People

Malaysia has a population of over 31 million people. 75% of them live in cities and urban areas. Malaysia's biggest cities are Kuala Lumpur and Klang. About 85% of the population live on Peninsular Malaysia, while 15% live in Sabah and Sarawak on Malaysian Borneo.

Malaysia is an ethnically-diverse country, consisting of Malays, Chinese, Indians and numerous indigenous peoples. Each group has its own religion, traditions and language, adding to the diversity of Malaysia. The Malays, who make up 50% of the population, are Muslim and control most of Malaysia's government.

Malaysia's diversity dates back to the first century when the Malay Archipelago was part of a trade network spanning the Indian Ocean and China, bringing merchants and traders to the area.

Malay

In Malaysia, the term ‘Malay’ refers to a person who practises Islam and Malay traditions, speaks the Malay language and whose ancestors are Malays. Most Malays are descendants of Buddhists and Hindus, who converted to Islam in the 14th century. Malays, along with other aboriginal minorities, are considered to be bumiputras, which means ‘indigenous people’. Many Malays live in rural areas and are farmers or work on rubber plantations, but there is also a prominent Malay middle class. Malays practise Sunni Islam and follow Islamic law.

Chinese

Malaysian Chinese are the second largest ethnic group and have a long history in the area through maritime trade. Most are descendants of immigrants who arrived in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to work in tin mines. They form 25% of the overall population, but around 40% of the urban population. The Chinese are prominent in commerce and trade, usually business people and shopkeepers, and they are overall the wealthiest ethnic group in Malaysia.
Indian
Most Indians are descended from Tamil-speaking labourers, brought to Malaysia to work on rubber plantations in the 19th century during British colonial times. There are also small communities of Sikhs, Punjabis, Telugus and Sri Lankans. The Sikh community traces its roots in Malaysia to the recruitment of Sikhs for police units in the late nineteenth century.

Portugese
There is a small community of descendants of Portuguese in Malacca. They are also known as Eurasian. They are Catholic and speak Kristang, which is a creole language and an old form of Portuguese. Kristang Portuguese/Eurasians can be found in small numbers elsewhere in Malaysia, as well as Singapore.

Orang Asli
Orang Asli is a collective term that means original people, or aboriginal people. In Peninsular Malaysia (West Malaysia) there are eighteen Orang Asli ethnic sub-groups, categorised into three main groups and numbering about 150,000 in total. There are 32,000 Temiar people, who live in the forests and practise animism, spiritual healing and dream interpretation.

In East Malaysia, the Dayaks are the indigenous people. They live in Malaysian Borneo's two regions of Sabah and Sarawak, as well as Indonesian Borneo and Brunei. Although they are collectively called Dayak, there are actually 200 separate ethnic groups.