

FOREWORD BY TONY FERNANDES

MALAYSIA

BAGUS!

TRAVELS THROUGH MY HOMELAND

SHARON CHEAH



“A truly engaging read, bursting with insight and local flavour! With a reporter’s instinct and a delightful eye for detail, Sharon shows us exactly why Malaysia Bagus!”

—GEOFFREY EU, travel writer and former Editor of *Insight Guides*

“Why are there so many Malaysians abroad? That may be the subject for another book. In this one, Sharon gives the millions who make up the Malaysian diaspora a vicarious means of going home, and it’s a great book for non-Malaysians too.”

—CLARISSA TAN, journalist at *The Spectator* (UK) and winner of the Shiva Naipaul Prize for travel writing

“An eye-opener for those of us whose understanding of Malaysia is limited to news headlines and the occasional sojourn to a JB seafood stall. There’s nothing like exploring a country with a knowledgeable friend by your side, and that’s exactly what Sharon does with this book. And like all good friends, she knows where to get the best snacks!”

—JAIME EE, Lifestyle Editor, *The Business Times* (Singapore)

“A delightful series of travel essays that will impart a deeper understanding of the real Malaysia. If there’s such a thing as armchair travelling, then this is it.”

—MENG YEW CHOONG, journalist, *The Star*

**MALAYSIA  
BAGUS!**

# MALAYSIA BAGUS!

TRAVELS THROUGH MY HOMELAND



SHARON CHEAH



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*For my parents,  
Tan Siew Tian & Frankie Cheah Eok Guan*

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## *Foreword*

MALAYSIA AND SINGAPORE lie at the crossroads of history, by virtue of their strategic location alongside what remains one of the busiest sea lanes in the world today. From the earliest times, travellers from near and far have flocked to the shores of what was once known as Suvarnabhumi, or Land of Gold, drawn by its bounty.

Many would eventually make their home here, where the monsoon winds which carried not only rain but cargo-laden ships from the East and West converged.

Each wave of visitors has added to the incredible melting pot that characterises the two nations. Spice traders from Cochin and the Coromandel Coast, tea merchants from southern China and Arab precious stone brokers have all made their indelible mark.

So too the British, Dutch and Portuguese, who came to the East Indies to seize control of the spice trade and contributed, in no small measure, to our language, culture and cuisine.

But it's not always easy to make sense of this dense tapestry, to examine the warp and weft that make up the shared heritage of Malaysia and Singapore. Though smaller than neighbouring Thailand and Indonesia, these two nations—birthed from a common womb—possess a cultural richness belying their size.

Faced with this daunting task, it's often tempting to fall back on set pieces. It's here where Sharon succeeds in avoiding pastiche by presenting the thirteen Malaysian states plus Singapore as a series of vignettes which are as entertaining as they are illuminating.

Equal parts history lesson, food diary and social commentary, *Malaysia Bagus!* eschews broad strokes for a more intimate approach. From searching for seahorses in Johor to waxing lyrical about Perak's culinary delights, the author explores the two nations with a journalist's careful eye for detail and keen nose for a good story.

With more people travelling now than ever before, this labour of love, which was five years in the making, is a timely addition to the existing catalogue.

I hope it will not only provide signposts for curious travellers but inspire those who wish to venture off the beaten path and explore the hidden wonders that Malaysia and Singapore have to offer.

Tony Fernandes  
AirAsia CEO  
May 2012

## *Introduction*

WHEN I EMBARKED on the legwork for this travelogue, Malaysia was celebrating its 50th year of independence. I was living and working in Singapore, so I thought it a good time to return, travel through all the states, and capture the mood in writing, given the milestone in self-governance and autonomy.

Despite the nice round number though, the country wasn't in a particularly celebratory mood as many people thought that Malaysia's fifth Prime Minister was floundering in his role. But maybe that was just as well, because it gave me the opportunity to capture the "true" Malaysia, in all its disgruntled glory.

In any case, politics isn't a subject I dig deep into here, even if it inevitably does have a bearing on nearly every situation in the country. Rather, these essays are built around travel and the topics of culture, nature and heritage.

The idea of writing a travelogue took seed because I realised that although there are travel guides on Malaysia,

there is little by way of travel writing, and then hardly any by Malaysians about our own country. Politics, it seems, is by far the most popular topic for Malaysian authors and publishers, followed by food, if a cursory look at the Malaysian section in bookstores is anything to go by. Indeed, it would seem that Malaysians have a voracious appetite for both.

Naively, I thought I could complete my book in a year, while holding a full-time job. But of course, without the pressure and discipline imposed by external deadlines, writing for “leisure” on the weekends after five days at a news office was an impossible task to keep up. One year eventually stretched to five.

Thousands of kilometres later, covered by car, train and AirAsia flights, I’m finally done. Malaysia is in its 55th year of Independence and the country is celebrating the 49th anniversary of Malaysia Day (because while the Federation of Malaya had gained independence in 1957, it was only in 1963, after Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore joined the bloc, that the country was re-constituted and had its name re-spelled).

The 13th General Elections are looming, and, no, the sixth Prime Minister isn’t having any easier of a time at the helm of *One Malaysia* (a slogan that is telling of the fractured society whose multi-racial harmony was once much lauded).

For this book, I originally envisioned myself introducing Malaysia’s best-kept secrets to foreign visitors whose appreciation of the nation’s charms aren’t ensnarled in

detailed knowledge of its politics. As the book took shape, however, I found that I was in fact writing for the diaspora of Malaysians who have exited the country in search of better jobs and prospects.

A year before, in 2011, the World Bank had come up with a report to confirm what most discerning Malaysians already suspected. According to the report, more than one million Malaysians now live abroad and about a third of them are tertiary-educated. This, the report tells us, is an indication that the Malaysian migration is increasingly becoming a migration of skills, and the trend is expected to continue. The fundamental drivers include the lack of career prospects, sense of social injustice and quality of life factors.

Statistics tell me I might be part of the 88 per cent of Malaysian Chinese making up the Malaysian diaspora in Singapore. An image comes to mind of Singapore as the cup tied to the rubber tree that collects the prized sap from Malaysia—the qualified human resource—as cuts are made.

I’ve written this book also for the children of the diaspora, who will almost surely become naturalised in the countries adopted by their parents. Children such as my niece and nephew in Singapore, who have grown up not learning how to appreciate the finer details of Malaysia’s diversity; and my nieces in England, who only visit Malaysia annually or biennially, mainly so that their father can gorge on durians and char kway teow (fried noodles). For them, Malaysia will probably always be no more than

a food paradise and a place to meet up with Kong Kong (Grandpa) and Grandma.

In “revisiting” Malaysia, I wanted to celebrate what I feel are the country’s best features—not necessarily the usual sights or experiences marketed by travel companies. With that in mind, instead of just hitting the road, I decided to “curate” my chapters by states and by topics. Some came naturally and were more obvious than others; some happened by serendipity; and some I squeezed out as I sat in front of my computer googling websites, news sites and blogs for all they were worth.

I wrote this travelogue for those who, like myself, had studied about the Majapahit, Srivijaya and Malaccan empires in school; had spent hours memorising facts about tin production and rubber cultivation; had learnt about Malacca’s heroes Parameswara and Hang Tuah (whose existence has been questioned in several revisions of history); had memorised facts about Portuguese, Dutch and British colonisation; and had grown up on Malaysian cartoonist Lat’s cartoons and stories in primary-school books about Ahmad, Ah Choong and Muthusamy living in utopian multi-racial harmony.

For those who did none of the above, but who want to know more about Malaysia, this book is for you too.

Sharon Cheah  
May 2012



*Chapter 1*  
**KELANTAN**



## The Kampung Life

“EVER IMAGINE YOURSELF staying in a remote Malay village in Kelantan, where the pace is unhurried and the folks friendly? Villagers who act as hosts in the homestay will make your stay there as comfortable as possible, treat you as they would one of their own.”

So goes the invitation found on the *Virtual Malaysia* website, the e-tourism portal of the Malaysian Ministry of Tourism.

As pitches go, this isn't a bad one. It had me at “remote Malay village” and “villagers acting as hosts”. If there was one way for me to catch a glimpse of the real Kelantan, this would be it—to go into a kampung. Having been to Kota Bharu, the capital city, a couple of times already, my sense was that the heartbeat of the state was contained within the villages.

To me, this was the best way to find out what really makes a place tick: when you experience how the people live. To a Penangite, who grew up in a largely Chinese

and urban environment, going to a Malay kampung in the northeastern state of Kelantan, touted as the cradle of Malay civilisation, would be, for all intents and purposes, like going to a foreign land. The homestay would be a brilliant way to get really up close and personal with the “locals”, even if I’m not a foreigner.

I am googling “homestay in Kelantan” and several websites later, am presented with a choice of kampung stays throughout the whole state. But these being Malaysian websites (which, like Malaysian hotels, can’t really be trusted to be well-maintained), one has to do some intensive googling before whittling down the choices. Finally I cross-reference the Tourism Malaysia and the Kelantan state tourism websites to narrow my choice down to Kampung Renuk Baru in Gua Musang.

The final verification is a phone call to the Kelantan state tourism office, where I get an enthusiastic officer on the phone telling me that yes, Kampung Renuk Baru in Gua Musang does host Malaysians or foreigners. He gives me a mobile number to book a homestay. I get Tuan Haji Wan Mohd Saufi on the phone, and as I had checked out the train schedule from Kuala Lumpur to Kelantan already, I mention a date and time. Immediately and assuredly, the chairman of the village’s Homestay Programme declares: “No problem. Akan ada orang tunggu kat kamu lah, di tren stesen, dengan label Homestay Kampung Renuk Baru. (There’ll be someone waiting for you at the train station, with a sign with Homestay Kampung Renuk Baru on it.)”

The Homestay Programme was started in 1995, under Malaysia’s Rural Tourism Master Plan, as a way for village folk to participate in the tourism sector. The aim was to bring paying visitors to the kampung so that villagers get a chance to earn additional income. At the same time, the Homestay Programme allows foreigners or even Malaysians from the city or other states to get a glimpse of the country’s kampung life and culture. It’s not unlike staying at a bed-and-breakfast, although the Homestay Programme’s focus is more on cultural exchange rather than just providing a place to sleep and something to eat for breakfast, like nasi lemak (the most popular Malaysian all-in-one dish which sees coconut milk-enriched rice paired with fish or ikan bilis—anchovies fried in chilli paste—and the whole thing wrapped like a pyramid in a banana leaf).

My sojourn to Kampung Renuk Baru begins with the 8.30pm night train from Kuala Lumpur to Gua Musang, a 10-hour-and-17-minute train ride, on the Wau Ekspres. We have a full coach that night. My ticket is for a top bunk, and below me is an elderly Malay man. He is dressed in a religious manner—with a taqiyah (short, rounded cap) on his head and a long white tunic over a chequered sarong. He holds a short string of prayer beads in one hand. His wife is on the opposite lower bunk, dressed in a colourful baju Melayu, which is a Malay-style dress like a tunic worn over a maxi skirt. If only I were capable of making sketches for a travel diary—they would be perfect subjects for the start of my Kelantan journey.

After a fitful night on the chugging train, with the rhythm of sleep broken whenever the train made longer stops at some stations and the constant worry of missing my phone alarm or my stop, scheduled at 6.47am, I manage to be wide awake just as the Gua Musang railway station apparates as a limestone hill with sharp, jagged edges. Dawn is just breaking so everything is blue and grey-tinged, and the limestone hill has dark shadows where there are possibly crevices and small caves, giving it a fable-like aura which harks back to the days when foxes were hiding in caves, which could be how Gua Musang, which means “cave of foxes” in English, got its name.

I’m one of the few that alight. As the other passengers quickly find their families or friends, I’m the only one left on the platform. A lady with a kindly face, seemingly in her mid-40s, approaches me hesitantly. I’m relieved that Tuan Haji Wan Mohd Saufi had made good his word of having someone meet me at the station. And so my host, Kak Yah, finds me, by process of elimination, and greets me in plain Malay rather than in Kelantanese which would have been rather difficult for me to understand. Pak Su, secretary of Kampung Renuk Baru’s Homestay Programme, is waiting to give us a ride home in his Proton Saga. We stop by a stall for Kak Yah to pick up some kuih (local cakes) for breakfast; proceed by the petrol station for a refuelling, and I am driven off for my first taste of life in a Malay kampung.

The sun is rising slowly like a simmering ball of fire in the hazy sky right ahead of us as we drive towards Kampung Renuk Baru. We’re on straight road, and occasionally I see

“sculptures” of rubber tyres arranged in a variety of ways or stacked to act as signboards or markers. This kind of do-it-yourself art is common throughout Malaysia, especially in the rural areas. Come to think of it, it was more common at one time, but less so now. But I like them for the rustic way something is recycled after it has outlived its first life.

We soon arrive at Kak Yah’s single-storey house with a white Perdana parked in front. Saying our goodbyes to the friendly Pak Su, Kak Yah asks me to make myself at home while she gets breakfast ready. I put my bag in the room and come out to take a closer look at the house. The house has a sizeable porch, tiled with shiny pink tiles. Large porches seem to be a common feature among kampung houses in the village, I would find out later. The extra-large porch is a great place for homeowners to relax and chit-chat with their neighbours and it’s a space I haven’t noticed in other kampung houses in the country. As I walk back into Kak Yah’s house, I smile at the riot of colours livening up the space, from the living room carpets to the floral curtains. The furniture is of the cane variety, so popular in the 1960s and 1970s, with round tubes of bamboo tied together, and cushions covered with floral material. The space in the living room is large enough for a prayer area.

The house has two parts, Kak Yah explains. I then notice that the timber portion marks the original house, while later extensions were done in concrete. As I move to the back, I see that the current kitchen and the master bedroom, plus one more bedroom, are part of the original house; while the guestroom and the living room are in concrete.

We work out the itinerary for my two-night stay over our breakfast of nasi lemak and colourful kuih, which we eat while sitting on multi-hued mengkuang mats (mats woven from pandanus leaves and dyed in a variety of colours) which are placed over the kitchen floor. What do I want to do while in Gua Musang, Kak Yah asks. “If you had come in a bigger group, you could go on a number of outings, like a visit to the ethnobotany park, explore the limestone caves or even try whitewater rafting down the Nenggiri River.”

I pause, surprised. Who knew Kelantan offered such exciting eco-adventure activities? Finally, I reply: “I just want to see what villagers do at Kampung Renuk Baru.” The poor sleep I had on the train, plus the delicious meal, is a lethal combination that is conspiring to make me drowsy. As a solo traveller, it was really easier to fit into Kak Yah’s normal daily routine. Besides that was really what I wanted to do—find out more about the simple kampung life.

“Oh hello,” I say, when I emerge from a short nap and see Akema in the afternoon. She must have made a very quiet entry into the house or I was deeply asleep since I didn’t hear her at all. She is Kak Yah’s eldest daughter and I have interrupted her while she is arranging long, thin sticks in a radial pattern, like the spokes of a bicycle. With shoulder-length hair and dressed in a T-shirt and a sarong, Akema obligingly explains that she is making a vase. “It’s traditional handicraft,” she says, and shows me how sheets of newspaper are hand-rolled into thin, long and stiff cane-like sticks which are then woven into paper vases, jars and

containers of various shapes. She gestures to the collection of vases sitting on the table which I had puzzled over before. She’s so adept at rolling the newspaper sheets that I know it’s something that’s borne out of much practice. Right now, she’s making a big vase, which will then be painted and shellacked. Then it’s ready for sale.

“Would you like to put this on?” Kak Yah asks me. We are going for my first kampung activity of the day—a women’s Yasin group (a Quran recitation session) at a neighbour’s house. Kak Yah, it turns out, heads the Umno Ladies division in Kampung Renuk Baru and organises community events like this Yasin session. She hands me a flowery, purple baju Melayu, the typical Malay dress which is a long shift over a maxi skirt. This belongs to Ajilah, her third daughter, who is still in school.

My “transformation” causes mirth between mother and daughter. “Comel (cute),” chuckles Kak Yah, handing me a seledang (a long rectangular scarf) as Akema exclaims that the baju Melayu is a perfect fit.

“Aren’t you going to the Yasin too?” I ask Akema.

“Er, no, you go ahead,” she says, giving me a “diplomatic” look, making me think that if I were in my early 20s, I wouldn’t want to join my mother and her friends in a prayer meeting either.

Bang Lah, Kak Yah’s husband, is back home for lunch, so he drives us in his immaculately-kept Perdana to the nearby house for the Yasin. By 3pm, the room starts filling up with ladies, mostly in their 40s and above, all with solid-coloured headscarves worn over gaily-patterned baju

Melayu. Each newly-arrived lady goes around greeting everyone present, the greeter's open hands touching the greeted, followed by the hands brought towards the heart. And they sit, forming a big circle, on the straw mat-covered floor.

One of the ladies leads the group reading of the Quran, at times in a call and answer fashion. I take a few pictures, but the sonorous rhythm, coupled with the oven-like atmosphere caused by the midday sun beating down on the zinc roof, exerts an irresistible gravitational pull on my eyes and I drift in and out between hazy consciousness and sleep to the melodious chanting of Arabic words and sentences, familiar-sounding but incomprehensible.

Finally, they say their last "amin", and I shake myself awake at that point; thankful that I had made it without tumbling headlong onto the floor. The prayer meeting then turns social, with fried bee hoon (thin rice noodles) on glass plates with scalloped edges passed out from the kitchen, along with jugs of sweet rose-scented syrup water. Kak Yah introduces me formally as her homestay guest, so a few of the ladies come up to say "hi" and to assure me that it was alright to doze off because of the heat and because I couldn't understand a thing.

Funnily enough, the Yasin session isn't at all strange to me, given that it's similar to a structured Christian prayer meeting, except with less personal sharing. I like the respectful greetings they give each other at the beginning, and the Yasin must be seen as something quite formal as well, as each lady had dressed up for the occasion. Yet

the camaraderie when they're tucking into tea after the session speaks of close-knit familiarity. The thought crosses my mind however, of how life would be like for those in the kampung who may not "fit in" or be so religious or community-oriented. Do these people then aim to migrate to a city?

I see a number of the same women the next day, when Kak Yah shows me how they make pekasam (a type of marinated fish). Pak Su comes by in the morning and drives us into an oil palm plantation. Suddenly, the path lined with trees opens up to two muddy-watered ponds. These are freshwater ponds for breeding tilapia, says Kak Yah, proudly explaining that the Ministry of Rural Development had built these ponds as a prize for the kampung being the cleanest village in 1999. The ponds are now part of an economic co-operative initiative involving the whole village.

"We pay for the feed of the fish, and that is quite expensive because it's imported," explains Kak Yah. "And we take turns harvesting the fish about once a month or two. The person who harvests gets to take back a bit more fish."

The wiry caretaker is there to net the fish for Kak Yah. He throws a large square net into the water, and then pulls out a heavy-laden catch, emptying the jumping fish onto the ground. Kak Yah and I then swoop down to pick up the pinkish white fish, some of them dusty red from flopping around on the ground, and put them into white plastic gunny sacks. Kak Yah chuckles at how gingerly I hold the fish, but it's certainly not everyday that I catch live fish

that are still jerking around so it's not surprising that she gets most of them in the bag and I just feel superfluous. We load up about three to four of the heavy sacks of the fish into the boot of Pak Su's car, and make our way to the state fisheries department workshop, a standalone building somewhere near town.

About half of the ladies who were at the Yasin meeting yesterday have gathered and are waiting for us. Dressed in "work clothes" this time—just flowery and loose tops over sarongs—the ladies, more than 10 of them, have already laid out tarpaulin and newspapers in a shady spot behind the building. Once we get there, the ladies quickly get to work. You can tell this is the usual *modus operandi*, as they have the division of work down pat. They split up into groups of twos and threes, and fours or fives. One group scales the fish and chops off the fins, another group slits the fish open and yanks out the innards, while the last group does a thorough brushing of the insides of the fish to get rid of any remaining parts so they don't turn odorous. All the while, they chat and joke, catching up on local gossip. It's the scene that a painter would love to capture on canvas.

After that, the fish is marinated with glutinous rice, tamarind paste and palm sugar, packed into plastic bags and put into the freezer, ready to be sold whenever an order comes in. So this is how a small cottage industry for pekasam is run in Kelantan.

The industry is run by this co-op of ladies and supported by both federal and state agencies, explains Pak Su who's also an officer with Kesedar, the Kelantan South

Development Authority which comes under the purview of the federal government. The state fisheries department provides the equipment and the use of the building for the activity, but the project was initiated by Kesedar, set up in 1979 by the Finance Minister then, a Kelantan native.

"During that time, Gua Musang was considered 'hulu Kelantan' (the back of Kelantan) but now, we're seen as KB Dua (the second Kota Bharu)," says Pak Su proudly.

Because we have tilapia in abundance, it features prominently in our lunch, which the ladies cook on the spot. There is deep-fried pekasam (tangy, salty and very similar to salted cod or bacalao); a lovely fresh tilapia in a simple, chilli-hot asam gravy; fried whole tilapia and buah petai (stinky beans, also known as *Parkia speciosa*) fried with onions and freshly pounded chilli; and a plate of blanched brinjal, baby corn and loofah, for dipping into budu, an earthy, salty sauce shot with fresh chilli and lime, another Kelantanese staple.

The dishes are laid out on newspapers on the floor, and we all sit around, talking and eating our simple but tasty lunch with our hands. "Comel," comments Kak Yah again, as she takes a picture of me eating with my fingers. I'm totally getting into the groove of this gotong-royong (helping one another) community spirit, and am quite impressed with how this feast was whipped up so matter-of-factly. Yes, this is the real Kelantan that I had wanted to see and experience!

Kampung Renuk Baru is a relatively new village, having been set up only in the late 1970s by farmers

brought in by the government to settle the land—membuka tanah. “The government picked one person from each village to be a pioneer settler in Gua Musang,” recounts Bang Lah, Kak Yah’s husband, in the last evening of my stay with them. He was in his 20s when he signed up for the scheme and was selected from Kuala Krai. He was given 10 acres (4 hectares) of forest to clear and convert into a rubber tree plantation.

“Gua Musang then was just jungle, and the trees we cut down had trunks as big as this,” he says, holding up his arms as if embracing a barrel. “That was during Tengku Razaleigh’s time... when he was the Finance Minister,” he adds. Gua Musang then was a notorious “black area” because of the heavy communist activity. It was the tramping grounds of the Bintang Tiga communists of the Malayan Communist Party, named after the three stars on their caps.

“In 1979, when I came, there were 400 soldiers for the area. There were 3,000 orang asli, 2,000 Chinese and maybe up to 3,000 Malays,” says Bang Lah, whose memory of the time seems crystal clear.

“The Chinese have been here for a long time. You know that Kampung Pulau<sup>1</sup> nearby has one of the oldest temples in Asia? It’s about 600 years old,” he says. “Really?” I ask,

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<sup>1</sup> Kampung Pulau, about 12 kilometres from Gua Musang, was settled by Hakkas who had come over 600 years ago, purportedly in search of gold. The Shui Yue Gong (Water Moon Temple) is dedicated to Guan Yin (Goddess of Mercy).

surprised to hear about such an old Chinese community in the heart of Kelantan.

After clearing the jungle to plant rubber trees, Bang Lah used the timber to build his house. Now, he is in the midst of converting his rubber tree plantation into oil palm. He’s not the only farmer doing this as palm oil prices have been so good in the past couple of years that it makes sense to switch crops, but of course, these farmers would be doing this with some form of guidance and support from the agricultural department.

Kak Yah says that she decided to join the Homestay Programme in 2001. This involved attending a training course. She has hosted a few Japanese and Australians, and a lot of local university students in the past two years. By all accounts, the Homestay Programme seems to be doing reasonably well, though one would imagine the bulk of visitors would be students on exchange programmes. According to official statistics, some 30,000 tourists attended homestay programmes all over Malaysia in 2006, including those from Japan, South Korea and Singapore.

As part of the scheme, homeowners can get government loans to renovate or beautify their homes, but it seems that most of the Homestay hosts in Kampung Renuk Baru prefer not to take loans. “We don’t want to be indebted to the government,” said Kak Gayah, in her 50s, who has a neat garden full of fruit trees, and who passed some *mempelam* (a sharply sour fruit like small, unripe mangos) and *buah salak* (the crunchy “snakeskin fruit” which grows at the thorny base of a palm-like tree) to Kak Yah when we drop

by for a visit. In turn, Kak Yah passes some of her papayas, which she had picked this morning, to Kak Gayah.

In the evening, the single-storey house cools down a lot once the zinc roof is no longer absorbing the sun's rays. Nurul, Kak Yah's youngest daughter, goes around shutting window panes to keep mosquitoes out. While Kak Yah takes a nap in the kitchen, I ask Nurul and Ajilah to take me on a walk around the village where we admire neat gardens, smile at neighbours and to querying looks, the young girls shout out that I'm their homestay visitor.

With a standing invitation to return during durian season, when she would make fermented tempoyak (durian pulp pounded with chilli and salt) for me, Kak Yah sends me off on a bus to Kota Bharu after my short stay. I am to catch a budget flight back to Kuala Lumpur; with an appreciation of the kampung way of life, patterned along cooperatives, economic and social; and paced by the rhythms according to nature's bounty, of rubber trees and oil palm, of fish ponds and fruit trees in the garden and in the wild.

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#### TRAVEL TIPS

*There are two types of homestays in Malaysia. There are the "commercial" homestays which are essentially private homes let out for short term stay, like a bed-and-breakfast. And there are homestays like the one at Kampung Renuk Baru which are hosted,*

*with the aim of introducing the visitor to the cultural activities of the village and the surrounding areas.*

*The latter is especially good for those who wish to immerse themselves in the essence of Malay heartland or kampung-style living. The best way to sign up is to go to [www.go2homestay.com](http://www.go2homestay.com) for programmes endorsed by the Ministry of Tourism. It's good to cross-reference with the various states' tourism websites.*



## *Acknowledgements*

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## *About the Author*

BORN AND BRED in Penang, Sharon Cheah went to Davidson college in North Carolina and majored in history. After a failed attempt to get a job at the Children's Museum in Boston, she returned to Penang and soon, answered an advertisement for a sub-editor in the local newspaper, *The Star*. "You know this means working the graveyard shift, right?" asked the editor, who promptly assigned her to reporting. Her first assignment was to cover a press conference held by an unrecognised Islamic sect, Al Arqam, and she's been hooked on telling stories since then. A British Chevening scholar in journalism (U.K.), Sharon joined *The Business Times* in Singapore in 2000, writing features with the byline Cheah Ui-Hoon.



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