

## MEDIA FEATURE

### RAMADAN IN MALAYSIA

*As the sun begins to set and the Maghrib call to prayer resonates through the air from nearby mosques; Muslims bow their heads together, reciting a short prayer, ending the day's fasting period by sharing a meal with family and friends.*

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Ramadan has always been a special month for me. There is something in the atmosphere that makes you want to slow down the hectic pace of life and be with family and the people that matter most. More importantly, it is a month of reflection and of religious observance, a month of serenity and a chance to show gratitude for all the blessings in life. Fasting, abstaining from eating or drinking from sunrise to sunset, grows a sense of empathy towards the poor, encouraging people to be more giving and helpful to those in need.

Visiting Malaysia in the month of Ramadan is a unique experience as one gets to see the sights and scenes of the country you otherwise wouldn't. While Muslims in the country take the opportunity to strengthen their faith during this holy month, Ramadan extends its uniqueness to everyone in multicultural Malaysia, locals and visitors alike.

#### **Sharing is Caring**

A few hours before breaking fast, most mosques are a hive of activity as volunteers, in the spirit of giving, get busy preparing the ingredients and spices to cook the savoury *bubur lambuk* or mixed rice porridge, which is later distributed to the community and any passers-by. The most famous *bubur lambuk* is the Masjid Jamek *bubur lambuk* in Kampung Baru, Kuala Lumpur. Long queues start to snake around the compound of the mosque as early as 4pm as the distribution to the public is done around 5pm. What makes the *bubur lambuk* much more special is perhaps in the sincere heartfelt sense of giving to the community.

As the ritual of the breaking of fast is over and after the *Isyak* prayer is performed, mosques throughout the country begin to fill with Muslims, young and old, wanting to perform the *terawih*, a special prayer conducted only in the month of Ramadan. Beautiful and melodious verses from the Quran are recited by the *imams* leading the congregation in prayer. Many mosques even go the extra mile to invite renowned *imams* from the Middle East to lead the *terawih*.

These prayer sessions often end with a small supper served in the courtyard of the mosques, where the food is often brought by the local community or contributed by individuals to be shared with everyone. There is a feeling of camaraderie as everyone sits close together, sharing a meal and enjoying the company of one another.

### **The Ramadan Bazaar**

Apart from the spiritual and religious practices of the Muslim community in the country, many non-Muslim Malaysians also look forward to the month as it is also a time for them to enjoy the various traditional food that are sold in the local Ramadan bazaar. These bazaars - with traders lined up along a whole stretch of road in most residential areas - sprout around the country during the month and are welcomed by Malaysians from all walks of life.

Visiting a Ramadan bazaar is like taking a culinary walk through Malaysia with all kinds of scents and sights greeting you as you slowly make your way from one stall to another...the smoky aroma of chicken satay cooking over charcoal flames...fish delicately wrapped in banana leaf and grilled on a smoking plate...*ayam golek* or chicken marinated in herbs and spices, spinning slowly on the rotisserie. It's enough to make you stand transfixed, weighing in your choices of either buying the satay, the grilled fish or perhaps the tender, juicy and succulent roasted chicken.

At another end of the bazaar you will probably find a Kelantanese <sup>1</sup>couple selling the *kuih akok*, a popular Kelantan<sup>2</sup> sweet cake, made from a mixture of duck eggs, coconut milk and brown sugar. The taste and texture of the *kuih akok* is similar to crème brulee, delicious despite its humble appearance.

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<sup>1</sup> People of the state of Kelantan

<sup>2</sup> A state in north-east of Peninsular Malaysia

Fancy a taste of Terengganu<sup>3</sup>? Head on over to the stalls selling *nasi dagang*, a mix of white and brown glutinous rice cooked in coconut milk infused with blended onions, garlic and spices such as the fenugreek. The dish is complemented with a side of fish curry and pickled vegetables. Don't forget Malaysia's famous *laksa* dishes - thick, white noodles served with sweet, sour and spicy fish broth and whose recipes differ slightly depending on its state of origin.

To further titillate your gastronomy experience, stop by for some *murtabaks*, a thick meat or chicken patty mixed with onions, herbs and eggs stacked high by the frying pan just waiting to be packed and sold. For those looking for something sweet, the *tepung pelita* is a must try. A two-layered dessert encased in a small square box made from banana leaf, the *tepung pelita* is a rice custard gently steamed to achieve a soft and creamy texture with a hint of saltiness in its top layer.

These Ramadan bazaars are not only for food enthusiasts. Those with an eye for photography will find the vibrant colours of the food and the lively characters of the hawkers and customers a challenge for the lenses to capture.

For days when you wish to dine out, many hotels and restaurants feature Ramadan buffets offering a variety of choice. Most hotels even have a dedicated space for the convenience of its guests to perform the *terawih* prayers.

Even though Malaysia is a multiracial country, tourists visiting in the month of Ramadan will not face any problems in scouring around for food or getting around the country during the day as restaurants, shopping establishments and government offices open for business as usual.

### **Preparing for Aidilfitri**

Towards the end of Ramadan, malls are packed with families scouting for clothing and household items to welcome Aidilfitri, the Islamic celebration indicating the end of the fasting month. It is quite a festive sight to see as these families try on colourful traditional Malay garments like the *baju kurung* for the women and the *baju Melayu* and *songkok* for the men while festive songs are heard through the speakers.

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<sup>3</sup> A state in the eastern coast of Peninsular Malaysia

Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman in Kuala Lumpur, a long stretch of street well known for its weekend night market becomes more lively than usual as traders set up their stalls after the *terawih* prayers every night. The whole long stretch of Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman overflows with traders selling bags, shoes, clothes, cookies and decorative ornaments with business owners trying to lure customers to stop and buy at their stalls with their amusing antics. For a good bargain, try to visit the night market a day or two before Aidilfitri as the traders usually lower their prices to get rid of excess stock before the festive holidays.

As the month of Ramadan draws to a close, many homes especially in the villages are decorated with oil lamps or colourful electric bulbs to welcome the month of Syawal. It is during this period that Malaysians regardless of race or religion look forward to returning to their hometown or as the locals call it *balik kampung* to spend the holidays with family and friends, bringing with them the greatest message of Ramadan, which is patience and humility.

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