



**KUALA LUMPUR** — In the 1800s the British arrived to transform Kuala Lumpur into tin town where it flourished as an Asian tin empire that later evolved into a rubber capital. Fast-forward 150 years and the city is seen morphing once again into an electronic high-tech powerhouse positioned at the forefront of industrialized Southeast Asia.

Not long ago the world stood awe-struck contemplating on how Malaysia, a compact country carved from the jungle, was able to erect a stainless steel masterpiece by Cesar Pelli. The Petronas Twin Towers captured everyone's imagination by becoming the world's tallest buildings. While the title has now been superseded, the towers still hold reign as the world's tallest twin towers and the world's tallest skybridge made famous in "Entrapment," the Sean Connery, Catherine Zeta-Jones flick.

This engineering marvel has come to represent a symbol of optimism for the future of modern Malaysia. The country has thrown itself head first

into the fast track to the 21st century. In Kuala Lumpur or "KL" as it is affectionately known, there's an ultra cool monorail system ferreting mass transit suspended high above the palm trees. On the city's southern periphery there's a high tech urban centre called Putrajaya built on the scale for giants with wide minimalist thoroughfares and bulbous architecture, a fit backdrop for any sci fi movie.

Despite the feeling that this country on the nub of a peninsula wedged between Thailand and Singapore wants to keep up with the Jones', there's a strong tradition of an ancient culture that continues to seep between the rafters. It was this heritage that I was hoping to discover on a recent trip.

After a long overseas flight from Toronto on Malaysian Airlines, I arrived to Kuala Lumpur, a sauna of heat for the festive Colors of Malaysia celebration.

A delightful month long event, the Colors of Malaysia opens with over 6,000 performers under one roof where exotic costumes and vibrant music are showcased in a spectacular parade. The festival's slogan, "Malaysia is truly Asia" matches the rich cultures where Malay blends with Indian, Chinese, Portuguese, Dutch and British influences.

Here's a painter's palette on the new and the old of Malaysia:

## Kuala Lumpur

Situated on the confluence of the milky coffee brown Klang and Gombak Rivers, Kuala Lumpur, which means "Muddy Estuary" has been a hub sought after by princes, pirates, miners and millionaires. It was a get-rich utopia for sultans and other colonial empires.

While the tin hey days are over, the remnants of the old empire are still visible in historical landmarks such as the colonial section around Merdeka Square. I made my way to the confluence where the murky rivers raged by Masjid Jamek, a peculiar red-bricked

Moorish style mosque, and the oldest in the city.

Beneath the airy roof midday worshippers sought shelter from the heat, some prayed while others took a siesta. The pace of life here is slower than the west. When you greet the locals, there is a soft cadence to their speech, an attentive eye and an easy quick smile.

For centuries, KL's multiculturalism has flourished and is one of the aspects of their society they are most proud of. When the Brits introduced the Chinese to mining followed by the Indians for rubber cultivation, different nationalities were forced to live together. Buddhist and Hindu temples, Islamic mosques and Christian churches dot the cityscape. However the majority of the country is Islamic but Malaysians consider themselves moderate Muslims.

I trekked through the open-air market, inquired about the location of "Little India" and soon was greeted with the sweet scent of jasmine and marigolds. The freshly cut flowers were laced into necklaces that perfumed the streets. One elderly woman had quick supple fingers and strung the fragrant bouquet like a precious jewel.

I ventured into a warren of new aromas where stalls of steaming woks and portable stoves of spicy curries and banana leaf snacks crammed beside music shops. Crouched artisans whose colorful saris fluttered in the sun displayed these roadside delicacies. This was bargain central.

For a respite from the afternoon sun, I returned to my digs at the Shangri-la hotel. Plunked in the middle of KL's Golden Triangle section, amid high-end hotels, embassies and ritzy shopping centres, the hotel emits a quiet calm from the bustling street life. Taking a dip in the penthouse pool, I gazed skyward surrounded by the shimmering Petronas Towers and the bulbous Kuala Lumpur Tower. Life couldn't get any better I thought.

## Melaka

This is where Malaysia was born. Legend has it that around 600 years ago, Parameswara, a prince from Sumatra, was resting beneath the shade of a Melaka tree when he saw a mouse deer kick his dog into the river. So taken by the spunk of the animal, the prince interpreted this to be a good omen and decided to stay and name this place Melaka.

Known as the Venice of the East, Melaka was once the largest port in Southeast Asia. A sprawling state where Sultans and European empires all vied for a piece of the lucrative pie, this entrepot was smack



in the middle of the famous spice route where the gentle monsoon winds made for legendary sailing.

Conquered by the Portuguese, Dutch and Brits, Melaka's people have endured a long difficult history.

The remnants of the old empires still linger in the architectural landmarks. The best way to experience the city is by a riverboat cruise or by the popular trishaw rides that line the brightly painted Dutch buildings surrounding Red Square. I hopped onto a vessel spouting black diesel as we pattered down the ancient river, passing dilapidated worn out buildings that have seen better days.

“When the British destroyed the fortress in 1807, they put the stones along the banks. They are from Melaka where the Portuguese cut them block-by-block to build the fortress,” says the boat’s guide.

Laden jackfruit trees shadow the riverbank and thick vines crawl up the crumbling facades punctuated with flowerpots dangling from window ledges. Beneath the wooden stilts lurk giant lizards sunning oblivious to the river traffic.

Later I decide to rent a trishaw for a leisurely cruise through the historic streets. Instead, I clutched the sides as Aladdin, my sprite driver, dodged the oncoming traffic, weaving between cars and cutting corners. On occasion I felt my heart reach my throat as a wall of steel converged on us but my driver had been biking these streets for over 30 years and he flashed me a reassuring wink.

“I love the heat,” he says stopping at our first stop, the historic Famosa Gate, which once belonged to a Portuguese fort leading up the hill. Although the fort is long gone, the roofless ruins of St. Paul’s Church remains.

Today, tourists meander up St. Paul’s Hill for a birds’ eye view of the city. I ambled to a steel fence cage for a glance at the empty burial site of St. Francis Xavier. The Roman Catholic priest dubbed the “Apostle of the East” attempted to Christianize the area but died on a missionary trip in China. His remains were returned here only to be moved to Goa, India,

Mammoth tombstones from Dutch nobility rest against the brick walls along with bright watercolor paintings of Mr. Francis Goh. I met this local



celebrity artist, who fanned a collection of articles from around the world profiling him. His church is his atelier. “You know I only do my painting here. I don’t do my watercolor here. I don’t have the feeling. You need patience and the people here are so impatient, they want to sit down and relax.”

Why wouldn’t they? The tranquil setting shows little evidence of the struggles that happened here. As the countryside and the serpentine river in the distance are engulfed in the afternoon sun, stray cats eye the birds fluttering through the windowless frames.

I leave the old man and resume the trek across town. For lunch, it’s time to feast on the nyonya cuisine famous here. When the Chinese arrived they married the local Malay women and the result was a special mix of people where the women were called nyonias and the men babas. At the Ole Sayang Restaurant teacups, forks and knives (chop sticks are notably absent) are neatly set atop round tables.

Like everywhere in Malaysia, superstition abounds and that applies to table manners in Melaka, as food is a symbol of jerki meaning good luck or fortune. I discover such rules as “If a woman sings at the table her husband will be old,” and the clincher “Food

should not be dropped and anything spilt must be picked up. If food is not treated with respect than this is considered bad fortune.” That might explain why a fellow traveler who spilled tea over a plate of food learns later his bandaged foot from a recent operation was not healing as expected.

Clutching my newfound pearls of superstitious wisdom with me, that evening I ventured to Jonkers Street for some night shopping. Vendors snag you to their trinket tables. Some tout ancient healing remedies while others invite you to tea and Karaoke. One persuasive man effuses how my smile exudes confidence and how rich I am because of it. Too bad my bank account doesn't show it.

Yet after exploring these ancient towns, I do feel like a millionaire and have yet to spill my tea. Chalk it up to the magic of Malaysia.