

MALAYSIAN INTERLUDE

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Images: John and Catherine Biggs © 2010

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Malaysian Interlude

We have a week in Malaysia to fit in a three-day conference in Kuala Lumpur (trs. “muddy city”) and whatever else we can manage. We each had visited Malaysia 30 years previously and are curious to see how things have changed. At short notice and in our time frame, our Hobart travel agent manages to arrange a day tour to Malacca, two nights and two-and-a-bit days in the Cameron Highlands and a free day in KL.



We do KL with the help of the Hop-On/ Hop-Off bus. We had been most impressed with Dublin’s version, where the buses came every 15 mins on the dot, the driver’s spiel was excellent and frequently very funny. We eagerly looked forward to something of the same to enlighten us about KL’s unique complexities. However, the buses here run every 30 mins, and instead of a blarney spouting bus driver, we have a dry as dust commentary on inboard earphones, only some of which work. Our cheerful little conductress suggests to those with dud earphones to change their seat, which doesn’t work when the bus becomes full.

We take photos through the bus window. We pass KL’s magnificent mosque-like Central Railway Station, and a Cultural Centre which looks like Utzon’s first draft for the Sydney Opera House. We alight at KL’s landmark,



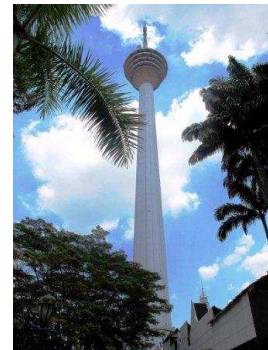
the 88-floor Petronas Twin Towers. Completed in 1998, it was the tallest building in the world until 2004, when Taipei One beat it, but Petronas still remains the tallest *twin* towers. Visitors may walk across the Skybridge on the 41st floor from



fantastic: don’t miss! Our usual luck holds. Today is Monday and the bridge is closed on Mondays. We later learn that we would never have got there anyway as you have to queue up from early morning. There is a strict limit on the numbers of people and too many at one time might result in the bridge collapsing. But never mind, a nice lady at the Information Desk tells us there’s an even better view of the tumbling sprawl of the new KL from the observation platform of the KL Telecommunications Tower, which also contains the highest McDonalds in the world – and being on a hill, this Tower is marginally taller than the Petronas Twin Towers themselves.



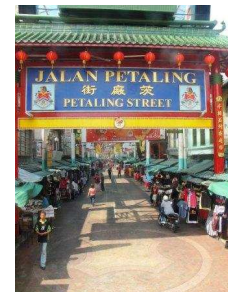
Usually travel stories are about the sights to be seen and the things that have been done, but this time the story is about what we didn't see and what we didn't do. We queue up at the KL Tower to buy our tickets to be told we have an option: Package A or Package B? Package A, we are informed, means that you get to the observation platform in the tower and then you ride a flying fox, take a pony ride through a phony forest, walk through a bunch of butterflies in a cage and have a go in a Formula 1 racing car simulator to recall the glory days of 1998 when Malaysia hosted the Formula 1 world championship.



In Package B you get to the observation platform, then visit a model Malaysian village, see some Malaysian arts and crafts (our intended next stop anyway), visit a mini zoo, ride a flying fox bareback, bungee jump from the observation platform but maybe I have that muddled up. Whatever, I tell the prettily scarfed young lady we only have time to go up the Tower to the observation platform. Not possible, we are firmly advised. You have also to drive a Formula 1 car through some damp rain forest, do some Malaysian dancing with a pony, parachute from the observation platform into the zoo ... Even our Minister for Tourism wouldn't get it as wrong as that by insisting on all those hoops. I suppose we could just have gone up the Tower and foregone the other delights but our respective danders were on the up. We punish the Malaysian Minister by not seeing KL from a great height; we refuse Packages A and B, and rejoin the bus.



We finish the tour at Central Market and Chinatown. Central Market is astonishing in its variety of delicate silverware, junk, batiks and silks, incredibly cheap Cashmere ... material piled high with nothing to spare while the Chinese New Year lanterns are displayed. We walk back through Chinatown, which has preserved traditional Chineseness to a greater extent than Hong Kong and the major cities of China itself. It's ten days into Chinese New Year and red lanterns are everywhere and five days to go yet. Hong Kong gets back to business after five days.



We walk back to our hotel along Jalan Pudu. Pudu Prison on this street was used by the Japanese for Australian POWs, and is where Australians Kevin Barlow and Brian Chambers were executed in 1986 for drug trafficking, after which it was closed. The prison cells had a window the size of a shoebox, which in KL's extreme heat and humidity, made conditions horrific. While pondering these unhappy events, we found our footpath has morphed to become the longest bus station in the world, serving all stations in Malaysia from Singapore to Penang. On one side is a high fence, on the other side are hundreds of snorting, belching buses lined up nose to tail, taking up about two kilometers along the street stretching way beyond our hotel. The already insufferable heat and humidity is pumped up



with hot diesel fumes blowing at us and others struggling to find their bus. The Government tried to relocate the station to outside the CBD where there is some space to build a proper bus station, but there was public uproar. This station might be a facsimile of a long road into the mouth of hell, but it was *convenient* for KL's commuters.

Our conference hotel has a Malay and Western buffet, which serves us for several lunches and dinners, so we get some sort of handle on Malay cuisine; satay, beef rendang (soft, mushy, and spicy, not chunks of beef in a runny sauce as it often is in Australia), casseroles of meat and local vegetables, sambal to go with everything, crunchy salads of raw vegetables with strange tastes, the all-asian steamboat, and a variety of ultra sweet desserts. At the conference morning and afternoon coffee, as well as the usual biscuits, noodles, rice, and various meat dishes are served. Lunch is an hour and a half, the extra half hour for conferees to repair to the prayer room. Food is important to Malaysians and so it should be.



The conference organizers give us a private tour of Putrajaya. Here is the hub of government, containing almost all Ministry offices, Parliament, the royal quarters (of which more later), staff quarters for civil servants, KL's most important mosque next to the PM's Offices, the Steel Mosque, and many public buildings. It is in other words Malaysia's Canberra but impressively out-Canberras our Canberra.

Malacca, some 150 kms south of KL, sits on one side of the Straits of Malacca, Sumatra on the other side. Malacca has a long association with China going back to the 15th century when a Chinese princess married the local Sultan. The ocean going sea captain, Cheng Ho, or Zheng He in Mandarin, set up trade links throughout the region as far as India, making Malacca an important seaport bringing many



Chinese who intermarried with Malay girls to form the Peranakan or Baba-Nonya culture and cuisine. The Portuguese came, saw and conquered in the 16th century, but they in turn were beaten by the Dutch, who had a good run until 1836, when the British took over. The Japanese interrupted British rule from 1941-1946, British rule ending definitively in 1957, with Independence and the new country of Malaysia. Harmony Road symbolises all

this multiculturalism: it has the oldest Buddhist temple, an Indian Mosque, a Malay mosque but with a Chinese-style roof, a Hindu temple. Western symbols are downtown. St Peter's Church is the oldest Christian church in current use in Malacca, St Pauls Church like Macau's St. Pauls is a skeleton overlooking the harbour, Christ Church, once Dutch Reformed now Anglican. Malacca has the most gorgeous taxis in the world. There is still a Portuguese



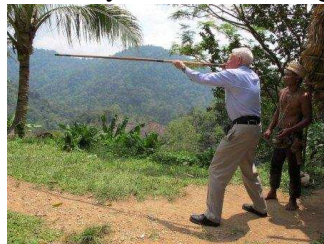
settlement from the old days but, rarely in Malaysia, the Chinese are in the majority here. Malacca strongly recalls Macau as it was before it became entirely devoted to high roller gambling following the handover to China in 1999.

The Cameron Highlands were first surveyed by Donald Cameron in the 1870s. At 2,000



m. the Highlands combine tropical jungle, fierce mountains and waterfalls, and cool nights and fertile soil, allowing a unique blend of temperate and tropical plant life. The Highlands are the food bowl of Malaysia. Many of the aboriginal Malays, the Orang Asli, live in the foothills. The young are encouraged to go to school and thence to university, while their parents set up stalls by the roadside selling jungle fruits and honey.

They are ethnically quite different from the majority Malays who emigrated from Indonesia, the indigenous people being of slighter build, darker skin and curly hair. The Orang Asli tribes were raided for slaves in the 18th and 19th centuries. They played an important role during the



Malayan Emergency against communist insurgents. We stop by the road so that they can teach me to use a blowpipe, but I was a poor pupil. My dart flopped out the business end at my feet, like the howitzer shell in *The Great Dictator*.



In the 1920s, the colonial Brits, tired of sweating it out on the Lowlands, built their holiday houses in the Highlands, turning it into a little Britain, nowhere more so than the Lakehouse Hotel, which our travel agent had found for us. The Lakehouse was built as late as 1966 (well after Independence in 1957) by British Army Officer Colonel Stanley Jack Foster. He turned it into a hotel in 1970. HPL, a Singapore company, bought it in 1989 sedulously maintaining the British tradition. The bar contains British boysey paraphernalia: aging photographs of Scottish soldiers, a “No Swearing” sign, hunting horns, muskets, ceremonial swords, regimental colours, all in nostalgic celebration of that Empire upon which the sun had already set. Dinner is served in the heavily English dining room, each table supporting a range of fine silver and glassware, a faded rose on a nice white vase. We are shown to our table, bearing a plaque “Mr and Mrs Biggs”. As we sit down, another party enters, as if from an Ealing Brothers film set: elderly *leddies* speak loudly and clearly in the pure received English of the wartime years. How splendidly in keeping!



We decline the set menu with a main course of, yes, roast beef and yorkshire pudding.

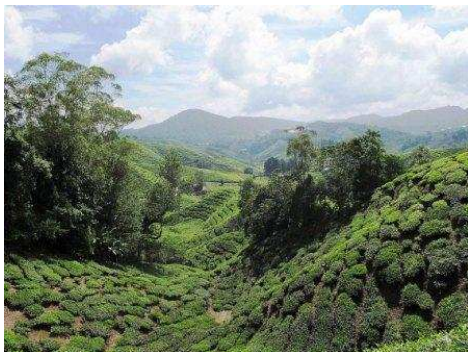
The *à la carte* menu is equally British, if with a nod to “Local Flavours” that turn out to be Indian curries, the like of which had not appeared on our Malay buffet. I order rack of lamb, Catherine grilled snapper. Her cutlery is elaborately cleared and relaid with a *fish* knife and fork, something I hadn’t seen for many a year. Alas, her fish seems poached rather than grilled and is limp and bland, so she leaves most of it, having filled up anyway on an excellent entrée of a large mango and prawn salad. Our waiter is feudally apologetic; he waives our drinks bill of bottled water and a glass of shiraz, and to our pleased surprise the waiver also applies to the next night’s drinks, a gesture that is appreciated. At \$14 a glass the wine is Queen Adelaide shiraz, a pleasant drop but at a 1,200% mark up, if you go on local Australian prices, which of course you shouldn’t as this is Malaysia. The room bar-fridge offers local Tiger beer at a more modest 400% mark up, using that sold at the roadside stalls opposite the Lakehouse as the baseline. Interestingly, that beer was not on display as most stalls were run by Muslims but on our enquiry a Chinese lady produced some from the back with a conspiratorial grin.



Our first impression is that the Lakehouse Hotel is in the middle of nowhere. There is nothing much to do except walk beside the muddy lake for a few hundred yards of path, or along the road to the town of Habu about a kilometre further on. From the road, Habu appears as a small cluster of houses, but when we walk there we find row after row of apartment blocks marching up the hill. On either side of the village and stretching up the hill behind it are huge areas under heavy plastic canvas where they grow vegetables. A friendly dog waves us goodbye as we descend the steps back to the main road.



The following day we are taken on a tour of the Highlands. As we leave our hotel a roadside sign proclaims the exotic delights to be had. Not only scones but with strawberry jam! Strawberries farms are everywhere. They are well designed, the strawberries growing in waist level troughs, much easier on the back when picking than the in-ground strawberries we are familiar with in Tasmania.



Strawberry flavouring forms part of the local cuisine, including my last night’s rack of lamb that was accompanied with a rich strawberry sauce – but no, I don’t think it really worked. Boh’s tea plantation is stunningly set in a valley. The road is a single lane, but alarmingly traffic flows fast in both directions. Our driver somehow juggles incredible skill, amazing judgment and sheer good luck as he overtakes on



blind bends. We are shown how tea is produced. The plants are grown with flat tops that are shorn like sheep, using long sheep shears. The leaves are then crushed, dried and fermented. The tea plants are Indian varieties but the tea we tasted was delicate and fragrant, drunk black with no sugar, like green tea.

This tour is like most others in that there is always a person or couple who seem to think the tour is for their personal use only. This time it is a young American couple who pointedly ignore everyone else; they talk loudly between themselves, sing to each other, and blatantly defy the law of kawat by canoodling (see below) – and they always keep us waiting at every place we stop at.



We had been told on the way that Brinchang is the tourist centre of the Highlands, so we were initially disappointed that the Lakehouse seemed so isolated. Then we discover that Brinchang is no great shakes at all – it simply happens to be conveniently close to more strawberry farms, tea plantations, honey farms and butterfly parks than other places. And once you have done all that, which we did in a morning, that's about it. Other hotels might have had a wider culinary range than the Lakehouse, but they were nowhere near as good to look at. On the way back to the Lakehouse, we stop off at Tanah Rata, another Highland town, to have a look around. Catherine buys some semi-precious stones for her jewellery making, but there is nothing much to see here. Yearning for a good coffee, we spy what else but a Starbucks! Refreshed, we go on our way in a taxi that makes the ride to the tea plantation a stroll in the park. The driver overtakes wherever there appears to be an inch to spare, across double lines, on blind

bends, on the inside or on the outside, whatever presents the greatest challenge to our continuing existence. And there are no safety belts. Yet here we are.



Now let me turn to more general matters. At the beginning of the conference I was struck by the attitude of the Chinese submanager as we were shown the conference room. She swayed from foot to foot with an eager-to-please smile frozen on her pretty little face, while the Malays told her what the arrangements were to be. How things had changed. In 1969, there had been bloody riots by Malays angry that the Chinese had more political and economic power than they. Legislation favouring Malays was introduced, but they thought it didn't go far enough so that when I visited KL 30 years previously in 1980, the split between Malays and Chinese was still palpably raw. The Malays, about 60% of the population, had the numbers and the politicians but the Chinese (30 %) still ran the economy and had the money. The Malays soon fixed that.

Let me explain that what follows was told to us by a Chinese we had met on our travels. I have tried to check the facts where I can, and to the best of my knowledge it is true – but I may be wrong. If so, I apologise.

Today, all nonMalay businesses have to give 30% of their shares to the government, who appoint a Malay as chairman of the company board at a salary, currently, of RM20,00 per month (about \$8,000 AUD) which is princely compared to other Malay salaries (a starting teacher gets about \$700 a month, a professor about \$2,000). Consequently, there is much jockeying by middle class Malays to become a government appointee to a board. Thus the government gains control of virtually all commercial firms. Profits are taxed at a flat 40%.

Are these policies racist, or simply a form of nationalisation? Then there's the added twist due to a blurry distinction between Sharia law and civil law (about 61% of the population are Muslim). In 1980, I was told by a Malay that it was unfair that Chinese couples could canoodle in public whereas Muslims could not – it was against the Sharia law of *kawāt*. There was talk then of imposing the law of *kawāt* on everyone, but as I saw plenty of canoodling couples this trip I guess that law did not get up, so to speak. A law that did concern mixed marriages. It seems that a Chinese Buddhist or an Indian Christian who wants to marry a Malay woman (or vice versa) has to convert to Islam, which involves a name change. The choice is stark: convert and marry, marry but do not convert and you are not legally recognised. So cross-racial marriages are rare, and when they occur, in most instances nothing changes except the name of the nonMalay partner, who presumably may continue to drink a good red with his or her pork chop.

Just before we arrived, three women were publicly caned with six strokes of the rattan for having sex outside marriage. The men who had partnered the ladies in this deed of darkness were not even mentioned. There was public outrage expressed inside Malaysia as well as outside, but that outrage fed even more outrage. I saw on television one cleric who thundered: "This is the law. The women concerned agreed to the punishment and accepted it. If people do not understand Sharia law they should shut up and mind their own business." Different strokes, but for only some folks.

The sight of a man dressed in comfortable flapping shirt, sunnies and shorts, walking in front of his wife, who is clad from head to toe in sometimes excellently decorated cloth, is disconcerting, particularly in 34 degrees heat and high humidity. This is a delicate subject but it does not strike me as having very much to do with religion but with domestic power politics.

We were also told that Malays and the aboriginal population have free education while nonMalays have to pay for their education both at school and at university. Malays are awarded a quota of 65% university entrance to counteract the previous situation where Chinese and Indians won most university places. These imbalances might be argued on socio-economic grounds, but the upshot is that the Chinese are now the ones who feel discriminated against. Chinese are becoming a smaller proportion of the population: many have emigrated, they have smaller families of one or two children – not least

because they have to pay for their children's education – while the Malays tend to have larger families. One Chinese who emigrated is, or was, the richest man in Malaysia, Sugar King Kwok. He has now relocated to Hong Kong, leaving an Indian IT King as richest man, who owns the land on which the Twin Towers totter, a great deal of Malay Airlines and much else. Foreign investment is tending more and more to go elsewhere. Car manufacturers Isuzu and Hyundai wanted to set up in Malaysia but balked at handing 30% of control to the government. They went to Thailand instead. Malaysia now imports from Thailand the cars they could have been producing themselves. As one who is opposed to deregulation on principle, I can't say I find this altogether offensive.

With a government controlled media, these issues did not receive much public airing, but today these chickens have found the internet a fine place on which to roost (think www.tasmaniantimes.com). People are becoming aware of what is really happening. Five states are for the first time under a coalition of the Opposition parties, including Chinese politicians. With an election coming up in two years, the government is worried. So rather like Tasmania Together, the government have announced a "One Malaysia" policy. Some Chinese have recently been appointed to senior positions, including one Deputy Vice Chancellor who is also a woman, while the Orang Asli have been renamed the Orang Kita, that is, from "the original people" to "our people", which is a grade above simply saying sorry.

Malaysia's population is larger than Australia's at 27 million. There are 13 states, nine headed by an hereditary Sultan, four by an appointed Governor. State power is limited in that all decisions made in the State assembly have to be ratified by Federal Government. I've thought long and hard about that one – and given the mess two or three Australian states are in, maybe it's not a bad idea. I doubt one timber company could control all those Federal pollies.

Every five years, the Sultans agree who should be King, an honour that rotates. Currently it is the Sultan of Terengganu. A RM12 billion palace is being built for the King, who



currently has to slum it Putrajaya, as pictured. And no sooner has he settled into his new palace he will have to hand it over to the new King. Life is tough for a Malaysian King. But just imagine us taxpayers allowing 4-5 billion AUD to build a new residence for the Governor General. Yes, I can imagine it given that a certain Minister of Defence ordered \$26 billion of a particular aircraft against strong advice that

it was a dud because he liked having his photo taken while sitting in the cockpit of one. The king's role is largely symbolic but he can, in conference with his fellow Sultans, dismiss parliament if they become too corrupt or incompetent, as happened in Thailand.

Malaysia has a tremendous six-lane tollway system right across the country connecting all the major cities, along which we saw many late model cars and motorcycles. There are R&R toilet stops with cafes, fruit stalls and prayer rooms as well toilets, with sheltered

stops for motorcyclists in the likely event of tropical downpours. There is money out there. The tollways are privately built by a Chinese firm, albeit with close government representation on the board. They plan to build a huge Asian interconnected system from India through Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand and China. The sticking point in this grand scheme is Cambodia, a communist state that doesn't hold with all this capitalist skulduggery. The environmental issues of such a scheme are hair-raising.

And talking of environmental issues, during our travels, we went by road 150 km south to Malacca and 240 km north to the Cameron Highlands. Until we were well into the Highlands, beside the road and far away on both sides were endless



palm plantations or worse, the shriven clearings for palm plantations. Palm plantations replaced rubber trees, which we grubbed out 30 years ago when the price dropped, but now the price of rubber is up again, spindly young rubber trees in formal row are being grown alongside the palm trees. Palm oil is extracted from the palm tree nuts and is used in soaps, shampoos, margarine, most Nestlé's products and recently for the new green biofuel, to replace all that nasty diesel oil. Palm plantations

sound good but there are huge dangers. Thousands of hectares of native tropical forest are being cleared and burned for plantations, thus displacing and endangering Malaysia's favourite animal, the orang utan.

That should sound familiar to Tasmanians.

