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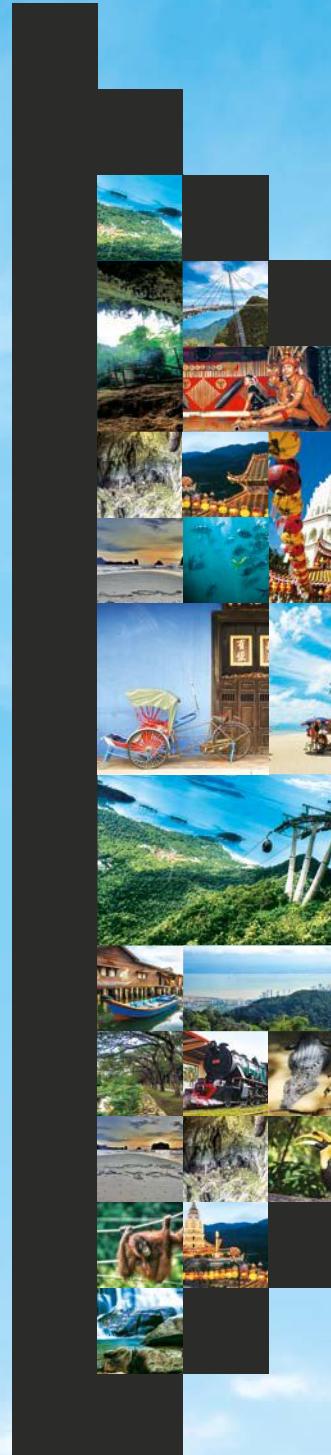
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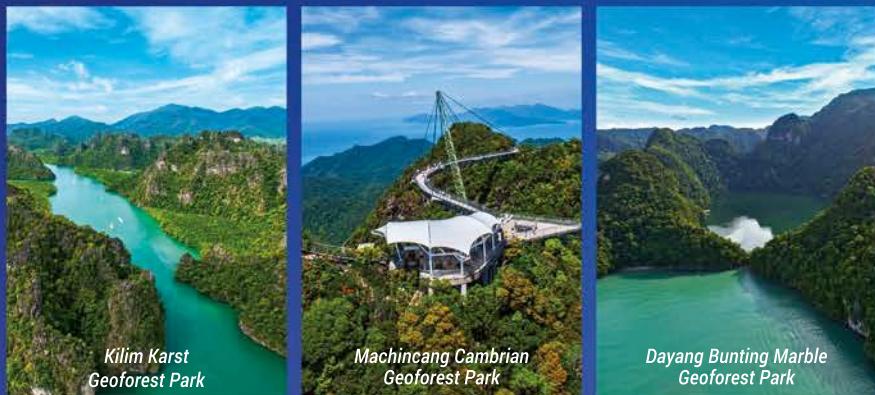
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IMAGE: GETTY

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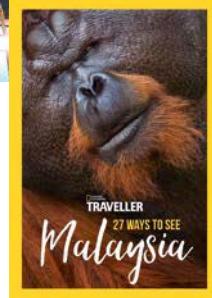
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Male orangutan.  
IMAGE: Getty

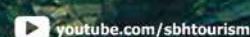
# NATURE'S HIDDEN TREASURE

World Heritage Site

Mount Kinabalu  
(4,095.2 m)



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## Editor's letter

**M**alaysia is a place where things happen; where, for 10 days a year, an unassuming brown stem blooms into the world's largest flower; where majestic red apes craft their intricate nests from folded back branches; where daredevils perch on lofty bamboo poles to harvest delicacies from the ceilings of caves; and where visitors stare awestruck from the windows of a bridge that links two of the world's tallest towers.

It's where kerbside street sellers cook up gourmet dishes enriched with the flavours of three distinct cultures; where spectacular rope bridges help budding explorers cross from one lush canopy to another; where indigenous tribespeople keep ancient traditions alive amid some of the world's oldest rainforests; and where swiftlets and bats perform a flawless mid-air dance as they pass each other in the dead of night.

For all its comforts and luxuries, Malaysia is a place where strange, exciting, fascinating things still happen. And it's a place that calls loudly to your inner explorer.

### GLEN MUTEL, EDITOR

@GlenMutel



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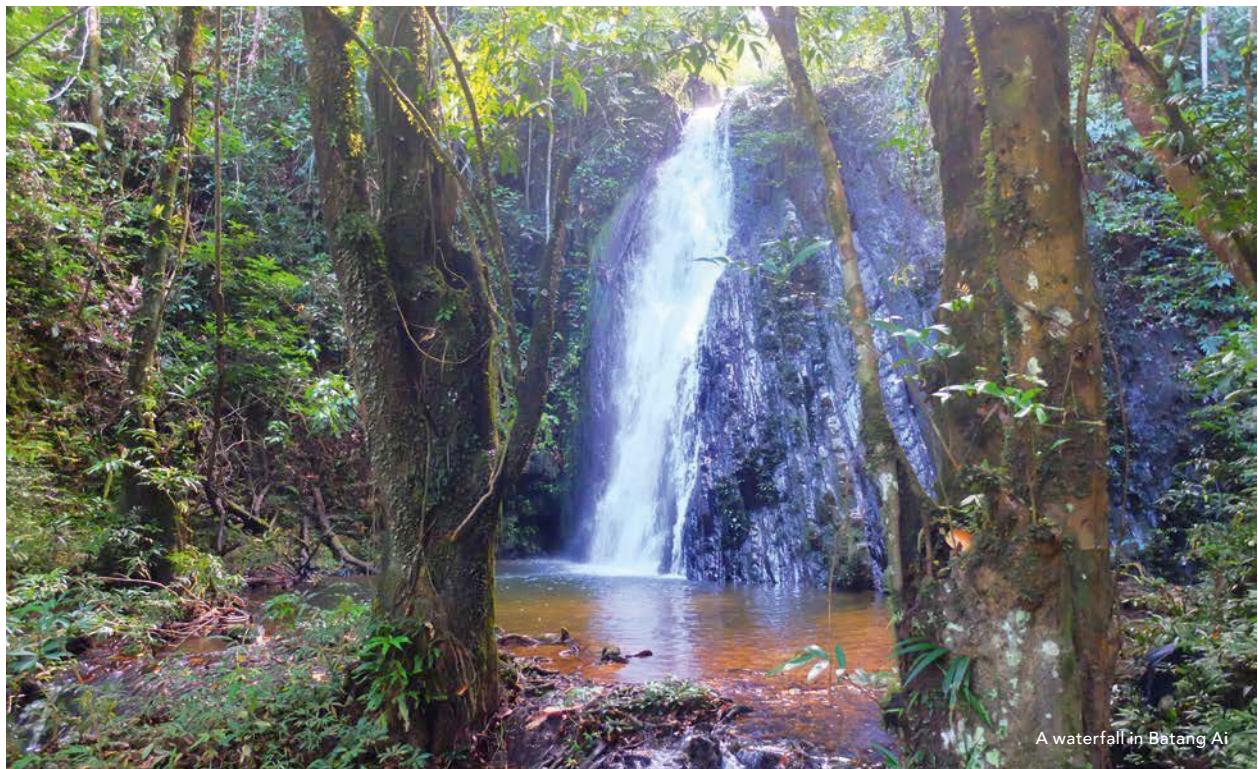
A close-up, high-contrast photograph of an orangutan's face, showing its dark skin, brown eyes, and thick reddish-brown hair. The lighting highlights the texture of its skin and the density of its fur.

MALAYSIA

#1

# SEARCH FOR THE *Red Ape*

JOURNEY DEEP INTO THE RAINFORESTS OF BATANG AI  
FOR A CHANCE TO SPY ONE OF SARAWAK'S FAMOUS  
ORANGUTANS—OTHERWISE KNOWN AS THE  
RED APE—IN ITS NATURAL HABITAT  
WORDS: LAURA HOLT



A waterfall in Batang Ai

**I**n the inky-black darkness of the rainforest night, we stand, ankle-deep in water. With only head torches to guide us, we scan the riverbanks for signs of life. One eye means spider, two eyes means frog, we're told, as we dodge low-hanging branches and navigate slippery rocks. Tree frogs reveal themselves, including a strange white one with translucent skin and tiny froglets the size of fingernails. A giant river toad, native to Borneo, perches on a rock, showing off its craggy, wart-covered skin. Tonight we're looking for amphibians, but somewhere out there lurks another creature, the real object of our fascination.

It's the first evening on the Red Ape Trail, an extended, multi-day trek taking us through prime orangutan terrain in Borneo's remote Batang Ai region. It has already taken an adventure to get to this point — a five-hour, 170-mile drive from the cosmopolitan city of Kuching, past ever-more dense jungle and terraces dotted with pepper and rice plantations to a jetty on the shores of the vast Batang Ai reservoir. Then, a bracing two-hour journey upriver by longboat — the traditional wooden vessel

favoured by Borneo's indigenous Iban tribe — to reach Nanga Sumpa lodge on the upper reaches of the Delok River. After a night spent acclimatising to jungle life, a three-hour hike has taken us even deeper into the forest to reach Mawang Camp, our home for the next few days.

The Red Ape Trail was created in 2000 by Borneo Adventure, a local tour operator, founded by Philip Yong and Robert Basuik in 1987. The pair came in search of an experience that would offer travellers the chance to glimpse Borneo's prized wildlife, while learning something of the region's dominant Iban tribe. They settled on Nanga Sumpa, a traditional, timber longhouse in which the locals lived communally.

A trail network has since been developed from the longhouse into the surrounding forest. The Red Ape Trail is the most challenging of these, taking walkers out into the jungle to camp out over multiple nights, in the hope of glimpsing wild orangutans. It originally started as an epic, 10-day challenge, but has since been reduced to a more manageable five-day trek — wise, in a country with humidity levels that can rise to up to 80%.

At camp after our frog hunt, we sit playing cards with our Iban guides, drinking potent tuak rice wine. As well as two guides, Bayang and Sobeng, we're accompanied by a team of Iban men, who lavish us with spicy Malaysian curries and fried jungle ferns.

The biggest character is Ronny, who speaks great English, having worked on the oil and gas rigs in Bintulu further north. With a big smile and prominent tribal tattoos, he sports a football shirt with his name on it — a modern token in an otherwise traditional life.

Among the tourists are two young engineers from England and a French couple in their mid-50s. With anticipation high, we try to bed down for the night, donning long sleeves and trousers to keep the insects at bay, before clambering under mosquito nets to sleep on simple roll-out mattresses. But the jungle has other ideas. As the sound of cicadas chimes out, howls and cries join in to disrupt the silence of night. I listen to the hypnotic chorus, eyes wide open.

## EMPTY NESTERS

Life at Mawang Camp is simple, and over the next few days, we settle into the ➤

easy rhythm of waking early to bathe in the river, before feasting on a breakfast of eggs, toast and banana fritters. Morning treks are followed by lunch at camp, and afternoon hikes, carried out when the weather is cooler and the orangutans are busy building their nests in the trees for the coming night.

We spot many of these sturdy nests crafted from folded back branches, and can tell if they're old or new from whether the leaves are brown or green. The technological skills needed to create them are often cited as evidence of the primates' innate intelligence.

But the significance of the nests goes beyond this. When logging companies recently started rounding in on the prized timber of the region's Dipterocarp forest, a team spearheaded

different species of hornbill that reside in Batang Ai.

The walking, though, is the real highlight, taking us through glassine rivers, silent valleys and dense jungle. Indeed, to call it the Red Ape Trail is something of a misnomer, as any evidence of a clearly marked trail seems entirely absent at times. Instead, our Iban guides use their knowledge of the jungle to forge a way through, hacking down six-foot ferns and persistent palms with long machetes to create a path where previously there was none. At other times, we use tree roots and bamboo shoots to clamber up and down steep slopes. With the humidity high, it makes for sweaty going and demands a certain level of fitness from the walker. But regular breaks, peppered with tales

The going is smoother this time and calmer than the way in — there's no need for the Iban to use their long wooden poles to push us up river, or get out to push when the boat drags along the river's floor. Suddenly, the calm is broken by a rustle in the trees. Our guides have spotted an orangutan, a female with at least one, possibly two, infants in tow.

From the boats, we sit and watch as the apes move from tree to tree, a tiny face at one point clearly visible, staring back at us inquisitively. Of course, they would be here: basking beside the cool, shaded waters of this mighty waterway, that has helped shape this landscape for centuries. While we toiled and tired on the Red Ape Trail, all this time, they were sitting beside the Batang Ai, hiding in plain sight. □

*"The walking, though, is the real highlight, taking us through glassine rivers, silent valleys and dense jungle"*

by Robert Basuik set out to protect the area. Together with the Forestry Department of Sarawak, the World Conservation Society and the local Iban, they carried out surveys, counting nests to prove this was a crucial orangutan habitat. Their efforts resulted in the creation of the 34,000-acre Sungai Menyang conservation area, between the reservoir and the upper Delok River. It was a vital move, especially as Batang Ai is now the last remaining viable orangutan habitat in the state of Sarawak.

It was good news, too, for the rest of the forest's residents, which includes 200 species of bird, from yellow-eared spiderhunters to red-crowned barbers, as well as bearded pigs, horned deer, civets and reticulated pythons — though I'm in no rush to meet these. Instead, I spy fruit bats hanging from a riverside cave, tarantula nests, pig-tailed macaques and several of the eight

of the forest and the Iban's customs, make it a fascinating adventure.

Each night, as evening falls, we return to camp, muscles aching and heads filled with the day's exploits. We sit at long wooden benches, staring out at the mist rising over the river, listening to the jungle start up its nightly song. With candles flickering on the tables, dinner arrives and we fill our hungry bellies, before retiring for the night.

With all this excitement, it seems to matter little that the orangutans remain elusive. We spy evidence of their existence everywhere, from nests and discarded fruit on the forest floor, to ripped palm shoots, which the animals tear apart to reach the hearts.

The Red Ape Trail is over, but the adventure is not yet finished. After a night back at Nanga Sumpa, with a trip to swim in the refreshing waters of Enseluai waterfall, we board a longboat once again for the journey back.

## Batang Ai: Three to see

### SLOW LORIS

These cute, teddy-bear-like primates are tree-dwelling and feed on insects, fruit and nectar. Nocturnal, they're perfectly adapted to life in the forest canopy.

### CLOUDED LEOPARD

With fewer than 10,000 left worldwide and no more than 1,000 in any single population, this elusive cat is Borneo's largest. Its dark coat features cloud shapes.

### SUN BEAR

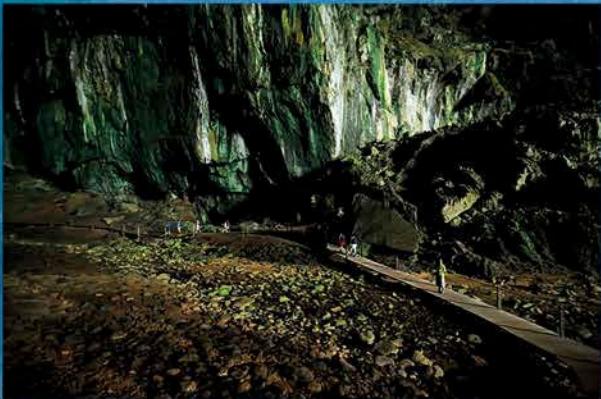
The smallest of the bear family has a long, protrusive tongue that can extend up to 25cm — ideal for extracting honey and insects from hard-to-reach places. They're mostly active during the day.

Heading up river.

**BELOW:** Slow loris



► **HOW DO TO IT:** Malaysia Airlines flies from Heathrow to Kuching via Kuala Lumpur from £689. The Red Ape Trail costs US\$820 (£634) per person, based on a minimum of two people trekking. This includes two nights' full-board at Nanga Sumpa and two nights at Mawang Camp, plus guided walking and return transport from Kuching to Batang Ai. [malaysiaairlines.com](http://malaysiaairlines.com) [borneoadventure.com](http://borneoadventure.com)



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Mulu National Park is home to the world's largest cave passage and natural chamber. Watch the exodus of millions of bats from the dim caverns at dusk. Leave your footprints when you trek up the paths of the serene jungle. And brace yourself for a wondrous viewpoint overlooking a collection of 45 metre limestone Pinnacles. Come live the adventure.

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Mulu National Park - A World Heritage Site

# #2

## LEARN THE SIPADAN SONG

### Q&A

DAVID MCCANN,  
DIVEMASTER,  
SCUBA JUNKIE



#### What makes Sipadan such a great dive site?

In a nutshell, the mind-blowing biodiversity. Sipadan sits inside the Coral Triangle — a region of the world with the highest levels of marine biodiversity — and has been protected by Malaysian law for many years. As a result, the reefs are thriving. Even after thousands of dives at Sipadan, my jaw still drops. It's possible to see just about anything: hammerhead sharks, whale sharks, marlin and manta rays — you name it.

#### Is it suitable for all divers?

You must be a certified Open Water Diver to dive at Sipadan, as the currents can be challenging. However, snorkelling here is suitable for everyone and snorkellers see just as much as the divers — sometimes more.

#### What species can you see there?

Sipadan is famous for its large schools of fish,

especially chevron barracudas, as well as its shark and sea turtle sightings. White-tip and grey reef sharks are also common; so are green and hawksbill turtles. You'll find that each dive site has its own unique quirks. For example, on South Point, bignose unicornfish will hang around, waiting for divers to descend, then make a beeline for their bubbles; the reason they do this is to get rid of parasites.

#### Can you dive it the whole year round?

Yes. Although it's worth noting that June to August is turtle-breeding season and during those months it's not unusual to see turtles mating on the surface or during a dive.

#### Tell us something about Sipadan we don't know.

There's a Sipadan song (selected verses below)! [scuba-junkie.com](http://scuba-junkie.com)

"There's an island in Celebes Sea,  
the name Sipadan you must go and see.  
If you are a diver and you want the best,  
come along and we do the rest"

"Well I'm glad to say the drop-offs OK,  
Barracuda Point's not far away,  
Lobster Lair is also there,  
and the Hanging Gardens are very rare"

# #3

## SEE THE WORLD'S largest (AND smelliest) flower

The blood-red rafflesia has a reputation worthy of a horror film. The 'corpse flower' is a mere brown lump on a vine, save for 10 days a year when it blooms (usually Nov-

Jan), releasing the fragrance of rotting flesh to attract pollinating carrion flies. The flower can grow to 3ft wide and weigh over 7kg; making it the world's largest. The smell doesn't deter local people, who've been using the plant — which it's claimed has aphrodisiac powers and can alleviate labour pains — for centuries.

# Win A LUXURY SEVEN-NIGHT STAY IN Malaysia

*National Geographic Traveller* (UK) has teamed up with Malaysia Airlines and the St. Regis brand to offer a twin-centre holiday for two in The St. Regis Langkawi and The St. Regis Kuala Lumpur, including seven nights' accommodation and return business class flights.

**THE ST. REGIS LANGKAWI** is a leading property on the island at the forefront of Malaysia's luxury offering. The resort features a 600m private white sand beach overlooking the emerald waters of the Andaman Sea. In addition to its 85 distinct suites and four over-water villas, the resort is also home to six dining venues, the Iridium Spa and a well-equipped Athletic Club. [stregislangkawi.com](http://stregislangkawi.com)

## Your prize

The winner will receive a three-night stay in a Deluxe Room with breakfast at The St. Regis Kuala Lumpur, plus afternoon tea in the hotel's Drawing Room; a four-night stay with breakfast in the St. Regis Suite at The St. Regis Langkawi, including luxury chauffeured transfers to and from the airport; and business class flights from Heathrow to Kuala Lumpur, and onward to Langkawi, with Malaysia Airlines.

Situated in the KL Sentral district, **THE ST. REGIS KUALA LUMPUR** offers the best in luxury, with large guestrooms served by butlers and interiors characterised by chandeliers and handmade Italian gold tiles. The prize-winners will receive afternoon tea in the period Drawing Room, one of the hotel's six dining options. [stregiskualalumpur.com](http://stregiskualalumpur.com)

**MALAYSIA AIRLINES** flies to more than 50 destinations worldwide, including twice-daily flights from Heathrow to Kuala Lumpur. Its business class seats on the A380 offer generous legroom and fully flat beds, and passengers can enjoy a wide-range of personal entertainment options via their large IFE screens as well as gourmet cuisine. [malaysiaairlines.com](http://malaysiaairlines.com)

## TO ENTER

Answer the question below by visiting [natgeotraveller.co.uk/competitions](http://natgeotraveller.co.uk/competitions)

**Kuala Lumpur is the capital city of which country?**



The competition closes on 15 December at 23.59 GMT. The winner must be over 18 and the trip is subject to availability. The prize is valid for 12 months. Full T&Cs available at [natgeotraveller.co.uk/competitions](http://natgeotraveller.co.uk/competitions)



# #4 Take a walk INTO THE PAST

From Portuguese forts to Buddhist temples, Melaka City is a historic treat — and one best explored on foot

## 2 // CHENG HOON TENG TEMPLE

In the heart of Chinatown, Malaysia's oldest Buddhist temple has welcomed worshippers for nearly 500 years. Keep your eyes peeled for the traditional Chinese opera theatre across the road.



## 3 // HEEREN STREET

Once described as Melaka's Millionaire's Row, this street is home to a collection of 18th-century dwellings. The pick of these is No.8, a Dutch-period residential property restored as part of a UNESCO project using traditional materials such as papered lime.

JALAN TOKONG  
JALAN HANG KASTURI  
JALAN HANG JEBAT

JALAN TUKANG-BESI  
JALAN HUNG LOH SING  
JALAN MERDEKA

JALAN GEREJA  
JALAN TAHAN

JALAN KOTA  
JALAN PARAMESWARA

JALAN BUNGA RAYA PANTAI  
JALAN PASAR BARU

JALAN BUNGA RAYA PANTAI  
JALAN TUN MAMAT 2

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7

## 4 // ST PAUL'S CHURCH

A sweat-inducing climb will take you to the oldest church in Southeast Asia. Covered in plant growth when it was rediscovered, it's now a roofless shell, providing great views across the city.



## 5 // A FAMOSA

The only remaining gatehouse of one of the largest fortresses ever built, with a 40-metre-high watchtower and walls three metres thick.

# #5

## FIND YOUR FAVOURITE CAVE

Among Malaysia's many miraculous cave networks, the Niah Caves stand out as the stage for some fearless foraging and a majestic ballet of birds and bats



**I**t's almost impossible to have a bad meal in Malaysia — something I brought home to me as I waited under leaden skies by a roadside, waiting for my bus to Batu Niah. Despite my unpromising surroundings, I had managed to breakfast superbly — throw together some glutinous rice, garlic, spinach and prawns, a cadaverously thin and henpecked chef, his bossy spouse barking orders, a large wok and change out of the equivalent of £2, and you have one of those life-affirming experiences that many of us travel for.

Batu Niah is a sweltering low-slung town and the gateway to one of Sarawak's great glories — the Niah Caves. A geography teacher once described the area to me as Niah's Ark on account of its extraordinary diversity and tangible links to early human history: earlier this year a 37,000-year-old human skull was discovered there — said to be oldest remains found in South-east Asia — while cave paintings depict the dead voyaging into the

afterlife. Come late afternoon, I made my way along a boardwalk and explored the interior of the Great Cave. At 60 metres high and around 250 metres wide, it's possibly one of the few caves that a claustrophobic person might be able to tolerate.

The same may not apply if you fear the onset of vertigo. Staring upwards into the distant recesses, I saw pinpricks of human beings perched on bamboo poles. Wobbling gently, they were retrieving segments of small cup-shaped bundles from the dizzying extremes of the cave.

These were the nests of the black-nest and white-nest swiftlet, which comprise a glutinous solution excreted by the birds' saliva glands. This quickly solidifies into a cement-like substance long favoured by the Chinese.

The nests are processed into a soup that turns up in fancy restaurants in Singapore, Hong Kong and the US. At times they have been worth their weight in gold, which is why nest harvesters are

prepared to take such extraordinary risks to retrieve them. Then, as dusk arrived, the show — the main reason people come here — began. In a thrilling tide of hundreds of thousands of wing beats, the swiftlets returned to roost, triggering a similar number of hitherto unseen bats to twitch into action, peel off the walls and swoop for the exit.

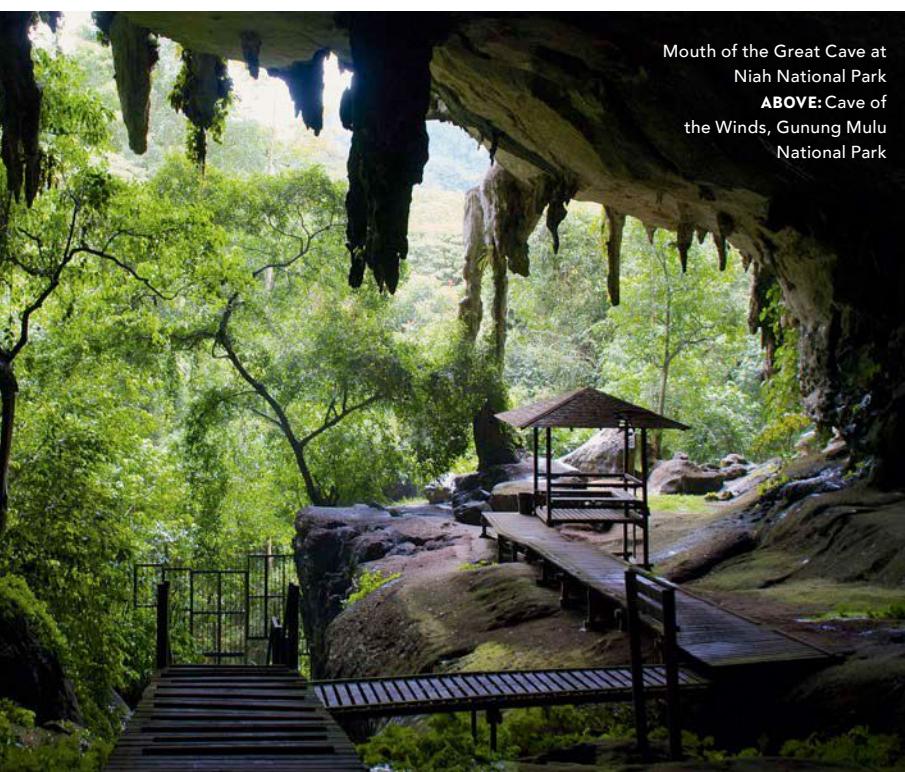
In no time, it was as though the air turned full of soot. I was outnumbered on a Hitchcockian scale. Mid-air collisions were narrowly avoided a thousand times every second. A similar spectacle occurs at dawn when the swiftlets dash out as the bats clock in.

Show over, I wandered back in the darkness, accompanied by unseen hooting and scuttling and the whizzing of bats cutting through the air. With my breakfast success still on my mind, I chose a pavement restaurant in town. I couldn't see bird saliva anywhere on the menu — but just in case, I steered clear of the soup. **MARK ROWE**



## MULU CAVES

Isolated by dense jungle, Borneo's Mulu Caves are a place to channel your inner explorer. Trek along tracks that fight their way through thick, primary rainforest via the thrillingly named Headhunter's Trail, or arrive by air (no roads here), your light aircraft following the twists and turns of tropical river systems to the South China Sea. It was this movement of water and the primordial heave of the earth some 500 million years ago that started to form Mulu's limestone and sandstone caves and peaks. Sarawak Chamber is the subterranean centrepiece here — the world's largest cave chamber by surface area, which at 1.66 million sq ft could house 40 Boeing 747s. Deer Chamber next door could fit in five St Paul's cathedrals. Riverboat rides and easy treks take tourists between the four main caves, while the 480-metre Mulu Canopy Skywalk travels into the trees. For a more challenging journey, hike to the Pinnacles, 45-metre high, razor-sharp limestone spikes that dominate the slopes of Mount Api. [mulupark.com](http://mulupark.com)



Mouth of the Great Cave at  
Niah National Park

**ABOVE:** Cave of  
the Winds, Gunung Mulu  
National Park

## BATU CAVES

The smell of incense is strong as Hindu families gather inside the Batu Caves to pray. One of Malaysia's holiest and most impressive natural structures, the Batu Caves and temple complex is just seven miles north of the capital Kuala Lumpur.

A 42.7-metre high concrete statue of Hindu deity Murugan stands guard at the entrance, painted with 300 litres of gold paint. To reach the caves and temple complex, visitors must hike up 272 gaspingly steep stone steps—but this doesn't tend to put anyone off.

Monkeys provide a distraction on the humid ascent. Once inside, the dampness cools the heat of the day. Cathedral Cave is the biggest, crammed with ornate gold Hindu shrines. At the base of the steps are two other cave temples, the art gallery cave and the museum cave, littered with paintings and statues. The caves are as craggy and magnificent as you'd expect, with mellow lighting to highlight the stalactites and bats' nests metres and metres overhead.

#6  
HIT THE RAILSTHE  
*Jungle*  
RAILWAY**Tell me more.**

The Jungle Railway was once known as the Golden Blowpipe thanks to its proximity to Taman Negara. That's the national park where the *orang asli* — Malaysia's nomadic aboriginal people — still use bamboo blowpipes to hunt. The line swings away from the nation's heartlands and heads all the way up to the Thai border, along the east side of the forested, mountainous spine of Peninsular Malaysia. (For Taman Negara get off at Jerantut station.)

**So it's all wilderness then?**

The west coast of the Malaysian peninsula is the densely populated home of the 'tiger economy'. This is the economically thrusting Malaysia, a network of transport hubs and oil palm and rubber plantations. This economic tiger has left much of the centre and east coast untamed, so doing this journey is a bit like entering into a long, glorious tunnel of green.

**Any big cities en route?**

Nope. This train effectively does a tour of slow-paced *kampong* — Malaysian

village — life. Despite its name, the East Coast Line doesn't actually run along the sealine, meaning coastal cities such as Kuantan and Kuala Terengganu aren't served. Instead, the line grazes Kota Bharu before terminating in Tumpat, up near the border with Thailand. There are only four trains a day back and forth along the main section, and only one that actually connects back with the rest of the network.

**So what can you see?**

In terms of fellow passengers, this has all the local colour of a village bus route, making it great for people watching. Scenery-wise, expect big limestone outcrops, broad ochre-coloured rivers, a few plantations, and a lot of forest.

**How close do you get to the border with Thailand?**

The track itself crosses the border, but the train stops at Tumpat. If you want to cross, you'll need to take a bus or a taxi for the nine miles between Tumpat and the Thai town of Sungai Golok, from where there are trains to Bangkok.

Andrew Eames

The Eastern and Oriental Express  
BELOW: North Borneo Railway

**NORTH BORNEO RAILWAY**

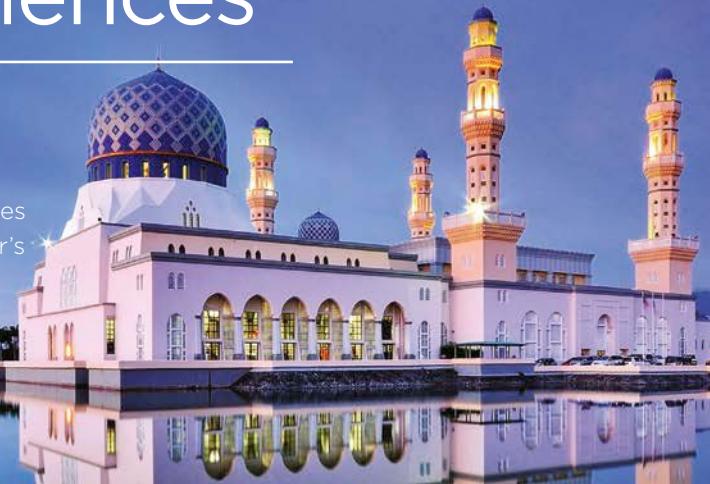
Borneo's oldest running steam train winds its way through the beautiful Sabah countryside, past wave-lapped beaches and villages perched high amid the vast rubber plantations. It takes in some of Malaysia's most awe-inspiring landscapes, while the dark green-and-cream carriages evoke the splendour of the colonial era.

**EASTERN AND ORIENTAL EXPRESS**

This luxury train cuts through Peninsular Malaysia, on its way from Singapore to Bangkok. The cherry-wood panelled cabins are pure five-star, as are the cuisine and the service, with stewards practically tucking you in at night. Excursions include a visit to Kuala Kangsar's golden-domed Ubudiah Mosque. [belmond.com](http://belmond.com)

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MALAYSIA



#7

# KEEP UP WITH

# Kuala Lumpur

IN THIS JUNGLE-FRINGED METROPOLIS, WHERE SOARING SKYSCRAPERS OVERSHADOW HISTORIC ENCLAVES, IT'S THE CITY'S CAPRICIOUS NATURE THAT REALLY ENTHRALLS. WORDS: ZOË MCINTYRE

*S*weet-scented incense wafts thick and heady between the temple columns, blending with the meditative chants and hypnotic notes of a sitar-led quartet. Men and women, similarly dressed in gold-embroidered silks, press together to catch a glimpse of the shrine, where a loincloth-clad devotee zealously anoints a garlanded deity: first water for purity, then turmeric for health and finally sandalwood for prosperity.

I've stumbled across this auspicious ceremony at the Sri Mahamariamman Temple by chance. Its five-tiered gateway, adorned with a pantheon of polychrome Hindu idols, overlooks the thronging streets of Kuala Lumpur's Chinatown. It's around the corner from Sin Sze Si Ya, a 150-year-old Taoist temple, where moments earlier I'd stood under a luminous string of vermillion lanterns and consulted Kau Cim (fortune-telling sticks) as little old women folded piles of sacred scrolls beside me. As I walked between the two temples, I'd heard the evocative call to prayer from a nearby mosque.

Such is life in Kuala Lumpur, a city whose diverse mix of cultures, faiths and races are drawn together in a thrilling smorgasbord of possibility. It morphs between shimmering skyscrapers and pencil-slim minarets, gargantuan shopping malls and hidden jungle dens, so that even the shortest of walks can entirely transform your impressions. It's this quicksilver quality that makes unwrapping the city so exciting. Come with a good map and an open mind and you'll soon take KL to your heart.

Less than 200 years ago, KL was little more than jungle. Then Chinese prospectors arrived, generating a booming mining trade. Forests were chopped and a scruffy trading post was set up on the junction of the Klang and the Gombak Rivers that soon assumed the name Kuala Lumpur, ('muddy confluence'). In the 19th century, this became a social confluence, as a wave of immigrants brought their own cuisines, customs and architecture to the city.

Malaysian Chinese account for roughly a quarter of the country's population. Their presence is felt in Jalan Petaling, a hectic thoroughfare in



the heart of Chinatown. In full market mode, it resounds with the sound of hawkers, peddling eye-catching imitation watches and flashy faux designer handbags. I weave past wheelcart ladies ladling sea coconut and 'dragon's eye' longan juice to seek out lunch in the Old China Café. Housed in a two-story shophouse — the kind once common to the area — it was previously the guildhall of a laundry association.

Behind swinging, saloon-style doors, dimly lit interiors provide a glimpse of the bygone cafe culture lived by early immigrant settlers. The scuffed plaster walls groan under an array of black-and-white photos, antique pendulum clocks and two sizeable mirrors, hung in a feng shui arrangement to perpetuate good luck. Delicious fusions of Malay-Chinese fare arrive at my marble-topped table. There's tangy *kapitan* curry, rich in tamarind; crispy *lobak* pork rolls and *sago gula melaka* — a local dessert made from palm sugar and coconut milk.

From there, the metro delivers me to another era at Dataran Merdeka, KL's palm-fringed central square and the former social centre of British colonial rule. Its grassy *padang* was once a cricket pitch and there's still something of a refined air, albeit tempered by circling exhaust fumes. Taking pride of place around the square's perimeter is the distinctive black-and-white facade of the mock-Tudor Royal Selangor Club, where well-to-do Europeans once rubbed shoulders as they applauded a good innings. At the centre stands a 312ft flagpole, where, in 1957, the nation's first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, hauled down the Union Jack and hoisted up the Malay Stripes of Glory in declaration of independence.

But for all its history, Kuala Lumpur hasn't shied away from embracing the future. A super-sleek monorail winds into a burgeoning business district known simply as KLCC (Kuala Lumpur City Centre) that's studded with an ever-increasing number of stratospheric skyscrapers. Here, luxury hotels vie for stardom and 10-tiered malls sprawl with enough nail bars, designer stores and food courts to make you giddy. Many are thankful for the icy air-con they provide, although I much prefer the balmy greenery of the KLCC Park, where, as passing joggers sweat it out, I can dip my toes into the man-made

lake and gaze up at the city's real showstoppers: the Petronas Towers.

There's something mesmerising about these twin structures — their perfect unity; their geometric verve; the mastery of their subtle Islamic motifs. Desperate for a closer look, at sunset I follow city slickers to Marini's on 57 — KL's highest rooftop bar, offering front-row views of the towers. In the lobby, the doorman graciously hands me a pair of squeaky

thatched roof. My Indochinese feast is accompanied by chirping birds and the flutter of giant butterflies, which perch on my tablecloth and make it easy for me to forget I'm in a city at all.

From there, I head to Bangsar, a complete antidote to the flashy KLCC, and the darling of KL's trendsetting bourgeoisie. Perched high on a hill to the south west of the centre, this once down-at-heel outskirt now thrives with new art spaces, organic coffee shops, side-street murals and hole-in-the-wall boutiques. And while it may have lost its gritty edge, tourists still remain largely absent from its leafy streets, meaning a relaxed local atmosphere endures.

I head to Raj's Banana Leaf — a no-frills curry house where frenetic waiters present banana leaves as refillable plates and heap them with rice, spice-rich curry and countless ladles of lip-puckering pickles and bitter gourds. With our elbows touching, conversation soon flows between me and my nearest neighbours — two regulars who instruct me on hand-to-mouth etiquette. "Only eat with your right hand," they warn. "Fold the leaf when you're finished. Inwards means you've enjoyed it, outwards means you won't come again."

Armed with an address scrawled on a post-it note supplied by my new friends, I order an Uber and minutes later arrive at a shadowy backstreet. Down a rickety stairwell, an inconspicuous basement door is scrawled with the words 'No Admittance' in five languages. I take a deep breath and push it open, thinking back to those temple fortune sticks and hoping now they'll serve me well. A dark subterranean speakeasy, decked in tufted upholstery, opens before me. "Welcome to Omakase & Appreciate," says the waistcoated bartender from behind a liquor-stacked bar. I pull up a stool beside a gaggle of well-dressed carousers ready for a long night's sit-in.

Once again, just when I thought I had Kuala Lumpur sussed, this kaleidoscope city shifts to reveal something unexpected. A buttoned-up Asian metropolis it most certainly is not. □

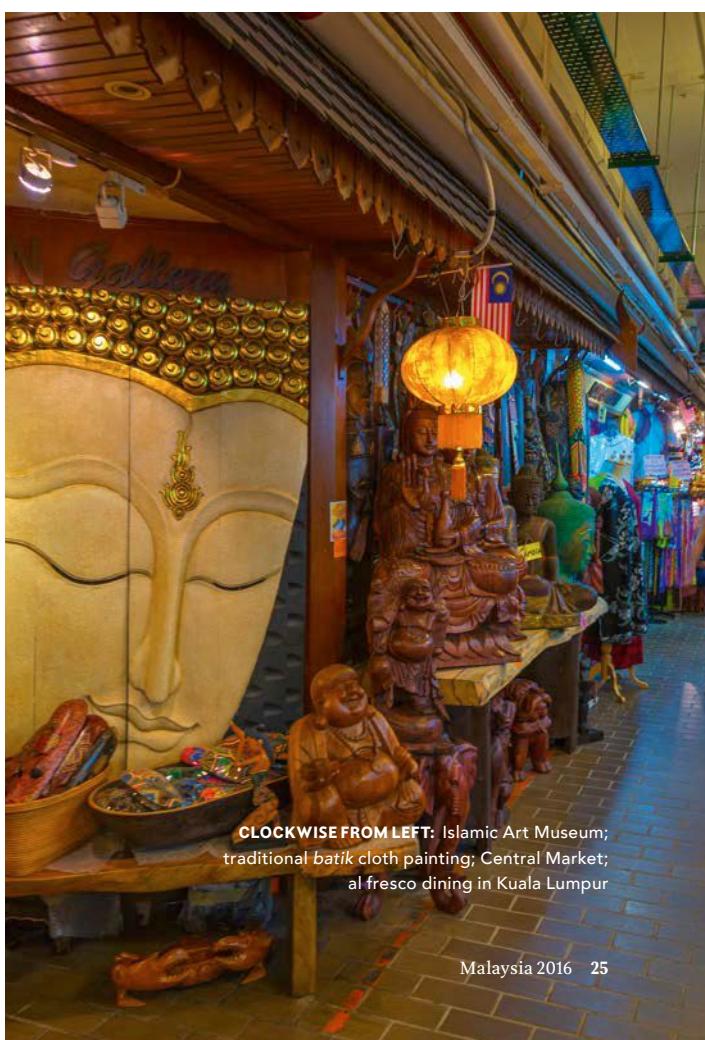
**LITTLE INDIA**  
Amble down the western edge of Jalan Tun Sambanthan to Brickfields for scents of jasmine and frying *appam* pancakes plus henna artists and *bhangra* music.

**TREC**  
This neon-lit urban entertainment/food and drink hub is split into five quarters, each featuring an eclectic set of see-and-be-seen venues.

pink pumps to trade for my scrappy sandals. Perhaps he doesn't realise that once the elevator opens at the 57th floor, no one will be looking down at my feet.

For dinner that evening I'm at the seductive forested lair of Tamarind Springs. Its only 15 minutes' drive from KLCC but couldn't feel more remote. A maze of zigzagging lantern-lit pathways encroached by giant leaves and tousled vines leads to an intimate dining deck set beneath a tropical palm-

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**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** Islamic Art Museum; traditional batik cloth painting; Central Market; al fresco dining in Kuala Lumpur



# Where to stay in LANGKAWI

Look no further as we introduce two premier Langkawi properties:  
The St. Regis Langkawi and the Andaman, a Luxury Collection Resort

## THE ST. REGIS LANGKAWI

Situated in a tranquil cove, The St. Regis offers a 600m private white sand beach overlooking the emerald waters of the shimmering Andaman Sea. Guests can enjoy the sophisticated comforts of 85 suites and four overwater villas, each distinct in design with bold colours, paintings by local artists and generous marble bathrooms. The premium suites also feature terraces with unobstructed sea views — which are also on the menu at the resort's six dining venues, including the overwater restaurant, Kayuputi. Meanwhile, the Iridium Spa offers more than 800sqm of tranquil treatments and salon services; guests can also enhance their wellbeing in the fully-equipped Athletic Club.



## THE ANDAMAN A LUXURY COLLECTION RESORT

Located in an idyllic tropical setting, The Andaman, a Luxury Collection Resort, is cosily tucked between a rainforest that's 10 million years old and the tranquil Datai Bay, with its 8,000-year-old fringing coral reef, in an area abundant with rare wildlife and exotic flora. Guests have the perfect opportunity to interact with the natural surroundings, not least by exploring the resort's very own coral reef, then learning more about it in the unique Coral Nursery — all while enjoying the luxurious trimmings of a five-star luxury resort.

### GET IN TOUCH

#### The St. Regis Langkawi

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07000 Langkawi, Kedah  
**T:** 00 (60) 4 960 6666  
**E:** reservation.  
langkawi@stregis.com  
stregislangkawi.com

#### The Andaman Langkawi

Jalan Teluk Datai,  
07000 Langkawi, Kedah  
**T:** 00 (60) 4 959 1088  
theandaman.com  
facebook.com/  
TheAndamanLangkawi



# #8 MEET A *cast of critters*



## PROBOSCIS MONKEY

As you float in your canoe down the Kinabatangan river by the Sukau Rainforest Lodge in Sabah, you might spot one of Malaysia's most incredible simians: the proboscis monkey. This unique-to-Borneo marvel is almost human-size, pot-bellied and endearingly ugly. It lazes in the canopy munching on ferns and observes hairless human intruders with a distant curiosity. Males have a huge nose that serves to indicate their virility to females, whose private parts swell and redden during the mating season. Locals nicknamed this monkey 'orang belanda' — Dutch man — for its resemblance to the hairy, large-nosed European colonials. [sukau.com](http://sukau.com)

IMAGES: GETTY; ALAMY; WORDS: MARCO FERRARESE



## ASIAN ELEPHANT

Besides the Kuala Gandah sanctuary on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur, elephants still dwell in Belum forest and parts of Sabah in North Borneo.

## HORNBILL

With a characteristic bone horn jutting from the upper part of its beak, this elegant bird inhabits stretches of Malaysian rainforest.

## LONG-TAILED MACAQUE

Malaysia's most successful primate has adapted to city life and dwells in urban vegetation. It's amazing how skilful they are at snatching anything edible.

## DUSKY LEAF MONKEY

Unlike the macaque, this black-and-white spectacled monkey is a shy cutie. Found in remote jungles and city parks, it likes hiding out in high canopies.

## MONITOR LIZARD

A smaller cousin to the Komodo dragon, this lizard is common in city suburbs and parks, often travelling from the coastline and marshlands via drains.

## ASIAN KOEL

The trademark, deep resonating and echoing sound of this cuckoo bird's call is so memorable, it'll stay with you long after you've returned home.

## HAWKSBILL TURTLE

This endangered large turtle returns to hatch its eggs on several secluded beaches. It can be commonly spotted swimming near the Perhentian or Sipadan and Mabul islands.

## FLYING LEMUR

A fox-like, canopy-dwelling, semi-flying cat creature common in the countryside and at the edge of cities. Their eyes glow alarmingly red in the dark.

# #9

## CATCH A SKY CAB

**Langkawi may be known for its beaches, but there's plenty more to enjoy, from cable cars and a Skybridge, to mangrove tours and limestone cliffs. Words: Maria Pieri**

The biggest, the longest, the tallest, the widest — Malaysia is a country that likes a superlative, from the mighty Petronas Towers, once the highest in the world, to some of the planet's most enormous shopping malls.

And what's true of the country in general is true of Langkawi, the archipelago of 99 beautiful islands off the coast of Kedah, which has a boast or two of its own — such as one of the steepest cable car rides on Earth, not to mention the world's longest free-span, curved bridge.

The cable car in question is better known as the Sky Cab, and as we ride it up to Mount Machinchang, Langkawi's second highest peak, we're rewarded with amazing views of the surrounding islands: an artist's palette of green, with a smattering of waterfalls and birds — lots of squawking, colourful birds. It's an experience akin to a ski lift in the summer, although it would be terrifying skiing from this height.

I'm here with the family, and, as is typical of most six-year-olds, my youngest is showing respect for the occasion by ambivalently falling into a deep, hot, sweaty slumber as we embark on



the first stage of the steady climb. That is, until we reach the top station when he's rudely awoken so we can cajole him into smiling for a family photo-op.

Not only that, I was pretty certain he wouldn't want to miss the chance to walk across the 82m-high bendy Skybridge. The bendiness of this 125m-long suspended walkway is apparently the reason you can see so much, as it swings out across the landscape with nothing to obstruct it. And yes, the views of the islands and their surrounds are impressive indeed; spectacular panoramas of lush tropical islands, the deep blue sea and the green smudge of rainforests.

The kids are suitably awed by — and I suspect just a little wary of — its sheer



Skybridge

LEFT: On a mangrove safari

scale and the dizzying heights it manages to reach; their sticky hands are firmly planted into their parents' palms for security.

The Skybridge was no easy build. All its various elements had to be lifted to the top of the mountain by helicopter to be assembled. Yet, for all the challenges this would have certainly involved, the engineers still managed to set up food and beverage stalls and official picture points.

A little while later, we find ourselves all heading back down towards the Oriental Village in Burau Bay, where our journey commenced. And it's good to note that, on the descent at least, we all seem very wide awake.  
[panoramalandkawi.com](http://panoramalandkawi.com)

## MANGROVE SAFARI

Take a motorboat tour from the Kilim jetty to discover the maze of 550-million-year-old cliffs and tangled mangroves that constitute the Kilim Karst Geoforest Park, home to an abundance of wildlife, from white-bellied sea eagles to macaque monkeys. [kilimgeoforestpark.com](http://kilimgeoforestpark.com)

## SUP YOGA

Stand Up Paddleboard Yoga might be tricky, but it's good for your balance and core strength, re-setting your nervous system and restoring inner calm. How many times did I fall in? Twice. Was I calm and focused? Well, I was focused on not falling in.  
[fourseasons.com/langkawi/spa/yoga](http://fourseasons.com/langkawi/spa/yoga)

## THE BEACH

*National Geographic* has rated Datai Bay the ninth best beach in the world, with its largely coral sands — meaning you won't suffer super-hot feet. Pasir Tengkorak is shaded and popular with both locals and travellers; the beaches between Pantai Tengah and Pantai Cenang are where most tourists bathe; and the Beach of Black Sand is found in one of Langkawi's oldest fishing villages.

## CLIFF HIKING

Climbing the karst limestone cliff faces through dense, thick forest isn't particularly easy, but it's well worth clambering up among wild orchids and thick-rooted trees as the views are absolutely spectacular.

# The HEAVENLY Bay

Langkawi's Datai Bay combines pristine beaches, lush rainforest and top-class golf to create an exceptional resort

Datai Bay — or Teluk Datai, as it's known locally — is situated on the northwest tip of Langkawi, just a 40-minute drive from Langkawi International Airport. Identified by National Geographic as one of the Top 10 Beaches in the World, the bay is an arc of flawless white sand, stretching a mile in length.

At its edge sits 500 hectares of dense rainforest — the base of Gunung Mat Cincang, one of Langkawi's best-known attractions. Formed around 500 million years ago, it's the oldest mountain in Southeast Asia, and listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Geopark. Its foothills are home to exotic species such as dusky leaf monkeys, colugos, hornbills and 530 species of butterfly.

Offering exclusive access to the bay, The Datai Langkawi resort offers a five-star experience and 122 rooms, villas and suites. Made from black shale and timber, the Canopy Collection rooms and suites are elevated so guests can enjoy eye-level bird-watching and partial views of the Andaman Sea. Spread over 750 hectares, the Rainforest Collection features rustic villas surrounded by jungle for a true 'at-one-with-nature' experience. Meanwhile The Beach Collection comes with butler service, private pool and sun deck, with each villa veiled in coastal vegetation and offering direct access to the beach.

Nearby is The Els Club Teluk Datai, an 18-hole, award-winning, par-72 championship golf course designed by Ernie Els — known for its spectacular vistas of marbled mountain peaks and emerald green sea.



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LANGKAWI



THE ELS CLUB  
TELUK DATAI

*"It's all a bit Blair Witch. Stray vines and fingers of bamboo keep lashing at my face. Unseen creatures squawk and cry and wail in the darkness."*

## #10 EMBRACE THE DARKNESS AT ROYAL BELUM

I've always been a night owl. But, to be honest, this tends to involve late-night dinners, rooftop bars or binge-watching *Breaking Bad* with a bucket of ice cream. Now here I am, ankle deep in sucking mud, puffing and panting in 34C heat and 90% humidity, as I scrabble up a blackened hillside on a night trek around Malaysia's Royal Belum State Park rainforest.

It's all a bit Blair Witch. Stray vines and fingers of bamboo keep lashing at my face. Unseen creatures squawk and cry and wail in the darkness. My torch seems to be generating the same glow as a tea light, and, I later discover, a leech has attached itself to my calf.

And there are snakes — hundreds of species, dozens of which are poisonous, including two types of cobra (common and king), three types of viper (the Malayan pit, the speckled pit and the white-lipped tree variety) and the strikingly beautiful blue coral snake, which my guide, Salihin, cheerfully informs me has the second-strongest venom of any serpent, only outdone by the black mamba. Oh, and we're at least a four-hour drive from the nearest hospital. And yet I'm having the time of my life.



Kobi Waterfall, Royal Belum State Park.  
BELOW: King cobra swimming in a stream

The biodiversity here is extraordinary. The rainforest is one of the world's oldest, dating back 130 million years, around 75 million years older than the Amazon. And it's home to some of the world's most endangered, and enchanting, animals — sun bears, pangolins, Sumatran rhinos, Asiatic elephants, cloud leopards, tapirs, tigers and black panthers (who hunt at night dropping down from tree branches killing their prey with a single bite to the neck). It's a night to remember of an altogether different kind — and it sure beats a box set.

LEE COBAJ



## National parks

### ENDAU-ROMPIN JOHOR

Offering 16 uncongested miles of hiking trails, waterfalls and exciting river crossings, Endau-Rompin Johor is a great option for those seeking peace and solitude. You'd be very lucky to spot one of the few Sumatran rhinos left in the park, but the trails still teem with hooting macaques and hornbills, while the park is also home to the Jakun, one of Peninsular Malaysia's aboriginal groups.

### BAKO SARAWAK

The headline attraction at Bako, in Sarawak, is the chance to glimpse proboscis monkeys among the mangrove trees, but there's plenty more to see and do. From its modest park headquarters, a series of tracks and boardwalks radiates outwards, enabling visitors to explore seven distinct eco-systems. These include every kind of vegetation Borneo has to offer, from coastal mangroves to dipterocarps (hardwood trees).

#11

# EXPLORE AN ISLAND fit for a Masterchef

THE ISLAND OF PENANG, WITH ITS VIBRANT CAPITAL, GEORGE TOWN, IS THE IDEAL PLACE TO EXPERIENCE THE SIMPLICITY AND FLAVOUR OF MALAYSIAN FOOD.

WORDS: JOHN TORODE

I've always been fascinated by Asia, and I'm not sure why. Maybe it's borne out of growing up in Australia at a time when the food on offer really didn't match the heat of the climate. So when I first ate chilli and noodles and rice, my palate was opened to a world of wonder.

After travelling to various parts of the world, I still find Asian food the most intriguing. I've always believed that to understand a country's food one needs to understand the people and their culture — and one of my more recent discoveries has been the food and culture of Malaysia.

Many years ago, I was dropped into Penang while filming, and found this bustling, colourful island immediately fascinating — but sadly, I only had a day to explore. Recently, however, I spent a number of weeks filming my own TV series all over Malaysia, and my childhood love of blue skies and the sea ultimately drew me back to the island of Penang.

Of the country's three dominant cultures — Malay, Chinese and Indian — it's the Chinese influence that's strongest in Penang — evident in both its architecture and, of course, its food.

The capital, George Town, is home to some of the world's best-kept culinary secrets and is definitely one of Malaysia's food capitals. While wandering its streets and markets, I was introduced to a wonderful woman of advanced years, who was manning a cart with a wood-fired stove. On it, she cooked a Malaysian treat called *char koay kak* — little cubes of cooked compressed rice and turnip cake, fried

in pork fat with pork lard and spring onions and *kicap manis* (an aromatic sweet soy sauce).

This was served with an optional egg and lovingly scooped into a cornet of newspaper lined with banana leaf for extra flavour. Such a simple dish, yet so delicious and expertly cooked, it's undoubtedly one of the best bits of street food I've ever been fortunate enough to eat.

Food finds like this are common in George Town, especially in the markets. Try Jalan Penang (Penang Road) and the Chowrasta Bazaar or the famous Macallum Street Night Market on a Monday. And if you're looking for the best streets stalls, simply head towards the crowded ones — the right place to be is wherever the locals are shopping and eating.

In the mornings, hawkers cluster near the corner of Carnavon and Campbell Streets, in front of the Campbell Street Market. Look for the elderly gentleman selling prawn *mee* (spicy fried noodles) — and hopefully you'll find my lady with the *char koay kak*! At night, head to Kimberley Street to the stall with *char kway teow* (rice noodles with bean sprouts, chicken and soy sauce).

Downtown's best *kopi peng* (Malaysian-style iced coffee) is served at the Toon Leong Coffee Shop (closed Sundays) at the corner of Jalan Transfer and Jalan Argyll.

If you want a cooking lesson, then go see Nazlina, who taught me to make pineapple curry. Her cooking

school, Nazlina Spice Station, sits opposite the Campbell Street Market, a former Victorian wet market, which is open most days.

But if you feel like a sit down with some coffee and cake, then head to China House — a wonderful old building that's now a coffee shop, restaurant and garden space serving great food and wine alongside more cakes than you can shake a stick at. Opened in 2011 by a fellow Aussie, Narelle and her team will be happy to let you in on some of the local secret food hangouts should you fancy advice on the area.

I still miss the streets and markets of Penang and George Town but I'm adamant I'll be back soon.

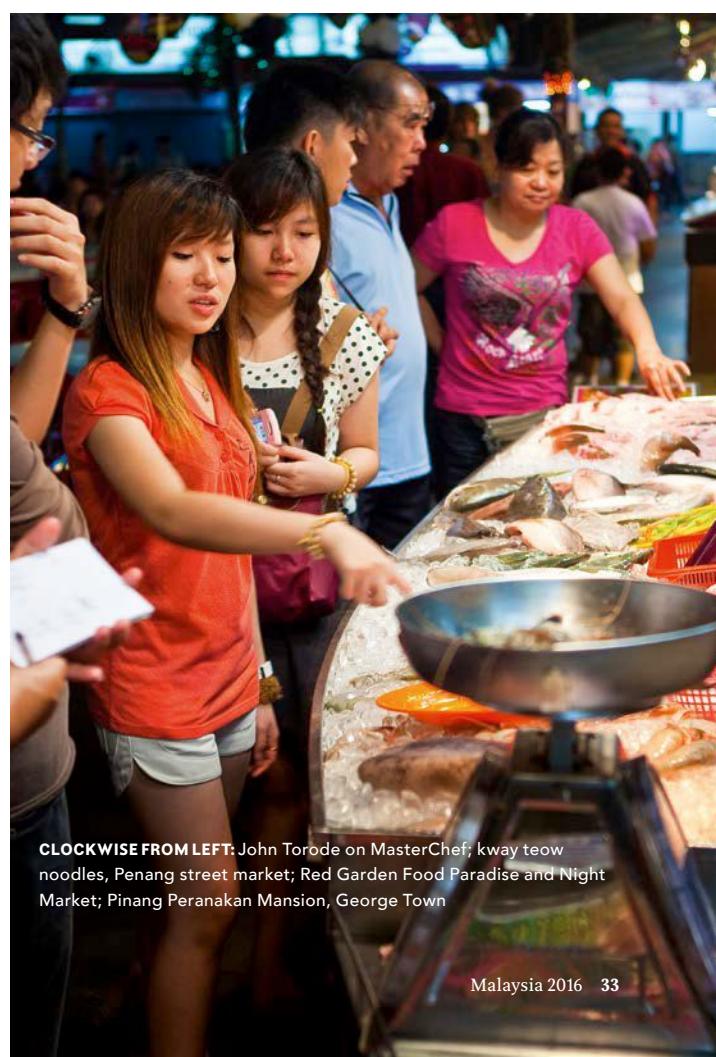
For me, the best thing about it is once you've wandered the streets and feasted your eyes, ears

and appetite you can retire to the beach and look up at that blue sky and out to sea.





**Don't Miss** The annual George Town Festival focuses on everything from art to music, theatre and dance. It's held every July/August. [georgetownfestival.com](http://georgetownfestival.com)



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: John Torode on MasterChef; kway teow noodles, Penang street market; Red Garden Food Paradise and Night Market; Pinang Peranakan Mansion, George Town

## #12

TAKE A TRIP TO  
THE PERHENTIANS

A whirlwind excursion to two little-known islands imprints a colourful memory of life above water and below. Words: Josephine Price

**M**alaysia and I had got off to a strange start. I knew of Melaka City and its colonial past; of Kuala Lumpur and its exceptionally tall towers; and, of course, of the orangutan of Sarawak and Sabah. But all that would have to wait. Having crossed over from Singapore, on a spluttering coach, my Malaysian adventure was destined to begin with a lesser-known destination: the Perhentians.

On my first morning on Perhentian Kecil — the smaller of the two islands — I'd overslept and stumbled out of my beach hut into a scene completely devoid of people.

I'd expected breakfast hour to be buzzing with sizzling woks, whipping up *mee goreng* (spicy noodles), and a chorus of blenders mixing fresh coconut water with fruit. But the tables were empty, the plates and cutlery discarded. Where was everyone?

The answer lay out to sea, where I could see the local fishermen bobbing on the horizon, the occasional boat transporting visiting divers. Beyond them, our larger neighbour, Perhentian Besar, seemed to emerge like a verdant boulder from the still waters.

Having strolled the beach, I finally found a local man called 'TP', who was neither a diver or a fisher. My attempts to find out more about him were met with an animated hand-dance — and an instruction to climb into his chalky blue boat. I jumped in. The engine chugged as he pulled on the cord, and the ocean began to ripple out from beneath us.

As we pulled out into the water, I looked back at the higgledy-piggledy

## Dive Time

PULAU  
PERHENTIAN

Electric-blue by day, and eerily phosphorescent by night, the clear waters of Pulau Perhentian are perhaps the islands' most alluring asset. Sparkling beside the bright white sandy beaches, they are a haven for snorkelling and diving, boasting a mesmerising display of marine life that draws in divers of all abilities. Beneath the surface await the likes of great rays and tiny seahorses, as well as vividly coloured fish and smooth, sleek reef sharks that gracefully glide through the water. A number of diving and snorkelling centres offer the chance to get up close to this spectacular array of wildlife. Divers can also keep a lookout for turtles, which are at the heart of conservation projects across these shores.

lines of wooden shacks that seemed to tumble down the bay towards the sea. We swerved round the first rocky promontory and chugged around from bay to bay, trying to find a favourite, before settling on a gleaming sandy stretch bordered with boulders. The fine white sand, made up of crushed coral, crunched under our toes.

TP headed into the jungle while I donned a snorkel and joined the schools, darting round the sun-dappled waters. And suddenly I understood the deserted breakfast scene — it was a real kaleidoscope of colours down there.

Later, back on the mainland, at the colourful port town of Kuala Besut, I tried out satay stalls while I waited for the coach. It was a whirlwind journey but it had paid off. It looked like Malaysia and I would get on after all.

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** A bay on Perhentian Besar; snorkelling off the coast of Perhentian Kecil

*I stumbled out of my beach hut into a scene completely devoid of people. The breakfast tables were empty, cutlery discarded. Where was everyone?*



#13

## SCALE THE Petronas Towers

No trip to Kuala Lumpur would be complete without a whizz up the futuristic towers that shimmer like skyrockets over the cityscape. Measuring an eyewatering 451.9m, the post-modern peaks remain a metaphor for the soaring ambitions of the city. Notice how the hypnotic pattern of their steel frames evoke arabesque motifs and finish in masts resembling minarets, thus reflecting the country's dominant faith. Ascending visitors stop off on the 41st floor, where the Skybridge links the towers, before zooming up to the 86th-storey Observation Deck. The descent goes down to Suria KLCC, one of the city's largest shopping malls and home to the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra. [petronastwtowers.com.my](http://petronastwtowers.com.my)





#14

# EXPLORE A 130-million-year-old RAINFOREST

TAKE A TRIP TO THE VAST NATIONAL PARK OF TAMAN NEGARA AND DISCOVER A RICH REPOSITORY OF REMOTE CULTURE AND OUTLANDISH CREATURES IN A PRIMEVAL JUNGLE SETTING.

WORDS BY ZOE MCINTYRE

A bloodcurdling scream pierces the soupy humidity of the Malaysian night. Emanating from the depths of the impenetrable forest, it rumbles around the darkness, reverberating off colossal trunks and interrupting the tireless croaking of rowdy bullfrogs. "Someone in other group. See big spider," whispers Angah, our guide, in colourful staccato Manglish.

My concerns are more snake-related, given that I've forgotten my torch and arrived in plastic sandals, a potentially lethal oversight since my surroundings sparkle like fairy dust with the shining eyes of a thousand tiny insects. Angah's flashlight reveals nests of splenetic black scorpions skulking in a hollowed trunk and spindle-legged spiders astride glistening golden threads. "Natives [sic] say only spider without web will attack. Web spider friendly," she says.

This is my introduction to Taman Negara, literally meaning 'national park'. It's a sprawling natural heartland, extending some 4,343 sq km over three different states, and evolving for a mind-boggling 130

million years, to make it one of the world's most ancient rainforests. Dense tropical lowlands overlooked by mountainous peaks accommodate a veritable cornucopia of strange and spectacular inhabitants. There are crab-eating macaques and roaring deer, insect-devouring pitcher plants and wheel-sized rafflesia (corpse flower), the world's largest and possibly worst-smelling bloom (see page 15).

Making it to the National Park has been a considerable test of stamina in itself. My partner and I left crowded Kuala Lumpur early in the morning to travel 200km on a rickety old bus bound for northern Penang and the muddy banks of the Tembeling River. We transferred from bus to motorised longboat and phut-phutted along turbid backwaters for three hours to reach the shabby little township of Kuala Tahan, gateway to the National Park.

Here, we clambered onto a clapboard boardwalk to join other travel-weary tourists gently stewing in the steamy jungle heat while seeking food and shelter under the tin-roofs of floating restaurants. Eventually, a water taxi ferried us to the opposite hillside and

Mutiara Resort, our stay for the next three days and the only lodgings located within the reserve. Its bungalow chalets fashioned in dark wood nestle neatly into the margin of the rainforest. At dusk we turned the key in our cabin door just in time to gaze through opened shutters at the river snaking into a resplendent sunset and a sky bruised chilli red and saffron yellow.

Daybreak in the jungle is a momentous occasion, celebrated with a hallelujah chorus of chirping crickets and the 'yoo-hoo, ha ha' wake-up call of cheery hornbills. Having survived the night walk unscathed, we emerge bleary-eyed to be greeted by a thick mist curled along the riverbank, obscuring the forest beyond. A hearty breakfast sustains us through the morning as we trail the tentacular paths that radiate outwards from the hotel into the reserve. Neat wooden signposts point us along the eastern bank of the Tahan River toward the natural pools of Lubok Simpon.

At first sight the forest appears a uniform leafy green and tree-trunk



IMAGE: ALAMY

Hiking through the jungle  
of Kuala Tahan, Taman  
Negara National Park



brown. But lustrous colours soon appear in the detail. Miniature turquoise butterflies flash their iridescent wings around pom-pom bunches of crimson berries and flowering tree-vine lianas clustered in orange blossoms. We find pink jelly-like fungi flourishing on mossy wood and metallic-silver millipedes concertinaing across the spongy leaf litter at our feet. We take it in at a snail's pace, over tangled roots and under taut vines that clutch and bend the trees like grasping fingers. The forest choir serenades our march: buzz, tweet, chirrup, buzz, tweet, chirrup.

The forest has a way of drawing you in and sharpening the senses. Every rustling leaf promises a sudden encounter with elusive animal life. My heart leaps into my mouth when a wild boar darts recklessly across our path, startling a fireback pheasant that careers across the canopy in a squawking tussle of black and blue feathers. We freeze at the sight of the bulky frame of a tapir appearing in the half-light between the trees, before it plunges back into the safety of the undergrowth.

As we penetrate deeper into the jungle, heavy floral aromas give way to the steamy odour of damp earth and rotting vegetation. Angah shows us the spiky stem of the rattan palm used locally to fashion sturdy furniture and basketry. Later, she takes water to a bristly melastoma leaf before buffing it into a soapy lather. "This is a natural antiseptic. Rub it on your arms, it will keep away mosquitoes," she advises. Finally, the tangled thicket parts to reveal a sunlit section of riverbank. We cool our feet in its pebbled shallows under the beady eye of a white-plumed heron. The sky is wide, the heat searing, and there's a pervading stillness that quiets the mind and lifts the spirit.

Our return journey takes a different turn, as we climb a wooden ladder, emerging high into the treetops. Starting from the summit platform, I grapple shakily at rigging either side and wobble along the wood-and-rope walkway suspended 45m above the ground straight through the leafy chaos of canopy. When I pluck up enough courage to look around, I notice dozens of conical nests dangling pendulously from the surrounding trees, home to colonies of tireless tree-climbing termites. Up amid this infinite sea of

## *Before you go...*

### CONSIDER A PRIVATE GUIDE

In peak season (April-August), employing a private guide may help you avoid the bulky groups and well-trodden tracks around Kuala Tahan, for better animal-spotting.

### HIKE IT ON A SHOESTRING

Take the bus from Jerantut to Kuala Tahan (1hr 30min) for only MYR7 (£1.30). Pay park entry and camera fees, then hike the signposted pathways deep into the reserve.

### EMBRACE THE ADVENTURE

Tackle the ascent to Gunung Tahan, Malaysia's highest summit. Enter the park via Sungai Relau for expeditions. You'll need camping gear and a registered guide.

emerald green, it's the airy sense of freedom that stays with me long after my feet touch firm ground.

### DOWN THE RIVER

The next day we return to the boat and expertly weave between sandbanks and rapids to explore further downstream. As we go, nature shape shifts; the jungle becoming skyscraper tall. From their buttress roots soar majestic tualang trees — the tallest of the rainforest — furred with fluorescent lichen and lashed with strangler figs. Playful grey macaques shimmy down knotty vines while below, a herd of glossy black water buffalos wallow in the river's muddy shallows. A breeze caresses my face and I try to resist drowsiness for fear of missing a single moment of the view.

Amid the profusion of life coexisting within the forest, there is human presence too. Along the riverbank we stop at a settlement of the nomadic Batek tribe, one of various tribal peoples still living within the National Park that are collectively referred to as Orang Asli, meaning simply 'original people' in the Malay tongue. Despite government efforts to settle them in permanent villages, many of these

communities still abide by their hunter-gatherer traditions, relocating to more fertile ground every three to five years to allow their former forest dwellings to replenish.

For the past year, eight families have lived in this village which consists of little more than a small clearing dotted with several semi-open, leaf-thatched huts pitched with hardwood branches and bamboo walls. Almond-shaped eyes, belonging to the women and children who spend the daytime in refuge from the sweltering heat, peer out at us from the shadows. Their appearance is markedly different from the rest of the Peninsula population — they're darker skinned, with curlier hair and are shorter in stature.

Men are mostly absent from the camp. We're told they're out hunting game and gathering wild fruits and edible plants. "Sometimes they leave for weeks at a time," says Angah. But the tribal chief has remained to greet us. He's a small but stocky man with jet-black hair and an intense gaze who proudly shows us his blowpipe fashioned from rattan palm and held together with a rubber-like tree resin.

While the Batek used to subsist entirely from the land, many of them now interact with the local economy, trading sought-after forest products, such as sandalwood for rice, tarp and other basic resources. In one hut, a withered man lies motionless, struck down with an infection. "He won't go to hospital," Angah tells us. "The Batek have their own healer. Their medicine[s] are the plants and remedies of nature."

Our fleeting visit has left us hungry to return, and on our final night, over Tiger beer and steaming river-fish curry, my partner and I plot future excursions. I'd like to forgo the luxuries of the hotel to camp out in the nearby limestone caves. He's dreaming of hiking the 53km trail to Gunung Tahan, Malaysia's highest peak, in the northwest corner of the park.

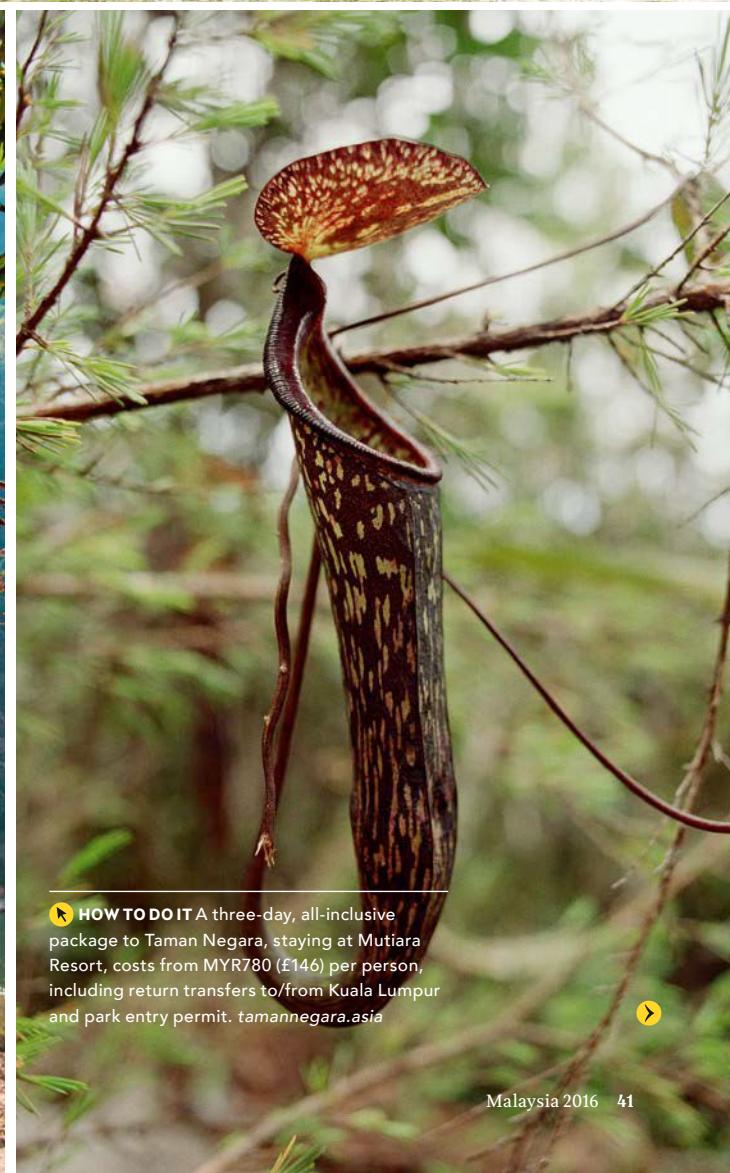
In little time we've come to feel at ease in the brooding presence of the forest, now hardly noticing the procession of ants streaming past our dining table or the shrill sound of ever-present cicadas. Before leaving, my partner records the sounds of the jungle on his phone — a small but resounding memory of a treasured stay to play back on the long trudge home. □

## MALAYSIA

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Lata Berkoh, amid the Taman Negara rainforest; a carnivorous Nepenthes plant; an Orang Asli villager



IMAGES ALAMY; FADURRAHMAN MAKSOM



HOW TO DO IT A three-day, all-inclusive package to Taman Negara, staying at Mutiara Resort, costs from MYR780 (£146) per person, including return transfers to/from Kuala Lumpur and park entry permit. [tamannegara.asia](http://tamannegara.asia)





## #15 DANCE WITH THE MASKED SEA GYPSIES

They call themselves the Ma Betisek ("people with fish scales"). This indigenous group, also known as the Mah Meri, were the original inhabitants of Pulau Carey, an island just over an hour's drive from Kuala Lumpur. It was named after Englishman Edward Carey, who was given the island to plant rubber in 1905, and imported a legion of South Indians to work his plots. These have since been replaced by palm oil plantations, many of which are tended to by the Mah Meri people.

There are five Mah-Meri villages on the island, and one Indian settlement. The Mah Meri Cultural Village showcases traditional art — including grimacing and smiling wooden masks with white teeth and scary, staring eyes. Call in advance if you'd like to see traditional dances, where the Mah Meri sway with their palm-frond skirts and call out to each other in ancient

tongues. After pirate attacks damaged their communities, the Mah Meri left the beaches and moved a little further inland, hunting for shellfish knee-deep in the muddy rivers of Pulau Carey.

The island is famed locally for its seafood, which means at weekends hordes of Malaysians drive from Kuala Lumpur especially to eat. Crabs and prawns are the two biggest catches here, and huge portions are deep-fried and shaken onto the plates of hungry visitors. Many dishes have an English theme — at the popular Kang Guan Restaurant, for example, platefuls of creamy buttered prawns are served, as well as bitter Marmite crabs.

Drive to the far west of the island, past the plantations, to watch cargo ships the size of churches ply the Strait of Malacca. The coastal path is ideal to walk off lunch and, come evening, catch magnificent sunsets.

# #16

## LEARN TO LOVE *Durian fruit*



**WHAT:** It looks like a spiky football, they won't let it on planes, and it smells so bad it's banned in many public places. What's more, novelist Anthony Burgess once described its pungent taste as akin to eating raspberry blancmange in the lavatory. Certainly durian is an acquired taste, but that hasn't stopped Malaysians crowning it the 'king of fruits'.

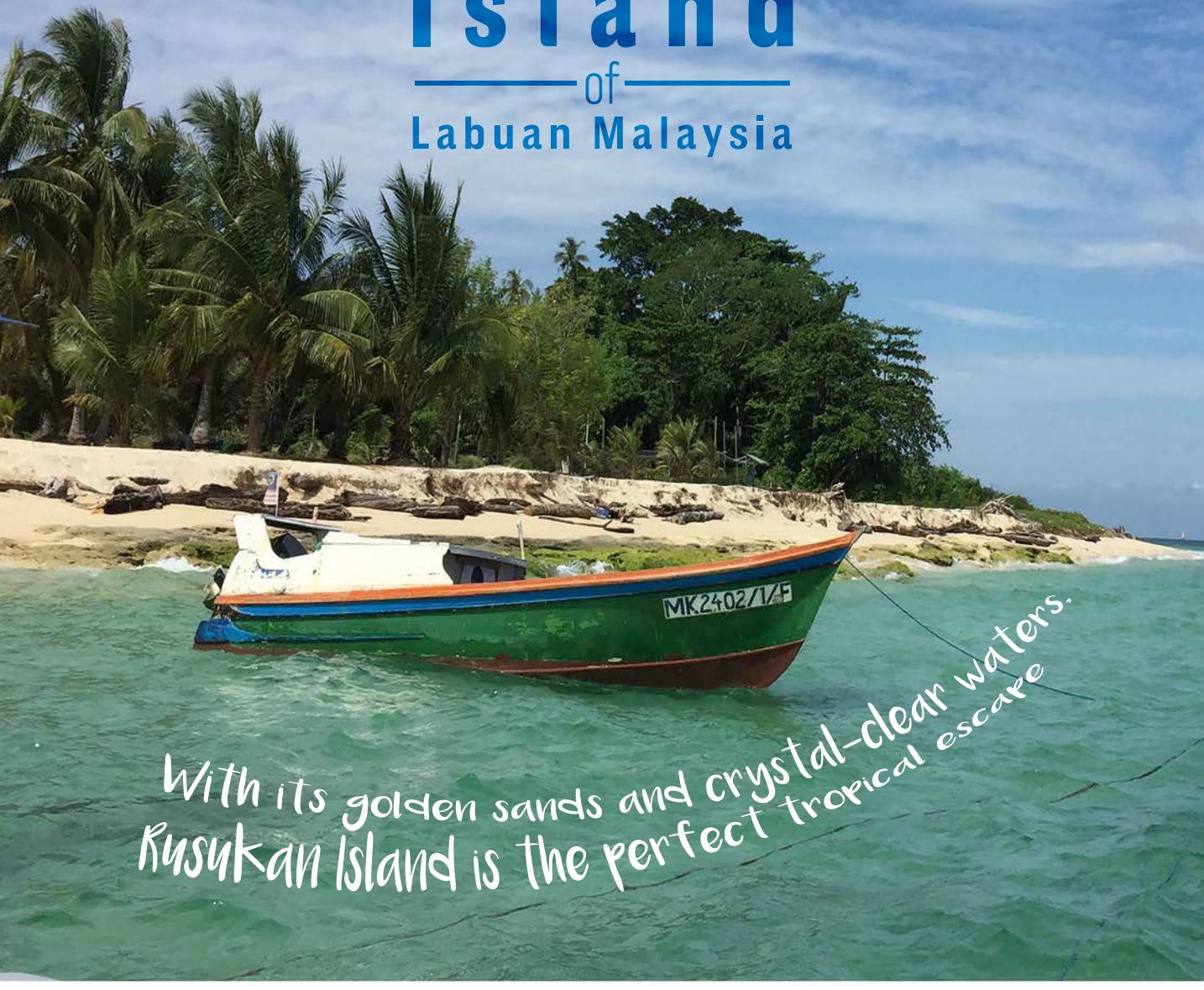
**WHY:** Durian fruit is believed to make men more virile, which explains why it's one stall in the market that gets serious male attention. Its season runs from May to September, during which time vendors set up in lay-bys up and down the land, supplied by lorries from Thailand (the Malaysian crop is insufficient to meet local demand).

**WHERE:** For all the fruit's polarising properties, eating durian is a quintessentially Malaysian experience and something of a traveller's right of passage. You'll find durian available in stalls all over the country, while visitors during summer should experience the Durian Fiesta, a programme of events at specially set-up farmers' markets across Malaysia from 1 July to the end of September.

# Rusukan Island

of

## Labuan Malaysia



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#17

# TRY BIRD SALIVA IN *Kota Kinabalu*

*From soft-shell crab to wonderfully fresh coconut, the vibrant markets of Sabah's capital are brimming with delicacies — though some are an acquired taste... Words: Emma Thomson*

Tales of the 'caviar of the East' reach my ears within an hour of landing in Kota Kinabalu — the capital of Sabah state, Borneo. For more than 1,000 years, its aphrodisiac and potent health powers have driven men to the limits of bravery in order to attain it. The Chinese call it Yan Wo — bird saliva. One of the world's most expensive delicacies, one kilogram can cost up to US\$10,000.

Deep in the darkness of Borneo's Gomantong and Niah limestone caves is where the wizardry happens. Male swiftlets find the perfect nook on the vertical 180ft-high walls and begin to build their nests. But no mere bundle of twigs will do in such extreme conditions. Instead, the little black bird excretes salvia from under its tongue and binds loose feathers together to

form a live cement. This is what the Chinese and Malaysians hanker for, and they pay top dollar to have the saliva strands painstakingly separated from the feathers with tweezers and mixed into the life-prolonging bird's nest soup that can cost US\$110 per bowlful.

So local men rig up treacherous networks of ladders strung together to reach the cave's high ceilings. One slip could mean death. At the top, they gently dislodge the nests and lower them down in a roped basket to a friend or family member waiting on the guano-splattered floor below. It's a skill passed down through generations and highly respected. I had to see if could find some...

My partner and I start the search amid the twinkling lights of a pasar

malam (night market) on Kota Kinabalu's waterfront. Faces appear from behind thick clouds of wood-fire smoke proffering piles of lobster, prawns, large fish, small fish and just-the-right-size fish laid out on sheets of newspaper. With no sign of the bird's-nest soup, we pick out a middling size fish and seat ourselves at one of the long trestle tables. A pot of finely sliced chilli sits on the plastic tablecloth. I follow the lead of the locals, pile it on, and take a bite. "Another coconut, please!" I stammer, taking great soothing gulps.

The next night we try another, less touristy, fish market on Sedco Square. A couple we met in the hostel, Sarah and David, decide to assist in the hunt. Here, beneath neon strip lights, the fish swim in tanks positioned around a gaggle of

# In AND around Kota Kinabalu

## MOUNT KINABALU

The Kadazan-Dusun people believe their ancestral spirits dwell inside this sacred 4,095m-high mountain within Gunung Kinabalu National Park. They're happy for visitors to attempt the two-day trek to the summit as long as you leave an offering. Visitors can also experience the mountain via the world's highest via ferrata.

[mountaintorq.com](http://mountaintorq.com)

## KADAZAN-DUSUN CULTURE

Take a taxi to Monsopiad Cultural Village in Sabah, run by the artist grandson of the renowned warrior-headhunter, Monsopiad. You can visit traditional houses and watch dances, but the highlight is the Siou Do Mohoing (House of Skulls), where the heads of 42 warriors are hung.

[monsopiad.com](http://monsopiad.com)

## GAYA ISLAND

Just a short ferry ride from Kota Kinabalu, Gaya is one of Malaysia's best spots for snorkelling, its clear waters positively teeming with fish. The 250m-long Coral Flyer zipline connects it in the most spectacular fashion with the neighbouring island of Pulau Sapi.

[coralflyer.com](http://coralflyer.com)

plastic tables and chairs. It's like a trip to the aquarium; the glass cubes before us house all manner of fish, while one containing giant sea snails particularly catches my eye. Tiny elderly ladies fillet fish with a swish of a cleaver, and above the stall fronts hang hulking great coconut crabs, strung up by their waists like *Mission Impossible*-style ninjas.

The only other tourist, a beefy Australian bloke, sits at a table with the shell of a horseshoe crab — a crustacean that appears to have pilfered the armoured plates of an armadillo — balanced upside down before him. It's among the most expensive seafood you can try. "Tasty?" we ask him. He rubs his belly and blows out his cheeks. "Kinda," he shrugs. We opt for soft-shell crabs, garlic squid and ginger-spiced snapper.

Sarah wanders off to find a toilet and returns with a big grin. "Look what I've found!" she shrieks, placing a sealed plastic beaker in the centre of the table. I scan the cartoonish label of reds, blues and yellows. In the top corner, inside a star-shaped speech bubble are the words: Bird Saliva.

I peel back the lid and sniff at the pale glue-like substance inside. There's not much to go on. So I pour a dollop onto my tongue. I swirl it around my mouth and everyone at the table leans forward in a collective "how does it taste?"

It's slightly sweet, but the gelatinous strings of saliva get stuck between my teeth. An acquired taste, definitely. But then perhaps it's right that consuming one of the world's most expensive delicacies is something I'll only do once.



Gomantong caves  
OPPOSITE PAGE: Inside a pasar malam or night market

PROMOTIONAL FEATURE

# CITY OF CONTRASTS & DIVERSITY

## Kuala Lumpur



[visitkl.gov.my](http://visitkl.gov.my)



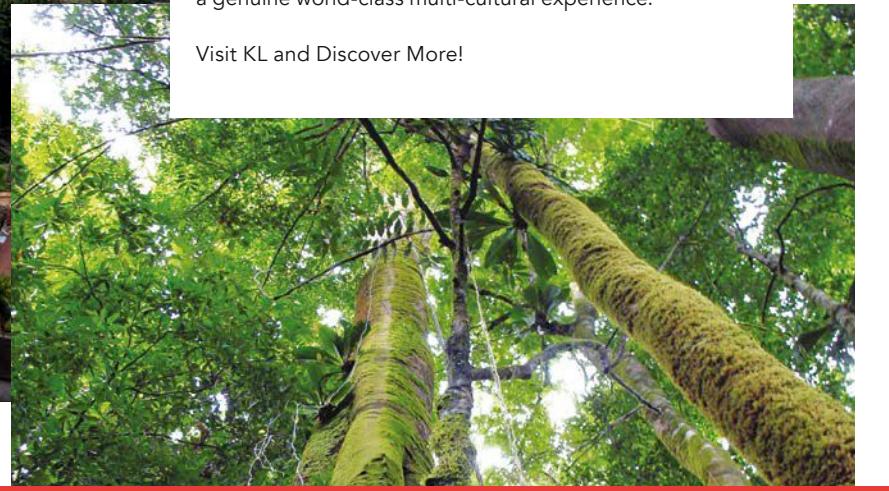
**O**nce a small riverine tin-trading post, Kuala Lumpur has blossomed over the past 150 years into a bustling modern metropolis. This exciting city is a combination of the historic and the new, reflecting the influence of the many different people who've brought their own traditions, cultures and religions to the city over the years.

KL's unique history is imprinted on its streets, from surviving colonial architecture to the generations-old traditional Malay houses at Kampong Bahru — a fascinating contrast to the city's backdrop of skyscrapers, led by the iconic Petronas Twin Towers. Meanwhile, the city's multi-ethnic composition creates a real feeling of diversity, whether it's in the sheer variety of culinary options or the breadth of festivals and celebrations.

The city offers visitors a multitude of things to see and do, whether it's shopping in world-class malls or local street stores; fine dining in a luxurious restaurant or at street food stalls; or just exploring the many historical, cultural and eco-attractions on offer. And the accommodation, whether five-star or budget, always comes with Malaysia's high standards of service to make your visit memorable.

Kuala Lumpur, the main gateway to Malaysia, is a unique city destination, a blend of the traditional and the new and a genuine world-class multi-cultural experience.

Visit KL and Discover More!



#### KUALA LUMPUR TOURISM BUREAU

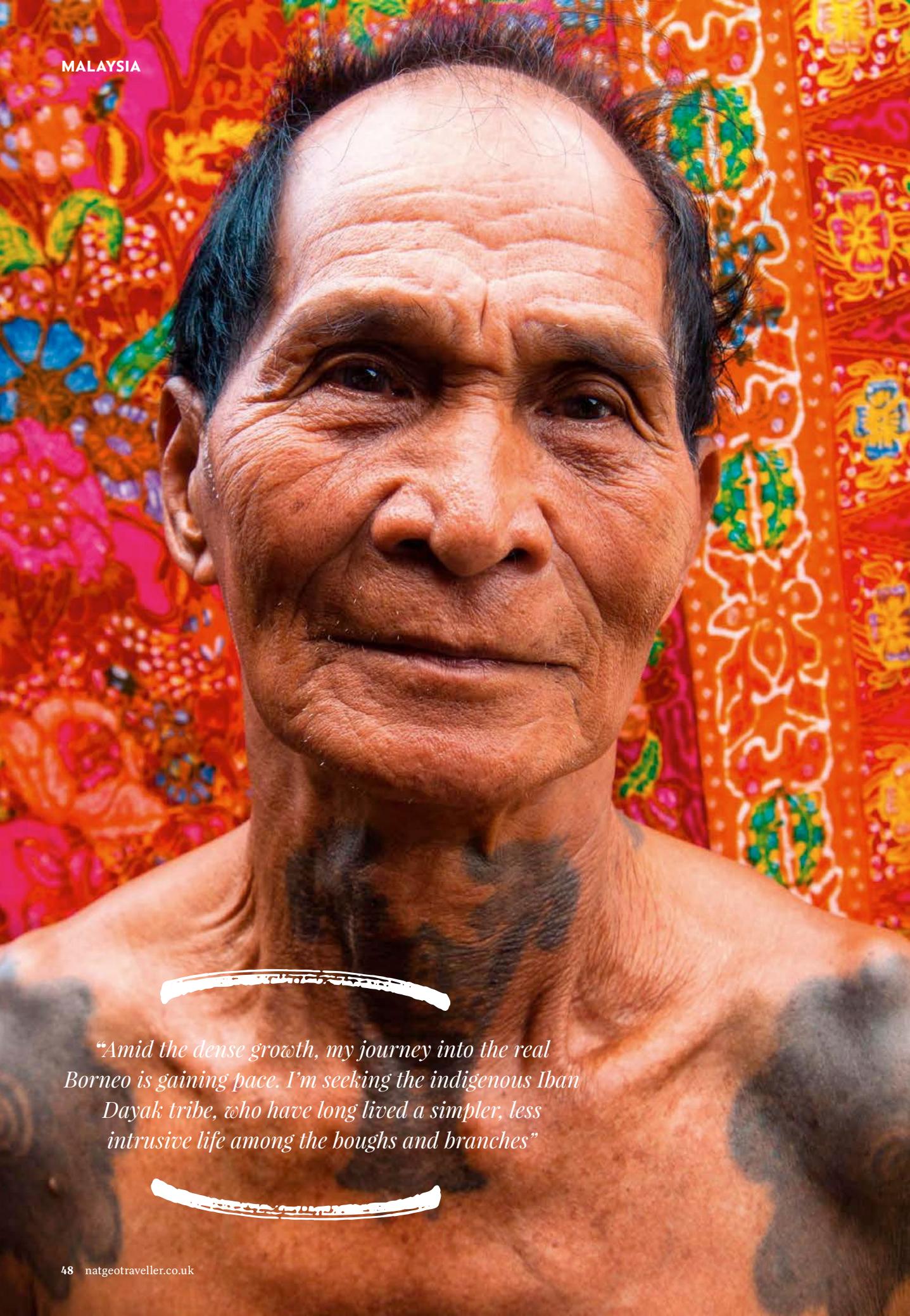
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*“Amid the dense growth, my journey into the real Borneo is gaining pace. I’m seeking the indigenous Iban Dayak tribe, who have long lived a simpler, less intrusive life among the boughs and branches”*

## #18

MEET THE IBAN  
OF BATANG AI

**K**uching sheds its skin awfully quickly. The capital of the Malaysian state of Sarawak has all the noise, clamour and clutter — motorbikes scuttling, cars growling, shops spilling onto the street — that comes with any sizeable city in the Far East. But as the car passes through the outskirts, the jumbled homes start to press the road with less urgency and the jungle steps in instead: deep, green, all-encompassing.

Once upon a time, Borneo was like this in its entirety; all 287,000 square miles of it, one vast stretch of 140-million-year-old rainforest. But some things don't change. Batang Ai National Park, 150 miles south-east of Kuching, is one of them. And here, amid the dense growth, my journey into the real Borneo is gaining pace. I'm seeking the Dayak, the indigenous people of the island, who have long lived a simpler, less intrusive life among the boughs and branches. Specifically, I'm looking for the Iban, the Dayak tribe who eke out their existence in the backwoods of Sarawak and Sabah, their homes seamlessly slotted into the jungle, rather than overpowering it.

Batang Ai Reservoir fades behind me, the Delong River pulling me east in a wooden boat — more an extended canoe than a ferry — so low to the brown-green water that it seems likely to be swallowed by it at any second. The motor snorts and coughs every time the pilot has to swerve us around a floating log or shallow section or through a patch of rocky rapids. There are shrill calls and rhythmic beats from the canopy, hornbills and woodpeckers at work. And the trees seem to crowd ever closer with each mile, as if the jungle wants to pluck me from my damp seat and hold me close.

It will have its way. After 90 minutes, we pull ashore at what seems the smallest of gaps in the foliage. And there it is in a clearing: the Nanga Sumpa Longhouse. Suddenly, there are



FROM LEFT: Iban tribesman; traditional fishing in Batang Ai National Park

people. Lots of them. Hands shaken, broad smiles, children flitting around my feet with that mix of curiosity and mischief that seems inherent in the under-fives. There are smatterings of English, a warm welcome, my bag lifted from my back and carried ahead.

The elongated structure clings to Borneo tradition so impressively that, momentarily, I stop and stare at it. On first impressions it looks a mile in length, raised up on stilts to protect it from flooding. While this might be a visual illusion, it's still a mighty construction. One main corridor ebbs into the distance. There are chambers off it at neat intervals, perhaps 40 in total, each one a set of rooms that accommodates a family. There are cooking smells and there's conversation, a giddy burble of voices. And as the day fades, the whole longhouse empties into the communal area for sitting, eating and talking.

It would be easy to romanticise all this as some 15th-century charade,

shielded from 2016 by the thick treescape. That would be a misrepresentation. Even here, the 21st century has found a way in. In one family unit, Taylor Swift lip-synchs silently on a muted television. In another, several young men are watching Premier League football, their enthusiasm undimmed even when the signal struggles to pierce the chlorophyll umbrella above. And when I slip into sleep in the adjacent Nanga Sumpa Lodge — exclusively for tourists — I do so in a comfy bedroom with clean linen and an en-suite bathroom.

But the jungle stands firm. And as I drift off gently amid its myriad shrieks and howls, I feel utterly removed from the city and its paltry concerns.

**CHRIS LEADBEATER**

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**RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL** offers a three-day 'Iban Longhouse Experience', beginning and ending in Kuching, which calls at Nanga Sumpa. From £595 a head, not including international travel to Malaysia. [responsibletravel.com](http://responsibletravel.com)

# Pride Of Putrajaya

**PUTRAJAYA**  
Malaysia



## Magnificent Architecture

The architectural style of the city is definitely a source of the nation's pride, as can be seen in the international standards of design and construction of the city structure. Among the distinctive buildings are the Ministry of Finance complex with a crescent-shaped tower and a series of arches forming Islamic motifs. Another notable structure is the futuristic entrance arch managing the administration of the Federal Territory of Putrajaya.



## Prime Minister's Office

Overlooking the Putrajaya Lake, Putra Mosque and Putra Square, this six-storey natural stone clad office complex comprises of the Prime Minister's Office, the office of the Deputy Prime Minister and Chief Secretary to the Government. The design incorporates elements of Islamic Mogul architecture in its green-glazed onion-shaped roof.



## Putra Square

The 300-metre circular Putra Square has concentric stars representing the states of Malaysia and is adorned with light and water features. Flanked by the Putra Mosque, Perdana Putra, Putra Bridge and the Promenade, the square is a popular spot for tourists, family picnics and outing on weekend.



## Postcard Bridges

There are eight signature bridges in Putrajaya of various sizes, design and importance. The Putra Bridge is one of the most important, connecting the Government precinct and Mixed Development Precinct. The Putrajaya Cruise fleet is also stationed below this bridge while the upper level forms part of the Boulevard. Other bridges include the Sen Gilang Bridge, Seri Wawasan Bridge and Seri Saujana Bridge.



## Masques of Putrajaya

There are two main mosques in the city, the Putra Mosque and the Tuanku Mizan Zainal Abidin Mosque. The Pink-domed Putra Mosque is constructed of rose-tinted granite, housing up to 15,000 worshippers. The second mosque is named after the 13th Yang di-Pertuan Agong and it is impressive with its steel facade.



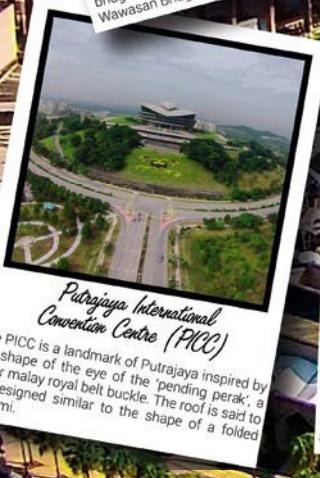
## Parks Wetland

Putrajaya is home to 12 unique parks. Among the top three are the Botanical Gardens, Wetland Park and the Agriculture Heritage Park. The land is the largest in the country. Wetland Park is the first and largest constructed freshwater wetlands in the tropics. The Agriculture Heritage Park is where you can learn more about Malaysia's commercial agriculture such as oil palm, rubber and cocoa.



## Putrajaya Lake

A vast 650 hectare man-made lake, Putrajaya Lake was designed to be a climate moderator for the city. It offers a place for recreation and water sports. Another option is the lake cruise with its 65-footer dining cruise boat or the 'Dondong Sayang' a romantic small sampan.



## Putrajaya International Convention Centre (PICC)

The PICC is a landmark of Putrajaya inspired by the shape of the eye of the 'pendang perak', a silver malay royal belt buckle. The roof is said to be designed similar to the shape of a folded origami.



## Melawati Palace

Built on the highest vantage point in Putrajaya is the Melawati Palace, a retreat for His Royal Highness Yang di-Pertuan Agong. Designed by an architect from the Terengganu Royal House, it is the second official residence of the King after the Istana Negara in Kuala Lumpur.



## Prime Minister's Resident

Seri Perdana is the residence of the Prime Minister as well as the venue for receiving dignitaries for official state functions and banquets. It shares similar architectural features as the Perdana Putra, in the green dome, structure and Islamic design.

**PUTRAJAYA**  
Malaysia

## #19

TAKE A BREATHER IN A  
*garden city*

**The perfect complement to neighbouring capital Kuala Lumpur, the planned city of Putrajaya is an impeccably thought-out haven of tranquility.** Words: Tamara Thiessen

I first decided to visit Putrajaya simply because it was convenient — located midway between KL and the KLIA international airport, it cuts the 60km trip by half. But I'd seen pictures of its beautifully silhouetted sky punctuated by mosque minarets and pinkish domes. And I'd been told it was a meticulously ordered 'garden city'. After a week in the chaotic capital, the prospect of space and greenery appealed greatly.

Putrajaya might be Malaysia's answer to Canberra — Australia's specially constructed administrative centre — but the reality of it somehow surpasses its billing. It may not be a place for thrill-seekers, but the preponderance of lakes and gardens make it a wonderfully tranquil place to take a pause.

It wasn't long before I started to fully appreciate the peacefulness. From the hillside infinity pool at the Shangri-La hotel, overlooking the palm-lined horizons, my frazzled mind was instantly soothed by the hypnotic night lights and distant Islamic chants.

On my most recent visit, I arrived to find Putrajaya blooming. With the help of my driver, I navigated the main boulevard across the steely span of the cabled Seri Wawasan Bridge, and soaked up some of the lake area's 38km shoreline. I immersed myself in its green spaces — which account for a huge 70% of territory — roaming through the Taman Wetlands or exploring the themed trails of the Botanical Gardens.

Then, finally, I donned a robe and visited Masjid Putra mosque outside prayer time, wowed by its towering 116m-tall minaret, latticed walls and fountained courtyards.

Putrajaya is the ideal destination for those suffering from capital burnout or just in need of a great place to take a little breather from KL, before heading back in for more.

# #20

## MARVEL AT a mosque

FEDERAL TERRITORY MOSQUE, KUALA LUMPUR

Strongly reminiscent of Istanbul's Blue Mosque, Masjid Wilayah Persekutuan boasts 22 lofty domes and Ottoman-style towers. The vast complex can hold as many as 17,000 worshippers at once.

**UBUDIAH MOSQUE,  
KUALA KANGSAR**

Renowned British architect Arthur Benison Hubback designed numerous buildings in Perak state, but this royal mosque's Italian marble, brassy domes and four minarets make it arguably the most ostentatious.

**PENANG STATE MOSQUE,  
GEORGE TOWN**

There's a hint of sci-fi splendour to this 1970s modernist mosque, whose central dome is cradled by curving white pillars. The whimsical design is said to have been inspired by Niemeyer's Cathedral of Brasília.

**MASJID SELAT,  
MELAKA**

With its latticed archways and seaside setting, this 'floating mosque' (when the tide's high) on man-made Melaka Island is Melaka's most dramatic sight. Visit at sunset, when its white walls and stained glass windows appear to glow.

**ZAHIR MOSQUE,  
ALOR SETAR**

Five domes representing the pillars of Islam crown Kedah's state mosque, built in 1912. It's one of the country's oldest and loveliest mosques, with elegant archways and columns in stunningly regal Malay-Islamic style.

#21

# GET UP CLOSE TO AN Orangutan

A TRIP TO SEMENGGOH NATURE RESERVE IN SARAWAK, BORNEO, OFFERS THE CHANCE TO SEE THE MISCHIEVOUS RED APES IN THEIR NATURAL HABITAT. WORDS: LAURA HOLT

**S**eduksu is not happy. Relentlessly, she hammers at the coconut shell, smashing it onto the wooden deck. Despite her best efforts, she can't seem to crack the thick, coir-covered husk open. She's no amateur, though: the oldest of all the orangutans at Semenggoh Nature Reserve, this 45-year-old grandmother is not one to give up easily. Indeed, like all the red apes at this 1,600-acre nature reserve, near Kuching, the capital of the Malaysian state of Sarawak, Seduku has already overcome considerable adversity to be here.

Down it comes again, and wham: the glossy white milk comes spilling out.

A total of 27 semi-wild orangutans reside in the primary forest

surrounding Semenggoh, although its focus has shifted somewhat since opening in 1975. Having successfully released so many red apes into the reserve over the last 40 years, the rehabilitation programme has now transferred to Matang Wildlife Centre in the Kubah National Park, allowing Semenggoh to concentrate solely on studying the biology and behaviour of its tree-dwelling residents.

However, a key part of the centre's activities also revolves around raising awareness about the plight of the beleaguered primates, which it does through twice-daily feeding sessions.

Open to the public, these provide supplementary rather than essential sustenance for the apes, which are otherwise encouraged to forage in

the forest for themselves. Yet it's the relative scarcity of food in the jungle, combined with their solitary existence and slow reproductive cycle — which can see a span of up to eight years between offspring — that explains why orangutans are in such a predicament.

The other reason, of course, is man — responsible for the illegal pet trade, palm-oil plantations, habitat loss and hunting for meat or medicine. According to the WWF, worldwide numbers now stand at around 75,000, confined to Borneo and Sumatra, where once they roamed as far afield as South China and mainland Indonesia. But centres such as Semenggoh are seeking to redress that balance, giving orphaned or captured orangutans a sanctuary in which to roam.



Pongo the orangutan with young in Semenggoh

After watching Seduku do her worst with the coconut husk, as two of her six children and grandchildren play contentedly nearby, I move through the jungle to the main feeding station.

The sound of the rainforest intensifies as I walk, hinting at the gibbons, porcupines, crocodiles, river terrapins and birds that also call Semenggoh home. Cicadas and frogs chime in as I reach a clearing and wait for the afternoon's fruit delivery to arrive.

Semenggoh tries to keep things as natural as possible. A few overhead ropes and the feeding platforms are all that suggests the presence of man.

Then, suddenly, the ropes begin to move.

With perfect dexterity, a flash of red hair zip-wires down the line, scooping

up bananas with her hands and feet. This, I discover, is Analisa, a 19-year-old female, who swiftly retreats up to the canopy to gorge on her pickings. Like Seduku, she's a regular at feeding times, more reliant perhaps on the supplementary food than the males. This becomes especially pronounced

during the 'fruiting season', roughly from November to February, when wild food becomes abundant and sightings of the apes, females or males, can be rare.

It's time to draw the session to a close, we're told by warden Dominic, who jokes the orangutans need to find a hotel room for the night. But Seduku is refusing to bid us farewell. As her son Ganya and her grandchild Anaku gambol in the branches above, she stretches out on her back, red-tufted belly turned upward, and lets her hands thud heavily onto the deck. She may be in her twilight years, but I'm pleased to see she's not growing old gracefully.

Feeding at Semenggoh take place twice daily, from 9–10am and 3–3.30pm. [ebooking.sarawak.gov.my](http://ebooking.sarawak.gov.my)



## Where else?

### DANUM

**THE LOWDOWN:** Danum Valley Conservation Area encompasses a 100,000-acre tract of lowland tropical forest, accessible from the nearest town, Lahad Datu, 50 miles away.

**THE USP:** With no human settlements nearby, Danum is a haven for Borneo's wildlife. Dorm beds and camping pitches at the Danum Valley Field Center ([danumvalley.info](http://danumvalley.info)) and chalets at Borneo Rainforest Lodge ([borneonaturetours.com](http://borneonaturetours.com)) are the only accommodation options, so visitor numbers are kept low. Activities include treks, night walks, river cruises and 4WD drives.

**THE PROSPECTS:** One of the best chances to see orangutans in the wild, as well as abundant birdlife, including hornbills, eagles and drongos, plus pygmy elephants, sun bears and red leaf monkeys. Sticky Rice Travel has good guides. [stickyricetravel.com](http://stickyricetravel.com)

### KINABATANGAN

**THE LOWDOWN:** The Kinabatangan River weaves through the mountains of Sabah leaving a dramatic 350-mile wildlife haven in its wake. Safaris are carried out by motorised longboat, whisking you past mangrove swamps and primary forest. Stilted retreats, such as Kinabatangan Riverside Lodge, can be booked through tour operators such as Abercrombie & Kent. [abercrombiekent.co.uk](http://abercrombiekent.co.uk)

**THE USP:** Wildlife spotting can be twinned with activities, such as a visit to the Gomantong Caves.

**THE PROSPECTS:** There's a good chance of sighting orangutans, which come to gorge on the fruit trees by the water's edge, plus proboscis monkeys, macaques and estuarine crocodiles.

### BATANG AI

**THE LOWDOWN:** Comprised of a vast artificial lake and rainforest-backed river, the Batang Ai region offers visitors the chance to combine meeting members of the Iban tribe with wildlife-spotting excursions.

**THE USP:** The Menyang region of Batang Ai has been declared a Wildlife Conservation area, meaning you can search for red apes, content in the knowledge they're being protected.

**THE PROSPECTS:** There's a good chance of spotting orangutans while travelling by boat upriver, and an even better chance while hiking into the forest. □

### SEPILOK



## Victor Joseph

Orangutan Care and Training Coordinator  
Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre

### Why is Sepilok a good place to see orangutans?

The orangutans roam in their natural habitat and by visiting you support their conservation.

### What do you do?

I work in the outdoor nursery with the babies, aged four to seven. I clean the cages and platforms, assist the vet, and feed them at night. Essentially, my job is to help them become independent. They'll occasionally return to the centre for a free meal, once they're released, but otherwise they're wild.

### What's most rewarding?

Teaching the infants to climb and forage. Sepilok replaces their natural mother's teachings by joining the younger orangutans with older orphans who'll show them the skills they need.

### When should we visit?

Arrive half an hour before feeding times (10am and 3pm). Usually, in the afternoon, mothers arrive with their babies. It's amazing sitting there hearing them approach as they swing through the trees. [orangutan-appeal.org.uk](http://orangutan-appeal.org.uk)

# LUXURY BORNEO ESCAPE



The luxurious Shangri-La's Rasa Ria Resort boasts an extensive range of facilities including 2 swimming pools, 5 restaurants, 3 bars, The Spa, the adjoining Dalit Bay Golf Club and the Sanctuary Nature Reserve which spans 64 acres of rainforest and is home to an abundance of amazing animals and birds. There are guided walks in the reserve and the opportunity to enjoy breakfast with a view – after a guided morning trek to the peak of the reserve where you can enjoy breakfast with a spectacular view of Mount Kinabalu. There are daily organised activities including fitness classes, cooking demonstrations, beach volleyball, beach football, Tai Chi and much more, so you can do as little or as much as you like.

Premier Holidays are offering an exclusive luxury break including Malaysia Airlines flights from London Heathrow, private transfers and 7 nights' accommodation at the five star Shangri-La's Rasa Ria Resort & Spa in a seaview room. Your stay will include daily breakfast including "breakfast with a view" on one morning, 20% off food and beverage and dinner on one night. Prices start from £1279 for travel between 01 May-30 June 17.

For more information or to book call  
**FREEPHONE 0800 980 0925**  
[www.premierholidays.co.uk/rasaria](http://www.premierholidays.co.uk/rasaria)



**premier**holidays

Prices is per person based on two adults sharing and is subject to availability. Book by Dec 16. Terms and conditions apply.

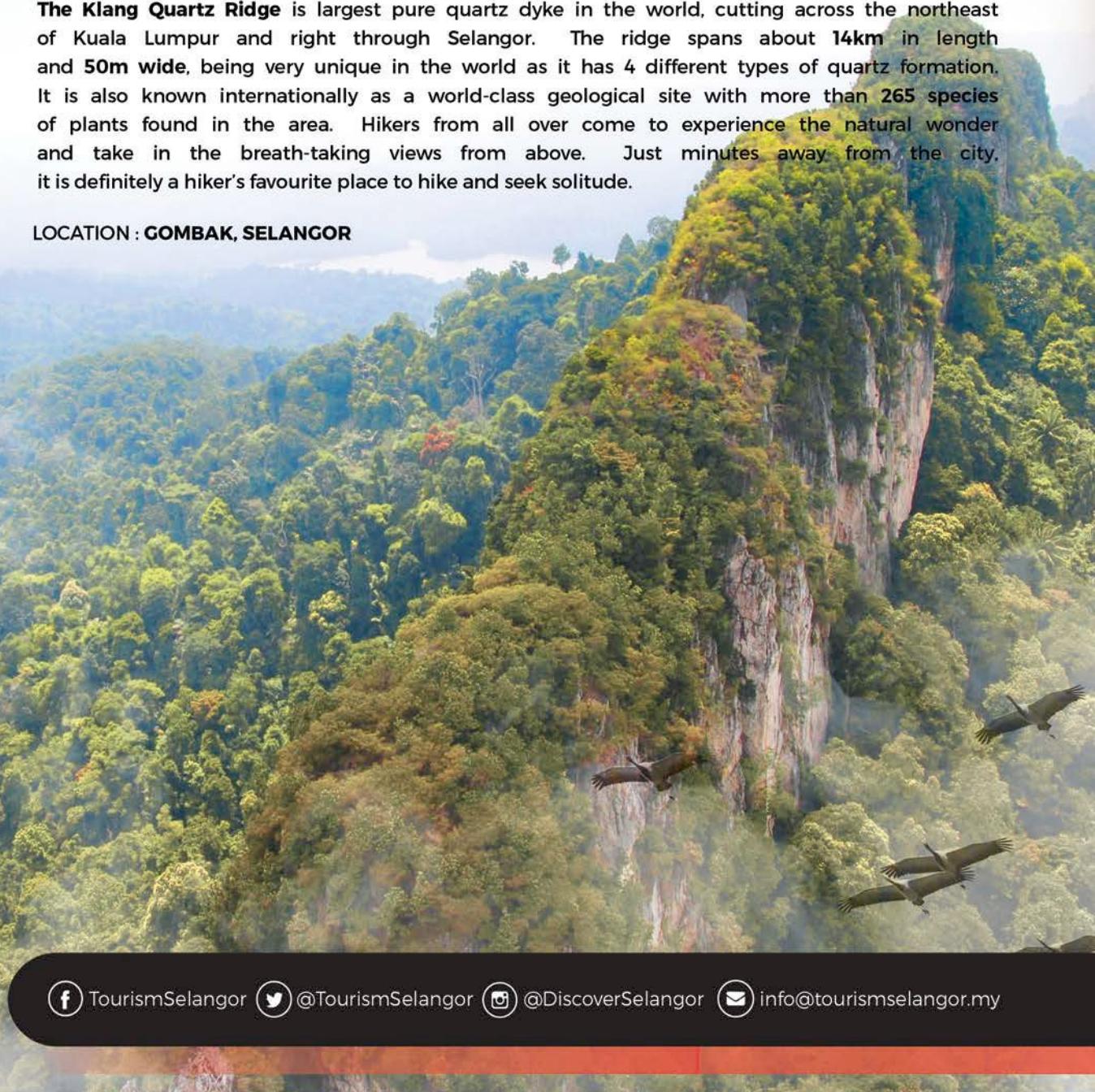


# HEART OF Discover **SELANGOR** MALAYSIA

## KLANG GATES QUARTZ RIDGE

The Klang Quartz Ridge is largest pure quartz dyke in the world, cutting across the northeast of Kuala Lumpur and right through Selangor. The ridge spans about 14km in length and 50m wide, being very unique in the world as it has 4 different types of quartz formation. It is also known internationally as a world-class geological site with more than 265 species of plants found in the area. Hikers from all over come to experience the natural wonder and take in the breath-taking views from above. Just minutes away from the city, it is definitely a hiker's favourite place to hike and seek solitude.

LOCATION : GOMBAK, SELANGOR



TourismSelangor



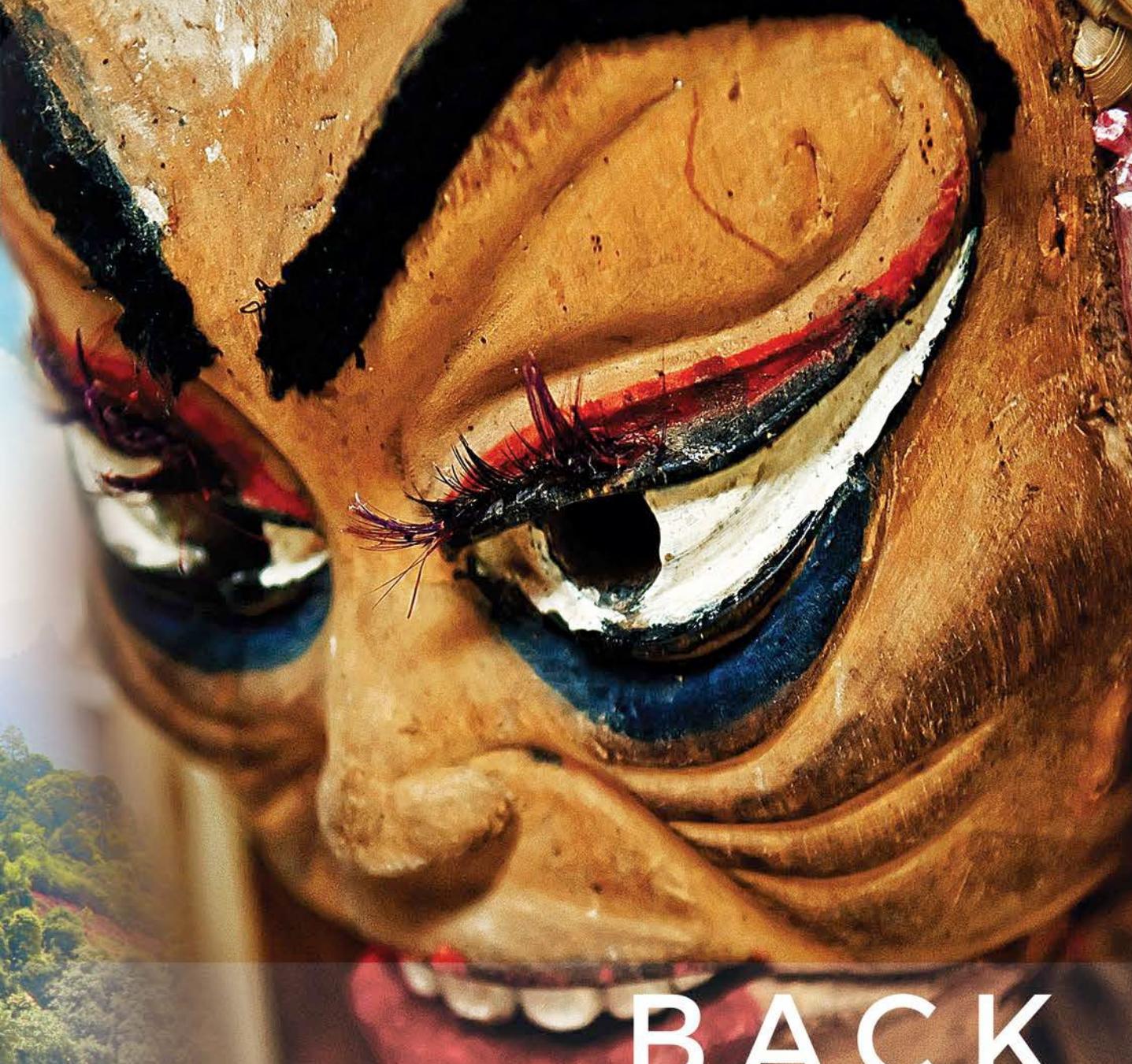
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## BEHIND THE MAH MERI MASK

# BACK TO THE ROOTS

Northwest of Morib, across the sea from Port Klang, is Pulau Carey (Carey Island). Located on Selangor's coast, is a mere 20 minutes drive from the royal town of Klang. Comprised largely of oil palm estates, the island is also home to the **Mah Meri**, an aboriginal tribe renowned for their traditional wood carvings and mask sculptures. They pay tribute during their New Year celebration, also known as Ancestor's Day with offerings, dances and rituals which is a colourful occasion. The tribe has kept the legends of their ancestors alive through these figurines and stories told to any willing listeners. Visitors wishing to tour the vast oil palm estates on the island must obtain prior permission from the relevant authorities. home to the indigenous Mah Meri community. The Mah Meri are known for their fashioned as an ancestral.

LOCATION : PULAU CAREY, KUALA LANGAT

[www.tourismselangor.my](http://www.tourismselangor.my)

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## #22

EAT YOUR WAY  
AROUND THE  
PENINSULA

From Chinese noodles to banana leaf curry, Malaysia's dazzling fusion cuisine varies subtly from state to state — something wonderfully evident on a dish-by-dish tour of the Peninsula.

Words: Andrew Eames



Char kway teow

**W**ith its cultural mix of Malay, Chinese and Indian, Malaysia was the home of 'fusion' cuisine before the concept was even born. This is a nation that loves to eat out, but not in fancy restaurants. The country's best food is cooked in front of hungry eyes, at bargain prices, in the streets and in hawker centres. For this whistlestop tour of the peninsula's signature delectables, we start north-west in Penang and drop down the west coast to Melaka, before heading over to the east coast.

### PENANG: CHAR KWAY TEOW

This large island is UNESCO-recognised for its traditional Chinese shophouses and clan temples with rooftop ceramic dragons. The Chinese community mostly arrived in the mid-19th century, living in villages on stilted jetties over the water, and a rich and tasty local cuisine is part of their legacy. Listen to the clatter of woks as they throw together broad rice noodles with bean sprouts, prawns, eggs, chives and thin slices of Chinese salami.



### PANGKOR: IKAN BILIS

These days the island of Pangkor Laut may be more internationally known for its luxury resort, but for Malaysians it's synonymous with anchovies, which are landed in huge glittering quantities, blanched in seawater and spread out on giant mats to dry. Lightly spiced and mixed with peanuts, *ikan bilis* (dried anchovies) is served as a snack, but also makes its way into the local breakfast pick-me-up of choice, *nasi lemak* — a glorious combination of coconut rice, boiled eggs and spicy shrimp paste.

### MERSING: SEAFOOD

Mersing, the jumping-off port for the holiday destination of Tioman Island, is also a major fishing port. This is the place to watch the boats surging into the river mouth on the tide, before feasting on the crabs they bring back, steamed Chinese-style, with rice wine and ginger.



## KUALA LUMPUR: BANANA LEAF CURRY

The Brickfields district of KL is home to the capital's Indian population. Even the Chinese flock here for banana leaf curry, an assortment of vegetable curries, rice and dhal, served on a banana leaf and eaten with your fingers. This is a real bargain, because the meal is replenished as often as you wish. Wash it down with *lassi*, a savoury yogurt drink.

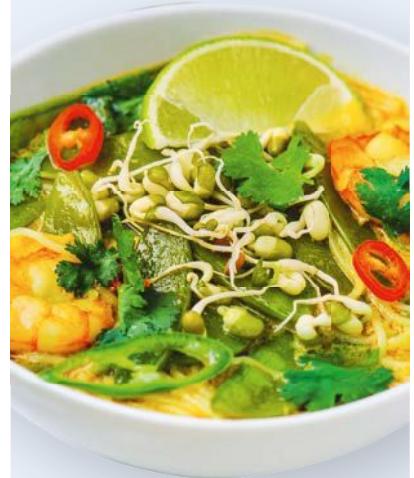


## KOTA BHARU: NASI DAGANG

In the northern state of Kelantan, on the border with Thailand, coconut milk features heavily in the local cuisine, meaning dishes tend to be creamier than elsewhere. One of the most popular local dishes is *nasi dagang*, a tasty mix of different types of rice, cooked with coconut milk and fenugreek to create a deliciously rich texture. It's then served with fish curry.

## KUALA LUMPUR: SATAY

This is one of Malaysia's most popular foods, commonly found in the evenings crackling aromatically over red-hot charcoal on street corners and in hawker centres. Marinated beef or chicken is skewered with bamboo kebab-style and then grilled, before being served with sliced onions, cucumber, rice cubes and a spicy peanut sauce. Locals believe the best satay is from Kajang, a suburb of Kuala Lumpur, where the meat is chunkier and the blend of turmeric and lemongrass in the marinade gives it an attractive yellow tinge.



## MELAKA: LAKSA

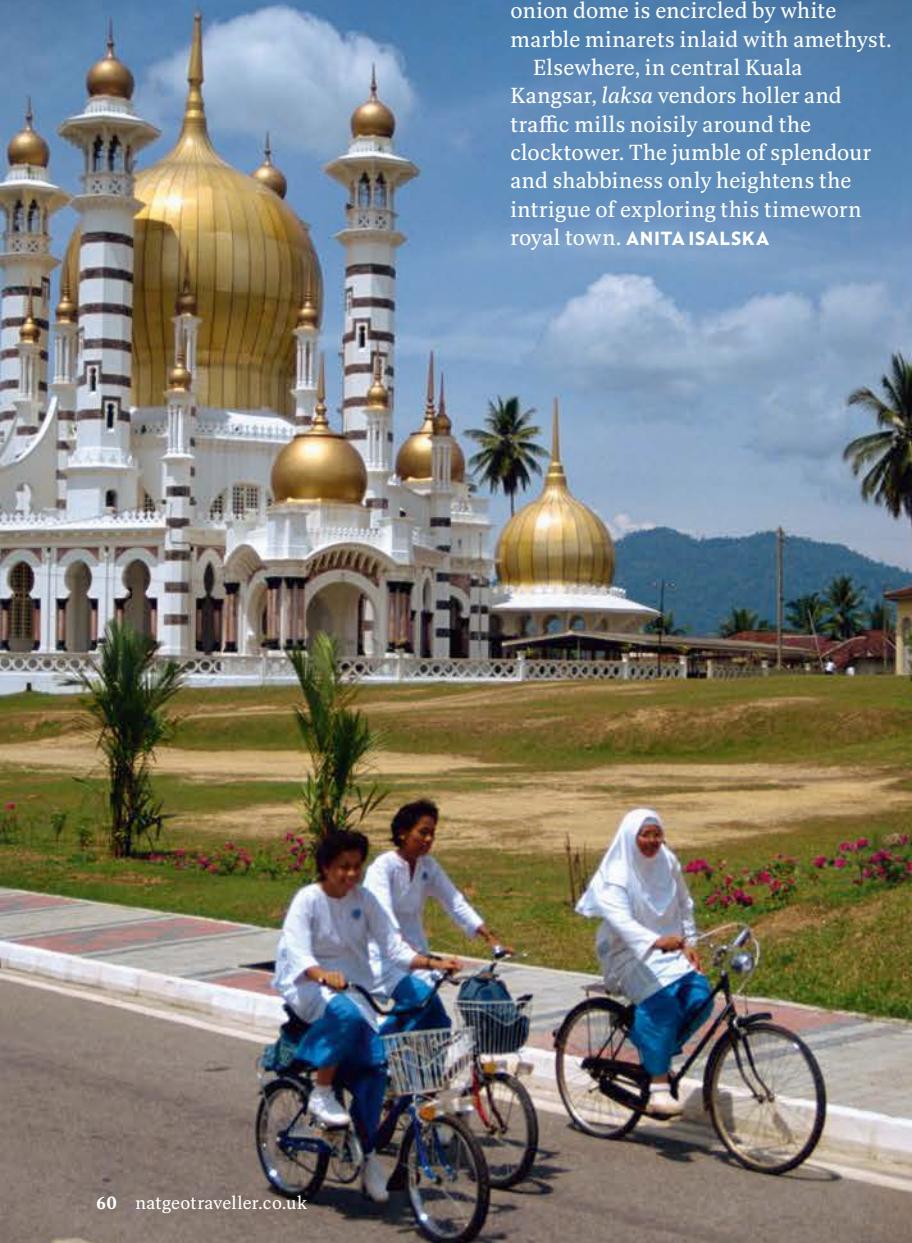
The Nyonya are the ultimate fusionistas — these are Chinese settlers in the Straits of Melaka who adopted local Malay culture. There's a whole book of Nyonya cuisine, but the dish that has virtually become the national dish is *laksa*, a spicy fish-based soup, creamy with coconut, bulked out with rice noodles, with a tangy kick.



## #23 ADMIRE THE TREASURES OF Kuala Kangsar

Lavish palaces and mosques have sprouted across the Kuala Kangsar district of Perak since the 18th century. Thanks to successive sultans, this sprawling royal town by the River Perak is a patchwork of regal opulence and faded colonial grandeur, enclosing a hectic town centre.

The present sultan's palace, Istana Iskandariah, marries classic Moorish style with the feel of a five-star holiday resort. Nearby stands another royal residence, Istana Kenangan — made entirely of delicately woven bamboo and painted bright yellow.



But the most immersive royal experience lies half-a-mile upstream: former palace Istana Kota is surrounded by manicured gardens and fountains. Now a gallery, Istana Kota honours Perak's 34th Sultan, Azlan Shah, whose classic cars, jewels and ceremonial swords are reverently displayed. Opposite gleams Masjid Ubudiah, a royal mosque commissioned by Perak's 28th sultan, Idris Shah, as an act of gratitude after his prayer to recover from illness was seemingly answered. Completed in 1917, the mosque's enormous golden onion dome is encircled by white marble minarets inlaid with amethyst.

Elsewhere, in central Kuala Kangsar, *laksa* vendors holler and traffic mills noisily around the clocktower. The jumble of splendour and shabbiness only heightens the intrigue of exploring this timeworn royal town. **ANITA ISALSKA**

Perak Man, Lenggong Archaeological Gallery.  
LEFT: Masjid Ubudiah



## #24 MEET PERAK MAN

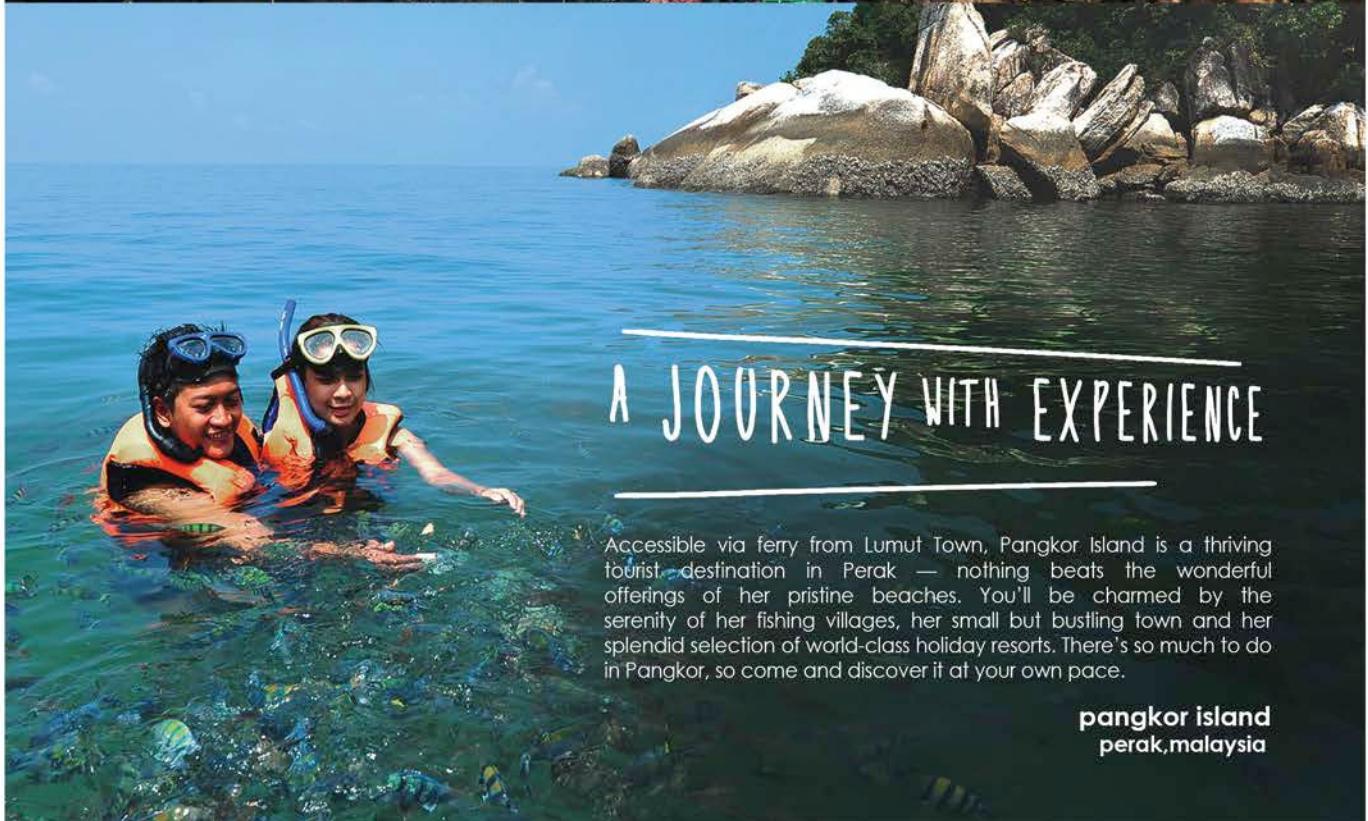
Lenggong Valley's limestone caves harbour traces of the earliest humans. This Unesco-listed seam of archaeological treasures, 30 miles north of Kuala Kangsar, lay undisturbed for millennia after a meteorite strike diverted the River Perak. Excavations in recent decades have revealed ancient burials in three of Lenggong's karst caves, most remarkably the 11,000-year-old 'Perak Man', Southeast Asia's oldest near-complete skeleton.

Gua Gunung Runtuh, where Perak Man was found, is concealed in a forested tangle north of Lenggong town. Reaching the cave mouth means a perilous scramble up a 30ft rock face. Fortunately, the skeleton is more accessible, on display at the Lenggong Archaeological Gallery.

# RETURN TO NATURE WONDERS

Preserved and conserved as a State Park, this Belum-Temengor forest complex is estimated to be 130 million years of age, making it older than the Amazon or Congo. Royal Belum is an extremely biodiverse habitat that's home to a number of large mammals — the Bos gaurus, Asian elephant and Malayan tiger. It's also known as the 'hornbill capital' as it's home to 10 species including large flocks of plain-pouched hornbill.

royal belum  
perak, malaysia



## A JOURNEY WITH EXPERIENCE

Accessible via ferry from Lumut Town, Pangkor Island is a thriving tourist destination in Perak — nothing beats the wonderful offerings of her pristine beaches. You'll be charmed by the serenity of her fishing villages, her small but bustling town and her splendid selection of world-class holiday resorts. There's so much to do in Pangkor, so come and discover it at your own pace.

pangkor island  
perak, malaysia



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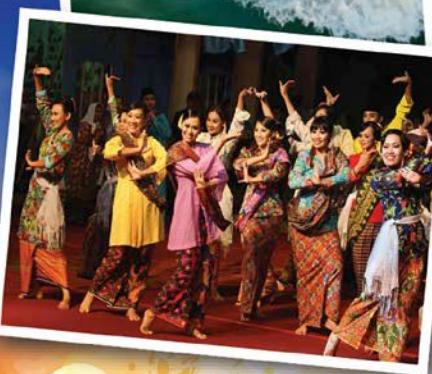


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# The Venice OF THE EAST

*Melaka City has long lured foreigners to its shores — and with culture, colour and character everywhere you turn, it's easy to see why.*

Once a quiet fishing village along Malaysia's western coast, Melaka City was the first taste of Malaysia for many European settlers. Merchants from all over the world docked here, lured by the wares traded at its harbour.

Although the bustling trading port has quietened down, today the range of faraway influences remains spectacularly evident in this thriving regional capital: scarlet colonial buildings dominate the streets, and the city's multicultural population produce a varied, international cuisine.

Located on the main north-south highway between KL and Singapore, Melaka City is an easily accessible destination. Its accommodation options are many and varied, with something to suit every traveller — from grand and luxurious chains to more traditional homestays, all of which provide a perfect base for exploring Melaka's fascinating city centre.

This coastal city is a true melting pot, serving up contrasting cultures with bold extravagance: the grand Melaka Straits Mosque is a must-see sight, especially at night,

while St Paul's Church, one of Asia's oldest churches, stands majestically above the city. Further vestiges of Melaka City's colonial past are everywhere, including



Portuguese fortress A Famosa and the Dutch-built Stadthuys (the old city hall), now one of the city's best museums. Visitors should also seek out the Baba & Nyonya Heritage Museum and the ornate Cheng Hoon Teng temple.

Hail a trishaw to tour Melaka City, stopping for a cup of Malaysian kopi (coffee) and a warming bowl of fragrant nyonya laksa (curry noodle soup) at one of the many vibrant eateries dotted across town.

Alternatively, take in the lush forests, hills and rubber plantations of the surrounding landscape by bike, and finish the day with a stroll through Jonker Walk Night Market, where the lights, music and bartering are certain to leave a lasting impression.

If you're seeking a true taste of multicultural Malaysia, Melaka awaits you with open arms.  
[destinationmelaka.my](http://destinationmelaka.my)



New Sarawak State Legislative Assembly Building.

**OPPOSITE:** Tua Pek Kong Chinese Temple; South City Council Cat



## #25 VISIT THE LAND OF THE WHITE RAJAHS

**Start your Borneo tour in Kuching, the historic capital of Sarawak. Once ruled by a British family, it's now a vibrant melting pot.**

**A**s the sun sets on the **SARAWAK RIVER**, wooden longboats putter across the water. Rickety hawker stalls proffer food from five continents. And the golden, umbrella-shaped façade of the **NEW SARAWAK STATE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY BUILDING** looms large on the horizon. Everywhere, tropical plants and bougainvillea bushes fill the air with exotic scents.

Any trip to Kuching, capital of Sarawak, should start here, with strolls along its **RIVERFRONT ESPLANADE**, watching as the lights flicker at dusk,

and the cooler breezes of the Bornean night settle in.

The so-called land of the White Rajahs is as intoxicating today as it must have been during James Brooke's day. The British soldier-turned explorer arrived in Sarawak in 1839 on the Royalist, the schooner he'd bought with his inheritance, and was installed as ruler of the state 1941 by the Sultan of Brunei in an effort to quell a rebellion.

It worked, and Brooke's success secured Kuching's prosperity and position for a century, with power handed first to his nephew, Charles, and then to Charles' son, Vyner, until events connected with the Second World War lead Sarawak to be ultimately returned to the British crown.

Today, you can explore the Brookes' legacy at the **SARAWAK MUSEUM**. Meanwhile, **THE BROOKE GALLERY** is also marking this year's 175th anniversary of the founding of Sarawak with a collection of artefacts at a new site in the restored **FORT MARGHERITA**. It's outdoors, however, that this laid-back

city really comes to life. Highlights include **CHINATOWN**, whose sprawling streets brim with coffee shops and canteens that whisper the romance of the orient. Then there are the street-food style restaurants of the **OPEN-AIR MARKET**, on the site of the city's first shopping mall.

If you're feeling adventurous, **MEDAN NIAGA SATOK**, the city's largest market, has new facilities on the fringes of town at Kubah Ria, where traders ply everything from spices to fresh fish and exotic fruits. Indeed, food is one of the real draws of Kuching. Malay, Chinese, Indian and indigenous people all bring distinctive flavours to the city's table. So whether you choose street-side bowls of Malaysian *laksa* soup or Chinese dim sum, the land of the White Rajahs is sure to leave you hungry for more.  
*museum.sarawak.gov.my brooketrust.org LAURA HOLT*

**HOW TO DO IT:** ABELL HOTEL offers well-placed doubles in the heart of downtown from RM125 (£24), room-only. [abellhotel.com](http://abellhotel.com)



IMAGES: GETTY/ALAMY

### Did you know?

Kuching is all about cats. Sculptures dedicated to the revered moggy are something of a motif for the city. In fact, its very name is derived from the Malay word for cat — ‘kucing’. Two of the most prominent statues are the South City Council Cat and the North City Hall Family Cat by the waterfront.



# #26 DISCOVER YOUR OWN *Coral garden*

Beyond the sandy shores of Tioman island, off the coast of Pahang, lies an enchanting underwater world rarely troubled by visitors. Words: Gavin Haines

In an era where you can play Pokémon Go at Machu Picchu it's increasingly difficult to feel like you're blazing a trail. But while the golden age of discovery is behind us, there are still a few nuggets left for those who look for them. A few monsoons ago, I headed to Pulau Tioman to boldly go where no one had gone before. Probably.

The island itself is hardly uncharted territory — a steady stream of tourists trickle through its tiny airport every week — but beyond Tioman's sandy

shores and swaying palms lie some of the most exquisite coral gardens in the South China Sea. Some of these reefs have never been dived before, but, thanks to Biosphere Expeditions, a non-profit organisation specialising in conservation holidays, it's now possible to "discover" these coral gardens.

Biosphere's project was set up to enable people like me — those with some derring-do but no actual qualifications — to conduct research into the region's reefs, which will be used to help

preserve these ecosystems as they come under threat. I'd travelled all over Malaysia, but for me, Tioman was the country at its best, and this expedition gave me an opportunity to immerse myself, literally and metaphorically, in the tropical island.

Biosphere's two-week programme began in the rustic Swiss Cottage beach resort, near the town of Tekek. In the first week, my group took a crash course in marine biology. We hit the books, listened to lectures and had practical lessons underwater at nearby reefs.

Marine biologist Kate Yewdall and Paul O'Dowd, an Aussie bushman and Biosphere expedition leader, taught us the ways of Tioman's waters, explaining



Underwater world.  
LEFT: Saran beach,  
Tioman island

how to identify fish, coral and other marine life. By the end of the week we could even diagnose coral diseases.

Certificates in hand, we hopped aboard a yacht and set sail around Tioman and its neighbouring islands for one blissful week. Some days we sailed close to the shore, marvelling at the deserted beaches and steamy rainforest, which shrouds much of the island and echoes with birdsong. Other days we saw nothing of land.

The reefs were like miniature cities. Corals towered above the seabed like Gaudi-inspired skyscrapers, while fish darted around like tardy commuters. We saw turtles and tuna, and enormous lobster. Once I spotted a shark skulking in the shadows. And on one particularly memorable day, we emerged from a dive into an almighty storm; the thunder roared overhead as we tried to board the violently rocking boat.

There was scant contact with the outside world. There was no phone signal and we saw few vessels, although we came ashore once or twice to pick up supplies and sink a beer in a beach bar. On one such foray I spotted a flying squirrel gliding between the trees.

At night I slept beneath the stars on the deck of our vessel, rocked to sleep by waves, kissed goodnight by the breeze. Malaysia was slipping into monsoon season and several times I was woken by huge raindrops falling on my body.

When we weren't observing reefs, we would tell stories, disappear into books, learn to freedive with Paul and take turns preparing dinner, which we'd eat on the deck beneath a setting sun. Eventually, reluctantly, we returned to dry land, where tourists sizzled on the sand and our phones picked up a signal. Messages from home came flooding in. The adventure was truly over.

**BIOSPHERE EXPEDITIONS'**  
reef research programme is now eight days long and costs £1,640 per person. Price includes flights from Singapore, plus all food, accommodation and hire of diving equipment. Participants must have their PADI Open Water qualification or equivalent to take part. The 2017 expedition takes place Aug 15-22.  
[biosphere-expeditions.org](http://biosphere-expeditions.org)

# *It's all in* **PENANG**

**Penang's culinary delights, incomparable architecture, colourful culture and sincere hospitality offer visitors an exceptional Asian experience**

The northern Malaysian state of Penang is an enchanting place, steeped in rich heritage and culture and set amid the backdrop of a thriving modern city. The captivating fusion of old and new has cultivated one of Southeast Asia's most vibrant cities. With its bold gastronomical culture, charming colonial architecture and beautiful nature spots, Penang truly offers the best of Asia.

**CITY LIFE:** George Town, Penang's capital city, is testimony to the multicultural heritage and traditions of Asia, where diverse cultures and religions have coexisted in harmony for generations. In 2008, George Town was recognised for its outstanding universal value by UNESCO's World Heritage Convention. The city's unique blend of architecture and traditions reflects the fusion of cultures from the Malay Archipelago, India, China and Europe.

**FUEL UP:** Asia's culinary traditions live on in Penang's coffee shops and fine dining establishments, and the city's street food is famed for its incredible variety and quality. Popular dishes include *char koay teow* (stir-fried noodles), *hokkien mee* (soup-based noodle dish) and *nasi kandar* (steamed rice served with curry dishes).

**NATURE'S BOUNTY:** Beyond the modern facade of Penang lies some of the country's most stunning scenery, from sandy beaches to green heartland and rolling hills. Natural wonders on offer include a meromictic lake (one of just four in Asia), an award-winning tropical garden featuring over 500 varieties of exotic fauna and flora, and one of the world's largest tropical butterfly sanctuaries.



**CAUSE TO CELEBRATE:** Penang's appetite for drama and entertainment comes to life in spectacular festivals for all occasions, including religious, cultural and arts. Celebrations are held year-round, offering fantastic scenes such as acrobatic lion dances during Chinese New Year, the intricate weaving of *ketupat* (rice dumpling wrapped in palm leaves) during Hari Raya Aidilfitri and the unbelievable body piercings on show during Thaipusam. Home-grown arts festivals are increasingly popular with global travellers, with the George Town Festival and Penang Island Jazz Festival among the favourites.

**CONTACT INFORMATION:**  
No.10, Ground Floor, The Whiteaways Arcade,  
Lebuh Pantai, George Town, 10300 Penang, Malaysia  
T: 00 604 263 1166

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SPAS, ROOFTOP POOLS  
— KL DOES A GOOD LINE  
IN LUXURY HOTELS  
WORDS: LEE COBAJ

## *Best new address*

### ST. REGIS KUALA LUMPUR

Opened just months ago and housed in a lavish new 48-storey skyscraper, every surface at the St. Regis sparkles, from the mirrored exterior to the lobby's Swarovski chandeliers. And then there's the gold-leaf ceiling murals and the glitzy rooftop infinity pool. The rooms are more refined, with mini-bars in leather trunks, rambling marble bathrooms and butlers who will unpack your suitcase, iron your clothes and deliver complimentary hot drinks and snacks on demand. There are five fabulous bars and restaurants. It's Crystal, however, the glamorous rooftop lounge, that steals the show with its high-tech, multi-media wall and high-octane city centre views.

**ROOMS:** Doubles from £480, room only. [stregiskualalumpur.com](http://stregiskualalumpur.com)

## Best for celeb-spotting

### MANDARIN ORIENTAL

This glamorous city-centre hotel is alive with famous faces when the Malaysian Formula 1 Grand Prix comes to town — you might spot Benedict Cumberbatch over breakfast in the executive lounge or rub shoulders with Lewis Hamilton in the Sultan Bar. Facilities are excellent — think swish rooftop pool with views of the Petronas Towers, leafy outdoor bar, tennis courts, state-of-the-art golf simulators and a dreamy new spa. The service is superb, rooms are typically walnut woods, creamy walls and peachy marble, and it all comes at a fraction of the cost of staying at a Mandarin Oriental in Hong Kong or London.

**ROOMS:** Doubles from £104, B&B. [mandarinoriental.com](http://mandarinoriental.com)



## Best for nightlife

### HOTEL MAYA

A soaring atrium, elevated walkways and vast walls of glass give the Maya an aesthetic edge over other four-stars. Rooms are crisp, clean and comfortable, with everything you need, including access to the guest-only Sky Lounge where complimentary drinks and snacks are served every evening. There are indoor swimming and hydrotherapy pools opening up to Kuala Lumpur's ever morphing skyline; a terrific little spa and a clutch of casual restaurants. The kicker, though, is the location, close to KL's newest clubbing district, Electric Boulevard, home to some of the best nightlife found anywhere in the city.

**ROOMS:** Doubles from £63, room only. [hotelmaya.com.my](http://hotelmaya.com.my)

## Best for foodies

### ANGGUN HOTEL

Set in a former Chinese shop-house on a leafy street around the corner from the city's best-loved foodie neighbourhood, Jalan Alor, the Anggun offers a delicious slice of old KL. To say the rooms are petite would be polite. They are quite lovely, though, with natural stone tubs, glazed sinks, shuttered windows and art works. The rooftop terrace offers a delightful spot for breakfast. For your other meals look no further than the end of the street, where you'll find rows of stalls selling aromatic black beef balls, chilli-topped chicken rice and steaming bowls of *hokkien mee* (goopy noodles drenched in soy sauce) at about £2 a pop.

**ROOMS:** Doubles from £45, B&B. [anggunkl.com](http://anggunkl.com)

## Best for budget

### RAINFOREST BED AND BREAKFAST

For all its many luxury properties, there are budget options too, and this B&B, hidden under a thick veil of tropical foliage in buzzy Bukit Bintang, ticks all the boxes. Guests are greeted with courteous staff and wafts of frankincense, while rooms are simple but atmospheric, with teak beds, tiled floors and spacious, spotlessly clean, white marble bathrooms. If you're after more than a tea-and-toast brekkie, head for a traditional *nasi lemak* (coconut milk rice) from the street stalls on Jalan Alor.

**ROOMS:** Doubles from £22, B&B. [rainforestbnbhotel.com](http://rainforestbnbhotel.com)

## Best for honeymoochers

### VILLA SAMADHI

Boutiques are still a rarity in KL but this 21-room hideaway is a sweet spot. The thatched roof, lanterns and tropical foliage carry a sense of the Balinese. Some rooms have outdoor hot tubs, others direct access to the swimming pool and all are extremely spacious with calm, minimalist, dark-wood interiors. Birdsong accompanies a divine à la carte breakfast, while in the evening the candle-lit terraces and soft glow of the swimming pool are wonderfully romantic.

**ROOMS:** Doubles from £129, B&B. [villasamadhi.com.my](http://villasamadhi.com.my)

## Best for views

### TRADERS

Cesar Pelli's iconic Petronas Twin Towers turned 20 in March and there's no better place from which to gawp at them than Traders Hotel, sitting right opposite. Traders' recently refurbished rooms — in creams, mossy greens and pale woods — are capped by a 25-metre swimming pool on the 33rd floor, alongside the Sky Bar, one of the city's most popular night-time hangouts — be sure to book a table at least a day ahead. Also on the doorstep is Kuala Lumpur's biggest shopping mall, the Suria KLCC and the lush City Park, as well of stacks of bars and restaurants. First-timers couldn't be better placed to take the city in.

**ROOMS:** Doubles from £73, room only. [shangri-la.com/kualalumpur/traders](http://shangri-la.com/kualalumpur/traders)

## Best for history

### THE MAJESTIC HOTEL

A heritage hotel straight out of the golden age of travel, the Majestic is all neo-classical columns and art deco detailing with white-gloved doormen to boot. Inside, the building has been split into two; there are tiled floors, Persian rugs, white wood panelling, Chinese lamps and swirling wooden fans in the original 1930s building, and swathes of black marble, giant Gatsby-esque chandeliers and a lively buffet restaurant in the new 12-storey tower wing. It's located in one of the city's most fascinating neighbourhoods, opposite the marvellous old Malayan Railway Station, a Moorish-inspired beauty.

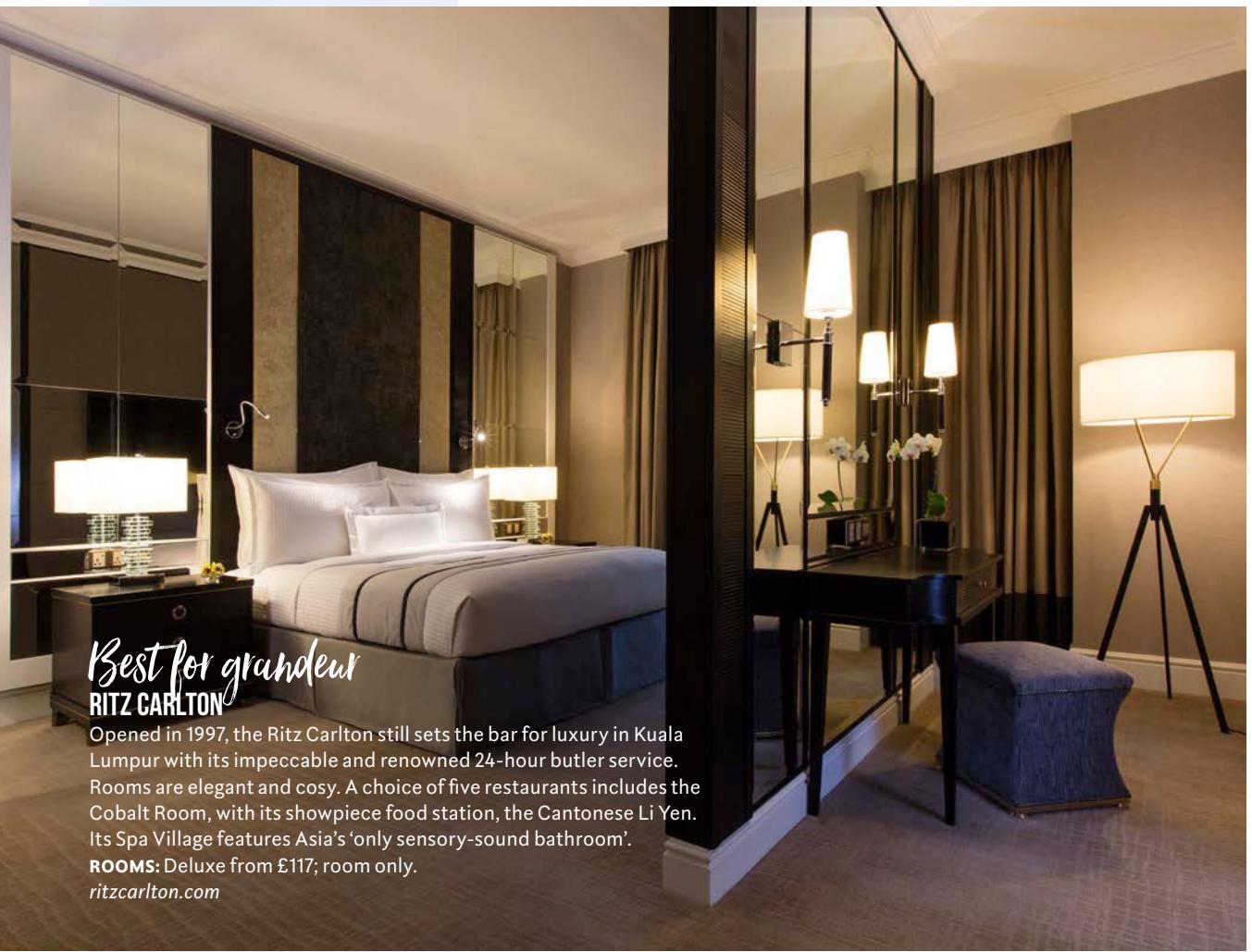
**ROOMS:** Doubles from £120, B&B. [majestickl.com](http://majestickl.com)

## Best for grandeur

### RITZ CARLTON

Opened in 1997, the Ritz Carlton still sets the bar for luxury in Kuala Lumpur with its impeccable and renowned 24-hour butler service. Rooms are elegant and cosy. A choice of five restaurants includes the Cobalt Room, with its showpiece food station, the Cantonese Li Yen. Its Spa Village features Asia's 'only sensory-sound bathroom'.

**ROOMS:** Deluxe from £117; room only. [ritzcarlton.com](http://ritzcarlton.com)





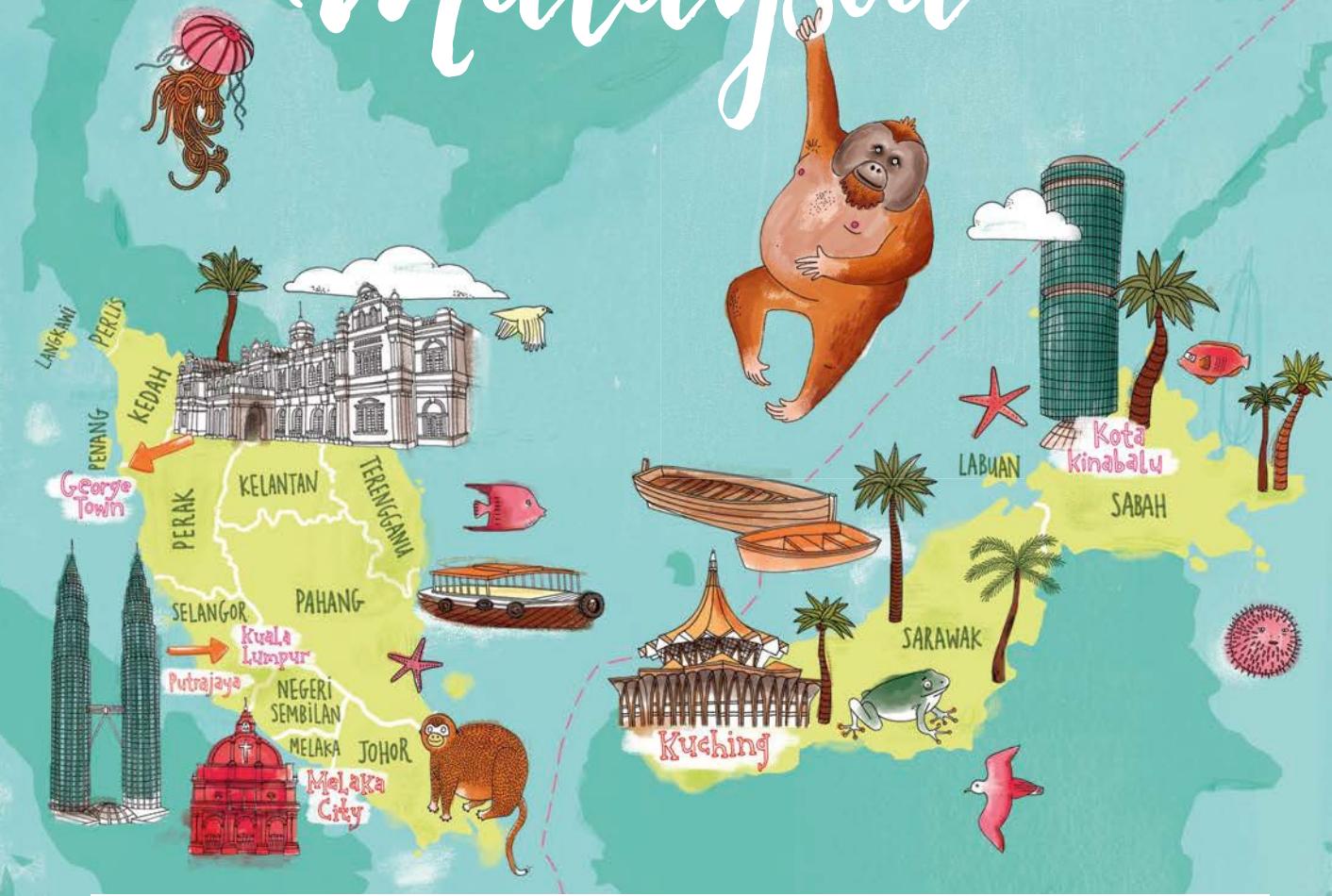
*Best for staying in  
GRAND HYATT*

You could spend hours whizzing up and down in the Hyatt's ear-popping elevators from gym to spa to palm-laced pool where saltwater swimming comes with views of the Petronas Towers. The extravagant breakfast is an all-morning affair, and by the time it's over, you might as well wait out sunset when the sky-high Thirty8 cocktail bar hots up. Plush bedrooms are equally fun, particularly the cubicle bathrooms. Transparent walls mean you can bear all and enjoy the city views, or flick a switch to magically turn the glass opaque.

**ROOMS:** Doubles from £125.  
[kualalumpur.grand.hyatt.com](http://kualalumpur.grand.hyatt.com) □

# THE ESSENTIALS

# Malaysia



## ESSENTIALS

### Getting there & around

**MALAYSIA AIRLINES** and **BRITISH AIRWAYS** both fly from Heathrow to Kuala Lumpur. [malaysiaairlines.com](http://malaysiaairlines.com) [britishairways.com](http://britishairways.com)

**AVERAGE FLIGHT TIME:** 12h 30m

**MALAYSIA AIRLINES** also offer domestic flights, as do MASwings, AirAsia and Firefly. [maswings.com.my](http://maswings.com.my) [airasia.com](http://airasia.com) [fireflyz.com.my](http://fireflyz.com.my) Taxis are common in cities and towns all over Malaysia, most with meters, while in some cities there are also rickshaws. Cheap bus services are found in most major cities, while KL has a monorail and Light Rail Transit (LRT) network. For travellers heading out of the

capital, the ETS (electric train service) covers the area north of KL, including Ipoh, Penang and Padang Besar. The MRT (Mass Rapid Transit) network connects KL to its surrounding suburbs, including the Klang Valley. The KLIA Ekspres links the city to Kuala Lumpur International Airport in 28 minutes. Meanwhile, shared taxis are a convenient option for those travelling long distance. These taxis can also be chartered.

### When to go

The climate is tropical, with hot and humid weather all year round, with temperatures remaining high all year, averaging 26C in the

lowlands of the coast — although the hill resorts having a somewhat cooler climate. The northeast monsoon blows from October to March, bringing heavy rain to the east coast of Malaysia. On the west coast the wettest months are May to September. The rainy season in Sabah and Sarawak is November to February.

### More info

[malaysia.travel](http://malaysia.travel)

The Rough Guide to Malaysia, Singapore & Brunei. RRP: £13.99

Lonely Planet Malaysia, Singapore & Brunei. RRP: £17.99

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