

KUALA LUMPUR

Malaysia has embraced the future and Kuala Lumpur, with its iconic Petronas Towers, is the symbol of the country's dynamism, reports **Luciano Di Gregorio**.

WHY GO?

Kuala Lumpur has spearheaded Malaysia's drive towards modernism and the echoes of a turbulent past are now long faded. The city is no longer synonymous with images of a muddy colonial outpost or perceived as the awkward urban conglomeration that it was 20 years ago. Today, thanks to the government's 2020 Vision – the brainchild of pioneering former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir bin Mohamad – Malaysia is well on track to achieving developed country status, with Kuala Lumpur at the helm of economic, cultural and socio-political innovation. In Kuala Lumpur you will witness a perfect fusion of traditional Asian cultures and the cutting edge of contemporary panache.

WHAT TO DO

It is not difficult to become lost in the labyrinthine streets of Kuala Lumpur and the Menara KL telecommunications tower is an ideal place to get your bearings. The views from the observation deck and the city's famed revolving restaurant reaches miles into the distance. Below, the tower is enveloped by lush tropical rainforest, the perfect place to sit in the shade of a palm tree before contemplating heading southwest to Merdeka Square where once upon a time suits and top hats were the order of the day as it was the centre of British administration in the region. It is easy to imagine businessmen and politicians rubbing shoulders in the Royal Selangor Club on the western side of the square. Perhaps the most attractive structure facing the square is the Sultan Abdul Samad building, with its charming double-lancet arches finished in 1897 and one of the earliest examples of Moorish architecture in the city.

The lack of shade in and around the square may drive you towards the cover of Central Market, once a busy centre for the purchase of meats and fish and now a place to buy all the touristy knick-knacks you could ever need. But keep a healthy reserve of cash: the bargains of Chinatown, sprawling east from the market, are some of the best to be had in southeast Asia.

The thriving hub of Chinatown is Jalan Petaling, once a magnet for seediness but now the site of one of the most talked about street markets in Asia. If, however, the sheer pandemonium of Jalan Petaling has you clutching your head ruefully, continue south past the market stalls to Chan See Shu Yuen Temple, with its intricate detail and eccentric shades of green, yellow and red.

When all the mod cons of air conditioning and swanky food courts come calling, the glitz and glamour of modern Kuala Lumpur is all too evident at the KLCC shopping complex, shadowed by the iconic Petronas Towers. Completed in 1998, the towers have since become synonymous with the modernisation of the city, a reality that is heartily embraced by the contemporary Malaysian. The shopping complex is a shrine to high street fashion chains and haute couture, with top notch casual dining to boot.

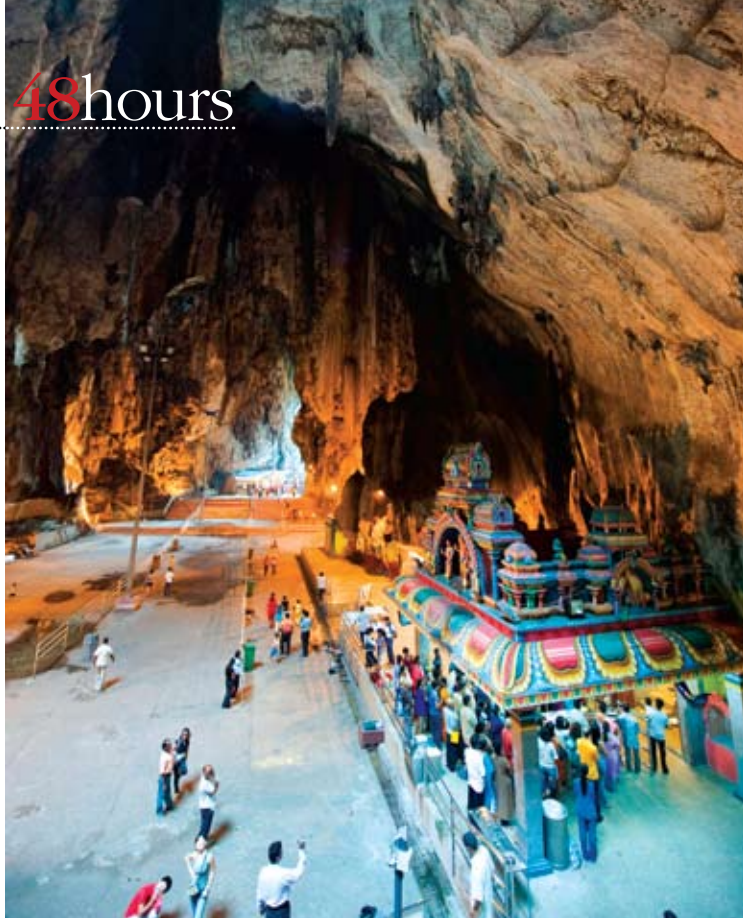
Once the sun goes down, catch a cab south to the area known as the Golden Triangle, with Jalan Bukit Bintang and Jalan Sultan Ismail at its core. Shuffle a move or two with the smartly dressed youth of the city at bars and nightclubs as intense as any in New York or Berlin.

WHERE TO STAY

The city centre's Dorsett Regency, with a price tag averaging approximately US\$80 per night, is excellent value for money given its proximity to KLCC and the twin towers. The hotel, impeccably maintained, is a stone's throw from the buzz of Bukit Bintang. For a little more lustre, stay at the 5-star

Opposite page (clockwise from top): The 451-metre-high Petronas Towers were the world's tallest building from 1998 to 2004; Petaling Street is at the heart of Chinatown. Jalan Petaling is a famous street market where bargaining is a must; The KLCC shopping complex offers six storeys of high-end stores and is directly linked to the metro; Satay, which consists of diced or sliced meat cooked over charcoal, is a KL staple; The Royal Selangor Club on Merdeka Square was founded by the British in 1884; Baru Chow Kit is the largest 'wet' market in KL; The Menara Tower has a revolving restaurant with fantastic views of the city; At night Petaling Street is a hive of activity; The huge Central Market has been serving the public since 1888; a flower shop at the Central Market.





Top: The Batu Caves are famed for its Hindu shrine, the surrounding fauna and flora and 160 rock-climbing routes. Plus it's a great excuse to leave the city for a day.

Below: *Teh Tarik*, which literally means 'pulled tea', is made by pouring the mixture back and forth repeatedly between two vessels from a height, giving it a thick frothy top and cooling it to drinking temperature.



Mandarin Oriental, framed by the gleaming Petronas Towers. At an average of US\$160 for a deluxe double room, your wallet won't take the battering it does in other Mandarin Oriental hotels around the world.

WHAT TO EAT AND DRINK

The eclectic eating experience of Kuala Lumpur is an undeniable highlight of any visit. The expression of the city's multicultural fabric permeates the dining scene, and traditional Malay is served alongside Chinese, Indian and modern European. Conventional Malay cooking is influenced by the spice and tanginess of surrounding countries such as China and India. Rice is the central element of most meals, and the likes of chicken and fish are flavoured using spices such as nutmeg and lemongrass. *Teh Tarik*, a frothy tea beverage with a cocktail-style method of preparation, accompanies most Malaysian meals.

You'll be spoilt for choice in Bukit Bintang, with its countless eateries and open-air cafés. One of the finest establishments is the chic Tamarind Hill. Set upon its own private hill and oozing flair and style, the restaurant offers a delightful fusion of Thai and Burmese cuisine. For authentic Malay street fare, look no further than nearby Jalan Alor, bustling with street stalls and roadside restaurants serving bonafide Malaysian dishes.

TRAVEL INFORMATION

At less than 350km from the equator, Kuala Lumpur's climate is hot and humid throughout the year. October and November are generally the city's wettest months, though there's also plenty of rain during April and May. July is the driest month, an ideal time to visit. The sun can shine relentlessly in the morning whilst the afternoons and evenings often see rainfall. Daytime temperatures range from around 29-35°C. Currency is the Malaysian Ringgiti. (MYR1= US\$0.30 approximately).

GETTING THERE

EMIRATES flies thrice daily between Dubai and Kuala Lumpur. Visit emirates.com or emirates-holidays.com for further information.

RESOURCES

Tourism Malaysia (tourism.gov.my) provides invaluable up-to-date information on travel throughout the country. Check out kuala-lumpur.ws for a comprehensive online guide to Kuala Lumpur.

FURTHER READING

THE INSIGHT SMART GUIDE TO KUALA LUMPUR is a concise guide to everything Kuala Lumpur.

WILD MALAYSIA by Junaidi Payne makes for insightful reading on the flora and fauna of the country.

FAST FACT

The name Kuala Lumpur may sound exotic, but it literally means 'muddy confluence'. As it suggests, the city is located at the convergence of the Gombak and Klang rivers. Residents of Kuala Lumpur are known as KLites.

TRIP TIP

To use an old but appropriate cliché, Kuala Lumpur is a place to shop until you really do drop. If you are attracted by the pull of a bargain or two in Chinatown's Jalan Petaling, it is almost a crime not to haggle. Never pay the asking price for an item here: begin by offering around 20 per cent of the original price and don't settle on anything over one-third to half that price. Keep it casual and friendly and remember: if the owner of a stall won't bargain with you, chances are the next few stalls will stock the same item.

MUST DO

Take flight from the bedlam of central Kuala Lumpur at the Batu Caves, 13 kilometres north of the city centre. The revered caves are the pulse of Hinduism in Malaysia and one of the most important Hindu complexes outside India. A taxi to the caves will set you back around US\$8. ❖