

Neighbourhood

KUALA LUMPUR

Malaysia's capital has long been one of Southeast Asia's best places to eat, and the city's melting-pot cuisine is now sharing the stage with hip hotels and thriving street markets. Words: Lee Cobaj. Photographs: Saskia Wesseling



The most memorable part of the 1999 movie *Entrapment* was the showstopping scenery. The glowing twin spikes of the Petronas Towers spiralling into the inky night sky imprinted Kuala Lumpur into filmgoers' minds as a high-tech city on the up. And it is. Malaysia's economy has lately been on a skywards trajectory, as have its visitor numbers. They come for the city's eclectic architecture; for its position as a convenient yet entertaining stopover; and for the amazing international cuisine — traditional Malay cooking, Chinese Hakka, Hokkien and Cantonese food, as well as a fair share of Indian cuisine. It's this colourful clash of cultures that's making KL a stand-out Southeast Asian city break.



Kampung Baru

Located right in the middle of the city, Kampung Baru, or 'new village', is one of Kuala Lumpur's oldest neighbourhoods. It's the city's last Malay settlement, complete with teak-wood still houses with pointy red roofs and pretty shuttered windows; banana trees, frangipani and pink bougainvillea bend on to manicured lawns. On the streets, grilled seafood, chicken satay and nasi goreng are served to hungry workers at fold-up tables under colourful strips of tarpaulin; locals seemingly oblivious to the ever-tightening ring of mirrored high-rises, swanky condominiums and swinging cranes that encircle them.

About 100 families, descended from Indonesia's seafaring Bugis people, are spread over 100 hectares of prime downtown real estate, their neat plots of land passed down from one tight-knit generation to the next over the past 150 years. The entirely Muslim community organises its own social activities — concerts, plays, music recitals — and revels in its volcanically hot cuisine.

The little enclave's energy comes from the food market, which slices through the heart of the village. From morning until night, each side of Jalan Raja Abdullah sizzles with hot woks, flame grills and cauldrons of curry.

Foodies flock from all over the city to chow down on its speciality dishes: *bubur lambuk* (rice porridge *congee* spiced with cinnamon, clove, cardamom and candlenuts); *rojak* (a sweet fruit and vegetable salad drizzled with caramel soy sauce); and *nasi campur* (a belt-busting buffet of up to 100 different dishes, including rice, mixed greens, *sambals*, peanuts, curries and fried fish). The chefs and waiting staff are mostly women, wearing clashing pink, orange and turquoise trousers and tunics, under floral hijabs secured with glittery brooches. My guide tells me their costume is called *baju kurung*; which loosely translates as 'enclosed dress'. The women are all business, with big smiles as they prepare, plate-up and take payment, creating a welcoming vibe that lingers long after your return home.

Some aspects of life in the village have moved on, of course. Walking off my enormous lunch I note homes which have morphed into B&Bs, others have become reflexology parlours and many of those old teak still huts have been replaced with concrete pillars, under which are parked shiny Hondas in place of the traditional herds of cattle. Still, in a city developing at such an astonishing pace Kampung Baru does manage to feel like a time capsule.

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Kampung Baru market by Petronas Towers; Batu Caves entrance; shopping in Brickfields

Brickfields

Exit from Sentral Station and on one side of the street you'll find the shiny Nu Sentral shopping mall, sleek blue-glass office blocks, and the fashionable Aloft hotel with its rooftop pool and tiki bar. On the other side, a rainbow of yellow, purple, red and pink low-rise buildings are wedged side by side, showy shopfronts advertising gold merchants, fashion emporiums selling glittering saris and other stores touting 'all kinds of food products'. This is Brickfields, also known as Little India, one of Kuala Lumpur's most fascinating and fastest-changing neighbourhoods.

These streets have traditionally been the preserve of the working-class Malaysian Indians who landed here in the late 19th century to work on roads, railways and plantations, as a result of British colonisation. "My daughter is the eighth generation of our family to be born in Kuala Lumpur," my driver, Kanan, tells me. "My great-great-grandfather came from Kerala. I still have some family in India but it's not my home, Malaysia is my home."

Although Hindu culture dominates the scene, Brickfields has attracted a whole melange of exiled peoples over the past two centuries. Wander off the main spine, Jalan Tun Sambanthan, and you'll find the quaint whitewashed Malankara Orthodox Syrian

Church; the early English gothic Cathedral of St Mary, one of the oldest Anglican churches in Malaysia; and the enormous Theravada Buddhist Maha Vihara complex. The latter sits back to back with the Tamil-founded Evangelical Lutheran Church and down the road from the Taoist Chinese Tam Kow Tong Temple, all painted dragon columns, ceremonial gongs and joss paper effigies.

Between the quirky architecture, vibrant stores and old-school beauty salons, Brickfields has more than enough layers to peel back over a full day's visit, but the real reason most people come is for the food, a wondrous bounty of India and Sri Lanka's best. Vishal Food & Catering is a classic Chettinad restaurant, where locals slide onto long rows of tables and devour mounds of mutton masala, chicken korma, courgette fritters, tangy *vellarikka* coleslaw and wispy chapattis served on glossy, just-plucked banana leaves. This feast, along with a mango lassi, shouldn't set you back more than £4. Or try the restorative ginger and coriander powder tea, and sets of pumpkin curry, battered bitter gourds and pearly yellow dhal dished up under posters of Mahatma Gandhi at the Sathiyany Vegetarian Food Centre. The hipsters might be edging their way into the neighbourhood but for now Brickfields retains its lively, authentic atmosphere.



IMAGES: ALAMY; GETTY



When in Kuala Lumpur...

1

MAKE TIME FOR THE TOWERS

Skipping across the skybridge and ogling the city from the 86th floor observation deck of the Petronas Twin Towers is a KL must-do. Book your £23 ticket and time slot online at least 24 hours in advance. petronastwintowers.com.my

2

DISCOVER BATU CAVES

Batu Caves is a Hindu temple set into a giant limestone hollow, and guarded by a 140ft high golden statue of Lord Murugan. Just on the outskirts of town, it's a rightly-popular half-day trip.

3

ROOFTOP BARS

This city has no shortage of fabulous rooftop bars. Try the Heli Lounge Bar, a working helipad on the 34th floor of the Menara KH building; the SkyBar atop Traders hotel; or the newly opened Vertigo at the Banyan Tree hotel, perched 59-stories above ground level. [shangri-la.com banyantree.com](http://shangri-la.com/banyantree.com)

4

FIND A TREASURE TROVE

The splendid airy white architecture of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia is almost as impressive as the museum's vast collection of ancient artefacts. iamm.org.my

5

TAKETE A

For a throwback to colonial times, book an afternoon tea of spiced Scotch eggs, duck spring rolls, passion fruit puffs and plump scones with cream and jam in the Orchid Conservatory at the Majestic Hotel. majestickl.com



Alila Bangsar hotel

66 *By day, it's all very 'Malaysian Notting Hill', with impeccably dressed mums stepping out of white terraced houses to push prams between lunch, nail spas and Lululemon*

Bangsar

Looming over the western edge of Brickfields like a giant domino hewn of black glass is the new Alila Bangsar hotel. In the 41st-floor atrium lobby, Tumi-wheeling guests are being checked in on iPads; while a level below, others swim lengths of the open-air infinity pool. There's a restaurant, Entier, where farm-to-table lunches are accompanied by baskets of sourdough bread and seaweed butter served on pebbles. And in the white-on-white rooftop bar, dizzying views stretch all the way across the city and jungle-laced suburbs to the mist-licked hills that mark the start of the Highlands. The Alila is the first five-star hotel to arrive in Bangsar — and it's the perfect fit.

Gentrification is all but complete in this orderly suburb. It's always been at the fancier end of town, attracting local white-collar workers through the 1960s and Japanese manufacturing executives in the '80s, who in turn brought high-performing schools, modern leisure facilities, boutiques and restaurants to the area. Nowadays, it's home to a rich mix of wealthy Malaysians, as well as Indonesians, Chinese, African and European expats. Its grid of streets feels calm when compared to the honking traffic-mired city centre.

By day, it's all very 'Malaysian Notting Hill', with impeccably dressed mums stepping out of white terraced houses to push prams between lunch, nail spas and Lululemon. There are art galleries and artisanal markets, yoga studios and expensive hair salons, Korean dessert bars and organic cafes of the highly Instagrammable gritty-pretty variety — try the homebaked cakes at Joe of the Town and picture-perfect pastries and coffees at Lisette's Cafe and Bakery.

Happily, you don't need a trust fund to dip into the Bangsar lifestyle for a day or two; you can bag a room at the Alila for £68, with breakfast; a meal of charcoal-grilled watermelon salad, spring chicken and flatbread at a happening restaurant such as Bakar costs in the region of £15; a pampering 45-minute foot massage no more than £8; and the people watching comes free.

After dark, nightlife here is far more engaging than the cheesy sports bars and cheap pubs littering the downtown Bukit Bintang entertainment district. X marks the spot; start your bar hop at Three X Co speakeasy for a Chocolat Fashioned, a new take on an Old Fashioned spiced with Kraken rum and chocolate bitters. And end with 12-year-old Japanese whiskies and a late-night DJ sets at The X. □

MORE INFO

- Aloft hotel: marriott.com
- Vishal Food & Catering: 22 Jalan Scott, off Jalan Tun Sambanthan
- Sathiyaney Vegetarian Food Centre: @SathiyaneyVegetarianFoodCentre
- Alila Hotel Bangsar: alilahotels.com/bangsar
- Joe of the Town: 23 Jalan Telawi 3, Bangsar Baru
- Lisette's Cafe & Bakery: 8, Jalan Kemuja, Bangsar
- Three X Co: @threexco
- The X: thexbangsar.com
- malaysia.travel
- visitkl.gov.my
- Local food blog: friedchillies.com
- Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei Travel Guide* (Lonely Planet), RRP: £12.99.

✈️ Wix Squared has a four-day trip staying at the Alila Bangsar from £900 per person, B&B, including return flights from London with Malaysia Airlines, airport transfers and a full-day tour of the city. wixsquared.com