phone. The access code for making international calls to most countries is ☎ 00. For information on international calls, dial ☎ 103. For operator-assisted calls, dial ☎ 108. Phone calls to Singapore are STD (long-distance) rather than international.

To make an IDD call from a pay phone, look for a Telekom pay phone marked 'international' (with which you can use coins or Telekom phonecards; dial the international access code and then the number). However, these phones are often in disrepair and frustratingly difficult to find.

Alternatively, you can buy the phonecards of other companies (such as Uniphone and Cityphone) and look for the corresponding pay phone. But there's no guarantee you'll find phones belonging to the same company in the next town you visit and your card may then be useless. The best option is to make a pay-per-minute call from a shop with an IDD-STD phone or at the Telekom office.

The card phones mentioned above all allow STD calls. Local calls cost 10 sen for three minutes.

If you have arranged 'global roaming' facilities with your home provider, your GSM digital phone will automatically tune into one of the region's digital networks. If not, and you are carrying your phone with you, the simplest way to go mobile is to buy a prepaid SIM card on arrival in the country.

TOILETS

Western-style toilets are slowly replacing the Asian squat-style toilet in many towns, hence the doors of some newly installed sit-down toilets carry a poster with a diagram instructing locals not to squat on top of the toilet seat. A hose to be used as a bidet is in most toilets; cheaper places have a bucket of water and a tap. Toilet paper (and soap) are rarely provided.

Public toilets in shopping malls and at transport depots are usually staffed by attendants and cost 10 sen to 30 sen to use; an extra 10 sen often gets you a dozen sheets of toilet paper.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Domestic tourist offices are usually helpful and can often (but not always) provide specific information on accommodation, attractions and transport. Within Malaysia there are also various state tourist-promotion organisations, which often have more information about specific areas.

Tourism Malaysia (Map pp424-5; ☎ 03-2615 8188; www.tourism.gov.my; 17th fl, Putra World Trade Centre, 45 JI Tun Ismail, Kuala Lumpur) has overseas offices, which are useful for predeparture planning.

TRAVELLERS WITH DISABILITIES

For the mobility impaired, Malaysia can be a nightmare. In most cities and towns there are often no footpaths, kerbs are very high and pedestrian crossings are few and far between. Budget hotels almost never have lifts. On the upside, KL's modern urban railway lines are reasonably wheelchair-accessible.

Malaysia Airlines and Keretapi Tanah Melayu (the national railway service) offer 50% discounts for disabled travellers.

VISAS

Visitors must have a passport valid for at least six months beyond the date of entry into Malaysia. Nationals of most countries are given a 30- to 90-day visa on arrival.

Commonwealth citizens (except those from India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan) and citizens of Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovakia, South Africa, South Korea, Sweden, the USA and most Arab countries should not require a visa for a visit of less than three months.

Citizens of many South American and African countries do not require a visa for a visit not exceeding one month. Most other nationalities are given a shorter stay period or require a visa. Citizens of Israel cannot enter Malaysia.

Sarawak is semi-autonomous. If you travel from Peninsular Malaysia or Sabah into Sarawak, your passport will be checked on arrival and a new stay-permit issued, either for 30 days or for the same period as your original Malaysia entry visa. See p493 for more details.

For more information (albeit scant), see the website of the **Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs** (www.kln.gov.my). For listings of embassies and consulates in Malaysia, and of Malaysian embassies and consulates abroad, see p512.

VOLUNTEERING

For volunteering opportunities, check out online directories such as **Volunteer Abroad** (www.volunteerabroad.com), which detail conservation and community programmes, or charity organisations such as **Raleigh International** (www.raleigh.org.uk/volunteer/nonuk.html). Check www.mycen.com.my/malaysia/ngo.html for a list of NGOs.

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Foreign women travelling in Malaysia can expect some attention, though a lot of it will just involve stares from locals unfamiliar with (or curious about) Westerners. It helps if you dress conservatively by wearing long pants or skirts and loose tops. Western women are not expected to cover their heads with scarves (outside of mosques, that is).

Malaysia's islands are fairly easy-going, but while travelling on the mainland, especially on the peninsula's east coast and in Malaysian Borneo, women should cover themselves from shoulders to knees. It isn't appropriate to sunbathe topless on beaches.

Tampons and pads are widely available, especially in big cities, and over-the-counter medications are also fairly easy to find.

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