

RACE AND RELIGIOUS ISSUES

About 52% of the population is Muslim and according to the Malaysian Constitution, Islam is the official religion of the country. Islam is a religion few Westerners understand well or have been exposed to at the personal level. Malays take religion very seriously. Indeed, Malaysians of all faiths are usually deeply attached to their religion. The advice is to observe, listen, but save your opinions for another occasion.

It may be useful and of interest to Canadian visitors to obtain an understanding of race/religious issues, but probing too directly into sensitive issues should be avoided. In general, the Malays are almost without exception Muslim, the Chinese are Christian or Buddhist and the non-Malay indigenous people are either animist, Muslim or Christian. Most Indians are Hindu, although there are significant numbers of Muslim and Christian Indians as well.

▶ **Muslim practices**

The Malays embraced Islam about 600 years ago. Islamic belief is enshrined in the Koran, the Muslim holy book. A congregational prayer is held at the mosque on Fridays. This is led by an Imam. A sermon is also delivered. Both men and women attend this prayer at the mosque. However, most women prefer to pray at home. Mosques are open to non-Muslim visitors, except on Friday mornings and at prayer times. Visitors are requested to observe the usual courtesies of wearing proper dress and removing their footwear before entering the mosque. Non-Muslims are not allowed inside the mosque proper, the place of prayer. Each Muslim home has at least one Koran. It is a sacred book to the Muslims and conservative Muslims consider it improper for non-Muslims to handle it.

One should avoid telephoning a Muslim between 6:45 pm and 7:30 pm since this is the time of Magrib (evening prayers). For the same reason, invitations for evening receptions and dinners before 7:30 pm should not to be issued. During Ramadan or Bulan Puasa (the fasting month), one must not offer food, drink or cigarettes before sunset.

▶ **The most important guideline when entertaining Muslims is never to serve pork or alcohol.**

Any product of the pig is forbidden, including hot dogs, hamburgers or any other mixed meat that contains pork and any food fried or cooked in pork fat. In addition, Muslim law requires that all meat eaten by a Muslim must be halal (i.e., slaughtered according to strict Muslim procedures and tradition). Some Muslims also may be unwilling to consume food if it was prepared with utensils that have at one time been used to cook or serve pork.