

Malaysia

Location

Malaysia consists of two geographical segments. West Malaysia, the southern third of the Malay Peninsula in South East Asia and East Malaysia, which occupies the northern quarter of the island of Borneo. Thailand to the north, the South China Sea to the east, and Singapore bind West Malaysia to the south, and the Strait of Malacca to the west. East Malaysia is bound by Indonesia to the south, the South China Sea to the west and north, and the Sulu Sea to the northeast. The country is slightly larger than New Mexico with a land area of 329,750 square kilometers. Malaysia is located at 2 30 N, 112 30 E.

Geography

The enclave of Brunei is located in the northern region of East Malaysia. West or Peninsula Malaysia consists of a range of steep forest covered mountains with coastal plains to the east and west, while the principal river is the Pahang. East Malaysia has a broad swampy, coastal plain that rises to jungle-covered hills in the interior. The principal rivers of East Malaysia are the Rajang, Baram, Lupar, Limbang, Kinabatangan and Padas.

West Malaysia grows out of the Asian continent and thrusts boldly into the island world of Indonesia. West Malaysia area of 51,319 sq. miles makes up approximately 40% of the country's total land. West Malaysia dominates the nation by virtue of its economic and political importance. Approximately 400 miles of sea separate East and West Malaysia, forming a geographic barrier that has given rise to cultural differences and intense rivalry between the two states, particularly from the side of the Borneo provinces.

West Malaysia, the "thick" end of the Malaysian Peninsula, extends from latitude somewhat north of 6° to just short of 1 ° N; it is at a longitude of between 100° and 105° E. From the peninsula's southern most point to the Equator is just over 62 miles; from the same point to the Thai border, 465 miles, while peninsular Malaysia boasts a total of 1,197 miles of coastline. A near neighbor is the Indonesian island of Sumatra, about 25 miles away across the narrowest point in the Straits of Malacca. This narrow, heavily traveled waterway is still vital to West Malaysia's trade; but has also brought the threat of environmental catastrophe right up to its doors (through the spectacular tanker accident and resulting oil spill in early 1993).

The peninsula boasts a rich and varied landscape. To the east and west, alluvial plains frame it. Two nearly parallel mountain ranges of different lengths run north to south through the interior of the peninsula. They are part of the continental shelf and composed of sediment and granite, a rocky sub-soil rich in tin deposits. Heavy tropical rains and erosion has washed the minerals into the valleys and low-lying plains creating a stratified crust known as "soap" - of ore deposits and silt. There are also numerous limestone formations, which create the peninsula's striking, steep, mostly wooded conical hills of chalk. The limestone conceals the rich deposits as well as brown iron ore and ilmenite that have made Malaysia the world's leading producer of tin.

Banjaran or Barisan Titiwangsa is the longer of the two mountain ranges that run through West Malaysia. Stretching from Thailand down to Negeri Sembilan, it reaches its highest altitude of 7,138 feet at the peak of Ginning Korbu near the mining town of Ipoh. Malaysia's capital city, Kuala Lumpur, lies at the foot of the Titiwangsa chain; some of the range's best-known areas are the Cameron and Genting Highlands.

The smaller Bintang chain takes its name from the peak of Gunung Bintang, which dominates the chain at 6,089 feet. It stretches from Perak in the northwest to Kedah in the south. East of the Titiwangsa Mountains, the Gunung Tahan range, named after West Malaysia's highest mountain, extends nearly to the coast. It lies in the northwest of the Taman Negara National Park, one of the last stands of the virgin forest which until recently covered most of the peninsula. Northeast of the Tahan Mountains, Gunung Lawit soars majestically to an altitude of 4,967 feet, forming the center point of the eastern Banjaran Timur chain. In the southwest, is a smaller range named after the 6,893 foot Gunung Benom.

Southwards, the mountains give way to a landscape of gentle hills and swampland. The countless rivers that meander through the countryside, flowing into the Straits of Malacca or the South China Sea, keep the coastal areas provided with deposits of fertile silt. The longest river in West Malaysia is the 295-mile Sungai Pahang; Sungai Perak and Sungai Kelatan follow it, respectively.

The peninsula's largest lakes are the result of human labor, dams and flood control. Water supplies are ensured, in the northern Perak region, by the lakes of Tasek Temengor and Tasek Kesind. In Terengganu, they're provided by the enormous Lake Kenyir created by the Kenyir Dam. In the south, Tasek Bera and Tasek Dampar have been joined to form a huge reservoir.

Climate

Malaysia has a tropical climate with two monsoon seasons. The NW Monsoon, from October to February and the SW Monsoon from April to October, with squalls and thunderstorms common. The average annual precipitation for West Malaysia is 100 inches and for East Malaysia it is 150 inches. Humidity is high year round and average temperature ranges for Kuala Lumpur are from 72 to 90 degrees Fahrenheit year round while, in the mountains, the average temperature ranges are from 55 to 80 degrees Fahrenheit.

History

The independent Federation of Malaya combined with the British colonies of Singapore, Sarawak and North Borneo (renamed Sabah) to form Malaysia on September 16, 1963.

The state's formation was highly controversial, and both the Philippines and Indonesia made claims to parts of East Malaysia. Internal rebellions supporting these claims or regional independence were suppressed by Commonwealth forces and three years of semi-war called Indonesian Confrontation on the borders to Indonesia ensued. As a concession to the widespread opposition, Brunei was kept outside the Malaysian federation, but remained under British military protection. The United States decisively agreed to support the formation of Malaysia after a 1964 secret diplomatic deal with the United Kingdom, in return for British support in Vietnam.

As a result of differences between the two governments, and tensions between Chinese and Malays, Singapore left the federation and became an independent republic on August 9, 1965. Continued ethnic tensions led to bloody racial riots in Kuala Lumpur on May 13, 1969, which resulted in a two-year state of emergency, and the subsequent imposition of a new economic policy aimed at redistributing wealth to the Malays, who at the time owned 2% of the economy.

Malaysia has since maintained a delicate ethno-political balance, and developed a unique rule combining economic growth and a political rule that favors ethnic Malaysians and moderate Islam. In the late 1990s, considerable opposition to the existing system was put down by the government, including democratic opposition as well as proponents of a stricter Islamic rule.

Important Holidays

For Muslims, the most important festival of the Islamic year is Hari Raya Uasa, a celebration marking the end of Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting. Hari Raya Puasa begins with prayers at the mosque early in the morning, followed by a visit to the cemetery to pray for the departed souls of loved ones. Feasting and celebrations follow.

For the Chinese the most important festival is the Chinese New Year in January or February. The colorful spectacle features traditional street dances, including the Lion Dance. All debts must be settled and the house spotlessly cleaned before the New Year begins. People give children Ang Pow, a red envelope containing money, with good wishes written on it in gold ink.

For Buddhists, the main festival is Vesak Day, which commemorates the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha. It is celebrated on May 25. Buddhists release doves, offer prayers, give alms to Buddhist monks and prepare meals for the needy.

Hindus celebrate a festival of lights called Deepavali, which usually occurs in October. Hindus adorn their houses with lights or oil lamps to signify the triumph of light over darkness and good over evil. Another festival, Thaipusam, celebrated in January, honors the Hindu deity Lord Murugan. On this day, some Hindus go into a trance and pierce their bodies to show their devotion to the deity.

The indigenous tribes of Sabah and Sarawak hold harvest festivals, which are characterized by feasting and dancing. In Sabah, the harvest festival is called Kaamatan and is celebrated in May with beauty pageants, dances and religious rituals. In Sarawak, the festival is called Gawai. People drink rice wine and watch the Ngajat Lesong, a dance in which a performer shows his strength and skill by lifting the lesong (the mortar used to pound grain) with his teeth.

Christians celebrate Christmas on December 25 with Christmas trees, decorations, lights, Santa Claus and carols. In the Portuguese settlement of Melaka, a special celebration is the Feast of San Pedro, the patron saint of fishermen, which takes place in late June. The people decorate their fishing boats, which are blessed for the next season's fishing.

Population

Malaysia is a multi-racial country with a population of approximately 19.9 million. This consists of the main racial groups of Malays, Chinese, Indians, and a very diverse group of indigenous people in Sabah and Sarawak.

The Orang Asli are the aboriginal people of Peninsular Malaysia, with an estimated population of over 60,000 and who, for the most part, still lead simple yet fascinating lifestyles. Sabah's indigenous groups include the Kadazan/Dusun, Bajau, Murut, Rungus, Lotud, Orang Sungei,

Kadayan, Bisaya and many other subgroups. The Ibans form the largest indigenous group in Sarawak, the rest are the Bidayuhs, the Melanaus and the Orang Ulus.

The different types of religion in Malaysia reflect the variety of races living there. The Malays practice Islam predominantly. Most of the Chinese believe in Buddhism and Taoism but others are Christians. The region's Indian population mostly practices Hinduism. Many indigenous people have converted to Christianity but others still practice animism.

Currency

The local currency is Ringgit Malaysia (RM) and it is currently pegged at RM3.80 to US\$1.00. The monetary unit used now is Ringgit (RM) and Sen (Since Aug 75). Rm1 (One Ringgit) is equivalent to 100 Sen. Denominations are 1 Sen, 5 Sen, 10 Sen, 20 Sen, 50 Sen and RM1. The RM1 banknote is now being replaced by Rm1 coin.

Education

The Malaysian school system is divided mainly into five stages: Pre-school, Kindergarten, Primary School, Secondary School, and Chinese Independent Middle School.

Pre-School is the first real stage of schooling; students generally come here between the ages of three and four. It can take either one or two years to complete. Students are assigned to one classroom for the entire year. The subjects taught in Pre-School include Malay, English, Handicraft, and Physical activity.

Kindergarten is the second stage of schooling. Students are generally five years of age when they enter Kindergarten. It takes one year to complete this level. Students move from classroom to classroom for different subjects.

Primary school corresponds quite closely to elementary school in the United States. Students are graded according to their conduct, homework, attendance, and performance on tests and exams. Graduates are usually twelve years old. They also have mandatory school uniforms. The subjects taught may include Malay, English, Physical Activity, Regional Studies, Art, Music, Math, and Science. Graduating takes place in the sixth grade. A national exam is administered to the entire nation, and students are accepted into Secondary School based on their results.

Secondary school is basically the American junior high, and high school combined. Secondary School is typically divided into three years. There are two main types of Secondary School, public and private. Private schools are predominate and are highly modeled after the Taiwan high school system.

Chinese Independent Middle Schools follows. Students attend Chinese Independent Middle School for seven years. Subjects taught include: Biology, Chemistry, Geography, Chinese History, National History, Music, and Art. Students have to take numerous National Unified Exams designed specifically for this school system. Before entering their final year, students are placed in streams, or majors. Students are placed into the streams according to their test results. Students that perform

well are placed into fields involving commerce and science. Students that place lower are placed into areas such as art and literature.

Language

The national language of Malaysia is Bahasa Malaysia. It's an old language, with early roots in the central and south Pacific, and simple enough to learn. In practice, you'll be able to get by with English in all but the most remote areas. As a general rule, older Malaysians speak better English than younger ones, as English used to be on the curriculum in schools, but is rarely these days.

Religion

The different types of religion in Malaysia reflect the variety of races living there. Islam is the official religion but Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and other religions are practiced freely.

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Economy

Malaysia has one of the highest standards of living in SE Asia, largely because of its expanding industrial sector, which propelled the country to an 8–9% yearly growth rate from 1987 to 1997. Growth contracted during the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis, and the government was forced to cut spending and defer several large infrastructure projects. Unemployment and interest rates rose, and thousands of foreign workers, many of them from Indonesia, were forced to leave the country. The economy began to improve in 1999.

Trade

Malaysia is a large producer of rubber and tin; other important industries include palm oil, crude petroleum and petroleum products, electronics, logging, and textiles. Since the late 1980s, the government has moved to privatize large industries that had been under state control, and foreign investment in manufacturing has increased significantly. Pinang city is the chief port. Subsistence agriculture remains the basis of livelihood for about 20% of Malaysians and agriculture provides about 15% of GDP. Rice is the staple food, while fish supply most of the protein. Industry is largely concentrated in West Malaysia. The major cities on the Malay Peninsula are connected by railroads with Singapore, and an extensive road network covers the west coast. The main trading partners are Japan, the United States, and Singapore.

Food

Since there is such diversity within Malaysia, the food can be broken in the three groups: Malay, Chinese and Indian. Malay food, like many Asian countries, consists of rice (staple food) eaten with meat, fish and vegetables.

An essential ingredient in most Malay states is coconut milk. Since Islam is a major religion, pork is a forbidden meat, as well as, the flesh of predatory animals and birds, rodents, reptiles, and worms. If an animal is slaughtered for food, it must be done in accordance with Islamic rites. As with Malay food, Chinese (Malay Chinese) food is mainly rice served with accompaniments.

The different Chinese cuisines are Cantonese, Kokkiean and Szechuan. Cuisine from Northern China (Beijing, Shanghai) is also becoming popular. Finally, Indian cuisine is notoriously hot and spicy. Unlike Malay or Chinese

food, the staple for Indian cuisine is either bread (capati, parratta, puri) or rice, which is eaten with many different curries. In accordance with their religious beliefs, Hindus do not eat beef.

Conclusion

Malaysia is a relatively new country that has been plagued by racial tensions and religious conflicts. The Malaysian Chinese has a bleak future in Malaysia. The government does not seem interested enough to create a Malaysian society regardless of religion. Their main goal is to help the Malays to increase their economic power and not integrating all other races into a truly Malaysian society. The discrimination against the Malaysian Chinese is still present and will be in the future. The Malaysian people and government need to come to grips with these problems before they cause further damage to the country.

Carmen Howard