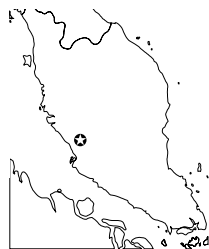


Kuala Lumpur



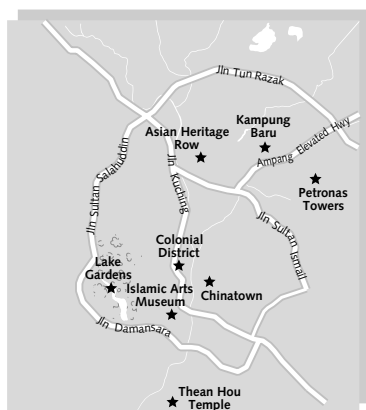
After years as a Southeast Asian runner-up, Kuala Lumpur (KL) is on a winning streak. More fun and easier to negotiate than Bangkok, grittier than Singapore and more eclectic than Hanoi, the buzz about KL is as palpable as its intoxicating aromas of sizzling satay, stinky durian, sweet incense and petrol fumes.

It's curious that a city where you still have to watch your step for pavement cracks and pot-holes can also feel cutting edge, but cast your eyes to the skyline and around the streets and you'll see what we mean. In just 150 years, KL has gone from a tin prospector's hovel in the jungle to a thoroughly modern metropolis, home of the shiny Petronas Towers, a design classic and until recently the world's tallest building. In the rush for the new, much of the old has been (and is being) demolished. Still, some impressive colonial-era buildings remain and the city's most atmospheric and colourful quarters are Chinatown, Little India and Kampung Baru, the heartlands of KL's Chinese, Indian and Malay communities.

It's this multicultural character that makes KL such a fascinating place – one moment you could be burning joss sticks at a Chinese temple, the next shedding shoes to enter a mosque or Hindu shrine. Hedonists will also be happy: you can eat and shop like a king in KL and the nightlife is cranking. For all its activity and urban landscapes KL also has its tranquil moments. This is a city where you can chill out in lush parks or escape to the countryside in the surrounding state of Selangor.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Discovering the historic **colonial district** (p95) and vibrant **Chinatown** (p88) on a walking tour
- Shooting up the jaw-dropping **Petronas Towers** (p88), then taking them in from the perspective of charming **Kampung Baru** (p91)
- Tucking into fabulous feasts at KL's **restaurants** and **night markets** (p104)
- Exploring the relaxing **Lake Gardens**, and visiting its showpiece **Bird Park** (p89)
- Admiring the beauty of Islamic art at the **Islamic Arts Museum** (p88)
- Paying respects to the heavenly mother at the **Thean Hou Temple** (p93)



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 03

■ POPULATION: 1.8 MILLION

■ AREA: 243 SQ KM

HISTORY

In 1857, 87 Chinese prospectors in search of tin landed at the meeting point of the Klang and Gombak rivers and imaginatively named the place Kuala Lumpur, meaning 'muddy confluence'. Within a month all but 17 of the prospectors had died of malaria and other tropical diseases, but the tin they discovered in Ampang attracted more miners and KL quickly became a brawling, noisy, violent boomtown.

As in other parts of the Malay peninsula, the local sultan appointed a proxy (known as Kapitan China) to bring the unruly Chinese fortune-seekers and their secret societies into line. The successful candidate Yap Ah Loy (Kapitan China from 1868 to 1885) took on the task with such ruthless relish that he's now credited as the founder of KL.

Loy had barely established control, however, when the Malay Civil War between local sultans fighting for the throne of Perak broke out. KL was swept up in the conflict and burnt to the ground in 1881. This allowed the British government representative Frank Swettenham to push through a radical new town plan that transferred the central government here, from Klang. By 1886 a railway line linked KL to Klang; by 1887 several thousand brick buildings had been built; and in 1896 the city became the capital of the newly formed Federated Malay States.

After occupation by Japanese forces during WWII (when many Chinese were tortured and killed, and many Indians sent to work on Burma's 'Death Railway'), the British temporarily returned, only to be ousted when Malaysia finally declared its independence here in 1957 at Dataran Merdeka (Merdeka Sq). KL continued to thrive but its confidence took a knock in 1969 when race riots that began in the Chow Kit area eventually claimed hundreds, perhaps thousands, of lives.

The city officially became the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur when it was ceded by the sultan of Selangor in 1974. Its mayor and councillors are not elected but appointed on the recommendation of the ruling parties in government. There's very little accountability and a job on the council is largely seen by locals as a trip on the gravy train, especially as KL is Malaysia's political and commercial capital as well as its most populous and prosperous city.

CLIMATE

KL's temperature ranges from 21°C to 33°C and the average humidity exceeds 82%. Although there's rain through the year, March to April and September to November are the wettest months.

ORIENTATION

It's relatively easy to find your way around KL, although getting around on foot can be frustrating. Distances are short, but footpaths are often missing. When in doubt, the public transport system (p117) is quick, easy and cheap.

The old colonial heart of KL is Merdeka Sq, near the confluence of two rivers (the 'muddy confluence' from which the city takes its name). Southeast from here is bustling Chinatown, famed for its cheap accommodation and night market. West of Chinatown, across several busy highways and the train tracks, is the Masjid Negara (National Mosque), historic KL Train Station and the peaceful Lake Gardens. South of the Lake Gardens is KL Sentral, the new regional and international train terminus and the first place you'll most likely arrive in the city from the airport. KL Sentral is part of the area known as Brickfields. On the other side of the tracks further south is Bangsar, a nightlife nucleus of trendy bars and eateries.

Another major arrival and departure point is the Puduraya long distance bus station. East of Puduraya, the intersection of Jln Sultan Ismail and Jln Bukit Bintang marks the heart of the Golden Triangle, KL's premier business, shopping and entertainment district. Crowded with midrange and luxury hotels, the Golden Triangle encompasses an area that now stretches north to the Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC) development anchored by the Petronas Towers.

Back at Merdeka Sq, if you head against the one-way traffic northeast along Jln Tuanku A Rahman (commonly called Jln TAR) you'll soon hit Little India, and further north, Chow Kit, a red-light area famed for its lively market. Immediately west of Chow Kit is the old Malay area of Kampung Baru. Jln Raja Laut runs almost parallel to Jln TAR and takes the northbound traffic towards Jln Tun Razak marking the outer northern boundary of the city centre; around here you'll find Lake Titiwangsa and the National Art Gallery, Library and Theatre.