



## Kuala Lumpur: Low Density Model for Asia

BASIC INFORMATION <sup>1</sup>	World Rank <sup>2</sup>		Similar to
Urban Area Population: 2005	5,300,000	58	St. Petersburg, San Francisco-San Jose, Toronto-Hamilton
Urban Land Area: Square Miles: 2005	700	45	Seoul-Incheon, Baltimore, Montreal
Urban Land Area: Square Kilometers: 2005	1,810		
Population per Square Mile	7,600	568	Brasilia, Stuttgart, Essen-Dusseldorf
Population per Square Kilometer	2,900		
Urban Area Projection: 2020	7,830,000	41	---

25 May 2007

### From the Airport to Kuala Lumpur

Most visitors to Kuala Lumpur will arrive at KLIA --- Kuala Lumpur International Airport, which advertises itself as the best in the world. They may be right.

Immediately, however, the traveler needs to be cautious about travel into the city. It is 75 kilometers, which means that cab fares can be high. There is a rapid transit line which takes you to Sentral Station, but then a cab is necessary to finish the journey. At the airport, there will be all manner of cabs prepared to provide travel to the city for MYR250 --- about \$80. A reasonable rate is under MYR100 (\$30) and can easily be arranged by bargaining with the many purveyors who wander around the airport arrival area.

### Introduction to Kuala Lumpur

Kuala Lumpur is the largest urban area in Malaysia. It is home to approximately 5.3 million people and includes the new planned-city Putrajaya, which is the national capital. The core municipality of Kuala Lumpur was the national capital until 1999.

The Kuala Lumpur urban area sits astride the Klang River, which flows into the Strait of Malacca at Port Klang. The river has its source in the mountains to the east of Kuala Lumpur, not more than 10 miles (16 kilometers) from the core of the city and 30 miles (50 kilometers) from the Strait of Malacca. The Klang River meanders through the city, past Sentral Station toward the sea. The river is not at all impressive in the city, being fairly narrow. As it gets closer to the sea, the river gets substantially wider.

### The Urban Form

Kuala Lumpur, like Manila, is perceived to be much smaller than it really is. The principal reason for this is that various world agglomeration lists (including that of the United Nations) show a population that is well

below reality. Generally, the lists use the population for the city of Kuala Lumpur (the federal territory of Wilayah Persekutuan), which has a population of only 1,450,000.

However, the Kuala Lumpur agglomeration extends far beyond the borders of the central city. Thus, using the city population to represent the urban area is misleading. It is akin to using the population of the ville de Paris (2.2 million) to represent that of the Paris urban agglomeration (more than 10 million).

Nearly three-quarters of the urban area population is located outside the city of Kuala Lumpur, nearly all of it in the state of Selangor (and some in the federal territory of Putrajaya). The most extensive development is to the south, toward the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (and including the new town national capital of Putrajaya) and to the west to Port Klang.

Most of the population growth is now in the suburbs rather than in the city of Kuala Lumpur. It had been projected that the city of Kuala Lumpur would reach 2.2 million residents by 2000; however that figure was missed by a full one-third. Now, the city projects that 2.2 million people will live in the city by 2020. It seems no more likely that the new projection will be met. As in other urban areas around the world, most growth is suburban and to substantially increase the population of a highly developed area like Kuala Lumpur would require a large increase in population density. Generally, population densities are declining, not increasing.

The city has more than 15,000 persons per square mile (6,000 per square kilometer), while the suburbs have a density of 6,400 per square mile (2,500 per square kilometer). These are modest densities for an Asian urban area. Indeed, the suburbs of Kuala Lumpur are about as dense as the suburbs of Los Angeles. The overall population density, at 7,600 per square mile (2,900 per square kilometer) is somewhat higher than Los Angeles and somewhat lower than Nagoya or Paris.

Sector	Kuala Lumpur Urban Area (Urban Agglomeration)				
	Population	Land Area: Square Miles	Density	Land Area: Square Kilometers	Density
Kuala Lumpur	1,450,000	94	15,455	243	5,967
Suburbs	3,850,000	606	6,351	1,570	2,452
Urban Area	5,300,000	700	7,571	1,813	2,923

### Central Business District

Kuala Lumpur is both like and unlike other Asian urban areas. Kuala Lumpur is like other Asian urban areas in its dispersion of large commercial buildings. Unlike western agglomerations, the tall commercial buildings are not generally restricted to the central business district or a few other centers. Moreover, even in the central business district, high rise buildings are not particularly concentrated.

Downtown Kuala Lumpur covers a land area of seven square mile (18 square kilometers), largely ringed by freeways. This area includes approximately 400,000 jobs, which represents a high share of metropolitan employment for a core area. The core of the downtown area is the “Golden Triangle,” which includes the most intense development and the KL and Petronas Towers (below).

The core of Kuala Lumpur may have the largest concentration of high rise commercial development of any urban area in the world its size. This is obvious from a trip to the top of the KL Tower, the fourth tallest telecommunications tower in the world (Plates 52, 81). From the KL Tower, one can see a panorama of tall buildings in virtually every direction (Plates 87-96).

## **Petronas Towers**

The most impressive buildings, of course, are the Petronas Towers, which were the world's tallest buildings for a few years, having displaced Chicago's Sears Tower (Plates 42, 48, 53, 58, 76, 79, 80, 85, 184). Petronas won the world title because its spires are an integral part of the building. The highest habitable space in the world remained in the Sears Tower even after Petronas opened. Moreover, the KL Tower is the tallest structure in Kuala Lumpur, but does not qualify as a building. More recently Taipei 101 in Taipei has displaced Petronas, and soon Burj Dubai in Dubai will far surpass both. There is also the usual plan for a taller building in Chicago, something that changes from year to year and never seems to be put under construction.

The Petronas Towers, however, are a triumph of high rise architecture. Up close, they exhibit architectural detailing far more elaborate than usual for a modern building (Plate 49). There is a bridge between the two towers at the 40<sup>th</sup> floor. At night, the complex is discretely lighted, providing an impressive image above the city (Plate 51). It is possible to visit the observation tower at the top, but this is rationed and requires waiting for tickets. On the other hand, access is easily obtained for the better view at the top of the KL Tower.

The Suria shopping center is located at the base of the Petonas Towers. It features an impressive central atrium, which makes it one of the most distinctive indoor shopping malls in the world (Plates 43, 44).

## **Housing**

At the same time, Kuala Lumpur is unlike other Asian urban areas in having a large number of detached upper middle-income houses and even more middle-income town houses (attached row houses), generally of one to two floors.

Kuala Lumpur also has high density, including both luxury condominiums and low income housing. The luxury high rise condominiums are concentrated in the core of the city and otherwise fairly dispersed throughout the urban area. The central business district contains the most expensive high-rise condominiums. However, the central area residential population has fallen substantially in recent decades. A usual feature of the high-rise condominiums, as well as the office buildings, is ample parking --- up to eleven floors in some buildings (Plates 26, 66, 104, 109).

The city of Kuala Lumpur is considerably more affluent than the suburbs. The better single family houses are located in the city, both detached and attached (Plates 11, 14, 15, 16). Substandard housing is comparatively rare. Most of the substandard housing seems to be in the suburbs, especially to the west, in the Klang and Port Klang areas.

The scale of residential construction is impressive throughout the urban area. Generally, the new construction is row-houses or town houses and covers many blocks (Plates 72-73).

In some cases, high-rise low income housing is under construction adjacent to the small substandard developments (Plate 123). The lower income apartment blocks are dispersed, throughout the urban area.

There are also many substandard single family dwellings, made principally of corrugated metal or tin (Plates 8, 10, 56). In some cases, they are close together and appear to form shantytowns, but they are very small. However, there is nothing here to rival the shantytowns of Jakarta, or much worse, India.

## **Urban Area in the Jungle**

The most unique feature, however, of Kuala Lumpur, is its physical setting. Kuala Lumpur is located in a jungle. Of course, much of the jungle has been cleared away, but not all. There are large areas of green space,

but more importantly, the jungle survives throughout the urban area, whether in small patches between developed areas or in the vegetation that lines the streets. In this regard, Kuala Lumpur is like Jakarta, with intense vegetation even in the central business district --- but even more so.

The jungle, in combination with the low density of the urban area doubtless creates less of a heat island effect than would be expected for an urban area of this size. This is similar to Atlanta, where the low density and the comparatively intense forestation of the urban area by deciduous trees creates only a modest heat island effect.

Kuala Lumpur is what Honolulu would be if it were a large urban area. Of course, along with the jungle come the tropical flowers, some growing from high in the urban areas' tall buildings.

### **Mobility**

There is a high automobile ownership rate. Despite having a fine public transport system, nearly 90 percent of travel in the urban area is by car. As a result, Kuala Lumpur has a higher automobile market share than most large Western European urban areas. The area is served by an extensive network of grade separated toll roads. Usually a separate lane is provided for the many motorcycles and motor bikes. A new "smart tunnel" has just opened, providing expedited access to the Golden Triangle in the downtown area. Many more roads are under construction. Certainly, Kuala Lumpur has its share of traffic, but nothing like in hyper-dense Hong Kong or more dense Jakarta or Bangkok.

Kuala Lumpur has its share of mass transit projects as well. The Kuala Lumpur monorail opened a few years ago (Plates 1, 2, 3, 82, 83, 84). It provides travel across parts of the central business district. The monorail was to have been commercially viable, but announced its insolvency, after years of operating losses, earlier this month. There are three metro lines that are called light rail. They are completely grade separated and operate at high frequency, which makes them metros rather than light rail. There is a regional commuter rail system. But even with this extensive system, the public transit share of travel in the city has declined and stands at barely 50 percent of the 1980 level.

### **Multicultural Kuala Lumpur**

Malaysia is one of the most genuinely multicultural nations in the world. There is a large Chinese population, in addition to the Malays. The Malays are largely Muslim, while the Chinese are largely Buddhist or Christian. There is also a large Indian population, which is principally Hindu. Unlike India, however, one does not observe bovines on the streets of Indian neighborhoods.

However, some of the best Indian food is to be found in Kuala Lumpur. As in India, the more informal eating establishments are recommended. A good rule of thumb (as in China) is to avoid the establishments that take credit cards, if one wants to enjoy the quality food preferred by the locals. An interesting feature of the less formal restaurants in Malaysia is bananas in the middle of tables, which are consumed as peanuts might be eaten as snacks in a western pub.

### **Kuala Lumpur: Model for Asia**

Kuala Lumpur may be the future of Asian urban areas. Though it much smaller than the Asian megacities, Kuala Lumpur appears to have achieved the greatest affluence. (This excludes the enclave city-states of Hong Kong, Singapore and Macao, where development has been unconventional due to border limitations.)

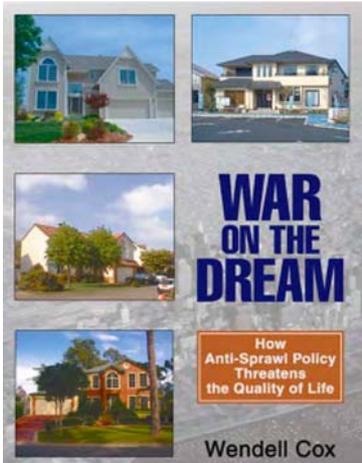
Kuala Lumpur has comparatively low density. It has a highly developed freeway system that is being expanded materially. Most travel is by car and the share of travel by car continues to rise quickly. Traffic

congestion is bad, but not nearly as bad as in Asian megacities where roadway development has been more modest. Kuala Lumpur demonstrates that a lower density urban area can work quite well in Asia.

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<sup>1</sup> For definitions of urban terms see <http://www.demographia.com/db-define.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Among urban 707 areas with more than 500,000 population (<http://www.demographia.com/db-worldua.com>, 2007.03 edition)



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### Urban Tours by Rental Car: About the Series

*Urban Tours by Rental Car* offers perspectives on urban development obtained by automobile tours through urban areas. Rental cars are not the favored method for visiting cities, especially those outside one's own country. Instead, tourists and urban planners favor packaged tours or local public transport systems. Both are splendid ways for seeing the city as it used to be --- the very reason for most tourist visits. The historical core areas contain monuments, prime government and religious edifices and quaint neighborhoods that are often centuries old. This is particularly important to tourists from the newer urban areas of the American, Canadian or Australian West, where history extends not far before World War II. It is further understandable that few tourists travel thousands of miles to see the newer suburban areas that look very much like home. But most tourists do not profess to be students of the urban area.

For the urban planner interested in understanding the whole urban area, it is not enough to study the core alone, regardless of its architectural attractiveness, romanticism, history or affirmation of an individually preferred life style. No one, regardless of the depth of their education can develop reliable conceptions from an unrepresentative sample, and urban cores are the very essence of unrepresentative samples. Both public transport and packaged tours miss the larger part --- the expanse of sprawling residential and business development that rings virtually all major urban areas. They may be of little interest to many urban planners, but they should be.

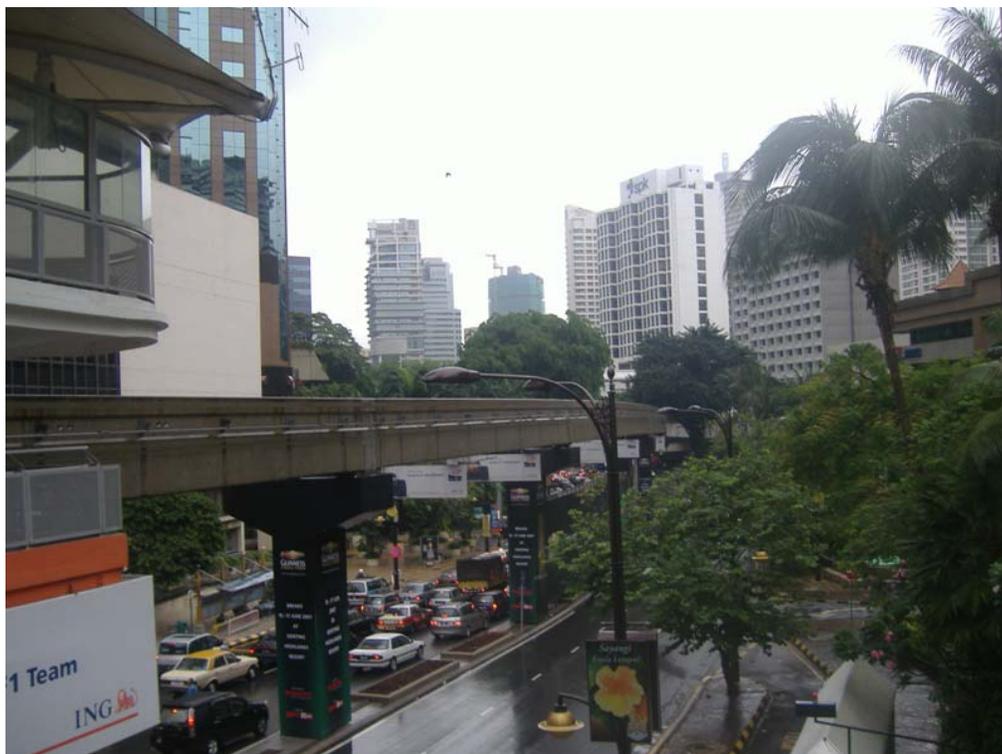
Stripping away regional architectural facades, one might as well be in the suburbs of Phoenix, Portland, Perth or Paris. Here, the automobile is king, because no public transport system has been developed that can effectively serve destinations outside the core (at least at a price any society can afford). While public transport market shares are higher in European suburban areas than in the New World, much of the difference is attributable to lower incomes and less automobile access. Indeed, public transport's principal weakness, lack of automobile competitiveness, is itself a contributing factor to the rising motorization occurring from the suburbs of Copenhagen and Nagoya to the suburbs of Lagos and Mumbai. To oversimplify this phenomenon as being a "love affair with the automobile" is the equivalent of saying that Singaporeans or Brazilians have a love affair with air conditioning. Human beings prefer comfort to discomfort and they prefer free time to time over which they have no control.

It is no wonder that tourists return to the United States thinking that all Paris looks like the second arrondissement (less than one percent does) and that urban planners think all of Milan looks like the architectural treasures that surround the Cathedral. In fact, the sprawling suburbs of Europe, Japan, Canada and Connecticut resemble one another in many ways. For any seeking to study the urban area in its entirety --- not just the favored haunts of core-dwelling elites --- there is no alternative to "getting behind the wheel." Thus, *Urban Tours by Rental Car*



Kuala Lumpur Monorail

1



Kuala Lumpur Monorail

2



Kuala Lumpur Core

3



Kuala Lumpur Core

4



Kuala Lumpur Core

5



Kuala Lumpur Sentral Station

6



Kuala Lumpur Core

7



Kuala Lumpur Core

8



Kuala Lumpur Core

9



Kuala Lumpur Core

10



Kuala Lumpur NW

11



Kuala Lumpur NW

12



Kuala Lumpur NW

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Kuala Lumpur NW

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Kuala Lumpur NW

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Kuala Lumpur NW

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Kuala Lumpur NW

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Kuala Lumpur NW

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Kuala Lumpur NW

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Kuala Lumpur NW

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Kuala Lumpur NW

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Kuala Lumpur NW

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Kuala Lumpur NW

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Kuala Lumpur Core

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Kuala Lumpur Core

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Petronas  
Towers

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Petronas Towers: Shopping Center

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Petronas Towers: Shopping Center

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Kuala Lumpur Core

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Kuala Lumpur Core

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Petronas  
Towers

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Petronas Towers: Design Detail

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Petronas Towers

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Kuala Lumpur: North

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KL Tower

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Petronas Towers

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Kuala Lumpur: NE

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Kuala Lumpur: NE

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Kuala Lumpur: NE

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Kuala Lumpur: NE

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Kuala Lumpur: Core

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Kuala Lumpur: NE

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Kuala Lumpur: NE

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Kuala Lumpur: NE

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Kuala Lumpur: NE

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Kuala Lumpur: NE

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Kuala Lumpur: NE

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Kuala Lumpur: Core

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Kuala Lumpur: Core

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Kuala Lumpur: Core

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Petronas Towers

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Kuala Lumpur: Core

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KL  
Tower

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Kuala Lumpur: Core

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Kuala Lumpur: Core

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Kuala Lumpur: Core

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Kuala Lumpur: Core

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Kuala Lumpur: Core

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Kuala Lumpur: Core from KL Tower

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Kuala Lumpur: Core from KL Tower

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Kuala Lumpur: Core from KL Tower

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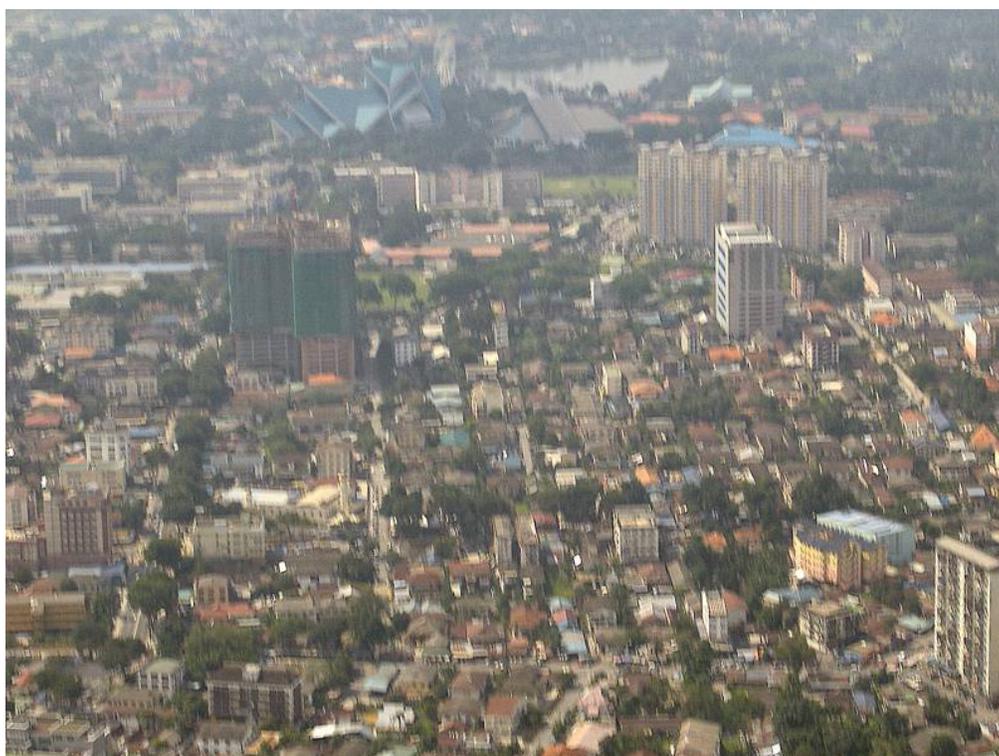
Kuala Lumpur: Core from KL Tower

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Kuala Lumpur: Core from KL Tower

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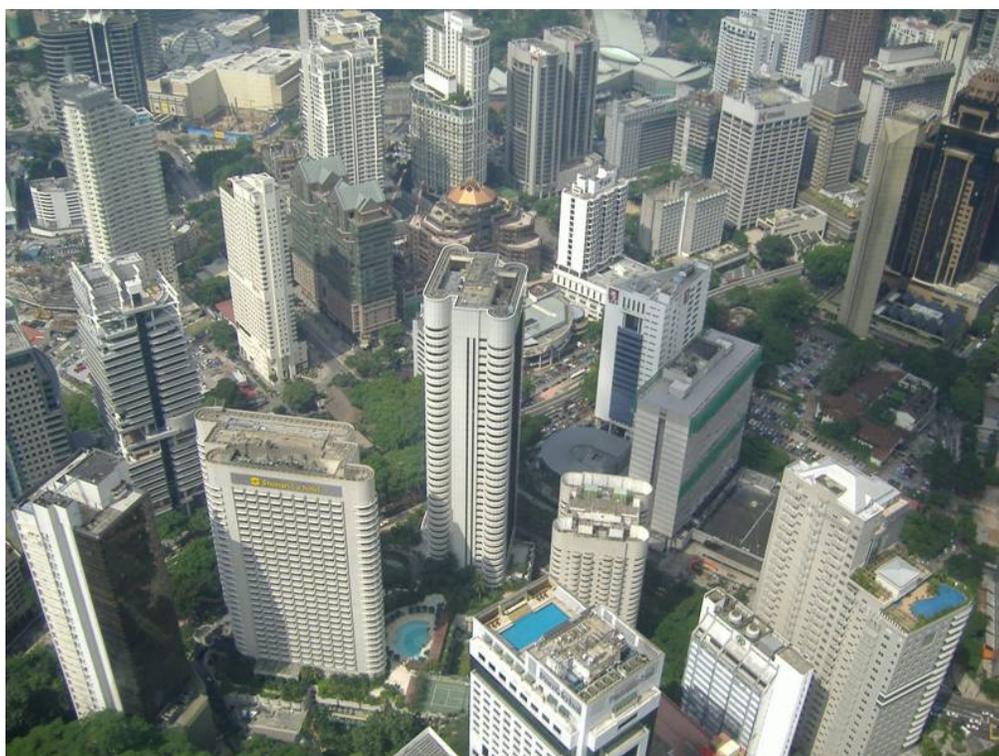
Kuala Lumpur: Core from KL Tower

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Kuala Lumpur: Core from KL Tower

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Kuala Lumpur: Core from KL Tower

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Kuala Lumpur: Core from KL Tower

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Kuala Lumpur: Core from KL Tower

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Kuala Lumpur: Core from KL Tower

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Kuala Lumpur: Core from KL Tower

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Kuala Lumpur: Core from KL Tower

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Kuala Lumpur: Core from KL Tower

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Kuala Lumpur: Core from KL Tower

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Kuala Lumpur: Core: Klang River

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Kuala Lumpur: Core: Klang River

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Kuala Lumpur: Core

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Kuala Lumpur: Core

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Kuala Lumpur: Core

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Kuala Lumpur: Core

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Kuala Lumpur: Core

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Kuala Lumpur: West

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Kuala Lumpur: West

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Kuala Lumpur: West

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Kuala Lumpur: West

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Kuala Lumpur: West

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Kuala Lumpur: West

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Kuala Lumpur: West

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Kuala Lumpur: West

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Kuala Lumpur: West

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Kuala Lumpur: West

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Kuala Lumpur: West

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Kuala Lumpur: West

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Kuala Lumpur: West

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Kuala Lumpur: West

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Port Klang

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Kuala Lumpur: Klang River Valley

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Freeway with Motorcycle Lane

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Kuala Lumpur: West

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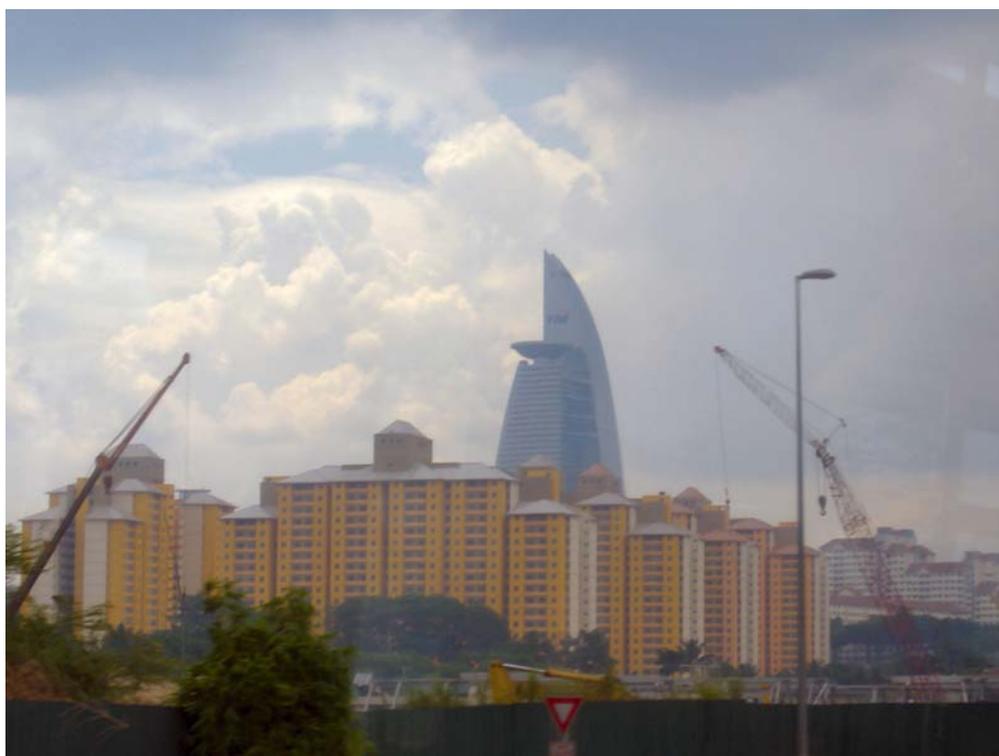
Kuala Lumpur: West

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Kuala Lumpur: West

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Kuala Lumpur: West

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Kuala Lumpur: North

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Kuala Lumpur: North

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Kuala Lumpur: North

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Kuala Lumpur: North

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Kuala Lumpur: North

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Kuala Lumpur: North

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Kuala Lumpur: North

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Kuala Lumpur: North

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Kuala Lumpur: North

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Kuala Lumpur: North (Rawang)

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Kuala Lumpur: North

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Kuala Lumpur: North

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Kuala Lumpur: North

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Kuala Lumpur: North

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