

This page, right and below: Indian cuisine guru Nimmy Paul specialises in home-cooked meals; Bayan Indah's Rohani Jelani (far right) teaches her students the basics of preparing desserts. Facing page, clockwise from top left: Biryani with shrimp and coconut milk curry; mee goreng (fried noodles); traditional Malay sweets; white fish molee with Nigella seeds; Penang assam laksa.



appam (a Christian speciality often served with curries), prawn curry and *biryani* (spiced rice with meat or fish and vegetables).

Nimmy specialises in cookery demonstrations and loves to put on special meals (called "Meal at Home") for visitors at her place, but she and her husband also offer two other extended options. "Day at Home" is for guests who wish to spend a day with Nimmy's family and "Stay at Home" attracts visitors who would like to enjoy the couple's hospitality for a few days while learning and sampling traditional Kerala cookery. Of the latter programme, Nimmy says, "Come to our home, as if you are visiting your friend,"

and indeed her friendly hospitality is as much key to her school's success as her magical skills in the kitchen.

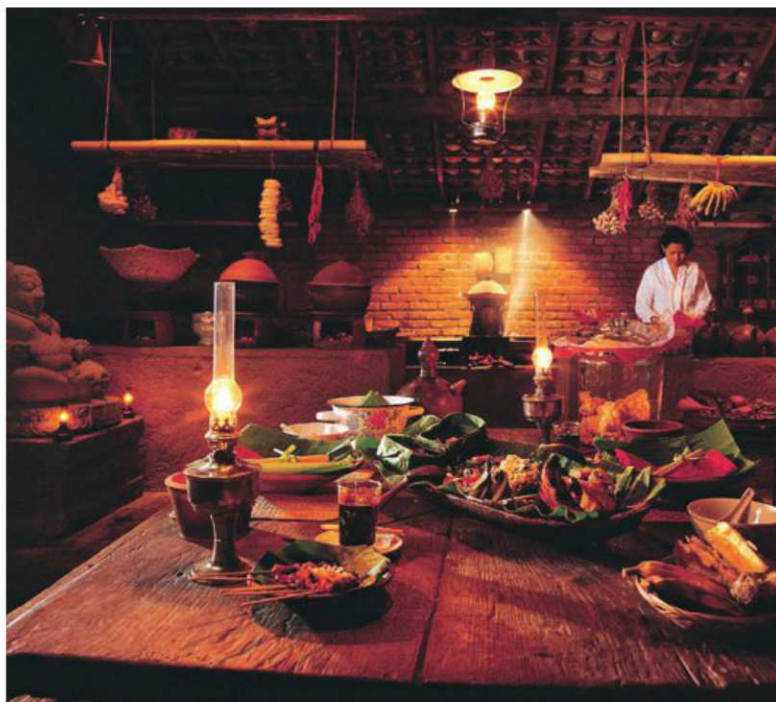
New Delhi is also a hotbed of cooking classes, but if your plans do not include India in the itinerary, you could give another related cuisine a whirl. Malaysian food draws from Indian influences and is remarkable in its own right, if not quite as famous as its cousin.

MALAYSIAN CUISINE

Rohani Jelani who runs Bayan Indah (www.bayanindah.com) in Kuala Lumpur is a passionate advocate of her country's cuisine. "I feel that Malaysian cooking is extraordinary and not as well recognised globally as other cuisines. We have such an interesting fusion of culinary styles that are influenced by Chinese, Malay and Indian cultures and the mix is so heady and delicious that I feel more people should know how to cook it," she says.

Visitors to Bayan Indah might be forgiven for noticing the ambience first, for the place is nestled amid lush greenery and beautifully outfitted with Asian antiques, handmade furniture and modern artworks. But it's the food and the cooking classes that really steal your heart. There are more than 50





At Hotel Tugu Lombok, participants learn local cuisine in a kitchen with Balinese decor and classes end in a festive lunch or dinner.

“themes” running the gamut of Malaysian cookery – including noodle dishes, Hari Raya festive classics, Malaysian high tea, *kampung* cuisine and the traditional snacks called *kuih muih* – and even western desserts such as cookies, tarts and English puddings. Half-day classes are from MYR250 per person and accommodation for cook-and-stay holidays is also available.

INDONESIAN CUISINE

For a change of pace, head out to the Indonesian island of Lombok. Situated just 54 kilometres from Bali, the island is fast becoming the destination for travellers looking for a more secluded holiday. Try the traditional cooking classes at Hotel Tugu Lombok (www.tuguhotels.com),

a boutique accommodation located on the beach of Sire on the northwest coast of Lombok. With a minimum booking of two persons, the classes start with a visit to the local market accompanied by the chef, who will give you tips on picking the best ingredients from the bounty on display – the best cuts of meat, the greenest spinach, the finest turmeric, lemongrass and chilli. You are then guided through the preparation of five Balinese dishes of your choice, which could include such favourites as *ayam taliwang* (Lombok-style grilled chicken with chilli sauce) and *ikan bungkus daun* (yellowtail marinated with turmeric, galangal, candlenuts and lemongrass). The class culminates in a festive lunch or dinner, in which eating with bare hands is encouraged, Balinese style.

As for my dim sum class, I will only say that the fruits of our labours weren't bad at all. The dumplings were the perfect balance of wrapper and meat, the spring rolls were crispy and we couldn't wait to dig in. As we lifted *siu mai* (pork dumplings) and *har gau* (shrimp dumplings) on to our plates, I imagined hundreds of other culinary adventurers doing the same thing at the same time – enjoying the results of their exotic cooking holiday. ✎

SilkAir flies from Singapore to Chiang Mai, Kochi, Kuala Lumpur and Lombok. For flight schedules, please see SilkAir Postcards on page 68.

SPICE IT UP ↓

While most cooking classes demand little preparation, there are a few tips to help you make the most of your experience.

Brush up on the country's foodways. Your guidebook is a good place to start, but ethnic cookbooks are even better as they'll give you a bird's-eye view of the culture's favourite ingredients, methods of preparation, cooking techniques and food rituals.

Take notes and pictures. This applies especially if you are a passionate cook. If the rules permit, taking videos will also help you remember particularly difficult techniques. And if there are printed course materials, take them home – it will be useful when you try to recreate the dish.

Stay active in the kitchen. Some participants complain afterwards that they didn't have enough time to cook during the class. If you want to participate more, jump right in and don't be afraid to make mistakes, or (politely) ask for more cooking time.

Keep an open mind. Unfamiliar flavours, exotic spices – they won't always appeal at first sight. But many foods grow on you over time.

Open all your senses. Food is not just about taste but also smells, colours and textures. You may never repeat this particular class or revisit this market. Absorb everything you can.



Enjoy the experience. Talk to your classmates. Ask questions from the instructors. It's not *Hell's Kitchen*; you're there to learn and have fun.

