



A COUNTRY PROFILE FROM INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS, INC.

GEOGRAPHY

Malaysia, situated in central southeast Asia, is divided into two parts. The western section, Peninsular Malaysia (or simply “Malaysia”), with 51,000 square miles, is roughly the size of Alabama. Malaysia, which constitutes the southern half of the Malay Peninsula, borders Thailand in the north. To the south it is joined to Singapore via a causeway.

To the east, 400 miles across the South China Sea, sits East Malaysia. Occupying the northern quarter of the island of Borneo, East Malaysia, with 77,000 square miles, is about the size of South Dakota.

East Malaysia borders Indonesia to the south. Its north coast, a small section of which is occupied by the tiny sultanate of Brunei, faces the South China Sea.

Jungle forests cover two-thirds of the country, while only three percent of the land is cultivable. Malaysia’s coastal plains give way to interior mountains.

Malaysia has an equatorial climate. One hundred inches of annual rainfall provide water for the country’s many rivers.

Malaysia also has a rich diversity of animal and plant life. It contains the world’s tallest tropical tree (tualang, up to 250 feet high), the world’s largest flower (rafflesia, weighing up to 20 pounds), 150,000 species of insects, and 100 different kinds of snakes.

PEOPLE & LANGUAGE

Malaysia has a population of over 25 million. The country basically consists of three distinct ethnic groups.

Malaysians of Indian descent comprise about eight percent of the population, approximately 85 percent of the Indian community is Tamil.

The population is growing at the rate of 1.86 percent annually. The government has even encouraged larger families so the country will not have to import workers. The population density in the cities is considerably higher, since much of Malaysia’s jungles are sparsely inhabited.

Bahasa Malaysia, the national language, is spoken by almost all the people. English is taught in public schools as a secondary language and is widely spoken in the business world.

Chinese Malaysians speak various Chinese dialects. Most Indians speak Tamil, but other Indian languages are also used. In all, more

than 100 languages are spoken in Malaysia.

MAJOR CITY CENTERS

The bustling capital of Kuala Lumpur, in west-central Malaysia, is the country’s largest city.

Other major cities include Petaling Jaya, Ipoh, Melaka, Johore Bahru, Kuching, Kota, Kinabalu, and Georgetown, the capital of Pinang, a resort island off the northwest coast.

Three out of five people live in rural areas.

POLITICAL HISTORY

For centuries, present-day Malaysia was ruled by political units in other parts of the region. In the 1400s, however, the city-state of Melaka on the west coast became a major trading center.

The Melaka Empire's influence spread to include most of the Malay Peninsula. Its reign coincided with the expansion of Islam in Southeast Asia. Many in Melaka embraced Islam, which has had a profound impact on the region ever since.

In 1511 the Portuguese captured this strategic shipping route. In 1641 the Dutch gained control of the area. The British arrived in the next century. By the 1920s, all the Malay states on the peninsula had come under British protection.

The British changed the face and ethnic complexion of the region by introducing the rubber industry and then importing Indian laborers to work on the plantations. The area's ethnic makeup had already been altered by the thousands of Chinese who had poured in during the nineteenth century. Feelings of Malay nationalism and a desire for self-rule began emerging in the 1930s. Japan's occupation during World War II further fueled the yearning for independence.

In 1946 the British formed the Malaysian Union by joining the nine Malay states with Melaka and Pulau Pinang. This union was abandoned two years later following strong opposition from Malay

nationalists.

Also in 1948 Communists began a costly and deadly campaign of guerrilla terrorism in a bid to gain control of the area. As a result, the government declared a state of emergency, which lasted 12 years.

The federation of Malaysia gained independence from Great Britain in 1957. In 1963 Malaysia was formed, bringing together the states of Malaya, Singapore, and Sabah and Sarawak, the two states that now form East Malaysia. Singapore left the federation in 1965.

In May of 1969 racial tensions broke out in Kuala Lumpur, leaving hundreds dead. This violence precipitated government changes to foster national unity.

Tensions, however, still exist between Malaysia's ethnic groups. The Malays feel that, being the indigenous people, they should qualify for more privileges than the "immigrant races." The non-Malays contend government policies unfairly favor Malays.

Malaysia is governed as a constitutional monarchy. The king (the Yang di-Pertuan Agong) is elected every five years by his peers, the hereditary rulers of nine of the states. The heads of the

other four states are appointed governors. Executive powers are vested in the Prime Minister and Parliament.

In world affairs Malaysia's government emphasizes fostering regional cooperation in Southeast Asia, promoting Islamic solidarity, and seeking friendly relations with as many countries as possible. The U.S. and Malaysia have a record of cooperation in many areas, including trade and investment, defense, counterterrorism, and counternarcotics.

ECONOMY

Malaysia has made tremendous economic strides in the last two decades. Already blessed with abundant natural resources, Malaysia has bolstered its economy by developing oil, mining, agriculture, and industry. Foreign investment has further spurred economic growth.

Manufacturing is the fastest-growing and largest segment of the economy. Major industries include rubber goods, steel, textiles, automobile assembly, and electronics.

Local trade and tourism employs 27 percent of the population and manufacturing employs another 27 percent.

Agriculture plays an important role in Malaysian commerce. Malaysia produces more than half the world's palm oil, which has overtaken rubber as the country's most important crop. Demand for both, however, has dropped in recent years. The U.S. is one of the country's leading trading partners.

In 1971 Malaysia adopted its New Economic Policy, which launched the country's economic surge. The plan's primary goals were to eradicate poverty, reduce economic imbalances among the races, and eliminate the identification of race with economic functions.

In the three decades since, the poverty level has dropped from 49 percent to eight percent. The average yearly income in Malaysia—about \$9,000 in U.S. currency—is one of the highest in Southeast Asia. Unemployment, however, is still a problem, even among college graduates, including those with a U.S. degree, who may receive training in a specialty for which there are no openings in Malaysia.

The Malaysian economy rebounded from a sharp recession in 1998 when real GDP contracted by 7.4 percent in 1998. The economy grew 8.3 percent in 2000, led by rapid growth in exports. When the U.S. economy began to slow in late 2000,

Malaysian exports declined.

EDUCATION

Malaysia has invested considerable resources in its educational system. The government pays for primary and secondary education; college-level education is provided at a nominal fee, though spaces are limited.

Children must attend six years of primary and three years of secondary education. Students then take an exam to determine if they may continue on in a secondary or trade school.

The attendance rate for primary school is 99 percent. Around 67 percent of males and 74 percent of females attend secondary school. About 30 percent attend college.

Many Malaysians study abroad; foreign degrees are prestigious. A particularly large number of Chinese and Indians study overseas because many are unable to enter Malaysian schools.

More than 6,500 Malaysians attended colleges and universities during the 2002/03 school year.

Malaysia has a literacy rate of about 89 percent.

CULTURE

Distinctions among the three main ethnic groups have long divided Malaysia along regional and occupational lines, although that is changing.

The Malay majority is the most influential in politics. Many Malays live in rural areas, however, and account for a high percentage of Malaysia's poor. Common occupations have been those of a farmer, fisherman, and civil servant, but now there is an increasing number of Malay professionals and businessmen.

The Chinese live primarily in urban areas. In fact, most Malaysian cities have a Chinese majority. Malaysian Chinese possess economic might as a result of their positions in trade, business, and finance.

Malaysian Indians are well-represented in the professions and service trades, but many also work on Malaysia's abundant rubber plantations. Most Indians, many of whom subsist below the poverty level, live on Malaysia's west coast.

While Malaysians typically identify primarily with their particular ethnic group, most are proud of their country

and its recent economic advancement. The different races also take pride in their ability to work together and live in harmony.

The family is the most important social unit. In the past, one's status and future opportunities were often linked to ancestry, though this is becoming less true.

In rural areas it is not uncommon for several generations within a family to live together in the same house. Values such as respect for elders, cooperation, loyalty, and unity within the family are all stressed.

Marriage in Malaysia means the joining of two families. In rural areas some marriages are still arranged by the families.

Conformity and resistance to change are other marks of Malaysian culture. Western influences continue to expand in Malaysia (especially in large cities), however, meaning that many of the traditional generalizations about the country no longer hold true.

Malaysians are sports enthusiasts; soccer is the top game. The country has also been a world leader in badminton. Traditional activities such as top spinning, kite flying, and dragon boat racing are also popular.

HOLIDAYS

Malaysia's diverse population celebrates many holidays and festivals. National holidays include New Year's Day, Labor Day (May 1), National Day (August 31), and the Birthday of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong (in early June).

Regional and ethnic festivals celebrate heroes, the harvest, and remembering the dead, among other things. Malaysian Chinese look forward to the Chinese New Year, a 15-day festival in January or February.

One of the most important Muslim holidays is Hari Raya Puasa, the three-day feast marking the end of the Muslim month of fasting (Ramadan). Another significant Muslim holiday is Hari Raya Haji, the Feast of Sacrifice.

In October or November, Malaysia's Hindu community celebrates Deepavali, the Festival of Lights, honoring the triumph of good over evil.

Buddha's birthday in May is a highlight for Buddhists. Malaysian Christians celebrate the Christian holidays.

Holidays are a time of fostering unity among Malaysia's ethnic groups. Individuals open their homes to relatives

and friends—especially from other races—on these days, which revolve around a celebration of culture and food.

RELIGION

Islam is the official national religion. Nearly all ethnic Malays are Muslim, as we as are some Chinese and Indians. Malays who reject Islam are ostracized and persecuted. Overall, Muslims make up 52 percent of the population.

The Yang di-Pertuan Agong is charged with safeguarding the special position of Islam in the country. He is the leader of the Islamic faith in Malaysia, as are the sultans in their own states.

An extremist Muslim minority has been pressing for radical Islamic reforms. As a result, Muslim missionary activity has accelerated, and discrimination against those of other faiths has increased, even though the constitution guarantees religious freedom.

Malaysia's Chinese are primarily Buddhist, although a number also follow Taoism and Confucianism. Most Indians are Hindu, though there is a Sikh minority.

CHRISTIANITY

Christianity arrived in Malaysia with the Portuguese in the early sixteenth century, in the form of Catholicism. The Portuguese persecution of the Malays, however, stirred resentment of Christianity in the region.

The Dutch introduced Protestantism in the seventeenth century. It wasn't until the British arrived another century later, though, that much evangelism took place.

Today, Christians account for perhaps eight percent of the population. Catholics slightly outnumber Protestants.

Evangelistic growth in Peninsular Malaysia has been severely hampered by laws making it illegal to proselytize Muslims. Therefore, most conversions have been among Chinese and Indians. The small number of Malays who do believe suffer repression. The government has even instituted restrictions against the Malay Bible.

Christianity has made far greater strides in recent years in East Malaysia. Perhaps of those in Sabah and Sarawak are Christians, with many believers coming from the indigenous people groups.

Christian outreach has also been hindered by a creeping erosion of religious freedom by the Muslim authorities. In addition, newfound prosperity has bred a materialism that has further slowed the spread of the Gospel. The Malaysian church also suffers from a lack of pastors.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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