

Notes for Visiting Kuala Lumpur

By Mindy McAdams, July 2005

This is a guide for people who don't have access to a car, who don't care much about luxury shopping and nightlife, and who would like to take a taste of this fascinating city.

KL Sentral and Other Public Transport

From the modern train station, KL Sentral (not to be confused with Station Kuala Lumpur, the *old* train station), you can take:

- The KTM Komuter train,
- The Putra LRT train,
- The KL Monorail, or
- The express train to KLIA airport.

Near the KLIA Ekspres area, you'll find a Starbucks and a very good magazine stand (MPH bookstore). You can find ATMs and phone-card stalls here too. If you're hungry, skip the McDonald's and try the Chicken Rice Shop (local fast food).

You cannot get on the Star LRT train at KL Sentral. The Star and Putra services do not connect to each other, and the KL Monorail doesn't connect to either of them.

Monorail: To get on the monorail at KL Sentral, leave the station at the *opposite* end from the escalators. Go downstairs and cross the street. Follow the straight path through the canopy-covered market stalls, and you'll have no trouble finding the entrance to the monorail. (It sounds more difficult than it is.) When you get off the monorail at KL Sentral, just look for the tent-like canopies and follow the crowd. There's an up-escalator and an elevator once you reach the train station.

Taxi vouchers: On the upper floor of KL Sentral, *above* the Komuter and LRT ticket areas, you can buy a voucher for a taxi to anywhere you like. Taking a taxi from here is a good way to avoid being ripped off, as many cab drivers will hop onto one of KL's many highways and drive you in circles until the meter gets to RM20. As that is only US\$5, it's not a bad rip-off, but it can waste a lot of your time.

Taxis

Taxi fares in KL are very reasonable by comparison to Western cities. You'll find many cab drivers who speak excellent English. You'll also find more than a few who do not, and that can cause problems. The driver may decide to drop you in a spot that is convenient for him and not for you. If the driver speaks English, you can insist that he drop you at the door of your destination (and not across the street or down the block). With a non-English-speaking driver, you may not be able to get to the exact location you want. You might want to refuse to ride with someone whose English is poor.

Hailing a taxi is often difficult; you'll see only taxis that already have passengers, and they won't stop for you. So look for a taxi stand (or a big hotel), or ask someone at an

information desk (e.g., in a museum) to call a taxi for you. If it's raining, it may be impossible to get a taxi anywhere but at a big hotel.

You'll sometimes get a story from the taxi driver that "the jam is so bad," it would be better to drop you at an LRT station, and you can just take the train from there. This happens a lot when you want the taxi to take you to KL Sentral. Politely insist on being taken to the place you want, and you'll get there. If the driver insists on RM10, it's a rip-off, true—but keep in mind that it's only US\$2.50 (*especially* if it's raining).

City Trains

Three train lines serve Kuala Lumpur: the KL Monorail, Putra LRT, and Star LRT. They do not connect to each other, and you cannot buy a ticket that allows you to go from one line to the other. Tickets are cheap, though, so that's not a huge problem.

You can walk between the Putra and Star lines at the Masjid Jamek station. The Putra LRT line is underground. The two Star LRT entrances (for opposite directions) are above ground and across the street from each other.

You can walk from the KL Monorail to the Star LRT line at Titiwangsa or Hung Tuah. You can also walk from the KL Monorail at P. Ramlee to the Putra LRT stop at Dang Wangi. Make sure you have a good street map with you. You may not like the over-the-street bridges, but there are no crosswalks at many intersections. In some cases there is a crosswalk, but after you press the Walk button, the walking light never turns green. You *will* find a way to cross the street, though. Be persistent, and look in all directions for oncoming cars and motorbikes.

Places you are likely to want to go and that are well-served by one of the trains:

Destination	Train	Station
Merdeka Square, Masjid Jamek, Sultan Abdul Samad Building	Star LRT or Putra LRT	Masjid Jamek
Central Market, Chinatown, Petaling Street	Putra LRT	Pasar Seni
KLCC and Petronas Towers	Putra LRT	KLCC
Chow Kit market, Globe Silk store, Little India	KL Monorail	Chow Kit
Golden Triangle shopping	KL Monorail	Imbi

Kuala Lumpur in general is not conducive to walking. Sidewalk paving is uneven, curbs are very high, and it's difficult to find a safe place to cross the street. Watch your step, and be mindful of the monsoon drains. The midday heat especially makes walking less than pleasant. However, once you get to any of the destinations listed above, you can walk around quite easily. Each one is discussed in more detail below.

Places worth visiting that you cannot reach conveniently by train (so, take a taxi):

- **Batu Caves:** To avoid traffic jams, you might want to take the KL Komuter train to the Sentul station and get a taxi there to take you the rest of the way. There are always taxis waiting at the caves, so getting back is not a problem. During the Thaipusam festival, you change trains at Sentul and ride a special train all the way to the caves, but that train runs *only* during the festival. Go to the caves as *early in the day* as possible to avoid the worst heat while you climb the 272 steps to the entrance—and wear mosquito repellent. *Do not* feed the monkeys.
- **National Museum:** You cannot get here except by car, which is a shame. It's an older museum (most of the exhibits could use a major facelift) but very informative regarding the history and traditions of Malaysia. The building itself is worth seeing; the huge mosaic on the front represents the whole history of the Malay Peninsula.
- **Islamic Arts Museum:** It's not a long walk to this excellent, modern museum from the old train station, but it's difficult to cross the busy streets (there are no crosswalks), and there is little clear signage to help you get your bearings. So, to avoid hot, sweaty frustration, take a taxi directly to the door. Afterward, you can walk downhill to the National Mosque. There's a taxi stand around the corner to the left after you pass the mosque, or you can risk death by crossing the street to Station Kuala Lumpur. The National Mosque is nowhere near as pretty as Masjid Jamek, but the museum has stupendous examples of Malay textiles and beautiful old Qurans in manuscript, plus a wonderful gift shop and an excellent high-end restaurant (Middle Eastern food). The domes inside the museum are stunning.
- **National Art Gallery:** A modern, well-designed museum of contemporary art, with exhibits that change frequently. You're sure to see some excellent work by Malaysian artists. Unfortunately, there is no bookshop. While you're there, walk next door to see the National Theatre, a lovely building with multiple roofs inspired by traditional Malaysian kites.
- **Kompleks Kraf:** A nice handicraft museum, working artists in a "village" of charming small open-air huts, and a large shop with lots of traditional Malaysian craft items, as well as key chains and other souvenirs. The place is also called Karyaneka, but no one in KL (including cab drivers) seems to know it by that name. You can say "Jalan Conlay" to clarify your destination to the driver. It's a short drive from KLCC.
- **Lake Gardens:** See below for details.
- **KL Tower:** Also called the Menara, or Menara KL. This is your typical flying saucer on a pole, with a revolving restaurant at the top, like the Space Needle in Seattle or the CN Tower in Toronto. Check for visibility before you go. If you don't have a clear sky, there's not much point. It's very pretty at night, but you'll get better photos in daylight. The food is okay but not worth a trip on its own.

KTM Komuter Train

From KL Sentral, it's one stop to the Mid-Valley Megamall (as if you couldn't find enough shopping in central KL), or about 45 minutes to Shah Alam (where you can see the very beautiful and huge Blue Mosque; take a taxi at the train station and arrange for the driver to wait for you at the mosque), or an hour to Pelabuhan Klang, where you can easily catch a ferry to Pulau Ketam and eat the famous chili crabs. You can also take the Komuter to either of two large universities, UPM (Bangi) and UKM, although you'll need a taxi to get from the station to the campus.

There are two separate Komuter train lines that connect at KL Sentral, so you have four end-points radiating out from the station. When you ask at the ticket counter which train to take, the ticket seller will tell you the end-point: Klang, Sentul, Rawang or Seremban. There are two entrances, but both take you to all four trains.

Long-Distance KTM Trains

You can take a slow train to Singapore, Johor Bahru, or Penang from KL Sentral. Tickets are sold on, and trains are boarded from, the upper floor—above the floor where the Komuter and Putra LRT trains are boarded. The nearest train station to Melaka is Tampin, en route to Singapore. (A bus from KL to Melaka takes two hours, so that's a better option. If you can take only one short trip outside KL, Melaka is a good place for learning more about the country's history.) To Singapore, most local people take an express bus, and not the train.

Reading Material

To get a handle on what's happening in KL *now*, buy yourself a copy of KLUE, a monthly magazine, at any newsstand (<http://www.KLue.com.my/>). It has very good listings for food, nightlife, film, music, and arts—*unlike* the free magazines your hotel will give you.

If you need a map, a guidebook, or some local fiction in English, go to either Kinokuniya on Level 4 of KLCC, or MPH in the Mid-Valley Megamall. Note that not all MPH stores are created equal! The Mid-Valley store is fairly well-organized and also has a very good local map section. The Borders at Berjaya Times Square is also decent (but there's not much else of interest there). For fiction in English about Malaysia, Kinokuniya has the best selection of the three, *by far*. Look for the separate Asian fiction section. Kinokuniya also has a good section on local history and politics.

To just hang out in a comfy bookstore and browse (and maybe meet other book lovers), go to Silverfish Books, in Bangsar, or Skoob, in Brickfields.

As for newspapers, in English you have *The Star* and the NST (*New Straits Times*) to choose from. Most hotels will give you the NST, but *The Star* sells a lot more copies.

If you're living in Malaysia long-term, you can get a free subscription to *The Expat*, a monthly magazine (<http://www.expatsKL.com/>).

Lake Gardens

If you've been in KL for more than 10 minutes, you're probably thinking, "Walk around a big outdoor park? No! Absolutely not!" Because of the tropical heat and humidity, the prospect of a stroll deters many people from experiencing this beautiful area. So here are some tips on how to enjoy it.

1. Start as early as possible. The Butterfly Park (Taman Rama Rama), Orchid Garden (Taman Orkid), and Bird Park each open at 9 a.m.
2. If you want to try all three in one day, get a taxi to drop you off at the Butterfly Park, because then you will be walking downhill to the Orchid Garden and after that the Bird Park.
3. If you want to see the Orchid Garden, do not allow the taxi driver to drop you at the entrance opposite the Bird Park. You will be walking uphill through the Orchid Garden from that point. Enter through the adjacent Hibiscus Garden (Taman Bunga Raya) opposite the entrance to the Butterfly Park.
4. The Bird Park could take you two hours or more, depending on your interest, the inclusion of small children, and whether or not you watch any of the shows (at 12:30 and 3:30).
5. Carry a bottle of water with you. You can also buy water, as well as bottled juices and ice cream, at reasonable prices at several points inside the Bird Park. A restaurant with an elevated veranda overlooks the park (in Zone 3, past the hornbills), so you could stop there for lunch.
6. Leave the parks by 1 p.m. at the latest. After noon, the heat becomes significantly worse. (If you like to start late, come after 3 p.m., but then it's more likely to rain.)
7. There's an excellent taxi stand at the entrance to the Bird Park, so no need to worry about how to get out of the park. Tell the man at the desk where you want to go, and he'll take your money and give you a voucher.

Bird Park

Highlights are the hornbills (something like a toucan, but with an even larger beak), parrots, lorries (sort of a cross between a parrot and a parakeet, many with gorgeous red plumage), brahminy kites (these are magnificent eagles), storks, flamingos, ostriches, and pelicans. There are numerous varieties of each species, most native to Southeast Asia.

Many birds are in wire-mesh cages, which makes them easy to see but difficult to photograph well. Sky-high netting covers several huge areas to create open-air aviaries, and you're likely to see storks and other birds with a giant wingspan soaring overhead, or above a manmade waterfall. Peacocks strut calmly throughout much of the park.

Be sure to check the map as you walk around. The pathways cross in such a way that you might miss a large section of the park without realizing it. Pathways are wide and mostly

shaded. There's only one entrance and exit to the park, so you'll be leaving where you came in.

Admission is RM28 for adults. It's well worth it if you enjoy seeing large, beautiful birds that you may never see anywhere else.

Sightseeing: The Usual Suspects

If you're staying in KL for only a day or two, you'll probably want to go to at least one of these places. They are grouped by proximity.

Merdeka Square, Masjid Jamek, Sultan Abdul Samad Building

Go in the morning, no later than 10 a.m., and you can stroll around without feeling like the heat is going to kill you. Wearing a light-colored hat helps a lot. Carry water. There's little shade here. What you'll see is the architectural legacy of the British, but even though it's not Malaysian, it's exotic by Western standards. The Sultan Abdul Samad Building (now home of the Malaysian Supreme Court) was built in the 1890s by a British architect. This building is lighted spectacularly at night.

For the visiting the mosque, Masjid Jamek, if you wear a sleeveless shirt or shorts, you will be required to put on a very hot ankle-length robe. If your pants or skirt comes to your knees or lower, and your shirt has sleeves, you don't have to wear the robe. Women are required to cover their hair with a scarf. If you don't bring your own, you will be lent one that others have worn. You can't go inside this mosque, but it has no walls, so you can appreciate the beautiful marble of the interior and the pretty minarets. Masjid Jamek was designed and built in 1907 by an Englishman.

If you walk around the back side of the Sultan Abdul Samad Building, you get a nice view of Masjid Jamek from across the Gombak River (as small as a creek). Keep walking south and you'll find the point where the Gombak meets the Klang River (also creek-size), and there's another nice view of the mosque. Nearby is a 7-Eleven, in case you need a cold beverage.

Central Market, Chinatown, Petaling Street

From the Putra LRT train platform, before you go down the stairs, look northeast, and you'll see the aqua-colored Central Market building. Then look to the right, and that's Chinatown. Farther right (south) and east is Petaling Street (Jalan Petaling; say *peh TAH ling*). If you see the white onion domes of the old train station, you're facing south.

You can easily walk all around this area in half a day and find plenty of delicious Chinese food to eat. The Central Market is a good place to buy both cheap souvenirs and decent handicrafts. Be sure to bargain for the best price, and check out the shops on the upper floor. If you want to make certain your handicraft purchases were made in Malaysia (rather than Thailand or Indonesia), *ask*. Most carved wood and masks are likely to be from Indonesia, especially Bali. Fabrics can be from either Thailand or Indonesia. For good quality pewter, go to the Royal Selangor shop here or in KLCC.

Do not expect to find air conditioning in this area. Go in the morning, or after 4 p.m.

Petaling Street has an entirely different character at night, when vendors set up booths in the middle of the street. It becomes a hot, sweaty pressure cooker of haggling over prices for fake designer goods, especially handbags, watches, and sports shoes. During the day, it's quieter and more laid back, and you'll see more fruits and vegetables than handbags. It's really fun at night. Be prepared to sweat buckets and to clutch your bag tightly, and you'll enjoy it!

KLCC and Petronas Towers

If you want air conditioning and Western food, come here. KLCC is a lavish shopping mall packed with foreigners as well as Malaysians of every race and religion. The shopping is mostly exclusive and expensive, but check out the Tenmoku pottery shop on Level 3 for unique, reasonably priced Malaysian gifts to take home.

On weekends and public holidays at KLCC, you can observe the hanging-out behavior of Malaysian teenagers, especially near the cinemas on Level 3. Walk through the huge (mostly non-Western) food court on Level 2 to see a wide variety of Malaysian families eating every imaginable cuisine. This is also a convenient place for foreigners to try dishes, because you can usually find out what's in the dish before you order it. Exit the KLCC mall at the center section to stroll around a man-made lake (really nice at night) and a pleasant public park.

The public cannot go to the top of the Petronas Towers, a tribute to the wealth and investment strategies of the national petroleum company, but you can go up to the Skybridge that connects the twin towers at the 41st floor.

Chow Kit market, Globe Silk store, Little India

In the streets east of busy Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman (TAR), along Jalan Raja Bot, you'll find a wet market of local produce, freshly butchered chicken and lamb, noodles, eggs, exotic seeds and greens, as well as household hardware, cheap plastic toys, and other sundries. If you've been to city wet markets elsewhere in Southeast Asia, there's nothing different here. But if you've never seen a wet market, you owe it to yourself to experience the unmatched sights and smells. Wear shoes with a good grip, because some patches of the ground will be slippery. Come as early as you can—at least by 9 a.m.—so it's not too hot, and you can watch the vendors setting up. If you show interest in an unusual fruit, you're likely to get a free sample. Many people here are very friendly when they notice a Western face, so feel free to strike up a conversation.

Walk south from Chow Kit along Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman, and you'll see many small shops selling Malaysian and imported fabric. In among the polyester of gaudy floral prints, you'll also see fine silk and cotton, including hand-painted and hand-printed batik designs. Prices everywhere will be low, and you can usually bargain. Most fabric will be sold in two-meter and four-meter lengths. Don't expect anyone to cut you a smaller piece. A two-meter length makes a waist-to-floor sarong or a shirt. A four-meter length makes a complete *baju kurung*, the traditional two-piece dress you'll see lots of Malay women wearing.

If you prefer one-stop shopping, go to the larger Globe Silk store (No. 185 Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman). The lower floors have ready-made clothing (but not much in big sizes for Westerners), while the upper floors have all kinds of fabric. A very good shop for fabrics is Noor Arfa (Nos. 293–295 Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman) a branch of the famous batik factory in Terengganu. Just south of Globe Silk, two blocks east of Jalan

Tuanku Abdul Rahman (and running parallel to it) is Jalan Masjid India, where there are even *more* fabric shops—but here you'll find that imports from India dominate.

If you walk as far south as Jalan Tun Perak, you can find the Star and Putra LRT stations at Masjid Jamek (from Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman, turn left).

Golden Triangle shopping

Another air-conditioned haven for those who are exhausted by the heat and humidity, this almost ridiculously over-built consumer center supplies a branch of every brand-name store in the West as well as many home-grown retailers. Two malls (out of too many to name) I can recommend are Sungei Wang (for trendy fashion with local flair) and Low Yat (for cheap computer accessories and software, go to the upper floors). You can also find every kind of food in this area, from posh restaurants to Western fast food. Walk around and look for small entrances to authentic local eateries.

A Note for Backpackers and Trekkers

It's not easy to get backpacking supplies and equipment in Kuala Lumpur. I found these:

- Outdoor Centre, 242-C Jalan Ampang. About 1 km east of the Ampang Park LRT stop and Jalan Tun Razak, on the north side of Jalan Ampang. Small one-story building, set well back from the street. Look for the big green sign above the door. Carries a good selection of packs and rock-climbing gear, including harnesses, gloves, shoes. Also waterproof ponchos, hiking boots, camping cookware, knives, Coleman lanterns, and head-mounted flashlights. Phone (03) 4251 2423 or (03) 4251 2548.
- Tearproof, Level 4, KLCC. Carries a wide assortment of packs, including genuine Deuter bags in many sizes and smaller Eagle Creek bags. They also have some repair parts for packs. Ask them about tents. They have an assortment of boots and trekking sandals. Good selection of Nalgene water bottles. Smaller store at Mid-Valley Megamall has a smaller selection of large packs.
- Profesor stores, in most shopping malls. In addition to kids' school uniforms, these small shops sell some outdoors gear, including Swiss Army Knives at good prices. Most have some coolers and insulated water jugs.

Conclusion

A lot of Westerners who visit KL never go far from their hotel, and that's really too bad. There's a fabulous range of cultures here, and you won't see and smell and taste them unless you hit the pavements.

If a local resident shows you around, expect to be driven everywhere in a car. Most locals will take you to Petaling Street if you show any interest in it. You'll probably have to beg and plead, though, to get any local person to take you to a real local restaurant. Many Malaysians simply assume that Western people cannot eat spicy food. You have to work hard to convince local people that you can eat chili peppers.

You can get out on your own, and you'll have a great time if you just take precautions against the incredibly brutal heat. You may think I'm exaggerating, but it can lull you into spending too much time in air-conditioned shopping malls if you're not careful! Wear a hat, carry water, and shelter inside the malls between noon and 3 p.m.

<http://mindymcadams.com/malaysia/>