

Happy New Year 2006, (1498 Muslim Year of the Dog). It's amazing how time goes by so fast when there's only one season, HOT!!

I've spent the last three months traveling along the peninsula of Malaysia. I'm beginning to learn the meaning of being a Malaysian...Mekan (FOOD). Especially during the holidays and in a country with three major races and cultures there are plenty of national celebrations.

The Muslim holiday of Hari Raya Puasa was the beginning of the holiday season and the end of my school year. Almost 60% of the population in Malaysia are Malays and have to be Muslim. Fasting, no eating or drinking, is a Muslim requirement during daylight hours during the tenth lunar month. I was only successful in keeping the fast when I went to stay with a Malay family the last week of Puasa. However, The breaking of the fast, Hairi Raya Aidil Fitri, was well worth the wait. I was invited to the Sultan of Perak's Palace to begin the month long celebration. I met the royal family and dined with the very elite of Perak. Malaysia is the only country to have a rotating king. The 11 sultans rotate every five years, they have no more then ceremonial purposes, but are highly respected.

November first was the beginning of Deepavali, the Hindu "Festival of Lights". A month long celebration where Malaysian Indians open their houses to friends and family for curry, murtabak, minyak, tosai, and of course rice, all traditional Indian Cuisine. I have attended many "open houses" where traditional foods are served and gifts of money are exchanged, (Empow).

During the school holiday I had a chance to travel to the southern most point of continental Asia with the other exchange students. We traveled along the west coast stopping in Melaka, a historical city with a strong Portuguese history. We also spent time in Pontian, a small, but famous fishing village on the Melaka Straight. We stayed a week with families in Johor Bahru before going on to Singapore. We ended the trip at a resort on the island of Tioman in the South China Sea.

I celebrated Christmas with my second host family, who are Chinese. I went Christmas Caroling with their church on Christmas Eve and had turkey for Christmas day. I spent New Years in Kuala Lumpur at a Rotary Conference and saw the fireworks under the Petronas Twin Towers. I started school on the 3 Jan and began a water cleaning project with the schools Interact Club.

I'm getting ready for Chinese New Year with lanterns and new cakes. My Rotary Exchange allows me to bring in the New Year twice with new family and friends and it is also giving me a wonderful new perspective on life and our global community. So thank you Rotary for an experience of a life time and Live the NEW YEAR!!! Hidup Tahun Baru!!!