

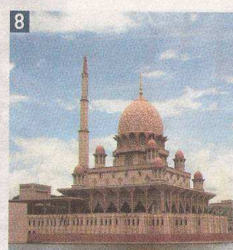
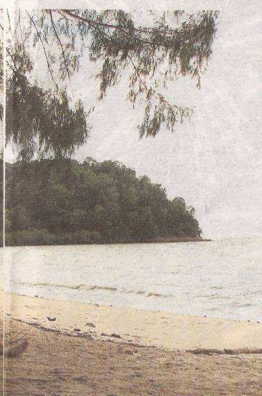
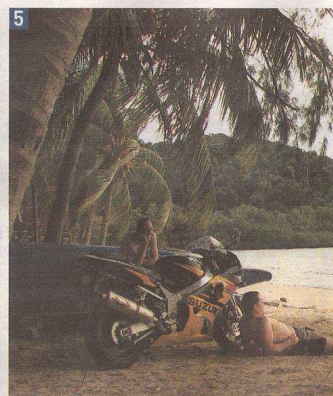
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TOP FIVE BEST THINGS ABOUT KUALA LUMPUR

Our tour kicked off with two days in the capital. Here are the highlights:



One of the breathtakingly massive Petronas Towers

MOSQUITOES
THE affectionate name given by locals to the buzzing mopeds favoured by youths. Standard riding gear includes flip-flops and a vest.

KLCC
OTHERWISE known as the Petronas Towers. The tallest twin towers in the world, they're the closest you'll come to seeing a scene from Blade Runner in real life. Truly unreal at night-time.

NAZA BIKE DEALERSHIP
GOLDWINGS in any colour you like, police-spec Multistradas, a clutch of Hypermotards, minimotoes, super bikes, an unregistered original 916 and the only

place you can buy a Foggy FPI for the road. Heaven.

CHINATOWN
prices; the place to find 'genuine fake' presents for loved ones with a penchant for Louis Vuitton and 'Pamu' trainers. All the hustle, bustle and wheeler-dealing you'd expect of an Asian market.

5 MILO ICE
PRETTY much the national drink. Iced tea with lemon, and milk. It sounds like a nasty combination but it's probably the most refreshing drink you'll ever taste. And if you like chili, you'll be in heaven - everything comes with it. Avoid durian fruit though - some things are just not meant to be eaten.

THE GUIDES

FEZAL and Lawrence were two men with a shared dream. They jacked in their day jobs to set up Malaysian Motorcycle Getaways, and now live off their fantasies by showing visitors all that Malaysia has to offer. This includes fantastic hospitality, amazing food, brilliant roads and many

backstreet pubs where barmails will feign ignorance of the rules of the road just to make Westerners look dim in front of the locals! They're both fluent in English, and the perfect hosts. Contact them at 0603-7710-5751 or visit www.ridemalaysia.com.my



Fezal and Lawrence run Malaysian Motorcycle Getaways

Right at home on the other side of the world

MCN's Marc Abbott explores Malaysia on a GSX-R600, taking in Sepang, Kuala Lumpur and a few poison darts along the way

SHOOTING a poisoned blow-dart into the side of a tribesman's house is fairly near the top of the list of Malaysian faux pas. There's no antidote for the deadly poison, concocted from sap local to the Cameron Highlands, used by Ali (pictured above left) for hunting small animals. Thankfully, most of his family have had the sense to leave his hut before the foolish white man in a football shirt takes aim.

Our attempt at the traditional hunting technique comes on the back of a gruelling ride the previous day from Kuala Lumpur up the E1 highway towards Ipoh - stopping for refreshment in the form of cendol, a perfumed chilled rice dish - and a punishing blast up the second-gear twists of the Cameron region on our 2002 Suzuki GSX-R600, supplied by the unfathomably

friendly guys at Malaysian Motorcycle Getaways. Thankfully invigorated by a decent night's sleep just a stone's throw from the Highlands' world-renowned tea plantations, and a giant cup of masala chai, we have an otherwise calamity-free descent, riding above the clouds, stopping to admire the jaw-dropping vistas that unfold on practically every corner and to make the acquaintance of Ali and his people. It is at his orang asli village, while the tribe admires our bikes, that we 'savour' the 'acquired taste' of durian - a fruit so pungent that it's banned from many hotels in the country. I smile, take a bite and force it down - it never does well to offend ones hosts, but I can categorically state that not a drop of the forbidden fruit will pass my lips again.

Our hosts deserve an introduction. Fezal and

Lawrence, the driving force behind Malaysian Motorcycle Getaways, are the only people in the country to run a tourist board-approved bike touring company. They live and breathe motorcycles - Fezal leads the group on a CBR600F, while Lawrence assumes the role of 'sweeper' on his brand new BMW F800ST. Their colleague Tariq ferries non-riders and luggage for the majority of our four-day tour, in a blissfully air-conditioned people carrier. With temperatures in the low 30s, and intense humidity, a touch of artificial cooling is much appreciated from time to time.

'...a fruit so pungent it's banned from many hotels'

We're also accompanied by Andy - who takes great pleasure in decking out the footboards of the Kawasaki VN900 supplied by Fezal and Co - and Zack, who have travelled from the US to join us in this ultimate motorcycling holiday. Myself

and Angus share riding duties on our GSX-R, fighting over the keys at our hotel early enough to find secure parking for the bikes, take a shower, and prepare for the most frightening experience of my life.

Our hotel is nestled in the foothills, surrounded by a golf course and koi ponds, and blessed with yet more of the welcome highland breeze than so far. The aim is to set off back into KL, then head off for the south-west coast, and the town of Melaka.

Before this can be achieved, though, I have to negotiate the rush-hour traffic of Kuala Lumpur, in boiling hot rain, keeping an eye on reckless car drivers ahead of me while avoiding the attentions of C90-riders, vest and saddle-clad local lunatics, piloting their 'mosquitoes' like their wife's in labour. Big bikes are not the norm in Malaysia, so a bright yellow GSX-R on the capital's roads might as well have a 'race me' sticker in place of its numberplate. Quite why the

Malaysian storms are something else. As I'm blinded by a flash of lightning, the cable car comes to an ominous halt. The ever-reassuring Fezal suggests they're probably switching to the emergency generator. Swinging about a precipice in a small tin car, screaming like a girl was, I'll admit, not my finest moment of the holiday.

Counting myself lucky to have survived the previous night, we're up early for day three, our longest riding stint so far. The aim is to set off back into KL, then head off for the south-west coast, and the town of Melaka.

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nation hasn't bred a world 125GP champ yet is beyond me. 'Fearless' doesn't quite cover the attitude of the Malaysian moped boys.

Our first stop is the ten-year-old city of Putra Jaya, created as the new seat of the country's government and home to the most impressive mosque this relatively-untravelled Brit has ever seen. Another rice-based lunch for this picky veggie gives me the much-needed energy and concentration to avoid the school buses, coaches and taxis that crowd the city's central square.

Taking the highway to Sepang before switching to the hugely-enjoyable twisting trunk roads I almost hit a monitor lizard in the fast lane. He sits in the road, provoking concerning traffic, with a casual look that says 'just try it'. Swerving to the central lane, I take a glance in my mirror - he's still sunbathing motionless on the melting tarmac.

An hour's ride is all it takes to reach the idyllic 'blue lagoon', 40 miles shy of our final destination. Our group needs no prompting to shed the riding gear and leap into

the Strait of Melaka to cool down. I dip my toe in the water, Brit-at-Bourne-mouth-style, and find it the temperature of a bath. Floating around in the sea for 20 minutes gives me time to reflect on the tour so far. Time stands still and all is calm in the world... except we've lost Angus. The more keen-eyed members of our crew spot the unmistakable lily-white glare of a man with Gaelic blood on the horizon. He's swum almost out of sight, and takes 20 minutes to walk back to the

shore (the water is no more than a metre deep for a good 200 metres from the coast). He emerges from the waves as I'm sitting on the GSX-R beneath a coconut tree on the beach, waking me from my Ursula Andress fantasy in the harshest way possible.

With us both fully-clothed once more, and with a lingering mental image of Angus rolling on the beach with Sean Connery, I jump into the car while Angus takes the GSX-R down the coastal route towards Fezal's home town of Melaka.

Arriving in Melaka, the place where, as Fezal proudly states, 'Malaysia all started', I have my 'New Orleans' moment.

The balmy coastal city is brimming with colour, night is drawing in, and in many Chinese inhabitants are lighting fires to guide the spirits of their deceased relatives to their homes. We hop in the car and drive down until, unsurprisingly, tracks to a huge yet humble, secluded al fresco eatery, bustling with local diners. Sitting at the periphery, digging into chili-ringed deep-fried toots with coconut rice wrapped

in banana leaves, the only soundtrack to our meal is the chirping of insects. Experiences like this are what my touring dreams used to be made of. Armed with the local knowledge to find this place, fantastic company and a sense of achievement in completing the 650 miles to make it this far, I'm feeling a little choked. Tomorrow is the final day of our ride, and melancholy is beginning to set in. Angus brings me back to reality as he finishes his watermelon juice with a loud 'schlurp' from his straw.

The next morning, back out on the highway we head for the highlight of our final day - Sepang's GP circuit, where, after a wander around the motor museum, I'm privileged to put in a few laps warm-up in the track. Riding in jacket and jeans round a GP circuit is one of the strangest things I've ever done on a bike, but it does help to rein in the Rossi aspirations. On TV the track seems flat, but in reality it's tight uphill hairpins appear to have been modelled on the S-bends of the Cameron Highlands. After posing for pictures on the podium I

hand the keys to Angus for the final leg of our journey back up to KL. With my helmet held above my head, my other fist punching the air, looking out across pitlane, it seems a perfect conclusion to my Malaysian ride. Peeling off my jacket and hopping into the car, there's a huge sigh of relief and a lingering feeling of accomplishment.

The furthest afield I'd ridden a bike before this trip was Sweden. In the space of a few days I've made new friends, experienced things I could only have dreamed about before stepping on to a 747 at Heathrow five days ago, and I've accumulated enough memories to last a lifetime.

This year, Malaysia celebrates its 50th anniversary of independence, and this trip has epitomised the spirit of this national landmark. The country now shares a place in my heart with Venice, the only other holiday destination I've known I'll return to time after time.

Five days ago I would never have thought the other side of the world could feel so much like home.