



The Road From Singapore

Nick Ghosh and Sid Davis find plenty to recommend a self-drive road trip from Singapore to Penang in Malaysia.

We must have been amongst a tiny minority of people to have ever experienced Singaporean inefficiency. Having spent several wonderful days in Singapore, the tiny city-state sometimes known as 'Asia's Switzerland', a sleepy immigration officer stamped our passport with the wrong year as we crossed the border to Malaysia! After the brief inconvenience of convincing Malaysian passport control that we had not been in limbo for a year at the border, we were soon in Johor Bahru and then on the road in our hire car.

Driving on the left in Malaysia is a remnant of its colonial past, and made driving even easier in a country with a good network of well tended roads, unlike much of the rest of Asia.

We headed to Malacca, a trading port which rose to such importance that many European powers sought to control it. The Portuguese, Dutch and British all left their mark, with a fascinating diversity of architecture. We enjoyed exploring this wonderful city on foot, our senses bombarded by an array of sights, sounds and aromas; apothecaries selling all manner of wonderful remedies and tiny restaurants serving mouthwatering morsels. The town's food mirrors its citizens, with its Peranakan cuisine a wonderful hybridisation of Chinese and Malay. Malacca is a fascinating place, especially at the weekends when markets open up and the area really comes to life.

Continuing north, we started our ascent to the Cameron Highlands, stopping en route for lunch at a tiny roadside shack. Our host was extremely friendly and talkative, rustling up a delicious

bowl of mee goreng while gesticulating at the spectacular visage in front of us. There was plenty to point at; the view was striking, with sprawling tea plantations and untouched forests merging on the horizon.

After a beautiful drive we arrived at the Lakehouse, just outside Tanah Rata, a wonderful mock Tudor hotel which is a real reminder of colonial days. On arrival we had a lovely pot of tea (what else!), accompanied with scones and clotted cream in front of a snug fire. Following the steamy lowlands we suddenly felt very civilised, though a little scruffy in our shorts and flip-flops. Quintessentially English, the Cameron Highlands retain much of the colonial atmosphere. A perfect retreat from the heat, its meandering trails through lush scenery are perfect for walkers.

After recharging our batteries in the Highlands we resumed our journey north, descending towards Penang State. We were staying at the Eastern and Oriental Hotel in Georgetown, once the 'Raffles of Penang' and originally set up by the Sarkies brothers. Magnificently restored, the E&O really is a reflection of Malaysia's past; Somerset Maugham mentions it in several of his novels, and was known to be a slightly troublesome guest. Other writers such as Rudyard Kipling and Noel Coward stayed here, and this is reflected in the names of the suites. Pink gins at sundown were definitely the order of the day for us at this last bastion of colonialism.

Georgetown is littered with reminders of the British Empire, with faded colonial residences

rubbing shoulders with Hindu temples and Chinese shophouses. A 33-metre reclining Buddha watches over proceedings at Wat Chayamangkalaram, whilst more centrally Fort Cornwallis still stands guard on the heritage trail. Our excellent guide, Alan, took us on a fascinating tour, which really brought home what a diverse melting pot Malaysia is. A wonderful blend of Chinese, Malay and Indian is a heady mix, and the smells and sounds of all these cultures lend a wonderfully exotic atmosphere to the colonial backdrop.

Strolling down any street your senses are assaulted; the smell of joss-sticks from Hindu temples gives way to a noisy Chinese market, while the beautiful lilting song of the ulama drifts from the mosque opposite. Penang really is Malaysia's cultural jewel, and whilst its beaches may not quite match up to its neighbour Langkawi's golden sands, its spectacular food and historical heritage make it one of the most fascinating destinations in Asia – and a leisurely drive from Singapore is the perfect way to get there.

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FACT FILE

A 14-night trip to Singapore and Malaysia costs from £1,825 per person. This includes return flights from the UK, two nights in Singapore and 11 nights in Malaysia, plus car hire. Please call Nick or Sid on 01993 838 130 for details.



Cameron Highlands plantation



Malacca Dutch Square



Children in Penang



Kek Lok Si temple