

# My Student is from Malaysia

This information is of a general nature and should be used as a guide only.

## Key country points:

- Malaysia is a multi-cultural society. The people of Malaysia are represented by a number of Malay cultures (60%), Chinese (25%), Indian (10%) and others (5%). The ethnic groups retain their religions, customs and way of life. Despite the ethnic differences there are commonalities culturally speaking.
- Over 60% of Malaysia's population is Muslim, approximately 20% are Buddhist, 10% are Christian and 6% are Hindu.
- Malaysia has a tropical monsoon climate.
- Family is considered the centre of the social structure in Malaysia, with a strong emphasis on unity, loyalty and respect for the elderly. The family unit will always provide each family member with guaranteed financial and emotional support.
- Malaysian people strive to maintain 'face', a personal concept that embraces qualities such as a good name, good character, and being held in esteem by one's peers.

## Some cultural differences explained:

### Arrival:

- It is important to find out your Malaysian student's ethnicity and customs as different customs apply to different ethnic groups.
- When greeting your Malaysian student, always offer your right hand. In Malaysian culture, the left hand is used for cleansing the body and therefore not used when shaking hands with people, receiving gifts, giving money, pointing directions, or passing objects.
- When Malaysian students initially arrive, they are likely to be a little culture-shocked about the quietness of Adelaide. Malaysian students may spend more time watching TV and chatting on their mobile phone or online to feel less lonely and isolated. Fabulous food:
- Malaysia's cuisine is a mixture of Malay, Chinese, and Indian cooking and provides both distinct and blended tastes.
- Your student will enjoy having meals with rice and noodles, as they form a staple part of the Malaysian diet.
- Spicy dishes are very popular, and there is always tropical fruit to be enjoyed. Among the different cultures and religions within Malaysia are some particular food preferences. Muslims are forbidden to eat pork which is a favourite of the Chinese population; Hindus do not eat beef; and some Buddhists are vegetarian. Discuss the types of meals you usually eat and determine what your student can and cannot eat. Be sure your student has their dictionary/translator handy for some of the new words!

### House harmony:

- Water is not an issue in Malaysia. If your family is trying to conserve water, let your student know about water preservation in Australia and how long all family members can spend in the shower and bath.
- Avoid touching and pointing. If you need to point, use the thumb of your right hand.
- If your student retreats to their room after meal times, it may be that they do not feel confident in trying out their English with the family. Do what you can to encourage games (sport, electronic games, cards, board games) to make your student more comfortable talking and interacting with the family.
- Often Malaysian Chinese students will not want to give a direct "no" answer for fear of offending. They often use "maybe". While we interpret "maybe" as a possibility, a Malaysian Chinese person is more likely to use it to mean "probably not". In Chinese culture, to resist revealing emotions is a sign of maturity and dignity.

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## Social scene:

- Malaysian students enjoy spending time with friends at Chinatown. Be sure to have open communication with your student so you know where they are, who they are with and how they will be getting home.

## Websites:

<http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/global-etiquette/malaysia.html>

<http://www.everyculture.com/Ja-Ma/Malaysia.html>

## Teaching and Learning:

- The Malaysian government provides free education for primary and secondary level students.
- The Malaysian school system is structured as follows:
  - o Optional kindergarten (age 3 – 6). There are only a few government-run kindergartens in Malaysia, most are run privately.
  - o Obligatory primary school (age 7 – 12) is divided into 2 three-year phases. At the end of primary school, students take the Primary School Achievement Test.
  - o Secondary education (age 13 – 17) is divided into lower secondary (three years) and upper secondary (two years) education both ending with a test. Students will take different final tests depending whether their focus was technical/academic or vocational.
  - o Post-secondary education (age 17 – 18) is for students who want to attend a university.
- Malaysian students are used to adhering to a strict uniform policy with a standard uniform that is consistent over all public schools.
- Due to a very large number of students and a shortage of schools, the students are taught in a two-session system. The morning session goes from approximately 7.30 am to 2.30 pm and is mostly followed by compulsory co-curricular activities. The afternoon session lasts until approximately 6.45 pm. As some students may live far from their school, it is not uncommon for them to arrive home at around 8 or 9 pm.

## Overseas Visitors:

**If your school is receiving visitors from Malaysia, there are a number of established protocols which might assist you during the visit.**

- Exchange of business cards is a common practice. Cards should be offered to another person with two hands and vice versa. Be sure to look closely at any business cards you are given. The respect you show someone's business card is indicative of the respect you will show the individual in business.
- At the first meeting between two organisations, Malaysians will generally not get into in-depth discussions. They prefer to use the first meeting as an opportunity to get to know the other side and build a rapport, which is essential in this consensus-driven culture.
- Silence is an important element of Malaysian communication. Pausing before responding to a question indicates that they have given the question appropriate thought and considered their response carefully. Many Malaysians do not understand the western propensity to respond to a question hastily and can consider such behaviour thoughtless and rude.
- Personal relationships are an important part of business in Malaysia. It is important to take the time to develop them, often over a meal. If visiting Malaysia on behalf of your school please note:
  - Initial greetings should be formal and respectful, introduce the most senior member first, and always use professional titles.
  - Malaysian men and women shake hands gently. Foreign men should always wait for a Malaysian woman to extend her hand and foreign women should also wait for a Malaysian man to extend his hand.
  - There will be a period of small talk, which will end when the most senior Malaysian person is comfortable moving to the business discussion.

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- Meetings, especially initial ones, are generally formal. Treat all Malaysian participants with respect and be cautious not to show anger or appear irritated.
- Malaysians tend to dress more formally than Australians. It is recommended that men wear 'dress' trousers, a long sleeve shirt and tie. On more formal occasions and initial meetings it is wise to wear a suit coat. For women, it is recommended that they dress conservatively. This usually means a knee-length skirt or trousers and a top which covers the shoulders.

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