

Traveldiary Brigitte & Heinz

Kuala Lumpur + Singapore two fascinating cities that are melting pots of cultures, and beach-holiday in Thailand



Chapter 13

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On June 3rd 2006, we left Auckland on a Malaysian plane to Kuala Lumpur. During the many hours we flew over Australia, we were fascinated to see how often the landscapes changed down under us on the red continent. Later, just before sunset, we admired a few steaming volcanoes on the Indonesian Islands of Bali and Java and wondered which one was "Gunung Merapi", which was presently making headlines as people had to be evacuated due to its imminent eruption.

The last half hour before landing, more and more lights became apparent and many towns and suburbs, connected by well lit motorways became visible.

Kuala Lumpur: modern Metropolis as host for different cultures

After eleven and a half hours flight, we landed in [Malaysia's](#) capital [Kuala Lumpur](#). The airport was very sophisticated, as was the highway into the city centre. We hadn't seen an 80 km stretch of such a good

highway for a long long time. Also along the roadside, everything looked modern and it felt more western than where we just came from. But as we reached "Chinatown", it was truly Asia. Now all the cheap guesthouses had been re-named to Backpacker's Hostels and many were fully booked, as it was Saturday evening. Never the less, Heinz finally found us a reasonably priced aircon-room with hot shower bathroom for 60 Ringgit (that's the name of the currency) (Euro 13), whilst Brigitte waited somewhere with the luggage in the heat.

Even though it was almost midnight, the streets were still bustling with people and there were exotic smells everywhere, especially along the night market. It was vibrant and fascinating and we dived in and soaked up the atmosphere, hardly knowing where to look first, as there were so many new impressions all at once. Then we ordered what we had been looking forward to so long: a delicious and freshly prepared Asian meal, accompanied by some freshly squeezed fruit juices.



We started the next morning with an ice-coffee (Asian style with ice and condensed milk), trying to wake up, but also to cool down and bear the heat and high humidity. Here it was twice as warm as in Auckland; around 32°C during the day, falling to ~28°C during the night. We sometimes sought some cooling in an air-conditioned environment like a shopping mall. Mostly we were wandering around the streets, as we were very curious to re-discover this contrast loaded city again. The balance of ultra-modern and traditional is just striking, be it in regards to buildings or population. The 24 Mio. Inhabitants of Malaysia are a blend of various people. Only 65% are ethnic Malays and they also control the government. Further, there are people with roots in China (26%) and India (8%) that can both

be thanked for the healthy economy. There remain a few "Orang Asli" the natives and "Dayaks" that live mostly on the Borneo Island district of Sabah and Sarawak.

Religion is just as diverse. Almost all Malays and some Indians are Muslims and they are by law not allowed to change their faith. The Chinese population follows Taoism or Buddhism, though some are Christians. Also some Indians are Christians but the majority of them follows Hinduism. Accordingly, each culture has built its own places of worship and therefore, many mosques and temples can be seen everywhere.

Of course, many people, especially women, also express their cultural background in the way they dress; Muslims are often covering up in colourful dresses, whereas Indian women wear saris. Only a few Chinese prefer their traditional two piece costume still, most prefer something western and often sexy.

In theory, the Chinese and Indians have their little quarters, but we found every culture blends well into the others' all across the city. Still: the contrast between the city's different areas is striking. Whereas most parts have been re-built to look now very modern and western, "Little India + Chinatown" remained almost unchanged in architecture. The modern part of Kuala Lumpur has many huge office towers and shopping malls - including one with an ice-rink. To our delight, they had not forgotten to leave space for many parks. A new one had been created with a free waterpark for the children to splash behind the [Petronas Twin Towers](#). Upon completion in 1996, the 452 M high headquarters of the Malaysian petroleum company had been the world's tallest building until 2004, when Taipeh 101 with it's tower of 508 M took this title. The base building houses a shopping centre with around 600 shops and several food-courts on six floors.

Hawker markets and food courts were abundant all across the city and they offered mainly very good, healthy and freshly prepared food and drinks. Sugar Cane, Melon, Starfruit, Mango, Apple and many more fruits were squeezed after order and served with ice. Apart from all those Asian delights, the locals also loved to savour what we would call rich "continental style" cakes. Therefore, many bakeries and café's offered a wonderful variety of baked delights, as we hadn't seen for a long time. Finally, we know why the few good bakeries Down Under were so often run by Asians. Those treats could be pricier than a simple noodle dish, but in general hawker-food is so cheap, big parts of the population eat out quite regularly.



After a while we found out, that even some ordinary and rather old fashioned looking office- or apartment-buildings could contain a modern air-conditioned 8 storey shopping centre, that was connected through various corridors into several attached buildings. One of them usually had a flashy main entrance, whereas other entrances needed to be known to be found. Some of the shopping centres would sell electronics or clothes only. In others, each floor was selling the same type of product. The amount of hi-fi, mobile-phone, cameras etc. sold everywhere, seemed out of proportion, but those shops were always busy - and not with tourists hunting for a bargain!

We have often heard that Kuala Lumpur has a big traffic problem and the city buses were certainly not the most efficient kind of transport. In addition, there is now a subway, a commuter train and a monorail that has been built above streets and houses to swiftly bypass the traffic jams below. As in Australia, it is also popular here to run cars on dual-fuel engines, which means they can either use petrol or gas. They make an effort to get away from the sole dependence on oil, even though the country is in the lucky situation to have both natural resources off shore.

Whenever we crossed a road on a traffic light, we were amused by the animation of the pedestrian's light. Ok; red was red. But when it turned green, a digital display would count back the seconds and a little green man started walking. Slowly at first, but then faster and faster, until the light turned red again.

In most parts of the city, only the lifestyle of the people was Asian, but it didn't look very different than in any part of the west. The only area where this didn't apply, as far as we had discovered, was around "Little India + Chinatown". Here the buildings were old and some looked quite run down. In "Chinatown", on a stretch of about 300 M, a modern glass roof was mounted over the street, higher than the three storey buildings. This covered about half of the night market, which really was held "daily" from about 10 a.m. to 1 a.m. After 5 p.m. lots of additional stalls were set up and so many shoppers came round, it was impossible to fall down. By the time the street vendors packed their gear and left, there was a big mess of rubbish on the pavement. Then a little army of street sweepers came along and the next morning, all was clean again and the circle could start once more.



These street stalls sold everything from fruit to clothing and souvenirs and they were also famous for selling genuine looking copies of watches, clothing and shoes of famous brands for just a few dollars. Every now and then the police cracks down on some of them and confiscates the goods. That's why Heinz had to wear his worn-out sandals a bit longer still. He had hoped to replace them here, but since there had been a raid on "Birkenstock" copies only recently, such shoes had now totally disappeared. The vendors don't even think about selling ordinary Birkenstock-type shoes, which would be totally legal. They rather wait until the situation has calmed down a bit and then put their "genuine" copies back into the shelves.



In one part of the night market, a big food court was set up on the street. Whilst most locals, young and old, had a meal prepared on the gas heated wok's that cost around 3-5 Ringgit (0.60-1.- Euro) and a fresh fruit juice for another 2 Ringgit, most tourists sat there, drinking one beer after the other. At 16 Ringgit (3.20 Euro), they felt it was such a bargain. Would they still order it at home, if it cost five times the price of the meal?

Another contrast were the little monkeys we saw roaming freely in the big parks and other green areas of this city with 1.4 mio. inhabitants. Quite a surprise to us, but these Macaques have learned to take advantage of living next to civilisation and we have seen them loitering the rubbish bins.

We have experienced a lot during the week we have had there and walked dozens of kilometres, despite the heat. On most days, a brief afternoon shower came down, that usually gave us a good excuse for another drink or piece of cake.



Also going back to the airport was easy easy easy. As it was midday rush-hour, we didn't take a taxi. It was only three minutes to the train station, where we hopped on one of MRT's trains that passed every five minutes and another three minutes later, we arrived at Kuala Lumpur's new Main railway station. Three airlines had 'check-in' counters there and after we had gotten rid of our heavy luggage, we boarded an express train that rushed us in only 28 minutes to the airport 78 km away.

It was only a short flight to Singapore, but as the airline-ticket from Auckland to Singapore had cost the same as only to Kuala Lumpur, we were happy about the free stop-over.

Singapore: efficient Chinese paired with Malaysian and Indian culture

[Singapore](#) held many surprises to us too. 13 years ago, we had known it quite well, but of course many things had changed since then. This city-state with 4.2 mio. inhabitants living on only 604 square kilometers (66 times smaller than Switzerland) has grown even closer to the sky, as had to be expected. But unexpectedly; the atmosphere had really changed a lot! People have become much more casual and relaxed and to us, it felt much more Asian now. Business attire with suits, ties, costumes and high heels are now a very uncommon sight in the streets and casual dress is "in". What a refreshing change. The streets are still clean, but not to an artificial excess, as they used to be. Behind the market, we have even seen and smelled rubbish laying around. There were still moderate penalties for major offences like walking your dog, riding your bike or peeing where you shouldn't, which all could set you back S\$ 1'000 (500 Euro) if caught - which is quite likely. At least chewing gum trafficking is no major offence anymore, only spitting the corpus delicti on the floor, makes you a criminal. The fine can easily be paid with a bankcard on an ATM-like machine, together with taxes, electricity- and telephone-bills or parking fines. The same machine dispenses also post-stamps. Only tourists need to find one of the last remaining post offices.



Along "Orchard Road" there's still one upmarket shopping mall next to another, often connected by air-conditioned under- or over-passes. In department stores there, the directory next to the escalator does not list useful items as: children's wear, household, shoes, books etc., but the names of protected animals like "puma or crocodile", some sort of natural resources as "diesel or quicksilver" and even the boss and his helper "Hilfiger" can somehow be bought...



There are many more shopping streets all around the city and except on Orchard Road, they are more "down to earth" and affordable for commoners. As in Malaysia, also various western chains like Carrefour or Ikea are now represented and every big Malaysian business seems to have a branch in Singapore and vice versa.

The number of people shopping was just amazing, on any day of the week and even more so on weekends. It seems that Singaporeans only have two hobbies: shopping and eating! No wonder, there are lots of opportunities to eat out cheaply and good. Hawker stalls and food courts are abundant all across the city - as unbelievable as it is: even more than in Kuala Lumpur!

In some areas, almost every second building housed a small or big food court. An outsider would not always find them, as often a small stair only led down into a kingdom of several dozens of food counters with a seating area in their middle. Many food courts are now air-conditioned and we heard that the others will gradually be upgraded as well. Also here, the food is freshly prepared and cheap and there is a wide selection of freshly squeezed juices and shakes with ice. As in neighboring Malaysia, a favorite dessert is grated ice with lots of colourful jellies and toppings, whereas other folks prefer coffee and cake after dinner. Even though everything, including food, is quite a bit more expensive than in Malaysia, it is still very cheap. Seeing how full all these many food courts are from lunchtime till late in the evening, we wonder if Singaporeans ever cook at home.

There are also quite a number of restaurants of which some serve western food and inevitably, the "fast-food chains" are represented as well. As the locals don't use them too often, there is almost no obesity. They are even fit to work until they are quite old. Recently, the retirement age was risen to 68 years but this is not enough, as the Taxi drivers just applied for the right to work until they're 73 years old!

The population is culturally well blended. The majority of 77% is of Chinese origins, followed by 14% Malay Singaporeans, 8% native Indians and some Westerners. Seeing these figures, it seemed like a joke to find a big area called "Chinatown", although like in "Little India", these were the last places with old buildings and they had been well restored, giving the quarters a charming - if touristy atmosphere in between all those skyscrapers.

For such a small country, it's amazing, how many people own a car, as the public transport system is excellent and in addition, a fleet of taxis serve the customers cheaply.

Again, we stayed in the middle of a very "happening" and cramped area: at Bugis Street, where there was a huge day- and night-market (plus a couple of food courts). We went sight-seeing from one area to another, sometimes on the ultra modern subway, visiting Chinese temples, fairytale Mosques and Hindu Temples that all were decorated with many amazing ornaments and craft works. As a contrast, we also admired many modern buildings that were architecturally very refined - much more modern than what the strict building-permission department would ever allow in Switzerland.



This island has many pedestrian areas with large boulevards and parks, often along the water. For those that can't be without winter, there is also a 300 M long indoor ski slope

Thailand: finishing off with a beach holiday

After a week, on June 17, we flew to the island of Koh Samui in [Thailand](#) where we spent a month holidaying. The first and the last few days, we spent on [Koh Samui's](#) Lamai Beach and in between we visited the neighboring island of [Koh Phangan's](#) Haadrin and Thong Nai Pan Yai beaches. Our overall impressions were about the same as we described in our travel diaries [Chapter 8](#) (Asia 2003-2004).

Some things had even changed in these two years. Lamai was now polluted with European time share touts: what a pest!

We have heard that after the Tsunami hit Thailand's west-coast, the number of tourists increased dramatically here on the east side of the peninsula, especially on Koh Phangan, which is mainly visited by independent travellers that don't book ahead. The number of daily flights between Bangkok and Koh Samui increased from 11 to 25 today.



For most bungalow-owners, this raised hopes that this trend would continue and so they started building like crazy. Within one and a half years after the sad event in the Phuket area, almost every old wooden bungalow on Koh Phangan has been replaced or is in the process of being replaced with modern concrete structures that now mostly have air-conditioning. As the small bungalows often have given way to hotel rooms, they can host much more tourists than before. A few up market resorts have already been added, not only to Haadrin, but also to the

outer beaches and more are under construction. Even the cheaper resorts started to add swimming pools, regardless of the limited resources of electricity and water. A newly laid underwater electricity cable to Koh Phangan had become too weak already after three months, as all now have air-conditioners.

Unlike on Koh Samui, where mainly families and sex-tourists are visiting, Koh Phangan is the destination of backpacking party freaks and the island is overrun once every month for the infamous full moon party. The rest of the time, it's (been?) pretty quiet. We guess that the bungalow operators aim for a better heeled and

more mature crowd, that would spend their two weeks family holiday there. However, as long as they put up two big screens in their posh and expensive restaurants, showing videos all day long and selling plastic vodka-buckets, we believe they don't understand that their desired clientele is looking for something else than the young people before. Consequently, they stay empty, as those seeking entertainment and booze rather go to the cheap eateries or beach-restaurants, which are still abundant.

As we were in Haadrin during the time when the "world cup 06" reigned the world, it was even harder for us that are not interested in soccer, to find a quiet spot for a meal. Along the beach and in many restaurants, big 3x4 M screens were mounted and as everything is always "open air", the noise even bothered the "quiet" places. Therefore, sometimes we had to listen how the winner gained another "devastating victory" over the loser. For us, this sounded more like the coverage of a major war. First, we intended to move to a more quiet beach, but either the place was closed until high season in December or the phone call went like this: "no, we don't have TV, but you can watch soccer" ... probably on big screen...



Finally we changed only to a more quiet bungalow outside Haadrin village. Several rocks were smartly integrated into bath- and bedroom, which were separated by a fountain and there was a breezy balcony with sea-view and later found more peace in Thong Nai Pan.

It was interesting to see the self-imposed segregation of the nationalities. Whereas the noisy and video polluted Haadrin area was mainly popular amongst English speaking nations, small and quiet Thong Nai Pan was much more favored by Austrians, Germans and Scandinavians.

Koh Phangan was still more laid back than Koh Samui and there were no "girlie bars". The local authorities had decided recently, that beach hawkers are more of a pain than a joy for tourists and forbade their presence. So now this island was as peaceful as a Thai island can be. It's probably the best compromise for a beach holiday in Asia and we openly admit our other priority: food, was perfectly satisfied over there.

It felt good that once in Asia, the media informed us about what was happening in the world again. In Thailand for instance, the English daily "Bangkok Post" informed in a critical, yet objective style about all continents and not only about it's own country.

On July 16, 2006 we flew back to Singapore, where we had another 4 days before we continue to Capetown.

Brigitte & Heinz



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