



# A Cool Christmas in Malaysia's High Country

Photojournalist **David Bowden** travels to two hill retreats to appreciate that, for the 2020 holiday season, this is close as you can get to a traditional European Christmas setting in tropical Malaysia.

**C**hristmas is a season of joy, a time to spend with family and friends, and a welcome break from work for most expats living in Malaysia. In previous years – that is to say pre-pandemic – Christmas was also a time for many expats to return to their home countries to celebrate the holidays.

Covid-19, however, has changed the way many of us celebrate festivals and take holidays, and this year will see most expats in the country enjoying Christmas right here in Malaysia. All is not lost though, as this year can still be

the season to be jolly and to even holiday in destinations which are vaguely reminiscent of the foreign lands many of us hail from and yearn for during the festive season.

While it will not snow in the Cameron Highlands or Fraser's Hill, these two hill stations are as close as Malaysia comes to a traditional European Christmas setting.

## HEAD FOR THE HILLS

Resident expats are coming to appreciate the value of having these two montane holiday destinations so

close to Kuala Lumpur, especially with Christmas just around the corner. Historically, hill stations developed as restive retreats for expats then working in the tropical climes of Malaya. Today, Malaysia has five such destinations (including Cameron Highlands and Fraser's Hill), with the first established on Penang Hill (arguably the first in the world) and the others being Bukit Larut (or Maxwell Hill) in Perak, plus the Genting Highlands together with Bukit Tinggi, both in Pahang. Similarly, the French and the Dutch also developed hill stations of their own in the countries they previously colonised in the Southeast Asia region.

It is worth noting that these destinations developed and evolved in an era of limited mobility and transportation infrastructure and colonial employment contracts that extended over many months or years. In those days, expats were often



Boh Tea, Cameron Highlands



Sunset and tree palm, Fraser's Hill





assigned to remote agricultural estates where socialising with others was limited. The weekends and periods of extended leave were important times to escape and fraternise with like-minded people.

A journey from the Klang Valley to the highlands is still an adventure today, but in the early 20th century, it was often quite arduous. However, the rewards were worth the effort, as the cool, fresh air satisfied those who saw the forested mountains as perfect retreats for recreation, rest, and recuperation.

#### **FRASER'S HILL**

During and just after World War I, many mountains throughout the British Empire were also considered as destinations for ex-servicemen and women to recover from injuries or just to recuperate from the stresses of war. The potential for Fraser's Hill to be utilised for such purposes was

identified as early as 1917 by the Right-Rev. C. J. Ferguson-Davie, the Anglican Bishop of Singapore. At the time, he was holidaying at the Gap Resthouse, and upon his return to his flock, submitted a report to the colonial administrators suggesting the establishment of a hill station at Fraser's Hill.

The Gap was a strategic stop on the initial road across the Main Range from what was then Kuala Kubu (now Kuala Kubu Bharu) to Raub and Kuala Lipis in the east. What started as a bridle trail to accommodate ponies that transported tin down from the mountains was carved through the steep forested terrain in the 1880s. In 1898, the Gap Government Resthouse with four bedrooms and a restaurant opened to accommodate travellers on this route. It quickly established itself as a destination for a change, to honeymoon or for a holiday. Sadly, the

resthouse is now in ruin and looks to be beyond salvaging.

It's worth noting the comparisons between then and now. While peace was declared in November 1918, Malaya was affected in the latter half of the year by pneumonic influenza or what is commonly known as the Spanish Flu. Reports suggest that 34,644 people in Peninsular Malaya and North Borneo died from the outbreak in that period. With a population then of 3.58 million, this represented an alarming one percent of the population – equivalent to the impact of over 320,000 deaths in the country during the current, ongoing pandemic!

Funds were raised to establish three convalescent homes at Fraser's Hill for ex-service personnel to rest and recuperate. The most significant for contemporary travellers is the Red Cross Bungalow, which now operates





as Ye Olde Smokehouse, a boutique heritage hotel. Completed in 1924, servicemen and women of all ranks who had fought in the Great War had access to the facility. In 1988, the property was converted to Ye Olde Smokehouse. (There is a similarly named property in the Cameron Highlands, but they are operated independently of each other.) With just 16 rooms, a lounge, restaurant, and bar, the hotel offers all the charm of an old English inn, with the rooms incorporating good facilities including ensuite bathrooms. While it doesn't offer the facilities of modern hotels, most guests choose to stay here for its character and old world charm. The hotel is perfect for those who appreciate an unhurried rest, but it could frustrate those who demand

unfettered connectivity to the contemporary world.

Guests can enjoy a modest but delightful afternoon spread of scones, strawberry jam, clotted cream, and tea. There is a small bar with an open fireplace and an adjoining restaurant that serves English fare. Guests checking in for Christmas can expect a traditional Christmas feast.

In the village, just down the road from Ye Olde Smokehouse, Scott's Pub and Restaurant offers a similar ambiance. Both properties are under the same ownership, and the pub serves similar culinary delights and the opportunity to toast everyone's good health with a cool adult beverage (something which is not commonly available elsewhere

at Fraser's Hill). The pub is fitted out with a bar and English country house furniture to recreate the atmosphere of an English country inn. A fireplace, wooden floors, and exposed beams provide a relaxed and inviting setting.

While Ye Olde Smokehouse offers a restful retreat, those seeking a more active holiday should consider the family-owned and operated MCM Nature Discovery Villa. This is a perfect choice for families or those looking to do more than just relax, as there are numerous activities available from archery and fishing to nature walks, mini-golf, and a rock wall. Some rooms are themed while the Tree House offers a unique experience with stunning views. Owners Stephen and Salmiah prepare some amazing home-cooked meals with a special festive menu being prepared for Christmas. This property also has a substantive library where families are encouraged to read together. The owners also operate Stephen's Place just up the road for visitors who are interested in discovering more about the rich and complex flora and fauna of Fraser's Hill.

Puncak Inn, meanwhile, operates a small modern hotel, as well as managing several heritage colonial bungalows in the vicinity.

There are various activities to participate in during Christmas in the cool montane air of Fraser's Hill. The 'hill' actually extends over seven hills







Ye Olde Smokehouse, Fraser's Hill

ranging from about 1,200m in elevation to the highest point of Bukit Pokok Pine at 1,456m and there are eight walking trails.

For decades, Fraser's Hill provided a venue for a relaxing holiday and for many; it was *the* holiday destination as there were few other accessible options in Malaya or in neighbouring countries. Nowadays, travellers have many travel alternatives, although Covid-19 has clipped the wings of many travellers to ensure those destinations closer to home now have greater appeal.

#### HIGHLAND HOLIDAY

Malaysia's best-known hill retreat is the sprawling Cameron Highlands, and it, too, is looking more inviting as a destination in which to celebrate Christmas this year. Devonshire teas and other colonial staples such as beef and Yorkshire pudding may seem out of place in Malaysia, but considering the cooler weather in the highlands, it almost feels like nothing else *should* be served. Cameron Highlands Resort and The Lakehouse look as British as Anne Hathaway's cottage at Stratford-Upon-Avon. The mock Tudor



The Lakehouse, Cameron Highlands

architecture, temperate gardens, log fireplaces, and afternoon teas make both these intimate hotels perfect venues to relax and ponder a European-style Christmas.

While extensively modernised, the deep leather lounges, fireplaces, brass fittings, and period lights at Cameron Highlands Resort provide a reassuring reminder of bygone days. Life here moves at a different pace to the

outside world where cream teas and evening drinks served in front of the log fireplace are important elements of the refined lifestyle offered. The Reading Room looks more like a library or gentleman's club than a hotel lounge, and it was just the place for me to read my book relating the tale of the disappearance of Jim Thompson in the highlands several decades ago. It offers a timely warning that anyone contemplating a forest





Devonshire tea with a view at Boh Tea, Cameron Highlands



## TRAVEL FILE

### Fraser's Hill

#### Getting There

The quickest and shortest route (100km) from Kuala Lumpur is to travel north along the North South Highway taking Exit 121 at Tanjong Malim. This connects to Road 1 through to Kuala Kubu Bharu. From here; travel eastward on Road 55 to the Gap and up to Fraser's Hill.

#### Places to Stay

MCM Nature Discovery Villa ([mcmoutdoorcenter.com](http://mcmoutdoorcenter.com)), Puncak Inn ([puncakinn.pkbf.gov.my](http://puncakinn.pkbf.gov.my)), Stephen's Place ([stephens-place.co.uk](http://stephens-place.co.uk)), and Ye Olde Smokehouse ([thesmokehouse.my](http://thesmokehouse.my)).

### Cameron Highlands

#### Getting There

The highlands are 200km north of Kuala Lumpur, with the old road (59) connecting Tapah to Ringlet while the new road (C181) links Brinchang to Simpang Pulai on the North South Highway.

#### Places to Stay

Cameron Highlands Resort ([cameronhighlandsresort.com](http://cameronhighlandsresort.com)) and The Lakehouse ([lakehouse-cameron.com](http://lakehouse-cameron.com)).

#### Reference

For those interested in the fascinating story of the man whose name was given to Fraser's Hill, seek out the excellent book written by Richard Hale (2018) *Fraser's Hill and Lewis J. Fraser of Singapore*, Entrepot Publishing. Likewise, the perfect book for background reading on the Cameron Highlands is the one about the mysterious disappearance of silk baron Jim Thompson – *Jim Thompson: The Unsolved Mystery* (2007) by William Warren, Editions Didier Millet.

walk in the highlands is advised to do it with the expert guidance offered by the resort's naturalist.

After dinner, there is always time for a game of snooker and a nightcap before retiring. Nightlife in the highlands is limited, to put it charitably, but evenings are restful and the cool mountain air guarantees a restful sleep. Those who stay here during Christmas can look forward to a memorable dining celebration with turkey and all the trimmings. To complete the scene, visitors can play a round of golf at the course located immediately opposite Cameron Highlands Resort.

From the township of Tanah Rata in the centre of the highlands, it's a short drive to the Boh Tea Estate at Sungai Palas just north of Brinchang. The narrow winding road into the estate passes through hillsides carpeted in emerald green tea plants that contribute to some of Malaysia's best known tea brands. It's a beautiful, bucolic scene, and the landscape is further punctuated with a few colourful Indian temples and narrow paths used by the tea pickers. Visitors can relax in the gardens and the tea rooms of the estate, sip a delicious

cuppa, enjoy some wonderful cakes, and buy tea-related products in the well-stocked shop. A visit to the Boh Tea Estate is a highly recommended part of any visit to the Cameron Highlands area.

The towns of Cameron Highlands are much more developed than Fraser's Hill, and in addition to the industrial-scale agricultural pursuits in some areas, there are also lots of tourist attractions, including rose gardens, honey farms, market gardens, strawberry nurseries, and fresh produce markets. There are numerous accommodation options, too, ranging from small local inns to more substantive hotels. It is worth noting that the Cameron Highlands is a popular holiday destination with residents from Greater KL and well beyond, and the narrow roads can get quite congested during festive breaks.

While Malaysia does not offer the festive air of a European Christmas, both Fraser's Hill and Cameron Highlands are as close as the country comes to a northern-latitude Christmas setting, especially welcomed in these unprecedented times. ■



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