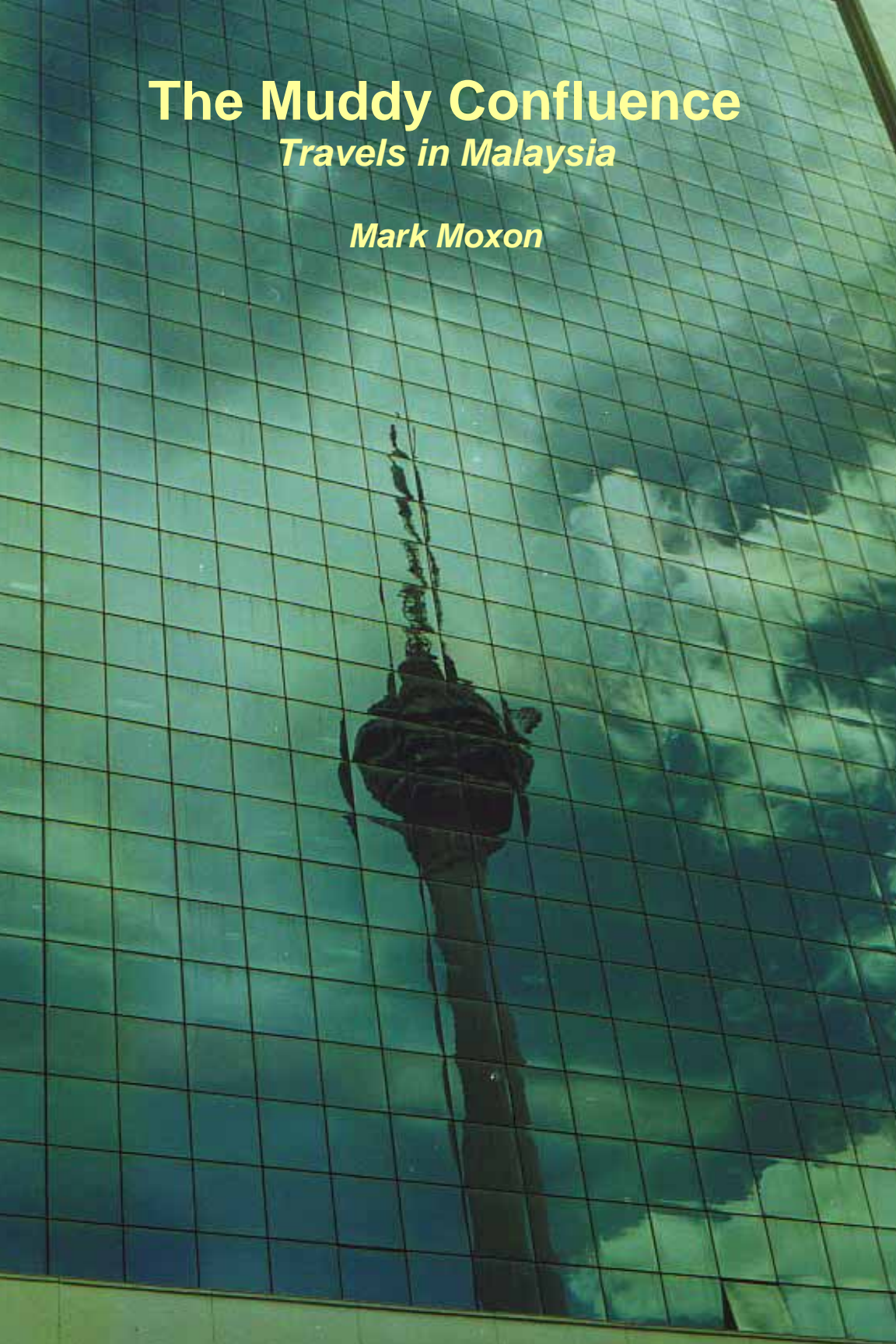


The Muddy Confluence

Travels in Malaysia

Mark Moxon





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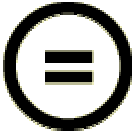
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The Muddy Confluence: Travels in Malaysia
v1.2.1, November 2004

Cover Photograph: The Menara Kuala Lumpur reflected in a skyscraper, Kuala Lumpur

Contents

Foreword	5
Map	7
Malaysia.....	8
Pre-Malaysian Apathy	8
Melaka	10
Malaysian Politics	18
Kuala Lumpur.....	23
Rainforest Statistics	30
Taman Negara	36
Walking the Rainforest.....	44
Meeting the Orang Asli	55
The Cameron Highlands.....	58
The Company of Travellers.....	60
The Cavalier Roundhead	63
Pulau Pangkor.....	66
Georgetown	70
Thoughts on Leaving.....	72
Further Reading	77
Copyright Notice.....	79

Foreword

This book is a collection of writing from the road, covering a one-month trip I made to Malaysia in 1997. This was part of a much larger, three-year journey that took me through Australia, New Zealand, French Polynesia, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, India and Nepal, from 1995 to 1998.

The travelogue for all these countries and more can be found at my personal website at www.moxon.net, where you can also find travel tips, recommended journeys and further free books for you to download. If you enjoy reading this book, then I'd be delighted if you would sign my website's Guestbook.

I've released this book and its companions via a Creative Commons Licence, which means you are free to distribute it to everyone and anyone, as long as you distribute it on a non-commercial basis and make no changes to it. If you know someone who might like this book, please pass it on; I make no money from it, but I do enjoy the thought of people reading it and recommending it to their friends.

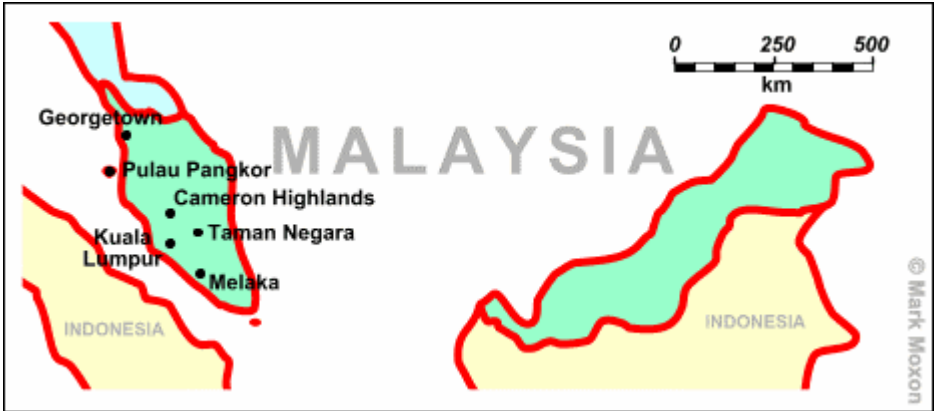
Finally, please be aware that this book is highly satirical, which means there's a slight chance that it might cause offence those who think my sense of

humour is amusing as a puddle of mud. On top of this, some parts will be out of date – which is why each article is dated – and others will betray the naivety of a traveller who discovered his way in the world by throwing himself into it headfirst. It is, however, an honest account of how I felt as I travelled the world for three years, and as such, I hope you enjoy it.

Mark Moxon, September 2004

www.moxon.net

Map



Malaysia

Pre-Malaysian Apathy

Written: 24 November 1997

On the morning of Monday 24th November I hopped on the bus to Johor Bahru, across the Causeway, leaving Singapore behind.

Planning a trip through Malaysia isn't that easy: well, it's not when you're sitting in a penthouse suite in Singapore, TV and hi-fi within infra-red range, fridge bristling with beer, clothes drying on the line. Never before have I read a guidebook and been so utterly uninspired.

Take this description of the Perhentian Islands, a gorgeous spot off the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia: 'As far as things to "see and do" go, it's a simple case of lazing around watching the coconuts fall.' Aaargh! It's full of stuff like this, places that would have sounded great to me two years ago, and which sound simply terrible now. Have I lost the point?

Or the Cameron Highlands, one of the most popular backpacker spots in Malaysia: 'Jungle walks are the thing to do here...' *Jungle!* If I never see jungle again, I

shan't be sorry¹. From my scouring of the book, Peninsula Malaysia has nothing I want to see, and eastern Malaysia is still full of bloody smoke from Kalimantan. Shit.

So do I skip a whole country because it sounds boring? Of course not, but I won't hang around if it turns out to be as crap as it sounds. The man in the Singaporean park said Malaysia was pretty much exactly the same as Indonesia: if that's the case, I'll go through Malaysia faster than a Bali burger goes through an Englishman.

Something else bugs me, too. I look ahead, and whatever my plans, I feel apathy. Travelling – at least at the moment – has lost its sparkle: it started halfway through Indonesia, and hasn't evaporated like most chemical depressions. So what the hell happened? I think it's this: I now know I can cope with anything, go anywhere, explore any park, survive in forest, desert, ocean, mountain, river, cope with cultural challenges, language barriers, health problems, sourcing money... what else is left?

¹ I wrote this paragraph before deciding to spend a week in the central jungle of Peninsula Malaysia. Funnily enough, after that week I vowed never to go on a rainforest trek again: the lack of views, the hard going and the astounding selection of creepy-crawlies is enough to wear down any resolve. I also remember making the same comment after leaving Fiordland, and Hinchinbrook and Fraser Island all came complete with rainforest... and, of course, I'd end up in the forest again in the future. I obviously don't listen to myself a great deal.

The housebound of you will answer, 'The travelling is left; now you've got an experience where you don't have to worry about the logistics, 'cos you know you'll cope. Just go out and enjoy the experience!' So why do I keep thinking that I can't be bothered, that it's all a little bit too much effort to go and see Malaysia, Thailand and so on? Not for the first time in my life I'm at a total loss: my lifestyle for the last two years is becoming normal, everyday, almost mundane. It's no longer a challenge, and this is exactly why I left my job in the first place. Am I destined to have to screw up my life every two years just to keep the variety intact? I bloody hope not...

One thing that does keep me going is reading other travelogues, though. For example, I spent some of my Singapore trip reading Bill Bryson's *The Lost Continent*, one of the few books in this world that actually makes me laugh out loud (the other being Terry Pratchett's *Mort*). When I read book reviews that contain lines like 'tears ran down my face' I normally squirm at the blatant lie, but seriously, I laughed out loud at *The Lost Continent*. Buy it. It's a hoot.

Melaka

Written: 27 November 1997

I'd assumed that Malaysia was going to be like Indonesia: after all, they're geographically fairly close,

they're both predominantly Islamic, and they both have dictatorial leaders. So I wasn't prepared for the fact that Malaysia is a totally different travelling experience from Indonesia. For a start it's easy.

Malaysia is an advanced nation. It's not as advanced as Singapore, which has managed to make advancement a clinical science, almost (but not quite) robbing achievement of its glory, but Malaysia is instantly a step up from Indonesia². The shops have fixed prices on their goods; transport costs are fixed and the ticket touts don't inflate them; everyone, absolutely everyone, either speaks English or knows someone who does; the roads are wide, multi-lane and efficient; the food is clean, wonderfully varied and inexpensive; the tap water is drinkable; you don't get mobbed by people everywhere you go; tourists are not a source of amazement and intrigue, they're just accepted and pretty much ignored. I was astounded.

I was so astounded that for the first few days I kept telling everyone I met that it was so quiet, so easy, so

² In fact the only example I could find of Indonesian insanity in Malaysia was with the labelling on cigarettes. Malaysian cigarette packets are labelled with the amount of nicotine and tar in each smoke, much as in Europe and America: in Indonesia they don't even bother to tell you, or to distinguish between high tar or low tar. However, every single packet in Malaysia claims to contain cigarettes with 20mg of tar and 1.5mg of nicotine, putting them in the very high tar bracket, irrespective of the actual strength: for example, Marlboro are labelled 20mg and 1.5mg, and Marlboro Lights – that come with the caption 'Lowered tar and nicotine' – still weigh in at 20mg and 1.5mg. Get the feeling that the figures are somewhat misleading? Uh-huh.

civilised here: Malaysia looked like it was going to be a halfway house between Indonesia and Singapore, with Singaporean civilisation and Indonesian pricing. I also didn't waste any time in going for the cultural jugular, hopping on a bus from Johor straight to Melaka, the famous historical port on the west coast of Peninsula Malaysia. As the air-conditioned bus sped along the superhighway, with ample seat space and very few other passengers, I decided that life was going to be better than the guidebooks had made out. Malaysia was going to be fun.

Melakan Culture

Melaka is, indeed, a historical centre, and is probably the best example of multicultural colonialism in existence. In its long and distinguished career the port has been inhabited in turn by the original indigenous people; by Prince Parameswara, who settled in Melaka in 1389, setting it up as an important port and starting the long line of Malay Sultans; by the Portuguese, who captured it in 1511 from the sultans and totally failed to capitalise on its potential as a port; by the Dutch, who captured it in 1641 and still totally failed to capitalise on its potential; by the British, who took control of it for the Dutch in 1795 during the French occupation of the Netherlands, and who retained it permanently in 1824 along with Singapore and India, in exchange for letting

the Dutch keep Indonesia; by the Japanese who occupied it in World War II between 1941 and 1945; by the British again, after the war; and finally in 1957 by Malaya³ when the British handed the area back to its rightful owners as part of independence. Every change of owner was bloody, except the first, the Dutch-to-British change and the last, and a lot of the historical sites and sights are remnants of fortifications or ruins of churches destroyed in the conflicts. It seeps colonial atmosphere.

I spent my first day in Melaka exploring the museums and cultural oddities of this delightful place. I was reminded of the words of a German I had met in the Togian Islands – one of the pitcher plant enthusiasts – who referred to the ‘steamroller effect’ of Islam, a force that was destroying Indonesian culture in the same way that it had already destroyed Malaysian culture, according to his observations. At the time I didn’t have enough information to agree or disagree, but I certainly was willing to accept that Islam is extremely influential on a country. Exploring Melaka showed me both sides.

There is no doubt that the historical aspects of Melaka haven’t been swept away by the torrent of

³ When Malaysia was first set up in 1957, it was to contain Malaya (now called Peninsula Malaysia), Sabah, Sarawak, Singapore and Brunei. At the last minute Brunei pulled out to protect its oil interests, and after two years Singapore was kicked out due to different racial mixes and, therefore, policies; as a result modern Malaysia is made up of Peninsula Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak.

Islam. They are actively pushed as tourist attractions, and the major museums are excellent. On the other hand, the exhibits that pertain to Muslim life in Melaka do come across as something of a shock to those who may not be familiar with the ways of Islam, probably because your average westerner isn't exposed to Islam that much, and ignorance is a terrible interpreter.

Marriage and the Stadhuys Museum

In the Stadhuys Museum in Melaka, there was a very informative display about Islamic marriage in the Melaka area, which I copied down because some of the things I read there appeared completely bizarre to someone used to a western version of marriage.

I'd already wondered about the reasons behind making women wear head scarves and clothes that don't flash an inch of flesh, a cruel torment in a climate that can fry eggs on the sidewalk, but the display on marriage was, frankly, weird. The main points I noticed were:

- The process starts when the parents of a boy decide that it's time he married, and they put out their feelers to look for a suitable girl (this is, interestingly, a different way round to some other religions that practice arranged marriages, when it's up to the mother of the girl to find a suitable

boy).

- When a potential bride is found, the boy's parents visit the girl to see if she has the correct manners, looks and so on, and if they reckon she's a good 'un, the two sets of parents agree on a suitable dowry.
- The agreement is ratified by the payment of half the dowry from the girl's parents to the boy's, but get this: if the groom decides to back out, the dowry deposit is considered lost and the groom's family keeps it, but if the bride backs out, then the bride's family has to pay the groom's family twice the dowry as compensation.
- When the couple actually marry, the holy oath and vows are made just between the men: the groom, the Imam (holy leader) and male attendees from the wedding party. The bride has nothing to do with it: she gets married *in absentia*, as it were.
- This ceremony is followed by the formality of giving the ring, where the bride actually gets to meet the man she's already been married to. Then follows the celebration – alcohol free, if you're a particularly keen Muslim – and they live happily

ever after. By decree.

When I read the following in the museum's diorama display on the history of Melaka, it didn't surprise me to see the wording: 'Melaka joined Islam in 1414... and the laws and prohibitions of Islam were implemented in 1424 when Parameswara's son, Sultan Mohammad Shah, took over after his father's death.' Prohibitions? According to the display in the Stadhuys, this word seemed apt. I just hoped that it was my lack of upbringing as a Muslim that made me raise an eyebrow or two at the difference between Malaysian marriage and western marriage.

Other Sights of Melaka

I spent Tuesday 25th wandering round, thoroughly enjoying the feeling of history and cultural significance, and marvelling at the sights of modern Malaysia. I visited the Stadhuys – the Dutch-era town hall – and its museum, where I not only read a complete history of Melaka, I also discovered the correct terms for rice harvesting. You 'thresh' the rice to remove the grains from the mature stalks, and 'winnowing' is the name of the method of throwing the dried grains into the air to remove the husk. Now I could talk to any rice farmers I'd meet with confidence.

I climbed the main hill in Melaka to the ruins of St

Paul's Church, checked out the Porta de Santiago (about the only relic still standing from the original Portuguese fortifications), ate a delicious curry for lunch, bought exotic fruits at the market and did all those things I enjoyed doing in Indonesia but without the hassle. I felt quite light-headed with the effortless way I could glide through the streets, sampling the environment without losing my cool. It was utter bliss.

Wednesday 26th saw more wandering and wondering. Bukit China in the western segment of Melaka is a hill smothered in 12,000 Chinese graves, most of which are in such a state of disrepair that it's impossible to tell who's buried there. Covering 25 hectares (about 62 acres) the hill not only contains huge numbers of traditional Chinese graves, with their extravagant surrounding walls and elaborate gravestones, but also provides a good view of Melaka itself, with its famous but polluted seaways, and ancient and cramped road system. The inscriptions on the graves are interesting too, or at least those that you can make out, and some are even in Roman characters. One of them had two people's names on it, a man and a woman's, but only the man's had dates; the woman's dates were left blank, presumably because she hadn't died yet. That would freak me out: imagine seeing your own gravestone every time you visited your husband's grave, just waiting for those dates to be filled in. Sounds

like something out of *A Christmas Carol*.

Old Melaka, with its side streets, temples and antique shops, is also a delight to walk around, tucked into a bend in the Melaka River, and it gave me a good chance to join in with a local custom: using an umbrella even though it's not raining. I've always trusted my bush hat to stop the ultra-violet from destroying the back of my neck, but an umbrella is even more effective: I felt terribly English strolling round Old Melaka with my umbrella unfurled, but I'm a convert, and it doesn't look stupid in Malaysia, because everybody's doing it. I have to rate my brolly as the most useful travel item after my computer: don't leave home without one.

Malaysian Politics

Written: 26 November 1997

Malaysia is not dissimilar to Indonesia and Singapore in that all these countries have long-serving, non-elected leaders who serve until they're almost dead, and then pass the reins of power onto a well-groomed deputy. There are elections, as in Indonesia, but the National Front party, dominated by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) majority faction, has held power continuously since independence in 1957, and the opposition has all but disappeared: Malaysia is a one-party democracy, and it would take a serious crisis to

foster any change.

The current Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, has been in power since 1981 (having once been expelled and exiled by his party), and he's not going anywhere: his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, is much more liberal, but there's no sign of Mahathir stepping down yet⁴. This has produced an environment where the leader does pretty much what he wants.

To the outsider, the most obvious effect of this democratic dictatorship is the anti-western propaganda. Dr Mahathir, in his personal support of Islam, has to tread a fine line between keeping the Muslim fundamentalists happy, with their calls for a ban on alcohol, gambling, snappy dressing and having a good time, and the Chinese, who make lots of money and gamble like crazy (not to mention the fact that they eat pork, something that Islam bans). A common bond between the Islam of the Malays and the neo-Confucianism of the Chinese is a hatred of the West, even if Mahathir isn't that keen on agreeing that the Chinese are in the same boat as his own Malay people.

Of course, anti-western propaganda is often

⁴ In September 1998, Anwar was sacked and was put on trial on charges of corruption and committing illegal homosexual acts, for which he received a six-year jail sentence. Then, in June 1999, Anwar was put on trial for sodomy, and in July 2000 he was sentenced to a further nine years in jail. Anwar Ibrahim says he was framed, and that the whole thing was a political set-up. Whatever, it leaves Dr Mahathir unchallenged as Malaysia's leader.

hypocritical: Singapore is a good example of the type of economics that accepts the West and flourishes.

Mahathir, however, blames almost everything on the Americans, claiming in his book *The Voice of Asia* that ‘western societies are riddled with single-parent families, which foster incest, with homosexuality, with cohabitation, with unrestrained avarice, with disrespect for others and, of course, rejection of religious teachings and values.’ I haven’t read anything like this since studying Chaucer’s *The Pardoner’s Tale* in school: Mahathir’s vision of Asian Values, as he calls them, are that Asians are hard-working family people who are morally sound, religious and good at making money, and that the West is simply the opposite.

In Malaysia, examples of Mahathir’s opinions abound, from the media to the political stage. Take this example from *The New Straits Times*, Wednesday 26th November 1997, on the ‘Young Times’ page, a page aimed at young people:

American-ology

by Wan Imran Wan Chik

*America here, America there,
America seems to be almost everywhere,
Sticking their noses into other countries’ affairs,
Right down until your very own underwear,*

*Cause they think that this whole world is theirs.
A modern country but with uncivilised people,
Infecting the world with their lifestyles and
ideology,
They live without tradition or moral values,
making everything look so very simple,
Invading the world through weapons of
psychology,
By creating their utopia called Americanology.
'A' serious effect upon the Earth's ecology,
Making fewer friends and more and more
enemies,
By disrupting other countries' peaceful economy,
Without saying 'Excuse me!' or 'I owe you an
apology!'
Advanced in space travel and in astronomy,
Creators of nuclear bombs and war technology,
Heroes only in movies, novels and short stories,
'Cause every last American President needs a
lobotomy.
America is a hero only to fools' eyes,
It is a villain wearing a disguise,
Plaguing the world by telling lies,
Only to be seen by leaders who are wise,
Leaders who listen to their nations' cries.
For those who are foolish America's price they
will pay,*

*To become an uncivilised country but modern in every way,
By gambling their future to be modern and richer today,
As social problems would grow each and every day,
And the countries' identity, cultural and traditional heritage would just seem to fade away,
Which is the only defence against America which has gone far astray.*

Pretty full on, isn't it? To complete the picture, Malaysia practises positive discrimination against non-Malays; Singapore's leaders cite this as the reason for their country leaving the Federation, because Singapore refused to extend these pro-Malay policies to its people, who are mostly Chinese, not Malay. Malaysia is made up mainly of Malays, but the number of other groups – Chinese, Indians and so on – is significant; the government, however, doesn't treat everyone equally in law. For example, non-Malays can find it difficult to go to university in Malaysia due to restrictions imposed on the number places available to them, so gifted 'immigrants' often go abroad for their schooling, to places like Australia and America.

But there is no doubt that Malaysia is thriving, and has managed to create a stable and forward-looking

economy from a post-colonial market that consisted of rubber, tin and timber exports only. Even if its Prime Minister is fond of huge building projects to satisfy his ego, there are plenty of worse regimes in the world: and after Singapore and Brunei it has the highest standard of living and most developed economy in Southeast Asia.

Kuala Lumpur

Written: 30 November 1997

I jumped on the bus for Kuala Lumpur on Thursday 27th November. Kuala Lumpur is the capital of Malaysia, and in the local language the name means ‘muddy confluence’, an apt description of the two rivers that meet in the city centre. Apart from that, though, Kuala Lumpur is a pretty smart place, a far cry from the large conurbations of Indonesia.

KL, as the city is universally known, has a population of just over one million people; however, what KL lacks up for in size of population, it makes up in the size of its skyscrapers. They’re everywhere, they’re huge, and they’re multiplying: wherever you look, KL has sprouted building sites to make the skyline even more interesting.

The most famous of all the skyscrapers is the tallest building in the world, the Petronas Twin Towers. At 451.9m above sea level, it is a monster of chrome and

glass made up of two huge towers, joined by a bridge halfway up. It will, no doubt, be relegated to the second highest building in the world before long (I hear that someone is building a bigger one in Beijing), but until then it's probably more impressive when you know that it's bigger than anything else, because when buildings get above a certain height, they all look the same: simply *monstrously* big. I just pity the poor window cleaners: it's a job on a par with painting the Golden Gate bridge.

The other distinctive landmark is the Menara Kuala Lumpur (otherwise known as the KL Tower) whose design is not a million miles off Toronto's CN Tower, or Sydney's Centrepont. At a height of 421m the Menara is no slouch either, and it has the advantage of having a 360 degree observation deck at the top, where you can look down on the minions below and the countless building projects that are hopefully going to transform KL into a modernist paradise by the Commonwealth Games next year, which Malaysia is hosting.

Observation decks are well named: they're excellent places to observe people. From the heady altitude of 421m, people's reaction to the view is interestingly varied. A common one is 'It makes you feel so insignificant, doesn't it?' which indicates an almost English attitude towards fitting in quietly; 'Isn't it amazing what man can achieve?' shows a propensity for

late-night philosophy and talking crap into the wee hours; ‘I feel sick’ denotes vertigo; and ‘You can see into that woman’s hotel room from here’ can only mean one thing: Boys on Tour.

Monsoon Confluence

Arriving in KL on Thursday, Franco⁵ and I found a place, wandered around exploring, and ended up eating in a steam café. A steam café is not unlike a fondue, except you dip your meat into boiling water rather than oil; it’s a pleasant way to eat, there on the sidewalk, watching the world go by. And it’s a great place to be when the rain kicks in.

I’d heard that KL was susceptible to extreme rain during the monsoon season, but however many harsh storms I sit through, it always amazes me just how much water can fall from the sky in one go. As we cowered under the table’s umbrella – not the most effective shelter, it has to be said – intense black clouds rolled in, the sky ripped open with thunder and lightning, and the heavens opened. We were trapped: unable to leave the shelter of our parasol for fear of being swept away, we lowered it to gain maximum cover. It would have been OK if there hadn’t been a big pot of boiling water in the

⁵ An entertaining Italian whom I met in Melaka, Franco was meeting his girlfriend off the plane the next day and was hoping to use the travelling experience to keep her off the heroin she’d been hooked on until recently. I hope it worked.

middle of the table, filling the umbrella with steam and condensation, raising the humidity to sub-marine levels and turning the storm into an experience I wasn't likely to forget.

In the meantime the road had become a river, literally. Asian city streets have huge curbs and open drains down the road sides, and until now it had been more of an inconvenience than a sensible idea, but one storm in KL and it became obvious why the pavement is a foot above the road: the roads simply disappear in a storm as muddy water rushes down the lanes, washing everything away and spilling into the rivers. But then the rain suddenly stops, the humidity level drops significantly, and within ten minutes all the water has gone: it's as if nothing ever happened. It has to be seen to be believed.

Exploring KL

The next day, with Franco occupied with his new arrival, I wandered the streets of KL alone. The scorching sun shone on streets of choking traffic and gleaming buildings, and it wasn't long before I found myself liking KL considerably. It doesn't have the insanity of Indonesia⁶, but it does have the character that

⁶ I'd started to encounter a larger diversity of travellers, now that I was on a real backpackers' thoroughfare, but most of the people I met hadn't been to Indonesia, either because they had yet to go there, or because they'd skipped it on the way north; and absolutely nobody I

is increasingly hard to find in slick Singapore. The Chinatown area, where I stayed, is just like any other Chinatown in the world – noisy, bustling streets with millions of shops, restaurants, stalls, people and smells – but KL has character beyond Chinatown. The buildings are the main attraction: with everything from colonial architecture (like magnificent Merdeka Square) to local (the many mosques and temples) to ultra-modern (the skyscrapers), KL is most definitely a great place to walk around.

I spent two days just exploring. Some things were just astounding, like the display boards in the Central Market where the department of transport were showing pictures of road accidents to demonstrate to people just how dangerous it can be to drive in the crazy way that Asians do.

Sure, there were the pictures of mangled cars and bikes, blood-stained windscreens and jack-knifed lorries, but the display went much further than that, indeed much further than it would in the UK: there were close-ups of men with crushed skulls, brains leaking out

met had been outside of Sumatra, Java, Bali and Lombok. On the other hand, those who had been to Indonesia and who had also travelled through Southeast Asia were quite adamant that Indonesia is the hardest and most frustrating place to travel in the area, and in the rest of Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent, only India is more challenging. This reassured me quite a bit, after the frustrations I'd felt in the outer reaches of Indonesia, and my later experiences would bear this theory out.

onto the road; photos of bodies so horribly mangled that it was hard to believe that they were human; shots of arms and legs, long parted from their bodies, ripped up like so much meat.

It was horrific, effective and shocking, but all I could think of, when faced with the picture of a man with the top half of his head spread across the white lines like so much meat paste, was, ‘That guy cleaned his teeth before setting out: what a futile thing to do.’ An odd reaction, but we all deal with reality in a different way, I suppose.

Another slice of real life was a display in the main tourist office showing the winners of the World Press Photographer awards. Here were pictures of war zones, famines, sports, science, people and places: a whole variety of newspaper and magazine photographs. But the pictures of collaborators being executed by rebel soldiers (of which there were a number, from all sorts of different conflicts) didn’t shock me half as much as the roadkill pictures: I suppose it’s because it’s hard to relate to war-zone death when you’re a mollycoddled westerner, but seeing road casualties is a bit too close to home. Indeed, one of the organisers came over and talked to me about the exhibition (which was in its first day), asking me what I thought about the photos and which ones I liked best, so I gave him the old spiel about the best photographs being ones that make you look at

otherwise familiar sights in a different way, rather than the ones that simply report an occurrence. When he found out I was a journalist, he was pretty shocked: I suppose you don't get too many journalists hanging out in Malaysia (immigration officers can have a thing about western journalists entering their country, especially when there's something to hide).

KL is home to some delightful colonial architecture, and taking in the sights of Merdeka Square and the Railway Station was an exercise in inventive and flagrant British building. With minarets, towers and Moorish roofing, the area surrounding the square – where the British rulers used to play cricket – seemed oddly appropriate as the sign announcing the coming of the Commonwealth Games fluttered in the breeze. The nearby Lake Gardens, with its muddy lake and not terribly interesting garden landscape, was pleasant, but the highlight had to be the National Museum, where I managed to catch a special exhibit on Infidelity. Among the interesting stories of famous cuckolds and adulterers, and graphic descriptions of punishments meted out to the guilty parties in ancient times, was this wonderful description of the Eskimos' way of dealing with adultery... the thought of the challenge in the final sentence is particularly chilling:

In some societies, a wife's hospitality included her

sexual services. She had no right to refuse such arrangements. On the Aleutian Islands, southwest of Alaska, etiquette required that men should place their wives at the disposal of guests. Among the Eskimo and other societies that practised wife exchange and wife hospitality, the wife had no right to volunteer herself to another man. Such a liaison was adultery and the Eskimo husband would assault the lover, or challenge him to a song contest.

Aren't museums wonderful places?

It was a shame to leave KL, but I would be returning, albeit briefly, on my way back from my next destination: the tropical jungle of Taman Negara. By all accounts I was going to be able to be well and truly away from the rat race there, so I bought a week's worth of food, packed my bags and, the next morning, jumped on the bus bound for the biggest National Park in Malaysia.

Rainforest Statistics

Written: 6 December 1997

Appreciating a jungle from the inside is a little different from reading about it, but the following facts that I've managed to glean from museums and books are

interesting in their own right, especially when you consider the political implications. Check out these selected facts about Peninsula Malaysia's tropical rainforests, as they are more scientifically called.

- Despite my experience to the contrary, the annual rainfall in Taman Negara isn't that big, being between 2200 and 3800mm a year (for comparison, Milford in New Zealand gets over 8000mm a year). And, surprisingly, the temperature is a pleasant and stable 26°C in the day and 22°C at night (or 72°F and 79°F for Fahrenheit fans). However, the humidity is always around 90 per cent, whatever the precipitation and temperature, and that's why it's so bloody uncomfortable.
- The amount of sunshine doesn't make that much difference to the walker; as little as two per cent of sunlight makes it through the canopy to the forest floor, which explains why I was mostly unable to use my camera on the walk. It also explains the constant temperature under the canopy; it's like a greenhouse that doesn't let too much heat in, or too much out.
- Malaysia seems to be ahead of even Australia

when it comes to obsession with size; in KL there's the tallest building in the world, and connecting the island of Penang to the mainland is the longest bridge in Asia. Taman Negara itself clocks in a few world-beating wonders too; it is home to the world's largest flower, the Rafflesia, which has been known to grow up to 97cm across (3 ft) and weigh up to 9kg; the resort's 450m canopy walkway, a hanging walkway through the top layer of the rainforest, is the world's longest; the resident Atlas moth, with its 25cm wingspan, is one of the biggest moths in the world; there's a 55cm stick insect in the park, and yes, you guessed it, it's the biggest one in the world; the *gaur*, the largest species of wild cattle in the world, hangs around here too; and you can also find the *tualang*, the world's tallest tropical tree species, clocking in at a height of 80m. And on top of these record-breakers, there are the 20cm-long cicadas, the katydids, the grasshoppers and the crickets who are responsible for the cacophony of background screeching, surely one of the loudest noises in the world after Indonesian bus music; one of the crickets even builds itself a concave amphitheatre to amplify the sound of its legs rubbing, just in case you thought you might be able to sleep out there...

- There are between 300 and 600 Orang Asli in the park, all of them members of the Bateq tribe. Of these, 150 are still fully nomadic, roaming within the boundaries of the park. However, it won't be long before modern intrusion does away with this way of life, whatever the park's authorities say; the government's intention to improve the population's standard of living applies to *everyone*, even if the people themselves might be happier in the jungle than in state housing.
- Peninsular Malaysia has one of the most biologically diverse environments on the planet. Peninsular Malaysia contains over 200 species of mammals, whereas Europe, 80 times larger, has only 170 native species; it contains more than 1000 species of butterfly, compared to the USA's 763, and the UK's 68; it contains 2398 species of tree, 27 per cent of which are endemic, whereas the Netherlands, for example, only has 30 native species; it contains 7900 species of seed plants, while the UK, which is 2.3 times bigger, has only 1430 species; it contains over 600 species of bird, compared to 470 in Europe; and it contains over 250 species of reptile, including 125 species of snake (21 of which are poisonous), whereas Europe has fewer than 90; and then there are over

800 species of orchid, over 200 species of palm, 90 types of frog, 150,000 types of insect – and they keep discovering more and more.

- However, it's amazing how just one short-sighted species can manage to threaten the existence of so much diversity. Prime Minister Mahathir's government seems blissfully unaware of the danger its logging programmes pose to the continued survival of this amazing diversity (or, rather, it chooses to ignore it). It's true that most of the logging in Malaysia takes place in Sarawak in northern Borneo, but it's a worrying fact that Malaysia is destroying its unprotected rainforests throughout the country; about 60 per cent of the country's rainforests have been logged, and estimates give Sarawak's forests five to ten years before they've all been logged. It's true that the logging was originally started by the British in the 1930s, and it's also true that it's rather unfair to sit on one's ecological high-horse as a member of the developed world while criticising a developing nation for trying to create wealth through exploiting its own natural resources, but some things are simply not on, such as the displacement of Sarawak's Dayak tribes to make way for logging concessions without even so

much as a nod in the direction of human rights. Whatever the politics, I was amazed to read the following in the Taman Negara Information Centre:

The threat to the rainforests... Is there anything you can do? YES! There is something very important you can do! No matter what country you come from, you can help by restricting the number of children you have. All pressures on rainforest come from one basic cause: population increase. The more people we have in the world, the more the forested land is needed for other purposes. It is as simple as that. The future of the Malaysian rainforest is up to YOU.'

I believe this requires no comment when it's a stated government policy to increase Malaysia's population from the current 19.5 million to 70 million by 2020.

- We'll end with a wonderful little quote from the meditation master himself, Gautama Buddha:

The forest is a peculiar organism of unlimited kindness and benevolence that makes no demands for its sustenance and extends generously the

products of its life activity; it affords protection to all beings, offering shade even to the axe-man who destroys it.

Well said, Buddha. Let's hope Mahathir's Muslim Malaysia doesn't simply ignore the diversity of human thought, too.

Taman Negara

Written: 8 December 1997

Malaysian place names are fairly uninspired. From Muddy Confluence I went to National Park; yes, Taman Negara literally means 'Park National', a whoppingly original name for a National Park, don't you think? I wondered if I'd soon be crossing River Sungai on my way up Mt Gunung on beautiful Pulau Island...

The bus journey from KL to the jetty at Kuala Temering was fairly uneventful; I slept through most of it, thankfully. The only way to get into Taman Negara is by a three-hour boat trip up the Sungai Temering, as there are no roads, a pretty far-sighted move by the environmental department, one of the few nods in the direction of conservation that you'll see in Malaysia. On arrival I sorted out the business of a permit and booking nights in the relevant huts – wading through reams of bureaucratically nonsensical paperwork in the process –

rented a cooker and pot, and packed my bag. For some reason it felt heavier than normal, by a long way; I've been on walks much longer than six days, and I swear I didn't need this much junk. Perhaps packing two long novels (Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* and Nicholas Evans' *The Horse Whisperer*), a computer and lots of food was the reason, but I needed my recreation out there in the jungle...

I dined at Wan's Floating Restaurant, recommended to me by an American called John whom I'd befriended in Melaka. Indeed, it proved to be the hotspot of Kuala Tahan (the home to Park HQ and the fancy Taman Negara Resort, the Malaysian answer to Kakadu's Jabiru) and before long I was surrounded by warbling Germans, Dutch, Indians and locals. I chatted to Wan for a bit, but something in me didn't want conversation; it was time I buggered off into the jungle for a bit of solitude among the flora and fauna. Sod the people; I wanted Mother Nature.

And I got her. Because central Peninsula Malaysia has been free of such excitements as seismic activity, ice ages or man's never-ending quest for wood, Taman Negara contains the oldest tropical jungle⁷ in the world,

⁷ Although Taman Negara is properly referred to as a rainforest – as in tropical rainforest, semi-tropical rainforest and temperate rainforest – I think 'jungle' sums it up better. The word jungle is defined in the dictionary as 'thick, tropical forest', and so it applies perfectly to Taman Negara. It's probably less scientific than rainforest, but I want to emphasise how different this place is to the other rainforests I've

some 130 million years old, and it looks like it. After 130 million years the trees, vines, shrubs and bush bastards have evolved into something quite, quite different, and a whole lot nastier.

Into the Jungle

The trek into the jungle was pure hell. I'd set my sights on the lodge at Kuala Perkai, some 28km from park headquarters, as a good place to get away from it all, and reckoned that two days' walking, one of 11km (staying the night in a hide called Bumbun Kumbang) and one of 17km, would be fairly acceptable. How little I knew of the rigours of hardcore tropical jungle; the first day took a little over five-and-a-half hours of hard slog, and the second a whopping nine hours.

It's not all unpleasantries in the jungle, though. Despite the fact that the going was tough, it was a unique and quite fascinating walk. My destination, a fishing lodge on the confluence of Sungai Keniam and Sungai Perkai called Kuala Perkai (see the logic of Malaysian place names?), had been described as an isolated paradise by the ever-effusive John, and although I felt that was a bit of an overstatement, it certainly was pretty. Actually, he'd said it would be a perfect place for a honeymoon, but seeing the lodge and remembering that John was from a country whose

explored. Taman Negara truly is a jungle.

divorce rate is among the highest in the western world (if not the highest), I remembered too late that objectivity is always subjective when it comes to the opinions of travellers.

The journey was not without its interesting parts. My stay in the hide⁸ at Bumbun Kembang was considerably enlivened by the presence of a white cat, who had obviously decided he was living there and that was that. As I stomped up the stairs to the hide and dumped my dripping pack on the floor, the cat shot me the look of a superior being, as if to say, ‘I live here, so don’t get any ideas, buster.’

‘Yeah, well I’ve paid my five ringgit to stay here, which is more than you have, cat,’ I replied. ‘And don’t get any ideas about stealing my food in the middle of the night.’

‘Who, me?’ yawned the cat, wide-eyed and innocent. ‘I’m a cat of the jungle, my friend, and I catch my own food. So there.’

‘And no pissing in the corner, either,’ I said, noticing an unpleasantly familiar smell coming from the corner where it sat.

‘Harrumph,’ said the cat, scratching his neck and

⁸ Hides are so called because they are perched high up on stilts, affording a good view of a grassy patch which wildlife frequents only when nobody is in the hide, of course. It wasn’t as pleasant as the fishing lodge, but it served its purpose as a break in the walk, and it did have a pretty view.

studiously turning away from me, staring out of the window as if I didn't exist. Not surprisingly he came and went as he pleased, and I hid my food in the mattress locker, which he obviously hadn't mastered yet.

The only tourists I saw were a young couple, fleetingly, whom I met just five minutes from the hide, and a Kuala Lumpur man called Pati who also stayed the night in Bumbun Kembang. I did come across a good example of the tourist trade at Keniam Lodge, a decent-sized collection of luxury huts and central eating areas that looked amazingly tranquil in this, the closed season. All that was left of the tourists was a menu board showing overpriced standard meals, and a sign tacked up saying, 'Closed from 1.11.97 to 31.12.97.' I dumped my pack, discovered flowing water in the toilets, and had a cup of tea, overlooking a picturesque bend in the Sungai Trenggan. It felt like something out of *The Shining*, this ghost town of a resort, normally bubbling with life but now silent and home only to spiders and piles of leaves. It was strangely moving.

The Fishing Lodge

I was soon back on the trail, getting hopelessly lost and having to ask for help from the locals, but I soon arrived at Kuala Permai. I spent two full days at the fishing lodge, and it rained for almost all of that time. I found

myself writing a lot (luckily I'd packed my computer) and reading a lot (fortunately *A Suitable Boy* is a monster of a novel). My clothes and pack steadfastly refused to dry out, I ate noodles and pasta in various unexciting combinations, and it wasn't long before I was bored out of my tiny skull.

It takes a special kind of person to really enjoy having nothing to do. Take sitting on the beach, for example; even if it's a two-week holiday between executive stresses, I still get frustrated and bored, and end up getting drunk or going out of my mind, often at the same time. The jungle wasn't quite this bad, but sitting on a verandah, watching the river flow by while the wildlife chorused around me, was only pleasant, not exactly riveting. Despite the fact that I knew I was going to have to go through hell again, I was keen to get back on the track.

On Friday 5th December I hauled out from the lodge, packing my still-wet belongings into my still-damp pack, squelching into my still-sodden boots and starting off down the still-drenched track. The trek back to Bumbun Kumbang was distinctly easier the second time round; it always goes more smoothly when you're fitter, have a lighter pack and know the route, and this time I didn't bother to explore the ancient limestone caves I'd checked out on the way in, so I arrived at the hide with plenty of daylight to spare. This was

fortuitous; the leeches had obviously learned a few new tricks, because when I took off my socks, there were maybe five on each foot, merrily sucking away. During the trek I'd had the usual problems, and one had even managed to climb up my leg and suck where the sun doesn't shine⁹. I needed the extra time to burn them off and tend to my wounds.

There was one more thing that drove me mad, though, mad enough to make me stick my earplugs in when I arrived at the hide. All day – I swear, there was no break – I had something buzzing round my left ear. I have no idea why my left ear was singled out for such attention, or what kind of buzzing insect it was, but however energetically I waved my arms around and swatted the air, I couldn't connect with anything, and instead developed a sympathetic buzzing in my brain that kept going well after the walking had stopped. The earplugs helped, but I couldn't help being reminded of a particularly persistent blowfly that did the same thing as I hauled my way up Katherine Gorge in Australia's Northern Territory. My left side must smell more divine than my right... or is it the other way around for flies? Not surprisingly, the resident cat was no help at all; all he did was look me up and down, sneer and tell me, in no uncertain terms, to buzz off.

⁹ A bit higher up and he'd have been performing a service that desperate men pay for. Walking can be such a thrill!

I returned to civilisation on Saturday 6th to find that after paying for my cooker and locker rental, I was broke. Whoops. Luckily the local glossy resort cashed a cheque for me – at a rate which had shot up considerably in my favour in the six days I'd been in the jungle due to the developing currency crisis – so it wasn't long before I was able to kick back, relax and enjoy the jungle from a safe distance. There are no leeches in Wan's Floating Restaurant, and I spent a very pleasant evening there with a couple from Perth whom I'd met while cashing up; we whiled away the night chatting about Kalgoorlie and Western Australia, and dreaming wistfully of the dry night air in the Australian desert.

Typically, the weather cleared up for my return, enabling me to see the moon and stars for the first time in ages. I sat by the river, gazing at the constellations, and to my amazement spotted the distinctive w-shape of Cassiopeia, a constellation I hadn't seen since October 1995. I used to know where all the various pointers in Cassiopeia led to, but all I could think of was how much I missed the sky when I couldn't see it. Which now, of course, I could.

Walking the Rainforest

Written: 6 December 1997

Here are a few highlights from the place that orang-utans, tigers and elephants call home: the Malaysian rainforest of Taman Negara.

Humidity

You hear about the humidity in the tropics, but unless you've been deep into the jungle, you haven't got a clue. The common perception is that humidity makes you sweat, but that's not strictly true; humidity makes you condense.

Ten minutes into my first day I was drenched, sweat dripping off my nose and running into my eyes, stinging slightly where it had mixed with remnants of soap and shampoo from the morning ablutions. The sweat patches spread from the centre of my chest – which is permanently slightly wet in the tropics, even in cities – across my shoulders, down my back and right up into the collar line; if I'd been a well-endowed woman, I'd have been attracting some pretty lewd looks by this stage.

Every hour or so I would have to stop to wring out my T-shirt and shorts, yielding about a pint of brownish water every time. Every five minutes I could squeeze my handkerchief in my pocket and it would be as wet as if I had dunked it in a river. I began to worry that I

wasn't going to be able to keep up the liquid intake at this level, but I kept on drinking at my usual pace, feeling no more thirsty than on any other walk (and indeed, I drank much less than I did in places like Katherine Gorge or Wilpena Pound). It soon became apparent that the liquid pouring off me, into my pack and down into my boots where the socks squelched noisily, was simply water in the air condensing on my skin.

As if to confirm my fears, I met a young couple who had taken the boat to one of the hides I passed on the way, just for an hour's jungle experience. They stopped for a chat, sounded suitably impressed at my progress, and watched amazed as I wrung out the bottom of my T-shirt. 'Have you been swimming?' the girl asked. I just laughed.

It wasn't so funny after two days of walking through the humidity. My crotch and armpits were so sore from the constant rubbing and sweat that I thought I'd never manage to walk again; prickly heat's one thing, but this was more like the salt sores I got from a month on the south Pacific. All part of the territory, I suppose.

Rain

This isn't a whinge; trekking into the jungle and moaning about the weather would be like visiting a big

city and moaning about the crowds, but the rain in tropical jungle deserves a mention.

You first hear it as a rustle in the treetops; it sounds like a gentle breeze. As it gets heavier it becomes obvious that this is no breeze, it's something more tangible, but on the jungle floor nothing reaches you, except maybe the odd leaf loosened by the downpour. The only signs of rain are increased humidity, a dimming of the already dim light, the crashing of branches tumbling to the ground and the rumbling of distant thunder, sounds which aren't too dissimilar.

But step into a gap in the jungle, where normally you would be greeted by a tantalising glimpse of the sky and a confirmation that there is still a world out there, and you'll notice the rain. It comes in bursts, bursts so heavy that as soon as it starts raining, the rivers start to flow with brownish water and the mud becomes a death trap. It's almost scary, especially when rain brings out the following nasties...

Leeches

As I have said many times before, every park has its resident pest, be it the dingo, the rat, the monkey or the sandfly, but in Taman Negara it's the leech.

Ask most people what they fear most about the idea of hacking through the jungle, and it's not tigers or elephants, it's the leech, despite the fact that the former

two are far more dangerous. The concept of a slug attaching itself to your skin and sucking out your blood is fairly repugnant, and before I hit the jungle, I shared that feeling. Having been sucked dry by all sorts of shapes and sizes of leech, I'm actually quite fond of the buggers.

Leeches are incredible beasts. Mostly active just after it rains – which is pretty much all of the time in the jungle – they look like brown-green two-inch strands of instant noodle, lurking in the undergrowth. Put your foot down for more than ten seconds, and you're spotted; the leeches will come from all around like something out of a horror movie. A leech has a foot and a head, and both ends grip like buggery; it moves around by stretching out with its head, sniffing the air in search of blood, and when it's satisfied it knows where to go, it plonks its head down on the ground, gripping whatever it touches, and pulls its foot to its head, attaches the foot to the ground, and raises its head in search of the next step. It's like watching a strange kind of slinky, and the way it holds its head in the air, sniffing, is quite eerie. When it decides that it's time to feed, the head burrows into your skin while the foot holds on, and it sits there until it fills up.

Leeches just love leather, and will rush towards your shoes when you stop for a breather; there's something quite manic about their movements, trying to

reach you before you set off again. It makes you wonder how they survive; there aren't that many beasts in the jungle, surely? But survive they do, and they even manage to attack humans, surely one of their more demanding clients, with great success. They climb up your boots, slinking towards your socks, and once buried inside the folds of wool they're impossible to see. And now they've got a number of options.

The first option is to go straight for the flesh, through the sock; this has the disadvantage of it being easy for the human to rip the leech off his flesh; just pull off the sock. The second option is to climb up the leg and go for the copious exposed flesh of the shin or even the thigh, a good bet for guaranteed blood, but a little overexposed in the event that the human feels the teeth sink in and wants to burn the leech off with a match. The third option, and the most successful as far as the leech is concerned, is to bury itself down inside the sock, next to the skin, and dig in, well out of sight; the only disadvantage here is that if the human slips and the shoe presses against the skin where the leech happens to be, it's a messy way to die.

I managed to experience all three methods of attack. I burned a couple off with matches; I ripped a few off by removing my sock; and I accidentally crushed a few inside my boots. I soon learned, though, that the easiest way to deal with a leech is to let the little sucker hang

on; you won't miss the blood, but best of all you won't create a wound that refuses to stop bleeding. When they latch on, leeches inject you with an anti-coagulant, not one as irritating as the mosquito brand, but one that's much more effective at making the blood flow. Rip a leech off, and not only does he take away a chunk of flesh in his teeth, he'll leave you with a bloody mess that takes maybe half an hour to stop bleeding. If you let him take his fill, then he drops off automatically, removing his teeth neatly and leaving you a wound that seems to heal much more quickly. Besides, trying to pull a leech off your skin is a tricky proposition at the best of times; as soon as you remove it, it latches itself onto your finger; pull it off with the other hand, and it attaches itself to that one. It's like trying to get rid of a long piece of extremely sticky Sellotape, except you can't just roll it into a ball and throw it away; unlike Sellotape, leeches just don't give up, and they never lose their stickiness.

As I plodded along the path on day 2, I got a big 'un on the front of my shin, a surprisingly good source for blood (judging by the amount dripping down my leg, regardless of the leech's best efforts to suck it all up). I watched him grow from noodle-thick to maybe half the width of my little finger, and as I sat down on a log for lunch, he decided that enough was enough and dropped off into the undergrowth. I swear that if a leech could

hold his stomach and burp, this one would have done so; his struggle to walk away was a painfully familiar sight, the sign of a serious overfeed. Well, good for him.

Ants

Ants are no big deal, right? We see them every day, milling around the garden, clearing up the detritus of nature and recycling it endlessly. Who could be scared of ants?

Well, me for a start. Sure, little ants are nothing more than a nuisance, and then only when they discover the sugar bowl, but out there in the tropical jungle, you've never seen anything like it. The ants are an inch and a half long, I kid you not. At this size you can tell a hell of a lot about an animal, and one thing that's obvious is its attitude, and big ants have plenty of that.

I came across one particularly big group on a five-minute break somewhere in the middle of nowhere. I sat down on the path, and this delegation of five huge ants started plodding down the tree next to me, obviously intent on finding out my business and whether I had the correct permits to be there; I could see their jaws, and it made me nervous. I was on the point of trying to sign them up for a major role in the next production of *Revenge of the Mutant Mandibles* when one of them waved an Equity card at me and told me to beat it; they already had a contract to star in *Jaws IV* and I was

sitting on their set.

I buggered off pronto. There's nothing scarier than an acting ant in one of his moods, especially when he's chomping his grapplers at you.

Mozzies

I include the lovable mozzie in this list simply because I have to get in an anti-mosquito dig at every opportunity. Not only are the tropical mozzies plague-like in their proportions, they have the added bonus of possibly being malarial. To be honest, the chances of getting malaria in Peninsular Malaysia are incredibly slim, but where there's a chance, there's a chance, and it's just another challenge to rise to.

Still, I haven't met a mozzie who can penetrate the Dettol and baby oil mixture¹⁰. Unless the sweat has washed it off first, of course...

Spiders

I don't mention spiders because they're nasty, spindly and poisonous, and make lots of people scream and run a mile. Personally I'm more spooked by cockroaches than spiders, if only because it takes a hell of a lot more

¹⁰ A handy tip I picked up in Shark Bay. Take 70 per cent baby oil and 30 per cent Dettol, mix and smear on your body for the ultimate insect repellent. The sandflies stick to the baby oil and die, and the mozzies simply hate the smell of disinfectant. It worked a treat for me in Australia and New Zealand, and it beats paying a fortune for normal sprays. It's more effective, too.

to kill a cockroach than a spider; no, spiders are included here because of their webs.

Take a spider, a perfectly good path and millions of square metres of jungle, and the chances are that the spider will string his web across the path. Perhaps the chances of catching flies there are better, but for the solo walker on an under-used path, webs are a pain. In Taman Negara, every few minutes I was pulling web off my face and brushing irate spiders off my shoulders.

Spider's web doesn't taste nice, isn't nutritious, and makes having a beard a right royal pain. There is one good thing about it, though; it indicates that nobody else has been along that path recently, so at least it means you're going to have some peace and quiet while you sit down and pull the strands out of your hair...

Kilometre Markers

These are a good thing, unless they lie. Then they are a bad thing. A very, very bad thing.

I have never had a track-based walk where progress was so slow as my walk in Taman Negara; only in the Pyke was the going tougher, and there the track had long been washed away. On a good stretch of ground – the Bada Valley, say, or Seventy-Five Mile Beach – a good average is about six kilometres in one hour, a rate I can keep up almost all day if the track is fairly flat. Add in mountains or valleys and the rate goes right down, but

even then it's not too bad; when climbing Rinjani the rate was still pretty good. In the jungle of Taman Negara, I was lucky to complete two kilometres in an hour.

This wouldn't be so bad, but when the kilometre markers are set up so that one minute it's 3.6km to your destination, and after half an hour of hard slog it's still 3.6km, you wonder if the person putting up the signs actually bothered to do the walk himself. Add to that the fact that there are loads of ways to get lost in the jungle, and it's a right royal botch up. It's a good job my tracking skills are pretty good; I was able to follow John's footprints for a lot of the way, even though they were about two weeks old. Looks like he had some pretty decent boots on, and a bloody heavy pack too...

Fallen Trees

Trees die, fall, rot and turn into topsoil; that's the essence of the jungle, the way it constantly recycles its nutrients, the reason that fungus and insects play such an important role in the cycle of life here. But fallen trees can really get on your nerves if you're not into eating dead wood.

Every five minutes I came upon a tree across the track. Some were easy to cross – just a stride over and onto the next one. But some of the fallen monsters were not only huge obstacles in their own right, they were

half rotten, swallowing whole legs if you stood on the wrong part, and smothered in beautifully coloured and probably poisonous toadstools and mushrooms. And as for some of the insects who live inside the honeycombed trunks... yuk! Come to think of it, that's probably how I managed to get so many leeches.

Actually, the only thing worse than a tree across the path is bamboo. Bamboo grows in huge clumps the size of a house, and with thick branches of maybe three-inches across, when it falls across a path it's like a prison. Add in the inconvenience of a backpack, and crawling through bamboo ends up like something out of *It's a Knockout*. Without the prizes.

Rivers and Streams

An essential part of any ecosystem, streams are not only a wet experience, they're muddy too. Stepping cleanly through a stream isn't an option; on each bank the mud oozes over your ankles, threatening to suck you in further if you're not quick enough.

This is fine after a while, because you're so wet you no longer care about mud, water or other slimy things. But the things that really hurt about streams are the steep banks; descending is more like skiing than tramping, and ascending is as close to volcano walking as you will get in the jungle; it's definitely one step up, two steps down. More than anything the streams were

the cause of my slow progress through the jungle. Still, without them I would have died of thirst, so I can't really complain, can I?

Meeting the Orang Asli

Written: 2 December 1997

It was two days into my six-day solo trek through the ancient rainforests of Taman Negara that I came across the Orang Asli. *Orang* means 'man' in its generic sense – hence 'orang-utan', or 'man of the jungle' – and the Orang Asli are the original inhabitants of the jungle. Evidence of their existence was obvious from the number of temporary shelters dotted around the place, mainly lean-tos with woven-leaf roofs that could be lowered above a sleeping body to keep out anything except horizontal rain, an unlikely occurrence in the jungle.

As I was nearing my final destination, Kuala Perikai – at least, that's what the kilometre markers were telling me – the path suddenly disappeared into an almighty thicket. Normally this is down to a tree-fall or bamboo collapse and most of the time it's pretty obvious where the path is supposed to go. This time it wasn't obvious at all.

Hacking through the thicket, I felt the strange sensation that I was being watched. And sure enough, I

was; there was this half-naked black man, looking on with a serious expression. I suddenly felt silly and self-conscious; here I was, a tourist with all the hiking gear, and I couldn't find the path. I must have looked pretty stupid.

'Hello,' he said, and before I could believe my luck at having run into the only Orang Asli who spoke English, I remembered that 'hello' is the usual greeting in multi-racial Malaysia.

'Hello,' I replied, trying to look confident and in control. 'Kuala Permai?' I asked, waving my arms around as if to say, 'Where the hell am I?'

He pointed into the thicket, a trace of a smile on his lips, and resumed his task of chopping wood, or whatever he was up to. I noticed that although his skin was pretty much the same colour as most Malaysians – it was possibly slightly darker – his hair and face were those of the Aboriginal Australian, with a frizzy microphone of black curls, and a boxer's nose squashed into the middle of his face. It was such a shock after seeing only brown Melanesian people in Asia that I had to stop myself from staring.

Pushing through the undergrowth, I spotted a roof. I couldn't be there already, surely, and the sound of children shouting and laughing confused me further; the ranger had said I'd be alone out here. It took a couple of seconds for me to register that I'd stumbled into the

middle of an Orang Asli settlement.

There were about five or six huts, made up of thatched-leaf walls and roofs, and dotted about were old men, women and children, scantily dressed in looped sarongs¹¹. They all had the Aboriginal features I'd noticed in the woodsman, and they all looked equally surprised to see me.

'Kuala Perkai?' I mumbled, while they stared. The response was less than overwhelming; they had no idea what I was talking about, and faced with a village full of people gawping at me, my mind raced. Half-remembered stories of the first western explorers of the rainforests jumped into my head, and although I knew that the Orang Asli weren't cannibals, my imagination was more than willing to ignore the facts after hours walking through the jungle. The women jabbering in a nearby hut, stirring boiling pots of water, didn't exactly help to make me feel at home either.

'Kuala Perkai?' I repeated, wondering if I was pronouncing the words totally wrong. Then I heard the sweetest sound; a young man stepped forward and said, 'Where you go?' I could have fallen down and worshipped him, but instead I tried it again. 'Kuala Perkai,' I said.

¹¹ Sarongs with their ends sewn together to form a kind of cylinder, into which you step and pull the garment over your shoulders; I hadn't seen this design since Tana Toraja in Sulawesi.

‘Den you go dis way,’ he said, and started off down a path that led out of the village. The entire population of the village stood and stared as we wandered off, either because they didn’t quite know what to make of me, or because they knew exactly what to make of me and it involved diced potatoes and chopped onions. ‘Dis way to Kuala Perkai,’ my guide said.

I commented on his excellent English, and he said he ‘learn Ingerris from my boss, he Germany, he learn me Ingerris.’ Apparently an enterprising German lived at the resort, had learned the Orang Asli language, and now brought tourists to see various settlements out in the jungle. It seemed I was talking to his protégé.

‘He bring turis here, maybe five hundred in one year,’ said my guide. ‘I learn him our language, and he learn me Ingerris. Here, you go dis way, about one and half kilometre to Kuala Perkai.’

I thanked him profusely – probably too profusely given my relief at finding my initial paranoia completely unfounded – but he seemed pleased enough, and after passing the sign that said ‘Kuala Perkai 2km’, I thanked my lucky stars that soon I’d be there. And soon I was.

The Cameron Highlands

Written: 12 December 1997

I left Taman Negara on the morning of Monday 8th,

churning back down the river to the outside world. Despite geographical logic, I had to backtrack to Kuala Lumpur to head north again, so after a bit of bus juggling, another night in the capital and yet more bus travel, I ended up in the Cameron Highlands on Tuesday 9th.

I also managed to team up with a similarly keen tramper called Charlie, a fellow Pommy who had just spend a year in New Zealand hiking almost every track in the known universe, and we combined plans for Christmas and helped make each other's minds up about what on earth we were going to do for the festive season...

The Cameron Highlands are in northwest Peninsular Malaysia, and they're a prime tourist spot. Being at a height of around 1500m (4500 ft) they're cool – in terms of temperature, not necessarily in terms of street-cred – and a good place to get away from the tropical heat. With a temperature range of between 10 and 23°C and not a great deal of humidity, I thought I'd died and gone to heaven: the local farms reflect the climate too, with tea, various vegetables, citrus fruits, coffee and mushrooms lining the hills. It was a pleasant place to relax, meet some other travellers after the isolation on Taman Negara, and make up some kind of plan.

Gently rolling hills, cool days, tea plantations and plenty of Indian and Malay restaurants filled our days, a

pleasant way to relax in anyone's book. On the second day we tramped into the surrounding forest, studiously avoiding anything too strenuous after the rigours of Taman Negara: in fact, on one trail we totally lost the track, and after spending half an hour trying to find where it went, we shrugged and simply turned around. Normally we'd have bush-bashed in the right magnetic direction, but even hardcore walkers like Charlie and me have to take a holiday once in a while.

The Company of Travellers

Written: 12 December 1997

Perhaps I will permit myself another whinge here, because this thing about 'other travellers' is beginning to frustrate me considerably. I've already mentioned how inane the conversation of other travellers can sometimes be on the main travellers' route through Southeast Asia, but I think it is more my problem than theirs. Every travel-orientated conversation seems the same; it starts off with 'Where have you just come from?' swiftly followed by 'Where are you heading?' and 'How long have you been travelling?' and continues with 'So, which countries have you visited?' And the worst type of conversation occurs when one traveller gets so stuck inside his own frame of reference that he doesn't notice the eyes glazing all around him. Try this,

a genuine excerpt from someone suffering from Boring Traveller Syndrome and inflicting it on anyone in earshot:

‘I’ll probably end up popping back into Singapore, to renew the Malaysian visa, if nothing else, because you get a month’s visa extension in Sarawak, but I don’t know if you need to have a full mainland visa before going into Sarawak, and of course I can go into Brunei and back into Malaysia, but then Brunei is really expensive and probably not worth more than a few days – we’re all on a budget, you know! – and there are no direct roads into Brunei from Sabah or Sarawak so you have to take the ferry, and then there’s always the question of flying from Peninsular Malaysia into Kuching in Sarawak and back from Kota Kinabalu in Sabah, which costs more if you buy the tickets in Singapore rather than Johor Bahru, which is only a few dollars on the bus over the causeway and saves you heaps, and they never ask for an onward ticket to get into Malaysia, even though you’re supposed to have one, unlike in Indonesia where they always ask you for an onward ticket, and you only get a two-month visa, which is never enough to see the whole lot, so you have to leave the country and re-enter by flying to Darwin from Timor and back into Indonesia, as long as you first get an Australian visa, which is a different matter altogether...’

This type of conversation doesn't interest me much any more, if only because I've heard it so many times before, and travel logistics are only interesting when you discover them yourself *en route*. I've heard every possible story about Australia, New Zealand, Southeast Asia and India – or at least it seems that way – and it's rare I find someone who really makes me stop in my tracks and think, 'Wow, this guy's an interesting character.' If I do, I tend to get into a conversation with them and team up for a while, as with Charlie, who proved more interesting and on my wavelength than many a Kiwi Experience protégé.

Perhaps the most annoying thing, though, is the fixation with how long you've been 'on the road'. There's an instant class system based on experience that permeates any gathering of travellers, and as travellers who've been at it for more than two years are pretty rare, someone like me elicits a bit of a dazed silence when I mention I've done this, been there and am going there for this long. It's disconcerting, and even if I do meet someone else who's done heaps, a sizeable number of them manage to be so smug about their achievements that they're unbearable. These days I tend to keep quiet about what I've done unless someone specifically asks: the bragging backpacker is a sorry breed indeed, and perhaps that's why I'm getting increasingly disillusioned about my fellow travellers. They're all so

full of themselves and simply don't want to hear from someone who's done anything that might make their travels look mundane. Sod 'em.

The Cavalier Roundhead

Written: 16 December 1997

Charlie and I boarded the ferry to Pulau Pangkor with plenty of time to spare, ready for a few days of serious relaxation. We sat together on the crowded ferry, lone white faces in a sea of Malay weekend holidaymakers (it being school holidays in this, the latter half of December), and while Charlie chatted to an English-speaking and very interesting Malay on his left, I stared out to sea, unable to hear the conversation above the cacophony of the engines. That's when I noticed the little boy over on the other side of the cabin.

He looked miserable, truly distraught. His mum was hugging him and stroking his hair, pulling strands of fringe off his slightly sweating forehead, and patting his hand in a show of devoted attention. The boy's left hand gripped a handful of material, which I noticed was part of a sarong that hung around his waist: I thought he just wanted something to hold on to, but his mother kept checking his grip on the garment, making sure he held it tightly as if his life depended on it. I wondered if he'd damaged the muscles in his hand or had been treated for

an infection of the joints. Whatever it was, it obviously hurt.

The boat swayed and shuddered on its half-hour trip across to the island, and during this time the young boy – who couldn't have been more than 11 or 12 – started to look more and more pained. His mother was sympathetic, but his father and another man looked more fatalistic, as if the boy's suffering was just one of those facts of life; on the other hand, other men in the compartment looked as if they fully understood the boy's pain, and exchanged knowing glances with each other of a type that I've only seen when you see someone get kicked in the crotch¹². The father and his companion toyed with a bag of capsules, probably antibiotics, but I couldn't for the life of me understand what an ill little boy was doing on the boat, obviously in a distressed state.

Not far from land, the boy began to cry. He was obviously trying very hard to keep his feelings bottled up, but some kind of pain was hurting him badly. He lay down, putting his head in his mother's lap while she dried his tears with a handkerchief, carefully ensuring his continued grip on his sarong. I felt extremely sorry for him: whenever he glanced at me, which was fairly

¹² We can't help it. In a movie, on the footy pitch, in a pub brawl: if men see another man get whacked in the central processing unit, they universally cringe in empathy. There is no pain worse than a bruised bollock, as every footballer will tell you.

often as we were sitting opposite each other, he looked almost ashamed to be suffering, but his eyes told of serious agony. He seemed to assume that I knew exactly what he was going through.

Just then Charlie leaned over. ‘You see that boy over there?’ he asked. I nodded. ‘Guess what.’

‘What?’ I asked.

‘He’s just been circumcised.’

I sucked in my breath, and it all clicked into place. Although I had no idea of his suffering, I knew that it would be hard to think of a more painful place to have an operation. Being male made us almost kindred spirits.

‘Looks like his local anaesthetic’s wearing off,’ continued Charlie, a veritable encyclopaedia on the subject thanks to his informative neighbour. ‘It’s a religious thing: Muslims either get the chop when they’re born, or between the ages of ten and 12. By the way, did you know that in America babies are automatically circumcised, unless the parents specify otherwise? Something to do with hygiene, you know.’

I looked over at the little boy with new-found respect, amazed at how brave he was being. He cried a little, accepted the good-natured care of his parents, and gritted his teeth. I was full of admiration: if someone had chopped my bathing cap off at the age of ten, I wouldn’t have been accepting, I’d have been bloody

furious.

Pulau Pangkor

Written: 16 December 1997

Where better to spend a few days taking it easy than at the beach? Normally I'd be full of smug answers – 'up a mountain', 'in the pub', 'in bed' or possibly even something witty – but the next logical stop after the Cameron Highlands was Pulau Pangkor, a popular little island off the west coast of northern Malaysia, and we took it. It's a tourist spot, sure, but Charlie and I had decided to see the rest of the year out with some real relaxation before the rigours of the New Year's travels. And where better to relax than at a beachside resort?

The bus journey was simple – getting around Malaysia is child's play, even easier than getting around the UK – and we boarded the ferry to Pangkor with plenty of time to spare.

On the Beach

Beaches are beaches wherever you are, and Pangkor was no real exception. The water was murky, the sand lightly dusted with litter, and the jet skis and power boats were as annoying as anywhere else, but there were some interesting differences between the little village of Teluk Nipah and similar hotspots on the Costa del Sol.

For a start, the place was totally Muslim, as is most of Malaysia. Sure, there weren't loud mosques blaring out the call to prayer – indeed, Malaysia is a hell of a lot quieter than Indonesia, even in the unfortunate hotels that sit next to the mosques – but every woman wore a *tudung* (a scarf covering the head, also known as a *burqa*), and there wasn't a hot dog stall to be seen anywhere. Even on the beach the Malay tourists observed the modest values of Islam: male and female adults bathed in T-shirts and long shorts, exposing a bare minimum of bare skin, and non-swimmers would laze on the beach in jeans, long-sleeved shirts and, for the women, *burqas*. It looked odd: there were a few westerners with their slinky Speedos and suntan lotion, but they looked out of place among the well-covered locals.

There's also a distinct lack of alcohol in Pangkor: it's available, but only from a few places, and then it's only between certain hours. This is a serious bonus: it prevents the resort turning into a drunken orgy of beer-and-beach proportions, and makes the behaviour of tourists pretty acceptable, with few late nights and drunken rampages.

The fresh fish available at the restaurants along the beachfront more than makes up for the lack of beer, with the charcoal smell of *ikan bakar* (barbecued fish) lilting across the sea breezes, thankfully masking the smell of

the choked streams meandering down to the beach from the village. If it weren't for the savage attitude of the mosquitoes, Pangkor would be a pretty pleasant spot: as it is, it's just another beach, on just another island.

There's something I noticed on Pangkor that had been driving me silently potty ever since I landed in Indonesia. The most common piece of Southeast Asian footwear is the sandal, whether in the professional leather-bound version, or the tacky rubber-and-plastic thongs: only businessmen wear proper shoes. There is one thing about the prevalence of flip-flops, though, that drives me stark, raving mad: Malaysians, and indeed Indonesians, drag their feet, making their flip-flops slide along the ground with a scraping noise that's constant and infuriating, and given that most floors are concrete, the sound's loud and grating. The problem is that once you've noticed it, you notice it everywhere, and much like the tap dripping at night, or the window rattling on the bus, it's torture. But, like much of Asia, you either take it or leave it, so I learned to take it, like it or not.

Charlie and I both discovered, too, that we'd lost the art of conversation. After such a long time learning to make small talk, both from travelling and, in Charlie's case, his career¹³, we'd both decided that polite small

¹³ Charlie used to work for the Ministry of Defence, under contract from GEC Marconi, so we've both signed the Official Secrets Act. As a result he got used to talking about his job at cocktail parties without ever saying what it was he actually did. He almost became as much of a

talk is simply boring. We sat around, studiously ignoring everyone, and exchanging glances every time someone mentioned their travels. People can be so repetitive, you know: I know I'll sound monotonously boring when I return home and keep saying things like, 'Well, in India they do this...' and 'That's not half as big as the spiders in Australia...' but I didn't think I'd ever get bored of *talking* about travelling.

I suppose another reason for our lack of interest in conversation was the collection of *Time* and *National Geographic* magazines lying around our guest house (or should I say campsite, as we stayed in an A-frame hut rather than a room). We spent hours each day devouring news and real journalism: I felt a need fulfilled as I read articles written in flowing, informational script, as opposed to the pandering prose more common in Southeast Asian countries. Good journalism is like a lemon sorbet – refreshing, bittersweet and with a lingering aftertaste – and after the stodgy staple of pidgin-English propaganda I'd been reading in the Southeast Asian papers, this was truly a taste sensation.

However we hadn't lost our interest in walking, spending the second day hoofing round the island on the one road available. We also included a bush-bash up to the top of Bukit Pangkor, but seeing as the path was overgrown and the views non-existent (due to trees) it

waffler as some of the journos I know, and that's saying something...

wasn't one of the most successful jaunts of all time. Still, just sitting on the beach for three days would have sent me mad, so I should be thankful for small mercies, even if it included plenty of ripped flesh from the evil plants in the local bush, and bites from the clouds of (malaria free) mozzies. Bloody rainforest: whatever happened to the pledge I'd made after Taman Negara never to bash through jungle again? Looks like it went the same way as vowing to keep off boats and promising not to moan about other travellers...

Bloody whingeing Poms, eh!

Georgetown

Written: 19 December 1997

Lazing around is pleasant for a few days, but on Tuesday 16th we decided enough was enough, and struck north from Pulau Pangkor for the island of Penang. Pulau Penang is as famous as Melaka when it comes to colonial history, due to its strategic position at the north of the Straits of Melaka, and although it's probably best known these days as a mediocre beach resort, we didn't come for sand, sea or surf. Nope, we came for Georgetown, the big old settlement on Penang's northeastern coast.

Georgetown is predominantly Chinese, and as a result it buzzes with energy and an underlying layer of

mania. The food is cheap and thoroughly excellent: from *murtabak* to *thosai* to strange noodle soups to curries, the quality of the available nosh is high, not to mention the amazing buildings around town, like the crazy Leong San Tong Khoo Kongsi clan house. Georgetown is as interesting place, no doubt it.

Murtabak in particular is worth an explanation; it's Indian pizza, and it's quite delicious. Malaysia has some of the best Indian restaurants this side of Birmingham, and they're much more authentic than the English version, which is effectively a curry, rice and nan experience. In Malaysia, Indian restaurants are more of the banana-leaf variety, where the food is served on a banana leaf, you eat with your right hand (not the left: the left is unclean, as it's used instead of toilet paper), and the food isn't that spicy. If you're wondering what to order in a Malaysian Indian, *thosai* (known as *dosa* in India) is a very thin lentil pancake, available with all sorts of fillings; *roti* (also known as *chapati*) is a different type of pancake that's a little thicker, and is also available with various fillings; and *murtabak* is a *thosai* filled with loads of egg, chopped vegetables, spices and, if specified, meat. They all come with these amazing curry dips, and make Indonesia's *nasi campur* and *mie goreng* look pathetic. It's weird that often the most pleasant way to eat a country's cuisine is in an ethnic restaurant in a more developed country: India can

be a really lousy place for food, but Malaysia and England excel at Indian cuisine. It's strange, but true.

I'm slightly ashamed to say that I did precious little in Penang; Charlie and I split up to attend to various mundane housekeeping chores – buying thrill-packed items like watch batteries and steel wool, sorting out plane ticket details, and tracking down second-hand guidebooks for India – and although I visited most of the central historical sites, temples and ethnic areas, I mainly spent my time hanging round town, eating and reading. To say I missed out on Penang's best attractions would be accurate, but I couldn't give a hoot. Sometimes you've just got to say 'bugger it' and do nothing: besides, Christmas was approaching, and Georgetown is a wonderful place for self-indulgence.

Thoughts on Leaving

Written: 19 December 1997

So that was Malaysia, a very different country to the one I'd conjured up in my imagination after reading the guidebook. I spent a full 25 days on just the western side of Peninsular Malaysia (the eastern coast gets very wet during the monsoon, which is when I was there), and it was surprisingly interesting. As with Indonesia, Malaysia is a country of contradictions, but the opposing values aren't quite as disparate as in its crazy neighbour.

There are, however, some interesting observations to be made about Mahathir's Madhouse.

Malaysia is modern, but still developing.

Individuals have cars and houses, but there are still open sewers and rubbish dumps in every town, with their characteristically rancid smells; there are huge – nay, immense – skyscrapers in the capital, but beggars on every street corner; and although Malaysia's health system is pretty good – you can drink the tap water, and malaria is rare on the mainland – it's still got some way to go to match the West.

Malaysia is mainly Muslim, but not as extremist as it could be. The *muezzins* don't wake you up with their wailing every morning, but the women all wear *tudung* (a scarf covering the head, also known as a *burqa*), though they don't tend to practice full *purdah*: women are allowed out of the house, and don't cover their entire faces. Although the Prime Minister has a bee in his bonnet about the spoiling effects of capitalism, the general public is more interested in the spoils of capitalism; the Christmas adverts are as intense here as anywhere else on the planet, and the country grinds to a halt over the year end, even if Christ's birthday is pretty irrelevant as a religious concept to most Malaysians. Still, business *is* a religion, if Singapore is anything to go by.

Malaysia has got some of the most wonderful

National Parks in the world – especially in Sarawak, which I unfortunately didn't get to, as it was monsoon season there at the time of my visit – but the ecological record of the government is pretty shoddy. Malaysia's rainforest is the oldest in the world, but the indigenous inhabitants are being kicked out of their homes as the chainsaws do their worst; Mahathir's plans to dam one of the biggest rivers in Sarawak and flood a large area of natural wilderness were over-budget and egotistical, until his deputy pulled the plug on it while the PM was on holiday; and there's a major inconsistency between blaming everything on overpopulation, and wanting to increase the population by 350 per cent by 2020.

Malaysia has a wonderful bus network, but it suffers from overuse. In Indonesia there was no such thing as a full bus – there was always room for another body, chicken, whatever – but quite a few times in Malaysia I had to take a later bus because the one I wanted was fully booked. Public transport is still the choice of the masses – the motorways are pleasantly empty, and it's not down to the toll, I'm sure – but whereas in Indonesia it's pretty much the only option, and is therefore not bad, in Malaysia it's slowly moving towards being the poor man's option as cars become more and more common, and it's starting to show.

Malaysia has a larger proportion of privately owned vehicles than in Indonesia, but that doesn't mean the

people know how to drive. Red lights are still regarded as pretty decorations rather than traffic controllers; biker gangs roar down the street, or should I say ‘phut’ down the streets, seeing as they all drive crappy little mopeds; and although there must be some kind of legislation controlling the condition of the old bangers on the roads, the amount of pollution choking out of the exhaust pipes is astounding, especially from the pink public buses in KL.

Malaysia has a language identity crisis. In Malaysia, you really don’t need to know any language except English: non-Malays (like the Chinese and Indians) speak their own languages among themselves, and English is the *lingua franca* for business, with Bahasa Malaysia coming in third. Indonesia, of course, was quite different, even on the main tourist trails: the English was generally very poor there, but Malaysians speak it amazingly well. If there’s one reason that Malaysia will develop into a big Southeast Asian success story, like Singapore, Taiwan and – until the recent crash – South Korea, it’s because the population speaks the international language of business. Even Mahathir speaks excellent English, even if he hates those who invented it.

Malaysia purports to be a free country, but it has draconian censorship. The newspapers are full, but they’re full of irrelevant trivia and tirades against the

Americans, and contain nothing at all about contentious or anti-Malaysian events; the television is distressingly tame, but most of the movies on TV and in the cinema are subtitled American flicks – and you’ve never seen so many films where they shout, ‘Forget you!’ and ‘Freaking hell!’ while mouthing something somewhat more vernacular; and if a foreign magazine happens to carry an article that criticises the government – be it *Time*, *Newsweek* or whatever – it mysteriously doesn’t appear on the newsstands that month. Funny, that.

But, despite the inherent contradictions, Malaysia is a coherent, united entity, and there’s precious little unrest or dissatisfaction among the majority. Malaysians are proud of their country, and unlike Singapore, the youth isn’t floating off nonchalantly to other countries to evade the stuffy atmosphere. It’s an easy place in which to travel, the people are very friendly without being the incessant salesmen of Indonesia, and with the currency crisis affecting the dollar rate, it’s a phenomenally cheap place to visit. I was extremely glad I came.

THE END

Further Reading

This story is continued in another of my books, *Melted Meccano: Travels in Thailand* (also available for free from www.moxon.net). If you enjoyed this book, you might like to know that there's a whole series of free books like this available from www.moxon.net, covering 16 countries and five continents:

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- *Snow on the Sun Loungers: Travels in Cyprus*
- *The Head and the Heart: Travels in Senegal*
- *A Million Mosquitoes Can't Be Wrong: Travels in the Gambia*

- *The Lapping of the Dunes: Travels in Mali*
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- *The Road to Jesus: Travels in Ghana*

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Happy travels!

Mark Moxon, September 2004

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