

BLISSFUL BINTAN

The lesser-known Indonesian island of Bintan has all the key ingredients for a high-end, hedonistic honeymoon, finds Rose Dykins





You may not have heard of Bintan — it's a fairly well-kept secret. But if you're longing for the feel of wet tropical heat on your skin, for honeymoon photos with jaw-dropping jungle scenery, and for the opulence of five-star facilities, it's time to put it on your radar.

The largest land form in Indonesia's 3000-island Riau Archipelago, Bintan's terrain is rugged, with snow-white beaches that melt into emerald wilderness, setting the scene for an adventure-filled escape.

To the north of the island, much of this has been tamed to make way for high net-worth holidaymakers. *Bintan Resorts* is a commercial area home to the island's 11 luxury hotels and resorts. The eldest is the *Banyan Tree Bintan*, established here around 20 years ago.

Don't dismiss Bintan as a "resort island", though — there is plenty to discover. Rainforest treks, mountain bike expeditions, or night-time boat rides through mangrove forests, as the boughs glitter with fireflies are just some of the intrepid ways to experience Bintan's wild side.



Tip

The best time to visit Bintan is from March to June to avoid the rainy season and extremely hot temperatures.



JUNGLE-CHIC BANYAN TREE BINTAN

I wake from a jet-lagged doze to the view of the golden afternoon sun ricocheting off the pirate cove-style bay in front of me. Twin statues of Balinese-style dogs guard us and our imperial-style villa — they're like bookends either side of our infinity pool, staring out to the topaz South China Sea. The view is too dreamy to be real, and it feels almost possible that swimming to the pool's edge would lead me straight into the ocean.

The grand, exotic design of *Banyan Tree Bintan*'s villas, complete with antique four-poster beds draped with white billowy fabric and scattered with petals, are perfect for a romantic base. However, it's the beautifully-preserved wildlife on the resort that makes it a truly special place to unwind.

Elderly buttress rooted trees covered in creepers, all kinds of indigenous fruit trees, and fragrant flowers are interwoven into the resort, which covers a 240-hectare area that steeply slopes down towards the wide, wild-looking bay.

We're whisked up and down the resort's pathways in buggies when we're feeling lazy, but exploring on foot is when you really notice the best bits. At one point, I think I spy a black cat, and my heart leaps when I realise it's a sinister-looking monitor lizard. They're free to roam the grounds, and are perfectly harmless to humans — just a little eerie when they pop up out of nowhere...



After a languorous afternoon by the pool, we stroll up to Saffron, the resort's elegant Thai restaurant. The expertly prepared curries — served with four kinds of rice and some perfectly crisp chapatis — ooze with authenticity, and the candlelight and open views of the bay are the perfect accompaniment.

Banyan Tree Bintan also offers unforgettable dining experiences for couples, where it sets a table for two at some of its most scenic locations — including the sweeping surrounds of Hole 8 of the Laguna Bintan Golf Club, and the resort's Kelong Restaurant, styled like a traditional fisherman's abode on stilts over the sea — you sail over there under the stars and tuck into freshly caught seafood.

Banyan Tree guests can also make use of facilities of the lively *Angsana Bintan Resort* next door. *Angsana* boasts a pristine beach strip and scheduled activities ranging from banana boating to stargazing. Its watersports centre offers the chance to scuba dive with some stunning tropical fish — including blue tang, a.k.a. Dory from *Finding Nemo*. And if you're there at the right time, you might be able to witness baby turtles being born, as the resort has its own turtle hatchery dedicated to preserving the wildlife. (banyantree.com, angsana.com)





COLONIAL CHIC THE SANCHAYA

Pulling up the driveway of five-star property, *The Sanchaya*, we see immaculate rows of flowerbeds laid out before the graceful silhouette of the white colonial-style house. From the reception, we get a glimpse of the Bounty-advert-worthy beach to the rear of the building, with spindly palm trees towering over the salt-like sand. The cabana beds are the only aspect of this scene that reminds you that you haven't just been marooned.

Open since January 2015, *The Sanchaya* still feels brand new. The contemporary décor of the rooms and villas will suit most tastes — think framed antique maps against serene grey walls that make the silver furnishings pop. All also come with excellent in-room technology, in particular the iPads stocked up with movies, which sync up to the Bang & Olufsen TVs.

The Sanchaya's service is another stand-out feature — when we're shown to our suite, we're asked what we'd prefer to be called, what time we'd like to be served hot chocolate and cookies in the evening, and whether we'd like a "bath experience" later — where a bath fizzing with bespoke bath salts is run, and a tray of treats is served. The attention to personal detail is just right.



We fall in love with the menu at the Dining Room restaurant, and tuck into succulent tuna steak salads and feta and squash wraps bursting with flavour. *The Sanchaya's* other restaurant, the al fresco Tasanee Grill serves well-presented Bangkok street-food style cuisine. There's also a classy old-school bar with eclectic décor, a library with leather studded seating complete with all manner of coffee table books, and a wine cellar with an impressive collection of cheeses.

After a Balinese massage in the couple's treatment room at the spa, we lap up the sun by the positively Olympic-sized swimming pool. Another thoughtful touch are the free "pool boxes for guests" complete with sparkling water, face mist, and a semaphore-style flag for attracting attention if you need another watermelon juice.

On our last day, we are delighted to find the luxury isn't over just yet. Waiting for us at Bintan's ferry terminal is *The Sanchaya's* own private lounge, complete with refreshments and the same warm service we've become accustomed to. A great send-off after the perfect getaway (thesanchaya.com)



CITY STOPOVER GUIDE: SINGAPORE

IT WOULD BE RUDE TO FLY INTO SINGAPORE AND NOT SPEND A NIGHT OR TWO THERE! HERE ARE SOME TIPS FOR A SHORT STAY.

STAY: Park Hotel Alexandra lies in a residential area with green spaces and a calmer feel than downtown. Its Aqua Luna swim-up bar offers 360-degree views for sunset drinks. (parkhotelgroup.com)

For a trendy hotel in the centre, go for Sofitel So Singapore (sofitel.com). Set in a neoclassical building, it features plush décor and high-end rooms with nods to local culture.

TASTE: For super-exclusive dining, *Kakure* is a newly-opened sake bar in a heritage colonial bungalow. It has the feel of an upmarket speakeasy, and world-class sommeliers serve you incredibly rare sakes from Japan.

SEE: Spend an afternoon at *Gardens By The Bay* (gardensbythebay.com). The attraction's botanical displays include 50-metre tall "light trees" connected by bridges. For modern art, the repurposed buildings of former military camp *Gillman Barracks* (gillmanbarracks.com) now house changing avant-garde art displays and trendy wine bars.

SHOP: For unique clothing and quirky pieces for your home, browse the colourful boutiques in Haji Lane in the city's Arab Quarter.

