

Cultural Guide to Malaysia



Facts and Statistics

Location: South eastern Asia. It consists of thirteen states and three federal territories and has a total landmass of 329,847 square kilometres (127,350 sq mi) separated by the South China Sea into two regions, Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia. Land borders are shared with Thailand, Indonesia and Brunei, and maritime borders exist with Singapore, Vietnam, and the Philippines.

Capital: The capital city is Kuala Lumpur, while Putrajaya is the seat of the federal government.

Climate: tropical; annual southwest (April to October) and northeast (October to February) monsoons.

Population: In 2015 the population exceeded 30 million.

Ethnic Make-up: Malay 50.4%, Chinese 23.7%, indigenous 11%, Indian 7.1%, others 7.8%

Religions: Muslim 60.4%, Buddhist 19.2%, Christian 9.1%, Hindu 6.3%, Confucianism, Taoism, other traditional Chinese religions 2.6%, other or unknown 1.5%, none 0.8%.

Government: constitutional monarchy

Malaysia has its origins in the Malay Kingdoms present in the area which, from the 18th century, became subject to the British Empire. The first British territories were known as the Straits Settlements, with the other states forming protectorates. The states on Peninsular Malaysia, then known as Malaya, were first unified as the Malayan Union in 1946. Malaya was restructured as the Federation of Malaya in 1948, and achieved independence on 31 August 1957. Malaya united with Sabah, Sarawak, and Singapore on 16 September 1963, with 'si' being added to give the new country the name Malaysia. However, less than two years later in 1965, Singapore left the federation. Since independence, Malaysia has had one of the best economic records in Asia, with GDP growing an average 6.5% from 1957 to 2005. The economy has traditionally been fuelled by its natural resources, the most valuable exported resource being petroleum, but is expanding in the sectors of science, tourism, commerce and medical tourism.

The head of federation is the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, an elected monarch chosen from the hereditary rulers (Sultan) of the nine Malay states every five years. The head of government is the Prime Minister. The government system is closely modelled on the Westminster parliamentary system and the legal system is based on English Common Law.

Language

The Malay language is an Austronesian language spoken not only by Malaysians but also people who reside in the Malay Peninsula, southern Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, central eastern Sumatra, the Riau islands, parts of the coast of Borneo, Cocos and Christmas Islands in Australia. It is also very similar to Indonesian, known locally as Bahasa Indonesia.

In Malaysia, the language is officially known as Bahasa Malaysia, which translates as the "Malaysian language". The term, which was introduced by the National Language Act 1967, was predominant until the 1990s, when most academics and government officials reverted to "Bahasa Melayu," which is used in the Malay version of the Federal Constitution.

Education

The education system features a non-compulsory kindergarten education followed by six years of compulsory primary education, and five years of optional secondary education. Schools in the primary education system are divided into three categories: national primary schools, vernacular and private international schools. Vernacular schools use either Chinese or Tamil as the medium of instruction, whereas national primary schools use Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction for all subjects except English, Science and Mathematics. Before progressing to the secondary level of education, pupils in Year Six are required to sit for the Primary School Achievement Test.

Secondary education is conducted in secondary schools for five years. National secondary schools also use Bahasa Malaysia as the language of instruction except in mathematics, science, and language classes. At the end of Form Three, students are evaluated in the Lower Secondary Assessment, although this is set to be abolished by 2016. In the final year of secondary education, students sit for the Malaysian Certificate of Education examination. The government has decided to abandon the use of English in teaching maths and science and revert to Bahasa Malaysia, starting in 2012. Before the introduction of the matriculation system, students aiming to enter public universities had to complete an additional 18 months of secondary schooling in Form Six and sit the Malaysian Higher School Certificate. Since the introduction of the matriculation programme as an alternative in 1999, students who completed the 12-month programme in matriculation colleges can enrol in local universities enrolling with Form Six result.

Malay Culture and Society

A Multi-Cultural Society

Malaysia is a multi-cultural society. The main ethnic groups are the native Malays as well as large populations of Chinese, and Indians. When visiting the country it is clear that the ethnicities retain their religions, customs and way of life. The most important festivals of each group are recognised by public holidays.

Although growing up, children are educated in the same schools and will eventually work in the same offices, few marry outside their own ethnicity. Families tend to socialise within their own ethnic group, all part of retaining their individual traditions and lifestyles.

Despite the ethnic differences there are commonalities culturally speaking.

Group Orientation

The family is considered the centre of the social structure. As a result there is a great emphasis on unity, loyalty and respect for the elderly. The family is the place where the individual can be guaranteed both emotional and financial support. When one member of the family suffers a financial setback, the rest of the family will contribute what they can to help out. Families tend to be extended, although in the larger cities this will naturally differ.

The Concept of Face

Malays, Chinese and Indians all strive to maintain face and avoid shame both in public and private. Face is a personal concept that embraces qualities such as a good name, good character, and being held in esteem by one's peers. Face is considered a commodity that can be given, lost, taken away,

or earned. On top of this face also extends to the family, school, company, and even the nation itself.

The desire to maintain face makes Malaysians strive for harmonious relationships. This is also a concept shared by some neighbouring countries like Singapore.

Face can be lost by openly criticizing, insulting, or putting someone on the spot; doing something that brings shame to the group; challenging someone in authority, especially if this is done in public; showing anger at another person; refusing a request; not keeping a promise; or disagreeing with someone publicly. Conversely, face can be saved by remaining calm and courteous; discussing errors or transgressions in private; speaking about problems without blaming anyone; using non-verbal communication to say "no"; and allowing the other person to get out of the situation with their pride intact.

Local customs and practice regarding dress

Malaysia is a multicultural but mainly Islamic country. You should respect local traditions, customs, laws and religions at all times and be aware of your actions to ensure that they don't offend, especially during the holy month of Ramadan or if you intend to visit religious areas. You should also dress modestly, particularly in conservative and rural areas and when visiting places of worship.

[UK Government Travel Advice March 2015](#)

The education sector is generally conservative in Malaysia and a more formal dress code is necessary in most situations if you are to project an image of a trustworthy and knowledgeable professional to prospective students, parents, research partners and other stakeholders.

At work and for business meetings the standard dress is a business suit, a jacket and trousers or a midi/maxi length skirt, or a dress, with jackets commonly worn if attending a formal meeting or function. You should avoid clothing which displays a lot of naked skin and in particular your back, chest, feet and stomach should be covered at all times. Any clothing that has words, terms, or pictures that may be offensive to others is considered unacceptable.

Meeting and Greeting

Greetings in a social context will depend upon the ethnicity of the person you are meeting. In general, most Malays are aware of Western ways so the handshake is normal. There may be slight differences though and a few things to bear in mind include:

- Malay women may not shake hands with men. Women can of course shake hands with women. Men may also not shake hands with women and may bow instead while placing their hand on their heart.
- The Chinese handshake is light and may be rather prolonged, men and women may shake hands, and many older Chinese lower their eyes during the greeting as a sign of respect.
- Indians shake hands with members of the same sex. When being introduced to someone of the opposite sex, nodding the head and smiling is usually sufficient.
- Most Malaysians are not used to greeting with a hug and kiss, this may happen among close family and friends (women only) and deemed inappropriate for first meeting.

Among all cultures, there is a general tendency to introduce:

- The most important person to the lower ranking person.
- The older person to the younger person.
- Women to men.

Forms of Titles

Titles of Malaysian Nobility:

Malaysians hold their titles and honorific's in high regard and protocol calls for their correct usage. Different titles are ranked in order of importance but it's important to remember that a person's position or public function may give them a higher rank than his title.

- TUANKU to address Malaysian sultans
- TUNKU or TENGKU is used to address children and grand children of sultans (royal blood)
- RAJA MUDA is a title for the heir of the throne in several states
- UNGKU or ENCKU is for the royalty of a lesser degree than TUNKU
- MEGAT is the title given to a child of a royal mother and commoner father
- PUTERI is the feminine form of MEGAT (for the Perak state)

Titles in Business

- TUN is the highest honour bestowed by the King and is limited to 50 living Malaysian men and women
- TANSRI is the highest second order of chivalry bestowed by the King and limited to 195 living Malaysian men and women
- DATUK or DATO is the highest title conferred by the rulers of the various states
- HAJI (male) or HAJJAH (female) means the holder of the title has made the Haj (pilgrimage) to Mecca

Names

The way names are used also varies between ethnicities:

Ethnicity	Names
Chinese	<p>The Chinese traditionally have 3 names. The surname (family name) is first and is followed by two personal names. The last name is the one commonly used to address a Chinese person in an unofficial way.</p> <p>E.g. Tan Eng Keong – Tan (family name) Eng Keong (the given name-but in short as Keong). In full, refer to as Mr Tan Eng Keong or Mr Tan. Many Chinese adopt more Western names and may ask you to use that instead. For example if Mr Tan adopted the name of Michael, you may refer him as Michael</p>
Malays	<p>Many Malays do not have surnames. Instead, men add their father's name to their own name with the term "bin" (meaning 'son of'). So Rosli bin Suleiman, would be Rosli the son of Suleiman.</p> <p>Women use the term "binti", so Aysha bint Suleiman is Aysha the daughter of Suleiman. Encik is equivalent to Mr and Cik is Ms. In more formal and respectful</p>

	way of address, you may use Tuan and Puan similar to Sir and Madam.
Indian	Many Indians do not use surnames. Instead, they place the initial of their father's name at the back of their own name. The man's formal name is their name "s/o" (son of) and the father's name. Women use "d/o" to refer to themselves as the daughter of their father.

Gift Giving Etiquette

Here is some general gift giving etiquette guidelines:

Gift giving to Malays:

- If invited to someone's home for dinner, bring the hostess pastries or good quality chocolates.
- Never give alcohol.
- Do not give toy dogs or pigs to children.
- Do not give anything made of pigskin.
- Avoid white wrapping paper as it symbolizes death and mourning.
- Avoid yellow wrapping paper, as it is the colour of royalty.
- If you give food, it must be "halal" (meaning permissible for Muslims).
- Offer gifts with the right hand only or both hands if the item is large.
- Gifts are generally not opened when received.

Gift giving to Chinese:

- If invited to someone's home, bring a small gift of fruit, sweets, or cakes, saying that it is for the children.
- A gift is traditionally refused before it is accepted to demonstrate that the recipient is not anticipating it or greedy.
- Do not give scissors, knives or other cutting utensils, as they indicate a desire to sever the relationship. Never give a clock as a gift, it represent death/end.
- Traditionally flowers did not make good gifts as they are given to the sick and are used at funerals. However, there has been a change with the influence from the west, it is now widely used at an event like ceremony, award dinner etc. and could be suitable for a female recipient in formal occasion.
- Do not wrap gifts in mourning colours - white, blue, or black.
- Wrap the gifts in happy colours - red, pink, or yellow.
- Elaborate gift - wrapping is imperative.
- Never wrap a gift for a baby or decorate the gift in any way with a stork, as birds are the harbinger of death.
- It is best to give gifts in even numbers since odd numbers are unlucky. Try to avoid number 4 which sounds alike death.
- Gifts are generally not opened when received.

Gift giving to Indians:

- If you give flowers, avoid frangipani as they are used in funeral wreaths.
- Money should be given in odd numbers.
- Offer gifts with the right hand only or both hands if the item is large.

- Do not wrap gifts in white or black.
- Wrap gifts in red, yellow or green paper or other bright colours as these bring good fortune.
- Do not give leather products to a Hindu. Hindu pays high respect to cows and for religious reason does not consume beef. Some Chinese also follow this tradition.
- Do not give alcohol unless you are certain the recipient drinks.
- Gifts are generally not opened when received.

Meeting and Greeting

Within the business context most Malaysian business people are culturally-savvy and internationally exposed. Your experience may very well depend upon the ethnicity, age, sex and status of the person you are meeting. The best approach is always friendly yet formal. A few tips include:

- Initial greetings should be formal and denote proper respect.
- If in a team, introduce the most important person first.
- Many Malays and Indians are uncomfortable shaking hands with a member of the opposite sex.
- Foreign men should always wait for a Malaysian woman to extend her hand. Foreign women should also wait for a Malaysian man to extend his hand.
- To demonstrate respect Chinese may look downwards rather than at the person they are meeting.
- It is important that professional titles (professor, doctor, engineer) and honorific titles are used in business. Malays and Indians use titles with their first name while Chinese use titles with their surname.

Business Card Etiquette

- Business cards are exchanged after the initial introductions.
- If you will be meeting Chinese, have one side of your card translated into Chinese, with the Chinese characters printed in gold.
- If you will be meeting government officials, have one side of your card translated into Bahasa Malaysia.
- Use two hands or the right hand only to exchange business cards.
- Examine any business card you receive before putting it in your business card case.
- The respect you show someone's business card is indicative of the respect you will show the individual in business. Act accordingly.
- Never write on someone's card in their presence.

Communication

- As an extension to the need to maintain harmonious relations, Malaysians rely on non-verbal communication (i.e. facial expressions, tone of voice, body language, etc). Such a communication style tends to be subtle, indirect and Malaysians may hint at a point rather than making a direct statement, since that might cause the other person to lose face. Rather than say "no", they might say, "I will try", or "I'll see what I can do". This allows the person making the request and the person turning it down to save face and maintain harmony in their relationship.
- If you are unsure about the affirmative response you received, you may want to continue the discussion, re-phrasing the question in several different ways so that you may compare responses. If the response was given because the Malaysian did not know how to respond in the negative without causing offense, this may come out. Alternatively, they may have someone else give you the bad news.

- Silence is an important element of Malaysian communication. Pausing before responding to a question indicates that they have given the question appropriate thought and considered their response carefully. Many Malaysians do not understand the Western propensity to respond to a question hastily and can consider such behaviour thoughtless and rude.
- Malaysians may laugh at what may appear to outsiders as inappropriate moments. This device is used to conceal uneasiness.
- Do not show anger in public as it makes Malaysians uncomfortable and creates a feeling of powerlessness. There is a greater chance of achieving a good outcome if you are calm, whereas little is resolved by shouting.

Business Meetings

- It is a good idea for the most senior person on your team to enter first so that he or she is the first to greet the most senior Malaysian.
- This gives face to both parties as it demonstrates respect towards the Malaysian and shows that you respect hierarchy within your company.
- It is customary for leaders to sit opposite each other around the table.
- Many companies will have their team seated in descending rank, although this is not always the case.
- Expect the most senior Malaysian to give a brief welcoming speech. You need not reciprocate.
- There will be a period of small talk, which will end when the most senior Malaysian is comfortable moving to the business discussion.
- Meetings may be conducted or continue over lunch and dinner.
- Meetings, especially initial ones, are generally somewhat formal. Treat all Malaysian participants with respect and be cautious not to lose your temper or appear irritated.
- At the first meeting between two companies, Malaysians will generally not get into in-depth discussions. They prefer to use the first meeting as an opportunity to get to know the other side and build a rapport, which is essential in this consensus-driven culture.

Bahasa Malaysia vocabulary

Selamat Datang	Welcome
Selamat Pagi	Good morning
Selamat Tengah Hari	Good afternoon
Selamat Petang	Good evening (before dark)
Selamat Malam	Good evening (after dark)
Apa khabar	How are you?
Selamat jalan	Have a safe journey
Selamat ulang tahun/ Selamat Hari Jadi	Happy birthday
Jumpa lagi	See you again
Tahniah	Congratulations
Minum	Drink
Makan	Eat

Note:

Every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of this document, it is intended that this document is a work in progress which can be built upon and amended through time, to provide a useful HWU guide to Malaysia.

The information provided in this document was collated from various sources, mainly from the web (as outlined below), additionally a Malaysian national employee also provided helpful comment and insight.

<http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/global-etiquette/malaysia.html>

<http://www.tourism.gov.my/en/uk/about-malaysia/in-brief>

<https://www.malaysia.gov.my/en/home>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malaysia>

King, V (2008), Malaysia, Culture Smart, K.U.P.E.R.A.R.D.