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I've been downloading the last couple of week's photos from the camera to the laptop to focus my mind for this page ... and now I see why I'm scattered: I've been flicking between a *Herbstfahrt* - a drive to see the autumn colours in Kanton Appenzell - to playing with pythons in a snake temple in Penang!

So, let me shake myself into some sort of order and see what sense we can make.

First - Kuala Lumpur. It's about thirty years since I was last here staying with Chow and MayWah (of whom more later). A while ago they did a big renovation to their house. They enlarged it - pushing out walls this way and that, and refurbished everything into a modern, spacious stylish home. On a larger scale, Kuala Lumpur has been doing exactly the same thing. It's expanded, upgraded, replaced and renewed itself massively. Chow and May Wah have finished their project - but KL is still full of cranes and construction sites. You'll probably have seen their twin towers in publicity shots - but those are only emblematic of many huge developments. Out "our" way, there's a hilltop-suburb where the high-rise condominiums are as dense as spines on a hedgehog.

And then the contrasts. Some parts of "old KL" remain, side by side with the new. Some are the inheritance from British colonial rule (pre 1957) - grand buildings in a variety of styles. Some are still grand. Others not so. Keeping the mildew from eating the walls is an issue even for newer places. Then there are the vibrant and bustling areas of Chinese and Indian life - shop-houses, food-stalls, everything you could possibly imagine and then more. And still in the centre of KL, a Malay kampong, now scheduled for demolition and redevelopment. The shift from single-storey houses surrounded by trees and community into apartment blocks will be mourned by many.

We were in a similar kampong area out "our way" for the anniversary celebration for a free out-patient health clinic Chow's Rotary Club had established 17 years ago, and still supports with fundraising and voluntary work. The stats are impressive - 50,000 patients since 1994; 2,500 voluntary man-hours (the medical staff volunteer their time too); client ratio 40% Indian, 30% Chinese, 30% Malays. We sat with the patients under the veranda till the clinic closed - then the "waiting area" plus some tents planted out into the street became a banquet hall. It was the best kind of party ... more food than speeches, and all the people there had that easy camaraderie that comes of working for a shared cause.

Malaysia is absolutely a multiracial multicultural multi-religious country. That's not without its problems, but here it's so embedded there's no sense that any part is a tolerated but dispensable "add-

on". Yes, the tensions show when politics, law and commerce need to be worked out according to different religious and cultural philosophies - and over the application of some special rights to the Malays.

But generally, it seems, the rule is one of "pragmatic co-existence". For instance - May Wah, like many Chinese Malaysians, prays to the Goddess of Mercy (a goddess I am coming to like.) There is a lovely story, too long to squeeze in here, about why that means May Wah holds cows to be special and would never eat beef. Yet, today as I write this, is a very important Muslim holy-day, on which they sacrifice cattle. I've heard and seen no outrage, no posters, no protests. No wonder Switzerland's mosque controversy was viewed with bemusement in places like this.

Still it was fun to ask, separately, a Malay and a Chinese taxidriver to explain the economic disparity between Malays and Chinese and get two very different perspectives.

Like Switzerland, language teaching in schools seems to be under constant review. The national language is Bahasa Malaya - the common Malayan tongue, which itself shows many international historical influences. English is the shared language of business and commerce, and many inter-community conversations. Current policy has been to teach secondary school maths and science in English - but that was to be changed to teaching those subjects in Bhasa Malaya, in order to strengthen the place of the national language. Parental protests ensued. Now those who've started maths and science studies in English will continue that way. Whatever the final outcome I have the same envy of the multilingual ease of Malaysians as I have of the Swiss!

Other similarities - immigration. As one of the more (on the surface anyway) prosperous countries in the region, Malaysia has many people crossing its borders illegally. They're just introducing what looks like a good policy to register and either "legalise" or deport such folk. Of course, the implementation will be fraught with opportunities for graft and injustice - but they're working on it.

I've had to look at my own prejudices too. Our Penang Hotel had many Saudi Arabian guests - most of the women in full black burqa and veil. I realised that until then I'd never talked with a so-clad woman. My first such conversation ended with her expressing truly sincere sympathy for my childless state. Then my tut-tutting over the tyranny of such clothes in the heat was challenged by the young woman riding pillion on a waterski in her full gear plus lifejacket, whooping and screaming and streaming yards of soaking wet black fabric in her slipstream.

Oh - the end of the page, and I've not even started on the food. Next time!