

Peter Kua

Malaysian Islands

**the good,
the bad &
the finest**

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Teetotallers' Paradise

I PANIC EVERYTIME I ENTER MALAYSIA. “Death to all drug traffickers in Malaysia!” proclaim the warnings, and I start to worry that somebody, somewhere has stuffed my bag with packages of white powder. I’ve seen the made-for-tv mini-dramas, I know what happens. As my paranoid imaginings gain ground, I think of all the times I haven’t been watching my bag – all those hours it was in luggage storage at the hostel, while I was asleep on the train, when I got off the minibus to go to the shop. My list grows and I feel more and more vulnerable.

Never mind that this makes no sense. Drug distributors have plenty of willing mules to do their work for them; they don’t need to plant valuable merchandise on unsuspecting backpackers they might lose track of. But we had set off 24 hours earlier, and the traveling was taking its toll.

Aside from the paranoia, the border crossing from Thailand was painless. Efficient and almost empty, we breezed through and moments after alighting from the minibus, we were looking for the taxi rank in Malaysia.

Seventy km down the coast we reached the small port of Kuala Besut in time to catch the last boat of the day. An hour and a half later, we came to a halt in a small bay. The setting was beautiful, a broad expanse of fine white sand stretched a mile or so, the sea was greenish blue and the jungle rose up behind. There was a handful of bungalow operations, a couple of dive outfits and one little shop. That was it. There was our beach, tantalisingly close, but after 28 hours of travel how were we going to cover the final few hundred metres?

Eventually we spotted a figure making for one of the tiny boats anchored at the waterline. Skimming along the surface over the barely submerged coral, he eventually reached the

Teetotallers' Paradise

deeper water and pulled alongside our ferry. Caelen transferred from our vessel to the taxi-boat with little difficulty, and laden down I began to follow. I stepped onto the little water-taxi, holding on to the side of the ferry for balance. As I did this the smaller craft began to bob away, and I found myself with my feet on one boat, my arms holding onto the other, and the intervening distance growing wider every second. I wouldn't have cared about falling into the water, but both the camera and laptop were in the bags I was carrying, and neither would have benefited from a dip. After an agonising few moments, the captain of the ferry came to my rescue and disaster was narrowly averted.

The Perhentians are in one of Malaysia's most strongly Muslim states. According to popular traveler rumour, the state government has recently banned bikinis, with a six-month prison sentence for offenders. There were bikinis aplenty, but little or no alcohol available anywhere on the islands. After dinner and a bottle of Sprite, nightlife consisted of sitting on the balcony reading our books, and admiring the local wildlife. From the enormous spider in the bathroom to the cat stuck in the tree, there was never a dull moment.

The Perhentians make up for their lack of nightlife with clear waters, coral gardens and an abundance of marine life. We were soon equipped with fins and masks and took off by boat around the islands. The sea was calm, the sun shone brightly and even from the boat we could see brightly coloured fish in the clear blue water below.

Dropping into the water, we entered another world and swum around in wonder at the coral formations and the fish that seemed pretty indifferent to our presence. Luckily the sharks seemed oblivious to us too. When the first pair sauntered by I was completely taken by surprise, and snorted about a bucketload of salt water in my shock. By the time we moved on to the aptly named "Shark Point", I had learned to keep my cool when I saw the grey shadows slipping by, but

there's no denying the shiver that went down my spine every time.

The next morning we swam out across the coral to a pontoon moored a couple of hundred yards offshore. As we came to the end of the reef, the seafloor dropped sharply away. I noted a pair of sharks swimming lazily below and continued nonchalantly on my way to the pontoon. As we climbed the six feet or so onto the wooden structure, I stubbed my toe. A minor cut, but enough to dent my previous nonchalance. Sharks can detect one part of blood in a million parts of water, after all. I find jumping into water from a height scary at the best of times, and the thought of sharks circling below, attracted by my bleeding digit, was an extra frisson I could do without. Soon Caelen acquired an injury of his own, just in case I wasn't doing enough to attract the grisly predators to our isolated spot.

Bigger, and much, much cuter, were the giant turtles. The first time we saw one we were out in the middle of a bay, and the turtle was lumbering slowly along the seafloor far below. I was green with envy when Caelen went diving and got to swim up close to one. While diving, he was instructed to swim behind the turtles, never in front. If a turtle sees someone swimming in front, it won't surface for air. And if it stays down for too long, it can have a stroke.

So two days later, when we returned to the bay where we had seen our first turtle, we were taken aback by the number of snorkelers gathered around a single spot. There was a turtle down below alright, but was it our imagination or did it seem unhappy? We weren't sure if we were being oversensitive, but we didn't want to contribute to any turtle-stress and quickly returned to our boat.

After four days in this teetotallers' paradise it was time to brush the sand off our feet, shoulder our packs and move on. Kuala Lumpur beckoned, and while it wouldn't have sharks,

Back Cover

Forget those cookie-cutter travel leaflets... read this book instead!

From spotting lumbering greenback turtles in the postcard-perfect Perhentians, to being scared stiff by a Japanese goddess in seductive Lang Tengah, to getting acquainted with a cheeky kitten-raping monkey in mythical Langkawi, to finding Nemo and his dad in dazzling Selingan... exotic Malaysian islands present an assortment of mind-blowing experience for the diver, snorkeler, sunbather and beachcomber – from the good, to the bad and to the finest.

Knee-slapping, heart-warming and occasionally hair-raising (think lunatic bus drivers, ghosts and snakes), this collection of 30 absolutely dripping-with-local-color tales, as narrated by adventurers who have been there and seen it all, is bound to pack a wallop to the reader's imagination.

“Humour, paranoia and personal insights... goes beyond the usual cut and dried information offered in travel guides” – Su-Ping, Singapore

“Excellent insider's tips... a guide for my next trip to Asia and Malaysian islands” – Harish Nataraj, USA

“A phenomenal insight into the many wonders & excitement of Malaysian islands!” – Shu Yin, Diver, Malaysia