

Malaysia's mystique: Diversity is the beauty of this southeast Asian gem - from mellow rural highlands to bustling markets of Kuala Lumpur

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Page: H1 / FRONT

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Byline: Barbara Balfour

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At the crack of dawn, our eyelashes flutter and our eyes open to the grey light beginning to seep under the curtains.

But it's not the first rays of the morning or the cool mountain air that rouse us from our sleep at Bala's Chalet, a former British boarding school turned guest house in the Cameron Highlands of Malaysia. It's the melodic call to prayer, a disembodied voice floating out over the hills from a megaphone at a nearby mosque.

It's not an unpleasant awakening - the deep, rich voice is strangely comforting, providing a reminder that, even though we will later nibble on scones in colonial-style bungalows, this is still an Islamic country in the heart of Asia.

As the largest hill resort in Malaysia, at an altitude of between 1,300 to 1,829 metres, the Cameron Highlands provides a welcome respite from the sweaty, overwhelming week we just spent in the country's bustling capital, Kuala Lumpur.

Here in this centre of Malaysian tea production, the temperature rarely climbs above 21 Celsius and plantations abound with fruit, vegetable, and flower crops cultivated for nationwide sale.

The relative quiet and lack of pollution is sensed immediately as we step off the bus after

a painfully long, rickety six-hour drive from Kuala Lumpur. (We learned the hard way not all long-distance bus companies are created equal. Make sure you shop around; some offer air conditioning, fabric seats and bottled water at the same price you'll pay for a none-of-the-above rattletrap with a chauffeur who thinks he's a race-car driver.)

At the bus stop we are greeted by several representatives paid by nearby hotels to lure business their way.

For an average of \$30 Cdn a night, we opt to stay at Bala's Holiday Chalet, a mock-Tudor style guest house built in 1934 as a boarding school for European expatriate schoolchildren. Its well-tended gardens, obliging staff and wonderful kitchen lend to the relaxing resort feel of the town.

Before leaving our luggage at the chalet, we drop by CS Travel and Tours next to the bus stop, where we sign up for a half-day tour of the Highlands on a bus that picks us up from our guest house at 9 a.m.

For the equivalent of \$5 Cdn, plus a few more dollars in entrance fees, we visit a strawberry farm, the colourful Sam Poh Buddhist temple, a butterfly farm, a flower and cactus nursery, a bee farm and -- last but not least -- the Boh tea plantation.

A visit to Malaysia is not complete without making a stop at the tea plantation, offering hourly tours of the mostly mechanized process, and surreal views over the hills. We enjoy several cups of fragrant tea and buy many more boxes to take home.

Here we learn the first tea bushes were planted in the area in 1929, making most bushes about 75 years old; and that it takes about five kilograms of leaves to make one kilogram of tea.

Though there are also several jungle trails to explore and a nearby golf course for the willing, we find two days more than suffice for a stay in this charming town.

Having regained our energy in this cooler climate, we brave our way back on the bus to the capital, which possesses an allure that is almost magnetic for a couple of Westerners who have never before seen anything like it.

Malaysia, like many southeast Asian countries, is a paradise for bargain hunters who are not afraid to barter, whether for a kilogram of honey mangoes in a bustling night market or for an evening bag in a department store.

Shoe fetishists must not leave the country without at least several visits to a Vincci outlet, referred to by locals as the Gap of Malaysia and specializing in inexpensive but trendy footwear, handbags and accessories.

At the Sungei Wang Plaza, hardware enthusiasts scope out the city's best deals on digital cameras and other technology, while Suria KLCC at the base of the city's glamorous Petronas Twin Towers offers more high-end designer wares.

At the Central Market we visit numerous stalls featuring everything from sushi sets and silk scarves to intricate woodwork and authentic Chinese clogs made for me on the spot. Nearby on JL Petaling Street, hundreds of booths hawk "designer" handbags and sunglasses, and barrels of exotic fruits indigenous to Malaysia such as furry red rambutans that taste like lychees, only sweeter -- and the tart mangosteens, resembling acorns on the outside and a clove of garlic on the inside.

Diversity in everything from food to fashion can be easily observed outside the market setting, and is most strikingly obvious in an urban centre such as Kuala Lumpur.

This is attributable to Malaysia's unique mix of cultures -- mostly Malay, Indian, and Chinese.

But what defines the country more significantly is the relative ease with which each ethnicity's way of life and religion is practised without interference.

This alone makes a trip to this gem of a nation a more than worthwhile stopover.

IF YOU GO

Language: English is widely spoken, even in remote areas of Malaysia.

Safety: Just being a fair-skinned foreigner attracts enough attention, so female travellers should keep minis and bikinis out of sight and observe a modest dress code. Be aware at all times, especially in crowded areas such as the subway and the markets. Passports, plane tickets and expensive jewelry should be left in your hotel safe.

Money: The Canadian dollar will buy you approximately three Malaysian ringgits (RM). ATM

machines are not always available so carry cash in small bills, in local currency, with you.

Visas: Commonwealth citizens do not require a visa to visit Malaysia; citizens of most countries are issued a 30-day or 60-day visa upon arrival. Those travelling on an Israeli passport may not enter Malaysia.

Health: For the latest travel health advisories, visit www.travelhealth.gc.ca. For recommended vaccinations, especially if you are travelling to rural areas or northwestern states of Malaysia affected by the tsunami, check: <http://www.mdtravelhealth.com/destinations/asia/malaysia.html>

Planning your trip: Visit www.malaysiamydestination.com or call Tourism Malaysia's Canadian office in Vancouver toll-free at 1-888-689-8672.