Malaysia, Singapore & Brunei
a travel survival kit

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Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei are three independent South-East Asian nations offering the visitor a taste of Asia at its most accessible. In all of Asia only Japan has a higher per capita income than these countries so, as you might expect, they are relatively prosperous and forward looking. Transport facilities are good, accommodation standards are high, the food excellent (often amazingly good in fact) and for the visitor there are very few problems to be faced.

Yet despite these high standards these are not expensive countries – Singapore may be able to offer all the air-conditioned comforts your credit cards can handle and East Malaysia may at times be a little pricey due to its jungle-frontier situation, but in Peninsular Malaysia the costs can be absurdly cheap if you want them to be.

More important than simple ease of travel this region offers amazing variety both geographically and culturally. If you want beaches and tropical islands it’s hard to beat the east coast of the peninsula. If you want mountains, parks and wildlife then you can climb Mt Kinabalu, explore the rivers of Sarawak or watch for wildlife in the huge Taman Negara (National Park) on the peninsula.

If you want city life then you can try the historic old port of Melaka, the easy going back streets of Georgetown in Penang or the modern-as-tomorrow city of Singapore. When it comes to people you’ve got Malays, Chinese, Indians and a whole host of indigenous tribes in Sabah and Sarawak. Last, but far from least, you’ve got a choice of food which alone brings people back to the region over and over again; there’s no question in many people’s minds that Singapore is deservedly the food capital of Asia.
Facts about the Country

HISTORY
It is only since WW II that Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei have emerged as three separate independent countries. Prior to that they were all loosely amalgamated as a British colony, Sarawak excepted, and earlier still they might have been independent Malay kingdoms, or part of the greater Majapahit or Srivijaya empires of what is now Indonesia. In the dim mists of time it’s possible that Malaysia was actually the home for the earliest homo sapiens in Asia. Discoveries have been made in the gigantic Niah Caves of Sarawak which indicate that stone age man was present there, and in other caves of north Borneo and the Malay peninsula, as long as 40,000 years ago.

Early Trade & Empires
Little is known about these stone age Malaysians, but around 10,000 years ago the aboriginal Malays, the Orang Asli, began to move down the peninsula from a probable starting point in south-west China. Remote settlements of Orang Asli can still be found in parts of Malaysia, but 4000 years ago they were already being supplanted by the Proto-Malays, ancestors of today’s Malays, who at first settled the coastal regions, then moved inland. In the early centuries of the Christian era Malaya was known as far away as Europe. Ptolemy showed it on his early map with the label ‘Golden Chersonese’. It spelt gold not only to the Romans for soon Indian and Chinese traders also arrived in search of that most valuable metal and Hindu mini-states sprung up along the great Malay rivers.

The Malay people were basically similar ethnically to the people of Sumatra, Java and even the Philippines and from time to time various South-East Asian empires extended their control over all or part of the Malay peninsula. Funan, a kingdom based in modern day Kampuchea, at one time controlled the northern part of the peninsula, but from the 7th century the great Sumatran based Srivijaya empire, with its capital in Palembang, held the whole area and even extended its rule up into Thailand.

In turn the Srivijayans fell to the Java based Majapahit empire, then in 1403 Paramesvara, a Sumatran prince, established himself at Melaka which soon became the most powerful city state in the region. At this time the spice trade from the Moluccas was beginning to develop and Melaka, with its strategic position on the straits which separate Sumatra from the Malay peninsula, was a familiar port for ships from the east and west.

In 1405 the Chinese Admiral Cheng Ho arrived in Melaka with greetings from the ‘Son of Heaven’ and, more important, the promise of protection from the encroaching Siamese to the north. With this support from China the power of Melaka extended to include most of the Malay peninsula. Cheng Ho brought something else to Melaka – the Islamic religion which also began to spread through Malaya.

The Portuguese Period
For the next century Melaka’s power and wealth expanded to such an extent that the city became one of the wealthiest in the east. So wealthy in fact that the Portuguese began to take an over-active interest in the place and after a preliminary skirmish in 1509 Alfonse de Albuquerque arrived in 1511 with a fleet of 18 ships and overpowered Melaka’s 20,000 defenders and their war elephants. The Sultan of Melaka fled south with his court to Johore where the Portuguese were unable to dislodge him. Thus Melaka came to be the centre of European power in the region while Johore grew to be the main Malay city state, along with other Malay centres.
at Brunei in north Borneo and Acheh in the north of Sumatra.

The Portuguese were to hold Melaka for over 100 years although they were never able to capitalise on the city's fabulous wealth and superb position. Portuguese trading power and strength was never great enough to take full advantage of the volume of trade that used to flow through Melaka but, more important, the Portuguese did not develop the complex pattern of influence and patronage upon which Melaka had based its power and control. Worse, the Portuguese reputation for narrow-mindedness and cruelty had preceded them and they gained few converts to Christianity and little support for their rule.

Thus the other Malay states were able to grow into the vacuum created by the Portuguese takeover of Melaka and while they squabbled and fought between themselves they also had the strength to make attacks on Melaka. Gradually Portuguese power declined and after long skirmishes with the Dutch, who supported the rulers of Johore, Melaka eventually fell, after a long and bitter siege, in 1641.

**The Dutch Period**

Like the Portuguese the Dutch were to rule Melaka for over a century but, also like the Portuguese, the Dutch failed to recognise that Melaka's greatest importance was as a centre for entrepot trade. To an even greater extent than their predecessors the Dutch tried to keep Melaka's trade totally to themselves and as a result Melaka continued to decline. Also the greatest Dutch interest was reserved for Batavia, modern day Jakarta, so Melaka was always the poor sister to the more important Javan port.

**The British Arrive**

Meanwhile the British were casting eyes at Malaya again. They had shown an interest in the area then decided to concentrate on their Indian possessions, but in 1786 Captain Francis Light arrived at Penang and this time British intentions were firm ones. Light followed a free trade policy at Penang, a clear contrast to the monopolistic intentions of the Portuguese and then the Dutch in Melaka. As a result Penang soon became a thriving port and by 1800 the population of the island, virtually uninhabited when Light took over, had reached 10,000.

While Penang was a success story locally it did not meet the high expectations of the British East India Company and in 1795 the company also found itself controlling Melaka due to events in Europe. When Napoleon overran the Netherlands the British temporarily took control of first Melaka and later the other Dutch possessions in the region. In 1814, with Napoleon defeated, an agreement was reached on the return of these possessions and by 1818 Melaka and Java had been returned to Dutch control.

During the years of British rule, however, there had been a number of advocates for greater British power in the region—one of the most outspoken being Thomas Stamford Raffles. He had decided that Britain, not the Dutch, should be the major power in the region, but was unable to convince his superiors in London that this was a wise plan. In 1818, however, the re-establishment of Dutch power had caused sufficient worry to the company officials in Calcutta that Raffles was told to go ahead and establish a second British base further south than Penang. In early 1819 Raffles arrived in Singapore and decided this should be the place.

**Raffles’ Singapore**

Over a thousand years earlier Singapore, then known as Temasek or ‘Sea Town’, had been a small outpost of the Srivijaya empire and around 1100 AD the place had been renamed Singapura or ‘Lion City’ by a visiting Sumatran prince who fancied he had seen a lion there. Later other Malay kings ruled the swampy island, but with the defeat of Singapura’s last Sumatran
In Singapore and Malaysia the developments through the balance of the 19th century were chiefly economic ones, but in their wake they brought enormous changes to the racial make up of the region. There had been Chinese settlers in Malaya from the time of Cheng Ho's visit to Melaka in the early 1400s, but in the 1800s they began to flood in in much greater numbers. The main attraction was tin and at mining towns around Kuala Lumpur and Perak fortunes were quickly won and lost. In 1877 rubber plantations began to spring up all over the peninsula. Since the Malays were unwilling to work the long hard hours necessary to tap the rubber the British plantation owners brought in labourers from India. Thus by the turn of the century Malaya had a burgeoning economy, but also a vastly different racial mix than a century before. Whereas Malaya had been predominantly populated by Malays now it also had large groups of Indians and Chinese. Furthermore with the arrival of women settlers the labourers who had come there only to work now began to think of settling down and remaining.

As in India the British managed to bring more and more of the country under their control without having to fight for it or even totally govern it. Internal government was left up to the local sultans while the British provided 'advisers' and managed external affairs. In 1867 the Straits Settlements became a crown colony and was no longer governed from India. In 1895 Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan and Pahang became the Federated Malay States. Johore refused to join the federation while Kelantan, Trengganu, Perlis and Kedah were still controlled by the Thais until 1909.

Meanwhile in Borneo

Across in north Borneo events sometimes read more like Victorian melodrama than hard fact. In 1838 James Brooke, a British adventurer, arrived in Borneo with his armed sloop to find the Brunei aristocracy
facing rebellion from the dissatisfied inland tribes. He quelled the rebellion and in gratitude was given power over part of what is today Sarawak. Appointing himself 'Rajah Brooke' he successfully cooled down the fractious tribes, suppressed head hunting, eliminated the dreaded Borneo pirates and founded a personal dynasty that was to last for over a hundred years. The Brooke family of 'White Rajahs' gradually brought more and more of Borneo under their power until the Japanese arrived in WW II.

The development of British power in Sabah was much more prosaic. Once part of the great Brunei empire, Sabah came under the influence of the British North Borneo Company after centuries of being avoided due to its unpleasant pirates. At one time Kota Kinabalu was known as Api Api, 'Fire, Fire', from the pirates' tiresome habit of repeatedly burning it down. Eventually in 1888 the whole North Borneo coast was brought under British protection although Mat Salleh, a Sabah rebel, held out against British power until his death in 1900.

**World War II**

From the turn of the century until WW II Malaya became steadily more prosperous although the peninsula continued to forge ahead of the north Borneo states. The various peninsula states came more and more under British influence, but more and more Chinese and Indian immigrants flooded into the country and eventually outnumbered the indigenous Malays. By the time WW II broke out in Europe Malaya supplied nearly 40% of the world's rubber and 60% of its tin.

When the war arrived in Malaya its impact was sudden and devastating. A few hours before the first Japanese aircraft was sighted over Pearl Harbor the Japanese landed at Kota Bahru in the north of Malaya and started their lightning dash down the peninsula. British confidence that they were more than a match for the Japanese soon proved to be sadly misplaced and it took the Japanese little over a month to take Kuala Lumpur and a month after that they were at the doors of Singapore. On 15 February 1942 Singapore fell and the remaining British inhabitants who had not managed to escape were to spend the rest of the war in prison camps. North Borneo had fallen to the Japanese with even greater speed.

The Japanese were unable to form a cohesive policy in Malaya since there was not a well organised Malay independence movement which they could harness to their goals. Furthermore many Chinese were bitterly opposed to the Japanese who had invaded China in the 1930s. Remnants of the British forces continued a guerilla struggle against the Japanese throughout the war and the predominantly Chinese communist Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army also continued the struggle against the Japanese.

**Post War & the Emergency**

Following the sudden end of WW II Britain was faced with reorganising its position in Malaya. There had not been the same concerted push towards independence which India had been through in the inter-war years so while independence and the end of colonial rule was clearly a long term programme, in the short term British rule was likely to continue.

At first the plan was to take over the rule of Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei, to form the Malay states into a Malay Union and to rule Singapore as a crown colony. This plan faced one major obstacle - all prior British plans for Malaya had been based on the premise that the country was Malayan even though, with the increasing percentage of the population of either of Indian or Chinese descent, this became less and less realistic. Through WW II the population of Indians and Chinese had become much more settled than before and now there was even less likelihood of them returning to their 'homelands'. British acceptance of this fact of life
naturally provoked strong Malay opposition.

Faced with these difficulties the British soon had an even greater problem to grapple with—the Emergency. In 1948 the Malaysian Communist Party, which had fought against the Japanese throughout the war, decided the time had come to end British colonial rule and launched a guerrilla struggle which was to continue for 12 years. Although there are still sporadic outbreaks of communist violence the threat was eventually declared over in 1960. In part this was because the communists were never able to gain a broad spectrum of support. They were always predominantly a Chinese grouping and while the Malays might have wanted independence from Britain they certainly did not want rule by the Chinese. Nor were all Chinese in favour of the party, it was mainly an uprising of the peasantry and lower classes.

**Independence**

In 1955 Britain agreed that Malaya would become fully independent within two years, but in the same year Singapore was torn by strikes, riots and demonstrations over low wages, terrible housing conditions, unemployment and education. Nevertheless in 1956 Britain also agreed that Singapore should have internal self-government by 1959. Malaya duly achieved independence (merdeka) in 1957 despite unsuccessful meetings with Chin Peng, leader of the communist forces, in an attempt to end the now merely smouldering Emergency. Tunku Abdul Rahman was the leader of the new nation which came into existence with remarkably few problems.

In Singapore things went nowhere near as smoothly and politics became increasingly radicalised. The election in 1959 swept Lee Kuan Yew’s People’s Action Part (PAP) into power, but they faced a whole series of major problems. When the Federation of Malaya was formed in 1948 the Malay leaders were strongly opposed to including Singapore because this would have tipped the racial balance from a Malay majority to a Chinese one. Furthermore while politics in Malaya were orderly, upper class and gentlemanly, in Singapore they were anything but.

Nevertheless to Singapore merger with Malaya seemed to be the only answer to high unemployment, a soaring birthrate and the loss of its traditional trading role with the growth of independent South-East Asian nations. Malaya was none too keen to inherit this little parcel of problems, but when it seemed possible that the moderate PAP party might be toppled by its own left wing the thought of a moderate Singapore within Malaysia became less off-putting than the thought of a communist Singapore outside it. Accordingly in 1961 Tunku Abdul Rahman agreed to work towards the creation of Malaysia which would include Singapore. To balance the addition of Singapore, discussion also commenced on adding Sarawak, Sabah and Brunei to the union. This proposal was welcomed by Britain who had been facing the problem of exactly what to do with their north Borneo possessions.

**Confrontation**

Accordingly in 1963 Malaysia came into existence although at the last moment Brunei, afraid of losing its oil wealth, refused to join. No sooner had Malaysia been created than problems arose. First of all the Philippines laid claim to Sabah, which had been known as North Borneo prior to the union. More seriously Indonesia laid claim to the whole place and Sukarno, now in the final phase of his megalomania, commenced his ill-starred ‘Confrontation’. Indonesian guerrilla forces crossed the borders from Kalimantan (Indonesian south Borneo) into Sabah and Sarawak and landings were made in Peninsular Malaysia and even in Singapore. British troops, having finally quelled the Emergency only four years earlier, now found themselves back in the jungle once again.