

# The MALAYSIAN Melting Pot



## *A celebration of diversity and harmony*

*By Danny Lim*



CRIES OF “MERDEKA!” – Independence – reverberated throughout every city, town and village in Malaysia on 31 August as people celebrated the 50th anniversary of their country becoming an independent nation. The pomp and pageantry of parades and dance spectacles were matched by the fun and excitement of motorcycle stunts, light shows, food festivals and jet fighter displays, putting the whole country in a party mood for the climax of Visit Malaysia Year 2007.

This multi-ethnic, religiously-tolerant nation has become one of Southeast Asia’s most vibrant economies, the fruit of decades of industrial growth and political stability. Mirroring this development, the face Malaysia presents to the world has undergone a rapid revolution, from picture postcard scenes of rustic eastern exotica to the gleaming testaments of modernity of the Petronas Twin Towers.

Today, Malaysia is the 18th largest exporter globally, has one of the highest per capita median incomes in Southeast Asia and one of the most open and forward-looking economies in the world. Oil production exceeds the country’s domestic needs, and the electronics sector represents more than half of exports; tourism is the second largest foreign exchange earner after manufacturing.

But what makes Malaysia and its people tick? How do we best define this eclectic ethnic mix of cultural diversity? One symbol that springs to mind is the classic Malaysian delicacy called Rojak, the Malay term for mixture.

This unique combination of fruits and vegetables comes in many varieties even within Malaysia, with ingredients ranging from cucumbers and pineapples to bean curd and cuttlefish, crushed and combined with a zesty curry sauce or prawn paste to create a blend of multiple textures and tastes within a single dish. For a nation defined by diversity, Rojak aptly describes in verbal, visual and culinary terms the unlikely harmony of so many disparate elements.

“Malaysia is unique in Asia in my experience because it is a truly diversified yet integrated nation,” says Neil Maffey, General Manager of Watsons Malaysia. “The Malay, Chinese and Indian communities on peninsular Malaysia and the various ethnic groups in East Malaysia live together in a harmonious way and relish one another’s diversity.”

The roots of this diversity can be traced to the rise of Malacca, the 15th century port and eastern hub of the spice trade. Traders from Europe, Arabia, India, Thailand, Java and China not only exchanged goods but left their cultural influences to linger, mingle and bloom. Hinduism and Buddhism were first introduced by Indians, who came to this land more than two thousand years ago, followed by the introduction of Islam by Arab traders.

In the colonial age, the Portuguese, then the Dutch and eventually the British found the sea trade routes around Malacca and the neighbouring ports of Penang



The independence celebrations put the whole country in the mood to party. Top right: The national delicacy Rojak, which means mixture in Malay.

PHOTOS: LEFT, GETTY IMAGES; TOP RIGHT, STOCKFOOD/OTHK

and Singapore irresistible. These three key ports subsequently became known as the Straits Settlements and by the end of the 19th century, the states of Perak, Negeri Sembilan, Selangor and Pahang formed the Federated Malay States.

An influx of labourers from China and India came to work in the tin mines, rubber estates and urban centres of the peninsular that was then known as Malaya. They joined an already eclectic ethnic mixture which had already integrated the Thais from the north, Bugis from the south, and the products of mixed marriages from earlier settlements of Portuguese, Dutch, Arab and Chinese.

Malaya gained independence from Britain in 1957 and the idea of Malaysia, that brought the states of Sarawak and Sabah in Borneo into a federal union, was realised in 1963, further adding to the "Rojak".

What has emerged is a success story against the odds. From a frail new national entity subsisting on an agricultural economy and the most basic modes of production, Malaysia has grown into a fast developing and progressive, pluralistic country thriving in peace and harmony.

It was during the 1990s that Hutchison Whampoa Limited (HWL) saw that Malaysia's increasingly confident economic climate was ripe for investment. HWL's presence today can be seen in the form of port facilities at Port Klang under Westports Malaysia and Watsons retail outlets.

Keith Lau, Chief Financial Officer of Westports Malaysia, highlights the strong legal and financial frameworks along with the educated work force that has a high proficiency in English. "Malaysia has positioned itself as the Islamic financial centre and supportive government policies are contributing factors for doing business here," he says.

This commitment to develop a modern, democratic and multicultural society is also what makes Malaysia such a distinctive tourist destination. Old churches, mosques and temples of various religions dot the scenery. Wooden longhouses in rural Sarawak offer contrasting home-stay experiences to the narrow Dutch colonial era houses in urban Malacca and Penang.

For Visit Malaysia Year 2007, the country has set a target of attracting 20 million tourists by offering some 240 events and attractions, including the Malaysian International Aerospace Adventure, the International Fireworks Display, the Malaysian International Tattoo and the International Buskers Festival.

This is a country that really does have something for everyone – pristine, sandy beaches, cool mountain resorts, romantic island getaways, scuba diving, shopping and golf – and all come with traditional warm Malaysian hospitality and first-class service.

From the island paradise of Langkawi off the northwest coast, to the bustling capital of Kuala Lumpur, to the jungles and diving hotspots of Sabah and Sarawak, it is easy to see why Malaysia is one of the region's key tourist destinations.

Just ask Filipino Ed Cabagnet, who came to Malaysia for the first time this year as part of the Asian Public Intellectual cultural programme that encourages co-operation among Asian nations.

"As a stranger in a new country, I don't feel out of place because I see a lot of different cultures in one setting," he says. "I just love the idea that I'm sitting in one place and there are Malays, Chinese, Indians, half-Malays, half-Caucasians, foreign tourists, all manner of ethnicities sitting with me."

"Success is not because of a single race or cultural perspective. It's the ability of many perspectives to meld and try to work together. The 'colours' in Malaysia are more vivid." 

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## RIDING THE TIGER

**H**WL's INVESTMENT in Malaysia began during the economic boom that saw the country acclaimed as the fifth "Asian Tiger" after Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan.

Watsons Malaysia opened its first store in the country in 1994. Today it has 211 personal care product stores in all 13 states, with a staff of 1,800. The stores even remained open on Independence Day to serve customers who wanted to go shopping on the nation's special birthday.

Hutchison Port Holdings has been a partner of Westports



since 2000, operating Port Klang, the historical successor to Malacca as the nation's premier port. Westports container throughput has grown from 1.4 million twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs) in 2001 to 3.4 million TEUs in 2006. To mark the golden jubilee celebrations on 31 August, 36 Merdeka veterans, all parents or grandparents of

Westports employees, took part in a special gathering at the port to share their memories from that remarkable day in history 50 years ago.



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