

CITIES ABROAD

A Lawyer's Survival Guide to Kuala Lumpur

By Alima Joned

Kuala Lumpur (or KL, as natives and some visitors affectionately call it) is a city made internationally known by the buildings that were formerly the world's tallest: the Petronas Twin Towers. However, KL is much more than the towers; it is the economic, political, and cultural epicenter of Malaysia, one of the world's most vibrant economies. KL can be a pleasant city for business travelers despite the occasional, but frustrating, traffic congestion. In fact, instead of being exhausting, a trip to this city can leave you energized and enriched.

KL's population is composed of Malay-Muslim, Chinese, and Indian ethnic groups, with many expatriates in their midst. The city's racial mix is a reflection of the rest of the country and is evident in the languages, cuisine, diverse cultural offerings, and religious practices found there and across Malaysia.

Language

English is widely spoken and is the language used for commerce and business in Malaysia. Many visitors are charmed by the way Malaysians speak English, which has traces of colonial English. For example, in the colonial era, the English colonizers went up the "hill stations" of old Malaya to escape the heat of the lowlands for their vacations. Today, a person who is out of town is described as one who is "out station."

Malaysians also pepper their spoken English with "lah," a slightly musical syllable they place at the end of their sentences every so often for

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emphasis. Although visitors may initially find this "lah" business quite baffling, many, after a while, either fall into the habit or try to impress Malaysian friends by using it.

Business Attire and Etiquette

Malaysians do not adhere to a strict dress code. Local counsel, especially litigators, typically wear dark suits. However, professionals and government officials may show up at meetings in "smart casual" attire. Women professionals and officials may dress in the modern version of Malaysian traditional dress or in suits.

Your meetings may well be predominantly attended by women. Unusual in business in other Muslim countries, women have assumed their rightful positions in Malaysia's corridors of power. They may wear head scarves, but do not assume that they are not equipped to discuss Homer, Kant, or American Realism.

Addressing your host can be tricky because most prominent individuals have honorific titles in front of their names. Those with doctorate degrees often like to display their accomplishments. All these will be included on business cards. Thus, it is quite common to find your host's business card written as "Tan Sri Dato' Dr. Mohd Noor Amin Mohd Shafie." If a name begins with "Tan Sri," it is quite safe to refer to the person as "Tan Sri," which is an honorific title conferred upon the person. Do not call the person "Mr. Tan." You could call him "Mr. Amin." Why "Mr. Amin" instead of "Mr. Shafie" is a subject for another article—Malay-Muslims are commonly and properly addressed by what their "first" name would be in many Western cultures.

If you expect Kuala Lumpur to be



Petronas Twin Towers, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

a sleepy city of yesteryear, you will be surprised at what you encounter there. On the contrary, like other cities in Asia, it moves at an extremely fast pace. People work at a frenetic pace, well into the wee hours. Energy and enthusiasm are in the air.

The thought of the long flight to Kuala Lumpur may be daunting. However, the charming culture and delightful people can make a trip worth your billable hours. ♦

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