

# Kelantan



Cities that broadcast chirping competitions between songbirds cooing in lattice cages; ancient cowhide puppets wielding pistols on a paraffin-lit night; a silk half-moon rippling past the blue sky on a sunny day. Really – how is it that so many travellers rush through Kelantan?

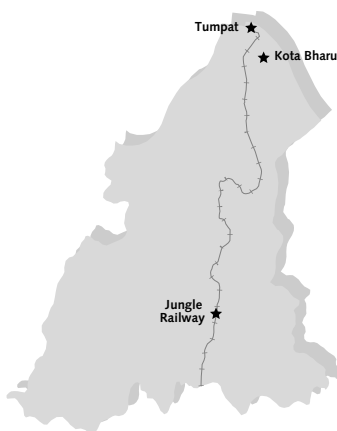
Likely as not, it's because they see *Darul Naim* (The Blissful Home) as a waypoint to something else: Thailand or Pulau Perhentian. That's a shame, as those who don't linger are missing out on experiencing both a stronghold of Malay culture and one of Southeast Asia's great cultural blending zones. This is a state that's heady with those things that make Malaysia distinctively Malay: the fire flicker of kerosene and the tinkle of a *gamelan*, blue rice dished out in paper cones, and the graceful kicks and punches, like a warrior's delicate dance, of traditional martial arts.

But seeing as Kelantan borders Thailand, there's a great deal of osmosis occurring here as well. Malaysia's cultural mix is generally realised in its distinctive blend of Chinese, Indian and Malay cultures, but here the mixing component comes from neighbouring Thailand. The graceful arch of Buddhist temples are likely as not to top the jungle treeline as the onion domes of a mosque, and Thai slang is mixed with Malaysian catcalls as the young of Kota Bharu, the state's pretty capital, go cruising in the evening.

This is one of the most Muslim, conservative and poor states in Malaysia. Despite this, and because of this, it's one of the most fascinating. Simultaneously an entrepôt of multiculturalism and bastion of traditional Malay heritage, Kelantan deserves more from you than a bus transfer.

## HIGHLIGHTS

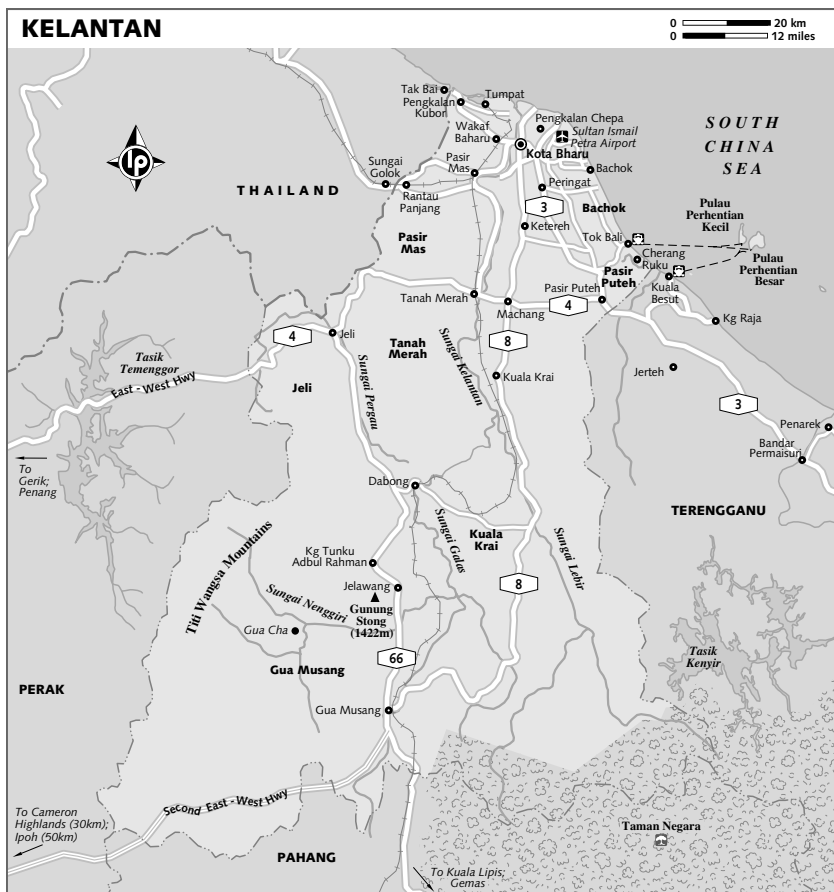
- Having squid on a stick, fried chicken and blue rice at the **night market** (p332) in Kota Bharu
- Watching the shadow puppets dance across the stage in Kota Bharu's **Gelanggang Seni** (p330)
- Trundling through the mountainous, jungle-clad interior of Peninsular Malaysia on the **jungle railway** (p336)
- Spotting the coexistence of Chinese and Thai design in the Buddhist temples of the **Tumpat district** (p335)
- Learning the art of **batik painting** or **Malay cookery** (p330) in Kota Bharu



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 09

■ POPULATION: 2.1 MILLION

■ AREA: 15,024 SQ KM



## History

Archaeological finds at Gua Musang and Gua Cha have turned up evidence of human settlements dating back to prehistoric times.

In the early Middle Ages, Kelantan was influenced by the Funan kingdom on the Mekong River, and there were strong links with both Siam and the Khmer Empire.

After being a vassal of the Sumatran Srivijaya Empire and then the Siamese, Kelantan came under the sway of the Melaka sultanate in the 15th century. After the demise of the Melaka sultanate in the 17th century, Kelantan was ruled by Johor and then in the following century, Kelantan was ruled by Terengganu.

By the 1820s Kelantan was the most populous state on the Malay Peninsula. It managed to escape the ravages of the disputes that plagued west-coast states and experienced largely unimpeded development. Like Terengganu, Kelantan had strong ties with Siam throughout the 19th century, before control was passed to the British following the Anglo-Siamese treaty in 1909. Kelantan's wealth and importance waned after ties with Siam were cut, the state becoming a northerly backwater of colonial Malaya.

It was the first place in Malaya to be invaded by Japanese troops in WWII. During the occupation, control of the state was passed to Thailand, but in 1948 Kelantan became a member of the Federation of Malaya.

Since 1990 Kelantan has been governed by the Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS) and joined at the hip to this state in many Malaysians' minds.

## Climate

Kelantan has a tropical climate, with average temperatures between 21°C and 32°C. There is intermittent rain throughout the year, and heavier, more prolonged rainfall during the east-coast monsoon season (November to January). Temperatures in Kota Bharu are often higher than in the surrounding countryside, and cooler temperatures are recorded on the coast. Humidity levels are highest in the jungled interior of the state, rarely dipping below 90%.

## Dangers & Annoyances

Newly arrived foreign tourists are regularly approached at Kota Bharu bus stations by unlicensed drivers offering lifts. Besides being illegal, this is potentially dangerous and you're pretty certain to be ripped off. Only get into an official cab, which will display the company name and phone number.

If you're going to Pulau Perhentian, be aware that some taxi drivers, working on commission, will take you to the tiny port of Tok Bali. The ferry service from here is longer and more

expensive than the one leaving from the main Perhentian departure port of Kuala Besut.

## KOTA BHARU

☎ 09 / pop 425,000

The northernmost major city in Malaysia is also one of its most devoutly Muslim and deeply grounded in Malay heritage. Kota Bharu is supremely pleasant: it has the energy of a mid-sized city, the compact feel and friendly vibe of a small town, superb food and a good spread of accommodation. It's also a logical overnight stop between Thailand and the Perhentians. But you'd be wise to treat Kota Bharu as more than a pit stop. This is a good base for exploring Kelantan on both physical and other levels; the state's villages are within day-tripping distance, and its crafts and culture can be dug through while strolling city streets. The charms of this town reveal themselves slowly, but once you have a taste for it, it's easy to get sucked into KB's languid way of life.

## Orientation

The centre of town is a busy area northeast of the clock tower, bounded by Jln Pintu Pong, Jln Kebun Sultan/Jln Mahmud, Jln Hospital and Jln Temenggong. The central bus station is just off Jln Padang Garong, opposite a huge, fenced-off hole in the ground where

## PAS PERFORMANCE




Thanks in part to its high proportion (95%) of ethnic Malays, Kelantan has long been a stronghold of the Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS). PAS is both an Islamic and Islamist party (the difference being the former promotes Muslim interests, while the latter's goal is creating an Islamic state).

Islamic law is enforced more stridently here than anywhere else in Malaysia. Since PAS came into power, supermarket checkout queues have been segregated into lines for single men, women and families; couples have been fined for public 'indecentcy' (including hand-holding); and women have been fined for not wearing headscarves. Traditional arts like *wayang kulit* (shadow puppetry) have been criticised, boycotted and protested by PAS because of their links to pre-Islamic Hindu and animist belief systems. Muslim missionaries are encouraged to marry and convert Orang Asli (indigenous) women, and Muslims who renounce their religion (apostates) can be detained in 'Islamic rehabilitation centres' – better than being executed, which the State Legislative Assembly called for in 1993.

You may think the above atmosphere would be anathema to non-Muslim Chinese and Indians in Kelantan, yet traditionally these groups have helped keep PAS in power. Partly that's because Kelantanese have a strong sense of linguistic solidarity; locals speak a distinctive dialect of Malay that often unifies across political and ethnic lines. Partly it's because there is more to governance than religious debates; a 2008 article in *The Star* notes many Kelantanese, Muslim or no, simply think PAS does a good job of the day-to-day running of the state.

Travellers are unlikely to experience repercussions related to the above. Non-Muslims are not subject to Muslim ordinances unless they try to convert Muslims, and Chinese women, for example, freely walk around Kota Bharu in short shorts.



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the 25-storey Kota Bharu Trade Centre was being built during our research – it's been scheduled for completion several times in the past, and may be done by the time you read this.

## Information

Banks are open from 10am to 3pm Saturday to Wednesday and 9.30am to 11.30am Thursday, and are closed on Friday.

**HSBC Bank** (Jln Padang Garong)

**Immigration office** (☎ 748 2126; Wisma Persekutuan, Jln Bayam)

**Maybank** (Jln Pintu Pong) Near the night market and usually open to 7pm.

**Multimedia Internet** (☎ 747 7735; 171 Jln Parit Dalam; per hr RM2)

**Tourist information centre** (☎ 748 5534; Jln Sultan Ibrahim; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-4.45pm Sun-Wed, to 4.30pm Thu) Very helpful staff and good reading material.

## Sights

### PADANG MERDEKA

Padang Merdeka (Independence Sq) is a strip of grass that was established as a memorial following WWI. It is best known as the place where the British exhibited the body of Tok Janggut (Father Beard), a respected elder who was killed at Pasir Puteh in 1915 after leading a 2000-strong uprising against British colonial land taxes.

## MUSEUMS

The real attraction of the Padang Merdeka area is the nearby cluster of **museums** (☎ 748 2266; www.kelantan.muzium.net, in Malay), all

contactable by the one phone number. There was talk during our visit of raising ticket prices by a ringgit.

Built in 1912 for the Mercantile Bank of India, the **Bank Kerapu** (WWII Memorial Museum; Jln Sultan; adult/child RM2/1; ☎ 8.30am-4.45pm Sat-Thu) building is a gem of colonial architecture, the first stone structure in Kelantan and, during WWII, HQ of the Kempai Tai, Japan's feared secret police. Today it is also known as the 'War Museum', thanks to its focus on the Japanese invasion and occupation of Malaya and the 1948 Emergency. Exhibits mainly consist of old photography, rusty guns and other miltaria. Upstairs is an uninspired gallery devoted to pre-war Kelantan and a garden interrupted by a reconstruction of a British pillbox.

**Muzium Islam** (Islamic Museum; Jln Sultan; admission free; ☎ 8.30am-4.45pm Sat-Thu) occupies an old villa once known as Serambi Mekah (Verandah to Mecca) – a reference to its days as Kelantan's first school of Islamic instruction. Nowadays it displays a small collection of photographs and artefacts relating to the history of Islam in the state.

**Istana Jahar** (Royal Ceremonies Museum; Jln Hilir Kota; adult/child RM3/1.50; ☎ 8.30am-4.45pm Sat-Thu) is the best museum of the bunch, both in terms of exhibits and structure. It's an achingly beautiful chocolate-brown building that dates back to 1887; thanks to its verandah and general sense of breezy space, it's one of the most attractive traditional buildings in the city. The interior displays focus on Kelatanese ritual and crafts, from detailed

descriptions of batik-weaving to the elaborate ceremonies that once marked the life of local youth, from circumcision to wedding nights to funerary rights.

The pale yellow **Istana Batu** (Royal Museum; Jln Hilir Kota; adult/child RM2/1; ☎ 8.30am-4.45pm Sat-Thu), also known as Muzium Diraja, was constructed in 1939 and was the crown prince's palace until donated to the state. The richly furnished rooms give a surprisingly intimate insight into royal life, with family photos and personal belongings scattered among the fine china and chintzy sofas, and the late sultan's collection of hats.

**Kampung Kraftangan** (Handicraft Village; Jln Hilir Kota; admission free), a touristy affair opposite Istana Batu, has a one-room **museum** (adult/child RM2/1; ☎ 8.30am-4.45pm Sat-Thu) with displays of woodcarving, batik-making and other crafts. The complex includes souvenir shops and (why not?) a good-value lunchtime buffet. Batik classes also take place here (right).

Nearby, surrounded by walls and closed to the public, is **Istana Balai Besar** (Palace of the Large Audience Hall). Built in 1840 as the principal royal residence, it's now used only for formal state functions.

**Muzium Negeri Kelantan** (State Museum; ☎ 748 2266; Jln Hospital; adult/child RM2/1; ☎ 8.30am-4.45pm Sat-Thu), next to the tourist information centre, is the official state museum. The exhibits on Kelantan's history and culture are interesting, but the accompanying signage is poor.

## GELANGGANG SENI

If you want to see *gasing uri* (top-spinning), *silat* (a Malay form of martial arts), kite-making, drumming, shadow-puppet shows and the like, the **Gelanggang Seni** (Cultural Centre; ☎ 744 3124; Jln Mahmud) is the place to go. Free afternoon and evening sessions are held on Monday, Wednesday and Saturday from February to September, currently between 3.30pm and 5.30pm and 9pm and 11pm, but check with the **tourist information centre** (☎ 748 5534; Jln Sultan Ibrahim; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-4.30pm Sun-Thu), or your hotel's owners, who should have a full timetable of events.

A note on *wayang kulit* (shadow puppetry): performances are interesting, but can be difficult to appreciate without any prior context. You may want to check out <http://discover-indo.tierranet.com/wayang> for a primer before catching a shadow-puppet show.

## Courses

### COOKING

The ever-cheerful Roselan runs popular Malay cookery workshops at his home; prices vary depending on the number of participants and ingredients used, but expect to pay around RM75 per person for a group of four. Contact the **tourist information centre** (☎ 748 5534; Jln Sultan Ibrahim; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-4.30pm Sun-Thu) for Roselan's current contact details. You will be invited to a real, middle-class Malay home and see food cooked under middle-class Malay conditions.

Hostels such as Zeck's, KB and Denai Lodge can all hook you up with their own cooking courses, which are offered at similar rates.

### BATIK-PAINTING

You can try your hand at a spot of batik-painting at **Zecman Design** (☎ 012-929 2822; zecman\_design@yahoo.com; Kampung Kraftangan, Jln Hilir Kota; ☎ 10am-7pm Sat-Thu). Tutored four- to five-hour classes cost RM50 for work on cotton and RM70 on silk, and a full-day course costs RM100. You'll need to book ahead.

## Tours

Most hostels organise tours for their guests. Possible tours include two-day/three-night expeditions into the jungle around Gua Musang (RM250 to RM350), boat trips up small local rivers into sleepy fishing villages where silk kites are made by candlelight (RM60 to RM80), and short city tours (RM25 to RM35). Prices will vary based on how many people are going and exactly what sort of service you are demanding; qualified guides should cheerfully meet your demands or provide good explanations for refusing them.

In our experience, and based on conversations with travellers, the guys at KB Backpacker's Lodge (opposite) and Zeck's Traveller's Inn (opposite) run the best operations around.

The **tourist information centre** (☎ 748 5534; Jln Sultan Ibrahim; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-4.30pm Sun-Thu) keeps a running list of reputable tour operators, and their former director, Roselan, also conducts excellent private tours, including a two-hour tour of the Tumpat temples (RM65) and a half-day river cruise (RM85). Contact Roselan through the tourist information centre.

## Festivals & Events

Kota Bharans love birdsong, to the point where they broadcast the chirping of birds in an abandoned building across loudspeakers set up through the city. Each year around August the city holds a **bird-singing contest**, during which you can see Malay songbirds perform; the ornate cages the birds are housed in are almost as pretty as their songs. Finally, every Friday and Saturday morning there's a bird-singing contest near Zeck's Traveller's Inn, where locals hang decorative bird cages up on long poles, then sit back and listen. Travellers are often invited to watch and even provide a bit of amateur judging.

The spectacular **kite festival** (Pesta Wau) is held in June, and the **cultural carnival** (Karnival Kebudayaan Kelantan), featuring drum and top-spinning contests, takes place in September. The **Sultan's Birthday** celebration (March/April) involves a week of cultural events. The dates vary, so check with the tourist information centre.

## Sleeping

The **tourist information centre** (☎ 748 5534; Jln Sultan Ibrahim; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-4.30pm Sun-Thu) helps arrange homestays in Kota Bharu's suburbs and nearby villages. The program was just getting off the ground during our research, but staying with a local family has the potential to be an ideal way of experiencing Kelantan. Otherwise, Kota Bharu is a popular stop on the backpacker trail, and there's plenty of cheap hostels around town, including several along Jln Padang Garong. Midrange and luxury options are aimed at business travellers and run from bland and big to plain big.

The budget options listed here all have shared bathrooms unless otherwise stated.

## BUDGET

**KB Backpackers** (☎ 748 8841, 019-944 5222; www.kb-backpackers.com.my; 1872-D Jln Padang Garong; dm/r from RM8/20; ☎ ☎) Run by the almost surreally friendly Pawi, KB's actual rooms are only so-so (the bigger the better is the rule). But Pawi is so helpful, and the vibe at his hostel is so internationally chill in that laid-back way that made us love backpacking in the first place, we can't help but declare our love of KB. Long may it reign.

**Denai Lodge** (☎ 017-370 7781, 019-963 2324; denai\_lodge@yahoo.sg; 2984-F Jln Parit Dalam; dm/s/d from RM8/20/35; ☎) Run by former trekking guides,

Denai gets high marks for its friendly owners and clean digs. It was new at the time of research, but a lot of thought seemed to be going into making it the sort of sociable spot every backpacker loves to lounge around in from time to time – quiet reading room, TV-centred common room etc.

**Zeck's Traveller's Inn** (☎ 743 1613; 7088-G Jln Sri Cemerlang; dm/s/d from RM10/18/25; ☎ ☎) Zeck's is a long-standing backpacker favourite in a peaceful nook north of the centre, with an attractive little garden to lounge about in and light meals and drinks always at hand. The friendly owner is a mine of information and travel hook-ups.

**Ideal Travellers' House** (☎ 744 2246; www.ugoideal.com; 3954-F Jln Kebun Sultan; s/d from RM10/25; ☎) Good for those needing a bit of quiet (there's a midnight curfew), this backpacker pad is located down an alley off Jln Kebun Sultan. There's a pleasant garden for having a laze during the day.

## MIDRANGE

**Hotel Anda** (☎ 744 7920, 747 7600; 2529-A Jln Kebun Sultan; r from RM63; ☎) If you need an upgrade to general midrange levels of cool and comfort with slightly less cleanliness, the Anda is a good option. It offers cold air-conditioning and a private room at almost budget rates.

**Crystal Lodge** (☎ 747 0888; www.crystal-lodge.com.my; 124 Jln Che Su; s/d from RM75/149; ☎ ☎) This airy place offers the best value in its price range. Rooms are plain but clean and comfortable, and there are free in-house movies and daily newspapers, while the attractive rooftop restaurant has a great view over the river. There is a business centre on site.

**Suria Hotel** (☎ 743 2255; suria.kb@tm.net.my; Jln Padang Garong; s & d from RM75, tr RM90; ☎) A welcoming though slightly drab hotel set right in the heart of town. The cheapest rooms are windowless but there are some more appealing choices boasting natural light and 'wall to wall carpets', no less. Rooms overlooking the street may be subject to noise.

**Azam Hotel** (☎ 747 0508; 1872-A Jln Padang Garong; s & d from RM80, f from RM110; ☎) This cosy if boring hotel is set right in the heart of town above the photography shop of the same name. The worst rooms are windowless; better ones have nice, natural lighting. Rooms overlooking the street may be subject to noise.

**New Pacific Hotel** (☎ 745 6555; www.newpacifichotel.com.my; 26 Jln Pengkalan Chepa; r/ste from RM188/330; ☎ ☎ ☎) This towering chain hotel provides

a good level of comfort and service, and the spacious rooms come with all the usual mod cons. However, it's awkwardly placed on a very busy junction east of the centre. There are regular promotional prices.

#### TOP END

**Pelangi Condominiums** (☎ 980 0996; <http://jompergi.com/homestay> (in Malay); Jln Post Office Lama; r from RM200; 🏠 📺) Not a hotel per se, but an agency that rents out luxury (and normal) condos around town on everything from a nightly to weekly to longer basis. This could be a good deal for groups of travellers, who may be able to get low individual rates if they split a property, or anyone needing a little privacy.

**Grand Riverview Hotel** (☎ 743 9988; [www.grh.com.my](http://www.grh.com.my); 9 Jln Post Office Lama; r/ste from RM215/318; 🏠 📺) Perched on the river edge, this huge hotel offers high standards at reasonable prices; long-term 'promotions' will shave around 40% off the published rates. Rooms at the back have some fine views across the water, and all have king-sized beds and big bathrooms with both showers and baths.

**Renaissance Hotel** (☎ 746 2233; [www.renaissancehotels.com](http://www.renaissancehotels.com); Jln Pasir Puteh; r/ste from RM248/352; 🏠 📺 📺) Part of the international Marriott chain, this gigantic hotel on the southern fringe of town offers all the business-class comforts and facilities you would expect. It's in the same block as the Kota Seri Mutiara shopping centre, but a long way from anything else.

#### Eating

Kota Bharu is one of Malaysia's better eating cities, with Malay, Thai, Indian and Chinese cuisine on offer in small hawker stalls and upscale restaurants. No visit is complete without sampling the town's famed night market (right).

If you need beer, head to the Chinese restaurants, which usually happily stay open late to satisfy booze-needy travellers. Note that some restaurants close on Fridays.

#### RESTAURANTS

**Medan Selera Kebun Sultan Food Court** (☎ 746 1632; Jln Kebun Sultan; mains from RM3; 🍴 lunch & dinner) A big, bright and bustling food court with a variety of standard Chinese dishes on offer, such as claypot chicken rice and *kway teow* (rice-flour noodles). Everything's in Chinese, but there are numbered photos you can point at. Beer is also available.

**Sultan Kopitiam** (Jln Kebun Sultan; mains from RM3; 🍴 24hr) This bustling cafe is ostensibly open around the clock, although it seems to close if no one's around. It has good coffee and free wi-fi for net heads.

**UP2U** (Jln Sultan Zainab Pong; mains from RM3; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This hip 'dessert station' is the perfect antidote to the searing Malaysian heat, with its yummy Oreo milkshakes and sweet fruit juices. Very popular with local teens and tweens.

**Muhbah Aneka Cake House** (☎ 748 3298; Jln Pintu Pong; mains from RM4; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Downstairs there's a nice bakery, while the upstairs restaurant serves decent Chinese vegetarian fare, although some of the stuff can be a bit oily.

**Sri Devi Restaurant** (☎ 746 2980; 4213-F Jln Kebun Sultan; mains from RM4; 🍴 lunch & dinner Sat-Thu) As popular with locals as it is with tourists, this is a great place for an authentic banana-leaf curry and a mango lassi; the biryani dinners are an especial treat.

**Restoran Golden City** (Jln Padang Garong; mains from RM5; 🍴 lunch & dinner) This basic but very good Chinese eatery in the centre of town has a big menu, in English, of the usual steamed fish, chicken, bean curd, rice and noodle dishes. At night, they'll serve beer until the last customer stumbles out.

**Ships** (171-181 Jln Padang Garong; mains from RM15; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Inside the Sabrina Court hotel, this nautically themed restaurant offers a menu of Western dishes including fish and chips, steak, and lamb chops.

#### QUICK EATS

The best and cheapest Malay food in town is in the **night market** (off Jln Pintu Pong): look for the yellow arch reading 'Medan Selera MPKB'. The stalls are set up in the evening around 5pm, when the sizzle of oil and heat hits the air and magic ensues. They're used to foreigners here and stall owners often tone down the heat without you having to ask; the resulting food is sometimes overtly sweet. Say 'Suka pedas' ('I like it hot') to eat as the locals do. Specialities include *ayam percik* (marinated chicken on bamboo skewers) and *nasi kerabu* (rice with coconut, fish and spices), blue rice, squid-on-a-stick and *murtabak* (pan-fried flat bread filled with everything from minced meat to bananas). Bear in mind, though, that the whole thing closes down for evening prayers between 7pm and 7.45pm, and Muslims and



non-Muslims alike must vacate the premises. The market closes around 2am.

The so-called **Chinese night market** (☎ 6pm-midnight) takes over much of Jln Kebun Sultan in the evenings, with numerous hawkers stalls selling hot snack food.

More food stalls can be found next to the river opposite the Padang Merdeka and by the Jln Hamzah bus station, and there's a modern **food court** (Jln Hamzah; ☎ lunch & dinner) inside KB Mall.

## Shopping

Kota Bharu is a centre for Malay crafts. Batik, *kain songket* (fabric with gold thread), silverware, woodcarving and kite-making factories and shops are dotted around town.

One of the best places to see handicrafts is on the road north to Pantai Cahaya Bulan (PCB). There are a number of workshops, representing most crafts, stretched out along the road all the way to the beach. Unfortunately, it's hard to visit these without your own transport; an alternative is to join an organised tour (see p330).

One of the most colourful and active markets in Malaysia, the **central market** (Pasar Besar Siti Khadijah; Jln Hulu; ☎ 6am-6pm) is at its busiest first thing in the morning, and has usually packed up by early afternoon. Downstairs is the produce section, while upstairs stalls selling spices, brassware, batik and other goods stay open longer.

Near the central market, **Bazaar Buluh Kubu** (Jln Hulu; ☎ Sat-Thu) is a good place to buy handicrafts.

The **old central market** (☎ Sat-Thu) consists of a block of food stalls on the ground floor, and a selection of batik, *kain songket* and clothing upstairs. A **street market** (☎ 6-10pm) selling clothes, copy watches and DVDs takes over Jln Parit Dalam in the evenings.

Modern chain stores can be found on the city fringes in huge shopping centres such as **KB Mall** (Jln Hamzah) and **Kota Seri Mutiara** (Jln Pasir Puteh).

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

The **Malaysia Airlines office** (☎ 771 4703; Jln Gajah Mati) is opposite the clock tower. There are direct flights to/from Kuala Lumpur (from RM48). **AirAsia** (☎ 746 1671) has direct daily flights to KL from RM39. **Firefly** (☎ 037-845 4543; airport) has direct daily flights to KL from RM49.

## BUS

The state-run bus company **SKMK** (☎ 748 3807) operates city and regional buses (and some long-distance buses) from the **central bus station** (off Jln Padang Garong), and most long-distance buses from **Langgar bus station** (Jln Pasir Puteh) in the south of the city. All other long-distance bus companies run from the Jln Hamzah external bus station. On arrival in Kota Bharu some buses will drop you at the central bus station, or just outside, but they don't depart from there.

SKMK has ticket offices at all the bus stations. Ask which station your bus departs from when you buy your ticket, and book as far ahead as possible, especially for the Butterworth and Penang buses.

SKMK has regular buses from the central bus station to Kuala Terengganu (RM10.90, three hours), Kuantan (RM24.20, seven hours), Ipoh (RM25.40, eight hours) and Gua Musang (RM10.20, three hours). The following SKMK buses leave from Langgar bus station: buses to Johor Bahru/Singapore (RM49.10, 10 to 11 hours) leave at 8am and 8pm. Eight buses go to KL (RM30.90, nine hours), leaving from 8:30am to 11pm. 'Business class' buses (with fewer seats) are available for these routes as well, and cost roughly 30% more. Buses to Butterworth/Penang (RM28.70, eight hours) leave at 9am and 9:30pm. Other destinations include Alor Setar (RM76.60, eight hours), Lumut (RM29.40, eight hours) and Melaka (RM40.20, nine hours).

The other companies cover many of the same routes. Buy your tickets at the Jln Hamzah external bus station or from the numerous kiosks behind the central bus station.

Most regional buses leave from the central bus station. Destinations include Wakaf Baharu (buses 19 and 27, RM1.20), Rantau Panjang (bus 29, RM3), Tumpat (bus 19, RM1.50), Bachok (buses 2B, 23 and 29, RM3.30), Pasir Puteh (bus 3, RM5.10), Jerteh (bus 3.30, RM7.10) and Kuala Krai (bus 5, RM8.30). Note that some of these may be identified by destination rather than number.

## Thailand

The Thailand border is at Rantau Panjang (Sungai Golok on the Thai side), reached by bus from Kota Bharu. Bus 29 departs on the hour from the central bus station (RM3.8, 1½ hours).

From Rantau Panjang you can walk across the border; it's about 1km from the station. Share taxis from Kota Bharu to Rantau Panjang cost RM30 per car and take 45 minutes.

An alternative route into Thailand is via Pengkalan Kubor, on the coast. It's more time consuming and transport links aren't as good. The crossing here used to be dodgy due to sectarian violence in southern Thailand, but at the time of research it was safe. You may still want to ask hotel owners about conditions before you depart.

### CAR

Travellers can hire cars from **Hawk** (☎ 773 3824; Sultan Ismail Petra Airport).

### TAXI

The taxi stand is on the southern side of the central bus station. Avoid the unlicensed cab drivers who will pester you here and elsewhere around town, and take an official taxi as these are cheaper and safer. The **tourist office** (☎ 748 5534; Jln Sultan Ibrahim; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-4.45pm Sun-Wed, to 4.30pm Thu) will put you in touch with a reliable taxi driver.

Those who plan to catch an early morning train should arrange for the taxi to Wakaf Baharu the night before they plan to leave, as it can be difficult to find a (licensed) taxi on the street in the early morning.

### TRAIN

The nearest station is **Wakaf Baharu** (☎ 719 6986). There is a daily express train all the way to KL

(RM38, 13 hours), stopping at Kuala Lipis, Jerantut and Gemas, and a daily express to Singapore (RM41, 16 hours).

A daily local train stops at almost every station to Gemas (RM19.20, 13 hours). There are also two or three local trains a day that go as far as Gua Musang (RM7.20, five to six hours).

KTM has a ticket office (counter 5) at Kota Bharu's Jln Hamzah bus station.

### Getting Around

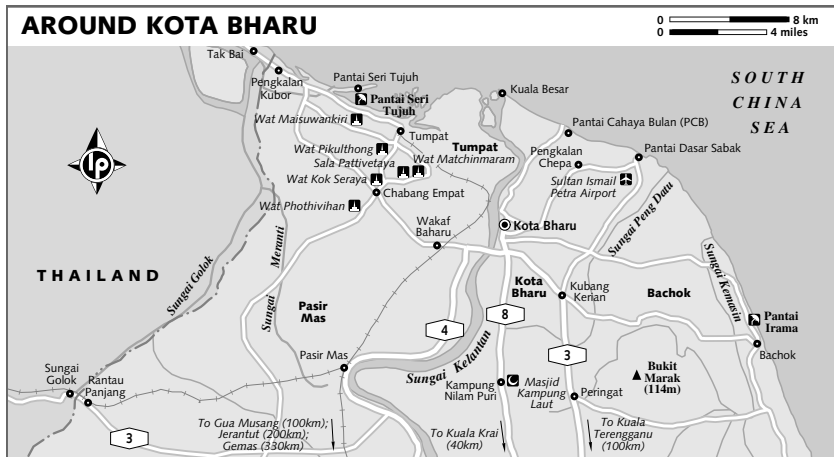
The airport is 9km from town. You can take bus 8 or 9 from the old central market; a taxi costs RM20.

Most city buses leave from the middle of the old central market, on the Jln Hilir Pasar side, or from opposite the Bazaar Buluh Kubu.

Trishaws can still be seen on the city streets, though they are not as common as they once were. Prices are negotiable but reckon on around RM5 and upwards for a short journey of up to 1km.

### AROUND KOTA BHARU Masjid Kampung Laut

Reputed to be the oldest mosque in Peninsular Malaysia, Masjid Kampung Laut was built about 300 years ago by Javanese Muslims as thanks for a narrow escape from pirates. Built entirely of wood, without the use of nails, and with a stacked pyramid appearance, it's a very different mosque to the more Arabic-style structures commonly seen across Malaysia.



It originally stood at Kampung Laut, just across the river from Kota Bharu, but each year the monsoon floods caused considerable damage, and in 1968 it was moved to a safer location. It now stands about 10km inland at Kampung Nilam Puri, a local centre for religious study. Note that entry is forbidden to non-Muslims.

To get there, take bus 5 or 44 (RM2) from Kota Bharu's central bus station and get off at Nilam Puri. Try to go in the morning, when the mosque is least crowded.

## Beaches

PCB beach once had a much better title: Pantai Cinta Berahi, the Beach of Passionate Love. Now, in keeping with Islamic sensibilities, it's **Pantai Cahaya Bulan** (Moonlight Beach), but the same initials apply and everyone calls it PCB.

**ourpick Pasir Belanda** (☎ 747 7046; www.kampungstay.com; Jln PCB; s/d/tr RM149/179/199; 🚽) This privately run homestay is one of the nicest accommodation options in Kelantan. Three sizes of traditional Malay homes have been decked out in smooth sheeting and with little luxuries such as coffee makers. You're close to the beach and can lose yourself there, or just watch the stars from under your *kampung*-style awning.

To get here, take bus 10 (RM1.30) from behind Kampung Kraftangan (Handicraft Village) in Kota Bharu. A taxi costs RM30. If you're staying at Pasir Belanda, you may be able to arrange a pick-up from Kota Bharu.

**Pantai Irama** (Beach of Melody), in isolated, wild and windswept Bachok, is one of the best beaches around. However, swimming here during, or just after, the monsoon period (November to March) is hazardous. **Motel Irama Bachok** (☎ 778 8462; r from RM75; 🚽) has all right chalet-style accommodation. From the central bus station in Kota Bharu, buses 23 and 39 (RM2) run out to Pantai Irama.

**Pantai Seri Tujuh** (Beach of Seven Lagoons), just 5km from the Thai border, is an undeveloped stretch of sand on a long spit, backed by a quiet bay. It's very serene and lonely; if this appeals, there are rooms at **Chalet Sri Tujuh** (☎ 721 1753; r RM48-150; 🚽) and a few food stalls near the beach.

## Tumpat District

Nowhere else in Malaysia is as Thai as Tumpat, a green quilt of rice paddies, villages, mud

paths and smooth roads between Kota Bharu and the border. This is a culturally porous hinterland, not quite of one nation or the other. The main attractions here are Buddhist temples that, while Thai in origin, are culturally Malay-Chinese-Thai in execution. Chinese guardian deities and laughing Buddhas often share space with typically fiery, golden Thai religious imagery; if you're into Asian art, it's quite a fascinating culture clash.

Pengkalan Kubor is an exit point for Thailand, while Tumpat town is the terminus of the railway line, although it has no hotels or attractions. The best way to see the temples is on an organised tour from Kota Bharu (p330). Visiting more than one or two places using public transport and walking long distances in the heat is likely to be a trying experience, and with poor signposting, even local drivers sometimes get lost.

## TEMPLES

Numerous Buddhist temples are found all over the region, and **Wesak Day** (a celebration of Buddha's life, usually held in April or May) is a particularly good time to visit.

Supposedly one of the largest Buddhist temples in Southeast Asia, **Wat Phothivihan** boasts a 40m-long reclining Buddha statue, erected in 1973. There are some smaller shrines within the grounds, as well as a canteen and a rest-house for use by sincere devotees, for a donation. To get here, take bus 19 or 27 from Kota Bharu to Chabang Empat. Get off at the crossroads and turn left (southwest). Walk 3.5km along this road, through postcard villages and paddies, until you reach Kampung Jambu and the reclining Buddha (about one hour).

At Chabang Empat, if you take the turn to the right (north) at the light in front of the police station, you will come to **Wat Kok Seraya** after about 1km, which houses a modest standing female Buddha. While the temple's architecture is Thai, the female Buddha is more Chinese in origin, which is probably attributable to most Buddhists here being of Chinese origin. Continuing north about 4km towards Tumpat, you will come to **Wat Pikulthong**, housing an impressive gold mosaic standing Buddha. You can get to both wats on bus 19; continue past Chabang Empat and ask the driver to let you off.

Around 4km north of Chabang Empat near the village of Kampung Bukit Tanah is **Wat Maisuwankiri**. A richly decorated dragon

### THE JUNGLE RAILWAY

Commencing in Tumpat, the so-called jungle railway runs through Kuala Krai, Gua Musang, Kuala Lipis and Jerantut (the access point for Taman Negara), and eventually meets the Singapore–KL railway line at Gemas. The local trains stop almost everywhere and don't strictly adhere to posted schedules; contact the train station for the latest timetable.

boat surrounded by a channel of murky water constitutes the 'floating temple', but of more interest may be the preserved body of a former abbot kept on somewhat morbid public display. The bus from Kota Bharu to Pengkalan Kubor stops outside the temple.

Also worth a look is **Wat Matchinmaram** with its magnificent 50m-high seated Buddha (more Chinese than Thai, but also decorated with an Indian-origin dharma wheel), allegedly the largest of its type in Asia. Just across the road from here is **Sala Pattivetaya**, a Thai temple and village complex dotted with colourful statues. They are located about 2km south of Tumpat.

### PENKALAN KUBOR

Right on the Thai border, Pengkalan Kubor is the immigration checkpoint for this little-used back route into Thailand. During the day a large car ferry (RM1 for pedestrians) crosses the river to busy Tak Bai in Thailand. From Kota Bharu, take bus 27 or 43 (RM2.40) from the central bus station.

### GUNUNG STONG STATE PARK

The wildest, woolliest area of Kelantan is its southern jungle interior, accessible via the so-called Jungle Railway. This line, which cuts through peninsular Malaysia's mountainous backbone, still evokes a feeling of tropical frontier adventure – the greenery is lush and presses in on all sides, and you generally feel a world away from the comparative modernity of urban, and even agricultural Malaysia. If you're exploring here, head for the savagely beautiful **Gunung Stong State Park**, named for the granite rock formation that dominates the surrounding wilderness. Once known as the 'Jelawang Jungle', the park consists of 21,962 hectares of remote, sparsely inhabited green: sharp mountain

peaks, thickly matted vegetation, the world's largest flower (the rafflesia, see p432) and Stong Waterfalls, reputed to be the highest in Southeast Asia.

Due to infrequent transport links, it can be frustrating to visit this area without your own wheels, unless you do it via a tour organised in Kota Bharu (p330). The main base for exploring is Dabong, located on the jungle railway (it's more scenic to arrive by riverboat from Kuala Krai if you're coming from that direction). There are several caves in the limestone outcrops a few kilometres southeast of town; **Gua Ikan** (Fish Cave) is the most accessible, but the most impressive is **Stepping Stone Cave**, a narrow 30m corridor through a limestone wall that leads to a hidden grotto and on to **Kris Cave**. These latter two should not be attempted by claustrophobics.

From Dabong, cross Sungai Galas for 80 sen and take a minivan (RM3) out to the **falls** on 1422m-high Gunung Stong. The main falls are a 20-minute climb past the forgettable Perdana Stong Resort; a further 45 minutes of climbing brings you to the top of the falls and a camp site. From the base of **Baha's Camp** you can make longer excursions to the summit of **Gunung Stong** and the upper falls; most tour companies divide the trek into three checkpoints. A combination of jungle mist and mountain fog can make for hazy conditions, but on good days you get the sense you're climbing over clouds humming with the screams of animals in the jungle below.

**Rumah Rehat Dabong** (☎ 09-744 0725; r from RM25; 🚻) is a 1980s longhouse and the only decent place for independent travellers to stay in Dabong; ask at the district office opposite the resthouse. There's the usual collection of food stalls near Dabong station. If you come on an organised tour, you'll be directed to your guides' camp sites, which tend to be of good quality.

### GUA MUSANG

The town is named after the caves in the limestone outcrop towering above the train station. The *musang* is a native civet that looks like a cross between a large cat and a possum, but you're unlikely to see one, as hunters have killed off most of these cave dwellers. It's possible to explore the caves, but it's a very steep, hazardous climb to the

entrance, which is above the *kampung* next to the railway line, 150m from the train station (walk south along the train tracks). Don't attempt the climb in wet conditions and be sure to take a torch (flashlight). A guide is recommended.

Once you complete the dangerous climb to the caves, you'll have to shimmy through a narrow opening and do some scrambling to reach the main chamber, which extends some 150m before opening onto the opposite side of the mountain. There are no views, but the chamber is impressive.

There are several hotels on the main road that leads away from the train station. The best of these is **Evergreen Hotel** (☎ 09-912 2273; s/d from RM32/50; 🏠) on the left just before the bend in the road. The amusingly named **Fully Inn** (☎ 09-912 3311; r from RM90; 🏠) is a little more polished (and has a karaoke lounge!), although some rooms are definitely overpriced.

Bus 57 to/from Kota Bharu costs RM12, and Gua Musang is also on the jungle railway. You can organise tours of Gunung Musang from Kota Bharu; see p330.

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