



BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Malaysia covers an area of 127,317 square miles (329,750 square kilometers), divided into two regions: West Malaysia and East Malaysia. Located south of Thailand and north of Singapore, West (or Peninsular) Malaysia is about the size of Alabama. This region has forested mountains in its center, flanked by coastal plains. Off the West Malaysian coasts are numerous small islands, including several popular tourist destinations. Kuala Lumpur (the capital and largest city) and Putrajaya (the government's administrative center) are also in West Malaysia.

East Malaysia, about the size of Louisiana, is located on the island of Borneo, which Malaysia shares with the nations of Brunei and Indonesia. East Malaysia consists of two states, Sarawak and Sabah. Sarawak is a broad coastal plain, while Sabah's coastal plain gives way to mountainous jungle. Mount Kinabalu, the highest peak in Southeast Asia at 13,455 feet (4,101 meters) is in Sabah.

Malaysia has a wide variety of native flora and fauna: more than 14,000 species of flowering plants and trees, 200 species of mammals, and 600 species of birds. Found in Malaysia's tropical forests are endangered species such as the orangutan, Asian elephant, tiger, and rhinoceros as well as the rare black bear, clouded leopard, and flying lemur. Illegal hunting, commercial logging, and rapid urbanization and industrialization threaten the continuance of Malaysia's diverse animal and plant life. However, some important wetlands and forests have been set aside as national parks or

special conservation areas.

The nation's tropical climate is hot and humid; temperatures generally range from 70 to 90°F (21–32°C). Monsoons are possible from June to September in the southwest and October to March in the northeast.

History

Many civilizations prospered on Peninsular Malaysia long before recorded history begins in the 14th century, when Asian traders established a thriving port and trade center at Malacca. An attack on a Portuguese vessel by local pirates in 1509 prompted the Portuguese to capture Malacca in 1511. Control of the port then passed to the Dutch in 1641 and to the British in 1824. Britain had already acquired the island of Pinang from the sultan of Kedah in 1786, and by the early 1900s, Britain controlled all the Malay states—including those on Borneo—as colonies or protectorates. The British brought in Chinese and Indian laborers to work in tin mines and on rubber plantations.

The Japanese invaded and occupied Malaysia during World War II, which strengthened Malaysian feelings for independence from foreign domination. After the Japanese were defeated, the British created (in 1946) the Malayan Union out of Malacca, Pinang, and the nine Malay states on the peninsula. In 1948, this union became the Federation of Malaya. That same year, communist insurrections and terrorism began to spread throughout the countryside; they were eventually quelled in 1959. Communist guerrilla warfare continued on a smaller scale against both the Malaysian and Thai governments until a 1989 cease-fire was signed.

In 1957, Malaysia was granted independence from Great

Britain. Six years later, the Federation of Malaya and the former British colonies of Singapore, Sarawak, and North Borneo (Sabah) united to become Malaysia in order to avoid a communist takeover in Singapore. However, tension between the Malay-dominated government in Malaya and the Chinese-dominated government in Singapore led to an independent Singapore in 1965.

In 1969, racial tension resulted in widespread rioting in Kuala Lumpur. Ethnic Malays were not satisfied with their share of the country's wealth, their access to business opportunities, and Chinese domination in some areas of society. The government changed the constitution in 1971 to give Malays more rights. A quota system established at the same time required Malay representation (at specified levels) in government, business, and education. Called the New Economic Policy (NEP), the system successfully improved the lives of many Malays. In 1991, the NEP was renewed as the New Development Policy (NDP) and altered to encourage help for poorer people of all races. Although the program has discouraged racial integration, it is credited with eliminating major ethnic violence, providing greater equality, and allowing for stable economic growth.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Malaysia's population of 28.27 million is growing by 1.6 percent annually. About 70 percent of Malaysians live in urban areas. West Malaysia is around seven times more densely populated than East Malaysia. The largest ethnic group is the Malays. Small indigenous groups include the Sea Dayaks (*Ibans*), Land Dayaks (*Bidayuhs*), Kadazans, Kenyahs, Melanaus, and Muruts. Together, the Malays and other indigenous groups are called *Bumiputras* (sons of the soil) and comprise 61 percent of the total population. Chinese comprise 24 percent of the population and live mostly in urban areas on the peninsula. Indians (7 percent) also live primarily on the peninsula. Ties between individuals have developed through educational, social, sporting, and cultural organizations, but ethnic groups still remain essentially segregated.

Language

Bahasa Melayu (Malay) is the official language of Malaysia and is spoken in all areas of the country. It is closely related to ancient Sanskrit. Ethnic Chinese also speak Chinese dialects (Cantonese, Mandarin, Hakka, Hokkien, and Min). Indians speak a variety of Indian languages, including Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, and Hindi. In Sabah and Sarawak, numerous indigenous languages are common, but the most prevalent are Iban, Dayak, and Khadazan.

Religion

Religion in Malaysia is usually tied to ethnicity. Islam is the official religion, and 60 percent of the population is Muslim. Almost all ethnic Malays are Muslim. Muslims show devotion through the Five Pillars of Islam. These include *shahada*, professing that there is no God but *Allah* and

Muhammad is his prophet; *salat*, praying five times daily while facing Makkah, Saudi Arabia; *zakat*, giving money to the poor; *sawm*, fasting during *Ramadan*; and *hajj*, making a pilgrimage to Makkah once in a lifetime.

Non-Malays claim a variety of religions. Nineteen percent of the population, comprised chiefly of the Chinese, is Buddhist. Taoists, Confucianists, and followers of other Chinese religions make up about 3 percent. Generally, Indians are Hindu (6 percent), Christian (9 percent), or Sikh. A number of Chinese families are also Christian. Many people maintain traditional beliefs and customs along with their formal religion.

General Attitudes

Many Malaysians believe successes, failures, opportunities, and misfortunes result from fate or the will of God. But a growing number of those influenced by Western ideals believe they can succeed with a good education and hard work. The government encourages Malaysians to promote traditional "Asian values," which include placing the welfare of the group over that of the individual. However, individual wealth, connection to power, home ownership, and higher education are highly admired. A car, considered a luxury item, is a status symbol. A person's ancestral background is often important to social status and future opportunities.

Although people are proud of their country and generally loyal to Malaysia, they often identify first with their ethnic group, island, or region. Some ethnic tensions exist between the Bumiputras and the Chinese and Indians over the quota system. Chinese and Indians believe the policies make them second-class citizens, while the majority of Malays believe they provide the only avenue for Bumiputras to overcome traditional Chinese dominance in business.

Personal Appearance

Urban residents wear Western-style clothing more often than rural Malaysians do. However, both rural and urban people might mix traditional clothing with Western attire or change to traditional outfits for special purposes. For instance, Muslim men wear a *songkok* (black velvet cap) on Friday, the Muslim day of prayer. When they attend mosque on Fridays, they also wear a long Arabic robe, loose jacket, and *sarung* (a long piece of cloth) about their waists. Or they wear a traditional Malay outfit made of silk or cotton, with a gold brocade *sarung* folded around the waist.

In some areas, Muslim women wearing head covers, veils, and long dresses are as common as women wearing short skirts or pants. Some Indian women wear a *salwar khamis* (type of pantsuit with a long shirt). *Batik* fabric (printed using a hot-wax process) is popular for traditional dress. The cost of *batik* fabric is prohibitive for many people, but the Malaysian government has asked its citizens to purchase and wear *batik* clothing to help support the struggling industry.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Men shake hands or greet with a slight bow or nod of the

head. When greeting a close male friend, a man uses both hands to grasp the hand of the other. Women and elderly persons may offer verbal greetings. Conservative Muslims do not shake hands with members of the opposite sex.

Greeting phrases vary between ethnic groups and regions. Typical Malay greetings include *Selamat pagi* (Good morning) and *Apa khabar?* (How are you?). A casual term is *Halo* (Hello). Muslims greet with *Al-salām 'alaykum* (Peace be upon you) in more formal situations. The Chinese may greet with *Tze pau le ma* (Have you eaten?) or *Ni hau ma* (Are you feeling all right?). Indians commonly use the greetings *Namaste* or *Vanakam* (Salutations).

How a person is addressed depends on his or her ethnic group, religion, age, and relation to the speaker. Christians may adopt a Christian name. Malay men and women are properly called by their first name. For example, a woman named Zahara binti Omar is called *Puan Zahara*. *Puan* means “Madam” and *binti Omar* means “daughter of Omar.” Hindus form their names in a similar manner. The Chinese family name comes first, followed by a given name. So, Quah Yow Chun is addressed by his full name or as *Mr. Quah*; his friends would call him *Yow Chun*. If his wife's name is Leong Ming Chu, she can be properly addressed as *Mrs. Quah* or *Madam Leong*, but her friends would call her *Ming Chu*. Chinese relatives usually do not address one another by name but by relation (“younger uncle,” “second aunt,” etc.). Indians address persons older than themselves as “uncle” or “aunt.”

Gestures

Malaysians bow slightly (as a nonverbal “excuse me”) when leaving, entering, or passing by a group of people. It is not polite to point with the index finger. Nor is it polite to beckon adults, with the exception of close friends. To beckon, one waves all fingers with the palm facing down. Giving and receiving gifts with both hands shows respect. It is impolite to pass items with the left hand alone, as is it considered unclean and traditionally reserved for personal hygiene. One does not move objects with the feet or point the bottom of the foot at another person. Since the head is the most sacred point of the body, it is impolite to touch another person's or even a child's head. One covers the mouth when yawning or using a toothpick. Public displays of affection are inappropriate.

Visiting

Visiting is an important part of Malaysian life. People usually visit on weekends and after 8 p.m. In predominantly Muslim states, the weekend is Thursday and Friday. Elsewhere, it is Saturday and Sunday. Urban residents are more likely to entertain in a restaurant, while rural Malaysians visit in the home. Close friends and family may drop by without prior arrangement, although urban dwellers call in advance. Generally, punctuality is not expected, as Malaysians value people more than schedules. One removes the shoes when entering a home. Hosts normally serve guests tea or coffee, and cake or cookies. Drinks are offered and received with both hands. Guests are not expected to bring gifts, but something small (especially for the children) is usually appreciated.

Eating

Eating customs differ among ethnic groups. Most people eat three meals each day. Families eat together as often as schedules permit. Malays and Indians eat with their hands and with spoons. Chinese eat with chopsticks and spoons. A bowl of water is often available for washing before and after a meal. Except for some rural Muslims who eat on a floor mat, most people eat at a table, choosing foods from various serving dishes. Some groups refrain from eating certain foods. For example, devout Muslims do not eat pork or drink alcoholic beverages. Hindus and some Buddhists do not eat beef.

Guests are served first and begin eating first. It is impolite to leave food on the plate. In some families, chopsticks are placed beside one's empty rice bowl to indicate one is finished. In others, dropping a few drops of one's drink on the plate could signal the end of one's meal.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Cooperation, loyalty, and unity are important in the Malaysian family. Although nuclear families are more common in urban areas, young married couples live near their parents, and unmarried adults continue to live with their parents until they marry. Rural households are more likely to include more than one generation, usually parents, married sons and their families, and all unmarried children. Rural families are also larger than urban families, which tend to average two or three children.

Housing

The average urban dwelling is a Western-style home, townhouse, condominium, or apartment. Traditional *kampung* (village) homes are most common in rural areas. Built of timber and elevated on stilts, a *kampung* home may have a palm frond or corrugated metal roof. These homes are well ventilated and have many windows. Traditionally, a *kampung* home has a *serambi gantung* (a veranda where guests are entertained), a *rumah ibu* (the main living area where the family eats, sleeps, and relaxes), and a *dapur* (the kitchen, usually in the back of the house). Near the kitchen are the bathing area and toilet. Most homes have electricity and running water.

Dating and Marriage

Although parents stress that dating should wait until after one's education is complete, urban dating usually begins around age 17 or 18. Young people enjoy shopping, going to movies, and eating fast food. In rural parts of Malaysia, dating habits are more conservative and some marriages are arranged by families. However, most couples make their own choices in consultation with family members. A marriage is seen as joining not only two persons but also two families. Marriage customs and ceremonies vary by religion, but a celebration with relatives and friends usually accompanies the event.

Life Cycle

Traditions marking birth, coming of age, and death are most common in rural areas. When a child is born to a Malay family, the father rubs the baby's mouth with a white cloth to symbolize that the child should always speak the truth. He also places the placenta in a clay pot, which is later buried beneath the house. A party held 44 days after the birth celebrates the naming of the baby. Boys are circumcised when they reach puberty, and a large celebration is held. Malay funerals follow Muslim traditions: a religious leader washes the body, which is wrapped in white cloth and must be buried within 12 hours of death.

A Chinese mother does not wash her hair, leave her home, or see her parents for several weeks following a birth. Her mother-in-law often takes care of her. After the confinement period, a celebration is held, at which red-dyed hard-boiled eggs are eaten and the baby's hair is cut. For funerals, the oldest son washes and dresses the body, and a silver coin is placed between the teeth. Mourners burn paper offerings representing various possessions, which are believed to accompany the deceased to the afterlife.

An Indian mother does not leave her home for 28 days after the birth of her child. The baby is not called by his or her name until the end of the 28-day period, when a party is held and the name is whispered into the child's ear. Oil lamps burn for at least 16 days following a death. Relatives bathe the body and dress it in new clothes. Coins are placed on the eyes, and if the deceased was a married woman, the *bindi* (red dot) is wiped from her forehead. Most Indians are cremated.

Diet

Many cultures have influenced the Malaysian diet, but rice is a dietary staple for all. Malaysians eat it at least once a day. Fish is a primary source of protein, but protein is also derived from legumes, milk, soy, and other beans. Durians (large oval-shaped fruits) are the most popular fruit. Other favorites include pineapples, bananas, and papayas. One of the most common dishes is *nasi lemak* (rice cooked in coconut milk and accompanied by ingredients that may include dried salted fish, fried peanuts, cucumber slices, and eggs). Other popular dishes are *satay* (grilled meat on a stick), chicken or fish curry with coconut milk, *dim sum* (a traditional Chinese snack), and *bah kut teh* (Chinese pork soup). *Roti canai* is a flatbread that is often dipped in lentil curry.

Recreation

Soccer was introduced to Malaysia in the 19th century and is the country's most popular sport. Other sports include badminton, field hockey, cricket, rugby, and table tennis. There are also facilities for swimming, volleyball, tennis, and squash. Traditional activities include *sepak takraw*, a competitive team sport played with a rattan ball; *main gasing*, a competitive top-spinning game in which tops have been known to spin for longer than an hour; and martial arts (particularly *silat*). Kite flying is popular on the peninsula. Attending local festivals, watching television or movies, and visiting friends also provide recreation.

The Arts

Music and dance are prominent Malaysian arts. The *joget* is a popular dance often performed by couples at social gatherings and accompanied by instruments such as the violin and gong. A principal instrument in Malaysian music is the drum, which comes in many forms. These include the *rebana* (a single-headed drum) and the *geduk* (a short drum made from a hollow tree trunk, covered with cow hide, and played with wooden sticks). Other notable performing arts are *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet theater), *mak yong* (a musical play) and *gamelan* (traditional orchestra).

Batik is a popular handicraft. These fabrics are printed using a process in which the areas not to be dyed are coated with hot wax. Other handicrafts include pottery, woodwork, beadwork, silk weaving, and silver filigree (in which silver wires are carefully soldered to jewelry frames).

Holidays

National holidays include New Year's Day (1 Jan.), Labor Day (1 May), National Day (31 Aug.), and the birthday of the monarch, the *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* (first Saturday in June). Chinese New Year is a festival spanning several days in January or February. Islamic holidays are set according to the lunar calendar. These include *Hari Raya Puasa* (the three-day feast at the end of *Ramadan*), *Hari Raya Haji* (the Feast of Sacrifice at the end of the pilgrimage to Makkah, Saudi Arabia), and the birthday of the prophet Muhammad. During the month of *Ramadan*, Muslims do not eat or drink from sunrise to sundown each day; they eat a meal and visit friends in the evening. The *Wesak Day* (in May) commemorates the birth of Buddha. *Deepavali*, a Hindu festival in October or November, celebrates the triumph of Lord Krishna over a demon king. Christmas is the main Christian holiday. The Dayaks celebrate the harvest, venerate the dead, and honor their heroes. The Kadazan festivals in May also celebrate the harvest.

SOCIETY

Government

Malaysia is a constitutional monarchy divided into 13 states. Sarawak and Sabah are self-governing states, with foreign policy and other powers delegated to the federal government. In 9 of the 11 peninsular states, hereditary rulers (sultans) compose a Council of Rulers. The king is elected from this pool of sultans and serves a five-year term. The king (currently Sultan Mizan Zainal Abidin) is referred to as the Supreme Head of State (*Yang di-Pertuan Agong*). He has some executive powers, but the real governing power rests with the prime minister (currently Najib Abdul Razak) and Parliament. Malaysia's two houses of Parliament are the *Dewan Negara* (Senate) and the *Dewan Rakyat* (House of Representatives). In the 70-seat Senate, 44 members are appointed by the king and 26 are elected by state legislatures. The prime minister is the leader of the party that wins a plurality of seats in the 222-seat House of Representatives. Elections must be held every five years. Party affiliation generally runs along religious and ethnic lines. The voting age is 21.

Economy

During the last generation, Malaysia's gross domestic product per capita rose sharply and poverty was greatly reduced. Agriculture, tourism, electronics, and automobile manufacturing all play important roles in the economy. Major rubber, palm oil, and other plantations operate on Peninsular Malaysia, allowing the nation to become one of the world's largest exporters of natural rubber and palm oil. Other key exports include timber, oil, and tin. About 14 percent of the workforce is engaged in agriculture. Migrant workers, mostly from Indonesia, make up a significant portion of the workforce, working mainly in agriculture, construction, or as domestic help. Besides the major export crops, Malaysians cultivate rice, coconuts, cocoa, fruits, coffee, tea, and pepper. The international drug trade has a strong presence in Malaysia, causing the government to take aim at drug traffickers. In 2008, Malaysia's exports fell, manufacturing slowed, and the economy's growth nearly stopped as a result of the global economic crisis. Malaysia's currency is the *ringgit* (MYR).

Transportation and Communications

The principal means of transportation are cars, motorcycles, and bicycles. For longer trips, buses, trains, and airplanes are used. Traffic moves on the left side. The majority of roads are paved and the national highway system is well developed. Taxis are plentiful in the cities. A light-rail system functions in Kuala Lumpur. Both domestic and international communications systems are good. There are several television and radio stations. More than 60 newspapers are available in the country's major languages. Cellular phones are popular in cities.

Education

Education is considered the key to social status and success. Six years of primary and three years of secondary education are compulsory. Students then take an examination to determine whether they may continue school for two more years in a secondary school or in a trade school, both of which require a modest tuition. Most students are instructed in Malay and are required to learn English. However, Chinese and Indian students may attend special schools where instruction is in their native language. These students generally spend an extra year in school because they must also learn Malay. Secondary school graduates may take an exam to enter two years of pre-university education. Malaysia has nearly 40 tertiary institutions. Degrees from British, Australian, and U.S. universities abroad are valued.

Health

Medical care is subsidized, and both central and state governments operate hospitals and clinics. Nearly all Malaysians have access to health care. Fees are low, and the quality of care does not depend on one's income. However, rural care is not as good as urban care. The government has sponsored national immunization, fluoridation, and hygiene campaigns. Malaria and cholera are prevalent. Haze from wildfires aggravates respiratory infections and disease.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

Embassy of Malaysia, 3516 International Court NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 572-9700; web site www.kln.gov.my/web/usa_washington. Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board, 120 East 56th Street, Suite 810, New York, NY 10022; phone (212) 754-1113; web site www.tourism.gov.my.

POPULATION & AREA

Population	28,274,729 (rank=43)
Area, sq. mi.	127,317 (rank=67)
Area, sq. km.	329,750

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	57 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	50 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$13,800
Adult literacy rate	92% (male); 85% (female)
Infant mortality rate	16 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	71 (male); 77 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

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