

# LEISURE



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# Mouthwatering Malaysia

When you're in Jalan Alor, Kuala Lumpur, bite into the island's culinary history

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A couple of years ago on a family holiday to Kuala Lumpur, we decided to stray from the popular Bukit Bintang shopping area. On an impulse, we took a turn, following the faint bouquet of spices that seemed to emanate from a nearby street. As the aromas grew stronger, we accidentally stumbled on the main street food area popularly called Jalan Alor. Here stood an entire neighbourhood dotted with stalls, selling everything from fish head curry to sambal and satay, giving birth to our everlasting affair

with Malay cuisine.

In Langkawi, we attend an engaging cooking class by Chef Shukri Shafie of 'Cook with Shuk' fame whose knowledge and insight into Malaysian food is non-pareil. "Bring your fat pants to Malaysia: he jokes. "Because Malays can happily tuck into up to six meals a day."

Normally, the day starts with breakfast, then a mid-morning snack, followed by lunch. A light bowl of noodles fills any gaps between 4 pm and 5 pm, and dinner is the main meal of the day. To cater to this non-stop nosh, the hawker culture works around the clock to feed the hungry with platefuls of delicacies like satay, laksa, redang and roti jala.

## A SLICE OF HISTORY

Until the 15th century, the cornerstone of Malay flavour was a paste made with mainly roots — lemon grass, onion or small red shallots, garlic, fresh turmeric and galangal. Spices and chilli were added later when the spice trade began.

Shuk shows me a vegetarian Rendang made with tempeh (soya bean cake), which is quite delicious. Curries, mainly made with coconut milk, have their roots in Indian cuisine. Malay culture is a smorgasbord

The Char Kuey Teow is a Nonya Chinese dish



Spices of grilled meat served with peanut sauce

of modern Indian, Thai, Arab and Chinese influences and has been strongly influenced by people of neighbouring lands, including the Siamese, Javanese, Sumatran and Indians. The influence of Hinduism was significant, and the Malay were primarily Hindus before converting to Islam in the 15th century. For 2,000 years, the traffic of traders between the Malayan Archipelago and India resulted in frequent inter-marriages, especially from Tamil Nadu and Gujarat.

This huge cross-pollination of cultures vastly affected the Malaysian way of cooking, resulting in a fiery cuisine second to none.

A wave of Indian and Chinese immigration occurred again 200 years ago when the country needed labour. A Malaysian meal is influenced by all these communities and usually consists of a curry, fried, grilled or steamed fish in a banana leaf, sambal, ulam and a dessert made with coconut, jaggery and rice powder.

## TRAVEL GOING OFF TRACK

FAREEDA KANGA



Street food during Ramadan at a popular hawker centre

## BEFORE YOU PACK

**GETTING THERE:** There are direct flights from Mumbai to Kuala Lumpur and seamless connectivity to Langkawi, Penang etc

**STAY AT:** From its convenient central location (next to the Petronas Towers) to the acclaimed spa and renowned restaurants, Mandarin Oriental, Kuala Lumpur aims to delight. Doubles from Rs 15,000.



Malaysia's famous Laksa noodle soup hails from Langkawi

## DIVERSE DINING

For a bird's eye view of Malaysian food it's best to go from one ethnic plate to another. For a travelling foodie, Ramadan is the best time to experience Indian Muslim style food — a culinary assimilation of Indian and Malay cooking styles at Mamak stalls.

'Malay-Muslim' dishes are basically a range of curries; the most promi-

nent one being the Malaysian chicken curry.

Every street stall has a secret recipe for curry, and I'm reminded of back home as fish curry tastes different in every Goan home, as does Dhansak for the Parsis.

While the curries have a distinct Indian element, they are prepared using a varied spice mix called rempah — a complex paste of spices and aromatics roasted and cooked together forming the base even as coconut milk adds body.

Another coconut infused dish is the noodle soup called Laksa, which hails from Langkawi. This is a Nonya dish. (Nonyas are a community of Malay and Chinese descent where Malay men mostly took Chinese wives.) Their cuisine is popularly known as Straits Chinese and is represented by popular dishes such as Char Kuey Teow (stir fried noodles with bean sprouts, prawns, eggs (duck or chicken), chives and thin slices of preserved Chinese sausages and the ubiquitous Hainanese chicken rice of poached chicken and rice in a bland but fragrant broth. Of course, trust the Malays to re-jig the recipe, so go easy on the dipping sauce laced with chillies, garlic and ginger, which gives it a spicy kick that will make your tongue twist and taste buds, salivate. "Sudah makan?" (Have you eaten already?)



BY SUHEL SETHI



## TELLING IT STRAIGHT

From the man who doesn't suffer fools

You can write to Suhel Sethi at mirrorfeedback@timesgroup.com

# WHAT'S REALLY MAKE IN INDIA...

While there is one India that is being re-branded by no less a person than a Narendra Modi, there are several make-in-India traits that we need to rid ourselves of if we are to remain relevant and, what's more important, sane. The roadblocks we create for ourselves are of our own making. And every one is guilty of that. From the rulers to the ruled. From the media to the academics. It is a cauldron of despair that we churn every day without any reason.

To begin with, we are a nation that obsesses about patriotism, whereas what we should really worry about is nationalism. Over the last few years, we have indulged in divisiveness of the worst kind. When asked, we identify ourselves on linguistic or regional patterns than on a national plane. Our knowledge of our own country is pathetic. We are almost always living selfishly in a bubble of

our own. And whenever things get too hot under the collar, the blame game begins.

So, here are some of the things we need to purge ourselves of.

Narendra Modi is India's prime minister and not the resident plumber. So, if your tap runs dry or some idiot makes stupid comments, stop blaming Modi and instead blame those dolts who elected those charlatans. We have to see Modi beyond his right-wing past. He has after all, won an election and is trying to clear up a humongous mess. We need to recognise that the media is allowed to take pot shots at whomever they wish. So, stop trolling Modi-bashers. They are doing their job and we need to do ours. We cannot be spewing venom in every utterance.

Let's not make everything into a cause of extreme national worry. Yes, the beef ban is silly but then there are many things wrong in India, which are part of our inheritance

including prohibition in Gujarat. We have to learn to deal with it. Last week, the influencers of this country went nuts over Net Neutrality. Do you think anyone cares? There are other serious issues so let's take cognisance of that.

I keep hearing some corporate stalwarts saying things are still not moving. That the pace of business is not good enough. Look gentlemen, if you don't like the pace of business then go elsewhere but stop infecting the mood of the nation with selfish cynicism.

There are many irritants among those who govern us. There is little we can do. In my heart, I believe they will change but then if they don't the people will vote them out. So let's not waste too much time over their desperate attempts to remain relevant during prime time news. The country needs to move on and it will despite these hurdles.

We need to show the world that there is

more to India than rape and the return of Rahul Gandhi. And yes, while on the subject of Rahul Gandhi, remember we are a democracy and it is critical for us to have an Opposition, so let's not throw the baby with the bathwater.

We also need to celebrate the good around us. And that good is not only on film sets or cricket pitches. There are many Indians who are doing a world of good to society and we need these stories to come out. Instead of vulgarity, make the good go viral and you will see a mood change.

Finally, a little bit about our Indianness. We are not going to be less Indian or culturally bruised if our museums host fashion shows, or for that matter, if we have a vigorous debate on Netaji.

We cannot be a country that is forever consumed by partisanship without any kinship. We need to whine less and smile more. And perhaps the time has come to go back to watching other good stuff rather than just news on television. Anger begets anger and we have had enough of it. It is our time to be happy.