

No matter how many times we checked the numbers, it just wouldn't add up. Our USA tour was already expensive -- airfares ascending well beyond cruising altitude after 2010 -- and taking into consideration the cost of relocation from Beijing to our new jobs in Borneo, the travel gods of the western hemisphere did not favorably smile upon us.



Kenny, seen here taking in a nice healthy hookah, presumably before he goes to run an Ironman.

It was about this time an email rolled in from my buddy Kenny, an Old Malaysia Hand in Kuala Lumpur. He told me of his plans to ride bikes from Singapore to Thailand. He had done some [research](#) and by the looks of things, the ride would be not only scenic and unique but also physically undemanding. Moreover, it would be dead cheap compared to an American safari. Since we were moving to Malaysia anyway, it made sense to do some early reconnaissance.

So it was decided. In the intervening months, things started to move pretty fast. We finished our work in Beijing, and while Fiona went back to New Zealand to tie up some loose ends, I traveled out to China's [Xinjiang Province](#) to visit the wild west.



"MAN-CA-TIONNNNNN!!!"



Other last minute details: enjoy a Fatburger in Beijing one final time.

Despite all odds, Fiona and I reconvened in Singapore as planned. Fiona had booked us into a [swank economy-sized room in Little India](#), complete with cable TV and wi-fi. Our days began and ended with some variety of curry. I came to particularly enjoy the high-proof IPA's and porters local to Singapore.



Yes, that says 8.8%.

One morning while taking our breakfast curry, we met a couple from Portland, Oregon of all places. Briana and Marco lived on a small town on the east coast, and invited us to stop and stay awhile when we passed through. Their town marked the halfway point for our journey, and we reckoned it would be nice to practice our English at some point during the trip, so we readily agreed. This is what writers call "[foreshadowing](#)."

We struggled to leave Singapore, ever lured by its modernity and food. It is the Manhattan of Southeast Asia, but gobsmackingly clean -- *too clean*, [some would say](#). In one block, you might overhear Mandarin, Cantonese, Hindi, Marathi, Bangladeshi, Urdu, Malay, and of course English. Buses and trains run on time. The architecture is modern but not pretentious, and pays respect to its East Asian and Colonial European roots. The museums are plentiful and engaging. My only real complaint is common to all corners of Southeast Asia: information acquisition tends to be dodgy at best.

Take the tourism office for example. We dropped in to inquire about the [best greenway](#) to take out of the city. The woman working the desk looked at us blankly.



Not the greenway we were looking for

“What is this man asking me?” she must have thought. “Did he say Universal Studios? Did he say he wanted to visit the [Long Bar](#) for a [Singapore Sling](#)? Surely... *surely* he didn’t just say he wants to ride a bicycle in the city!”

“Are you interested in the museums, sir?” she asked. “There is currently an exhibit on --”

“No, no, we’ve seen the museums, thank you. As I said, we want to ride our bikes to Malaysia and --”

“Ah, but you cannot do this. Singapore is an island.”

“Thank you. We drew this conclusion some time ago. That’s why we intend to take a ferry --”

“Ah, but you cannot do this. There are no ferries.”

“There are no [ferries](#) in or out of Singapore?”

“No.”

“At all?”

“There are no [ferries](#), *la*.”

“So, here on my map of Singapore, where it says ‘[ferry terminal](#),’ that’s not a ferry?”

“Yes. This is. But there are no ferries for taking the bicycles.”

At this point, I realized this woman did not earn her job by thinking outside of the box.



No ferries at all. None.

“Okay then. Let’s change our plans a bit. Let’s say we want to ride our bikes to this place on the map, the part where it says ferry terminal. Is there a greenway that gets us there?”

“No no! [You cannot ride bikes in the city!](#)”

I took a deep breath, and left.

As luck would have it (luck, and a night of poring over Google Maps) we discovered numerous coastal parks, all interconnected by [greenways](#). They offer camping, views, and not surprisingly, more food. When we did finally get around to commencing the ride, we seriously considered camping in one of those parks for a night, as it was next to the ferry terminal. After all, riding out of the city had been taxing as it was our first day of real exercise in over a month. However, the man at the ferry yard told us there was ample camping on the Malay side as well.



*Here's one of the ferries that doesn't exist.
Too bad they wouldn't let us take our bikes.*

By this point we had done just 25 kilometers, still had plenty of energy, and we figured it made more sense to head over than pedaling eight kilometers back to the park, only to start all over, still in Singapore, the next morning. So we decided to go ahead on the ferry.

Except.

We had already converted nearly all of our Singapore dollars to Malaysian ringgits. This meant that I got to add 16 km to my total for the day, riding back to the park after all for an ATM.

Eventually, we got to the Malaysia port and found out that there is actually *not* camping, at least not for another 40 kilometers. Yep. Forty. Never trust a [ferryman](#).

We were eager to tent camp on this trip. The [monkeys](#), [monitor lizards](#), and [snakes](#) gave us second thoughts, and the cloudburst we met at ten kilometers convinced us. No camping, not in this jungle. But if we weren't camping, then where to sleep? There seemed no end to the troublesome quagmires and [palm oil plantations](#). It couldn't get worse.

So we thought.

The next 25 kilometers were a solid monsoon downpour but now with lightning to match. There is no fear like that which freezes your soul as a lightning bolt strikes the palms trees just a stone's throw away. After about the twentieth time this happened, we found a shanty shelter and tried to get dry.



Dangerous wildlife



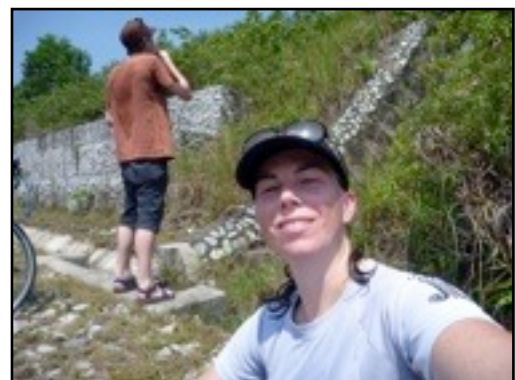
"Getting dry"

In the end, we managed to find hot food and cozy seaside accommodations in a town called Desaru... cozy by Malaysian standards anyway. The beach was plagued with jellyfish, but there was an Olympic-sized pool, complete with diving board and a view of the sea. It also featured a swim-up bar, but because this place was run by a Muslim family, it was unmanned and unstocked. I'm thinking that this town used to be a hotbed of western tourism, but as we would learn in the weeks ahead, conservative Islamic values had chased all the infidels away from Malaysia's east coast some decades ago. We were no longer in Singapore! On the bright side, an absence of western tourism meant an absence of white people, who can be annoying and dangerous in large numbers.

In any case, we had fortunately packed a portable minibar on the back of my bicycle.

The weather failed to improve by the next day, and we hurt all over, so we gave it another day before we setting out again. The rum was powerful medicine.

Our ride to Sibiling was a damnably hot 35 kilometers. When I say "hot," bear in mind that this is Malaysia, so unless you live in the tropics, you may be unfamiliar. "Malaysia hot" is like a warm, wet wool blanket. There is no escape, not in the shade, not in the air-con. There is a slight relief on a bicycle or motorbike, as this creates the illusion of wind, which does not seem to naturally occur in this region. When exerting oneself outdoors, drinking water, even if it is immediately excreted out of the sweat glands, is necessary. I felt like an aquarium pump, sucking water down, gushing water out.



The water cycle in action

Then we had those hills. My knees had blown out in the first leg from Singapore to Desaru, so the rolling hills ensured that I stayed physically decimated and the both of us generally exhausted. One of my high school football coaches used to say that "pain is fear leaving the body." I believe he abused steroids and needed professional help.

Our bodies called it quits just as we were between two towns. Fortunately we found a campground, and we were well ready for a solid night's sleep. I have spent my birthday camping for the last several years, so the timing was perfect as I turned 33 that day. The camp was set next to a river and the river led to a memorably scenic mangrove. Lovely.



Bike camp



Scenic mangrove

Sharing the camp was a large youth group from area [madrasas](#). They eyed us with curiosity but seemed more concerned with the stern instructions of their youth leaders. What we didn't know was this night was their bonfire jamboree. As soon as we settled in for an early night, the revelries began and did not stop for hours. In an odd role reversal from my usual birthday camp-out, I played the role of the grumpy old man, shaking my fist at a group of hooligans who were up well past midnight, listening to their rock and roll music, acting like crazy people. Turning 33 sucks.

One sleepless night later we miraculously managed to mount our bikes and start what would be the most grueling 50 kilometers yet. Rolling hills became giant rolling hills, mountains became visible on the horizon, and [every ten minutes](#) went something like this:

Pant, pant, pant, pant, pant...

WHEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!

Pant, pant, pant, pant, pant...

WHEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!

All this way, there were no towns. Not even so much as a lean-to [warung](#) selling sugary colored water in plastic bags with straws sticking out the top. Our water supply was dwindling. Fortunately, just then we saw the sign for Tanjing Leman and that gave us the final push for the final 10 km.



Please, just no more hills!

We checked into a rustic 'resort' that, much like the one in Desaru, had seen better days, like in the 1980s. The beach was the best we'd seen so far, and virtually vacant. Our bungalow was a few easy paces to the shore and to the cafe. Surely, this place would provide the peaceful night's sleep we had sought in the wake of the camping debacle.

Right about sundown, the PA system fired up. One of the local families, coming from all corners of the Johore State, was holding a reunion, and one of their cousins ran his own karaoke business.

For the first couple hours we tried to ignore it. Finally, I'd had enough and went out there to give them a piece of my mind. I marched right up to the tallest, smuggest punk-ass Malaysian there and asked...

"Do you have anything by the Beatles?"

Comic antics ensued. The family found Fiona and me to be the wildest addition to their reunion. [Satay](#) and sweet tea were forced upon us by the plateful. They tried to teach us local dances and demanded encores of the three English songs they had available. It was a hard day's night by so many interpretations. Not like we were going to sleep anyway. May as well have fun with it. Sleep when you're dead and all that.



Pictured far right, red shirt: not dead yet

Next stop: Mersing.

Allah be praised. Mersing offered everything we needed. Sure it took 60 km to get there from Tanjing Leman, and at least a couple hours found us in the daily downpour, but by gum we made it! We found a hardware store that provided tools for some minimal but long overdue bike repairs. We hit a cell phone store [to get my iPhone back on the grid](#). A friendly local directed us to what he called "the best cheap hotel in town."

Did I say Mersing had everything we needed? No, that's not quite right. It failed to provide the one thing we needed the most: an honest to God good night's sleep.

The best cheap hotel in Mersing, the Riverview Inn, offers no view of any river and no peace for the heavy of head. Apparently, the management was holding a special for drunken Chinese orgies. The inn was like the Beijing [subway](#), every room overfilled with Malay Chinese speaking at top volume like they were on their cell phones. And the walls? Paper thin. Yet another sleepless night.



The best scenery we could find in Mersing.



Ahhh. Much better views on the beach.

Mersing is an easy 10 km to the beach at Papan Air, so we decided to take an extra day before continuing north. Arriving at this sleepy -- nay, dead -- seaside town, I was sure to ask the receptionist at the Papan Air Resort, "Are you expecting any large parties, family reunions, or youth groups?" She replied that she had no reservations for the night and the entire resort was vacant. We were so in!

We checked in at 11am. For the next 24 hours, we didn't leave the room save for eating and the occasional dip. We slept like the comatose and caught up on

novels. ESPN was running highlights of the X-Games and Ironman 2010, which helped rejuvenate our spirits. By morning, we were ready to tackle the next leg.

Onward to Kuala Rompin.

The roads at this point had become far less hilly and punishing. My kneecaps thanked me. We rode through a forest reserve and spotted all kinds of exotic wildlife including flocks of toucans and hornbills.



Exotic wildlife -- not pictured: live birds



Trying to look really happy about another downpour.

Kuala Rompin was the next logical stop since it's an even 75 km from our last point of departure. It is also marked on our map as a Point of Interest. For the life of me I can't figure out why.



The only building we saw for 75 km

There is a tiny strip of beach, but no other landmarks jumped out at us. Maybe it's because KR is the first place you'll find a liquor store after leaving the conservative Muslim state of Johore -- similar to the thrill of [running the Carolina border](#) to pick up a case of [Southpaw](#) on a Sunday.

Despite the potential for reckless abandon, this town was fairly quiet after dark. I was most pleased to enjoy two consecutive nights of restful slumber.



Kuala Rompin: Perhaps a little too quiet?

The ride to Pekan began with a stop at a curry house, the first we had seen since Singapore. The stack of [*roti chanai*](#) (beats the pants off of pancakes!) was exactly what we would need for the 90 kilometers ahead of us.

Pekan is the Detroit of Malaysia, putting America's motor city to shame in many respects. They have manufacturing contracts from automakers all over the world. There is an engineering school in the middle of the industrial park which sends graduates straight to the factories. We learned all this from our hosts. This is a crazy story...

Ninety kilometers was tough. What was really tough was learning that every lodging was fully booked for some kind of conference that week. We were on our way out of the city, ready to take on another 50 kilometers (now in the dark) when we passed a small [*home stay*](#). I checked it out. The man sheepishly grinned and shrugged his shoulders, apologizing that he had no vacancies.

It must have been the utterly defeated look on my face that got to him. When he learned that my girlfriend was outside, and that we had come by bicycle, he hesitantly informed me that perhaps he could see about a room. Within a half hour, we were sitting with our host and a few fellow guests, gobbling down Malaysian food. He informed us that he was a youth group leader for one of the local *madrasas*, and they were having a jamboree that night. Remembering our nightmare of a camping trip with the youth of Malaysia days before, Fiona and I exchanged a knowing smile, which he must have mistaken for enthusiasm. He insisted that we join him and meet the young Muslims of Pekan. With his outpouring of generosity, we were not in a position to decline, even if we *had* experienced one of these jamborees already.

The jamboree went well into the night, and we were dead on our feet by the time we packed back into his car. Excitedly, he told us that the fun had only begun. He took us on a royal tour of Pekan: the grand mosque, the sultan's palace, the Pahang State capital building, and the aforementioned industrial park. This adventure had all the makings of a whimsical travel article in [Lonely Planet](#), but it was well past midnight, and we had been ready to crash for hours by this point. Our host suggested we pick up some late night curry. It killed me to be so offensive, but I had to insist that we really, really were not in the mood for food. Ugly American.

Kuantan, just 50 kilometers up the road, was a dose of relative normalcy after the week we had. We checked into a [lavish yet easily affordable hotel room](#) for the next two nights. The Indian Malays on staff were tremendously helpful in securing our bicycles and over-the-top accommodating to our requests, directing us first to the best food in town, and the nearest liquor store where we could replenish our traveling wet bar. One Indian food gorge session later, we were snuggling in for a boozy marathon of cable TV with full bellies.



In this part of Malaysia, utensils are not typically used. The guy just kept bringing out plates. We gave it our best shot. Left: before. Right: after.

Not to say Kuantan is a vanilla-flavored, quirkless town! At one point, Fiona had sent me on a mission to get more juice for our vodka. Between our hotel and the central mosque was a night market. I decided to take a stroll through and try to find an [evil monkey paw](#) or perhaps a [puzzle box that opens a gate to Hell](#). You know, something practical, something for Mother's Day. Instead I found something even more shocking: [hipsters](#)!

If you have spent a few years between Asia and America, you will notice that Asian fashion actually predates [hipster fashion](#) in the US by a couple years. I think Asia might actually be the test market for American Apparel. Tight jeans, undersized t-shirts, Ray Bans with colored frames, sweatbands... Asian teens have been rocking that gear for years longer than those kids States-side.

But these were not just fashionable young Malaysians. These were full blown [hipsters](#), as was evidenced by the plethora of [fixed gear bicycles](#).

In Portland, Austin, San Francisco and other painfully hip towns, one sees plenty of these fixies. But this was the first time I had seen a fixie army. There were easily more than a hundred of them riding up and down the length of the night market, occasionally stopping

to converge with friends and share cigarettes, blast music out of their faux iPhones, and look disapprovingly at each other. They were all very proud of their fixies, and eager to tell their new foreign friend about them.

“Got mine straight exported from London, *la*.”

“He did not. His mother, she bought him this thing.”

“*My chain is pink!*”

Awesome.

I could have spent the whole night with these hipsters -- comparing Malaysian emo rock to the garbage we have in the US, debating the merits of cowboy shirts, doing track stands -- but I had a sweet babe waiting for me in a hotel room with an undoubtedly diminishing bottle of hooch.



Bike maintenance at the bike shop. Note fixed gear in upper left.

The next day's leg was a brief one. Cherating is a mere 50 kilometers up the coast (our stamina was much improved by this time) and the road is plenty scenic all the way. I liked Cherating because it is a caricature of the Southeast Asian tourist destination; like the strata of a archeological dig, one can observe the layers of its rise and fall.

Up until the 1970's, Cherating was just another beach town in a 700 km stretch of beach towns. Then surfers discovered its tasty waves. Then *Lonely Planet* wrote about it. Then it became a mecca of [Eurotrash kids](#) who wanted a more “authentic experience” than “I drank ‘til I puked and got this t-shirt in Thailand.” Then it became the rehab clinic for Full Moon Partying [shoestring ravers](#) (yes, the ones wearing the t-shirts). Then venture capitalists, always the death knell of innocence, opened a string of resorts, including the region's first Club Med. From that point forward, Cherating was pronounced “[played out](#)” by uppity backpackers and largely abandoned by the hordes that had built it up, leaving the locals with a heaping pile of “What the hell just happened?!” and wondering who was going to help them clean all the bottles off the beach.

Flash forward to August 2011.

In more than 400 kilometers, we had seen not one single white face. It was refreshing. We had eaten like locals the whole way on a diet consisting primarily of rice, [naan](#) bread, and various curries. We had sweated in the tropical sun day in and day out. I had kept in regular practice with my limited Malaysian, and felt it was improving every day. In short, at the risk of sounding [chi-chi neocolonial](#), we were coming to feel like real Malaysians.

Then came Cherating. We knew we had arrived when Fiona exclaimed, “Oh my God! White people!” Sure enough, there they were at the roadside bus shelter, anxiously flipping through their *Rough Guide to Malaysia*, expecting that Malaysian transit actually runs on any kind of discernible schedule. We eyed them, awestruck, as we rode by, much in the same way as the locals had eyed us for the last 400 kilometers. They nervously muttered something in German and stared back much like Marlowe must have stared at Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*.

As I said before, the ride was scenic, but when Club Med rose over the horizon, I realized we were no longer on the Malaysian east coast with which we had become familiar. One luxury resort after another followed, each one with manicured lawns and empty parking lots. This place was looking [expensive](#).

Fortunately, all the guilt gave way to the town’s main stretch, just off the motorway. The “main stretch” in question is no more than [two kilometers](#) long, and makes up the whole of the hamlet of Cherating. Small shops and bungalows dotted the drag, a little worse for wear and largely unoccupied. Cherating had indeed lived out its peak heyday, but what remained was the same charm that undoubtedly captured the first backpackers so many decades ago.



Footy love. For a few bucks a night, one can understand the appeal of Cherating.

We checked into a place on the far end of the beach and asked where a young couple such as us might grab an evening tipple.

“That’s easy, *la*. Don’t Tell Mama’s,” replied the innkeeper.

[Don’t Tell Mama’s](#) is not the only bar in Cherating, but once you visit, you don’t care about the other ones. Inaccessible from the road, drinkers must walk down the beach to grab a table in this open air ramshackle bar. They serve burgers the size of your head and dangerously potent cocktails toxic enough to get an elephant stampy. We had operated out of our saddlebag wet bar for most of this trip, so having someone mix drinks for us was a real treat. My ambitions of quasi-Malaysian-hood faded about halfway through my

citrusy-sweet Long Beach. All I can tell from my camera roll is that the rest of the night involved Dutch girls and a drunken weasel. I'm told Fiona walked me home that night.

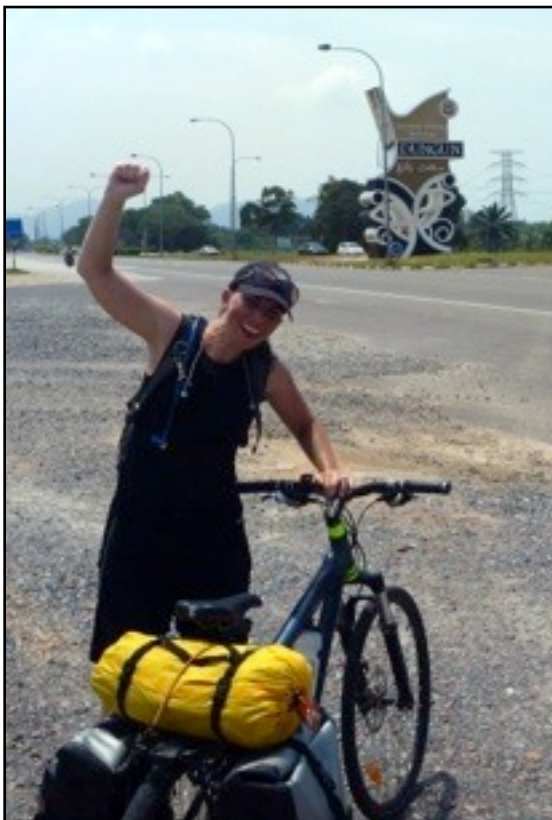


Let us never speak of this night again.



Stupid white people.

Remember our friends from Singapore, Briana and Marco? Their town was next.



Look out Dungun, here we come!

We had been looking forward to this stop on our trek, so the 85 km of ocean roads whizzed by us in no time at all. We rolled into their expansive estate, with all of its cats, goats, and monitor lizards. For the next few days we were blessed with barbecue, beer, and banter.

We learned that Briana worked for a public education consultancy group that sends western educators into Malaysian schools with the goal of teaching Malaysian educators how to better do their job. And who doesn't love having someone from outside the community telling them how to do their job? Especially when your job holds you unaccountable to even a minimal standard of competency. Especially when you can leave the students alone in the classroom and go have coffee. Especially when you can simply not show up for work, no phone call, no nothing, and expect no consequences for your dereliction of duty. Especially when you've been doing your job in this manner for 20, 30 years and like things just the way they are, thank you

very much. Especially when you are a conservative Malaysian Muslim man and your assigned consultant is an empowered white woman.

As you can imagine, her job is difficult.

Marco just came along for the ride. He is a devoted house husband these days, but back in the US he worked for an ambulance company, and before that his life had been an even crazier one, involving [General Pinochet](#) and decades of virtual refugee status. One afternoon, he and I discussed our respective lives back in Portland, we began playing the "Who d'ya know?" game and discovered that we both know this one lovely crazy gal. Had this conversation happened in Seattle or Minneapolis or some other town that is not Portland, it would have been an impressive coincidence. But here we were on the complete opposite side of the world, virtually soul mates through this one person whom we had both known for years and years. Yet Marco and I had never met. That's heavy. We spent the next several minutes yelling, "No waaaay! No freaking [waaaay!!](#)" thus rousing Fiona from her catnap. We became especially good friends after that.

There was a wine tasting happening in Kuala Terengganu, about 80 km north. Briana and Marco highly recommended we join them. A local friend had secured us rooms in KT's finest hotel, and all we had to do was get there. Thinking back on this day, I am still awestruck at how those 80 km breezed past, considering that such a ride would have killed us the previous week. We nearly beat our friends there, who were traveling by car.

The wine tasting was really more of a guzzle-fest in the end. We mingled with pretty much the entire expat community of the eastern peninsula -- all thirty of them. Many of them worked for the same company as Briana, and as is often the case, difficult working conditions ensure instant camaraderie. Plenty of goodly souls, intrigued at our audacious bicycle trek ("Doesn't it get *hot* on your bike?!"), were eager to host us in their respective towns as we continued north that week. Our uncertain journey north had suddenly gotten a lot more certain, comfortable, and friendly.



The scenery was pretty cool too

Bitch and Moan (not their real names, but perhaps should be) hosted us in Permaisuri, 60 km northwest through pleasantly shady mangroves. They resided in a -- for lack of better

word -- mansion. Yes, this is Malaysia, so the mansion in question had the typical problems with mosquitoes and feral cats, but when our bikes came over the hill, this place dominated the horizon. Simply huge for two people.



Bitch and Moan were hospitable. They took us to the local night food market. Because [Ramadan](#) was being celebrated at this time, vendors prepared all kinds of special high holiday dishes, [beef rendang](#) being one of my favorites. But Bitch and Moan were also the kind of people who could not seem to get happy. They complained about the vendors, they complained about the house, they complained about Malaysia in general. We snuck out early in the morning for fear that their whiteness would rub off on us.

Derek was the helpful soul who offered to assist us in Kuala Besut, an easy 45 km up the coast. This town features in the travel guides only because it is the port of

Fortunately, we blended back into Malaysian society before long.

departure for the Perhentian Islands. Derek said he liked it because he could rent a beachside bungalow for pennies and pick up hot tourist chicks at the dock.

Up to this point, we had passed up every opportunity to get off the mainland and enjoy some hedonistic, not at all conservative Muslim, Jimmy Buffet-style island time. We wanted to keep our experience as authentic as possible, and those tiny islands around Southeast Asia are about as culturally authentic as the Old Spaghetti Factory is authentically Italian. However, Derek secured a price with the [ferry operator](#) we could not refuse. The next two (three? four?) days were dedicated to absolutely... nothing. Sand, scuba, and fresh drinks in carved-out coconut husks. Derek joined us for part of the trip, partly because I think he appreciated the value of a [wing man](#).



The exact opposite of physical exertion

By the time we got back to the peninsula, I felt fully converted back to white tourist mode. Malaysia felt hot, icky, and foreign. I now wanted all my drinks served in coconuts, and *right now*. Our bikes were falling to pieces. And we still had plenty more road to cover before Thailand. This is the chapter of every epic overseas holiday that couples dread the most, the part that usually follows the hedonism. The melancholy.

We had become Bitch and Moan.

By the time we had slogged the 55 km to Kota Bharu, we had abandoned all hope of reaching Thailand. Not that we physically couldn't do it, but mentally we were in ruins. Any of the beauty we had experienced on our best riding days had been trampled by Bitch and Moan, saturated with the saccharine sweetness of island extravagance, and now turned a rotten brown under the finger-wagging culture of the Bharu State.

To understand the Bharu State, you must first know its political history. While Malaysia was trying to unite and get hip to globalization, the ministers of Bharu argued that they should maintain a conservative theocracy where fun would be outlawed. The rest of Malaysia said, "Yeah okay have fun with your little Islamo-fascist state," and decreed that unpatriotic a-holes like that should not receive any more government funding lest they get some unhealthy ideas about armed revolt.



As a result, Bharu high architecture.

Today, the Bharu State, represented by an inspiring all-black flag (because color might incite prurient thought or some such thing), is a potential model of what the US Bible Belt could look like if the Tea Party wins. With no government subsidies, their infrastructure is rubble. Dilapidated buildings, rancid sewers, and roads so worn and pockmarked so as to be indistinguishable from those in rock quarries. Weather-worn citizens cower behind crumbling brick walls, shawled women beg for alms. It was a depressing contrast to the comparatively wealthy palm oil states we had passed through to get here. Rent [Book of Eli](#). That should give you a better idea.

During our wine night the week before, we heard that someone from the expat circle had been beaten by a gang of thugs as he left the bar one evening. He called the [police](#). They shrugged their shoulders. "Shouldn't have been drunk," they said.

We wanted to get out of this place as soon as possible.

On the occasions when we had to leave our hotel, we spent as much time as possible down in the Chinese district. Take note, Chinatown is the safest place for non-fundamentalists in any fundamentalist state (unless you are dealing with fundamentalist

[Communists](#)). Our plan was to leave by train. Unfortunately, the best laid schemes, especially those laid in Malaysia, soon go awry.

I had contacted the [national train company](#) at least three times during our trip to ensure we would have no problems bringing our bicycles with us. Every agent assured me, "Yah. Can." However, when we presented our bikes to the porter at the Bharu station he asserted, "Cannot."

What followed was hours of deliberation with the train company, the porter, and finally the station manager. Despite my most eloquent ranting, the train people were steadfast. "Cannot."

Now it was official. We hate Malaysia.

In the end, we loaded our bikes onto a bus, a normally free service that our driver was only too happy to collect a fee for anyway. And why not? We were just stupid white people. The overnight drive all the

way back down the peninsula was sleepless and quiet, save for the DVD that played a looped sequence of only the first 30 minutes of several Hollywood [blockbusters](#).

When we arrived at the bus station in Kuala Lumpur, we had to ride across the city to the other bus station. There, we were informed that there are no buses that cross into Singapore, at least none that can carry bicycles. Thus we overpaid for a private car. Friendly driver though. As we passed through customs, the [dystopian congestion of Kuala Lumpur](#) giving way to [Singapore's squeaky clean metered and monitored motor traffic](#), our driver had a few words that really capped off the whole experience for us.



This is me. Pissed.



Singapore is the syphilis of SE Asia: sterile and insane.

"Me, I am from India. I speak very good English because I study very hard. I was an engineer in India. But I come to Singapore so I may send my son to the very best schools. The schools in Singapore, they want to teach Malay in the schools. I say no. Malaysia, she has great beauty. Rain forests, mountains. Singapore has none of these things. But do *not* teach my son Malay. He will make Malay friends and he will become lazy. Look at Singapore. The language here is English. The language of money. Look at Malaysia. Everyone is lazy and poor."

His diatribe did not make up for the fact that his car company overcharged us on the crossing, but we felt a little better knowing he commiserated with our gripes about the peninsula. Complaining about Malaysia is not just for white tourists anymore.

Right then, he pulled up to the hotel we had checked out of a few weeks earlier. It had seemed like months and years since we had left the Dickson. We unloaded our bikes for the last time before we would have them boxed up for the flight to Borneo. I thanked the man and we entered the lobby to check back in to civilization.



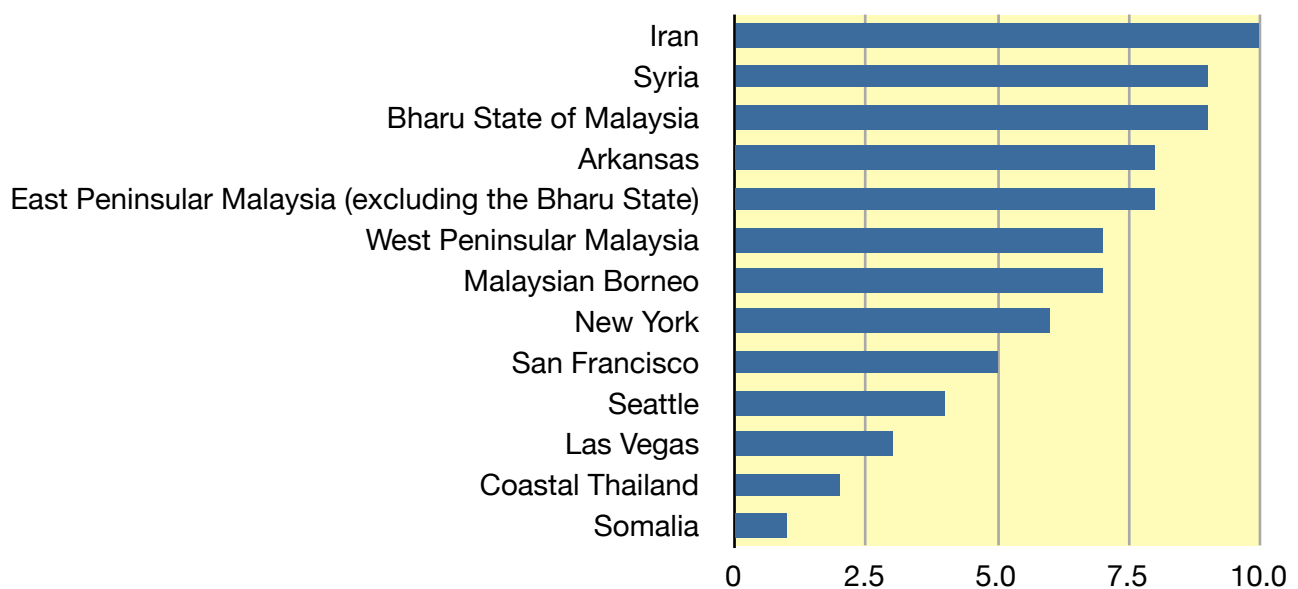
In this case, a civilization that strives to resemble the computer generated models found in architecture firms.

Epilogue

The Malay Peninsula ride was full of highs and lows. We found it hard to believe that the ride had finally ended, but even harder to believe that we had chosen to take our new teaching contract across the South China Sea in Malaysian Borneo. The bike trip may be over, but our life in Malaysia had just begun!

Though the people in our host city of Kota Kinabalu had less conservative attitudes than those on the eastern peninsula, they were nonetheless thoroughly Malaysian. To help everyone understand what this comparison looks like, I have created a chart.

Comparative Conservative Values, as They Impact the Lives of Citizens



Where:

10 = God is the State, the State is God, but guess who runs the State?

5 = Tolerable for most, but mildly annoying to hardline moralists

1 = Freewheeling liberalism, borderline anarchy

Margin of error +/- 3 points based on personal bias and watching too much television.

Note that "conservative values" is not intended to imply a religious context, but rather a system of morals often based upon "good old days" that probably never existed but nonetheless is thrust upon a population irrespective of their willingness or unwillingness to conform to such mores.

When I say “thoroughly Malaysian” I do not mean to offend. But I know I will. I found most Malaysians we met to be kind, happy people. I found that most of those same Malaysians will gladly tell a person yes just so as not to suffer the awkward discomfort of saying no. They obey authority without question, but deep down inside, figure that they have won the game, because they are not going to work any harder than they feel like working that day. Their economy is fast growing, yes, but that is mostly due to [Chinese investors taking advantage](#) of cheap labor and rich resources. That money is not going back into the hands of Malaysians. It is a self-perpetuating cycle of poverty, greed, and waste.

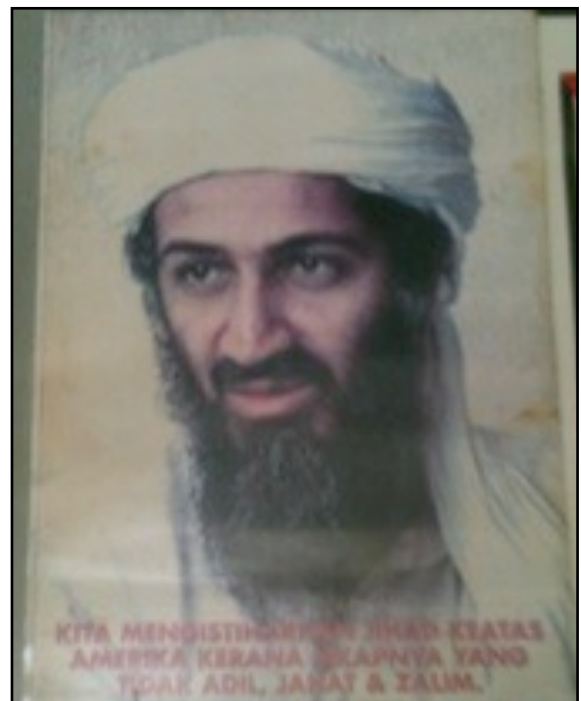
Malaysia, like Singapore, was a British colony all the way through the late 1950's. Some blame Malaysia's maladies on post-colonial trauma; because Malaysia spent so many generations answering to the Crown, it forgot how to govern itself. If this is the case, one can only wonder how many generations must pass before a people pulls itself together?

In saying what has been said so far, some would accuse me of generalizing, stereotyping, race-baiting, and so on. They would be right in part, I cannot deny that. My attitudes are unabashedly neocolonial about things I dislike, stupid things especially. I fear that such things might one day become acceptable in other countries, such as the one I hail from. Maybe you drew a few parallels of your own as you read through the last 22 pages.

Generalizing is an important first step to understanding the gestalt. As a fellow traveler and longtime friend of mine once said, “Experience rarely breeds idealism.”

That said, Malaysia's post-colonial hangover, or whatever you want to call it, is balanced out by gorgeous, untouched beaches, outgoing locals, and unforgettable adventures. If I were writing for *Lonely Planet*, I would leave it at that. Fortunately, I do not write for that company or any other travel guide that [paints rosy pictures](#) of everything. Just like at home, there is [magnificent beauty](#) and [deplorable ugliness](#), compassionate souls and real jerk-offs. My aim is to point the whole picture. One must walk in the darkness to witness the light.

As for the Islam thing, I have no strong opinion on the matter, except to say that I care little about one's religion, so long as it doesn't hurt anyone. Some in the West see the Muslim world as a breeding ground for terrorism. Careful! When generalizing (as I do), make sure you take in the whole picture. Yes, terrorists (or freedom fighters, depending on which side you stand) do come from Muslim countries. They also come from Ireland ([IRA](#)), Colombia ([FARC](#)), and America ([SOA](#)). Do try to remember there was a time in the USA when it was acceptable to be [anti-Semitic](#), support [Stalin](#), and rally behind the [KKK](#). Also remember that for every terrorist that comes from a certain religion, culture, country, etc, there are millions of others not at all like him.



Translation from Bahasa Malaysia: “We declare a jihad on America because it is unfair, evil, and wrong.”

Oh, and that Osama poster? Found it in a Johore coffee shop. Great curry.

Because it was Ramadan, I listened to the entire Koran during the ride (randomly mixed with tracks by Pink Floyd, Ben Folds, and Yes). Funny how much it's like the Bible. Lots of [contradictory statements](#) about God the benevolent and God the destroyer. One theme that comes up a lot in that book is that no man is fit to judge another man. That is God's job. Something for extremists on all sides to consider. I have come to believe that religions are mostly benevolent (charity, hope, coffee and donut drop-ins). In cases where religion is used as a rationale to limit or take away someone's rights, it is no longer religion. It is politics.

On that cheerful note, ride safe, travel widely, and test your thresholds of comfort often.