

Malaysia

JUNGLE JOY RIDE





My R 1150 GS pulls firmly as I lean into a fast bend with Lisa just a few feet behind me. We're among 25 new friends and BMW riders who've joined us to provide an escort into one of Asia's most vibrant countries, Malaysia

The Petronas Towers, a Modern Marvel

Ivan, on his R 1200 GS, is just ahead; we'd met him months ago in Northern Thailand and gratefully accepted his offer of an apartment room in Kuala Lumpur (or KL) for our first few nights here. Hard on the throttle, we're 125 miles north of KL and working to keep up with the rapid pace of our group. We slice through the center of the Kinta Valley and past the Perak State city of Ipoh with its architectural mélange of colonial austerity and Chinese shop fronts. As evening sets in, we've exchanged countryside for suburbs, and our freeway is now lit in fluorescent orange and bright neon blues resembling a scene from the sci-fi adventure film Tron. We merge carefully into the traffic entering Greater Kuala Lumpur, a city that 1.6 million people call home. Surrounded by car exotica, we ogle the latest and greatest offerings from BMW, Mercedes, Porsche, and Ferrari before finally reaching Ivan's sky-rise apartment in Damansara Perdana, one of KL's wealthier suburbs. Our band of riders has shrunk to three as each peeled off to find their own way home.

The past few days have given us a chance to acclimatize to KL's modern-day tempo. We're on the bikes and have moved away from the speeding freeway that encircles KL. We navigate the city center's complex and congested one-way system at a more familiar pace. Neatly painted markings on black asphalt denote motorcycle parking only. We are dwarfed by Malaysia's crown jewel that looms overhead, The Petronas Towers. Designed to symbolize Malaysia's advancement on the world stage, thousands of steel and glass panels stretch almost one-third mile into the sky. On the 41st floor, the famous Skybridge spans the distance and joins the 88 sparkling stories. As night falls, we are perched on the 33rd floor of Traders Hotel, which boasts one of the best views across Kuala Lumpur. We can't help being impressed with the Petronas Towers as they dominate the skyline and send beams of vertical light into the low cloud base.

Race to the City in the Sky

We're riding northeast of the city along the Karak Expressway, a 6-laned leviathan cut into the hillside. It's Sunday morning, and we've joined local bikers for one of the most famous rides in Malaysia. Lisa and I are being inducted by Ivan and his biking buddies into a long-held weekly ceremony, the

race up to Genting Highlands. Atop the Titiwangsa Mountain Range, the resort offers KL's elite a cool respite from the city's intense heat. Besides, it's the place for petrol-heads to be seen on the weekends.

I'm tucked in behind Lisa on her F 650 GS and surrounded by BMWs, race-prepped Ducatis, MV Agustas, and Bimotas. Ivan signals for our group to peel off the expressway and join a two-lane, one-way track. We throw our bikes into an endless succession of corners that come at us increasingly faster as we hurtle up the mountainside at an ear-popping pace. The landscape changes from tropical to alpine as we near the 6,000-foot summit at Genting. The resort is cloaked in a cool mist, and the view is spectacular. With the bikes parked nearby, Lisa and I sip on strong coffee and gawk at an exotic mix of Ferraris, Lotuses, Porsche, and Lamborghinis that pull up smoothly to the nearby casino. Although the roar of 30 motorcycles starting tells us that our group is ready to head back down, we elect to stay and meet up with Ivan later this evening.

Mischievous Monkeys and Human Skewers

Back on the bikes, our ride to the lowlands is as dizzying as the ascent, and we are soon sweltering once again. Five miles north of downtown KL, we ease off the Jalan Lingkaran Tengah 2 highway and pull up at the base of a dramatic limestone outcrop. Gangs of mischievous macaque monkeys roam the 272 steps that lead to the elevated mouth of the Batu Caves. At the top, we catch our breath and take a moment to let our eyes adjust to the vast and dark interior of the main chamber. The vaulted ceilings of the aptly named Cathedral Cave (a Hindu temple) disappear into an eerie gloom. At the start of each year during the Thaipusam Festival, the cavern becomes a frenetic and gruesome spectacle as throngs of devotees to Lord Murugan crush inside, many of whom skewer themselves with stakes, hooks, and knives. For now, the darkness of the tranquil shrine is lit by candlelight, and a handful of bare-chested Hindus prays and chants. In the rear grotto, where the limestone has crumbled, shards of bright sunlight pierce the murk. The scene is a surreal contrast to the well-heeled, Wi-Fi festooned places of shiny KL.

The 'Headhunter' Ride

In the blur that was last week, we were invited by Tourism Malaysia and WTR magazine (a Malay motorcycle publication) to join them on their annual tour, the Sarawak Headhunter Ride. With a name like that, how could we refuse? Our destination is Borneo!



Under a royal blue sky, we're hurtling south along a smooth multi-lane freeway amid a sea of rolling greens hills. Waves of lush forestation, palm farms, and tea plantations stretch into the horizon. Malaysia is a dynamic melting pot that Malays, Indians, Chinese, and a host of others call home--and where the best of each fuses into a culinary and social scene unlike anywhere else in the world.

Text: Simon Thomas
Photography: Simon and Lisa Thomas

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Rolling over the smooth cobbled streets of Kuching (the capital city of the East Malaysian state of Sarawak), the bikes seem none the worse for their 90-minute flight from KL. We promptly check into the plush Merdeka Palace Hotel where we meet our riding companions, an international group of biking journalists and photographers (Nicky from Thailand, Franco from Italy, Halley from Indian, and Dimitry from Russia). Wisnu, Firdaus, and Ahmet had flown in from Indonesia yesterday. Five Borneo riders led by the ever-smiling Aki make up the local contingent, and they will ensure we catch Malaysian Borneo's highlights.

Malaysian hospitality is as legendary as their food, so we feast on a traditional Malay dish of curried laksa (coconut broth laced with dried prawn, thick rice noodles, and spice) while listening to tall tales of biking adventure.

The Rainforest World Music Festival

We've been kept busy the past two days at the Rainforest World Music Festival, a 3-day extravaganza held north of Kuching at the foot of Mount Santubong. Tribal displays, food stalls, and local workshops are closed nightly with concerts given by top musicians from around the world. Along with 30,000 other impassioned ticket holders we clap, dance, and party as the tempo swings from the soft Celtic tunes of an Irish folk band to the energized rhythm of a Mariachi ensemble from Mexico. The charged atmosphere tonight will guarantee this festival continues to be Malaysia's largest.

Hanging out with the Wild Man of Borneo
Our ears are still ringing from last night's music,

and we're in a great mood as we negotiate the easy streets south of Kuching with our group. We are south of the city, and the tar is behind us; our wheels now rattle over a firm dirt track that leads us gently uphill. Brightly painted birds squawk in the tropical canopy above our heads and then scatter en masse disturbed by the noise of 12 motorcycle engines.

Dismounting the bikes, we walk a short distance to the ticket office of the Semengoh Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre, famed for its successful Orang Utan Rehabilitation program. As an endangered species, 54,000 of the world's 61,000 orangutans are found in the Borneo rainforests. To share time with wild orangutans is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and easily worth this morning's early start. Orangutan literally translates as "person of the forest," as "orang" is the Malay word for "person" and "utan" means "forest." Considering their intellect and human-like appearance, this is an apt description. There are no cages, fences, or barriers, so we pay strict attention to the warnings given by our guide. He strongly advises us against making direct eye contact; the large males may interpret this as a challenge.

With our cameras at the ready, we walk into the forest of red-haired natives. Described as being naturally reclusive, the two boisterous adolescents play-fighting well above our heads obviously didn't get that memo. We can hear the rustling and cracking of branches as one of the world's largest primates heads our way! I'm aware suddenly of our vulnerability. To my right, Dimitry is already firing his camera in successive bursts. I swing my camera upward and instantly spot Richie; a spectacular 300-pound alpha male perched on a sturdy branch. I'm caught

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off guard by his proximity. Richie's massive frame underpins his status; his torso and extra-long limbs are covered in what resembles a shaggy red carpet. Richie knows he's the man, the king of the jungle. I wonder how many photos he'll allow me to take. Protruding from either side of his face are large bulbous cheek pads only seen on the dominant adult males. We walk and marvel among the Borneo orangutans for two hours before finally stowing our camera gear and riding northwest as a group.

For 60 miles, an easy mix of firm dirt track and pitted asphalt sees us through small rural villages and across tributaries. Rugged mountains to our left reach for the clouds while their rainforest-adorned slopes gently fuse with the rice paddy fields at their base. Rice workers wave as our noisy group passes by.

Life's a Beach and Then You Ride

The tang of sea salt and drying fish fill the air as we ride through Sarawak's most westerly settlement, Sematan. At the end of a small track, a steep concrete boat-launch leads us to a long white sandy beach. I'm hard on the throttle as my rear wheel cuts deep into the sand leaving a satisfying channel behind me. We're riding with only Dimitry and Franco on

their KLRs. To our left, the beach is fringed with deep green tropical foliage; to our right, the waves of the South China Sea lap the shore. We pose for a few photos before returning to Sematan for iced-laden drinks where we find the rest of our group. By late afternoon, we're riding east and returning to Kuching. The sea breeze on the coastal route, the Jalan Lundu Sampadi, offers us a cooling respite from today's sweltering heat. The old wooden planks on the narrow metal bridges rattle as we cross. We ease on the brakes, pulling to a stop on the crumbling tar as we reach the Batang Rambungan estuary where we board the ferry to the far bank. Our ranks have swollen, and the noise from 25 large-capacity bikes is deafening as we whack on the gas to climb from the ferry back up to the road. Back at the Merdeka Palace Hotel, we feast on a spicy coconut fish curry.

Getting Seriously "Flagged Off"

At 8 a.m., we're astride our bikes and keen to get rolling if we're to reach the inland town of Sibu. We line up with 28 other bikes outside the hotel entrance and rev our engines while a band of local photographers takes a barrage of photos. We are about to be "flagged off," a Malaysian custom where a dignitary lowers a race flag to start an event. The dignitary this morning is Datuk (which

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means “Sir”) Azizan, Director General of Malaysian Tourism. After ample ceremony, thanks, and a small speech, the flag is lowered, and we roll onto the street out of Kuching with a police escort.

Smooth, fast, and curvy asphalt for the next 120 miles has us rolling into the town of Sri Aman earlier than expected. Sri Aman is renowned for the “Benak,” a rare river tidal bore that produces tidal waves large enough to surf. At the Tidal Bore Institute, Sarawak Tourism has laid out for us a banquet fit for a king. It has been a 264-mile Borneo day, and at nightfall we’re riding in convoy into Sibü. Tired and keen to enjoy the luxurious room, we forgo the lavish dinner and head for bed earlier than most others.

A Karaoke Surprise

The last few days have been a whirlwind of riding, culture, food, experiences, surprises, and more food. In Sibü, Datuk Azizan and Lisa surprised us all by singing a karaoke duet. We visited Iban (headhunting tribe) elders in a traditional wooden longhouse and posed for photos at South East Asia’s largest group of temples, Chinese Tua Pek Kong. The pace has been a little more hectic than we’d have liked, but the experiences and opportunities have been unforgettable.

The Marvels of Borneo’s Buried Worlds

Close to 400 miles of tar, track, and jungle has us nudging the border of the Kingdom of Brunei and the city of Miri, where we securely lock up our bikes. We won’t need them where we going! A plane flight and two boat rides from Miri, we’re detached from civilization and transported to a road-

less, mountainous equatorial rainforest, which is also the UNESCO World Heritage site of Gunung Mulu National Park.

Our canoe paddles break the water as we quietly glide down the Melinau River. Pushing back a thicket of branches in a narrow channel and squeezing beneath large overhanging trees, we round a bend where the river widens and a naked young man squats casually on a log. Above the tropical tree line, Mount Mulu rises to 7,795 feet. “This is Indiana Jones territory,” I joke with Lisa as we lift our heavy camera gear onto our backs and prepare for a 2-mile hike. Amid 340-square miles of primary rainforest, we weave our way across jungle streams and along a planked walk that passes through peat swamp and limestone outcrops standing like broken teeth.

As our eyes slowly adjust to the gloom at our destination, we are awestruck by one of nature’s most spectacular landscapes. We stand in the center of the largest cave passage in the world. Deer Cave is incomprehensibly huge (2.5 miles long, 570 feet wide, and 400 feet high), and sunlight at the cave’s entrance barely penetrates the seemingly all-consuming darkness. A thick crust of sticky bat droppings covers the slippery floor, and the smell is acrid. We focus on each step, being careful not to slide and fall. Upon exiting this hidden world, we are treated to one final natural spectacle as more than a million free-tailed bats swarm like a black cloud from the cave’s entrance in search of food.

Malaysia, Simply Asia

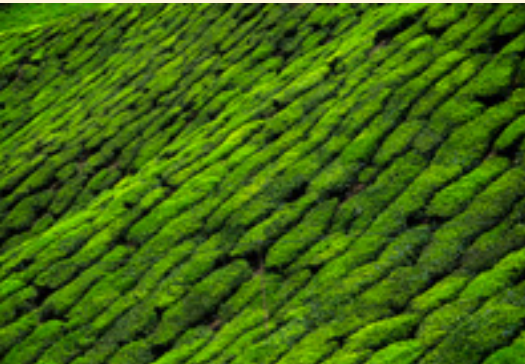
Back in Kuala Lumpur, I smile at a TV ad that finishes with “Malaysia, simply Asia.” From what we’ve been privileged to see and share over the last few months, Malaysia is so much more than that. Malaysia is complex and full of contrasts: skyscrapers to wooden stilted homes and well-heeled city dwellers to headhunting tribes people. Filled with enough natural spectacles to delight the most demanding ecologist, Malaysia is home to some of the greatest warm-hearted and generous people one could ever want to meet. All that aside, it’s a great place to ride a motorcycle. **RR**

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Facts & Information

Total Mileage
Approximately 5,165 miles



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In General

Malaysia is like two separate countries: The peninsula with its modern and fast-paced capital city of Kuala Lumpur, and Borneo, a wild jungle and amazing mountain ranges. Malaysia is one of the safest and most stable countries in Southeast Asia. The official language is Malay, but English is widely understood.

The currency is the ringgit (RM). Locals sometimes refer to the ringgit as a dollar. Currently 1 is equal to RM3.50. Most cities have ATMs, and U.S. dollars are easy to exchange. In more remote villages, carry cash.

Malaysia has a tropical (hot and humid) climate throughout the year. The best months to visit are May to September. It rains heavily in October to November in the west and in April to May in the east. Monsoon season is November to January.

How to Get There

U.S. citizens are granted visa-free travel for 90 days. If bringing in your own vehicle, a carnet du passage is usually requested by Malaysian customs. Local vehicle insurance is advised.

The international airport is in Kuala Lumpur, although Singapore may be a better arrival/departure point as it has more international connections.

Note: There are no ferry services connecting the peninsula with Malaysian Borneo/Indonesia.

Food & Lodging

Malaysian cuisine has strong Chinese and Indian influences. Popular dishes include nasi lemak (rice steamed with coconut milk), rendang (spicy meat stew), and sambal (a spicy chili paste). Indian style bread such as roti canai and dhosai are popular at breakfast time.

The majority of Malays are Muslim and do not consume any alcohol or pork. This does not prohibit others from purchasing and consuming these products.

There are guesthouses, hostels, and hotels suiting all budgets.

Roads & Biking

Traffic can be chaotic, fast, and aggressive in the cities. Many drivers ignore the standard rules of the road! Be aware that drivers may often be on your side of the road, especially on corners. Major roads are in good condition.

Contact Information

- Up-to-date information on visa requirements and travel advice: <http://travel.state.gov/travel/>
- General motorcycle travel information in SE Asia: <http://www.gt-rider.com>

Books & Maps

- Lonely Planet Malaysia Singapore & Brunei by Simon Richmond, ISBN 978-1741798470, \$26.99
- Peninsular Malaysia Travel Map 6th Edition, Periplus Travel Maps, ISBN 978-0794605896, \$8.95

Motorcycles & Gear

1999 BMW R 1150 GSA
2002 BMW F 650 GS

Luggage Systems: Touratech Zega
Jacket and Pants: Touratech Companero
Helmets: Airoh Aviator
Boots: MX boots, Alpinestars Tech 6 and Gaerne SG-10



Always consult more-detailed maps for touring purposes.