

## The Best of Singapore & Malaysia

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I could spend a lifetime exploring Singapore. I'm in awe of the cultural mysteries and exotic beauty of the city's old mosques and temples. As I pass the facades of buildings that mark history, I get nostalgic for old tales of colonial romance. Towering overhead, present-day Singapore glistens with the wealth of modern miracles. And when I smell incense, spice, and jasmine swirling in wet tropical breezes, I can close my eyes and know exactly where I am.

The longer I stay in Singapore, new curiosities present themselves to me. Singapore thrives on a history that has absorbed a multitude of foreign elements over almost 2 centuries, melding them into a unique modern national identity. Beginning with the landing of Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819, add to the mix the original Malay inhabitants, immigrating waves of Chinese traders and workers, Indian businessmen and laborers, Arab merchants, British colonials, European adventure-seekers, and an assortment of Southeast Asian settlers—this tiny island rose from the ingenuity of those who worked and lived together here. Today, all recognize each group's importance to the heritage of the land, each adding unique contributions to a culture and identity we know as Singaporean.

I'll confess, many travelers complain to me about how westernized Singapore is. For many, a vacation in Asia should be filled with culture shock, unfamiliar traditions, and curious adventures. Today's travel philosophy seems to be that the more underdeveloped and obscure a country is, the more "authentic" the experience will be. But poor Singapore—all those lovely opium-stained coolies and toothless rickshaw pullers are now driving BMWs and exchanging cellular phone numbers. How could anyone possibly find this place so fascinating?

With all its shopping malls, fast-food outlets, imported fashion, and steel skyscrapers, Singapore could look like any other contemporary city you've ever visited—but to peel through the layers is to understand that life here is far more complex. While the outer layers are startlingly Western, just underneath lies a curious area where East blends with West in language, cuisine, attitude, and style. At the core, you'll find a sensibility rooted in the cultural heritage of values, religion, superstition, and memory. In Singapore, nothing is ever as it appears to be.

For me this is where the fascination begins. I detect so many things familiar in this city, only to discover how these imported ideas have been altered to fit the local identity. Like the Singaporean shophouse—a jumble of colonial architectural mandates, European tastes, Chinese superstitions, and Malay finery. Or "Singlish," the unofficial local tongue, which combines English language with Chinese grammar, common Malay phrases, and Hokkien slang to form a patois unique to this part of the world. This transformation of cultures has been going on for almost 2 centuries. So, in a sense, Singapore is no different today than it was 100 years ago. And in this I find my "authentic" travel experience.

When the urban jungle gets me crazy, I escape to Malaysia. Even Kuala Lumpur, the capital city, seems relaxed in comparison to Singapore. In fact, many Singaporeans look to their northern neighbor for the perfect vacation, taking advantage of its pristine national forests and marine parks, relaxing on picture-perfect beaches in sophisticated resorts, taking in culture in its small towns, shopping for inexpensive handicrafts, or eating some of the richest food in Southeast Asia. Malaysia offers something for everyone—history, culture, adventure, romance, mystery, nature, and relaxation—without the glaring buzz of an overdeveloped tourism industry. It almost makes me overjoyed that few tourists venture here.

My favorite part of Malaysia, however, is the warmth of its people. I have yet to travel in this country without collecting remarkable tales of hospitality, openness, and generosity. I've found the Malaysian people to be genuine in their approach to foreign visitors, another fine byproduct of the underdeveloped tourism industry. For those who want to find a nice little corner of paradise, Malaysia could be your answer.

I've crept down alleys, wandered the streets of cities and towns, combed beaches, and trekked jungles to seek out the most exciting things that Singapore and Malaysia have to offer. In this volume I've presented the sights and attractions of these countries with insight into historical, cultural, and modern significance to bring you a complete appreciation of all you are about to experience. I've peeked in every shop door, chatting up the local characters inside. I've eaten local food until I can't move. I've stayed out all night. I've done it all and written about it here. I can only hope you will love Singapore and Malaysia as much as I do.

## 1 Frommer's Favorite Singapore Experiences

**Sipping a Singapore Sling at the Long Bar:** Ahhhh, the Long Bar, home of the Singapore Sling. I like to come in the afternoons, before the tourist rush. Sheltered by long jalousie shutters that close out the tropical sun, the air cooled by lazy *punkahs* (small fans that wave gently back and forth above), you can sit back in old rattan chairs and have your saronged waitress serve you sticky alcoholic creations while you toss back a few dainty crab cakes. Life can be so decadent. Okay, so the punkahs are electric, and, come to think of it, the place is air-conditioned (not to mention that it costs a small fortune), but it's fun to imagine the days when Somerset Maugham, Rudyard Kipling, or Charlie Chaplin would be sitting at the bar sipping Slings and spinning exotic tales of their world travels. Drink up, my friend; it's a lovely high. See p. 185.

**Witnessing Bloody Traditions:** Every so often, a magical Saturday night comes around when you can witness the *Kuda Kepang*, which is not your average traditional dance. It features young men on wooden horses who move like warriors, whirling and spinning and slapping the horses to shake intimidating sounds out of them. Accompanied by rhythmic and repetitive traditional Malay music, the warriors dance in unison, staging battles with each other until by the end of a long series of dances, the horsemen are in a trance. A pot of burning frankincense is produced, from which they all inhale. After that, all hell breaks loose. The dancers are whipped, fed glass—which they chew and swallow hungrily—walk on glass shards, and shred entire coconuts with their teeth. Although the whipping appears somewhat staged, I assure you

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the rest is real. It's a traditional dance that's taken very seriously both by the dancers and by the huge and mostly Malay crowds that gather for it. What's more, the next day the dancers don't recall what they did—and they're never injured. Unfortunately, the dance is not performed on a regular basis. The group works mostly for private ceremonies and gatherings, and appears at Malay Village (© 65/6748-4700) on the off Saturday night when they don't have a gig. Call ahead to find out if they'll be performing. See chapters 5 and 8.

If you're not able to catch a performance, but still want a little ceremonial gore, check out the calendar of events in chapter 2. During the Thaipusam Festival, men pierce their bodies with skewers, and during the Thimithi Festival, they walk on burning coals. To celebrate the Birthday of the Monkey God, Chinese priests will slice themselves with sharp implements and write chants and prayers with their own blood.

### Checking Out the Orchard Road

**Scene:** You can't find better people-watching than on Orchard Road every Saturday afternoon, when it seems like every Singaporean crawls out of the woodwork to join the parade of shoppers, strollers, hipsters, posers, lovers, geeks, and gabbers. Everybody is here, milling around every mall, clustered

around every sidewalk bench, checking everybody out. At the corner of Scotts Road and Orchard, just under the Marriott, there's an alfresco cafe where you'll find local celebrities hanging out to see and be seen. International celebrities and models have been spotted here on occasion, too. In the mix, you're bound to see most every tourist on the island, coming around to see what all the excitement is about.

On Saturdays, school lets out early, so the malls are filled with mobs of bored teenagers kicking around, trying to look cool, and watching the music videos in the front window of the HMV music store in The Heeren. Moms and dads also have half-days at the office, so the strip takes on the feel of an obstacle course as all the parents race around wielding strollers, trying to run errands while they have the chance. Meanwhile, outside in the shady areas, you can see crowds of domestic maids and workers relaxing and catching up on the latest news on their free afternoon.

For some, the scene is a madhouse to be avoided; for others, it's a chance to watch life on a typical Saturday afternoon in downtown Singapore. And it is typical because however huge and delightful the scene is for tourists, it's just part of everyday reality for residents of the Garden City. See p. 143.

## 2 Frommer's Favorite Malaysia Experiences

**Letting the sea wash away all your stress:** This is paradise.

Lying flat, arms outstretched across the surface of the water, I felt the rays of the sun warming my back and the cool ripples of salty sea beneath me. Through the clear water I could see the seabed at the bottom of the bay and all assortment of creatures swimming in and out of corals. My snorkel guide pointed in the shadows to the silhouette of a meter-long shark, too shy to approach.

Back near the beach, I stood in the shallows feeding breadcrumbs to the smaller fish. Within minutes I was surrounded by a swarm of brilliant colors—vivid day-glow flashes of salt water fish; hundreds of them, dozens of species, swirling around me and plucking bread from my fingertips.

On the beach, my friends and I lazed under the shade of a tree, digging our feet into the soft and powdery sand. One friend climbed a coconut palm and twisted a giant nut

off its stem. Using a cleaver from the kitchen, we hacked it open and poured the coconut water over ice in a glass, then picked the sweet flesh from the inside the shell. After a day of this, I was ready to tear up my return ticket.

This kind of paradise is everywhere in Malaysia, and you can find it within an hour's flight from Kuala Lumpur (KL), if you visit Langkawi, Tioman, and Redang, or if you have more time, in Sabah.

**Experiencing Kampung Hospitality:** *Pakcik* (uncle) was just slightly older than his ancient Mercedes, but his price was right, so I hired him for the day to drive me around Kota Bharu. Sometime after lunch, during a stop at the kite-maker's house, I spotted a beautiful gasing, a wood-and-steel Malay top. It would be the perfect gift for my brother! I just had to have one.

Well, the kite-maker didn't want to give his up, but *Pakcik* had a few ideas. After coming up empty at the local shops, he took on my quest with personal conviction. Off we drove through the outskirts of town, the sights becoming increasingly rural. He turned down a dirt road, past grazing water buffaloes lazing near rice paddies. Soon the fields turned to jungle,

and a small kampung village appeared in the trees. I watched out the window as we passed traditional wooden stilt houses where grannies fanned themselves on the porch watching the children chase chickens in the yard. Beside each house, colorful batik sarongs waved from clotheslines in the breeze.

The path wound to the house of *Pakcik's* nephew. I was welcomed inside with curiosity, perhaps the first foreigner to visit. They offered me a straw mat, which I used to join the others resting comfortably on the floor. Within minutes, an audience of neighbors gathered around, plucking fruits from the trees in the yard for me. I listened as *Pakcik* told them of my search for a gasing. That afternoon I was offered every gasing in the village.

My afternoon in *Pakcik's* kampung is one of my most cherished memories, and a most meaningful experience. As Southeast Asia becomes increasingly affluent and globalized, this way of life becomes steadily endangered. It's a lifestyle that for many urban Malaysians captures the spirit of the good life—simple days when joy was free. And everyone will be proud to show you; all you need is an open heart and a big smile. Malaysian hospitality never ceases to amaze me.

### 3 The Best Small Towns & Villages

**Any Kampong (Tioman Island, Malaysia):** Even though Tioman was developed for the tourism industry, you'll never think this place is overdeveloped. The casual and rustic nature of the island's tiny beach villages holds firm, and those who seek escape rarely leave disappointed. See p. 250.

**Malacca (Malaysia):** As perhaps the oldest trading port in Malaysia, this town hosted a wide array of international traders: Arabs, Portuguese,

Dutch, English, Indian, and Chinese, all of whom left their stamp. See p. 225.

**Kuching (Sarawak, Malaysia):** Renegade adventure-seeker James Brooke thumbed his nose at London's colonial office so that he could claim Sarawak for his own and rule as the region's first White Raja. He built a cozy little capital with quaint tropical-colonial architecture, picturesque back streets, and a pretty riverfront. See p. 268.

## 4 The Best Beaches

**Tanjung Rhu (Langkawi, Malaysia):** Perhaps the most stunning beach in Malaysia, this wide gorgeous stretch of white sand hugs a crystal-clear, deep blue cove. Even Alex Garland would be impressed. See p. 243.

**Kumpang Juara (Tioman Island, Malaysia):** This beach is what they mean when they say isolated. Be prepared to live like Robinson Crusoe—in tiny huts, many with no electricity at all. But, oh, the beach! Most visitors don't get to this part of the island, so many times you can have it all to yourself. See p. 253.

**Sentosa Island (Singapore):** The three beaches on Sentosa are just about the best you'll find in Singapore, which isn't really known for its

beaches. They're lively, with water sports and beach activities plus food and drink. Every so often you'll find an all-night dance party here. However, if you really need pristine seclusion, you'll have to head for Malaysia. See p. 157.

**Cherating (Malaysia):** If you're a leatherback turtle, you'll think the best beach in the world is just north of Cherating. Every spring and summer, these giant sea creatures come ashore to lay their eggs, so if you're in town from May to June you might catch a look at the hatchlings. Meanwhile, during the turtles' off-season, international windsurfing and water-board enthusiasts gather annually for competitions at this world-famous spot. See p. 254.

## 5 The Most Exciting Outdoor Adventures

**Trekking in Taman Negara (Malaysia):** With suitable options for all levels of comfort and desired adventure, peninsular Malaysia's largest national park opens the wonders of primary rainforest and the creatures who dwell in it to everyone. From the canopy walk high atop the forest to night watches for nocturnal life, this adventure is as stunning as it is informative. See p. 222.

**Sungei Buloh Nature Reserve (Singapore):** Every year during the winter months, flocks of migrating birds from as far north as Siberia vacation in the warm waters of this unique mangrove swamp park. Easily traversed by wooden walkway, the park will never disappoint for some stunning wildlife shots. See p. 153.

## 6 The Most Fascinating Temples, Churches & Mosques

**Thian Hock Keng (Singapore):** One of Singapore's oldest Chinese temples, it is a fascinating testimony to Chinese Buddhism as it combines with traditional Confucian beliefs and natural Taoist principles. Equally fascinating is the modern world that carries on just outside the old temple's doors. See p. 136.

**Jalan Tokong, Malacca (Malaysia):** This street, in the historical heart of the city, supports a Malay mosque, a Chinese temple, and a Hindu temple

existing peacefully side by side—the perfect example of how the many foreign religions that came to Southeast Asia shaped its communities and learned to coexist in harmony. See p. 231.

**Armenian Church (Singapore):** Although not the biggest Christian house of worship in the city, it is perhaps one of the most charming in its architectural simplicity, tropical practicality, and spiritual tranquility. See p. 121.

**Hajjah Fatimah Mosque (Singapore):** I love this mosque for its eclectic mix of religious symbols and architectural influences. To me, it represents

not just the Singaporean ability to absorb so many different ideas, but also a Muslim appreciation and openness toward many cultures. See p. 141.

## 7 The Most Interesting Museums

**Images of Singapore (Sentosa Island, Singapore):** No one has done a better job than this museum in chronicling the horrors of the World War II Pacific Theater and Japanese occupation in Southeast Asia. Video and audio displays take you on a journey through Singapore's experience. The grand finale, the Surrender Chambers, features life-size wax-figure dioramas of the fateful events. See p. 158.

**Penang Museum and Art Gallery (Penang, Malaysia):** A slick display of Penang's colonial history and multicultural heritage, this place is chock-full of fascinating tidbits about the people,

places, and events of this curious island. Plus, it doesn't hurt that the air-conditioning works very well! See p. 242.

**Asian Civilisations Museum, Empress Place (Singapore):** The newest display on the block, this extremely well-presented museum documents the evolutionary and cultural history of the region's major ethnic groups. A very informative afternoon. See p. 124.

**State Museums of Malacca (Malaysia):** This small city has more museums than any other city in the country, with some unusual displays such as kites and Malaysian literature. See p. 230.

## 8 The Best Luxury Resorts & Hotels

**Raffles Hotel (Singapore):** For old-world opulence, Raffles is second to none. It's pure fantasy of the days when tigers still lurked around the perimeters. See p. 70.

**The Shangri-La Hotel (Singapore):** What sets this hotel apart from other city properties is its sprawling grounds. Shang is a meticulously landscaped tropical oasis, with lush garden views from every angle. Three individual wings give you a choice of accommodation styles: urban contemporary, natural resort-style, and Oriental opulence. See p. 82.

**The Regent (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia):** For my money, the Regent offers

the best location, most comfortable rooms, and best selection of facilities in the city. See p. 212.

**Tanjong Jara (Terengganu, Malaysia):** Traditional Malay style chalets furnished in natural woods and local textiles blend gorgeously with the tropical gardens of this seaside resort. The people here will bend over backwards to make sure your stay is perfect. See p. 260.

**The Datai (Langkawi, Malaysia):** The Datai is as stunning as any of the best resorts Phuket and Bali have to offer, without the Phuket or Bali price tag. See p. 247.

## 9 The Best Hotel Bargains

**The SHA Villa (Singapore):** This boutique hotel is packed with South-east Asian charm and has an attentive staff and an ideal location, close to Orchard Road. See p. 91.

**Traders Hotel (Singapore):** Value-for-money is the name of the game, with all sorts of promotional packages, self-service laundrettes, vending machines, and a checkout lounge just a few of the



offerings that make this the most convenient hotel in the city. See p. 88.

**Swiss-Inn (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia):** Location, location, location! Right in the center of Kuala Lumpur's bustling Chinatown, the Swiss-Inn is the perennial favorite for travelers here. A comfortable choice, plus it's so close to everything. See p. 215.

**Heeren House (Malacca, Malaysia):** Bargain or no bargain, this boutique

hotel in the heart of the old city is the place to stay in Malacca if you want to really get a feel of the local atmosphere. See p. 228.

**Telang Usan Hotel (Kuching, Malaysia):** An informal place, Telang Usan is homey and quaint, and within walking distance of many major attractions in Kuching. See p. 271.

## 10 The Best Local Dining Experiences

**Hawker Centers (Singapore and Malaysia):** Think of them as shopping malls for food—great food! For local cuisine, who needs a menu with pictures when you can walk around and select anything you want as it's prepared before your eyes? See chapters 4, 9, 10, and 11.

**Gurney Drive (Penang, Malaysia):** Penang is the king of Asian cuisine, from Chinese to Malay to Indian and everything else in between. This large hawker center by the sea is a great introduction to Penang. See p. 240.

**Imperial Herbal (Singapore):** In the Chinese tradition of yin and yang,

dishes are prepared under the supervision of the house doctor, a traditional healer who will be glad to “prescribe” the perfect cure for whatever ails you. See p. 107.

**Chile Crab at UDMC Seafood Centre (Singapore):** A true Singaporean favorite, chile crabs will cause every local to rise up in argument over where you can find the best in town. Head out to UDMC to try the juicy crabs cooked in a sweet chile sauce. Prepare to get messy! See p. 116.

## 11 The Best Markets

**Arab Street (Singapore):** Even though Singapore is a shopper's paradise, it could still use more places like Arab Street. Small shops selling everything from textiles to handicrafts line the street. Bargaining is welcome. See p. 174.

**Central Market (Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia):** This huge bustling market turned me into a shopping freak! All of the handicrafts Terengganu is famous for come concentrated in one

exciting experience: batik, songket cloth, brassware, basket weaving—the list goes on. See p. 261.

**Petaling Street (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia):** This night market gets very, very crowded and crazy with all who come for watches, handbags, computer software, video CDs (which aren't exactly DVDs but can be played on a DVD player), and all manner of blatant disregard for international copyright laws. See p. 220.

## 12 The Best Shopping Bargains

**Silver Filigree Jewelry (Malaysia):** This fine silver is worked into detailed filigree jewelry designs to make

brooches, necklaces, bracelets, and other fine jewelry.

**Pewter (Malaysia):** Malaysia is the home of Selangor Pewter, one of the largest manufacturers of pewter in the world, and their many showrooms have all sorts of items to choose from. For locations in Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Malacca, and Johor call the **Selangor hot line** at ☎ **03/422-1000**.

**Knockoffs and Pirate Goods (Singapore and Malaysia):** Check out how real those watches look! And so cheap! You can find them at any night market. Ever dream of owning a Gucci? Have I got a deal for you! Can I tell you about pirate video CDs and

computer software without getting my book banned? Uh, okay, whatever you do, don't buy these items! See chapters 6 and 9.

**Batik (Singapore and Malaysia):** While most of the batiks you find in Singapore come from Indonesia, most in Malaysia are made at factories that you can often tour. The Indonesian prints usually show traditional motif and colors, while Malaysian designs can be far more modern. Look for batik silk as well. See chapters 6, 9, and 10.

### 13 The Best Nightlife

**Singapore, the whole city:** Nightlife is becoming increasingly sophisticated in Singapore, where locals have more money for recreation and fun. Take the time to choose the place that suits your personality. Jazz club? Techno disco? Cocktail lounge? Wine bar? Good old pub? They have it all. See chapter 7.

**Bangsar (near Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia):** Folks in Kuala Lumpur know to go to Bangsar for nighttime excitement. A couple of blocks of concentrated restaurants, cafes, discos, pubs, and wine bars will tickle any fancy. Good people-watching, too. See p. 221.