

Malaysian Culture and Customs

There are three main people groups in Malaysia: Malays, Indians and Chinese. Many Chinese are Buddhist; many Indians are Hindu, but some are Muslim and Malays are officially Muslim. The following is a brief description of these religions.



Buddhism

Buddhists believe there are only good and evil people. Buddhism stresses the value and dignity of individuals.

Buddhism offers firm rules. Buddha preached that there are four noble truths: suffering is universal; the cause of suffering is craving; the cure for suffering is to get rid of craving (and reach nirvana) by following the Eightfold Path. To follow the Eightfold Path, you must practice right view, right aim, right speech, right action, right living, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. (The list may vary depending upon the Buddhist teacher.) Also, the serious Buddhist may follow many commands which could include: do not steal, destroy life, commit adultery, lie, get drunk, eat in the afternoon, watch dancing, singing or plays, sleep in luxurious beds or accept silver or gold.

Buddhists believe life is very real; it is real suffering. Buddhists believe humans must save themselves; they can expect no help from God. Buddha did not believe that people have souls: Buddhists see Jesus as a great teacher. They have no problem with His claims to be God in the flesh because they see everyone as God in the flesh, or containing some sort of potential divinity.

Hinduism

Hindus believe Brahman, Vishnu and Shiva are three parts of the “force” God: one creating, one preserving and one destroying. Hindus worship so many minor gods that nobody, not even the most devout Hindu, knows just how many gods there are. Some feel there are over a million. They believe in submission to fate, that since people are just part of the force of the universe, they must submit to their various lots in life. They believe in the caste system, the idea that humans are born into various levels of reincarnation according to the karma they earned in their previous living. The people of lower castes have lower worth than those of higher castes. They use Yoga as a discipline to help a person control her or his body, mind and will. They adhere to Dharma, various moral laws that differ for each race, caste and family group. Once you have figured these out, you follow them to reach nirvana. Hindus believe life is an illusion, meaningless. Hindus believe that each person has a portion of the god-force. Hindus see Jesus as a great teacher.

Islam

The religion of Islam came into being about 600 years after the resurrection of Christ. Islam is a mixture of ideas from Judaism and Christianity. Muslims believe in one God, Allah. They don't believe Jesus was God come to earth. They call Jesus Christ a prophet and believe he was able to escape death on the cross by substituting Judas (in disguise) at the last minute.

Many of the events in the Koran are taken from the Old Testament, though the facts have been altered from the Biblical accounts. Islam teaches that getting to heaven involves following the regulations laid down by the prophet Mohammed. These are mostly prescribed actions that must be followed. They include: praying to Allah five times a day, fasting, helping the needy and making a once-in-a-lifetime journey to the holy city of Mecca.

Muslims do not believe the Bible is the word of God because it has not been “fixed” by the prophet Mohammed. Only the Koran is true.

Muslim dress and customs:

Some Malay men wear a black velvet cap, the songkok, every day, many wear it only on Fridays. Friday is the Muslim holy day. Each Friday, Muslims attend congregational prayers at the mosque or surau (chapel). They may change clothes for this, wearing an Arab style robe, a loose jacket and sarong, or a suit with a sarong around the waist. Men must cover their heads. Friday lunch hour starts at 11:30 am and will last until 2:30 pm to allow Muslims to attend prayers.

Malay women may choose between wearing western style clothes, or the Malay outfit. It is left to the individual woman whether she wishes to wear a scarf or veil, except at prayers when she must have her head covered.

There are prayer rooms (surau) in many public places. Don't enter one, thinking it's the restroom!

Superstitions:

There are many local superstitions including: pointing at a rainbow will make your finger drop off; a girl who sings in the kitchen is fated to marry an old man; if cats are allowed to jump over a corpse it will sit up as a ghoul, and many others.

Touching and Pointing:

Touching: It is considered rude to touch another person. Of course, in a crowd, it's impossible not to touch someone, but it's best to keep your hands near your body to demonstrate you're trying to be culturally sensitive. Women should try to avoid walking through a group of men. Deliberate touching, such as handshaking is acceptable, though you may experience more of a touch on the hand than a handshake. Among conservative people, men don't shake hands with women, they bow to each other. You should be careful not to touch someone else's children, as patting children's heads and ruffling their hair is not as acceptable here. People believe the head is a spiritually vulnerable part which when handled carelessly may injure.

Kissing in public is generally not acceptable, even often among relatives and children.

Hand Gestures: Never point with one finger. It is considered very rude and is only done as a deliberate insult. Pointing at *people* is especially rude, so avoid it entirely. Children are told that a rash index finger may drop off if it has been pointed at a heavenly body. And don't crook your finger to ask someone to come to you. That's used by prostitutes to encourage customers.

You may motion towards something with the thumb extended over a loosely doubled fist. Pounding your fist into your hand as a gesture of exasperation is seen as a rude gesture by some Malaysians. Also, if you use sign language (for the hearing impaired), do not use the North American finger spelling of T.

Girl Watchers:

Young (and some not so young) boys sometimes like to hoot and call at foreign women. Do your best to ignore them and keep walking. Don't make eye contact.

Shoes:

It is polite to remove your shoes before entering a local house or a temple.

Language:

There are a lot of phrases that you will find are expressed differently from what you expect in most North American culture. This will take some adjustment for effective communication. A few examples are using the terms “take away” instead of “carry out” and “queue up” instead of “line up.”

Auto/Van/Motorcycle Accidents:

Malaysian law states that you have 24 hours to make a police report. Be wary of tow trucks that suddenly appear at the scene of an accident. You can call 999 to report an accident. It is best to be assertive when an accident occurs and not to immediately say it was your fault.

Directions:

Be wary of accepting directions from strangers. They can sometimes be very helpful and direct you immediately to the right location and other times will give you directions that are not accurate, but they will try to be polite at all costs. They usually aren't well versed in the use of maps. Directions are most commonly given in terms of specific landmarks which you may or may not be familiar with. Carry a map with you wherever you go, particularly for the first several months.

Dress:

Be considerate of the local culture by not wearing short shorts and dresses that may offend the local population. You'll generally find you get better service if you are dressed relatively conservatively: long, relatively loose pants, particularly for women, shirts with sleeves. Sometimes you can't just dress for comfort. Modesty is a considerably higher value in this country than in much of North America.

Government:

Do not openly criticize the government. This is taken as a great insult. Remember you are a guest in this country.

Traffic safety:

Be very careful when crossing the street here, as pedestrians do not have the same rights you may have enjoyed in the country you came from. It is common for vehicles not to slow down even when they see pedestrians crossing the street in front of them. Also, traffic comes from a different direction here, since Malaysia has the road/driving system they inherited from the British colonists: You drive on the **left** side of the road, so traffic will be coming from your **right** when you step off the curb on a two-way street. Of course with one-way streets (and there are a number of them in and toward town, you'll just have to check to see what's happening. **But that's not enough!** At any time and any place, a motorcycle can come screaming at you, regardless of the official direction traffic is supposed to be going.

Animals:

Be careful of stray animals. They can carry diseases that you would rather leave with them.

It is interesting to note that many Malaysians think all Americans are rich and that many are immoral. This view has been developed through the media. It can be very interesting to read the Letters to the Editor in the local papers. This will often give you an understanding of how the local people view Americans and foreigners. Often they will like Americans but have trouble with America. Everyone loves Canadians.

Additional Tips

1. Smile a lot. People forgive most of the things you do if you have a friendly disposition and are willing to be a learner.
2. Don't compare where you were to here. "We don't do it that way in America, or wherever." Look at your new placement as a new adventure, have the attitude to experience it all and enjoy it, not to compare it. Even durian. Once.

Relation to the National Staff

1. Do not ask for things with a condescending, or arrogant attitude. Ask respectfully and with kindness.
2. Use the proper chain of command. Don't ask a national worker to do something that should come from their supervisor, or that you can do, like changing light bulbs.