

Penang Diary

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1. Penang is a beautiful island west of main Malaysia peninsula. It is a tropical paradise with tropical forest and flora and fauna in the northern part of the Penang.
2. Our entry into Malaysia was through Kuala Lumpur airport – one of the great Asian airports. The Penang International airport was also good, clean but small. There is an expansion taking place and it should be ready very soon.
3. Penang is also a tourist place and is presented as a shopper's paradise by the Malaysian Government. It is also the place where rich people of Malaysia have their multi-million ringgit (RM) condominiums on or near the beaches (1 RM \cong Rs. 15).

4. I was invited as a [plenary speaker](#) in the International Conference on Environment (ICENV 2010) organized by University Sains Malaysia (USM). This conference, organized once in 2 years, was held in a 5 star Park Royal Hotel on the Batu Ferringhi beach. [My talk](#) was well received.



5. The theme of the conference was Green technologies for bottom billions. Thus it was strange to have the conference in 5 star hotel with fancy food and facilities. Nowadays almost all international conferences on the theme of helping the poor are held in 5 star hotels!



6. The conference was interesting though ordinary. Nevertheless it gave me an opportunity to meet interesting participants and to visit Malaysia, see the beauty of Penang and sample the excellent Malaysian cuisine.

7. Malaysian economy is strong and it shows in the quality of life in Penang. All the places are very clean, including bathrooms and the street hawker food is cheap and excellent. The roads are excellent and repaired immediately even if slight potholes are discovered. We saw such road repairs at many places on the winding beach drive on Ferringhi beach.
8. Malaysians love to eat and it shows in their increasing waist line. Rising obesity in Malaysia is a major issue and part of the reason is increasing use of cars. Nevertheless obesity levels are nothing comparable to that in US and even India. We hardly saw people walking except in George Town – the heritage site in Penang or in shopping malls! Penang is dotted with huge shopping malls.
9. Since it is a tropical lush island hence we wanted to see its natural beauty and thus spent our spare time visiting the national parks, butterfly garden etc. The butterfly garden is small but stocked with extensive collection of Malaysian butterflies including the endangered Rajah Brookers' Birdwing (*Trogonopetra brookiana*) species. It also houses the local insects including giant millipedes and 15-20 cms black scorpions.



10. One can get a beautiful view of Penang harbor from the highest part called Penang Hill. The hill, at the height of 830 meters, can be reached in ½ hours by Jeep ride over very steep narrow roads. We went to the hill on a rainy day and hence could get occasionally the glimpse of the Penang Harbor. The cloud mist with cool breeze on the top of the hill had a beauty of its own and reminded us of Mahabaleshwar or any other Indian hill station during rainy days.



11. Public transport system in Penang is excellent with clean air conditioned buses plying all over the island. We therefore used the bus and walked a lot. We hardly saw Malaysians' walking and everybody seemed to be going in cars. Nevertheless we

never saw a single car with dents so the traffic sense of Malaysians must be good. This is in contrast to Indian scene where hardly one sees a car without a dent.

12. Penang comes to life at night. From 7 p.m. onwards night hawkers market is set up on footpaths all over Penang. They sell everything at much cheaper prices than the main shops and bargaining is the order of the day. Since almost everybody speaks passable English, communication was never a problem. Except for batik clothing hardly anything is made in Malaysia including their fruits! Thus apples come from New Zealand, oranges from South Africa, etc. Local mangoes which were plenty were quite bland and ordinary.



13. Together with the hawkers markets' are the hawkers' food malls which are found all over Penang. Malaysians have made hawkers food into an art form. For 7-8 RM per person one can have a full and excellent meal from infinite cuisine choices which includes Indian, Chinese, Thai, Korean,

Malaysian etc.

14. The cost of living in Malaysia is quite reasonable. In 1500-2000 ringits (RM) per month one can live a simple and decent life.
15. Women are employed in large numbers in almost all industries. We saw extensive women force at airports, petrol stations and in other tourist industry. For a muslim country this is a very commendable thing.
16. No liquor was served during the conference lunches and dinners including the banquet. This was a very welcome sign for tea-totallers like us. Besides at the end of the banquet everybody was sober !
17. Overall people were very helpful and friendly and we never felt that we were cheated in any transaction, whether getting watch repaired, taxi driver, food malls etc.

Nevertheless taxi fare has to be bargained. Though the meters are functional but it is a good idea to fix the rate to the destination beforehand.

18. Everywhere we went we never saw any garbage on roads or next to food hawkers stalls. The general cleanliness of Penang was of very high order. Even in George Town which has old shops, narrow roads and very high population density there was no garbage anywhere to be seen. This is so much in contrast to India where every place is dirty.
19. Just like U.S. and Europe nobody honks while driving and hence the noise pollution is quite low. The only jarring note occurred 5 times a day when over loudspeakers all over Penang the Namaz prayers (Azaan) was broadcast. Nevertheless the quality of azaan by various Imams was high and hence was not unpleasant to the ears.

