

FEATURES

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DICAPRIO'S CLOSE SHAVE

Actor Leonardo DiCaprio had a brush with death during a diving trip off the Galapagos Islands. He felt suffocated while trying to take photos of a school of stingrays



Amateur swimmers in Muscat take part in competitions just for the sake of fun

Ben Reeves
Muscat

The 'schizophrenic' sea off Qurm beach can vary, from day to day, between being as calm as a mill pond to being very turbulent and rough. However, it is always cool, it is always there and it is always free. These three reasons make it ideal for the Muscat Amateur Swimming Association.

"Swimming pools are hard to find around here. They're very limited and, in summer, they are very very hot. In April, they were 31°C. A nice training temperature is about 24 or 25°C. Trying to swim in 31°C is like running on a hot day, you just don't want to do it," said the group's organiser, Andrew Malinak, who works as an engineer on the airport development project.

"I've been swimming since I was a kid. I came out here in October and there was the triathlon club and the running club. There were some people who did swimming, but there were no formal events. At the time, I was training for a competition in Dubai to be held in May. Events tend to give me a reason to train and when you're training for an event that's six months out, it's kind of hard to keep focused on it."

As a result of this desire to have some sort of competition to keep him training, Malinak founded the association in January. It caught on very quickly. "We did our first event at the Grand Hyatt in February and it was just a case of doing a couple of short races - 1600m, 800m, 200m - but we had 54 people



show up. I was really shocked to see that many people there. We did another one a couple of months later with 11, which is more than what I expected."

An event on Friday, only the third in the history of the group, attracted 19 swimmers in 200m, 400m, 800m and 1600m. Starting from the beach, a couple of hundred metres down from the Costa coffee shop at Shatti al Qurm, four markers detailed the course.

"There's no prize, it's just for fun. I do it for my health, for my stamina and for fun. It's a good pastime for me. I don't usually measure the times, I just see if I come in the first five positions," said Vigneshwar Madhan, who finished second to Malinak in the 800m race. This is particularly

impressive as Madhan, a student at Indian School Ghubra, is only 11. "I still swim when the water's rough. It's very hard work. I started from 200m and 400m races and I gradually increased. When it's a rough sea, I have to put in all of my effort." While the water was quite calm for Friday morning's competition, it is far from always being so. Just the day before, on the group's regular social swim, conditions were a lot trickier. "It's like being on a roller-coaster ride. It's difficult to swim, but once you get used to it, it's easier," said Ramil Velarde, who works in sales with Gulf Business Machines.

"I mainly do it for health reasons. I'm not so young any more, so I started out with running. Swimming is a good cardio exer-

cise. It's a lot easier to swim than to run, especially in this weather. There's also nice camaraderie and you get to meet different people. Also, Muscat is quite small and there isn't very much to do so, whenever I am free, I spend my morning here and I get some exercise as well," he said, seeming very pleased just to have taken part, despite finishing last in the 800m race.

"I just started swimming in the open sea when I came to Muscat in 2008. I initially joined the road runners and then some of the road runners started organising this. I started out going to the normal Thursday swim to build up confidence and then I thought I'd try one of the races. I was the last one to finish but, for me, just to complete it is a nice thing to do during the weekends," he said.

"I registered for the 800m race once before, but when I saw that the Omani national team was there, I decided not to bother. This time it's for fun, so I thought I'd do it."

The event days are very well organised, with the Friday one even receiving sponsorship from the Park Inn Muscat. The social swims, which start at 8am from behind the Grand Hyatt Muscat, are a lot more relaxed.

Malinak said, "It's just whatever anyone wants to do. Basically, we start from the Grand Hyatt and then it's a kilometre down to the hospital, another kilometre down to the InterContinental Muscat and then half a kilometre in the other direction to the end of the British embassy."

Catching them early: Gymnasiums, spas and salons for the very young

A sign read: Spa Baby. Furbished with soft-coloured decorations, the mall was full of children that weekend. The young customers lounged, staring at mini laptops on cozy sofas.

Some were having their nails done. Others had their faces covered with edible yogurt masks.

Next to the beauty outlet, located at Plaza Indonesia, Jakarta, a gymnasium had opened to welcome other young customers. A sign there read: I Like Gym. There, kids happily exercised with instructors (some with their parents), using mats, balancing bars, monkey-rings, trampolines and a wall-climbing pad painted in kid-friendly colours.

Today's children's world doesn't only revolve around chic clothing and expensive toys. It has become more interesting, more fashionable, and more beautiful, partially thanks to gyms, salons and spa services. "Even young children deserve to look and feel good," said 27 year old parent Marita Eka, who often takes her five year old daughter for cream-bath and hairstyling sessions.

For Ivonne Wahjudi and her friends - including teacher Susan Bachtiar, Dini Sembiring, Mitzzy and Cindy Christina - who run Spa Baby and I Like Gym, it's a part of daily life. "Some of us are mothers too, so we know the children's world very well," said marketing director Ivonne.

"We have long been interested in this world, and we have been searching for fresh ideas for parents," she said. So in 2009, they opened the first Spa Baby outlet in Dharmawangsa Square City Walk, south Jakarta. After receiving a positive response, Spa Baby opened their second outlet in Plaza Indonesia.

Earlier in June, Ivonne stepped into a new business - a children's gym centre. The centre, I Like Gym, is said to be the first of its kind in Indonesia, bringing together children aged from six months to 12 years to enjoy various types of exercise.

"The gym is more than just a place to play. It's a centre for child development," explained Ivonne. "We don't just instruct classes. We design curriculums based on the USA Gymnastics Junior Olympic programme. We have instructors with years of experience." One satisfied parent is



fashion model Koming, who enrolled her children in the centre's unique classes. "Some parents think it is alright for children to watch TV and play video games and browse the Internet all day," Koming said. "But for me, this is a problem because these activities have negative side-effects



like childhood obesity."

Similar to I Like Gym, Spa Baby also introduces parents and children to activities and programmes that combine both health and fun. Because it deals with children, Spa Baby seeks out child-friendly, organic products.

Baby spa services do have a price though. The facial mask service, for example, costs 225,000 rupiah (about US\$23), and the creambath and manicure-pedicure cost 80,000 rupiah

(US\$8.8) each. Hair cuts, colouring and perm services range between 65,000 rupiah (US\$7) and 100,000 rupiah (US\$11). Those interested in the basic aqua swim or organic oil massage services should expect to pay 200,000 rupiah (US\$22) per session. Like Ivonne and her friends entering the children's salon business, Sarah Darmawan, Lisa Samadikun and Andha Soekrisno started D-Katz in Kemang, south Jakarta, in 2000. At that time the salon business for children hadn't blossomed to where it is today.

Yus, operational manager, D-Katz, said, "The setting up of a children's salon isn't as easy as people may think, because it takes more than just decorations to keep children sitting still." "It takes more than just colourful chairs and walls. We have to provide mini monitors, toys, and good meals," Yus said. "For us, it takes extra patience to work with little customers. I myself am a stylist, and always have to make sure kids are comfortable before I can start cutting their hair."

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Hot springs, warm mist and herbal soup

The Shunjing Spa Hotel is the self-described world's largest spa resort, at almost 130,000sqm in size, and is the most luxurious hot spring resort in town. Its hot springs bubble up from 3,075m underground. After an elevator takes you down from the entrance lobby to the underground hot springs area, you get to decide the level of luxury you want to enjoy and pay for.

The whole area has the graceful look of a traditional Chinese garden. A man-made stream, one thousand metres long, wanders through the whole space, like a chain that connects the different areas into a bracelet. Bridges made of wood, stone and white jade arch nicely over the stream. As cobble stone roads lead the way to



bridges, visitors strolling about have plenty to take in.

The garden has many plants. Some are artificial giant trees that reach to the ceilings. Others are real flowers hidden in

bushes that occasionally stroke visitors' knees. You cannot see from one end of the garden to the other, because the foliage is so thick. It feels like waking in a labyrinth and it creates the at-

mosphere of a famous Chinese verse - 'behind the dark willows and blooming flowers lies another village'.

The hot spring pools, big or small, round or square, are not

easy to see. Some are inside houses, some behind trees, and others are more open because they are exposed to sunlight under a glass ceiling.

On a path leading down to the hot spring area from the entrance, the manager, Li, suddenly stopped and said, "this is the foot bathing spring". She pointed at a covered corridor that was not yet complete, but which still had a stream under the roof. Standing in the stream were several sets of stone tables and chairs.

"Later warm mist will rise from below," she said. "Surrounded by the heavenly mist, you can sit on the chair with your feet bathed in the spring while playing chess with friends." She then pointed to a bird's nest hanging on a tree not far from the corridor. She

said the two colourful birds in the nest could imitate human speech. After several turns and bridges, the strange scent of Chinese herbal soup filled the air. A line of rooms appear. Inside each of the room was a



small hot spring. Each had a different theme and a distinct smell to match - one was sandalwood, another was chrysanthemum. These are healthy herbal springs. Waiters stand in every corner of the spa ready to

offer cool towels. And there was a tea table made of a giant tree trunk, beside which waitresses were serving famous and expensive teas such as Longjing and Pu'er.

It is a surprise to see the kind of gate depicted in A Dream of Red Mansions show up as the door of a guest room in a hotel. All the rooms were furnished in Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) or Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) style, with typical dark brown wooden wardrobes with big bronze locks shaped like clouds. Such luxury does not come cheap. Staying in the room for one night costs about 12,800 yuan (US\$1,900).

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