

# *Malaysia*

## *A country with beautiful people*

The first things I heard about Malaysia were not positive. A relatively high crime rate, a large number of tourists robbed, car crash, dirt and indifference. Moreover, Johor Bahru, the first town on the border, was known in the past as a vanity city, with mobs, gambling and prostitutes. Fortunately, our statistics were old and in the meantime the situation had changed for the better. The government took action in eradicating corruption, imposing drastic laws and punishments, cleaned the country of mobs and prepared the city for a peaceful existence. Moreover, tourist programs have been successful, as 2014 is considered the year in which Malaysia brings the highest number of tourists in the country, giving all its best in terms of tradition, religion and beauty of the country and its people.

Thus, while fearfully reaching Malacca, a city which was declared a UNESCO World Heritage, our surprise was huge.



We met Howard by mistake, but we went to his house. He had a villa with 11 rooms where he was receiving tourists from all around the world at low prices. But this was not his main quality. In the eight days that we lived in one of his rooms, we became good friends. Howard is an open-minded person, friendly and eager to show to everyone that people of Malaysia are more than nice.

He invited us to have a lunch with his friends, sharing some of their traditions with us: how to prepare tea, how to wash the cutlery before the meal and their eating ritual.



In addition, I first entered the house of a man found in the lower strata of society with Howard. The house was simple, with Chinese signs at the entrance, a statue of Buddha and a special altar for prayer. It was consisted of a simple room for guests and a dormitory where the old woman was sleeping. Howard was careful that his mother did not miss anything, but the mother chose to live modestly, as she had done her entire life.

Then, Howard took us to visit a local market, away from the tourist area of the city. He explained to us that ordinary people gather weekly in the market for nutrition or for selling various products for locals.



There, friendly people made us feel the atmosphere of the place by giving us traditional dishes, telling us how they prepare them and by expressing joy and hospitality.

One evening, Howard told me that a family in the village remained homeless after a fire. I immediately asked what I could do to help them. We took his car and, after a long way in the night, we arrived at the house where those escaped from the calamity found refuge. When we

arrived, the firefighters had already left and despite the darkness we could distinguish somewhere nearby something what I suspected to be the remains of the house burned.

We did not spend too much time there. All that we did was to get those poor men and to go to Howard's home. A child of about ten years with mental problems, a man that looked older than he was because of the hardships and misfortunes that he had to pass be and his wife, a lady who remained paralyzed because of the fear that she felt when she saw her house burning.

We went back to Howard's home, where the generous man offered them a place to live. The next day, I went cycling with other people who wanted to help the family after we told them about the tragedy to buy food. Apart from the other persons that we took the day before, other three children and an aunt that were living in the same house arrived. They were away on the day of the fire and had the misfortune to come back and no longer find their house. Howard hosted everyone and bags full of food were offered by all who were mobilized for charity. Besides food, I felt the urge to offer a sum of money for the affected family. Words could not explain what I felt when I saw the father's eyes when he shook my hand. He was a man burdened with needs that had lost all his savings in a fire that became homeless with five children, among whom one had mental problems and a paralyzed wife. No matter how much money I would have given to them, it would not have been enough to give me a feeling of relief. However, people cried out of gratitude for any amount that they received.

Also in Malacca, we saw another face of the Islamic religion, which was nothing like the pictures full of malice that we had to see every day presented in the media. I was with Smaranda and Mark, and, as we were walking under the scorching sun, I saw a towering mosque few steps away from us. It took more than a moment to understand that my colleagues share the same desire to enter the courtyard of the mosque. Admittedly, it was impressively beautiful with its clear crystal waterfall that we saw glowing from the street. I slowly entered the yard and stared at the imposing building, when I heard a friendly voice that welcomed me inside the mosque. We all entered inside, but not before taking a coat suitable for Islamic ceremony.



The Mosque was gorgeous and smelled like peace and quietude and we walked with small steps in order not to disturb the tranquility from inside. Then, a middle-aged woman with a serene face approached us and told us that we could take pictures if we wanted. She stayed there looking at us with a friendly grin on her face, and after I asked her to take a picture with us to have it as a souvenir, she began to tell us about the real significance of Islam and the relationship between Christianity and the Islamic religion. She spoke with such warmth and love that I could not peel it long. So, I learned about Islam and about life in general and after an hour spent in the mosque I felt like an old friend of the community. After she told us everything everything that could be said about Islam and mosques, Norma (this was the name of the woman) invited us to sit with other members of the community, offered us as a gift an Islamic perfume and invited us to eat with them. We joined them and I was charmed by the friendliness and warmth that I felt from all those present. At one point, Norma sent someone to buy ice cream and served us with ice cream, while talking about the importance of accepting that you could make mistakes and the will to admit when you were wrong. That ice cream has meant a lot to us and I was impressed by the generosity with which we were accepted by the community. As we wanted to thank them, we found out that that day was very special for Muslims because it was a celebration. In fact, Norma and other community members were living in Kuala Lumpur and they t came just to visit in Malacca. We said goodbye to each other with friendly hugs, but not before we promised them a visit in Kuala Lumpur. Even after they left Malacca, we felt the warmth which welcomed us in our hearts and we put our little Islamic perfume bottles that were to remind us how friendly were the members of the Malay community with us in our backpacks.

We left Malacca after saying a hard goodbye to Howard and the grieving family, while thinking at the friends that we had made in the local community and the beautiful places we had been through. Nevertheless, we headed with big smiles on our faces to Kuala Lumpur, the meeting place of the entire team.



There followed three days full of joy and enthusiasm that we were all together again, each of us recounting stories from the road. It did not matter too much who, where and how it was, as each

of us wanted to do what the others did or at least to overcome the limits that he did not manage to pass over before.



Following the advice of the loved ones from Hornsjo, but also of Ole who came here to meet with us, we devised a new plan to try to accomplish more in the last weeks of the trip spent in Malaysia than during the whole journey. And I could say I did.

It is said that Cameron Highlands is a dream place. We have seen and can vouch for it. The huge mountains with forests, springs and rivers, the very diverse flora and fauna and the constantly serene sky, make this place a towering paradise of Malaysia.



As the place became more and more popular, fame went on to place as fast as investors began to buy land that indigenous people still spend their lives in tents far from civilization that they consider to be harmful . And as soon as the news went, the tourists invading the little paradise multiplied. The investments increased, living standards evolved and natives were forced to take their tents and to give the lands where generations lived before. And if all this would not have been enough, a government decision that is no longer recognized by anyone but nobody wants to cancel allows explorers to „invest in the area „by any methods. Thus, the forest is cut for wood, the mountain for stone, while houses, commercial complexes, hotels and gas stations are built in a large scale. All these are done in the name of attracting investments and tourists. Unfortunately, the abusive investment unstoppable now because lands have ghost owners, will completely destroy this place. Yes, it is true that Cameron Highlands is still a dream place. But in the next few decades it will become nothing but history. But, until then...

I got a local ride with Smaranda , Lili and Alina in the evening. It was very cold and the weather continued to cool down. I had been advised that in the area the temperatures fall down from 30 degrees during the day to just 2, 3 degrees at night. But we were armed with sleeping bags and prepared to sleep in the woods if necessary. But we were willing to fight to stay without being forced to choose a hotel resort. Remembering Norma and the fact that she told us to mention her name if we go to a mosque, we went to the only mosque that we found in the area and we mentioned her, relying on the fact that she was well-known all over the country. Thus, we went to talk with the people from the mosque and we agreed to get accommodation in a location of the church. Kind as they were, the people drove us cars a few miles away, where we were welcomed by other people and after carrying another discussion about our work as volunteers, we were offered a room. Unfortunately, after those who brought us left the place, the host came to us asking us an exorbitant amount of money for one night of accommodation. After we politely explained our situation, people seemed to have vanished and we did not manage to find them even when I went to look after them yelling. We did not meet them next day either and we left the house without managing to find someone to say goodbye to and to thank for hospitality. I deduced that they felt ashamed that they asked for money after we were brought there with the promise to get free hosting.

After leaving our first place to stay, we started to explore the surroundings. Thus, we woke up in a place full with strawberry farms. Trying to enjoy the red fruits, we were surprised to discover everywhere depleted stocks. All farms that we were had been selling their production of strawberries for the day first thing in the morning, most often on demand made a few days before. From place to place and in talking about, we managed to get into discussions with some local people and find out more about these farms. All belonged to the people around the place and they were opened and developed only on personal investments.



However, business became prosperous and experienced profit because that one was the only place from Malaysia where they grow strawberries. Fruits had three purposes: they were sold in large quantities for food companies, in small quantities to various local producers and what remained was processed into jams, compotes, natural products, which then were sold across the country. We did not get any strawberries for free, but they were offered for sale, even if they officially announced that the stock had been exhausted. We were allowed to visit the farm and then they told us how the simplest process that gave the best results worked (note and the photos that each plant has its own irrigation system that allows irrigation in controlled amounts by plant growth). That day was warm and sweet there in the mountains, but the real challenge was to come in the next days.

Although, I do not consider myself a very religious person, I felt a warm shiver that reminded me of home when I read on a plate of Tanah Rata town (Queens of Cameron Highlands), the place where we went to collect information about the life of local farmers, The Catholic Church. It was unbelievable that in a Muslim and Buddhist world, which seemed so far away from Europe, I found traces of Christianity. Yet so it was. I headed to the gate of that chapel with small steps, a little doubtful, but sure that there I would find something more than I was looking for. Near the entrance of the chapel, a man with a friendly voice asked me from what country I was. But I was scared and I rushed up, as if awakened from my dream state. I had not given any attention to that friendly, with curly black hair, tanned skin and eyes of an extraordinary clarity. A few hours later, after I choked fear and entered into conversation with him, I found out that his name was Father Eugene Benedict, priest of that parish. I searched for a few hours for the priest, asking for its address without knowing that I had actually talked to him. One of the people I asked one who worked to repair the church (I forgot to mention that the front part of the church resembled a building site) called the priest and so I had the chance to talk to the man to whom a few hours before I did not even answer the greeting. But he did not seem bothered by it. On the contrary, he received me with a warm smile and a familiarity like we were friends for a lifetime. Encouraged by his attitude, I began to talk to him about me and about the program, about the journey and what it means for me this travel. I said I wanted to go for answers about what it meant to be poor, to see hope in the eyes of poor people, to see how was the life of refugees and that I was not afraid to explore the world that so many people chose to ignore. Then, he offered me something that I would remain grateful for a lifetime: to accompany him in his visits he made weekly to immigrant families that were working in nearby farms and a school where their children learn. He suggested talking with other colleagues of mine who would be interested about and to meet in the afternoon in downtown, near the Indian restaurant nearby. I was

anxiously waiting with my colleagues for the priest and he came with his car to pick us up. After we got in the car, Mr. Father asked us if we were to walk behind the main street. The question seemed to have no meaning and I answered honestly that I had not explored that area. Then, the father of the crankshaft on a street that leads behind the hotel and asked us to look at the alarming danger that threatens the region. After a seeming forest, a huge brown abyss in which they were immersed fifty cranes that were digging the ground that was part to the mountain few days before dominated the skyline.



Vali rushed to take some pictures, deeply impressed by what he saw. The priest explained that what we see is the site of a government project to build a new housing district with the price of cutting piece by piece large parts of mountain and forest deforestation. . As all things were intertwined, employees who handle these machines were illegal immigrants from poorer nearby countries like Myanmar, Indonesia and Bangladesh. They had an extremely hard work that many of them end up in a car accident because they fell asleep at the wheel. So I found out that the priest is a passionate defender of the environment and sent numerous petitions to denounce illegal logging and the type of housing projects. After the visit to the site, we headed towards the school for refugee children. We found out that the school was founded five years ago at the initiative of Father Eugene and there, from Monday until Friday, 17 children aged 4 to 13 years studied. Although the school was recognized in 2011 by the UN, most of the funds came from the church and from contributions of \$ 400 per month that parents pay to give their children the chance to study and have three meals daily. The school was a small building, dusty, near a Christian chapel, which consisted of a dormitory, a classroom, a tiny kitchen and a dining room. I could not get inside the dormitory, but I understood from the priest that children slept on wood, there as there were no mattresses or beds.





The classroom left a bitter taste to all of us, because there were only few old and dusty books, no toys and a little board that seemed sad in the whole ensemble. Just a dirty illustration with alphabet letters on the wall and a neatly written schedule of classes were giving little optimism to the empty and dusty room. But the kids were happy. The priest asked each of them to hold small conversations with us in English, and each, with small, large, came in front of us smiling and serene to shake hands and tell his name in English. Their joy made me cry even harder because these children, who proudly presented their blue UN backpacks were kids who could no longer return to their homeland and remained in the world without any protection. School was nursed by two teachers and the wife of one of them, dealing with cleaning and kitchen.



After about an hour we got in the car with a bitter taste, but still smiling, because these children had shown that we could smile and we went to a Burmese refugee center that was in our way. I took the opportunity and we asked what advantages did legal registration as a member of Chin refugee community bring, what one's need to be registered and how dangerous it was to get from Myanmar in Malaysia. We found out that he spent 12 days in the jungle along with other refugees and one year in prison for illegal border passed in Malaysia; then, he paid a large sum of money to get his wife into Malaysia. We understood from him that this was the way in which all Chin refugees arrived in Malaysia, but the situation of conflict in the country forces them to resort to illegal border crossing. After one was accepted as member of the Chin refugee community, it passed at least one year to be registered by the UN. The process was very long, but it was their only chance. That was because this community could protect a member if its rights were infringed or was physically abused.



Then, the priest took us to a Burmese family. I did not know who was more scared: us or them, but I remember the efforts he made to make us feel at ease. He showed us their home kitchen, what they cooked and talked about their financial situation. There were two women and three men in a small house, poorly isolated. The husband of one of the women, who was also head of the family, showed us that he had a diploma received after graduating a course organized by the UN in the field, but he was working on a nearby farm and was sometimes dealing with the illegal cutting of trees to support his family. After a few minutes, we got in the car and we ventured with the priest through some rough roads to reach a flower farm managed by a family of Indonesians. I deduced that they were more fortunate than many of their nationals, as even if they stay in a shack iron, it was clean and spacious. There were seven men, a woman and a newborn, who I found out that, was declared by the priest in order to be registered. Probably that was a reason why they were friendly: they had a reason to celebrate.



Later still, in the hours of the night, we left the priest with a handshake and a great regret that the next day we had to leave Tanah Rata. I thanked him for the day he offered to me though the words were not enough for what I got. I was lucky that I met him, and for me, Father Eugene would remain a man that I would always admire.

Malaysia was surely a blessing for us: amazing places and beautiful people, simplicity and desire for life. Every man that we met, even by chance, gave us, first of all, regardless of his social condition, a smile. That smile was for us one step ahead!

