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MALAYSIA G33

The country of Malaysia is actually two separate pieces of land divided by the South China Sea. The region on the left is called Peninsular Malaysia and the one on the right is called Malaysian Borneo. Look at the map to see their positions, which are highlighted in pink.



The population is approximately 25 million and the capital city, Kuala Lumpur, is home to some of the tallest buildings in the world. The picture on the right shows the Petronas Towers with its sky bridge.



As well as busy cities, Malaysia also has a beautiful coastline and densely forested mountainous areas (pictured on the right and below).



The objects in the box show some aspects of life in Malaysia, including traditional craftwork.



Reading Borough Council

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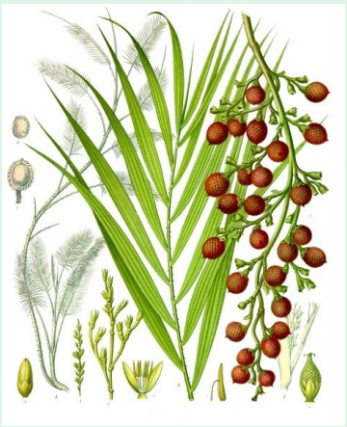
Rattan ball





Rattan is a type of palm found growing in the tropical areas of Asia, Africa and Australasia. The leaves are used to make building materials, baskets and furniture. The seeds are often used to make jewellery as they are attractive and also very tough.

This ball is made of rattan. It is used in a game called sepak raga or kick volleyball. The game is common across Southeast Asia and is similar to volleyball, although players can use their feet, knees, head and chest to touch the ball. The picture on the right shows a match in action, with a rattan ball in mid-flight.



This particular ball comes from Port Dickson, a town on the east coast of peninsular Malaysia. Port Dickson is known for its beautiful beaches, which attract tourists from all over the world.

Prayer cap





A prayer cap, also known as a taqiyah or a kufi, is worn by Muslim men. Muhammad and his followers always covered their heads and so Muslim men do the same today to follow his ways. Some men only wear the cap whilst praying, others wear it all the time. The picture on the right shows a man wearing a similar cap to the one in the box. Caps are most often white like this one, but can be a variety of different colours. This particular cap comes from Kuala Lumpur.

About 52 per cent of the population of Malaysia is Muslim. Other religions followed include Christianity, Buddhism, Sikhism and Hinduism. Indigenous groups in the east follow Shamanism.

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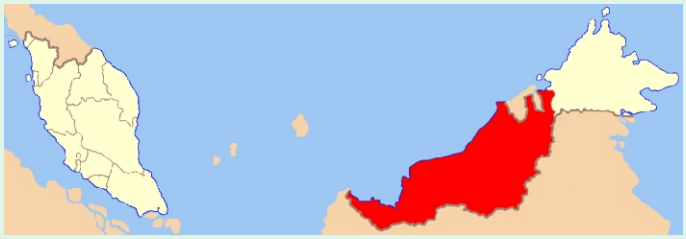
Hornbill skull





This strange looking object is the bill of a hornbill, or kenyalang, as it is also known (pictured right). It comes from Sarawak - one of two states that make up Malaysian Borneo. The map on the right shows Sarawak highlighted in red. Sarawak means 'land of the hornbills'.



There are about 2.5 million people living in the state of Sarawak. Most belong to indigenous groups with individual languages and culture. The largest group is the Iban. One of their most important annual festivals is Gawai Kenyalang - the Hornbill Festival.

Many Iban are now Christians, but they still celebrate the traditional cultural festivals alongside Christmas and Easter.

Kapok pod

The Kapok is a tropical tree that is grown extensively in Malaysia for the fibre found inside the pod. The fibre is light, buoyant and water resistant - ideal for stuffing mattresses, pillows, teddy bears and as insulation in the home. Kapok fibre was used to stuff life jackets during the Second World War, but now foam is used instead.



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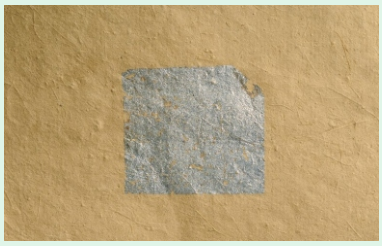
Prayer money



There are five sheets of prayer money in the box - although they may not look much like actual money. Sheets of prayer money (also called ghost money) are burned at Chinese festivals whilst a prayer is offered to the ancestors for good luck and prosperity. Paper prayer money is also burned in traditional Chinese funerals as it is believed to become real money in the afterlife.

The paper is traditionally handmade, often from bamboo paper, which is why it has an uneven look.

About 28 per cent of the Malaysian population is of Chinese descent. They arrived between the fifteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, mainly to find work.

Beggar's gong



This heavy piece of metal has a similar shape to the decorations added to Buddhist temples (see the picture on the right). It was used by a beggar, who might have been asking for food or money. Giving generously to beggars is considered lucky and a sign of devotion to your religion in religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism.



Buddhist monks and nuns traditionally live by begging, although they rarely need to ask for anything as local people will actively seek them out to give donations of food, medicines and other essential items. This isn't thought of as charity, because the giver believes that they gain something in return. It is known as dana and plays a major part in the life of a practising Buddhist.

There are also those people who beg because they are poor and have very little as in many countries, including our own. It is not known whether this gong belonged to a monk or to a person living on the street.

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Ikat weaving



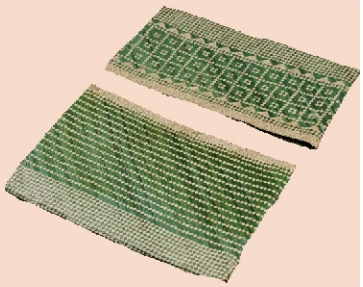
The practice of Ikat weaving is thought to have started in the Middle East and spread across Asia during the sixteenth century.

Ikat means to tie or bind in the Malay language. The individual threads are carefully tied together in small bundles and then tie-dyed before weaving begins. If the threads need to be brown at the top, green at the bottom with a red strip in the middle, then the bundle would need to be dyed three times. Each time, the section that has already been dyed needs to be covered so that it doesn't take on the new colour - this is tie-dyeing.

Do the patterns on this cloth look a bit blurred? That is because it is very difficult to line up all the threads exactly when weaving them together.

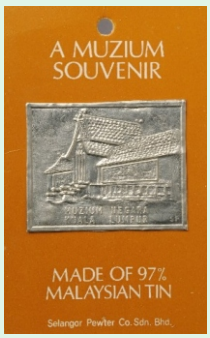
Ikats are made as wall hangings or throws. Sometimes they were used to make ceremonial clothing.

Palm leaf purse with top cover and lining



Palm leaves were cut into strips, dyed and woven together to make this purse. Many indigenous groups living in Malaysia use this technique to make mats, baskets, bags and roofing materials.

Piece of Malaysian tin



Malaysia used to be one of the main producers of tin in the world. In 1979, the country produced 63,000 tonnes, but by 1994 this figure had fallen to just 6,500 tonnes. The reason for this drop is that there is little tin left in the mines now and the cost of tin is low. Little profit can be made.

This particular piece of tin was bought as a souvenir from Muzium Negara the national museum of Malaysia. The Museum gives an insight into Malaysia's rich cultural heritage, customs and traditions.

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Palette in wooden box, stick of ink and brush



The official first language of Malaysia is Malay, or Bahasa Malaysia, as it is known. Malay is written using the same latin alphabet as English, except the letters q, v, and x are missing. For example, Siapa nama anda? means what is your name?

But, as 28 per cent of the population have Chinese origins, many people still write and speak Chinese languages such as Mandarin and Cantonese.

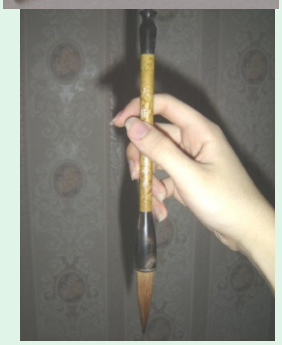
Chinese is the world's oldest continuously used written language. It is made up of characters called hànzi, which started out as pictures of animals, people and other things. Over the centuries these pictures have altered and now look less like the things they represent. For example, the word for people is written like this:



It is a simplified version of a person. The two strokes look like legs.



The hànzi are written using a brush, like the one in the box. The hairs of the brush are typically rabbit or goat or some other animal. The handle is made from bamboo.



The brush strokes must be made in the right order and the brush is normally held very straight, like the picture on the right. The characters are written vertically, going down the page, although with street signs that are translated into different languages the characters are sometimes written horizontally.



Traditional ink doesn't come in liquid form, but in a solid stick. The stick is made from either burnt vegetable oils or the soot from burnt pine, which is then mixed with glue. The ink is then ground on a stone and mixed with water in a palette, like the one in the box. Ink sticks can last many years if looked after properly and are a collectors' item today. The characters on the stick tell the user what the ink is made from and the region in China it comes from.

Of course, in today's modern world many people buy liquid ink in a bottle or simply write the characters with a biro.

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Rubber collecting bowl, knife and spout





These three items work together to collect latex from the trunk of a rubber tree. Latex is the milky white sap, which can be used to make rubber. The process is called rubber tapping.



The knife is used to shear off a thin layer of the tree's bark. Cutting too deep injures the tree. Then the small spout is placed into the cut and the latex drips out into the bowl. The pictures on the right show this process in action.



Rubber can also be made artificially using petroleum - despite this, 42 per cent of the rubber produced annually is made from natural latex. The three largest producers are Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia.

Rubber seed



In nature, the rubber tree seeds grow in large capsules, which burst open and fire the seeds up to 20 metres away, where they can start to grow. It can take some time for a seed to germinate and grow, but on a rubber tree plantation the process is helped along. A branch from a healthy, adult tree is grafted on to the seedling and acts as its new stem. The picture on the right shows what this grafting looks like.



Smoked rubber sheet



Smell this piece of rubber - it is very distinctive.

After the latex has been tapped from the tree, it is then poured into a mould and formic acid is added so that it becomes a solid block. The solid block goes through a mangle to squeeze the water out and make it thinner. The sheets are then taken to the smokehouse. The picture below shows the pieces of rubber hanging up.

Smoked rubber sheets can be used to make shoe soles, car parts, rubber bands amongst many other things.

