

Greg, Karen, Claire and Annette Baker's Holidays in Malaysia, July 2004

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saying goodbye to Claire, and risked having her car towed away in order to give my wallet to the ground staff at 1:59pm (for the 2:00 MH122). We waited outside immigration until 1:50 to see if we could meet up, but she had taken the far way around to get to the international terminal. Just as we were really getting into a panic that we wouldn't make it before the plane left, we were stopped by immigration - Karen's visa in Australia had been mishandled - and so we had to waste precious minutes talking to customs about what to do when we get back.

Then there was too much baggage on the plane, and they had been given a flight path that was higher than they expected, and so had to wait for ages to get extra fuel. So nobody really needed to rush at all! The flight attendant was named Pearly Lim - I kept having the tune to the Beatle's "Penny Lane" run through my head - she lived up to her name by having an usually copious amount of eyeshadow and eyelash extender. She rummaged through Malaysian airlines' stock of children's activities and came up with a packaged game for 6-10 year olds. Claire's quite precocious, but we didn't try it on her.

During takeoff, Claire sucked on some juice and then fell asleep immediately. We stretched her out over two seats, which left me standing up for the first 1.5 hours. The meals came around, and we tried to work out whether it is possible to eat aeroplane food standing up. Claire chose that moment to wake up. Her children's meal had chips, a burger, a bread roll and a kit-kat. She just ate the tomato sauce and butter by dipping her fingers in and then sucking them. We both had a remarkably good

salmon. Clare. when she first saw the apples on the front menu. decided that they were "like a toilet". We don't know why. We also don't know why she described the plane as "like a bus with a roof."

We gave Claire some jigsaws designed for three-year-olds, which she was interested in, but not overly challenged by. Karen's cache of threading games, tiny wooden toys and an erasable drawing board came out one by one and kept Claire quite entertained. Annette had bought some golden books and a car for Claire, which we nearly immediately lost. I had copied lots of her favourite DVDs and VCDs on to my laptop hard disk. Until I figured out that the sound wasn't really at maximum we couldn't make it loud enough to hear over the engine noise, but eventually I sorted it out, and that kept her occupied for a while.

Karen also bought a Miffy doll, made out of a beautiful cuddly material. Claire dropped her in her lunch, and I suggested that she had fallen ear-first into the chips. This then led on to a game of Miffy doing various acrobatic dives. One particularly silly one was the triple summersault with ear-pike, and unique kind of act only performable by rabbits and other animals with long ears.

As we ran out of things to do, we built a tent across the seats using a blanket. I suggested that we should leave it up during landing. If any of the flight staff asked. we would reply that we were flightists and that it was our religion that we had to huddle under such a structure whenever we stopped flying.

I wasn't encouraged to hear the muzak playing during landing was "say a little prayer for me". We landed one minute late

at 8:46. We rushed out. through customs (Claire by this time had distinct tiredness sillies and was rushing around darting and dodging through the queues and around in front of the lines wanting to be chased.) We made it to the connecting flight just in time for when boarding was supposed to happen... but it was late. We wandered through to board some time around 10:00pm Malaysian time.

The safety video suffered a semi-catastrophic failure as it dissolved into a blur of static.. The reading lights wouldn't turn on. And the five minute fix for the cargo door held us up from takeoff until 11:15pm. The end result was that we spent far more time in the aeroplane on the tarmac than we did in the air for the thirty-five minute flight.

Fortunately. the hotel taxi driver waited for us. and we got into the hotel about 1:00. Claire slept at about midnight. but woke up again once we got to our room. Which was an ordeal in itself. because the hotel had confused our booking. and had us staying in the same room with Annette.

2 4th July 2004 - Eating, eating, sleeping

Claire somehow managed to get up at her normal time - 9:15 Sydney time, or 7:15 Malaysian time. In the night, Claire decided that she couldn't sleep without being near Karen, so I got pushed out to her bed. She woke up bright eyed, announcing to Karen that she "wanted to play toys, go outside, go in an aeroplane". I slept through most of this! They had breakfast

and went for a swim.

The breakfast area was so full for them that they were upstairs from the restaurant. Annette had charkueytiao for the first time, and liked it, which isn't surprising because she and I have similar tastes and I quite like it. I got up a bit before 10 (still tired!) and went with my usual hotel breakfast rules (try to eat so much that they lose money on you, and so that you don't need to each much for the rest of the day). I joined the others at the pool, and splashed around with Claire. We did some sandcastle building on the beach just outside the hotel and then swam some more. Then it suddenly started to rain. Except that the rain was so short-lived that it had stopped by the time we had got to our towels.

I woke up Annette, who had fallen asleep while reading on a banana chair. I told that there was a quick tropical storm on. In a dazed blur, this teacher of geography asked "do they happen often around here?" I replied that yes, since we were in the tropics, this did happen.

I read a few wonderful stories from Stephen Baxter's "Phase Space" collection. Then we all gathered at the Tamerind restaurant to have lunch. Since I'd only had breakfast three hours earlier, I tried the lightest lunch on offer (which was the charkueytiao Annette had had in the morning). Timothy had it as well, but the others went for the vast buffet on offer. We even took photographs of the lunch.

Claire was grumpy and tired and not too hungry, so I took her to the children's playroom. Two other children put "Finding Nemo" on. Claire raced over to watch the previews and advertisements. As soon as the movie started, she lost interest, which

was pretty much what happened when I took her to see it in the cinema about a year ago.

Aileen wanted to look after Claire for the afternoon, so I went back to the room, got my mobile's voicemail changed, had a two hour sleep and then started working on my fast website blacklisting program. Karen, Annette and Timothy drove around Penang. They found a museum of the history of Penang (quite good), an old fort and a durian market. Annette actually ate one - and went for seconds!

We went to "Eden" for dinner, which had a cultural show on. This consisted of a few Malay and one or two vaguely Chinese-looking dancers doing performances from various parts of the country. This ranged from being almost Thai (lots of swirling silk and short pointy headpieces) to Chinese (a woman with too-long sleeves trying to cross her arms or direct traffic perhaps), oddly Middle Eastern (reedy music while people did martial arts that might have frightened a nervous mouse, but little more), Indian (sitars twanging slightly out of time with people raising and dropping their eyebrows), a peacock dance (including funny head bobbing movements) and some tribal things from Sabah and Sarawak (what could we do with some spare bamboo poles and some thin shields? We could try eating the shields. We could clap the sticks together. We could pretend they are very stiff skipping ropes. Or maybe we could lift one of the female dancers up to stand high in the air. Any other ideas?)

Claire was fascinated from beginning to end. She asked where the dancers had gone afterwards Annette saw the differing muscle definition between one dancers quadriceps

and triceps and worried about his future back problems. I noticed how they weren't in sync.

On the way back Annette wanted to check out the night stalls, but Aileen wouldn't let her go alone. So I tagged along. We were looking for a new wallet for her (which she bargained down admirably). On the way I spotted a cart of CDs and stopped to find any new A=mei albums. Which I think I did, only I don't know whether it's just a re-packaging of something else. The salesman talked me into buying Sammi Cheng and Jiaolin(?) as well, but as the whole package was only 20 Ringit I didn't think it particularly extravagant.

3 5th July 2004 - leisurely sight-seeing

Claire woke up about 8:00 and spent the next hour whispering things to herself, such as the complete lyrics to the Miffy theme song. Aileen and Timothy took her down to breakfast, where she wouldn't eat anything, until Annette struck a deal - if you eat something, we can go for a swim together. She immediately started wolfing down everything on her plate, and dragged an extra pancake away with her when she left the table.

By the time Karen and I got up and had breakfast (half an hour of eating), she suddenly wanted to find us. I had had an odd experience - the waiter searched around for an empty table, which I then left untouched while I went to grab some juice - only to get back and find that I was about to sit opposite to a Moslem woman who had been

assigned the same table (presumably by a different waiter, or perhaps by the same one who wanted to see what happened.)

We spent a while rounding everyone into one room and we planned the rest of the day - Aileen wanted to stay at the hotel and play with Claire and the rest of us wanted to go out, so we did.

Claire did some painting and "cooking" (using plastic food and plastic ovens).

Our first goal was Bukit Bintarang, which is a steep railway up to the top of Penang. When we got there, it was needing repairs and was closed. Which is better than it needing repairs but still running, I suppose. The next nearest place of interest was Kok Li Temple. The rather long stairway up to it is made slightly more difficult to traverse by the entire pathway being lined by permanent make-shift stalls selling tourist knick-knacks. Think rainforest jungle with T-shirts instead of ferns. At the end of the stairway lies a turtle pond. Without looking up from reading her Chinese newspaper the nearest stall holder announced 1 Ringit packets of dry bread to feed them, and suggested ice-cream and cold drink for us - in an infinite loop until we were out of hearing range.

It then started raining with tropical enthusiasm. We climbed some more stairs to reach the temple proper. There were many completely incomprehensible statues of Buddha standing on top of green or black people (a bit racist to my thinking, particularly against green people). Further along there was a 45-degree inclined lift to go up to the very top of the temple area. It must have been quite a feat of engineering to build, through thick jungle at an awful angle. Karen didn't want to go on this as the

fees were going towards the temple building fund. The rest of us went, and this did give Annette and I a chance to take photos of a decent view of Georgetown.

The bronze Buddha statue is impressive for its height - perhaps 30-40 metres. It is believed to be the largest in the world. They plan to build a pagoda over it, and a thousand 6-foot statues around the base.

This made me think. If my money had been spent on evangelising Buddhism, I would have been more reluctant to hand it over. But as it was, I could echo the Old Testament prophets - why are you worshipping idols of wood and stone made by human craftsmen? Yes, I know Buddhists don't literally worship the statue, but western capitalists don't bow down before Mammon literally either. If your energies go in building large gaudy monuments, eventually people will tire of it is utter and complete meaninglessness.

My prediction - one day, Christian archaeologists will dig up a giant pagoda-protected statue on the ancient island of Penang and will try to figure which sect of the ancient and long-forgotten Buddhist religious groups built it.

We then went into town to Komtar(?) and wandered around trying to find a food court. We toured the tourist information centres (there were several, all quite unique and each with a particular different culture). After getting completely lost trying to find the fifth floor food court, we found a nice cheap Chinese bar, and we had various soupy-noodly things, which came very quickly. We bought a SIM card for Annette (no, we don't take credit cards - too much fraud; no, can't take 100 Ringit note - no change). It was with DiGicall, which didn't

have much reception in the places we went over the following days. But it was a cheap way of making calls in Malaysia using an Australian phone.

Finally Annette and Karen needed to go the toilet. I was looking forward to this moment, to see Annette's first reaction to Malaysian public toilets. Disappointingly, she handled it easily = the mess was no worse than doing it in the forest and the smell was "tolerable" (even Karen found it pretty bad). We stopped by at some Buddhist temples - one Thai and another Burmese, all it loud yellows, and with dubious English signs. The Thai one first - a very long and remarkably lean Buddha reclining, with a variety of other statues and pictures around. There was a special note of commendation from the Penang Tourism board, praising them for their cleanliness. One amusing note was a collection of statues, one labelled for each day of the week, with donation boxes and a description of what you should pray for that day - health, prosperity, others feeling pity for you (why is this good?). It struck me as very much like the buying of indulgences in pre-reformation Europe. Only they'd spread it out over the week, rather than just when someone died. The Burmese one was more interesting. firstly, there were signs prohibiting the hanging of material on the outside fence. Presumably posters are OK, as long as they aren't made of material. And spray paint would obviously be fine. Inside were various posters of the life of Buddha - which struck me as a curious mixture of superstition (lots of battling dragons and flying up to various sky castles and heavens) and vaguely historical accounts. I was amused by one picture depict-

ing a beautiful woman who was announcing to all and sundry that Buddha had slept with her. It set me thinking - if anyone had tried that on Jesus, would the charge have stuck? Somehow, I doubt it - I can't imagine that anyone close to Jesus would have believed it. Or more likely, that he was followed by so many prostitutes that no one would have known what to think, and he would have just ignored the accusations. A pagoda also showed Buddha statues from different countries around the world - all had weirdly shaped ears, but the height and tummy-size changes greatly. We came back to do some laundry and laze around in the pool. Timothy produced some more discount vouchers for a hotel restaurant (where Karen and I had been before many years ago). This time they had skipped with the clang-a-bell-before-each-course routine, which did get a bit tedious. Annette commented that she looked at the prices and was a bit taken aback- but then converted them into Australian dollars, and realised she was eating out quite cheaply.

We also discovered that Annette was getting a lot of complimentary items that we weren't - biscuits and water bottles every day. Why is she so special?

4 6th July 2004

Claire got herself a floaty ring. She was crying this morning when Annette took her for a swim. One of the other children had tried to use the ring down the water slide, but it was too small for anyone much over the age of two. So he gave it to her to make her feel better.

The car hire agent dropped the car over

to us. Annette and I tried to figure out why her pre-paid card wouldn't work in her phone when it worked fine in mine, and watched as Karen took care of everything. Karen, Annette and Timothy then went to the nearby tropical fruit exhibition. But at 20 Ringit per person, Timothy announced that that was too expensive to be just shown his childhood. So they went hunting for durians instead. Annette actually quite enjoyed it, much to Timothy's delight.

Meanwhile, Claire and I played in the children's room. Eventually that got boring, and we started playing in the ball pit - but for some reason she wanted to hear the Hippopotamus Song ("Mud, Mud Glorious Mud") continually. We then went to the beach, and the game was for me to stand still and have the waves wash around my legs. She didn't want to be on the ground - she just wanted to see me get wet. In the end she got her wish, when it started pelting down with rain. She didn't quite understand why we had to get under cover then - "where's the pitter=patter gone?"

Timothy and Aileen had to go home, so Karen took the afternoon shift looking after Claire (she slept for two hours!). Annette wrote some more of her play, and I read some more Steven Baxter and worked on my high-speed blacklisting program. When Claire woke up, she went for a swim, and chased after a Moslem family's three kids, and learned a few words of Malay in the process. Their mother (dressed in the full black Darth Vader costume that the more extreme Islamic groups force on their womenfolk) said hello to Claire. Claire peered up at the eyeslit and Karen could see that she was about to say "peekaboo" until Karen

stopped her.

We were all so stuffed we couldn't be bothered having dinner, and went out for a walk. We did notice a nearby shop offering "full English breakfasts, including real bacon" (directly opposite a proudly Halal restaurant and the local mosque - which was nearly empty even though it was evening prayer time. Annette and Karen bought sarongs - which is not easy when both refuse to wear flowers. In the end they found what they were looking for in a shop so filled with incense that I was coughing out in the street.

5 July 7th 2004 - Penang to the Cameron Highlands

After agreeing to get up and ready to leave the hotel by 9:45, I slept in. So did Claire (yay!). We stumbled around and I finished breakfast at 10:30. Claire wanted to play in the kids club again, so Karen packed. Our room was a complete mess, so this took some time with some minor scares such as "where are the car keys - did Timothy taken them with him back to Kuala Lumpur?" Anyway, by the crack of 11:15 we bundled into the car (to discover that the car seat was buckled in using a most creative topology) and Annette drove off to the Botanical Gardens. Despite my navigation skills (errm, I can't say any reference to the "New Bob Centre" on my map) and the general disinterest in following road rules in Malaysia, we made it. Annette showed her usual fast adaptive skills and was driving aggressively and forcefully after about three

lane changes.

The Botanical Garden car park is guarded by a man on a motorcycle who demands payments of 2 Ringit, but then doesn't give you a receipt for it, nor puts any kind of mark on your car. Since his only identifying attribute is a sort of traffic guidance jacket (yellow reflective bee-combs), we weren't even sure if he had any legal right to demand it anyway.

Eventually we walked in, discovered that "Ipoh" is a poisonous sap of a tree (useful next time I'm making some poison-tipped darts), marvelled at a bridge some 8-10 metres above the river water level which had once been destroyed by flood waters, and fed Claire biscuits and muffins about five times, we met a family of monkeys. Claire was very excited, and made me sing "Jimmy Monkey" repeatedly to express how wonderful this all was.

We had planned on having a picnic in the gardens, but the concierge was determined that it was a really, really bad idea. We discovered why, when we encountered a man (with his quite human family) illegally feeding peanuts - the monkeys got very aggressive, and managed to round us up and away from "their" part of the park. So we wandered past the herbarium (nothing too smelly), and past the sign to the epiphytes (we think we know what that means) and over to the grand old orchidarium. The building looks as though parts of it date back to Victorian England (which it probably does). The outside is about all we saw of it, because it is only open for viewing in the morning. (Do orchids have an afternoon nap? Do they get stressed like koalas from too much attention?) The monkeys were climbing over and down this too, and it

was hard to get Claire out some food without them noticing. It got really challenging when she wanted a nappy change - we decided not to risk it and went away as fast as we could.

The way back to the car had us run into a small lizard that we couldn't recognise and some butterflies.

We headed back, had some lunch in the hotel, checked out and then Claire and I had a swim. A better sequence would have been to swim first, then check out, because then we could have used the towels made available to guests. So at 3:30pm, we set out to get the Camerons, expecting a three to four hour trip. This time I was driving, and decided to take a shortcut along Jalan Fettes, which turns into a very impressively-named highway. It was mostly bluster, as the "highway" suddenly stopped and turned into a driveway. A few roughly-guessed turns later (our map didn't have this level of detail) and we found our way out again.

The Pinang bridge is always impressive. We crossed at high tide, and we could see the bare fragments of islands scattered across the strait. Does it need dredging? It seems that the depth of water has changed since I remember it (in 1994). I was amazed at the speed at which people drove - one particularly optimistic driver was pushing his Kancil at around 130-140km/h over the bridge, and it was a great insult to his dignity, his family and his ancestors that I had chosen to use the overtaking lane to get past a slow moving truck when I surely should have known that he would appear to take his rightful place there at that moment.

The journey out of Butterworth and through Perak was uneventful. We popped

into Kuala Kansar, a pretty little town which houses the gallery of Sultan Azlan Shah (a fine man indeed, from what Karen described of him and his family) - a gallery large enough that he had to get special permission to tax his state higher than the neighbours. We arrived there too late (after 5:00pm) to actually go in, but we looked around from the outside. Then we went down to the nearby Obadiah Mosque (which had visiting hours between 5:30 and 6:00pm). This involved Karen and Annette swathing themselves in sarongs, and me changing out of shorts and into trousers in the car. However, it was all worth it, as it is one of the most beautiful buildings to look at, and the workmanship in it is - well, done to glorify God.

Karen didn't want to take Claire in, so they fed Tiny Teddies and other junk food to a scrawny but gorgeous cat that was mewling outside. Annette and I found ourselves wondering why we didn't find this mosque as offensive to the spirit as the previous days' buddhist temples. We thought of a couple of reasons - unlike Buddhism, Islam is a religion, not a mix of local superstition tied in with some occasionally intelligent philosophy; Moslems don't bow down to worship their statues - they build beautiful buildings as a response to God's actions in this world, so they are much like Christian churches; as next-door neighbours, western and middle-eastern architecture have grown in similar directions, unlike the very alienness of the far east.. Much ruminating later, we drove past Ipoh to Simpang Pulai, where we had on good authority been told there was a short cut. In my usually incomprehensible Malay, I got some confirmation about this. It was only when

we past the famous limestone caves *way* north of Simpang Pulai that we got the feeling that something had gone wrong. Karen popped into the local Caltex to ask the way, and was told to drive south, and take the last road left just before the second set of traffic lights. We drove south, encountered two sets of traffic lights (and no left turns), and tried again at the Shell station. Karen came out giggling, because she got told to "keep on driving south, and to take the last road left just before the second set of traffic lights". Which we did, and this time it worked.

I couldn't figure out the speed limit - but it was so wet I stuck to around 60. This road - which is new, and for which we don't really have a name - is somewhat empty of human habitation. We counted down the road markers to "Pos Slim" and realised with horror that we would not be there until well after the time we needed to feed Claire. Worse, when we got to "zero", we drove past a few small huts, and the countdown began again. Then we got stuck in a single lane behind a truck, travelling at less than 10km/h. It was a scary moment when I realised that if we wanted to get to the highlands before dawn (12 hours away!), that I would have to overtake - across a double line, on a slippery road, in total darkness, through mist that gave only a few tens of metres of visibility, uphill. Somehow we survived, and no cars were coming the other way to meet us head-on.

Time lumbered past as it does, and we worked out that getting to Brinchang would probably take us to 9:00. Annette began to get cramps - she has to eat on a very strict timetable if she doesn't want to be in agony. Claire was very hungry, very tired

and understandably very upset. We could not stop anywhere to eat - there was nothing on the way. Claire munched through some chips (what an unhealthy diet she has had today - biscuits in the morning in the park, a milkshake and some fries was all she ate for lunch, and now snacks instead of dinner!).

We saw some odd sights on the way - suddenly after we were over the border into Pahang the road improved remarkably, and we saw large canopies across fields lit to mid-day levels. We joked that it looked like a scene from the X-Files, but reasoned it must be strawberries or some other fast-growable fruit. And Trinkap (which we got to later) gave us a giggle because I thought that in teetoling Islamic Malaysia, someone had name their town "Drink Up" - surely an outback Australian town name somewhere!

Kampung Rajah is not a town that it is otherwise worthy of much notice, but we were very delighted when we got to it. We tossed up eating dinner there, but with half an hour to go before we made it to the hotel, we decided against it. We did stop, got Annette some panadol, and raided the car boot for anything nutritious. I then made a wrong turn, and took us into what I hope was the not-so-good end of town (if it was the good end, bad end must have been a warzone), and another wrong turn had us headed back the way we came, and a few anxious moments as we found it was nearly impossible to turn around.

Nearly, but not completely impossible, and so the party of a (by now) screaming toddler, bad navigator and driver, pain-ridden passenger, and overly stressed mother-of-a-screaming toddler made it to the Equatorial Hotel in Brinchang. We

had booked a two-bedroom apartment, and picked up the keys from reception.

I lugged all the bags out of the car, up the stairs and into the unit. Then we noticed that the place stank - every cupboard was mouldy. All the cupboards were empty - no crockery, not cutlery, not even a glass or cup. Then we noticed that there was no cooktop, nor oven. Then the phone wasn't working. And the water pressure so low that the taps could barely turn on. So despite our exhaustion, we repacked all the bages and trundled back up to reception (several blocks away) and tried to come up with an alternative. We chose to stay into two hotel rooms. Because I was still in some semblance of a calm state, I took Claire to the coffee club to get her some dinner (at 10:00 at night!).

It was at this point that things got unimaginably more difficult and bizarre than they already had. The wait staff spoke no English. So I tried speaking Malay. Speaking foreign languages is not something I am good at. I counted up on my fingers and stammered "we are 1-2-3-5 humans. And baby here. Do you have a men's menu?" (I meant to say "children's menu"). I ordered some water, which came boiling hot (I think because water is in short supply in the Camerons and needs to be boiled to be safe to drink - they wouldn't have kept any spare in case anyone walked in late at night). I asked for some ice, which came in a coffee cup. I ordered a sandwich whose ingredients took up most of the line on the menu, on the grounds that it was easy to point to. Annette and Karen meanwhile were trying to get into our rooms (one doorhandle needed to be pulled up, the other down). They found a porter and a

parking spot and only lost each other a few times (and with no mobile phone coverage, had no way of just calling to find out what happened). They joined me in the Coffee Club at around 10:30, by which time they had just finished making Claire's sandwich - fast service!

Claire ate some of the cheese, and ignored everything else. Karen found a hotel shop that sold milk at extremely high prices, and we put Claire to bed (listening to her favourite going-to-sleep CD from my laptop). I went to the toilet, to discover that the toilet got stuck and was on the verge of overflowing. This seemed a fitting end to the day (as it was nearly midnight by now).

6 8th July 2004 - Offroad in a Proton Perdana

After the very late night last night, Claire woke up at 7:15, and helped Karen wake up by getting out of bed, creeping up to Karen and poking her nose into Karen's and yelling "wake up mummy!"

Annette and Karen had an odd experience at breakfast. The wait staff were preparing the table while they were standing by when another guest picked up their crockery from in front of them and took it to his table.

The weather was very clear in the morning, so we decided to go to the summit of Gunung Brinchang. The road is a little narrow (only just as wide as the car), very slippery and winds its way up to the highest point you can drive to in peninsular Malaysia. If you meet a car coming the

other way, you probably won't see it until a few metres away, and the two of you have to edge past each other with two wheels in the dirt on the side of the road. Sorry, you hope that if you veer half off the side of the road that you still actually have some ground underneath you. Anyway, we made it what we thought was the top ("you cannot go past this point without permission" - written in Malay in lettering that suggests an extreme fire danger warning), and then drove on to get to the telecommunications tower that really is the top. We tried climbing the bare-metal framework observation tower. Annette and Karen got right up to the top. While I was carrying Claire, I couldn't get much up past the first ladder. Even without Claire to unbalance me, I still found the height too frightening to make it past the second one. My excuse is that Malaysian buildings aren't built to the same safety standards as Australian ones. We tried taking a walk around the front of the telecommunications facility, but didn't get too far before it got too muddy and too dangerous for Claire. Also, mist and fog had set in, and the viewing range had dropped down to a few metres - not good for getting the sweep of the landscape. Claire got very interested in the flowers, and kept wanting us to stop to look at them. It wasn't until I realised that she was looking at tiny dandelion-like plants that were hiding underneath the grass stems. Ah to be less than three feet tall!

From there we went back down the mountain (very slowly!) and stopped along the way to take pictures of the worker huts for the local tea plantations. The Perdana nearly got stuck in the mud as we did this.

We went to the Boh tea plantation. I

had been there before in 1994 but had completely forgotten everything about it. I suspect in 2014 I will have forgotten the 5 minute tour through the noisy factory I had from a very softly (and quickly) spoken Indian woman. Karen and I had been talking about how crushing the poverty of being an tea plantation worker must be - the worker huts had a communal bathroom and most houses kept their own chickens. The Boh plantation had obviously made some attempts to improve things - a primary school on site for the children of workers, and also a Hindu temple. Reading some of the descriptions on the photos in the tea house, I saw that some families had lived 4 generations on site. Was this because we were wrong, and it was such a good life that no-one wanted to leave it, or because there was no way out of the poverty trap and that no-one could leave it? We went back past our hotel and on into Tanah Rajah. We were worried about food poisoning, so we went to a generic multinational prepackaged fast food store, which did appalling fried chicken, burgers that didn't taste like anything recognisable as food, a surprisingly good fried rice and a quite delicious chicken porridge. The porridge was for Claire, who wanted nothing of it (she didn't even trust the milo we served her).

Annette wanted to look through a well-written up souvenir shop, Karen wanted to put some clothes into a laundry (she found a cheap dry cleaner instead), and Claire needed some exercise. So I took her to the well-equipped park at the start of the town (on the aptly named "Big Street"). Since it was still drizzling, she got herself incredibly wet and muddy, but learned how to walk along a wet and slippery balance beam

(for some reason she counted her successful steps out loud). In the meantime, Karen and Annette bought some hawker-stall style curry.

We came back, and Karen gave Claire a bath while I tried to have a sleep (which was odd, because I'd had a sleep in in the morning anyway). We then went to see the hotel's private strawberry garden.

Our first mistake was when Annette boldly raced down a long flight of outdoor terrace stairs to go to what actually was the vegetable garden. Our second mistake was to go when we did - by the time we found it (it's right outside the entrance, and we had driven past it several times), it was long closed. Fortunately, there are several pick-it-yourself strawberry farms along the roadside. We went to the first one, and negotiated 10 Ringit for half a kilo. We then suggested to the owner that we would like to have the scales start at zero when there was nothing sitting on them. I don't normally eat strawberries, but some of these weren't bad at all.

By the time we got back, it was time for Annette to race back to Tanah Raja to pick up our laundry. I spent my time having a surreal conversation with housekeeping - we were paying for three people in the room, so why did we only have two towels? Particularly as we had had three the day before. They assured me that it would be an extra 5 Ringit per night to have the extra towels. I replied that we were already paying 50 extra for Claire - why didn't that include a towel? They phoned back to say that it definitely would be extra. Karen didn't believe me, so she rang, and asked why towels were an extra charge even though we had the extra bed. Finally this made progress

- if we are paying for an extra bed, we automatically get a towel. Presumably I hadn't made clear that the 50 Ringit we were paying for to have a third person in the room was for their bed, and that they did not perhaps levitate during the night or hang from the coat hooks in the clothes cupboard. Which still leaves the mystery of why the housekeeping staff walked into our room, changed the sheets on the extra bed, and then carefully laid out two towels. We made a booking for the hotel's chinese restaurant for 7:00. Annette was quite late getting back, but by the time she arrived, the wait staff had barely taken our order (we wanted the set steamboat option). Claire was exhausted and foul-tempered beyond imagining at this point - hungry and very tired after only one small afternoon nap. We hung on for a while until we could cook some noddles for her, which she ate and then I took her up to the room to put her to sleep. While we were doing the usual things, I somehow guessed she needed to go to the toilet... and with a bit of help she did a poo in the toilet! Yay, we might be nearing the end of nappy changes in the near future! She knew what all this meant - "I did a poo in the toilet so I get a yolly (=lolly, possibly lollipop)". But without much else on hand, her reward was a teaspoon of newly-bought strawberry jam. She was happy.

Annette worked late into the night finishing off her play that she needed to send back to her other director by tomorrow.

7 9th July 2004 - waiting for each other

We all slept terribly. Claire woke up at 2:00am as her nasal decongestant wore off. She was still awake at 3:00, and so I couldn't get back to sleep until 4:45. She woke up at 7:30 and I tried (not very successfully) to get her to go back to sleep again. She woke Karen up at 8:00am, who had been up until 1:00 anyway, not counting the several night awakenings.

Annette had a deadline to meet for her play - today. So Claire, Karen and I went down to the children's playground in the hotel. On the way, she noticed a peculiar feature in the disused fountains - the oddly shaped leaf structures in it "look like cat's paws", which they did, but only if someone else pointed it out first. The playground equipment was hot to the touch - but in its shade, the ground was muddy. The sky was so clear that the moon was visible - a big deal in cloudy Malaysia

Coming back, Claire wanted to look in a working fountain, and we found one in front of the lobby of the hotel. She spent the next half hour saying "here fishy fishy fishies!" which surprisingly, worked well enough to bring most of the fountains inhabitants over to see what was happening.

While we were playing with her there, another mother came over with her child, hoping to see some fish in the fountain as well. After a few moments, Karen and the other mother (Tan Soo-suan) recognised each other as old school friends - best friends from early high school. They caught up on what other people were doing. Soo-suan was living in Penang (near where we

had just been), and was heading back to Kuala Lumpur!

Annette meanwhile tried to email her work back to Australia. The hotel's internet server was down (or more likely, the staff who knew how to work it were on holidays). She drove into Brinchang. Same problem there.

Finally, at 1:00pm, we were ready to start our day. Except that the packed lunches we ordered weren't quite ready. Our first destination was Robinson falls, a rather long and wide waterfall.

Just before the final turnoff, Claire fell asleep. So we turned around, and went back into Tanah Rajah, found an internet cafe, and Annette was able to send everything off.

We went back to the waterfall - only to find ourselves driving over a road construction site to get there. Claire woke up just in time (and announced that the construction crew had two digger, but one was sleeping), but the walkway was far too slippery for her not to be carried. I haven't done much exercise for a while, and between the high altitude and extra 15 kgs I was carrying made it heavy going. The ground was slippery too, even for Annette in good quality shoes and a lot more bushwalking experience than we have. Finally we made it to the viewing point, where we had planned to have our picnic. Unfortunately, every flat surface was covered with taut barbed wire and the pathway was too narrow even to sit down on, even if we had liked the mud. So our grand ideas of a picnic lunch fell apart. We turned around and started heaving everything back up the narrow steep pathway.

And then it began to rain. And then it rained more heavily. And then a bit more.

And I was now carrying an extra 15kg up a steep incline while having to jump the occasional fast-flowing rivulet.

We made it back to the car (which I had left completely unlocked accidentally) and tried to dry off. With nothing better to do, we ate our picnic lunch in the car. Except that the order for one dairy-free sandwich and two with anything had somehow got lost in translation, leaving us with three mayonaise-based sandwiches - which is of little help for Annette's dairy intolerance.

Driving out was challenging, as the rain had turned the dirt of the construction area to thick oozy mud that the car barely had enough traction to get through. Back on the next highway, I was overtaken around a blink corner by a school bus drivin at high speed. The students inside didn't seem to notice that their lives were in imminent danger.

There was a native village listed as a tourist attraction on the map we were using, and we set about finding it. Since the map showed three separate roads branching off the main road, when in reality there was only one, this required some guesswork and brute-force patient searching. We have now taken every subroad that splits off from the intersection opposite the Cameron Highland's golf course. One leads to the warehouse for the water services commission; another leads to the meteorological station (this would have been a great lookout were it not for our uncanny ability to bring fog with us whenever we go to a mountantop - Gunung Brinchang, Koszciosko, Kangaroo Valley, and so on for every holiday Karen and I have had); another subroad leads to a hotel; another to the power service's equipment depot; and finally one to the village.

Unfortunately, the village is not much of a tourist adventure. It just feels plain uncomfortable walking into the street in front of someone else's house and to start taking photographs. Claire found some goats that she wanted to be photographed with, and Annette was able to make discrete use of a telephoto lens on our camera to get some pictures to use in her society and culture classes.

We stopped by a run of small roadside shops. Claire was very excited by a sequence of five children's character rides (a plane, a pokemon, a red elephant, a car and a cat) - but since she gets frightened if they move, she didn't want us to put any coins in. Karen bought some plants to give as gifts, and I got the giggles over the wide variety of cacti for sale. If I were in the market for a cactus, I don't think I would immediately think of going to a humidly hot, mountainous and wet place like the Cameron highlands to buy one. Claire then helped the gardeners out by playing with the outlet of a siphoning pipe which was being used to empty some large aquatic plant bowls. She used it to water nearly everything (but mostly the concrete pathway) and to try experiments with blocking the water flow to see its effect.

Reluctantly, we managed to drag her away from all this fun and down to the honey farm that we had seen the day before. Our hosts instructions were simple - don't pick the flowers, and don't annoy the bees. This is good advice, but what exactly annoys a bee? Walking near it? Taking its picture without its permission?

They had placed some oversized scarecrows in the form of cartoon-like bee characters (some with spades and tools, others

just having a drink and waving). Claire had to describe each one to us in detail as we passed it. The many beautiful range of coloured flowers had little impact on her at all really, nor did any of the smells from the scented flowers for making strong flavoured honey.

As we were leaving, Claire got into one of her sorting moods, and kept us all (including the staff) completely amused as she re-arranged the seating in the outdoor cafe. The staff suggested that we could pick her up at 7pm when the shift finished. They gave her hot honey water drinks when they found out she still is having a bit of a cold.

We foolishly went back to the same restaurant for dinner as last night, and discovered that the wait staff actually ran away whenever we tried to get their attention. And since we were the only guests seated in the whole restaurant (on a Friday night!) this was no easy achievement. We were better organised, and dispatched Karen down first to order everything, and Annette to report back to us when it arrived (I gave Claire a bath in which she discovered that if you empty every single bottle the hotel offers you into the water, you get very large, very short-lived bubbles). We went downstairs for dessert, and a storm in the distance fascinated Claire as the lightning flashed through the window. She spent the rest of the evening asking "where's the lightning gone?"

The night ended on a yet stranger note. At around 11pm, we started hearing construction noises. Karen asked the duty manager what this was, and he replied that it was probably scheduled maintenance work on the stairwells. As the banging and drilling got louder, Karen poked her head

around the corner to check. She saw it was someone working on the room opposite. I then phoned up the duty manager, who told me that there was no scheduled maintenance, and that the noise must be from one of the guests and that he would investigate. Karen's quick glimpse picked him more likely to be a tradesman working here than someone wealthy enough to afford one of the Cameron Highland's most expensive resorts. But some minutes later and so argumentative shouts echoed around the hallways brought peaceful silence back for us.

8 10th July 2004 - Brinchang to Klang via Ipoh

Thanks to some adeptistry with a peg and the lampstand, we were able to block out the window enough that Claire slept in until 8:50 - yay! I got up at the same time and discovered that before it gets hot and before it rains, the Camerons are particularly pleasant. We sat outside in the coffee house balcony to have breakfast, and Claire made friends with a little baby sitting at a high chair on the next table - "aaaah!" they said to each other repeatedly, and then she would laugh.

Karen woke up a bit before Claire, and went down to the markets to buy some vegetables and some fruit. She knew we didn't have much space, and some kept telling the attendants that she wanted less, but they kept giving her more freebies. She came back with two large bags full of vegetables and five or six bunches of flowers for 40 Ringgit.

We managed to get out of the hotel by about 10:30 and took the rather windy road back down the way we had come in. By daylight, there are a few more farms visible, and we did see some of the tiny kampung villages that we saw the road markers for on the way up. We were amazed at the number of buses lined up making traffic jams as they brought Malaysians up for their weekend holidays. Also we met some very brave or very foolish cyclists trying to cycle up from Ipoh to somewhere in the Camerons.

We popped into the limestone temples outside of Ipoh. These are Buddhist temples embedded in caves, sometimes with whole buildings constructed to fit the available shape, sometimes the cave walls were just plaster-covered and used as is. The voracious mining of the limestone peaks around the area made us wonder how long they would last - even whether there would be any mountains left.

Karen, Claire and I had a search for a picnic spot to eat out our generous spare supplies of tropical fruit. We completely failed at this, and discovered that Ipoh has traffic problems so bad that in places there are traffic policemen on intersections which already have traffic lights. Annette wondered what had happened to us, and sent us an SMS - which said "dondenmo" - because she was using my phone and couldn't find the delete key, accidentally hitting "send" instead.

In the end, we ate our picnic on the rocky wasteland that is used for a carpark in front of one of the first temples. Claire sat on the boot of the car and plucked every piece of fruit off from its stem for us. A couple of times she got confused about which was stem and which was fruit, and threw the

fruit to the ground and handed us a stem. Some british backpackers fresh off the bus from the Camerons helped us finish off the rambutans which were just about rotten.

Most of the drive down to Kuala Lumpur consisted of trying to convince Claire to take her afternoon nap. I had put all of Claire's songs onto an iPod, which we listened to incessantly through the car attachment. Today she just wanted to listen to the Wiggles, but the re-sorting that I had done had put the introductions after the songs themselves, which made for some very funny sorts of non-sequiturs ("I love working in the garden - put on your fire assisted jacket and your black boots"). Also, bits and pieces of the car kept falling off - the plastic cover from the trafficator never wanted to stay on. Karen's nose was blocked and she was very groggy from the pollen from the flowers we were bringing with us. About half an hour north of Kuala Lumpur, we stopped at what in Australia would be called a roadhouse or truckstop, but in Malaysia is something more akin to a shopping mall of restaurants (with the odd toilet and semi-mosque squeezed in). Annette was quite happy to discover that it was clean when she went in. This is the only public toilet that any of us can remember seeing that met this description.

Karen's youngest cousin - Amira - is 7 years old, and we went straight to her party in a playland in one of the bigger shopping malls in Kuala Lumpur. Claire only went to sleep when she discovered that we were going to a party and that if she slept she wouldn't have to wait for it. Claire bounced around the play equipment and made friends with a shy and delicate Chinese girl named Zoe.

We came home to Karen's parent's house in Klang. Dinner was in a local Klang Chinese restaurant, where Claire kept everyone amused by gripping a toy basketball in her mouth, and, pretending it was a beak, "pecking" everyone, and then laughing, which often meant that she forgot to keep her jaw clenched. The ball would then fall out, and bounce dangerously near the crokery tables and so forth, which Claire found even funnier. And of course, there was a fishtank filled with fish to frighten.

We collapsed at home, and I dialled up using Aileen's internet service provider. It took until 4:00 am the next morning for all the messages to download and for me to have handled them all. Yawn!

9 11th July 2004 - No plan should ever rest in peace

Karen and her parents went to church with Claire to Klang Baptist. I wasn't awake when they left - I was barely awake when they returned. Annette had a peaceful morning looking at what her co-author had done with his portion of the play and doing some reading. We missed Daniel Lee give an inspirational sermon vaguely on his work trying to get bibles on CD in Myanmar.

We then planned a quick lunch at ???, where we would also organise our tickets to Hong Kong and then to take Annette on a tour around Kuala Lumpur. The first part worked out OK - we had chicken rice. Then Timothy and Karen failed to get the tickets, because the travel agent there could only use Malaysian Airlines, rather than Cathay,

which added 40trip. So we regrouped, and decided to send Karen and Timothy off to 1-Utama, while Annette, Aileen, Claire and I went to Karen's uncle Zachy's place - she could then grill him on Islamic weddings (and other customs) for the studies of religion course she will be teaching next year. Then Timothy and Karen could meet up with us afterwards and carry on the KL tour.

This fell apart badly again. Karen's cousin Christine had just got to Malaysia as part of her 6 month honeymoon with her new husband Shane, and Zachy (with wife Joyce, Timothy's sister) had to go and pick them up. There was a large jam in the city, meaning that everyone was delayed by several hours. We arrived to find no Moslems at home, and no prospect of doing anything for the rest of the afternoon - bitterly disappointing for Annette with her limited time here.

Annette took a walk around Zachy's housing area, taking photographs to try to capture some of the unique (to Australian eyes) aspects of Malaysian architecture. Think repetition, simplicity and economies of scale. In the mean time Aileen and I plotted out a revised plan - Aileen's friend Pushba from church offered to have Annette over for dinner, to talk about being an Indian Christian in an Islamic country, among other things. This too didn't work out. Annette ended up doing this on Monday.

Everyone eventually made it back to Zachy's house - including Timothy's other brother living in Malaysia - and with great rudeness I made Joyce dig up their wedding video so that Annette could look through it and discuss it. This caused much hilar-

ity amongst the gathered guests (pictures of themselves 22 years ago - newly-married Christine was a cute little toddler not much older than Claire is now; Karen was little changed!). Eventually we went through the whole ceremony and reception, and I took a copy of the video back to Klang for copying on to my laptop.

Zachy talked Annette into joining us all for dinner (which he paid for) at one of the few Halal Chinese restaurants in the world. Bizarrely, he (who would surely be the least Chinese person in the group, except perhaps for Annette) ended up ordering. We still don't know why.

Claire got bored, and later in the night wanted to go outside and watch the lizards ("chik-chaks") climbing up the walls. We found one for her, frozen in place (probably terrified, or possibly just waiting). Claire said "I want the chik-chak to start" - presumably she thought it was turned off and needing turning on.

Coming home I took a wrong turning and ended up adding another half hour to the journey. Putting Claire to bed I got to try out a new toy I had put together - her favourite bed-time songs fit on to the compact flash card on the Psion 7 (which I had brought so that Annette had something to write her play on); with a freshly downloaded MP3 player, she went to bed just as she would at home, listening to her (slightly crackled) CD lulling her to sleep.

10 12th July 2004 - Brownian Motion

Annette got up at her usual time, and got a lift with Timothy to the train station. She didn't find the trains smelly (I always did - they must have been cleaned up), thought that the ticketing system was pretty sophisticated (is this the Klang - KL train system I remember?) and spent the day getting totally lost wandering around Kuala Lumpur.

I got Claire up and played with her for a little bit until Aileen took over (and then went back to bed). Karen got up somewhat later, had 10 phone calls in one morning, and then brought Claire in to give me a wake-up call at 11:30 (so that it would still be morning).

We went to the local Klang shopping mall for lunch, and then wandered around buying things that you can only get in Malaysia - Sheila Majid's latest album; cheap VCDs; imported toys that Claire will play with because they have funny Japanese and Chinese characters on them.

We came back home to give Claire a sleep (1hr30mins, yay!) and organise our time in Malaka. Then we went to visit Karen's old pastor Jerry Ng (who conducted the wedding of friends of ours from Carlingford). Always he is very interesting company and comes up with interesting theological points to cover. Our short half hour today was no exception.

Then we picked up Annette from the station (Claire is better at spotting her than we are) and dropped her at Pushba's place. Karen's uncle Wai-ying had a dinner planned for us in a nice restaurant in the very roughest and most dangerous part

of Klang. Karen had troubles finding the entrance lane and proceeded to drive in through the exit, and take three sides of the square of one way streets in the wrong direction. Somehow we lived to tell the tale.

11 13th July 2004 - Not exerting too much effort

Annette didn't finish everything she wanted to see in Kuala Lumpur, so we went back in for another try.

The plan was to get going early in the morning. But everything conspired against us, and Karen had to spend ages enrolling us in the a new frequent flyer program so that we could get the special discount tickets to Hong Kong. We had lunch and then got going at the crack of 1:30 in the afternoon, leaving Claire with Aileen.

We went down the NKVE (New Klang Vehicle Expressway??) and took the Damsara Kota exit in order to get onto Jalan Damansar. Logical eh? We asked the toll booth attendant which turn off to take, and she immediately replied that we should take a U-turn and take a different exit off the NKVE. We ignored her advice, and decided to try navigating using our street directories. One is 2 years out of date, the other 4. Now, in Australia, that's no big deal - you'll see a few new little roads, and maybe an estate that's not in your map, but in Kuala Lumpur, when locals find the number of new highways being built disorienting, it's a big issue. Particularly challenging is that none of the exits are marked sensibly. Quite a lot of signage exists, how-

ever, much of it is covered by black tape to try to hide it in case someone is foolish enough to want to read it.

We took a delightfully circuitous route, mostly by ignoring the maps and signboards and just guessing, and after a mere extra hour, we found ourselves driving into the national monument. We were actually aiming to be in the planetarium, which is several blocks away, but we figured that any tourist attraction will do at that point.

And then it bucketed down with rain. Genuine proper monsoon rain (except a bit out of season). Annette armed her amazing backpack with its built in rain protection cover, and I just shrugged. Karen stayed in the car, and sister and brother went to look at the memorial of the three great wars. Yep, three - the two world wars and then the battles against the communists that are pretty much forgotten by everyone outside of Malaysia.

It's kind of tragic - Australians gave their lives, and "lest we forget" has become "alas we forgot" - I honestly can't remember anyone ever mentioning the "Malaya conflict" at any of the Anzac day services I've ever attended. Just as a digression - Karen's maternal grandmother spent much of the second world war hiding in the Cameron Highlands, dressed as a boy or covered in pitch tar to protect herself from the Japanese soldiers who would have loved to have gotten their hands on a pretty young Chinese girl of suitable age. Finally, at the end of the war she was able to return to normal life - for about three years before it all started up again.

The effect on Timothy's generation can't be understated. He never did like our old house in Marsfield overlooking the Terrey's

Creek forest - he was afraid the communists were about to come out of the jungle and take over. And he had had a bit of an argument with Annette this morning - he would love to see all the natural rainforest around Kuala Lumpur chopped down and replaced by rubber plantations, and Annette didn't.

Anyway, when we had finished splashing around the monument, we went to the planetarium. Last time I went (in 1994) this was a fascinating place with lots of information about Islamic/Arabic astronomy during Europe's Dark Ages. It is now more appropriate for late primary school kids, and has only two attractions of interest to the greater public - their virtual reality game is kind of addictive (even if the cleaning staff have nabbed all the high scores and it has nothing to do with space science); and they have the not-vertical room where all the visual cues conflict with your proprioceptive senses, sort of mirroring the zero-gravity effect somewhat.

Since it was still pelting down with rain, and Annette had been singularly unimpressed with my selection of tourist attractions, we thought about going home. I was going off to meet with Daniel Lim, and I could be dropped off on the way home.

So we started driving out of the park, when we saw a sign for the Police Museum. There's no point in making plans except to change them at the last moment, so Annette went in, and Karen dropped me off at the taxi stand in the park to make my own way to Petaling Jaya.

Annette and Karen enjoyed the museum, but they won't tell me anything about it, and I'm supposed to go and see it myself. They went on to the bird sanctuary. Karen spoke Malay to the attendant, so got in for

RM12; Annette had to pay RM28 as punishment for being a foreigner. I thought Annette should have own the whole Moslem black body suit, and with her brown eyes probably could have been indistinguishable from a local. It remains to be seen whether I'll buy myself a fez and grow a bit of beard.

Meanwhile, I went to Petaling Jaya. I really wanted to meet Daniel Lim after what Karen told me about him and his sermons. He was delayed going home, so he did get a chance to meet up with me, although we were pretty constrained for time. While we were talking, his brother called to say that he was having car troubles in Ipoh and that he wouldn't make it in time - letting us talk for as long as we needed to (which was quite a while). Easy to see God's hand in that one - I wouldn't have bothered if I hadn't slept in; he never would have read my email asking to meet if his flight hadn't been pushed back; we wouldn't have finished if his brother's otherwise-reliable car hadn't developed problems.

So we talked a lot. He had gone to much effort getting electronic copies of Burmese language bibles ready, but there is no native language MS-Windows version available, and very little other software in any of the major Burmese languages (except for the pockets of Mandarin speakers). So we talked about knoppix, about BibleTime (the KDE interface version for the Sword project), kbabel and how easy it is to make the existing multi-lingual Linux software ready for distributing in Myanmar. We got to dream big - employing people in Burma is so cheap, that it might be possible for Ifost to underwrite the entire translation project for (say) KOffice, KMail, GPG, Konqueror and a few others and establish

a real open source beachhead - a country where the only native language offerings are open source, and which is almost never going to get any commercial system (the sanctions should pretty much stop Microsoft, Apple, Sun or any other USA-based player with pretensions on the desktop from getting in). And a population in which *everyone* has access to PGP is a country that is unlikely to suffer oppression for long. So I'm willing to go into this with a clear conscience.

Anyway, we finished up and couldn't convince Daniel to let me pay my own train fair to KLCC. Karen and I met up with Karen's old university friend Geoffrey (whom I keep thinking of as Chuen Ping Pong, because that's almost what his name is in Chinese). He's back in Kuala Lumpur a lot of the time now (he was working in Hong Kong before) and he told us amazing stories of Hong Kong - that there are places to go for a bush walk, that there is some wilderness left and that he found time to do a lot of exercise while he was there. We ate at a fairly glamorous restaurant - it's a pity I was in a marked T-shirt, wet shorts and a pair of worn-out sneakers! Karen and Geoffrey tried all sorts of local dishes, all of which looked deeply and fundamentally suspicious to me - going for a kway teow is about as exotic as I could muster.

At 10:00pm Karen and I were tired and went home - of course, Geoffrey who is still single without kids had plenty of energy left.

12 14th July 2004 - The upgrade to business class

Annette and I spent a good while last night deciding what to do - we would go to Crab Island, take some peanut butter sandwiches for lunch, have a look around, and come back in the early evening.

What actually happened is that we sat around for what little morning there was after we woke up, reading either the newspaper or any interesting novel on hand. We delayed until after lunch, and then delayed some more. Then we agreed that we were both so exhausted that maybe a rest day wasn't such a bad idea after all.

Around 3:00 we went to Karen's uncle's house (the one brother on her mother's side). Alex owns a rubber factory, and used to own a golf range (a very profitable business indeed in Malaysia). He had just bought a new house, and renovated it and done some interior decorating. The house itself cost more than our guess of RM1.2M, and the additional work probably another RM400k on top of that. Expensive - even if we converted the amounts into Australian dollars.

Their first (adopted) son had died of a degenerative disease before the house was built, and their young daughter didn't have anyone else to play with. Jacqueline had barely slept the night before because she was so excited to have a playmate over. Claire and Jacqueline hit it off pretty well - Jacqueline didn't mind being ordered around by Claire, and Claire found plenty of things to order her around to do.

They were playing well enough that An-

nette, Karen and I decided to go for a drive around Shah Alam, to go and visit the blue mosque and see the prime minister's residence. We set out, and within two corners we were hopelessly lost. We couldn't retrace our steps back out, because every building on every corner looked exactly the same (more economy-of-scale Malaysian architecture at work). We thought we had counted two streets, but that seemed to end in a dead end (later we discovered that it was a corner heavily disguised as a hazard fence). We drove around through every street in the community complex until eventually we found one that seemed to lead out. This didn't help much, because it didn't seem to lead out to anywhere. We passed Indian workers on a smoko break in front of an iron wall twice, but we couldn't be sure if we were driving around in a circle or whether they just looked alike. We drove into another gated community, and decided to take the largest road out of it we could find. Surprisingly, this worked, and that let us get out and down to the highway. The ambiguous signs generally headed us in the right direction, and we somehow edged through the nearly-peak hour traffic to the stadium. Which didn't appear to get used for anything - certainly not the commonwealth games, as Karen informed us they were held elsewhere.

A little bit more confusion and misdirection brought us to the sultan's palace - oops, no that's actually the Shah Alam club. It turns out to be a much more impressive building than what little can be seen of the palace, which we discovered after we did eventually make it to the palace compound (and drove around the bulk of the hill trying to get a good view of it, only

to discover that there are so many trees that you there is no good view of the palace anywhere. I guess if you are the Sultan, you want some privacy and you might as well get it. We stopped in front of the main gate (to the guard's ire - with Karen pretty offended that we should be so disrespectful) and no-one there could offer any suggestions of where to admire the palace from either. So we went looking for the blue mosque.

The blue mosque is a giant structure capable of holding 24000 people, with a minaret so high it can see the entire surrounding countryside, and every now and then a man screams out songs of his stomach pains (it's what it sounds like to me) in Arabic amplified so loudly that it can be heard above the traffic noise of a busy city centre. This is the kind of structure we had a hard time finding our way to.

A few one way streets lead us away, a very bendy road confused us as to which way to turn, and the signage was completely misdirecting. But we found it in the end, and discovered that up close, it is mostly ugly concrete around the base, and somewhat dirty (because it would be so hard to clean). Even the blue tiles on the top are a bit off-colour. Annette and I debated whether there was enough carparking spaces to hold 24000 cars, and then we all got the giggles looking at the shoe racks. Errm, did I leave my shoes on rack 12 at door 13, or was that rack 13 at door 12? Or - ooh, I could just do with a pair of size 9 sneakers, I wonder if more than a few thousand people would notice if I took them?

We left and had a walk around the park and lake. It was then that we discovered that the remote control for the car was steadily getting worse - and we kept propos-

ing different places to wave the keys in order to get it to lock. As this is one of the more significant areas for crime in and around Kuala Lumpur, this caused us some concern. Anyway, we got it sorted out in the end, and the three of us wandered around the lake. Annette cringed at nearly every passing jogger, because even her level of sports motion knowledge was enough to see that most people were running badly. We even found someone walking badly - but I pointed out that she could be waving her arms around so enthusiastically because she was swatting mosquitos and terrorising potential bag snatchers. The suggested exercises around the track were pretty bad too. Particularly as the instructions were in Malay, and somewhat incomprehensible even for native speakers. But we did find a vantage point from which the mosque actually looked quite splendid.

Finally we went back to Karen's uncle's house. Claire hadn't slept, but was in her tired-grumpy state, so we looked at their fish pool (and the maid and I tried to converse using my usual sophisticated level of Malay fluency as she tried to ask me whether Claire could feed the fish or not). It turned out later that they were extremely valuable ornamental fish, and they have a set feeding time that we probably violated hideously. Oh well.

Timothy had joined the gathering swell (oops, nearly wrote "swill") at his brother-in-law's house, and decided to take Annette, Claire and me to the restaurant first, while Karen and everyone else bathed.

It was a day for getting lost - or Annette jinxed us. Timothy immediately made a wrong turning, and we drove in the gathering darkness through to smaller and smaller

kampungs. We might perhaps have made it into Sungai Buloh (but who knows where we were) when Timothy admitted defeat and asked for some instructions. "Don't go forward," he was told, "there's a night market on, blocking the roads". (A blade of grass blown the wrong would have been big enough to block the road ahead from what I could see of its width). "Go back to the petrol station and turn left. We went back, seeing no turnings and no petrol station for another 20 minutes or so, before we hit another dead end. This time we were told to go back to the petrol station and turn right. We couldn't find this either, and without making any turnings, ended up on yet another road, which included lit shop-fronts - a sign of deepening civilisation. So we continued on the magic road with no turnings until it eventually led us out and back to the highway. After over an hour of driving (most of which Claire slept through, fortunately), we caught up with the other car load, who had wondered how we had taken so long driving ten minutes down the most well signposted highway in Kuala Lumpur.

The food was pretty good. Karen's uncle shouted dinner for all of us - including Christine and Shane, who had joined us again (despite the fact that they are relatives on the other side of Karen's family, so not related to Alex and Shirley at all).

After dinner we drove (slightly more successfully) back to the mansion which was being made available for us, Claire, Timothy and Aileen, Christine and Shane and the usual family. Karen, Claire and I shared the master bedroom, kicking out Alex and Shirley, which was a very strange experience. I had a good talk with Alex about an idea that we started talking about last

year - he does a lot of gambling on his golf games, and the rules of the bets are so arcane that he and his partners regularly end up in arguments over who actually did win. Originally we were thinking of some kind of clever golf scoring calculator - perhaps with an in-built GPS to keep track of where the ball landed and how far away the tee is, but a year's thinking had me start thinking about just using the capabilities of modern mobile phones. The sort of people who play golf in Malaysia will tend to have high-end phones, so expecting them to be able to run Java MIDP is not completely out of the question. We promised to talk more about it later.

Claire found it difficult to go to sleep (12:30 - yawn!) - this was even despite my smart pre-planning of copying all her bedtime songs in super-low-sample-rates onto my Psion 5MX (which even then could barely keep up with the MP3 decoding!).

Meanwhile, all the Malaysians (and Annette) sat downstairs and ate durians. The Australians discovered the maid's story - she has six children back home in Indonesia ranging from 3 to 15 years old (which is why she spent so much cuddling Claire and Jacqueline - she was missing her own children terribly). Her husband was a police officer who had been killed, and the pension she received from that was not enough to live on. So the 15 year old was looking after the youngest (and missing school as a result) while the mother worked overseas. We all felt terribly, terribly uncomfortable, as we came face to face with the staggering differences in wealth and poverty across the world, and the stories of suffering in the third world became very real to us. Karen was trying to find a bin to throw out

her saniary pad, and asked the maid, who took it from her and dealt with it herself (yuk!). And we don't even know her name, although she knew ours.

[Some days later we discussed all throwing in a few hundred Australian dollars to help her out, but we weren't allowed to do this. We are still stumped. Anyone with any good ideas, let me know.]

13 15th July 2004 - Kuala Lumpur to Malacca

We stumbled out of bed and met the workmen doing some additions coming up the stairs. We said our farewells and drove uneventfully down to Malacca. We went to the pan Malaysia village just north of Malacca, which has houses of the style of each different state, and some displays of the sort of things that happen in the day-to-day life of traditional Malaysia.

It got a bit repetitive, and some things were obvious - the houses from Selangor (the region around Kuala Lumpur) were bigger (because the people living there have always been somewhat wealthier), and the only really big differences in style were the Sabah and Sarawak houses, which used a lot of bamboo, had a much more primitive feel to them and felt like something that belonged in the jungle, rather than something that sort of needed a bit of road to live beside.

Still, there were some interesting things. Such as - why were they so keen on antler heads in every house? I have been to many houses in Malaysia, and no one has ever dis-

played antlers outside of this mini-Malaysia complex. The photographs of Penang from the 1950s-1960s made me realise how hard a job it was to industrialise / develop / commercialise Malaysia, and what a huge leap forward in the standard of living the country has seen. The scenes show wooden shacks jutting into the ocean - no sanitation, no fresh water, and probably barely sufficient coverage from a tropical storm. And finally, Claire loved the gamelon in the Sarawak house - with a supplied cloth-wrapped stick she banged away on every metal lid and shape she could. Sometimes, she hit them hard enough to knock them out of position and onto the bamboo floor (which was so rickety that we wondered if my weight would make things fall through - and whether the nails and broken ends had stabbed any one yet). The steep pole with chopped out foot notches made me wonder how old arthritic people survived (and got into and out of their house); although using the ladder was steep enough for us - we ended up playing pass-the-parcel to get Claire down to ground level.

Then we had a cultural show. And, indeed it was, although perhaps not for the reasons they planned. Several (eight?) dancers, both male and female, some Chinese, some Malay (but none obviously Indian) performed some Portugese and Malay dances in a large stadium, to an audience that consisted of Claire (rapturously fascinated), Annette (somewhat bored), Karen (more interested in watching Claire's reactions than the show itself), myself (never one for dance much), and two Chinese honeymooners (presumably - they were more interested in each other than anything around them). Presumably government

grants supported this, because our entrance fees surely wouldn't have covered it, unless they are being paid mere cents per hour.

We skipped the "houses representative of other pacific and asian nations" because we were getting pretty bored (although I was impressed to see that the tree planted by the Vanuatu ambassador from when I was there last in 1994 was doing quite well).

I didn't feel like driving, so I passed that on to Annette. This was fortunate, because the only map of Malacca we had required a fairly sophisticated knowledge of topology, statistics, possibly some category theory and a willingness to continue believing one's infallibility, even when all available evidence points otherwise. This is more me than Annette or Karen. The map was probabilistically helpful - not all the roads that we drove through were shown (including ones that date back to the Portugese settlement in the fifteenth century, so it's not just out-of-date), and there were required some creative map reading to see that what we had driven through was displayed on the map. And land-markings were also somewhat random - such as the mosque and hospital that were marked as being directly on the main road in, but are actually 300m down a side street!

Fortunately, the streets of Malacca are like a spider's web - it really doesn't matter which turns you make as long as you head in roughly the right direction, because you'll always find a street-strand that meets up with something like the right positioning. So even when Annette's normally aggressive driving was unable to match the quantity and enthusiasm of traffic stopping her from turning the way we needed to go, we just took a bit more of a tour around the

town.

We had promised Claire a swim when we got the Century Makhota (which advertised good facilities for children, and mostly delivered). We hadn't had lunch either, so I took Claire to the first pool she saw (any other alternative being hopeless), while Karen and Annette organised lunch. They bought me a sausage roll, which I quite liked, except that I've always assumed that a sausage roll was sausage meat held together and surrounded by a savoury pastry, not a whole piece of sausage with a sugary batter at a distance of a few centimetres.

Anyway, we were all so tired out from the last couple of days that we decided to laze around in the pool for what little was left of the afternoon (it was getting on to about 5:00 by this time). Karen gave Claire a bath, and Annette tried to read out in a loud voice what activities there were to do in the city, and we voted on what to do.

This was my third trip to Malacca, but none have previously been successful. The first time was in 1994, when Timothy drove me down with Karen's two grandmothers. One got travel sick along the way (there was no highway, and it took three hours down windy roads), and so we couldn't do much that involved moving anywhere - so we had yum cha at a restaurant where you were charged for what you *didn't* eat. The second time (before Karen and I were married, I think) it was so hot that Timothy refused to let us out of the air-conditioned car.

So this time I was determined to do something, even if it was just to walk into a historic church.

There was a light show that Karen and

Annette wanted to see, so I offered to stay back and put Claire to bed. Claire and I ordered room service (actually, she didn't contribute much to the process other than to climb over the menu and drool on things). I felt slightly guilty ordering a seafood pizza, but my excuse was that it would be exotic and different when cooked by chefs of a different culture. Which it was, I suppose, although I'd have a hard time defining what it was - not as much cheese, different proportions of big fishy things to little fishy things - I'm not sure.

Claire has a spaghetti carbonara, which she normally adores, but for some reason she wouldn't eat. The answer came when Karen tried a mouthful - the chef had mixed up the salt and the sugar, so that it was impossibly sweet. More of a spaghetti hydrocarbon-error, really.

Karen and Annette came back to announce that the light show was nowhere near where the tourist map assured them it would be (quelle surprise!), by which stage Claire was sound asleep. So we all stayed up a bit, talked and read.

14 16th July 2004 - Malacca

Malacca is an unusual town. There is an incredible depth of history, which is tucked in as a somewhat inconvenient interruption to some lesser depths of history, which was in turn tucked in around just ordinary city life. So we parked in the one ringit parking lot behind the bank, turned the corner and walked into the catholic church which had seen Portugese and Dutch missionar-

ies over many centuries come to work in (and in some cases, die of tropical diseases in). The local priest encouraged us to look around, which we did, including the notice board advertising a youth-on-fire outreach in November 2003 (perhaps they are having the same problems attracting a large youth group that most Australian catholic churches have).

Further down the road and we passed by the youth museum (which the lonely planet guide described as "even locals find it incredibly dull". Fortunately, it was closed, and the museum manager was sitting outside waiting for people, informing them that he had left the keys at home, and we were interested in going in he'd pop back and get them, but it could be a few minutes. Obviously by 11:00 he had had no takers, which would dampen one's job enthusiasm somewhat.

Around the corner, and we were at the Studhey's (the buildings the Portugese ruled from in the early seventeenth century - still standing and being used productively), and at a fountain built by the english during Queen Victoria's reign (nineteenth century and still working), a church built by the Dutch (eighteenth century (?) and taken over by the English when they conquered). On the other side of the street (depending which way you looked) were bridges built post 1950, shopfronts that could have been from any time, and a somewhat freshly rebuilt main road. An interesting mix of the aged and the new!

We tried the church first. Again, an interesting mix of the new and the old, with an obviously modern worship team (synthesizers, electric guitars, amplifiers) was set up at the front, ready for an evening service

on a Sunday. Beside the pews I read some breathtakingly sad moments encoded in the memorial plaques - of the British officer who came to Malacca and lost his wife (who was only young), and all three children (from six years old down to one year old) in the space of fifteen days.

Next we looked in the museum in the Studhey's. For the first time since I was at university (when I made friends with the van Hoorn sisters), the Dutch city of Hoorn got mentioned, as it declared itself a sister city to Malacca at the front of the museum. Most of the text on the ground floor was translated from Malay by someone who wasn't completely comfortable in English and if you can't understand it, you wouldn't be alone. Some moderately interesting pottery at the front led to to a display of knives that I found intriguing - German weapons are efficient killing weapons; Dutch and Portugese are symbolic and threatening; Arabic/native ones look devious and designed for close work.

The top floor was much more worthwhile. Claire and I spent twenty minutes just staring outside at the newly-started downpour and its lightning and thunder. The actual exhibits were good too - the story of Malacca is interesting. Particularly the speed at which it all happened - in 1389 the founder saw a deer push a hunting dog into a river and decided to set up there. Within twenty years he was marrying the daughter of the local major power (Aceh), was meeting up with Chinese delegates who thought it worth their while to say hello and invite them back to China. Another generation and the Chinese were sending a royal princess down to get her married off (probably under slightly exaggerated claims of the

greatness of Malacca's leadership).

Another two interesting alternative history moments - the early warrior class had a philosophy of "obey the king in everything"; but after a bad court decision, one knight diverged and thought he should append "except where there is injustice". He was killed after a battle with one of the other great knights - what if he had survived, and the "loyalty always had died"? Would Malacca have been a more just society afterwards; or less war-like (they conquered most of the rest of Malaysia fairly guresomely). The other moment of change - just before the Portugese came Malacca had a particularly good admiral and also a bad one, but the good one had lost some of the kings goods in a storm some years before and was persona non grata when the Portugese invaded. What would have happened if the Portugese had lost, (and lost badly, as they could well have) in the early sixteenth century?

Flying over to Malaysia, I read a wonderful Steven Baxter short story about what might have happened to Admiral Zheng He (the Chinese sailor who sailed giant junks around in 1451, probably not as far as America, but definitely as far as Africa; these were might vessels that would have dwarfed the European ships of the next few centuries). There was a room in the Malacca devoted to his journey, as well as a few panels in the "history of Malacca" which mentioned China's diplomatic overtures; my mind kept wandering off to think about what happened next.

I also spent a lot of time worrying about the exhibits as the roof leaked - including into the inside behind the glass of a display case holding some precious antiques.

Annette had long since finished by the time I was only half-done, so there was a bit more to look at that I didn't see, but I was pretty happy anyway. By now it was just past 12:00 on a Friday, so most museums were going to be closed until 3:00 (so that Moslems could attend the mosque).

We wandered up the hill, slowed down by Claire's insistence that we have the umbrella open to keep out the rain (which was drizzling ever so lightly) and made it up to the old roofless Dutch church on the summit. A busker attempted to play something that made Claire run away; I was try to read the inscriptions (with moderate success). Chasing after Claire I discovered how slippery the steps are. The paving stones around the church seem to be pumice, which had worn down surprisingly little, and absorbed water well enough to provide good traction, but the steps were something more conventional (which I didn't recognise) and dangerously slippery. The southern gate is about all that is left of the original Portugese port and we wandered through its two corridors wondering whether it was the fort, until a local artist corrected us (and nobly, didn't try to pressure us into buying a caricature).

Claire wanted to stay and play (with what??) and Karen volunteered to wait while Annette and I picked up the car. We passed the obligatory faded "trespass will be shoot" sign that seems to be compulsory on at least one residential building in each street, which this time was opposite some old Dutch graveyards, which made the threat somewhat more believable. Trying to get out from the carpark (about 2 blocks from where Karen was) we managed to take a few (forced) wrong turns. Our accuracy-

challenged map didn't include such minor details as one major thoroughfare being a one-way street. It was now that I discovered how really, really badly the map confused Annette. At one point I asked her where we were on the map and she had us travelling south into the city centre, past a large municipal mosque, when we were actually travelling east, away from the centre, past a tiny suburban one!

Anyway, after only 15 minutes driving around Malacca to get back to the hotel and retrace our steps of the morning (to be sure we'd be where Karen was) we found them. We stopped in the middle of the street (where all the cars were parked) rather than at the streetside, because that was now crowded with market stalls.

We searched for somewhere to have lunch, and Karen told us to keep a look out for a famous Nonya restaurant. We couldn't agree on who should look on the left hand side of the street, and who should look on the right, so it was kind of a miracle that we found it. It was closed.

So we drove into the nearest large shopping mall. It took two tries, as the signage was so bad we couldn't work out where to turn, and had to drive around the block to try again. A wizened and geriatric Chinese man took our one ringit and let us through, but there didn't seem to be any reason to believe he was associated with the shopping mall or the carpark. So much water was gushing down the ramp to the rooftop parking that we started making jokes again about our offroad-model Proton Perdarana having an aquatic option. Once we got in, past the incredibly smelly lifts, and the shopkeeper practising his karaoke while waiting for some customers, we discovered

that there was no food court to speak of.

So we got back into the car, slipped down the very wet downramp and went to the next large shopping area we could find. Which again was so badly signposted that we ended up almost back in our hotel before we discovered that we were being led around in a loop. We followed the loop around again and found our way in. The car park was quite large so I decided to try and find a spot close to the doors, which involved navigating backwards and forwards through just about every aisle of cars. Finally, I discovered that there were no spaces near the doorway, and I had to follow the same procedure to get us to the next aisle out where we found one, which then spawned off a series of jokes about my carparking techniques.

Karen found us a nearly-empty Chinese restaurant, ordered, took off with Claire to find her a strawberry milkshake (her favourite!) and left us waiting to be served - which happened very quickly, leaving us with a spread of completely unrecognisable and unidentifiable dishes. I asked a waitress "what's this?" pointing to a bowl of green Chinese vegetables. "Vegetables," she said, less than helpfully.

After lunch, Claire and I stayed back to give her a rest and some time to play. I'd seen much of what I wanted to see, so this seemed like a good option to me. It was - we splashed and paddled and played in the many swimming pools. Claire found a huge snail on one pool wall, and would squeal and giggle as she splashed it (poor thing!) then watched it retract its antennae, before slowly regaining the courage to extend one and then the other, and then the cycle would repeat.

Annette and Karen meanwhile visited a few other attractions, such as Bukit China (China Hill), expecting thereto be something significant there about the Chinese entourage (over a hundred) who came with the Emperor's daughter to marry the Malaccan king in the mid fifteenth century. There wasn't - just their graveyards, and a spooky walk up, where Karen persuaded Annette to be very careful of her bags from bag snatchers.

Annette wondered why she hadn't had much of a problem, and opined that it would be like an Australian bag snatcher trying to steal from an islander. Even if you thought you could outrun Jay La'palga, you still wouldn't do it - he's much bigger (heavier, musclier, chunkier) than you are. It seems like a reasonable theory when you put Annette beside almost anyone in Malaysia - she's not any taller, but probably got biceps about the same as Mr, Malaysia contestant entrant.

We decided to go somewhere interesting for dinner, and went down to the Portugese quarter. We sat right beside the sea (a good food fight would have seen quite a lot land in the water) and ate crabs, spicey fish, battered calamari and many other nearly-normal Malaysian dishes - except that they weren't. It was an odd experience. We had stepped into a little community, five *centuries* old; people still spoke Portugese (plus Malay, English and possibly others) and lived their lives as Portugese sea-villagers would have for centuries. The rickety wooden wharf poked into the straits of Malacca rather than the Atlantic, and the air was probably more hot and humid than it would be south of Lisbon, but little else was different. The wind swirled and

swept as ocean sea-breezes should; the cook in the restaurant cooked using the spices that had been handed down from generations past who had lived their lives in Portugal; the waiters talked dressed and looked like their counterparts on the other side of the world.

It put me in mind of the writings of Jared Diamond. Sometimes geography determines the inevitability of conflict. The Portugese fishermen living their lives on the Atlantic would have built boats designed for some of the worst seas and storms; they would have learned to navigate and trade with Africa a short hop away - is it any wonder that they were the first Europeans to make significant in-roads (in-seas?) into Asia?

Claire found a few things she liked to eat, but got bored, and we could see some playground equipment in the distance across a rather slushy parkland. I took her there, and she had lots of fun chasing the other children around. It was nearly 10:00pm at night, and yet there were young children - some only ten years old or younger. Playing without adult supervision! One older girl (perhaps 13) seemed to be looking after them, but it turned out that she was just playing on the swings with her friend, and eventually decided to go home, leaving the others there.

One small Indian (?) boy asked me "you piano?". "Huh?" I replied. "You not Chinese, not Indian, you piano?" "No, I'm Australian. Caucasian, I suppose." "Ah, ya. So piano." I still don't know what sort of person a piano is, or why I am one. I'm not sure if this is better or worse than being a goodist, which was what I got called last year in Malaysia.

15 17th July 2004 - From Melacca to Kuala Lumpur or Sydney

My mother had reliably informed us that we would need at least three whole days to explore Melaka in depth. After one whole day, we had all pretty much exhausted anything important that we wanted to do. I guess our ideas of depth are different.

Annette and Karen wanted to wander around the street-side stalls to look for some bargains. Yesterday Annette had seen a few things in some off-main street shops, none of which was remotely large enough for her to get into. It was hot outside and I thought Claire would go crazy with boredom (as would I), so she and I stayed in the hotel pool for the morning. We didn't try the children's room, which Karen said was full of broken toys, far too many people and the only thing to do there was to watch videos - not healthy in several different senses of the word.

I felt slightly guilty about this, thinking that I was wasting a valuable day of holiday on yet another similar activity. But on reflection I thought that if I had gone on a site-seeing tour of stunning landscapes, or trainspotting or one of many other alternatives that no-one would think it odd to go and do a sequence of similar activities. So I decided that I was actually having a holiday sampling hotel pools. Or maybe Claire was - this was probably what she will remember of this trip to Malaysia if she remembers anything at all. By now she was brave enough to run into and out of a tall

shower-like construction in the middle of the children's pool, and also very keen on doing "speedboat" (where she went in one of the full-sized adult pools while draped around a floatation ring and dragged by me as fast as I could swim along over the bow wave she made in front of herself). In fact, she was so relaxed that she spontaneously did a poo in her swimming costume, I just saw it coming (but with not quite enough time) and raced and slipped and skidded to the change room. Given that this was over tiles and I was dripping wet, the danger and suspense of this can't be underestimated. I washed her out in the sink, and suddenly realised why the decor of the bathroom made me so uncomfortable - the photographs on the walls of the men's bathroom were rather pornographic. This surprised me in a way - I wasn't expecting to run into the dark undercurrents of Islamic society in such a sudden way. (As it turned out, Karen told me later that the children's room had men's magazines lying around on side tables - presumably for chauvanistic fathers forced to spend time with their children on their holidays.)

We were very pressed for time - we had to check out by midday and Karen and Annette were a little late back. This gave me the challenge of either (a) walking up to the cashier in a swimming costume, dripping wet (b) taking Claire back into the change-room when she'd rather be playing on the climbing set just away from the pool, or (c) coming up with something else. She was keeping herself terribly amused by sitting in the middle of one of the tower boxes eating some bread ignoring me anyway, so I foolishly dashed off and got changed. I came back to find her tearily asking a com-

plete stranger (the father of another child there) to help her down a steep ladder that she was too scared to climb down on her own. It was an odd moment - had I done something wrong by letting her too much freedom, or something really good in that she was able to figure out her own limits?

I drove the car out of town but foolishly followed the street signs to Kuala Lumpur to do so. This takes you on a zig-zag path which encounters almost every traffic light ever built in Malacca. Annette and I concluded that the reason for this is that if you are a local, you wouldn't need to use the signs, so anybody reading the signs must be a tourist and therefore should be made to look at every street in the city (both for impact and the possible tourist Ringits able to be earned).

Karen assured us that there was a McDonald's on the way out of town (Claire had managed to wrangle a promise out of us to go there). Karen had confidence when Claire, Annette and I were completely convinced we had missed it. We were just about to turn around when we saw a sign for the Orang Asli (native people) museum, which Annette wanted to see. We turned in to find that it was also the parking lot for the McDonald's that Karen had remembered from Thursday. Never let cultural sensitivity prevent you from placing a commercial enterprise somewhere that might make money.

The food was of course completely inedible, and Annette didn't even bother but said that the museum was only so-so interesting. With that out of the way, we sped north towards the airport, and Putrajaya (the administrative capital). This took a few hours but fortunately Claire slept a for

some of it. Putrajaya has been criticised for being a waste of money with little to show for it (except reducing congestion in Kuala Lumpur, which is worth more than any number of bags of gold). Karen and I had just seen "Shrek 2" before we came to Malaysia, and the prime minister's residence looks startlingly like the open vistas of the kingdom of Far, Far Away from that movie. We tried to identify what was the VIP hotel - if we got it right it has the useful property of looking equally bland and repetitive from every direction, thus assuring visiting dignitaries that nobody is being singled out for any special treatment.

There is a sculpture-cum-play area near the wrapping-paper mosque. Claire discovered that there was a small water and managed to get her only shirt completely soaked. But it was a hot day, and she just took it off (I tried to dry it in various places around the playland), leaving her the centre of attention being the only white kid and the only one not properly dressed, Karen took Claire through some of the shops, where Claire chose her first item of purchased clothing for herself - a quite nice shirt. I suspect sadly that it may not be her last.

Finally, it was time to drop Annette at the airport. Fortunately we were not running late, as it is deceptively far from the turn off. The car had been getting progressively worse (bits falling off, and the remote not working at all by now), so we popped in to the car rental centre at the airport. The attendant there took half an hour to conclude that (a) if we wanted to extend our stay, he couldn't do anything about it and that we should call Penang where we hired it (b) that he didn't know why yesterday

on the phone he himself had told us the exact opposite of (a), and (c) that he couldn't do anything about the car, (d) he didn't have any spare batteries for putting in the remote control, nor could he swap controls nor cars and (e) he didn't know why yesterday he had also told us the exact opposite of (d) and (e). On that note, Annette decided that she would just take the lift up two floors and check in, which concerned Karen because Annette might get lost (she didn't).

It was odd driving off without Annette in the car. Claire alternated between being very subdued and asking "where's aunty Net gone?".

For dinner we went to a famous crab restaurant in Port Klang with almost the whole tribe (Christine, Shane, Zacky, Joyce, Amira, Lily, Timothy, Aileen and the (now) three of us). There is a rickety wooden bridge that you have to walk along to get in and out, and Claire was very interested in exploring its edges and looking down and the mangroves and murky muddy water below. And through the gaps in the planks. And around the breaks in the fence. Zacky has an unusual accent when speaking English - the letter "i" sounds almost like "a". This gave me the giggles when somebody asked "the fish here is very good, isn't it" and he began his reply (to my ears) with "I haven't been here for a whale..." Claire took a ride home in his volvo and sang songs the whole way home. She was so excited to have some company again (Malacca is too lonely with just three relatives) that she didn't sleep until well after midnight, and even then only after she had confirmed several times that everyone had gone home.

(Annette got home safely but without

much sleep.)