



# A KOTA BHARU

On a very quick trip to Kota Bharu **Mike Smith** found there were exotic dishes to be enjoyed in the northern Malaysian city, despite it being Ramadan.

## Quick Bite

**I** remember my first trip to Kota Bharu 20 years ago. My wife was heavily pregnant and we drove there via the notorious East West Highway. The culture, traditional crafts and food were great, but the Central Market, with its assorted vegetables and spices, was most memorable. I hadn't been back since and wondered how much had changed as I took my seat on Firefly's inaugural direct flight from Singapore.

The one and a half hour flight on the 72-seat turbo prop was smooth. Arriving in Malaysia it took a while to be fingerprinted and clear the newly set up immigration desk as they weren't used to getting international tourists. It was just a slight delay and before long we were ready for sightseeing.

### Unique Mosques & Reclining Buddha

Kelantan is the most Muslim state

in Malaysia, thus there are a large number of mosques. We visited two interesting examples, constructed in very different architectural styles. Kampung Laut Mosque, the oldest in Malaysia, is a simple wooden structure built without nails over 300 years ago. The Beijing Mosque is more intricate and fashioned in the style of a Chinese temple.

Being near to the Thai border there are a number of Buddhist temples in Kota Bharu. Our stop was at Wat Pothivihan to see the 40m reclining Buddha, the largest in Malaysia.

### The Night is Young!

The day didn't end with dinner! A snack of *colek ayam* at a crowded coffee shop was on the agenda following our evening meal. It's a special *rojak*-like dish, served during Ramadan. Containing a variety of ingredients, including deep fried chicken, fish, prawns, squid, potatoes and a potent chili sauce, it was very tasty!

Wakaf Che Yeh, the massive night market was





the final visit of day one. At 11.30pm we joined a mile long queue of cars trying to park before we could explore the stalls selling food, clothes, shoes and Ramadan outfits. Business was brisk and the atmosphere good. It was 1.30am by the time we got to the hotel. This exploratory trip was all systems go!

### Colours & Smells of Central Market

After an early breakfast we went to Siti Khadijah Central Market with its amazing array of local produce sold primarily by women vendors. I swear it hasn't changed in twenty years! Housed in an octagonal building it is very colourful and a photographer's dream. The ground floor has a superb selection of fruit and vegetables in the centre with fish and meat around the outside. The second floor has a wide range of spices while the third floor has clothing and textiles plus great views of the ground floor.

### History & Shopping

We strolled in the area near to the Kelantan State Museum where there are historical buildings, but nothing that screamed for my attention. The *songket*, silver and batik manufacturing houses were rather commercial. Each had a couple of people demonstrating their craftsmanship, but the emphasis was on the large salesrooms.



### Fishing Village

Pantai Mek Mas is a lovely fishing village a short 15-minute drive from town. On our arrival a group of smiling children posed for photographs and showed off their diving and fishing skills. It was hard to drag myself away, but a family stripping palm leaves to make self-rolled leaf cigarettes caught my attention.

Cottage industry is thriving in the village. Another group of women were making large batik sheets in beautiful bright colours. The sun was brutal and we had little shade, but did get a refreshing drink of coconut as the local monkey tossed down fruit from the tree tops.

After dark we took a boat trip at Kampung Pulau to observe fire flies twinkling like Christmas lights on the mangrove trees. I crawled into bed exhausted well past midnight.

### Dodol & Akok

On our way back to the airport we stopped

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for last minute shopping to buy *dodol*, a sweet toffee-like snack, and *akok* delicious pancakes made from eggs, coconut milk and brown sugar cooked in a pan on bricks heated with coconut husks.

Surprisingly, not that much has changed in Kota Bharu! I enjoyed my very brief, hectic return trip. It's a place to experience rather than to see specific sites, and a place to chill out in. It is not really a party town.

### Exotic Spreads

There were pros and cons of going during Ramadan. The exotic spreads and special dishes when the Muslims broke fast and a bigger night market compensated for limited lunch and alcohol availability.

I recommend hiring transport or taking a package tour. The markets and fishing village were particularly interesting and with Firefly's direct flight from Singapore Kota Bharu is well worth considering for a short get away. **AJ**