

Seeking Knowledge in Malaysia

Studying in

The International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM)

Prepared by: Chris Caras

A brief note before continuing:

It has been my intention to make my notes about living and studying in Malaysia available for others to look at. Although my experience is limited in a couple ways. First of all, I was only in Malaysia for one year by the time I decided to make this available. Second, I was not working, nor was I sending children to school, plus I did not have permanent residency in mind. These factors severely limit my ability to provide some of the most important advice and help that people may be interested. Those who knew me from Medinah knew that I am an introvert that did not mix with others *too often*, although, as an introvert, I may be better at communicating relevant observations, so I made this available in any case.

And just like Saudia, there are Western expatriates that may be more qualified to provide more specific details. The words I have to offer are primarily for anyone thinking of doing exactly what I did—i.e. come to study at IIUM.

First of all, where are we talking about?

This, is earth. Malaysia is just about equidistant from Japan to the northeast, and Australia to the southeast...



Malaysia is a country divided into two portions. One is at the southernmost tip of continental Asia, which may be called *peninsular* Malaysia. It is just a few degrees above the equator. The other half, which may be larger, takes the upper half of the large island Borneo, which may be called *insular* Malaysia or East Malaysia.

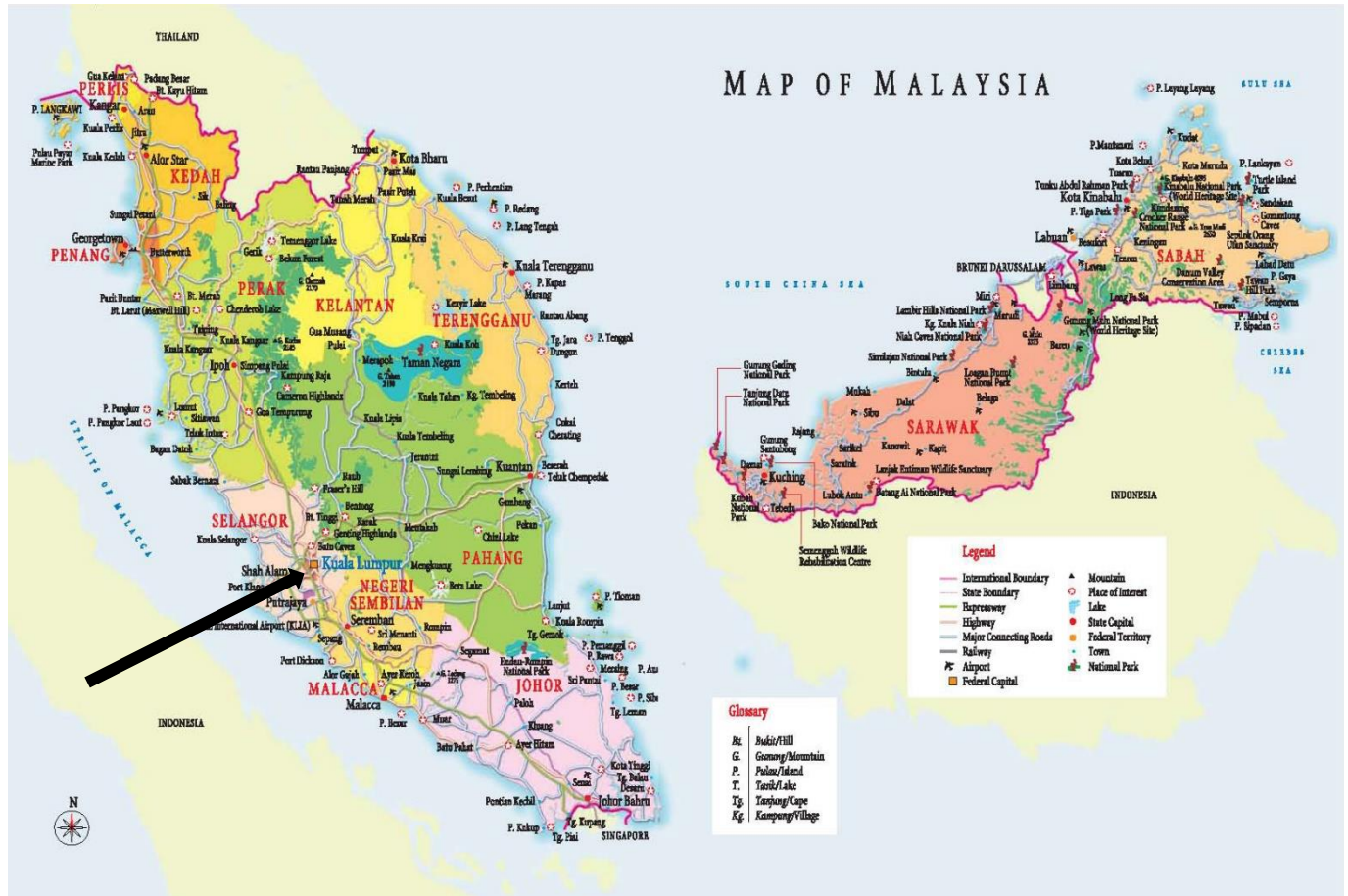
Let's zoom in a little



Malaysia occupies the strategic “Strait of Malacca” which continues to be an important shipping lane. See my red arrow.

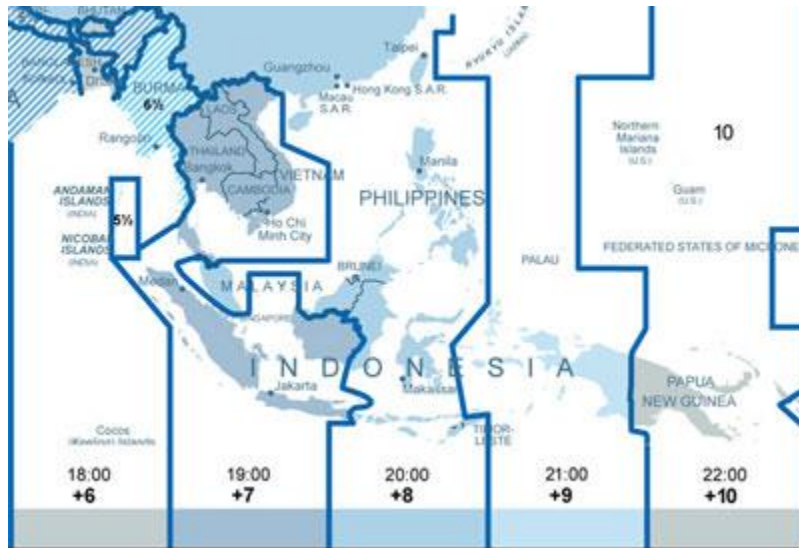
Politically, it is divided into 13 states with 2 federal territories...

Sarawak and Sabah make up East Malaysia, while the rest for the peninsular country. As you can imagine, there are political talks to make the two into two separate countries. Of further note is that the northern states of Malaysia, particularly Kelantan, are the more Islamically conservative, and attempt to enforce the hudood.



Look at West/Peninsular Malaysia above. See the West coast? Look closer to the state of Selangor in the middle (not north or south). You'll see where Kuala Lumpur (KL) is. To the south of KL is Putrajaya, the government headquarters, and south of that is the main international airport.

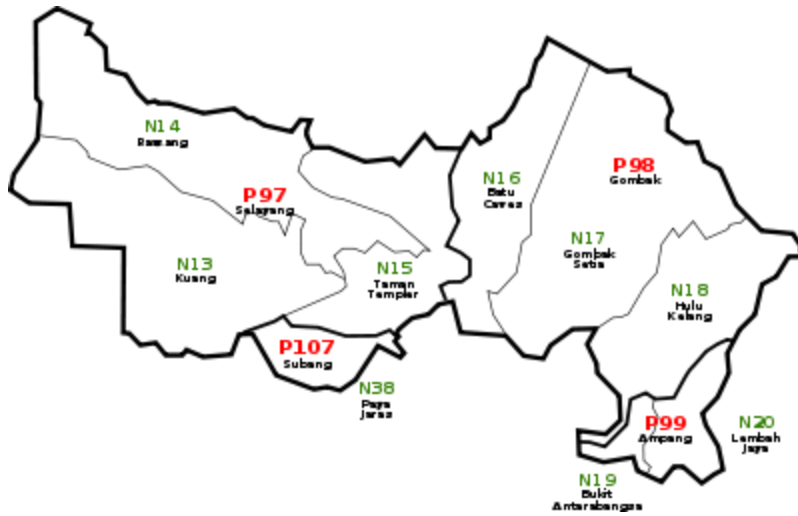
The time zone is "UTC +8:00" along with China, the Philippines, and Central Indonesia. They haven't observed any DST time changes since January 1st 1982.



Now let's zoom in on Selangor. It has several districts. IIUM is located just northeast of Kuala Lumpur, in a district called Gombak, in the state of Selangor.

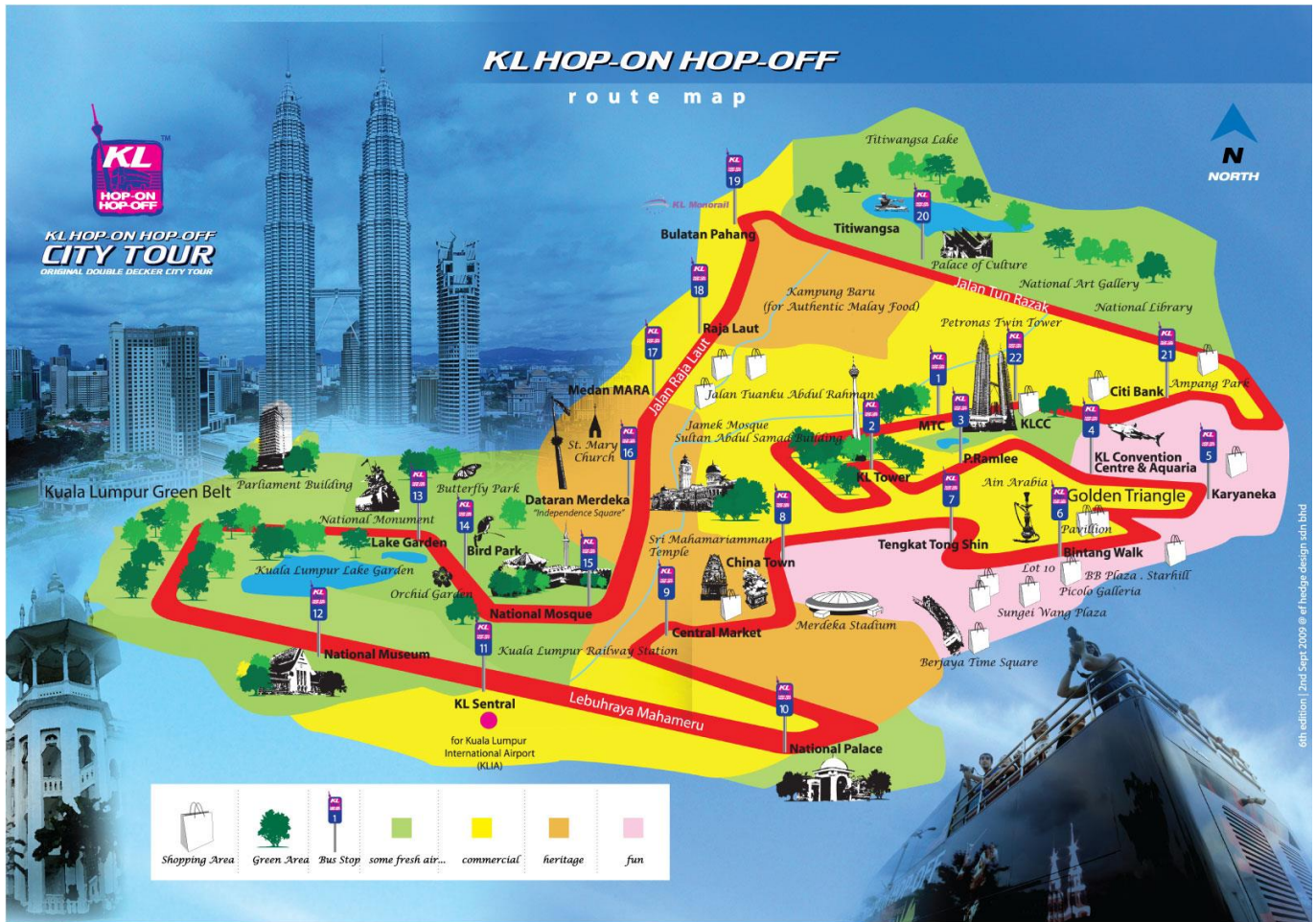


And a close-up of Gombak...



See Batu Caves right in the middle? That's where the famous "Lord Murugan" Hindu statue was built in 2006 that you see tons of pictures of in front of the giant staircase. It's also where I live.

Want a closer look at Kuala Lumpur?



On the right, near the Golden Triangle is BB (Bukit Bintang). You will hardly find more shopping malls in a square mile on earth. Petaling Street, around Chinatown, is where all the black market stuff is. While KL may rival downtown Manhattan in some ways, the KL suburbs are a far cry from American white collar suburbs, but more closely resemble smaller city appearance and is very unclean.

Most of Malaysia is a humid 85 degrees Fahrenheit, 365 days a year, with some mild breezes from time to time. There's no mentionable change from day to day. There are two rainy seasons, October-November-ish, and March-April-ish, but sometimes may blend in with the rest of the year. The most common time for rain is the afternoon between 2 and 6 pm. It's rare to see rain any other time of day. After 6 months living here, I only recall seeing rain in the morning (walking to fajr or getting ready for morning swim) twice.

Want to call someone? Phone numbers in Malaysia begin with +60... just as Saudi numbers would begin +966... So the country code for Malaysia is 60. Most local numbers, if it's a cell phone, will begin 01... and seven or eight numbers afterwards OR if it's a landline, will begin with a different number, but usually 03, for the Kuala Lumpur greater area. One of the zeros is always removed if calling from long distance. So my number, 0113569474 would be 601135619474, and *not* 60 01135619474. When calling Malaysia from the US, add 011 at the beginning to "exit" the US. So you can message my number by dialing 011601135619474.

Planning a visit? Make sure you take several plug adapters like these for any American made electronics...



Don't forget, European/Middle East two pronged plugs WILL fit—with a little struggle—into and work with sockets specifically designed for this type of plug.

Wondering about the Qiblah? Here you go...



The national currency is the Ringgit, abbreviated as “RM” for Malaysian Ringgit. They will frequently call it “dollars” or “bucks” and even use the dollar sign \$ since they do not use any other sign, nor the sign for British pound. In size, it's a little bit smaller than a dollar bill. The image on each one is the exact same picture, just different size, color and graphics. They haven't manufactured pennies in a long time, but there are two different sized and colored 20 and 50 cent pieces. So make sure you do not accidentally give someone a 50 cent piece when you mean a 20.



As for the exchange rate, as of December 25, 2014 (when I write these lines)...



When you actually arrive, you may need to exchange a small amount immediately at the airport, although they will offer *horrible* rates. So only do what you need. The most accurate and up-to-date rates I found in KL, only differing by .005 buying and selling, was Vitec Rate Forex Exchange on the first floor of the Pavilion Mall (lot 1.24.05). So in February when the rate was 3.60... most places would buy/sell dollars for 3.57 and 3.63, with a few at 3.59 and 3.61, but at this mall, it was 3.595 and 3.605. The Google Play app store has some good free currency rate apps so you can stay aloof.

- And as of September 2015, when I made this document available... wow, the ringgit has gotten even worse. So glad I didn't start a bank account here and wire a ton of money. Instead, every time I withdraw 1500 ringgits, less and less dollars are removed from the US bank account. When I first came here, it would be \$489. Now after one year it's \$350.

Do you plan on using your debit card here? Make sure it has a smart chip (circled in red below)...



My wife's Commerce Bank debit card was actually *taken* by an ATM machine, as if it were a forgery, for not having this chip. We had to wait for the bank to open, show them her passport, and then they opened the machine up and gave it back to her. To date, no ATM nor any business has accepted her card, even though Commerce says to us on the phone "it should work". As for my Chase card, it does not work in any business establishments (it does not have the chip, although Chase started printing those just recently I've heard) however, thankfully, it works at Hong Leong Bank ATM machines. If it weren't for that, I'd have to rely on my parents sending my money to me via Western Union or Money Gram, or open an account here and do a wire transfer.

The language is “Bahasa Melayu” or “BM” which hardly differs from Indonesian. It is very easy to learn, as it is without genders, while plural forms may simply be expressed by just repeating the word twice. Note that a “y” is frequently pronounced as an “h” as in insya Allah, and the “k” at the end of a word is like a hamzah, so “Gombak” mentioned above is like Gomba’. The most important words for Muslim travelers are: masuk (entrance, pronounced masu’), keluar (exit), tandas (bathroom), surau (prayer place), and mamak (halal Malay food).

Why IIUM? Why Malaysia?

NOTE: my experience is solely with IIUM. I have no contacts from MEDIU, founded and ran by Shaykh Muhammad Khaleefah al-Tameemi, former ‘Aqeedah professor in Medinah, KSA. I’m familiar with their website since I strongly considered them, but that’s the extent. Since I’ve been in Malaysia, I wouldn’t even know they existed.

Anyway, I had heard of the International Islamic University of Malaysia on and off while studying in Medinah. More specifically, heard that they were fairly advanced in the areas of Islamic Finance and Banking. While this topic did not perk my interests too much, I did from time to time, visit their website, and consider them, among dozens of other colleges in the Muslim world as well as Western world, for future studies. Go ahead, take a look and browse yourself. Here’s the link: <http://www.iium.edu.my>

But I chose to apply for studies here—and nowhere else—for my masters degree because I really wanted to **experience** a different part of the Muslim world in the midst of my studies, i.e. not from a tourist perspective. I wanted to see the good, the bad and the ugly. Also, I wanted to get a degree in fiqh. Nearly all other Islamic universities do not accept applications for a masters in fiqh unless the applicant has an undergraduate degree in fiqh. IIUM was one of only a couple exceptions. The other being Qatar. And like I mentioned, I wanted to see a different part of the Muslim world, understand their issues, culture, etc. Qatar simply could not provide that. Those are the two main reasons of which I can hardly find a third.

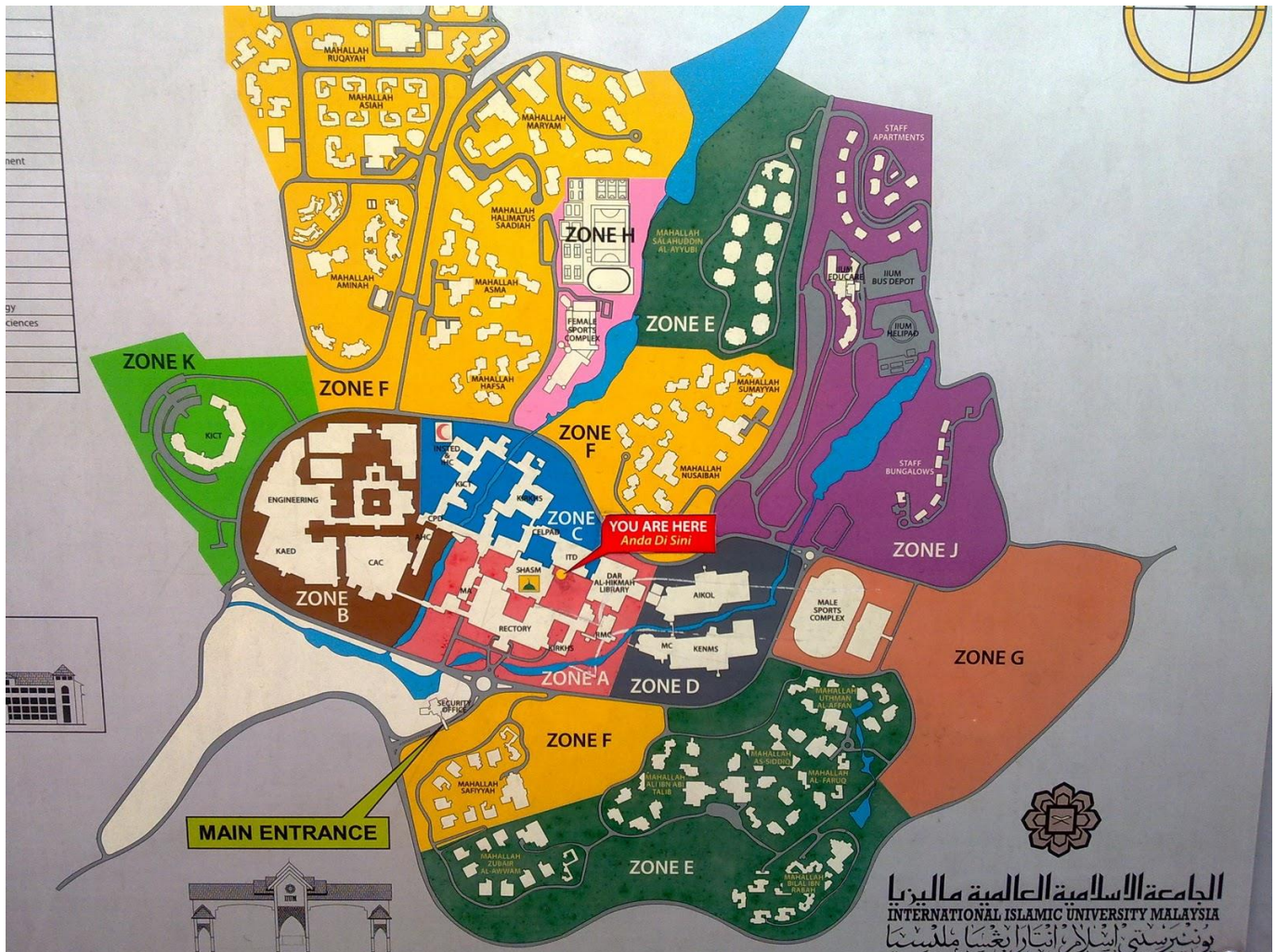
This university, as you can see below, is a **veritable labyrinth**. All buildings look alike, from the interior and exterior. Even the word “building” is a bit misleading. The university bears a strong resemblance to



the old Arabic Language College of Medinah, where interior hallways are hard to find, yet it is possible to get from point A to point B, in many cases, without getting rained on. The paler blue roofs are the student villas, while the sharper blue, in the middle where the large IIUM mosque is, is the actual academic setting, and as you can see, a ring road surrounds it.

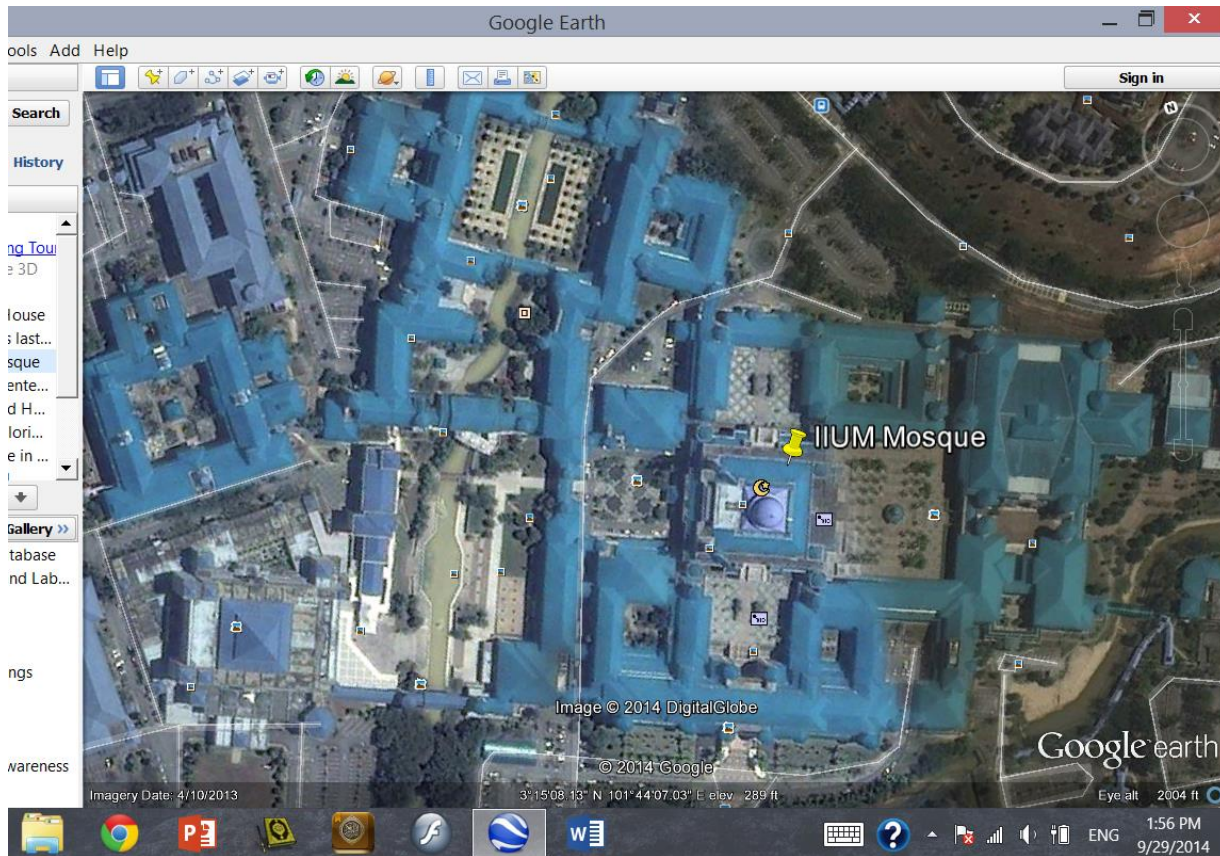
Thankfully, throughout the campus there are numerous signposts telling you where to go if you're looking for something particular. Unfortunately, many of the signposts are oriented so you have to tilt your head to place yourself accordingly. Good luck with that.

Here's just one example. Zones A, B, C and D are the academic portions. If you live off campus, that is probably the only area that will concern you. And as you can see, the yellow and pink areas for where the female students will stay and spend their off time—and that is clearly a large portion of the campus. The men's living quarters is in the dark green.



One thing fascinating about the campus—and the country’s wildlife—is that you’ll frequently see monkeys on the roofs of the buildings. Yes, monkeys. Not only that, but there’s a river that runs through the campus. You WILL see large monitor lizards swimming about in the stream or sunbathing on its banks. I’ve even seen a large turtle. Outside the campus, and in the countryside, you’ll see medium sized undomesticated dogs. The region also has an interested variety of birds.

Although the campus is much larger than this (below), if you live outside, you will probably spend your entire time within these buildings



As for the students, sure, the majority are Malaysian, but there is a sizable number of Arabs, Africans and a small number of other Asians (South and Central) and a tiny number of westerners—less than 10 Americans. Most students are women, and they will be present in each class, perhaps even outnumbering the male students.

While the campus looks beautiful from a distance, you'll find that in person, it seems they are lacking funds to keep the place looking neat and modern. The classroom computers, as of March 2015, are old HP desktops and giant monitors running Windows XP. Even with students present in the cafeteria, it *still* looks like it was the scene of a battle. Many of the chairs are unusable with the seats ripped out. The classroom chairs are extremely uncomfortable and old. It's not uncommon for a toilet or sink to be "rosak" (out of order). Some of the classroom air conditioners are also busted. Most of the university—except the offices of the heads of course—looks like it received its last face-lift 10 or 15 years ago. A huge pity, since the whole purpose of the university is to promote learning and help the students in that endeavor. The one exception is the library which is very nice with a modern check-out system.

[IIUM as a university, classes and academics](#)

Although IIUM is not Malaysia's strongest university, nor did it make the top 400 universities of the world in 2014, it has still accomplished many feats. Here, their debate team travelled to England,

Germany and elsewhere, defeating and outranking Harvard, Yale, and others.¹ This actually happened more than once.



Like any university, some professors will be energized by their subject, challenging their students, while others will be jaded and offer little to stimulate. While most professors are male, several are also women, even in the Islamic studies department. Since few classes are mandatory, you have the opportunity to ask other students about their experiences with different teachers so that you can take the most beneficial classes with the best teachers, or at least audit them if you prefer to gain your credits elsewhere.

Many of the profs graduated from Medinah and then got an advanced degree in the West. A lot of them are even “stuck” in the thinking of their own graduate school days.

The master’s classes I took in the first semester, from the Quran/Sunnah department and Usool-al-deen department were simply a few words from the professor while the students gave boring presentations all semester long. In every class, you’ll turn in a 15 page or so “research” some time before the final exam, which is a few essay questions. Some of the students only fill out one side of the pages, and every other line at that. I completely ink it up.

I found the Fiqh/Usool department to be the strongest of the three, the professors talking more, the students spending less time talking in front of the class, but more discussion and more demand. Still, it does not compare to the demands placed on a student in Saudia or probably anywhere else in the Arab world, or the west for that matter. A master’s or doctoral thesis, for example, will be within a certain number of words—nothing voluminous by any standard.

What kind of scholarships are offered for foreign post-graduate students? When I asked about this, I was told more than once that you need to have at least one semester completed (so you’ll need to pay at least once) and then also have published work. There are avenues to get published before completing your masters but it’s not anything knocking on your doorstep so you have to ask the different professors

¹ See <http://www.iium.edu.my/rector/news/iium-debating-team-outranks-harvard-u-recent-world-debate-tournament> and <http://www.thestar.com.my/News/Nation/2013/11/21/IUUM-debate-teams/> and <http://www.thestar.com.my/News/Nation/2014/12/01/Ameera-Natasha-named-best-speaker-in-Cambridge-debate-tournament/>.

for opportunities. For example, writing a book review for one of their journals or some collaborative effort. If you choose the coursework only option, then you will take classes wherein you'll publish in their journals, however the soonest you can do that is the second semester, since they have prerequisites. Furthermore, the scholarship application window is only open at the beginning of each academic year. So if you start one August, you'll to wait till the next August to apply, and if you're passed up or do not fulfill the conditions, forget about it. And there are personal interviews involved in the process to make sure scholarship money goes to the truly deserving. Outside the university, it is possible to get a scholarship from the government of Malaysia which not only covers your tuition, but also your airfare and a monthly stipend on top of that (just like Saudia). It's called the Malaysian International Scholarship (MIS) which you can apply for here: <https://biasiswa.moe.gov.my/INTER/> see "application" at the top menu.

One thing missed in Malaysia are masjid halaqaat. There are some teachers that go over mutoon, whether in the IIUM masjid, their home, or a reserved classroom, but this is not common.

IIUM community, students especially, have a great sympathy and support for the Muslim Brotherhood and a mild Sufism. Osama Hamdan², political head and spokesman of the Lebanese wing of Hamas (which is considered a terrorist organization by the US and maybe the UN also) gave a talk at IIUM auditorium. I had other commitments at the time and made no effort to attend.

Students dress casually. You'll only see thobes from some foreign Islamic students. The university does have a dress code which is mildly enforced. Some female students wear tight pants yet I was once barred from entering the university library for having ¾ length pants (clam diggers or knickers). Hisbah used to be more prominent, I'm told, and co-ed students were fined if they sat next to each other without a mahram or relation.

Signs like this can be found throughout the campus. The lesson here is that attending the library or going to class is considered an "official function" like attending an inaugural ball with the president or something.

² See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Osama_Hamdan.



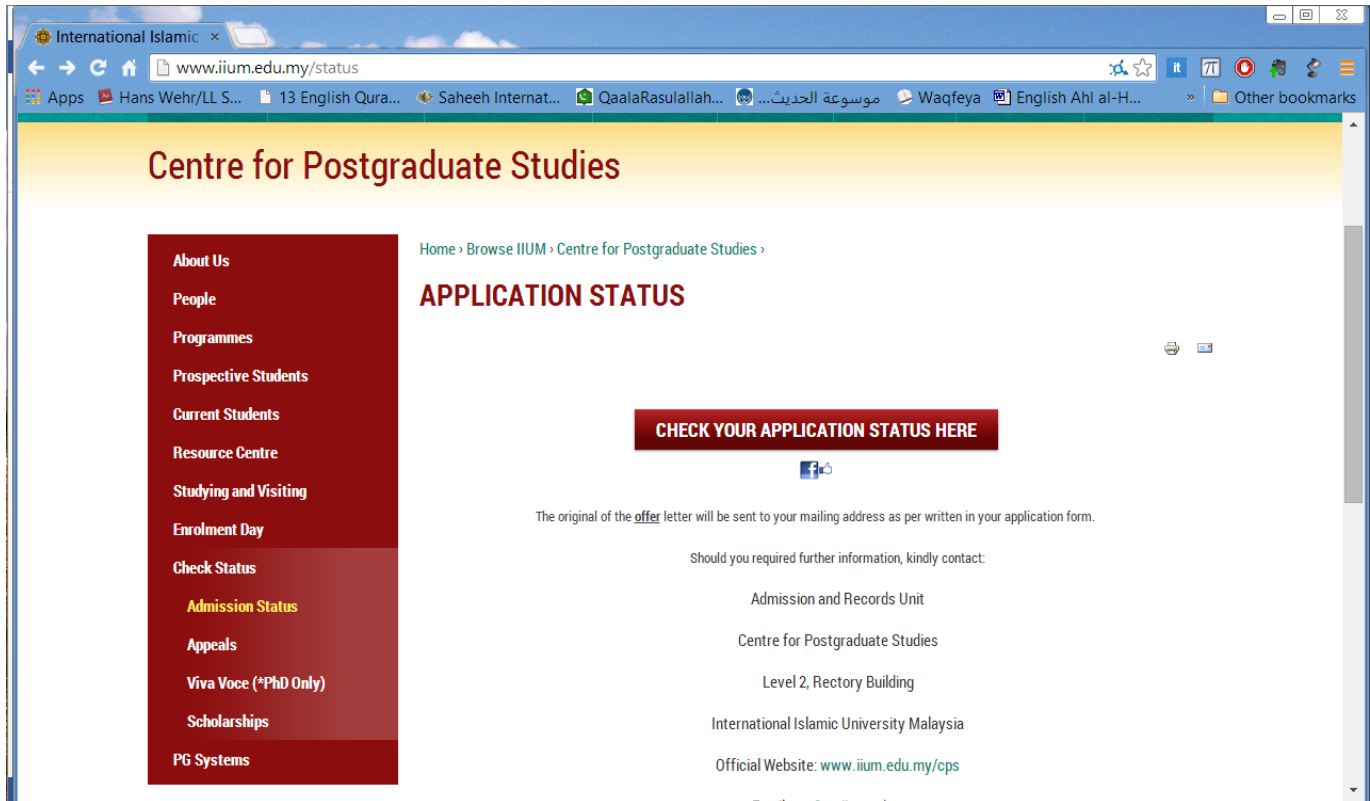
As for Arabic books, there is an Arabic book store called “Kedai Buku” in Gombak, not too far from the university, near a budget mall called Idaman Plaza. I’ve been to nearly all of the Arabic book stores of Medinah, Mecca and Jeddah yet I was impressed by this one. However, if they don’t have the title you’re looking for, you can just about forget every getting a hardbound copy yourself. There are some Arabs that have small stands in the university and have connections with guys overseas that can procure titles, but I haven’t found them to be too helpful.

Application, Acceptance & Registration

The application form and info can be found easily on the IIUM website. A good thing about the application is that it does not require any running around for layers of certification. A simple notary stamp on the copies of your passport will do, if even that is rigorously required. They ask for *certified English translations* of all submitted transcripts. I did my own translation, and at the bottom of the last page, I added a clause basically saying that it was accurate to the best of the ability of the translator and good for all public purposes, signed it in front of a notary public and had it notarized to look official. In the US, notary publics do little more than witness signatures. They don’t care about the document contents itself, so you could even have an illegal contract, while the notary simply signs and stamps that

they witnessed the signing of it and nothing else. I also translated the two tazkiyahs I had. When sending it, make sure it is through a tracked carrier—common sense it may seem, but untracked international mail usually does NOT reach its destination. As for paying the application fees, and anything I might need to pay prior to arrival, I used Google’s exchange rate, printed it out, and enclosed a banker’s check for the required amount. Unlike Saudi Arabia, the exchange rate fluctuates quite often.

Perhaps a month after I sent it, **they e-mailed me** acknowledging that they received it (so make sure you print your e-mail address flawlessly!!!!!! Do not let an “l” or a “1” look like the other or write your “r” like a “v” or anything clumsy like that!), and they provided a code to use for checking the status of the application.

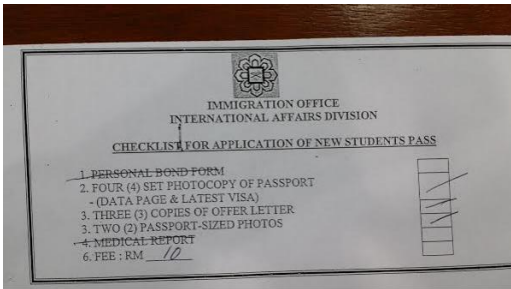


I sent it around mid-July, and received the code in mid-August. I found out in mid-November, from checking this link every week or so that I was accepted. Immediately several links with valuable materials were provided—although some didn’t work for a month or so—but most importantly, the admissions booklet, which contains several forms, some of which **must** be submitted and received by them BEFORE YOU SHOW UP. Just like any Western University, you have to acknowledge that you accept their offer letter, or kindly reject it, or accept with deferment (which is what I did for financial reasons). It is very important that you provide them with a valid, **legible e-mail** address so that you can receive the code to enter this website. Otherwise, **you may not receive the real offer letter in its nice, thick paper, until the day of enrollment!** And there is only one day of enrollment upon which it is compulsory to attend.³

Between finding out you’re accepted, and coming over, there is nothing special you need to prepare except the student pass to save you some money.

³ A person can show up late and do all the procedures late, but they’ll miss out on some things for sure.

Surprisingly, the offer letter says *nothing* about applying for a student pass in order to get a student visa. Even the booklet they instruct you to print out on all the necessary procedures before and upon arrival, as well as for registration—nothing whatsoever. I was fortunate to learn from Ali Ahmed about this beforehand. Basically, you just mail these docs [see image below—the writing is not mine but the office lady’s] to their “immigration unit” along with 10 RM. When I actually called them up on the phone, they



told me to mail it to a friend and have the friend give them the money since it was such a small amount. She also said to wait until within a couple months of my departure because then I would only get a small window to enter the country in. So I mailed the application in June, fastest method.

Then, about a month after it was handed to them, I received an e-mail with this PDF attachment (below).



Oh, you can’t read Malay? It basically says your application has been approved. I responded to them asking, “now what? What do I do with this” **A month later, they responded** (typical, and most of the time you e-mail them, their inbox is full) saying I should print it out and that the next day they’d send a copy to “the embassy” (the Malay one in the USA or the US one is Malaysia? They didn’t explain). I did not receive anything before I left. I showed this paper to the passport stamper at the airport and he still gave me a regular 90-day visa, although he did not take thumbprints from my wife nor myself.

When I actually arrived and completed most of my registration stuff, I went to the immigration unit, told them I applied and was accepted for the student pass, and they crossed my name off a list and asked only for my passport and 72 RM. As for my wife, or any dependents, the girl behind the counter gave me this:

IMMIGRATION OFFICE
INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS DIVISION
INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA
JALAN GOMBAK, 53100 KUALA LUMPUR
TEL: 03-61965843

CHECKLIST FOR APPLYING SOCIAL VISIT PASS

1. Copy of passport (student & family)
2. Copy of marriage certificate / Confirmation letter from embassy
3. Copy of student's birth certificate / Confirmation letter from embassy
4. Copy of child's birth certificate / Confirmation letter from embassy
5. Copy of student's offer letter / certification letter
6. 2 photos
7. Fees : RM 602

Remark:

My wife's passport was ready in two weeks, and they gave 502 rm back. I didn't ask why. I just took the money and ran.

That brings up something interesting. For a lot of things and services, you'll have to have more than the real cost of the item, as a deposit. For example, whenever you check into a hotel, you'll have to fork over 50 RM or so, at least, as a deposit, in addition to the regular fees (unless you booked with your plastic). When you're ready to leave, don't forget to pick it up! Likewise, when I purchased a cell phone, the store asked for a 50 RM deposit just to go into the back of the store and get it out! When they figured my bill and I paid for the phone, they said I was 50 RM short. I said, "the deposit my friends." And so they looked at each other and started blaming one another, haha. When I bought a new computer, they took a 300 RM deposit, just to get it out of warehouse. You'll get this "deposit" business a lot. Just go with the flow and keep track of what you've paid, whether it's figured into the balance or whether you'll have to pick it up once everything else is all said and done.

Recently however, the immigration process has been detailed pretty well at the IIUM website:

<<<http://www.iium.edu.my/iad/unit>>>.

Also, there's a Facebook group administered by students designed solely to help newcomers through the admission process. Here: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/admissions.iium/>

IIUM also states that they want you to have a medical report filled out with chest x-ray before arrival. You *could* do that. If you don't, they will simply give you an appointment at their medical facilities for blood and urine labs, the x-ray, and a very casual visit with a doctor. All that costs 140 RM—or about \$43, compared to how much you might have to spend in America. Plus in America, they might take that form seriously and ask for a stool sample and also do a hernia check [drop your shorts, look away and cough].

The enrollment process, for postgraduate (PG) students is described on the CPS (Center for Postgraduate Studies) website. <http://www.iium.edu.my/cps/enrolment-day/during-enrolment-day/process-flow> Basically, you spend the whole time in one building, going from station to station. Later on in the day is a presentation in a nearby auditorium. One of the speakers, amidst an energetic speech, mentioned in a somber tone that they had to deny many applications. I have no idea how many applications they receive, accept and deny, but over 100 nationalities are represented in the postgraduate section.

NOTE: They don't really spell this out, but no matter who you are and where you're from, you **HAVE** to take an EPT (English Placement Test) and, if you're studying in Islamic or Arabic departments, also, an APT (Arabic Placement Test). There is no waiver for native speakers. The only waiver is in the case you have any college degree, *with transcripts*, obtained from the US, UK, Australia, Canada or New Zealand. As for Arabic, then an Arabic degree, with transcripts, from an Arabic country. This also must be presented at a place called CELPAD [Center for Language and Pre-Academic Development], more specifically, their office known as TEMU [Testing and Measurement Unit]. The point here is, even if English is the only language you know, you'll still have to take the test unless you have a completed degree from one of those countries. The university is not used to native English speakers. If you do not do this, you will be prevented from registering for courses. The tests are specialized so registration is a must, and they only happen once every month or two. So don't miss it if you don't have an appropriate degree!

As for on-campus lodging, their website reads "Since the early years of its establishment, IIUM practices 100% accommodation for its full time undergraduate students. For postgraduate students, the accommodation is provided based on availability of rooms. Priority are given to the non-Malaysian students especially new intake students. Currently, IIUM Gombak has 17 Mahallats that accommodate about 16,000 students who come from various countries and cultures."

The university is متكامل. It has banks, restaurants—including Western and Arab, clothing stores—although more catered to women—and separate sports and recreation facilities for men and women.

Nearly all on campus students are bachelors, and many of them work and earn money some way or other.

Just like in Medinah and most other gated universities, students require special permits to enter and then park their cars in designated areas. Enforcement is spotty.⁴ This map [<http://www.iium.edu.my/print/910>] shows where one can park and the buses that go through the university.

As for living outside, as nearly all Western students have done with their families, it's a bit expensive. When I first arrived—with my family—I had reserved a hotel called “My Home Hotel” for about \$35/night. The place did not have a window. We stayed at one of their branches located around the area we ultimately wanted to live. The Batu Star Hotel is even cheaper, and across the street from our current residence, but I'm glad to have stayed at My Home Hotel, since the neighborhood, known as “Sri Gombak” had several more restaurants and shops. They also have many pharmacies. My area has more Indians and Chinese places, so halal food is not a guarantee everywhere.

Finding an apartment can be done through mudah.my, propertyguru or iproperty—each one has mobile apps—and then contacting realtors through there and WhatsApp when you find something interesting. Expect to spend at least \$400 a month for a good unfurnished apartment or \$500 for a decent furnished apartment, about 1500 rm in Gombak. Add at least 500 rm if you plan to stay anywhere else. Nearly everything for less than that—less than 1100 rm/month—is in a smelly neighborhood, or doesn't have a [reliable] elevator, and/or is a long walk from civilization, supermarkets, services and taxis. Trust me, I did not want to spend \$400 a month just for shelter, but alas. Doing the math, that's about \$6,000/year just for a roof in a nice neighborhood with good nearby amenities, like swimming pool, on-site convenient store, janitors and watchful security. Add another \$1800-2300/semester for university fees and tuition, and you're looking at nearly \$10,000 a year **excluding** your bodily sustenance. Alhamdulillah, food is cheap. Electricity is expensive (at least 350 rm per month), and so is gasoline. Internet is at most 249 rm/month via TM Unifi's fastest and largest router/modem plan which automatically (whether you like or not) comes with a cable box (network figures are set up through the TV you should have) and cordless phone. **If I knew how much it'd cost to live here, I wouldn't be here** (I'd instead be doing a MEDIU degree online). It's as simple as that. Although I have no regrets, yet.

As for navigation, you can use Google Maps, or Waze app. The second is also completely free, and you receive messages from other drivers about rain, traffic jams, cops, etc. But if you prefer to save phone battery or data and you own a Garmin GPS unit, you can download and install Malaysia maps for free from www.malsingmaps.com, which is what I did because I prefer the Garmin screen layout over any of the Android apps.

Make sure to get a “touch n go” card from a gas station once you buy a car to breeze through toll booths and parking garage fees at the megamalls. Otherwise, you take a token at the garages and pay cash at an “auto pay station” before you return to your car after shopping.

The Android app “Findit Malaysia” is also decent for discovering nearby places of interest.

Malaysia—country and people

⁴ Here's the application form:

<http://www.iium.edu.my/sites/default/files/users/178/files/Vehicle%20Sticker%20Application%20Form.pdf>

While possessing an indigenous population known as orang asli who continue to live very humble lifestyles in the mountains and jungles, the region now known as Malaysia received its first influences and culture from China and then India. Buddhism and Hinduism were the first religions to spread within the peninsula via the silk route. Much of Malay culture, even today, reflects the heavy influence of the two cultures and religions. However, around 1420, the King of Melaka seaport city—which reigned over most of the peninsula—accepted Islam at the hands of Arab traders. He then assisted the propagation of Islam among his people and the archipelago. He was the second ruler of Melaka to accept Islam. To this day, the Sultan of the country and each respective Sultan of the separate states, is the unifying symbol of Islam. If that post were abolished, a chunk of the Malay people would probably stop calling themselves Muslims. Indeed, the position of sultan, although with little political concern, is a position of tremendous respect in all of Southeast Asia. Typically, if the sultan enters into a debate, it is because it has blown out of proportion, and it is usually quelled upon his interruption. Every 5 years the position is rotated among the dynastic rulers of each of the states. The sultan is a regular person and when you see a small motorcade go by in KL, that could be him. I once saw him at Pavilion Mall, walking briskly but casually with about 10 suits.

Anyway, not long after Islam spread, Southeast Asia witnessed colonialism from the 15th century onward by the Portuguese (Malaysia from 1511), Spanish (Phillipines), Dutch (Malaysia from 1641, Indonesia), French (in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia), the United States (Phillipines from 1898 to 1946) and Great Britain (Malaysia since 1791 and Myanmar). Malaysia proclaimed its independence [known as “Merdeka”] on August 31st, 1957. British presence was finally removed and the Malaysian republic became a reality on “Malaysia Day” September 16th, 1963. Both days are national public holidays.

Malaysia is about 50% Malay/Muslim (light brown, Indonesian), and the rest are white skinned Chinese (Christian, Buddhist), dark brown Indian (Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Sikh/Singh) and indigenous (orang asli—very dark skinned, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim). Singapore, which is 75% Chinese, was expelled on August 9, 1965. The Islamic Brunei Darussalam sheikhdom, although geographically close, was not a part of Malaysia, and gained its independence from Great Britain in 1984.

Just like its national holidays, which are twice as many as most countries, owing to the diverse population which is catered to by the government, Malaysia has *a lot* of holidays. Hindu Diwali/Deepavali five-day holiday; Chinese New Year; the two Eids and the Prophet’s Birthday; birthdays of all the kings—there’s one for each district, but in Selangor, only that sultan’s birthday is celebrated along with the main sultan of the country. And don't forget Christmas and Easter.

Like nearly all Southeast Asian countries, Malaysia is in a strong pact with the rest, and they take pride in their historic neutrality since their independence.

Being a former British colony, a surprising amount of the locals around KL speak and understand a basic level of English. However, Jumu’ah khutbah will nearly always be in the language “Bahasa Malay” except at IIUM, which will have it in English and/or Arabic, and “Masjid al-Saudi”.

As for the cuisine, it is a mix between Chinese and Indian, with some instances more closely resemble a violent collision. For example, I love ice cream too much to put beans and corn on it—but that's what's done here. Also, a lot of the food is HOT, but unlike Desis, in Malaysia, you won't find it served with yogurt (raita) to cool it down. Also, dairy/beef products are expensive, but fish is cheap. I've seen squid at the local 7/11. Here's a menu from a popular international Malaysian chain:

<http://papparich.com.my/menu/>. Restaurant tipping is not expected, and many bills at popular places will include a 10% service charge.⁵

The people here typically do not nap during the day, so stores will be open at regular hours, usually from 10 am or so till 11 pm or so depending on the nature of the business—government facilities operating from 8 or 9 to 5 usually. Many restaurants will open at 11 am and might take a break between 3 to 4 before reopening with the dinner menu.

Some recommended restaurants: for Pakistani cuisine: <http://www.bbqtonight.com.my/> and <https://www.facebook.com/TastyChapathi> and with a more modest atmosphere <http://shaheenpalace.blogspot.com/> (try the “Taliban bread” it’s a naan loaded with meat and spices, lol) and <http://lahorerestaurantkl.com/> open 24 hours. But for all these places, it’s good to call ahead of time just to make sure they’re currently in business, reconfirm their hours and whether it will be ala cart or buffet.

The country’s popular form of martial arts is called “pencak silat”. Watch about it here, a National Geographic documentary, beautiful, awesome. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7WwRmqfCKUO> if you need a testosterone boost ;-)

Malaysia is fairly secular and un-Islamic on many levels, owing to its diverse demographic. Nonetheless, one of its prime ministers, Mahathir (1981-2003), who earned a doctorate in economics from America, was very pro-Islamic and he highlighted Islam’s role in the country’s history, and he also opened the Islamic University which received a lot of funding and direction from Saudi Arabia. It was during Mahathir’s time that Malaysia prospered economically and made such phenomenal growth.

Nearly all Malays have Muslim-sounding names. There are many Arabic words that have also entered the vocabulary. For example “medan” means neighborhood, and “awam” means public. Nearly all the Malay women wear hijab (known as “tudong”) and even have the hoods of their clitoris circumcised after birth, because that is obligatory according to the Shaafi’iyyah, the fiqh school which reigns supreme in Southeast Asia.⁶ Malay girls wear hijabs from a young age, like as soon as they’re born it almost seems. Tasawwuf is also a part of Malay Islam, with the Ash’ari ‘aqeedah, but of course, the laymen probably have little or no knowledge of this. They also recite al-fatihah for every occasion. They recite the *basmalah* aloud, leave a pause between Faatihah and the next soorah for you to recite it, and they make their final sitting of tashahhud with tawarruk, and do qunut for every fajr prayer.

But make no mistake. There’s a Malaysian version of Las Vegas known as Genting Highlands, not too far from Kuala Lumpur. Gambling is legal here for non-Muslims, so there are government signs posted in all such places that clearly say it is *haram* by the religion of Islam [حتى يقولوا إنما نحن فتننة فلا تكفروا تفسق]. Likewise “casual sex” has a dual application. The “age of consent” for non-Muslims in Malaysia is 16, but if Muslims are caught engaging in it, they will be arrested. Every so often, there is a news article of a hotel staffer alerting authorities of a Muslim tenant accepting suspicious guests of the opposite gender. If any of them get pregnant out of marriage, they *frequently* throw the newborn in a dumpster or baby box. Prostitution is illegal, but not enforced. There are known brothels in Chow Kit district of KL and many loose companies with websites as well as “independent freelance workers” that advertise in places like

⁵ See http://www.malaysia-trulyasia.com/tourism/tipping_in_malaysia.htm and <http://www.tripadvisor.com.my/Travel-g293951-s606/Malaysia.Tipping.And.Etiquette.html>

⁶ Read here from a Malay woman <http://www.theislamicmonthly.com/a-tiny-cut-female-circumcision-in-south-east-asia/>.

Craigslist. Transgenderism is also common. Most families may have some relative suffering from gender dysphoria. So if you see a “woman” with a little more muscle on her arms, a bit taller, an Adam’s apple with a **lot** of make-up, especially working at a salon, just assume she’s a man on hormones (“shemale” or TS).⁷ Also, there is no dress code in the public world, so be prepared to see short shorts and miniskirts—mainly from the Chinese and Indians—as well as Malay girls in tight pants, short sleeves and colorful hijabs. Chinese restaurants are labeled “non-halal” and many restaurants, establishments, offices, and car dashboards have idols. Liquor can also be found in the “non-halal section” of major supermarket chains. Sexual promiscuity for Malays is forbidden and punishable with lashings—but rarely if ever more than 6 whips (rotan). Malaysia even has its own version of the Committee for Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, although their activities seem limited to catching adulterers and drug-dealers.⁸ Also, sexual abuse of male children, from the fathers, is an issue in Malaysia.

But do you hear the adhaan? It depends on where you live. From my first apartment, on the 29th floor, my eyes see four different masaajid within a mile or two and I can hear the adhaan walhamdulillah. Many shopping centers, residential areas, and gas stations have musallas which are known locally by the name “**surau**”. So wherever you are you can ask “where is the surau?” Although once when I was in the middle of the city, Little India, I did not hear the adhaan when the sun set but I did see a hindu ceremony going on with bells, chanting and incense burning.

If Saudi Arabia was run by foreigners while the Saudis held the managerial thumb-twiddling positions, Malaysian men do the same thing while women run nearly everything. It can be a huge fitnah if you fight temptations of being a shameless flirt or consider yourself “looking” (married or not) because a lot of these girls act very naïve, and have a cute high-pitched voice like they just breathed in helium. And most of the students are women—and you’ll find no barriers in the classrooms, however the chairs are clearly aligned so women will often sit on one side and men on the other. Women ride motorcycles here and I’ve even seen female taxi drivers—although very rare. This imbalance has been present for centuries, as even ibn Batootah, famous Moroccan explorer of the Muslim world, noted the scandalous placement of roles in his journal.

Most Malays are a shy, reserved, tolerant and innocent-like people, until you get to know them deeply. One of the things I continuously heard from brothers returning from Malaysia was how friendly the people were. And they are. Malaysia actually clocked in at no. 10 on Forbes’ list of the Top Ten Friendliest Countries in the World in 2012—the only Muslim country.⁹ The people place a lot of value on friendliness, so it is not wise to barge in the place with the same attitude you’d need to get things done quickly in Saudia. Another expression of their friendly and self-conscious behavior is that they do not point with their fingers but with their thumbs, and when they return your change from a purchase, they make a slight bow of respect—I hate that.

As for the kuffaar, they are friendly as well. However, if you get to know them closely, their suspicions about Islam and Muslims may surface. Malay is synonym for Muslim, and any “Malay only” privileges usually extend to all Muslim citizens, even if Indian or Chinese.

⁷ See <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/islamic-law-restricted-to-familial-matters-court-of-appeal-says-in-transgen>.

⁸ See <http://www.thestar.com.my/News/Nation/2014/09/02/Lesbian-couple-nabbed-in-raid-Undergraduates-rendezvous-to-try-out-a-dildo-goes-awry/>.

⁹ See <http://www.forbes.com/sites/bethgreenfield/2012/10/24/the-worlds-friendliest-countries-3/>.

The most turbulent time in their history was 1969 when racial riots broke out, leading to the deaths of hundreds while thousands were injured. Ever since independence, the government, while sometimes promoting diversity and tolerance, has consistently pursued a policy of lending a helping hand to the Muslim Malay population, known as “bumiputras” aka *sons of the soil*. Historically, and to a greater extent, during the British colonization, the Indians did a lot of administration work while the Chinese operated the large businesses and the Malays occupied the unskilled labor and peasantry.

Living, Work & Da’wah

Yeah, in Malaysia, you drive on the left “wrong” side of the road. It’s easy to follow when there are other cars around, but if there aren’t any, then it’s easy to forget and make a turn into the wrong lane. Likewise, the car arrangements will be backwards—steering wheel on the right, turn signal on the right, wipers on the left. Although there are cars where the signal/wipers have a US-like arrangement. Gas and brake pedals are in the universal arrangement—thank God!

I use my US Illinois driver’s license¹⁰, and most expatriates use their native licenses. At a checkpoint, I was told I needed to get it converted to a Malaysian license, but they did not write a ticket for me—either because there’s no law against it or they simply let me go because I’m a Muslim IIUM student on student visa. All police are Muslims, I think. It’s a good habit to carry your passport around with you—just like you would your iqaamah in Saudia—but I rarely do. You will need it for checking into hotels, getting SIM cards, etc.

As for buying cars, most dealers will NOT allow you to test drive the vehicle outside the parking lot or neighborhood, because once a car is without personal owner, its “road tax” has expired, and they really fear getting stopped and fined by the police for driving on the road without paying homage to it! Watch some YouTube videos about what to check for in a used car before purchasing. The process is otherwise simple if you purchase from a dealer.

Giving birth in Malaysia? Alhamdulillah I experienced this first hand. I went to the modest Gombak Medical Centre clinic, dedicated for this purpose. Monthly checkups with ultrasound never went beyond 150 rm. The actual birth--natural—was about 1500 rm. Cheeeeeap. The facilities and staff were all nice Muslim women, and accommodating although most of them had poor English which made communication sometimes difficult. They provided us with all we needed to obtain the baby’s birth certificate from the JPN that is right next to the Amaniyah masjid by my house.

As for obtaining US citizenship for the baby and a passport, see <http://malaysia.usembassy.gov/crba.html>. Get official translations of any necessary documents from <http://www.itbm.com.my/contact>, but allow a few days for them to complete the translation, at 90 rm per page of course.

¹⁰ In the “Rules of the Road” manual published by the Secretary of State’s Office in the state of Illinois, it clearly states it is **not** an international driver’s license.

Getting married in Malaysia? Think long and hard. The laws here are just a little less rigid than Saudia. You can marry native young virgin women but you cannot obtain citizenship and the children will be second class citizens unless they "choose" one over the other by actually providing a letter from the US embassy saying that your children no longer carry a US passport. Of course the US embassy is willing to tell a little white lie for you or reprint a new passport upon request (seriously). Malaysia is a great country--for Malays. You'll find a lot of different prices and options for citizens and Malays that foreigners simply are not accorded. So be ready. Of course being a practicing white Muslim from America provides its own unofficial privileges but that won't change tuition fees for children, etc.

There are English teaching and tutoring opportunities, but nothing serious unless of course you have a CELTA certificate and bachelor's from an English university. I do not believe the English teachers here rake in the dough that they did in Saudia.

The English da'wah in Malaysia owes its roots to a guy named Sajid Hussein, who now runs marriage-related seminars. Mercy Mission is headquartered just outside Kuala Lumpur, as well as al-Kauthar institute—the brainchild of Taufique Chawdry. Al-Maghrib Institute also recently began having duroos in Malaysia. There are lots of opportunities in English da'wah. Hussain Yee and his organization, Al-Khaadeem, is also headquartered here. From the perspective of a servant of Allah and caller to Him, like nearly every place on earth, Malaysia is a great place to do da'wah.

One thing interesting about the Muslim-kaafir relationship in Malaysia is that there is definitely a sense of “walaah and baraa”. Part of this is fueled by government policies, favoring “Malays” which includes anyone who embraced Islam, even if they are Chinese or Indian. Indeed, Malay is synonymous for Muslim.

Even if one does not intend to do grassroots type da'wah here, there are tremendous opportunities to network, as Kuala Lumpur attracts all the world's most famous personalities. In the second half of 2014 alone, Hamzah Yusuf, Noman Ali Khan, Suhaib Webb, Mufti Menck, Tariq Ramadhan, and a slew of others, Al-Maghrib and even non-affiliated, came through. Even Arab scholars, like the famous Sa'eed al-Kamaali (Morocco) and Ali al-Qarahdaaghi (UAE) visited. It is common for them to visit IIUM and even give khutbah at the mosque—although most sermons are delivered by staff and faculty, while the adhaan (or as they call it “the bilal”) and the imam is a rotation of students.

Another interesting tip, if you wear an American size “large” or above, you might want to pack all the shirts you'll need. Size large for Americans is like size XXL here and hard to find except from the more expensive shops at the big malls like Pavilion's Columbia or Parkson store. And if a woman has a cup size of D or larger, she should pack several braziers, simply because D size is hard to find. Even going to a “bra shop” that sells **nothing except bras**, they only carry B and C cup bras. So it's like that.

And this might sound a little odd, but you might want to pack along a bedsheet. Not a fitted sheet with the elastic edges but the one you put over yourself. In Malaysia, I think people typically just have a fitted sheet (under them, wrapped over the mattress) and a comforter, nothing else. It took us a long time,

even searching at bedding stores before we ever found a bed sheet for 60 rm. Parkson's at KLCC of course had one single bed sheet, 2000 count thread (I didn't know this sorta thing existed, maybe they keep it in stock for Arab princes or something), on *sale* for \$500 (read all that correctly, no type-o's here, it was about 1700 rm, sale price). Hotels have them and some budget hotels will even sell them for cheap but the point is, bring your own if that's what you're accustomed to sleeping with.

If I've left anything out or said anything grossly incorrect, please message me and I'll try to fix it in a timely manner. Please make du'a for me for having taken the time to cover this much for the concerned audience.