

## **The Cameron Highlands – not quite what I expected...**

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So I approached my research for this trip with my usual uselessness – in other words, I bought my guide book and I downloaded all the information but then, apart from skimming in case I needed to pack anything in particular, left it until sitting on a coach in Malaysia to actually read them! Until I reached the Cameron Highlands, I hadn't really come across anything that surprised me. My assumptions from general knowledge of Singapore and Malaysia seemed to be fairly ok – obviously visiting places has consolidated or challenged some of these assumptions but not in a very significant way. But the Cameron Highlands was not at all what I expected.

Now I realise that only reading the first paragraph of the rough guide section on the highlands is probably where I went wrong: “Indian planters, Chinese vegetable farmers and wealthy landowners in search of a weekend retreat flocked in, establishing tea plantations and leaving a swathe of what can only be called mock-mock-Tudor buildings in their wake.” (Rough Guide to Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei, 8th edition, page 171). So I expected mock Tudor buildings (and we stayed in one) tea plantations but I didn't expect it to resemble a garden centre covered with polythene tunnels with small towns full of hotels and neon signs – the Cameron Highlands is big agribusiness and tourism. More than I've seen anywhere else in Malaysia on my visit so far.

Seeing the hive of industry, I was torn between being impressed at the scale of the business and feeling that the scale of deforestation here is really worrying. The concern over deforestation in Malaysia when you research it at home seems to be about the growing palm oil industry and loss of rainforest but in the highlands forests are also being lost.

I left the Highlands today with mixed feelings about the area. Major pluses of the cooler, fresher air with mossy forests to wander through and some amazing views across the valleys but minuses of it being a major tourist area, tacky tea and strawberry themed cafes packed with tourists (and long queues for the toilets) and giant cuddly strawberries for sale in the markets. It would have been good to spend a bit longer in the Highlands to get a better picture of exactly what is going on there but alas it was on to Ipoh today via some waterfalls and caves (more 'touristy' places, although no queues and better toilets at the caves!).

I think it might be time to read the rest of the rough guide and the briefing notes to see what else I missed in the Highlands...oh and read the bits about Ipoh so I'm ahead of myself!