

ISSUE #2

# IKHILAS

THE MAGAZINE OF THE DATAI LANGKAWI



**A JOURNEY  
OF HEALING**  
SEVEN FLOWERS  
& SEVEN SPICES

**LEADING  
THE VISION**  
GENERAL MANAGER  
ARNAUD GIRODON

**MAN & NATURE IN  
PERFECT HARMONY**  
THE DATAI LANGKAWI'S  
NEW NATURE CENTRE

**SCHOOL IS  
IN SESSION**  
THE DAPUR  
OPENS





# Welcome To THE NEW DATAI



I am proud to present to you the second issue of IKHLAS (meaning 'sincere' and 'heartfelt' in Malay), the new magazine of The Datai Langkawi. The resort has now completely reopened after an unprecedented renovation, and we hope you appreciate the subtle new design and facilities, all of which respect the DNA of the original property, as it was envisioned more than 25 years ago. I'm extremely proud of the team and all that we have achieved together; The Datai Langkawi is a truly unique resort in a captivating yet fragile setting and any change requires the utmost care to ensure we continue to respect our precious surrounding environment. I believe we have achieved this and it is my great pleasure to see many loyal guests returning; having booked while we were still closed, confident that we would deliver the ultimate escape.

Whether you're here for the first time or one of many, IKHLAS is a chance for us to connect with you and to showcase experiences at The Datai Langkawi. These include our newly-launched *The Atelier*, where artisans from Langkawi and across the country preserve their timeless traditions in a unique and interactive studio setting, as well as the purpose-built *The Nature Centre*, the new home to our expanded team of naturalists and marine biologists. The resort is privileged to be nestled right at the heart of one of Asia's most important ecosystems and we are delighted to share some of our home's heritage and knowledge with you during your stay, including its very unique culture and people.

Wishing you an enchanting stay in our mesmerising rainforest!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Arnaud Girodon'. The signature is stylized with a long horizontal stroke and a small mark at the end.

Arnaud Girodon  
General Manager

# IKHLAS

## MAGAZINE

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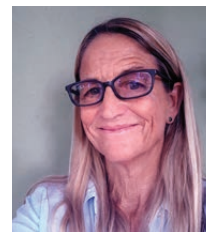
**Denise Cullen** is a freelance food, travel and wellbeing writer based in Brisbane, Australia. She lived and worked in Kuala Lumpur for two years and married her husband on Langkawi Island. Her work has appeared in AsiaSpa, Australian Yoga Life, body+soul, The Guardian, Hemispheres, Nature & Health, WellBeing and more.



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After a 30-year career in the medical field, **Vanessa Workman** decided to focus on more creative endeavours. Now an avid travel blogger and freelance writer, her blog 'The Island Drum' is a mix of travel and lifestyle based on her experiences as a Southeast Asia based expatriate. She presently calls Langkawi, Malaysia home.



**Ronan O'Connell** is an Australian freelance journalist and photographer with 15 years experience as a reporter. He worked at daily newspapers in Australia for nine years and since going freelance has contributed words and images to more than 70 media outlets across the world.

# IKHLAS

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# IKHLAS

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A large, thick tree trunk with a wooden walkway and platform in a rainforest. The walkway is elevated and has a metal railing. Two people are standing on the walkway. The platform is circular and also has a metal railing. The background is a dense forest of green trees and foliage.

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Making it  
Look Easy







## ■ Langkawi Art Biennale

July 12-23, 2019

**KELAB MUAY THAI,  
LANGKAWI, MALAYSIA**

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With the theme of Environment & Culture, this year's Langkawi Art Biennale will tackle environmental issues, with local, national and international artists exploring this important theme through sketches, sculpture and installation art. The island's largest art show is an opportunity for discourse and exploration and for visiting artists to be exposed to Malaysia's multicultural heritage as well as the natural beauty of Langkawi.



## ■ Hari Raya Haji

August 11-13, 2019

**INTERNATIONAL**

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The worldwide religious holiday that marks the end of the holy month of Ramadan, Hari Raya Hajii, or Eid al-Adha as it is known outside Malaysia, is a chance for communities to come together. Malays from across the country will return to their family homes to celebrate the end of the holy month's fasting by donning their finest clothes and opening their homes (called pergi beraya) for visitors to try traditional snacks, including ketupat, rice dumplings steamed in palm leaves; kuih raya, biscuits and cakes baked for visitors, and of course Rendang, one of Malaysia's most iconic dishes. Traditionally, an animal is sacrificed to mark the holy occasion; a third is kept for the family, one portion is give to relatives and friends, and the final part is given to the needy.



## ■ Real Floria Putrajaya

13 August – 8 September 2019

**PUTRAJAYA**

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An annual event since 2009, this celebration of flowers has become Malaysia's top horticultural event – think of it as the answer to London's Chelsea Flower Show. As well as showcasing commercial products from the industry, the festival features sweeping show gardens, dramatic floral designs, and engaging floristry demonstrations alongside the flower shows where international and local participants compete for the top prizes.

■ **Langkawi International Beach Soccer Tournament**

August 24-28, 2019

**LANGKAWI, MALAYSIA**

The inaugural Langkawi International Beach Soccer Tournament promises to be a brilliant showcase of football skills and beach culture, with big names in the sport including former internationals Roberto Carlos and Eric Cantona expected to attend. The tournament will include teams from Spain, France, Italy, Iran, Bahrain, Australia, Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia, all of whom will be competing for a US\$10,000 first prize.



■ **National Day**

31 August 2019

**THROUGHOUT MALAYSIA**

Known locally as Hari Merdeka, this celebration marks Malaysia's independence from British rule in 1957. Parades, shows, exhibitions and festivities are held across the country, but to really get in on the action you'll want to be in the capital. Kuala Lumpur puts on a real show starting with a firework spectacle the night before, a big parade at historic Merdeka Square the morning of, and concerts and performances throughout the day.



■ **Ritma Kinabalu (Rhythms of Kinabalu)**

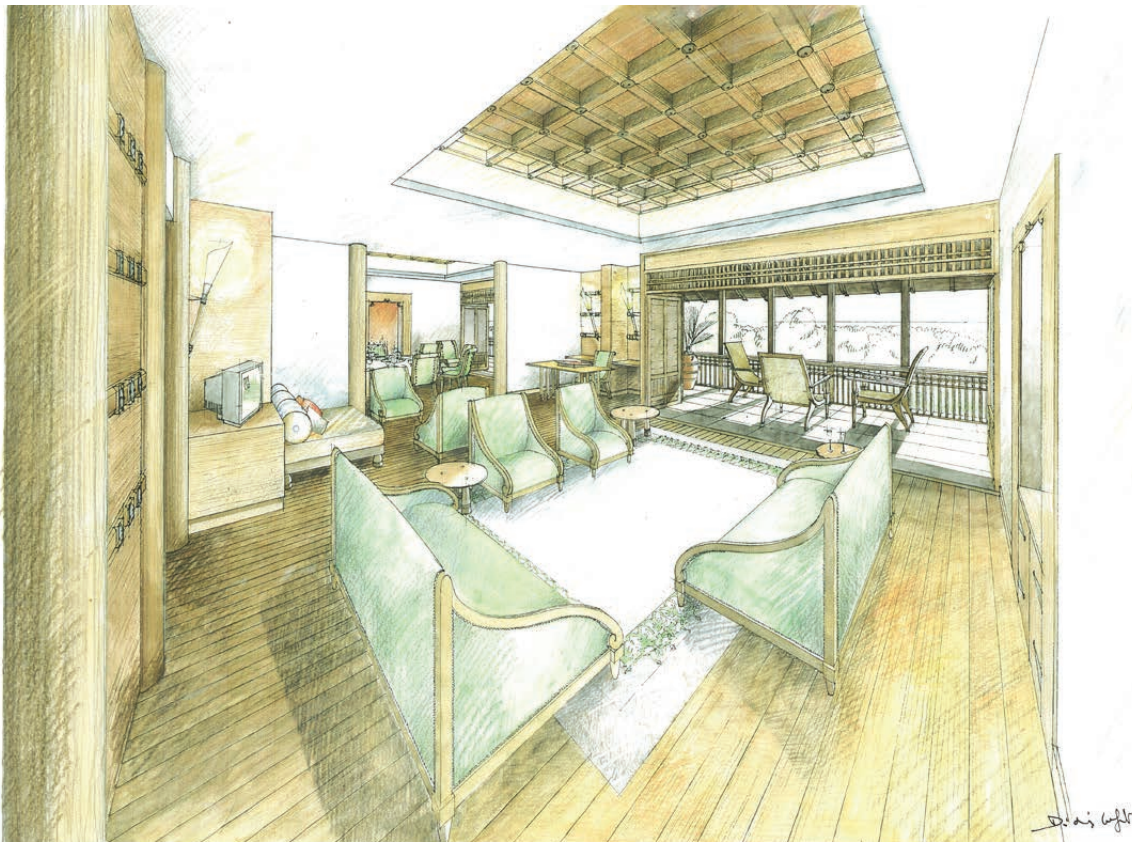
1 September – 30 September 2019

**KOTA KINABALU**

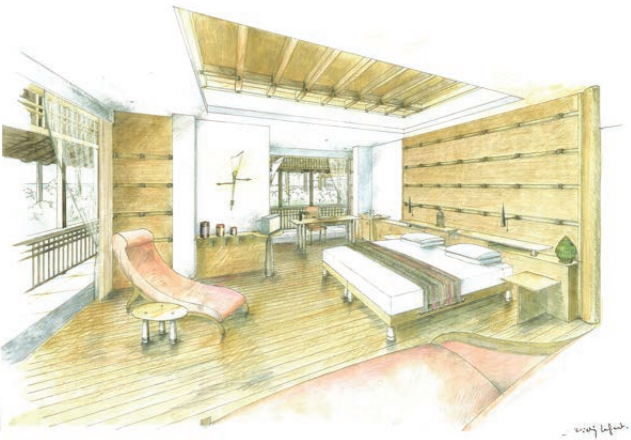
This eclectic festival offers an array of unique modern and traditional music inspired by the sounds that emanate from the jungles surrounding Mount Kinabalu. Adding to the otherworldly atmosphere is the wide variety of traditional instruments on which the music is played, all of which are drawn from the diverse cultures that make up Sabah's multi-ethnic culture.



# A BEAUTIFUL MIND



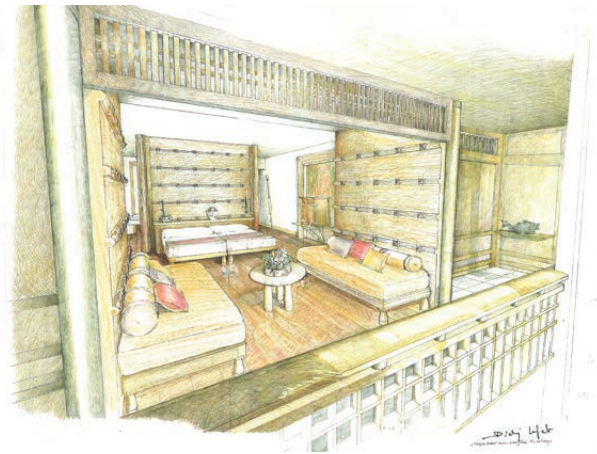
When The Datai Langkawi prepared for its unprecedented renovation, it called on architect and interior designer Didier Lefort, one of the original visionaries behind the resort. The Frenchman was tasked with recreating one of Asia's most revered resorts, one beloved by its many return guests, without changing its fundamental design DNA. In this issue of Ikhlas, the designer gives us a glimpse behind his vision for The Datai Langkawi through his initial sketches.



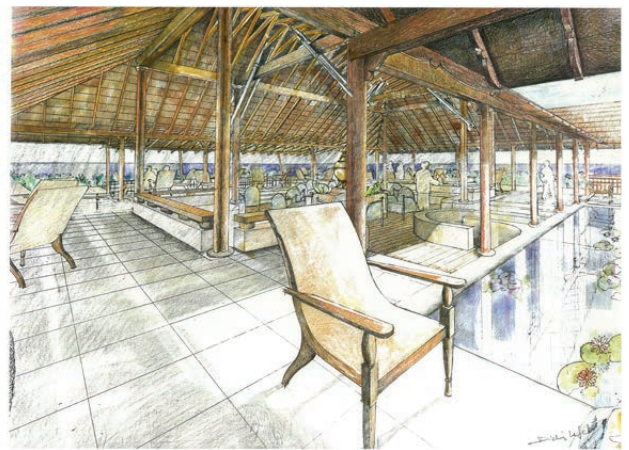
“Like all bedrooms, The Datai Suite is a mix of Malay, Indian and Chinese cultures,” says Didier. “Here, the panelling and ceiling are purely Indian patterns while the sofas are tropical in style, while door frames and lighting are a modern Malay interpretation.”



One of the most iconic aspects of The Datai Langkawi must be its striking lobby, an airy, refined space where all guests begin and end their journey at the resort. “Horses, being noble animals, are at the centre of the lobby to welcome guests as if through an alley of honour,” says Didier. “The timber roof frame is typical of the Malay style, and guests might spy the traditional spears that brace it.”



The connection with The Datai Langkawi’s stunning natural surrounds was always at the core of Didier’s vision. “The original bedroom layout was conceived to be fully-immersed with nature through a wide hidden opening,” says Didier. This was achieved through a design that flows from the bed through an intimate lounge space, onto a private balcony and into the canopies that wreath the main pool.



The Lobby Lounge is one of the most popular places in the resort when it comes to sunsets. “Created as a peninsular inside the natural surroundings, the fully-opened bar is also a place to quietly contemplate the tropical forest,” says its designer. “The design and furniture layout has been created to form rings of seating at different levels, with the bar in the middle. Tropical furniture and lighting have also been employed to enhance that atmosphere.”

# WEAVING THE FUTURE

Traditional songket weaving faces a battle for survival, but innovative social enterprises and changing consumer trends are coming to the rescue, finds **Denise Cullen**.



*Wooden hand-operated looms are used in the process of weaving songket. Image courtesy Tanoti Crafts.*

Mechanisation and mass production have threatened traditional crafts of all descriptions, and songket weaving is no exception.

Creating this distinctly Malaysian silk or cotton fabric by hand, with its intricate motifs in metallic thread, is a demanding, painstaking and time-consuming undertaking, with even the most skilled workers able to weave at a rate of only four to six inches a day. Consequently, as older artisans hang up their looms, it's difficult finding younger people to replace them.

As a result, though traditional weavers can still be found in places such as Terengganu, Kota Bharu and Sarawak, their numbers have plummeted in the past two decades. Jacqueline Fong, co-founder of Tanoti Crafts, considers it a national crisis.

"It's important to keep songket weaving alive, because it represents our identity, history and culture," she says. "We cannot afford for another generation to lose the skills, to have other sets of fingers not knowing the craft."

Determined to play her part as a custodian of national heritage, former investment banker Fong, along with textile designer and lecturer Dr June Ngo, established Tanoti in 2012.

They did this by signing up an atelier of songket weavers initially employed by a foundation, the Yayasan Tuanku Nur Zahirah, established by Her Royal Highness the Queen of Malaysia in 2008. Due to withdrawal of funding, these weavers were about to find themselves out of work.

Fong says the aim was, firstly, to ensure their

continued employment but, more holistically, to use this ancient art to improve the lives and livelihoods of women and rural communities. Tanoti is currently comprised of a 15-strong community of weavers who practise traditional labour-intensive methods, including the hand-dyeing of threads. Classical designs, from the *pucuk rebung* (bamboo shoot) to the *teratai* (lotus), continue to be used, reflecting familiar themes of culture, identity and faith.

Consistent with the way in which traditional skills are passed down under the tutelage of elders, Tanoti employs a mentorship model, in which highly experienced weavers train new hands. “The things that we do are always highly progressive, while maintaining as much purity as possible in every step of the process,” says Fong, who points out that while industrialisation has made the production of textiles cheaper and faster, contemporary trends like sustainability and slow fashion mean that more and more people are turning towards products which aren’t made by machine. “This resurgence of interest in anything that’s handmade works in the favour of craftspeople.” she says.

While the history of songket is shrouded in some mystery, it probably came to Kelantan as early as the fifteenth century through trade, migration and intermarriages between royal families in the Malay Archipelago and Indo-China. Commonly worn for special occasions like weddings, formal functions and other ceremonies, songket remains a symbol of wealth, prestige and luxury.



But, as anyone who has donned traditionally-made songket will attest, while it looks majestic, it can feel stiff, scratchy and itchy. Ngo said these drawbacks helped inspire her 2008 PhD research on contemporising songket, with a view to making it softer, sheerer, lightweight and infinitely more suited for fashion.

Speaking from her adopted home in Brisbane, Australia, Ngo said there were plenty of naysayers who thought her task impossible: “They said they will chop off their heads if I can do it.”

However, she did. The trick was introducing silk filament threads, as fine as hair, to the weaving process. Ngo’s work has dramatically improved both the wearability and comfort of songket. While no longer with Tanoti, her legacy lives on in its range of couture, homewares, artworks and more, as does the spirit of this timeless traditional artform.

*From Top to Bottom: Extremely fine silk filament threads in metallic shades of silver and gold form the motifs in songket fabric; With its elaborate artistry, songket belongs to the brocade family of textiles; Tanoti’s weavers work in an airy downstairs studio in Sarawak. Image courtesy Tanoti Crafts.*



# Save Room for SATAY

Despite its origins in neighbouring Indonesia, Malaysia has made satay part of its national identity, with an ever-evolving range of versions sating palates across the nation. By **Nick Walton**

When you think of Malaysian cuisine, it's hard not to think of satay. As simple a dish as you can imagine – meat lovingly grilled on skewers and paired with heavenly peanut sauce – satay has its origins in Java but was introduced to the world as a distinctly Malaysian street snack. Today, Satay (or Sate) is part of the national fabric of Malaysia; it's served in street side stalls throughout the country, including Langkawi - especially at the pasar malam (night markets), and has won the national carrier, Malaysian Airlines, international awards for its authentic catering in-flight.

A typically Malay dish consisting of chicken, mutton and beef, with variations of fish, tofu or even pork in non-halal areas, grilled or barbecued over wood or charcoal, satay is the Malaysian equivalent of a bechamel sauce – seemingly simplistic but easy to mess up, and chefs who have perfected the marinating, the cooking time, the preparation and the execution win notoriety in a nation that takes its food very seriously.

As with many popular street foods, there are many variations on classic satay, ranging from seafood staples like squid and shrimp. While Javanese satay tends to use smaller, leaner pieces of meat or single finger-length strips, Malaysian-style satay, or Sate Kajang, tends to use plump cubes of meat, the additional fat of which offers

an enhanced and indulgent flavour and an aroma once cooked over flame that draws in the hungry to the grill.

Other variations include Penang's Sate Lok-Lok, skewers of seafood, fish cakes, vegetables and even century egg that's cooked in hotpot caldrons; and Malacca's Sate Celup, which is cooked in boiling peanut sauce.

Chicken satay remains the most popular choice across Malaysia, with *lidi*, the midrib of the coconut frond, used as skewers, although bamboo is often used for sturdier cuts like beef. Skewers are soaked beforehand to ensure they don't burn over the grill, and the meat is marinated in turmeric, which gives chicken satay its distinctive yellow hue, as well as coconut oil, or palm margarine, or sweet soy sauce, which caramelises over the coals.

Satay is traditionally served with a slightly spicy peanut sauce, *acar* or vegetables pickled in vinegar, salt and sugar; slices of fresh cool cucumber; and dense *ketupat* rice cakes. With satay, cooking time is everything – the exterior of the meat should be chargrilled while the inside should be succulent and juicy.

At The Datai Langkawi you can try a range of satay styles, from traditional chicken and beef from the room service menu, and Satay Ayam & Daging at The Gulai House, to The Datai Nasi Goreng, fried rice served with lobster satay, at The Beach Club.







# SRI LANKA'S ODE TO GIN

Using a 70-year-old recipe, Colombo No. 7 Gin is a distinctive London Dry-style spirit that's captivating palates across Asia and beyond. By **Nick Walton**.



When the Union Jack flew over much of Asia, the British decreed that London Dry gin could not be produced beyond the boundaries of its empire. It was believed that producers beyond that dominion lacked the understanding and finesse to create world-class gin. However, one distillery in Sri Lanka – then Ceylon – stood resolute.

Rocklands Distilleries, a producer of the island's fiery arrack founded in 1924, fought for the right to produce London Dry-style gin and eventually the Ceylon Made Foreign Liquor regulation came into effect, allowing production and exportation of this precious spirit. Then war broke out, trade links were severed, and original gin recipes had to be supplemented with locally-sourced ingredients. The result was Colombo No. 7 Gin.

The new incarnation of Colombo No. 7, which was relaunched in 2015, flies in the face of modern craft gins, which wantonly stray from gin's London Dry origins with the addition of imaginative and often unnecessary ingredients. In the uncertainty of post-war Sri Lanka, Colombo No. 7 Gin's producers decided to move distillation to the UK. However,

No. 7 remains a distinctly London Dry gin that pays tribute to its exotic island home.

Just seven simple spices and botanicals are used in its creation, including traditional staples like coriander seed, angelica and liquorice root, as well as Sri Lankan cinnamon, curry leaves, and ginger root. Yet, despite the addition of exotic local flavours, Colombo Gin, which is handcrafted in small batches using copper pot stills, is a proudly juniper-forward spirit in the style that's indulged the palates of the Empire for generations. With its absence of citrus, replaced with punchy curry leaves, the gin leans towards the traditional despite its youthfulness. The gin boasts an earthiness, with touches of sweet, spicy cinnamon and the fragrant warmth of ginger that adds to a prolonged finish.

You'll find Colombo No. 7 Gin in The Datai Langkawi's new collection of traditional and contemporary gins, available at The Dining Room, The Beach Club, The Beach Bar and The Lobby Lounge where the spirit is matched with high-quality tonic and the same stunning Southeast Asia panoramas that inspired the spirit's creation so many years before.



# A Lingering LEGACY

The late Denis Dubourdieu was one of Bordeaux's most acclaimed winemakers and academics, and his flagship wine, Clos Floridène, continues his great legacy for sustainable wine production.

By **Nick Walton**.

Most wine lovers will have benefited from the dedication, passion and research of Denis Dubourdieu, even if they didn't know it at the time. One of the most influential wine makers in Bordeaux, Dubourdieu, named Decanter Man of the Year in 2016, was also an acclaimed academic who helped foster sustainable viticulture practices in his role as director of *l'Institut des Sciences de la Vigne et du Vin de l'Université de Bordeaux*, the Institute of Vine and Wine Sciences of the University of Bordeaux, where he was a Professor of Oenology.

Dubourdieu championed the production of world-class white wines in a region dominated by, and world-renowned for its reds, and advocated organic farming, oak barrel fermentation, improved bottling techniques, and the adaptation of winemaking techniques in the age of climate change, earning him the nickname the 'Pope of Wine'.

Despite his death in 2016, Dubourdieu's legacy lives on through the estates he owned or co-managed, which include Château Reynon, Château Doisy Daëne, Château Cantegril, Château Haura, and Clos Floridène, which is often considered his flagship winery and an insider's choice for Bordeaux white wine.

Clos Floridène is located in the South of the Graves appellation and is famed for its classic dry white wine of great quality, while its production is offset by an adjacent estate-planted forest the same size as the vineyards. Made from a blend of Sémillon, Sauvignon Blanc and just a touch of Muscadelle, which lends the wine a delightful perfumed aroma, Clos Floridène Blanc, Graves 2014, which is available at The Dining Room of The Datai Langkawi, is made using traditional techniques, including organic fertilisers and a horse-drawn plough for weed control. Bright and aromatic, this wine boasts notes of summer fruit, including white peaches and yellow apples, touches of minerality, and a clean, zesty finish that makes it both accessible and commendable.

# A PASSION FOR CREATION

The Datai Langkawi's artist in residence series continues with a spectrum of visiting talents from across Malaysia.



*(Clockwise from left)  
Salbiah & Zainap Muhi preparing  
traditional keringkam embroidery;  
Nursery Rhymes by Angelina Bong;  
The Beader's Colourful Life by  
Angelina Bong; contemporary batik  
by Jaludin Haji Zaini.*

## • Angelina Bong

Hailing from Kota Samarahan on the Malaysian island of Borneo, poet and visual artist Angelina Bong taps into her background in fashion and her own spiritual discoveries to create thought-inspiring poetry and mixed media pieces that capture a sense of place. Her physical pieces, which include vibrant acrylic works as well as bold black and white ink illustrations, are sometimes paired with her poetry to create a multi-dimensional illustration inspired by travel, people and culture. Her works have been displayed around the world, and her poetic performances have taken her to South Korea, South Africa, Botswana, Australia, the United Kingdom, India and Egypt, with poems translated into a variety of languages. Recently Angelina has revisited her fashion days by combining textile techniques such as beading with painting.

• Sheila Kho

Another artist who has made a name for herself with her use of bold colour formations, Sheila Kho's use of colour is often defined by emotion. Using a unique approach to her pieces, Sheila often deconstructs works into their elements, finding narrative in the parts as well as their sum. She has explored various forms of abstract art, using a wide range of mediums, including acrylic and oil, as well as beads, which have become a reoccurring element to her art. Her exposure to beads during the World Bead Conference in Kuching in 2015 has led the artist in the direction of wearable art. Sheila creates mesmerising one of a kind jewellery pieces using beads from her native Borneo as well as rarer beads she collects during her extensive travels. She also has a keen interest in pottery and has experimented with forms captured in clay.

• Jaludin Haji Zaini

From his boutique Pua Indah, in Rawang Selangor, outside Kuala Lumpur, Jaludin Haji Zaini, or simply 'Udyn' creates striking traditional batik textiles inspired by the natural world, including Malaysia's ancient rainforests. Both functional and thought-awakening, Udyn's creations are fresh and lively and youthful, injecting a contemporary vigour into one of Southeast Asia's oldest textile traditions. Having showcased his works in Paris, Milan, New York, Singapore and Rio de Janeiro, Udyn has helped put authentic batik concepts from his native Sarawak on the world stage.



• Salbiah & Zainap Muhi

Sisters Salbiah and Zainap specialise in keringkam, the traditional embroidery of the Sarawak Malays. The sisters became interested in this unique embroidery, which uses delicate gold and silver threads, in their teens, having learnt the art from their mother, and are now at the forefront of a movement to keep the tradition alive while also gaining recognition of its intricacy and aesthetics further afield. Usually reserved for special occasions like weddings, keringkam's techniques are often used to create two types of scarf, a shorter one called selayah and a long piece known as a selendang. Pieces can take months to produce by hand, with many Sarawak Malay families holding pieces as family heirlooms. Salbiah and Zainap's embroidery company, Sazalia Warisan Craft, continues the legacy of keringkam, making breathtaking pieces for government departments, royal families, and homesick Malaysians looking for an authentic piece of Borneo to cherish at home.





# The Rainbow Dragon of Langkawi

Malaysia's maritime heritage comes to life as you embark on a high-seas adventure aboard the breathtaking Naga Pelangi, one of the last remaining traditional Malay schooners.







Step out on the beach at The Datai Langkawi and you're likely to see a slice of Malay heritage at anchor in the bay. The *Naga Pelangi*, or Rainbow Dragon, is a living testament to a rich maritime history that once spanned the Andaman and South China Seas. A traditional wooden junk-rigged schooner in the style of the Malay pinas that once plied the Langkawi coast, the *Naga Pelangi* is a breathtaking recreation of a regional icon, the Perahu Besar, a type of chengal wood schooner used for trade (and occasionally piracy) on both sides of Peninsula Malaysia.

The *Naga Pelangi* is the vision of Christoph Swoboda, a German who tasked the craftsmen of Duyong Island, on the east coast of the Malay Peninsula, to recreate a traditional *pinas*, but created to the exacting standards of contemporary yachts. The craftsmen of Duyong Island originated from Sulawesi, where they had already mastered shipbuilding techniques, some of which had been influenced by cultural interaction with the Dutch, the French and the Chinese (an aspect that can be seen in the vessel's mesmerising junk-styled sails).

The *Naga Pelangi* was not Swoboda's first *pinas*; he created the original Rainbow Dragon in 1981 and was inspired to create the second Dragon by the traditional techniques used to build Perahu

Besar vessels, including fire-bending of planks and the use of paperbark skins as a natural sealant. Today's *Naga Pelangi* was finished in 2010 and now offers guests of The Datai Langkawi a unique opportunity to step back in time to the region's rich maritime tradition.

A series of adventures are on offer; Discovery Cruises are available daily for up to 12 guests and offer first time sailors the chance to get their sea legs as they sail north from Datai Bay towards Koh Tarutao before stopping in the lee of Langkawi's soaring peaks for an afternoon of swimming and dining. Alternatively, the Indulgence Cruise is a private charter of the *Naga Pelangi* that delves into the Andaman Sea, reaching remote islands halfway between Langkawi and the Butang Archipelago. As you navigate back towards the northern tip of Langkawi, there's time for swimming, kayaking and snorkeling before you return to Datai Bay in time for a champagne-laced sunset.

Time-poor guests may prefer to set sail later in the day with the Sunset Cocktail Cruise, a daily departure for up to 12 guests that captures the majesty of sunset over the Andaman Sea and Langkawi's Tanjung Chinchin headland. The cruise includes an open bar with free-flow champagne and canapés.

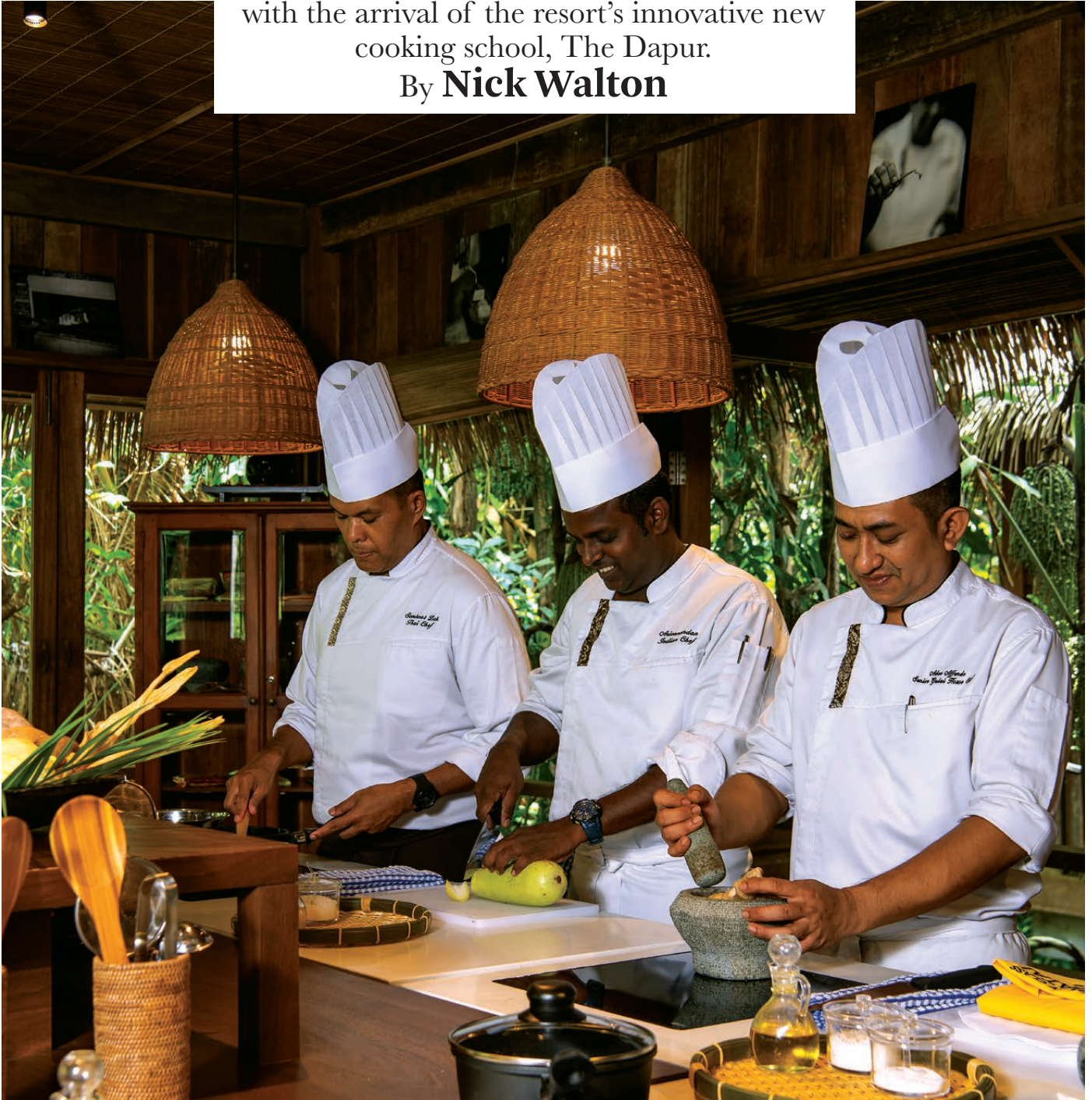


Available from  
the months of  
December to April

# SCHOOL IS IN SESSION

For a generation The Datai Langkawi has been a culinary destination for travellers seeking authentic Malaysian and Thai cuisine. Now guests can be part of the creative process with the arrival of the resort's innovative new cooking school, The Dapur.

By **Nick Walton**





Thai Tom Yan Goong; Indian Chana Salad; and Malay Kerabu Udang Kepala Parut

It's one thing to enjoy authentic cuisine when we travel, but how often do we return wishing we had brought home recipes and know-how rather than just sated appetites? The newest culinary innovation at The Datai Langkawi, The Dapur cooking school taps into the entire gastronomic journey, from the resort's own sustainably-managed gardens, to the kitchens of its esteemed restaurants, to the multicultural influences that have made Malaysia a world-renowned foodie hotspot.

Named for the Malay word for 'kitchen', The Dapur is an immersive and fascinating experience, held in a newly-built show kitchen at The Gulai House, that offers cooks of all skill levels the chance to immerse themselves in Malaysia's culinary cultures.

"We created The Dapur so guests can discover the vibrant flavours from Malaysia and Thailand, explore new techniques with coaching by experienced resort Specialist Chefs, and learn the art of tastes and textures using local, natural and sustainable produce picked from the permaculture garden," says Executive Chef Stephen Jones. "It adds an exciting new element to the culinary experience at The Datai Langkawi."

Chefs Adee, Ari and Somkeat lead guests through enthralling gastronomic encounters that bridge Malay, Indian and Thai food heritages through dedicated three-hour classes that begin with a tour of The Datai Langkawi's herb and vegetable permaculture gardens, where would-be chefs collect fresh produce for their dishes, including ulam raja, lemongrass, galangal, birds eye chilli and kaffir leaves. Back at The Dapur, guests will don chef hats and aprons in preparation for the class.

During the Malay cooking sessions, led by Malay chef Adee, guests will learn about Malaysia's role on the maritime spice road, and how spices like cloves, cardamom, cinnamon, and star anise became the foundation of authentic Malay dishes. The cooking classes, which are available on Mondays between 11am and 2pm, will allow foodies the opportunity to create signature Malay dishes, from *Kerabu Udang Kelapa Parut*, a fiery Langkawi prawn salad; and *Kerabu Sook Hoon*, a spicy glass noodle salad with bean curd and ginger; to *Rendang Ayam Utara*, slow-cooked chicken with lemongrass and roasted coconut.

The Indian cooking classes, led by Indian chef Ari on Wednesdays (11am-2pm), are an instruction in balance that tap into India's rich culinary heritage and the balance that is maintained between sweet, sour, and spicy elements in classic dishes like the Chana Salad, with chickpeas and coriander; Methi Fish Curry with fenugreek leaves and masala; and marinated chicken with freshly-ground spices.

During Thai cooking classes, available on Fridays (11am-2pm) led by Thai chef Somkeat, guests will learn how classic Thai cuisine is framed by strong aromatic flavours and spicy edges as they prepare the likes of *Tom Yum Goong*, a spicy prawn soup with fragrant mushrooms; *Gai Pad Khing Sod*, stir-fried chicken with young ginger and wood ear mushrooms; *Yam Mamuang Goong Naang*, a salad of young mango and prawns; and *Nuea Phad Prig Sod*, beef with fresh chilli and basil.

After the lesson, guests will sit down with a glass of wine chosen by The Datai's sommelier to match their cuisine, and dine on the fruits of their labours, leaving with their chef's hat and apron, a certificate of completion, recipe cards, and lasting memories of their new culinary credentials.

# LEADING FROM THE HEART



With extensive experience and travels under his belt, The Datai Langkawi's chef **Stephen Jones** talks about the importance of service, the use of local ingredients, and the influences he's picked up on his adventures.

### What first drew you to cooking?

Raised in a public house (better known as a pub) in North Wales, I helped in the kitchen during school holidays. My grandmother cooked very well, and that, coupled with a desire to move and travel, led to a passion for cooking and a desire to become a chef.

### Where did you train as a chef?

I attended Catering College, graduating in 1984, before work life started in various countryside restaurants washing up pots and pans. Opportunities came and took me to where I'm supposed to be.

### Early in your career who were your biggest influences?

I found inspiration on every page of chef Marco Pierre White's book *White Heat*, also famed Australian chef and restaurateur Tony Bilson, and esteemed hotelier Henry J.P Gray.

### You've worked at luxury resorts in Mexico, Indonesia, India, Montenegro, the Maldives, Lebanon and Oman, and on projects in Fiji and Singapore; how have perceptions of resort dining and the expectations of guests changed during this time?

Concepts of luxury have shifted, and today luxury travel incorporates a healthy dose of wellness with a "cleaner greener" concept. Food today is more accessible, produce is better than ever, there's been a surge in food related trends, allergies and diets, and social media is now widespread, with online reviews and rankings. People's expectations are changing, but ultimately it's all about service.

### How would you describe your approach to cooking and how

### have your extensive travels shaped your culinary style?

I'm in favour of less is more and simplicity; my approach to food is multicultural and layered with worldly influences with an awareness for health and well-being. Using different ingredients, different technique, the pleasure, the struggle, research and the adventure of cooking make it interesting

### What can diners expect at The Datai Langkawi under your stewardship?

It's an exciting platform to develop a new creative expression that is produce and people driven. The content of the cooking will continue to evolve; collectively we have brought a fresh vision, redefining the restaurant concepts, developing new offerings and in leading a talented and experienced team who are passionate about service, delivering new standards to our discerning clientele.

### What ingredients are you currently experimenting with?

We're constantly looking for new ingredients and flavour combinations and make use of local ingredients and specialities where possible. We're excited about Langkawi-made Buratta, Stacciatella and Buffalo Mozzarella cheeses (*read more on pg 42*) and adapting them to our cuisine.

### Do you have a signature dish that every visiting guest should try?

It's not about the one dish that defines us, it's about the "Dining Experience"; the aim is simple: to give great pleasure by producing delicious food.

### What's your guilty food pleasure?

Bitter chocolate, fine cheese and artisan bread.

# LEADING THE VISION

French General Manager **Arnaud Girodon** has led The Datai Langkawi through its dramatic US\$60 million 12-month renovation, and now has his sights set on returning the property to its former glory. He talks with **Nick Walton** about first impressions, the allure of Asia, and the changing expectations of today's luxury traveller.

*What motivated you to go into the hotel industry?*

I come from a modest family, lost in the middle of the mountains, in a place called Aubrac, in south-west France, where only about 500 people live. At the age of 12, my mother took me to Paris to see my aunt, who welcomed us at the George V, (now Four Seasons George V), where she was Executive Housekeeper at the time. When I arrived in the lobby and saw the grandiosity of this iconic hotel, I said to my parents "That's it, I know what I want to do when I grow up."

*You've worked all over the globe but have now spent many years in Asia, with roles in Thailand and Vietnam before Malaysia – what is it about the region that has seduced you?*

I was absolutely captivated by many factors: the warmth of the people first of all, and the general openness of Asia. Also, the absolutely incredible landscapes and luxurious nature, all bathed in sunshine and warm temperatures. The quality and diversity of the culture in general, and the region's fascinating history also appealed and of course, being French, the incredible food, with its mix of flavours and great natural products. This was topped by the fact that I also had great professional challenges to open and manage very diverse and exciting properties. I feel very blessed indeed!

*What were your impressions when you first visited The Datai Langkawi in 2014?*

The Datai Langkawi has always been a legend in Asia, since the late 90s. Everyone in the profession, at least in Asia and the Middle East, had heard about this incredible high-end design-led hotel, which was totally immersed in a very luxuriant rainforest. So, when the opportunity came to manage this iconic resort, I really gave it my best shot. When I arrived at The Datai Langkawi, I was captivated by the sheer beauty of the surrounding rainforest and astonished by the architectural design of the hotel. However, by then the resort had unfortunately lost some of its reputation and was really showing its age, which really motivated me even further, as a clear challenge was there: to re-establish The Datai Langkawi as one of the top resorts in the world.

*What were your thoughts the day you were told The Datai Langkawi would go through such an extensive restoration? How challenging was the process and how do you feel about the resort's new look?*

Well, I knew that The Datai Langkawi needed a major renovation and boost and that is one of the reasons why I was recruited for this role, having strong experience in opening hotels and resorts, so it really did not come as a surprise. What was most surprising was



that I was given this incredible responsibility to not only overlook the operations side of the resort and its re-opening, like a GM would typically do, but to also be fully in charge of the renovations and given, under an approved budget and frame, the full authority to execute such a groundbreaking renovation. It presented such an exciting prospect and I am grateful to the Board of Themed Attractions Resorts & Hotels and Khazanah for placing such trust in me. I am certainly very proud of the outcome and obviously feel very good about the renovation, but more importantly, I feel far prouder about the feedback we received from everyone, from regular guests and new guests to the press and shareholders.

***The Datai Langkawi is now seducing a new generation of travellers but were there ever times when you were overwhelmed by the scale and ambition of the 12-month renovation project?***

As a luxury resort, we must evolve to attract new generations of travellers to a certain extent, but more specifically we need to answer the new “needs” of the luxury traveller. Today the demand is for “experiential holidays” with a clear focus on sustainability and that has always been a motivator for us. I had some moments of course, specifically during the start of the project when it was “demolition” time and you think to yourself “god, what have we done!” But I was confident in the designer, the project team, and of course the Datai team and my trust was well rewarded.

***You worked closely with the original designer of the property, Didier Lefort, who was brought back to refresh the resort. How much of your own vision will we find in The Datai Langkawi today?***

Didier is an amazing designer and I am very honoured that he accepted to come back. I think the outcome of his design speaks for itself - Didier is a true artist, and makes his beautiful ideas come to life. However, the master planning, the new services, buildings, and room categories, as well as all sustainable components and concepts can be credited to the Datai team.

***How have the expectations of travellers changed during your career?***

That’s a question that could warrant a small book of its own! The fact that people in general are having children later in life when they have more disposable income, means the family segment has taken a much bigger role at luxury properties. Also,

people are now very well-travelled and therefore are in search of authentic experiences that really stand apart. Service expectations have also changed and today human interaction and service from the heart is valued over pure efficiency and discretion. The development of new technologies has also shaped the industry factor in significant ways. Our industry is like many others, changing and evolving constantly. However, in our world, a constant exists and that constant you’ll always have to do well - extremely well if you can. We are in the hospitality sector and therefore, a sense of welcome, a sense of service, great experiences, great food and beverages, and genuine smiles will always be a key to success.

***How does a general manager balance the requirements of administration and hospitality?***

As a general manager who’s almost always on the property, there is always a balance and the less administration you have to do, the more time you have for your team and guests. I try to spend as little time on administration as I can but I wear a double hat at the moment and am also working on other potential developments for our head office, so I find this balance a little more difficult.

***Dining is an important part of The Datai Langkawi experience; when you dine in a restaurant, what else do you look at besides the menu?***

I always notice the welcome, the level of lighting and the general set-up, the way the table is laid out, the attention to detail and alignment of the table setup. The way the team members are dressed and groomed, the way the menu is presented, the introduction of the waiter, and even their body posture are all important factors. I am very particular when it comes to both soft and hard touches surrounding the menu and the food itself.

***Protecting and sustaining the natural environment of The Datai Langkawi has always been close to your heart – what initiatives have you developed while GM and how do you maintain the balance between sustainability and a strong bottom line?***

Sustainability is at the heart of The Datai Langkawi; we have an incredible location and the rainforest has such amazing biodiversity so it’s clearly our duty to make sure we protect it as well as leave a legacy. We have therefore developed many aspects to protecting our immediate environment. First, we make sure



we do not pollute while achieving minimal impact thanks to the various programmes already put in place, including sending zero waste to landfills by this month, enforcing a no single-use plastic policy, producing our own water, using low intensity energy systems, and fully recycling our grey water. But we also participate actively in protecting our sea and wildlife, educating our team members and young students, reaching out to communities and inviting our guests to participate. Specific programmes have been put in place already and this year will see the fulfilment of all our efforts, so watch this space.

I also think somehow that there is confusion that sustainability costs money. Well, it may be the case initially but our board of directors and shareholders understand that today, sustainability is a responsibility and a necessary investment, and I am so glad to work for a company which believes so strongly in this. Sustainable also means financial sustainability and therefore, green initiatives, if they are done well, do produce long-term benefits in terms of reputation, cost savings, morale, and eventually, revenue. So really, a balance should easily be found.

***The Datai Langkawi has many regular guests, with some visiting the property multiple times a year. What is it that brings these travellers back time and time again in the face of stiff competition from across Asia?***

I suspect what draws these travellers back time and time again is our truly unique surroundings and biodiversity, coupled with one of the top beaches in the world (top 10 according to National Geographic) and more importantly, service from the heart from all of our team members. The fact that we have one of the lowest hotel employee turnovers in Malaysia, with most of our employees having been with us for more than 10 years, plays a big role. We know our regular guests very well and we have established strong bonds with them.

***We're sure you have moments when you see a guest having a fantastic time because of an environment you created; how does that feel as a general manager of a luxury hotel?***

Sheer pride and joy! I joined this industry for those moments and I certainly intend to stay in it for a while because of the emotions we manage to trigger.



***Now that the renovation is complete, what are your goals for the property in the next 12 months?***

The Datai Langkawi must regain its reputation as one of the top luxury resorts in the world and we will strive towards this goal. But we will do so in fulfilling what we believe in - unique nature experiences, genuine warm service, the protection of our immediate environment, the respect and well-being of our team members, and excellence in our core services (food and beverage, wellness, and accommodation). These are the pillars which I will work towards with the team for the next 12 months.



# Penang's Pint-Sized Paradise

Taman Negara Pulau Pinang may be tiny by national park standards but it offers visitors a chance to delve into a truly unique ecosystem only minutes from one of Malaysia's most popular destinations, discovers **Ronan O'Connell**.



*Sunset at Kerachut  
Beach, Penang  
National Park*

*(Clockwise from left)  
A Great White Egret;  
Penang National Park  
is famed for its diversity  
of flora and fauna; the  
park is filled with serene  
spaces including flowing  
waterfalls.*



I came here for quiet and solitude, yet I'm delighted by the noisy company I've made. Sitting on a bench beneath a dense forest canopy, I'm enjoying the short, whistle-like calls of two Asian fairy-bluebirds. One is perched to my left on the branch of a screw pine tree, the other to my right, somewhere amid the lush vegetation. As these birds communicate, I hear the sea lapping at the beach in front of me, and a creature rustling around in the bushes behind me, perhaps a squirrel, perhaps a civet cat, perhaps a monkey.

Just 25sqkm in size, Taman Negara Pulau Pinang is reputedly the world's smallest national park. Yet it boasts a huge variety of extraordinary flora and fauna, with more than 1,000 species of plants, and 271 species of wildlife. Tucked away in the north-west corner of Penang (and often referred to as Penang National Park), this is one of the most isolated and wildest parts of an otherwise busy tourist island.

As I wander down its sandy paths, flanked on one side by jungle and on the other by a pristine coastline, it is easy to forget I'm just 5km west of the bustling tourist area Batu Ferringhi. Boasting verdant forest, exotic wildlife, nice campsites, fine fishing spots,

several adventurous hiking trails, and some of the quietest beaches on the island, Penang National Park is a hidden gem.

Beyond its obvious beauty, this park also has a couple of unusual attractions. On the western edge of the park, about 3km walk from its main entrance, is one of Asia's few meromictic lakes. A seasonal lake which fills up only between May and September, it consists of two layers of water which do not mix – seawater on the top and colder freshwater on the bottom. This creates a rare situation







*(Clockwise from left)  
Take a different perspective  
from the park's canopy  
walk; a Brahminy kite on  
the hunt; a Long-tailed  
macaque; sunlight captures  
a spider in its web.*



where saltwater creatures are living alongside freshwater creatures, each within their own layer.

A short walk from this lake, on the white sand of Kerachut Beach, is a turtle sanctuary. Penang's Department of Fisheries manage a turtle conservation centre at this peaceful locale, where green sea turtles lay their eggs between April and August, and olive ridley turtles nest between September and February. Guests can visit this centre between 8am and 5pm to learn about the turtles and, if they're lucky, may even get to see some newly-hatched babies make for the safety of the water.

This pristine beach, which is also regularly visited by bottlenose dolphins and white-bellied sea eagles, is one of the best spots for swimming in Penang. Fringed by trees and boasting translucent and calm waters, Kerachut Beach is safe for swimmers of all ages and skill levels. An even

longer and quieter stretch of sand is just over 1km south of here at Teluk Kampi Beach and both of these two west-facing beaches are famous for their spectacular sunsets.

Because the two paths back to the park entrance are difficult to navigate at night, visitors who want to admire these sunsets should book in advance one of the camping sites at Teluk Kampi or Perachut beaches. By day, these same paths offer both adventure and the chance to commune with nature. Starting from the beachside and heading into the lush interior, walkers can tilt their heads to the sky to admire the likes of great egrets, stork-billed kingfishers, brahminty kite eagles, and kingfishers. Or they can lower their gaze and keep an eye out for pangolins, crabs, long-tailed macaques, dusky leaf monkeys, mouse deer and even wild cats.

I may have headed to Penang National Park seeking silence, but I left beguiled by its boisterous wildlife.



# ESTATE ESCAPE

With the relaunch of The Datai Langkawi comes the arrival of The Datai Estate Villa, a sumptuous and superbly private new retreat hidden away at the heart of the resort.

Designed as a miniature resort-within-a-resort and part of the newly-launched The Rainforest Collection, The Datai Langkawi's new The Datai Estate Villa offers families and friends travelling together a secluded and luxurious hideaway nestled deep within the 10-million-year-old rainforest.

The 3,500sqm villa, which can be booked as a whole estate or as two separate units — three-bedroom Seraya and two-bedroom Meranti — is just five minutes' walk from the beach and offers guests five interconnected guest rooms, including one indulgent

135sqm master bedroom. All guest rooms feature daybeds and private balconies. In addition, a guest room located beside the kitchen is ideally suited to travelling staff, nannies or security personnel.

“The Datai Estate villa is the ultimate accommodation of The Datai Langkawi, being a total private villa but part of the hotel primacies at short distance of the beach,” says the property's designer, architect Didier Lefort. “The villa has been designed to be split into two independent houses or to serve as one large retreat. The Datai Estate concept



has followed the original Datai DNA to be fully integrated to the hotel complex.”

Perfect for families looking to enjoy each other’s company in a private and luxurious setting, The Datai Estate Villa boasts a dedicated games room, as well as a pool table and stand-alone wet bar, ideal for evening cocktail gatherings. Dressed in warm timber and subtle lighting, the Estate features spacious living and dining areas that open onto a sun-kissed poolside patio wreathed by sun lounges, while guest rooms boast cathedral-like bathrooms and beds laid out in high thread-count linens.

With a stay at The Datai Estate Villa come additional perks to ensure your visit is like no other. In addition to a champagne-laced welcome, daily breakfast is included in the tariff and can be served at The Beach Club, The Dining Room or in-villa by a dedicated butler. Daily afternoon tea, in Malaysian or western style, is also served each day, and complements extensive in-villa dining menus that include full selections from the resort’s restaurants. Airport transfers using The Datai Langkawi’s luxurious fleet of vehicles is also included, as is consumption from the wet bar.

A stay at The Datai Estate Villa is all about indulgence and togetherness; have your butler organise a private chef for an intimate dinner party or poolside barbeque; opt for a treatment from The Spa’s extensive menu, conducted in the comfort of your villa; or enjoy a private guided exploration of the resort’s remarkable rainforest with one of the experienced guides from The Nature Centre.



# Mozzarella Magic

The last thing one might expect to find on the Malaysian island of Langkawi is fresh, homemade buffalo mozzarella cheese. Nevertheless, the Jewel of Kedah is in fact home to one of the most famous producers of the iconic cheese in the country, discovers **Vanessa Workman.**



Down a dirt lane wreathed by lush paddocks is one of Langkawi's best kept secrets, Buffalo Park opened in 2007 after several area farmers agreed to contribute use of their land to a unique government-initiated agro-tourism project. With 18 hectares of land and 100 water buffalo to work with, Langkawi's Buffalo Park went into the mozzarella cheese and dairy business, becoming a sustainable tourism venue in the process. Today, this curious experiment is visited by both Malaysian and foreign tourists, who come to learn how this Italian staple is produced, and to enjoy the Valley Farm-branded fresh dairy products which the park has become known for.

According to Suriati Hussein, who oversees Buffalo Park's sales and marketing, some visitors come to delve into Langkawi's unparalleled natural environment. Others come for the herds of buffalo, which visitors of all ages can pet and feed, or for the extensive range of dairy products, from yoghurts and cheeses to ice cream, made from the milk of these gentle beasts.

Seen one water buffalo, you've seen them all? Not at all. The commonly seen Swamp buffalo of Langkawi can often be observed grazing in paddy fields throughout the island. These beasts of burden live a relatively easy life, with much

of their traditional work load now replaced by modern machinery.

The Buffalo Park cooperative initially imported a higher milk-yielding Murrah breed of river buffalo from India. These imported buffaloes were then cross-bred with local breeds, and the result was a distinct looking water cow with black colouring and distinguishing crescent-shaped horns. They can live up to 17 years and adult bulls can top the scales at 550kg!

Guests visiting Buffalo Park will quickly realise how important the humble buffalo is. Water buffaloes are the second largest source of milk in the world and produce a milk that's much richer and which boasts less water than their bovine brethren, making it especially attractive to cheese makers. It's more economical too; in basic cheese production, 8kg of cow's milk is required to produce a mere kilogram of cheese. However, depending on its daily caloric intake, one water buffalo can produce 8-9kg of milk per day and only 5kg of buffalo milk is needed to produce a single kilogram of fresh mozzarella cheese.

Despite the efficient milk production of water buffalo, the mass-produced, firm mozzarella you'll find in the supermarket is typically made from cow's milk, which is more readily available,





and stretched by hand or machine into ropes of cheese. These ropes are then formed into balls and placed in cold water to maintain their shape.

"It's so easy, but also quite difficult to make it," says Suriati, as we watch a fresh ball of mozzarella being shaped to perfection. Including salting and packaging, this entire process is completed in less than eight hours. Nothing is wasted either; the whey liquid from the curd making process is also used by Buffalo Park to make delicious Valley Farm Ricotta Cheese.

Because it isn't aged like other cheeses, Buffalo Mozzarella has a short shelf life and despite modern refrigeration and transportation options, the cost of exportation makes it economically unviable. Fortunately, The Datai Langkawi's culinary team is the sole luxury resort on the island to use this local white gold in its dish, Caprese, served at The Beach Club for lunch and offered in the In-Room Dining menu.

leaving true buffalo mozzarella for the purists. Although Buffalo Park's mozzarella can also be made into a harder block-shape, it's the farm's soft mozzarella that connoisseurs can't get enough of. This cheesy delicacy is the moist and creamy end product of a very exacting process involving fresh buffalo milk and a perfectly maintained pH balance.

The basic process of making any mozzarella starts with raw milk, which is pasteurised and then coagulated to form a dairy product called curds. At Buffalo Park, fresh buffalo milk is pasteurised at temperatures between 72-90 degrees Celsius, before being cooled to 32 degrees Celsius.

The curdling of the milk is then created by adding a touch of rennet enzymes to every litre of milk. Rennet is an enzyme that lowers the pH of the milk and at Buffalo Park they make their own rennet from scratch. After 45 minutes of exposure, the milk reaches a pH level of 5.2 which is optimal.

With the pH process complete, the whey (the liquid by-product) is drained from the curds, which are then cut and soaked further until a smooth consistency is reached. It is at this part of the process that the curds are placed in hot water



*Resident  
Naturalist  
Jonathan on  
Ocean's Drifters  
nature activity*

# MAN & NATURE IN HARMONY

At the heart of  
The Datai Langkawi's  
recent reinvention, the  
brand new The Nature  
Centre allows guests to  
delve into the island's  
captivating ecosystems like  
never before.







*Photos of Ocean's Drifters  
courtesy of Eric Martin*

Anyone who's visited The Datai Langkawi before will know how remarkable its surrounding rainforest is, and how important its preservation is to the resort. Few resorts can boast such a spectacular setting, one backdropped by primordial mountains and wreathed by a pristine 10 million-year-old rainforest that laces its way through the resort, making the property a part of its ecosystem. This precious forest is home to a host of wildlife species, many of which are endemic, ranging from Dusky langurs and shy Sunda colugos to Tokay geckos, Asian small-clawed otters and, local celebrities, the Oriental-pied and Great Hornbill, to name just a few.

With such a remarkable setting comes responsibility, to preserve and to understand, and that's where the resort's new The Nature Centre comes in. While The Datai Langkawi has always had nature-based activities on offer, the newlybuilt centre elevates these experiences, adding in levels of research and interaction rarely seen in a resort.

Located in a shaded corner just off the beach, and constructed in sustainably-sourced timber, The Nature Centre's design takes its inspiration from the tribal bamboo longhouses of Borneo. Within, guests will find a treasure trove of information on the natural world of Langkawi and Malaysia, including a library of insightful

books on the ecosystems of the region and the breathtaking wildlife of the island. Guests will also discover the Tea Corner, where special curative brews using indigenous herbs and spices from the rainforest (many of which are also used in the spa), have been curated by recognised Malay traditional medicine guru the late Dr Abdul Ghani Hussain.

Documentaries are regularly screened in the centre's main lounge, while talks with the resident naturalist team, led by acclaimed environmentalist Irshad Mobarak, take place in a shaded outdoor pavilion, just steps away from the Andaman Sea. The pavilion is also the meeting place for the many guided walks on offer to guests at The Datai Langkawi.

The resort's ever-expanding and evolving series of nature excursions and wildlife tours offer guests a unique perspective on the natural environment. Excursions take guests off the beaten path and into the rainforest, specialising on different aspects of nature and on different ecosystems. For early birds, the Rainforest Awakening explores the forest as it wakes, with a special focus on resident bird, monkey and squirrel species, while the Rainforest Afterdark delves into the darkness in search of nocturnal creatures, including bats, flying squirrels and flying lemurs. The naturalist team also offer butterfly garden walks that search for the island's more than 500 species, while the Rimba Trail takes one through three different habitats, including a mangrove trail and 15m high canopy walk, with flora adapting to the unique environments.

Encounters with mother nature at The Datai Langkawi are not limited to terra firma, with specialist excursions also taking to the Andaman Sea to explore and learn of our conservation efforts for the coral and fish populations during snorkelling safaris and beachfront walks led by resident marine biologists Jonathan Chandrasakaran and Nicole Lim.

In addition to the opportunities guests have to explore this remarkable landscape, The Nature Centre also offers visiting scientists, naturalists and researchers a base from which they can study the rainforest and surrounding seas as part of a wider effort to safeguard these resources for generations to come.





*The Nature Centre*

*Participants at the Me.reka Space at the Publika Mall in Mont Kiara, Kuala Lumpur*



# Force for Change

A revolutionary Malaysian initiative is changing the way people look at what they discard, discovers **Skot Thayer**.



The problem of urban waste is not a new issue. As long as humans have been around, they've been making garbage. Throughout the world and especially in Southeast Asia, the issue of what to do with all that refuse is reaching epidemic proportions. Fortunately, a Malaysian collective of progressively minded individuals has been using their passion for design and art, as well as their hardcoded knowledge of science and engineering, to take bold steps to shift the way people think about what they throw away.

The Biji-Biji Initiative was founded in 2013 as a way to repurpose waste. In keeping with its name (biji means seed in Malay) the initiative hopes to plant seeds in the minds of the public that will grow leading to a better, cleaner, and more sustainable future.

Initially, the small team worked out of the apartment that many of the founders shared. Working where they lived leant a powerful impetus to the original works that has carried on through Biji-Biji's rapid growth phases.

"We'd drive a lorry around to collect the morning junk lying around the city and bring it back," says Gurpreet Singh, one of the core members of Biji-Biji and current CEO of the group's Me.reka Makerspace. Makerspaces are collaborative working spaces that give kids and adults access to the equipment required to create almost anything, as well as guidance and education to bring ideas into reality.

Me.reka, located in the heart of the affluent Mont Kiara neighbourhood's Publika shopping



mall in Kuala Lumpur, functions as an unconventional open-source education platform. The space is home to a woodworking shop, whirring bays of 3D printers, banks of high-powered design PCs with VR headsets, electronics workshops and myriad other workshops and stations. The space is one where anyone can come to make their idea a concrete reality. Literally. The latest addition is a cooking space, complete with wood-fired pizza oven where Biji-Biji will bring its philosophy of sustainability into the culinary world.

“One of our first mission statements was we wanted to change the way people look at waste. Now we want to reimagine consumption,” says Gurpreet.

Biji-Biji has brought that same approach to the fashion industry. As part of the Biji-Biji Design branch, the group is using repurposed materials to make fashionable bags and stylish clothes that are kinder not only to the Earth but to the people that make them as well. Some of the group’s bestsellers are the stylish and functional bags crafted from recycled seat belts and overstuffed kimonos from the Nakakoma Orimono production house in Japan. The initiative sees its sustainable and ethical standards - now seen as an ‘alternative’ by the mainstream - as critical for the fashion industry at large to adopt as the new norm.

Having utilised 4,521 wood pallets, 630 metres of seat belts, almost three tonnes of metal, and numerous other materials in their projects, Biji Biji has been drawing attention from many angles, including the new Pakatan Harapan government.

“There was a lot of stigma to overcome at the start,” says Gurpreet. Something so revolutionary impacting such a wide



range of markets didn’t fit within the status quo when the Biji-Biji Initiative first began in 2013, but it has gotten easier over the years. “Now it’s becoming a focal point. All these people preach sustainability, theoretically”, Gurpreet says, “and they come to us and see that they can create what they have imagined.”

Aside from the Me.reka educational space, the Biji-Biji Initiative has a factory in Klang where the team fabricates its large art installations and commissioned projects for large corporations and government outreach and education programmes.

As part of its social initiative, Biji-Biji has a detailed governance framework which outlines not only their environmental sustainability efforts but also guarantees fair pay for their workers - more than double the national minimum wage - making its ethical and humanitarian commitments equal to its environmental ones.





*Mandi Bunga or 'Flower Bath'; the traditional ritual of showering brides with water and flowers symbolising attention, affection and blessings.*



*Image courtesy Eric Martin*



*Spa Pavilion:  
The spa suite comes  
complete with outdoor  
jacuzzi, bath pool, indoor  
and outdoor showers,  
steam room and sauna.*

# A JOURNEY OF Healing

A rub, a tub, and a scrub out in the pristine rainforest is just the thing to reconnect with your inner self at The Datai Spa, discovers **Chin Mui Yoon.**

Hidden amidst a rainforest, perched above a forest-clad brook, backed by a majestic mountain range, and steps away from the ocean, The Datai Spa's location alone is therapeutic.

It is little wonder that guests book the three to five hour-long Seven Flowers and Seven Spices Rituals, treatments crafted using natural ingredients renowned for their healing properties and inspired by the spectacular natural surroundings of the resort. The luxurious full-body rituals enable guests to discover and indulge in the wondrous effects of nature's gifts. For instance, Sea Pearl & Seaweed Body Treatment is a unique spa experience inspired

by the Andaman Sea that utilises an aromatic blend of ingredients for both a seaweed body exfoliation and a pearl and rosehip facial, while the Mangrove treatment includes a highly detoxifying mangrove carbon body exfoliation. Guests also choose between a blend of pure essential oils extracted from seven flowers, including roses and ylang ylang, or from healing spices such as cinnamon, cardamom and pepper.

Beyond its breathtaking location, the spa takes its holistic objectives very seriously, with treatments based on *Ramuan*, the timeless Malay concept of wellness in which outer beauty is a reflection of inner health and harmony.

*Tea Pavilion; enjoy a tropical herbal elixir and the timeless tranquility of the rainforest before your treatment.*



The Datai Spa's concept is sustainable to its environment and the unique local culture. Elements are derived from the forest, mangroves, and ocean that encompass and extend into healing paths within the spa to create a sensorial journey. It is all about connecting you with nature, and also, with your own unique self.

While this unique wellness enclave, which was completely reimaged as part of The Datai Langkawi's recent renovation, is a thoroughly modern spa, the philosophies at its core are as ancient as its primordial surrounds. The spa team has developed The Datai Langkawi's very own collection of products called Akar, which means roots, because it dates back to a wellspring of centuries-old Malay wellness and health traditions, and the roots of the forest and island. These products are offered alongside international collections under the French Bastien Gonzalez podiatry treatments and Swiss skincare line Phyto 5.

The spa journey begins at a shaded riverside pavilion, where new arrivals are served with hot spiced tea and a cool towel. Every treatment takes place in a private villa that is encircled by the rainforest. The fan-cooled space opens out, and frames, a perfect view of the forest. The ambience is distinctly reminiscent of the Japanese concept of *wabi-sabi* that celebrates perfection found in simplicity. The largest villa includes a luxurious deep soaking bath tub, outdoor jacuzzi, steam room and sauna.

Once attired in a cotton sarong, The Datai Scentsation journey begins on the sunbathed wooden wrap-around verandah. My therapist Emy begins with a foot polish using a blend of finely ground rice and essential oils. Then she slowly stirs a ceramic urn filled with a delightful mix of fresh flowers, and scooping up the water with a coconut

ladle, proceeds to pour the water over seven parts of the body, starting with the ankles and ending with the head.

This little ritual is rooted in traditional Malay weddings, where brides are showered with attention, affection and blessings. Today, research has proven what our forefathers had already known, that flowers have their own natural frequencies that uplift the spirit.

Guests are then left to enjoy a heavenly bathtub filled with roses, chrysanthemums, orchids, ylang ylang and other seasonal flowers. Surrounded by such pretty things, the senses are awakened and lulled at the same time into a blissful, playful state, especially with a glass of chilled champagne, fresh coconut juice, and fruit.

An indulgent body scrub comes soon after, using the same blend of finely-ground black glutinous rice that leaves the skin feeling soft and smooth, along with a hair mask using the same blend of oils, which are renowned for their healing, moisture-locking properties.

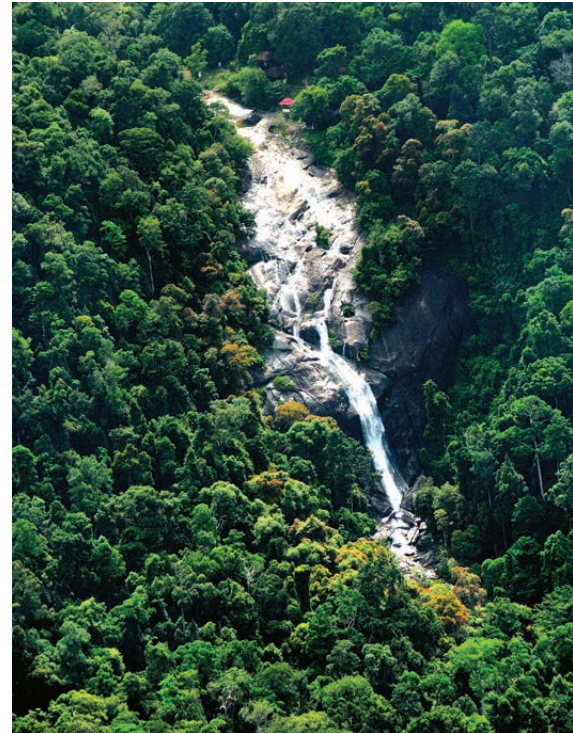
Finally, a massage follows, where Emy pounds, stretches and kneads away all tension and tightness in the muscles, using a blend of skill, experience, and instinct. It is at this point that guests usually fall fast asleep, succumbing to the pleasures by just letting go.

The journey comes to an end with a serving of hot spiced tea and traditional cake on the verandah. The Datai Scentsation is the name of the treatment, but the experience also celebrates nature out in this pristine wilderness. A deeper contemplation helps to understand the rainforest's constant cycle of regeneration, where the falling leaves feed nutrients to the soil as they decay, enabling trees to grow heavenward in this cycle of renewal, healing, and self-sustenance.

Little wonder that writers, poets, painters and musicians all seek the solitude of nature to delve deep, or refresh, their creative wellspring.



# Langkawi's Fertility Falls



Emerging in a rush from the depths of the rainforest, Langkawi's Seven Wells Waterfall isn't just one of Malaysia's most beautiful, but also one of its most revered.

The climb to the Seven Wells Waterfall, also known as Telaga Tujuh, isn't for the faint-hearted. Located on Langkawi's western headlands, the falls are named for the seven connected pools, which are fed by seven falls that tumble down the heavily forested flanks of the Machincang Mountains. However, the climb is a small price to pay for women hoping to discover the spirits which dwell in this most magical of settings.

Surrounded by tropical jungle in which macaques, giant squirrels and hornbills reside, the 90-metre-high Seven Wells Waterfall has had a place in Langkawi folklore for centuries. The pools, their rocky rims so polished by the rush of water that they were assumed the creation of the gods, were said to have been the bathing place of the fairies who dwelled in the rainforest and bathed in the starlight. Their magic lingered in the water, or so the legend goes, and women hoping to give birth would brave the steep climb to the pools and bath in the waters, hoping for a blessing.

Today the falls make for a challenging but rewarding day trip, although swimming is not encouraged due to safety reasons.

# Preserving the Rhythm of the Rainforest

**Chin Mui Yoon** meets the musician keeping the traditional music of the Borneo jungle alive.

*Photos courtesy of The Tuyang Initiative*

Deep within the emerald layers of the tropical rainforest comes the gentle, melodious tune of the sape, a sound that's both hauntingly-beautiful and mesmerising. Mathew Ngau Jau, 67, warmly welcomes visitors to his rustic Kenyah and Bidayuh-styled Tuyang Longhouse Homestay with bright eyes and a cheerful smile, continuing to gently pluck at the strings of his elegantly-carved instrument.

A true instrument of the rainforest, this boat-shaped wooden lute has long been used to facilitate traditional healing ceremonies conducted by the Orang Ulu - the Upriver People - the indigenous people of the Kenyah, Kayan, and Kelabit ethnic groups living in communal longhouses in central Borneo. Today, the sape is a much-loved instrument that's often featured at indigenous music festivals such as the annual Rainforest World Music Festival in Kuching, the vibrant capital city of Mathew's home state of Sarawak.

Recognised as a Malaysian Living National Heritage, Mathew is a native Kenyah Ngorek from Long Semiyang, in the upper reaches of the Baram River, a remote area near the Kalimantan border. He resides with his wife Candy Birong, a Bidayuh native, in Singai, Bau, an hour's drive from Kuching, where he teaches the sape to students from around the world.

"I truly enjoy teaching and passing down the tradition of the sape to anyone of any background and age who is interested to learn," says Mathew, "because how else do we ensure the survival of its unique music?"

He has seen a growing interest in the instrument and its timeless traditions. "I am encouraged to see the fascination the sape has created in different countries and among the various cultures. I've participated in cultural presentations







and exhibitions in the United States, Germany, France and Japan among others. Some students I met have even travelled all the way to find me and take classes with me [in Malaysia] so they could understand the context of this instrument. To them, the sape, as well as the bark paintings that I create, are a form of environmental, ethnic and heritage conservation.”

Teaching is something that comes easily to the former school teacher. Elderly tribal leaders passed down the art of the sape to Mathew in the early 1970s, and he soon started performing with the late Uncle Uchau Bilung as part of a local musical collective called Lan E Tuyang. A turning point came in 1977 when one of Mathew’s mentors, renowned Orang Ulu sape musician and artist Tusau Padan, passed away, and appeared that night in a dream, asking him to keep the legacy alive.

“The sape’s original role is to accompany the healing rituals of our tribes,” he explains. “Whenever someone is ill in the longhouse, the sape is played to soothe them. Today, such ceremonies are rare, and so the sape’s function has evolved into a more social setting. However, I continue to make the sape with the traditional three strings, instead of six strings like a modern guitar, to better preserve its distinctive sound.”

The approximately one-metre long instrument is hand carved from a single piece of fine grain wood harvested from the native kayu ba’ok tree, which is more easily available than the kayu adau, the traditional timber sourced from the banks of

the Baram river. The wood is then hollowed out, polished, and carved with the motifs and patterns of the Orang Ulu. An original handmade sape costs around RM1,000 or USD250 and requires several weeks to make.

Mathew is managed by The Tuyang Initiative, an award-winning social enterprise by father and daughter duo John Wan Usang and Juvita Tatan Wan that is dedicated to uplifting the economic status and skills of Borneo’s indigenous Dayak communities by promoting various cultural services and the sharing of knowledge.

Last year, Mathew was the star of a locally-produced film, *Iman Untuk Bulan*, directed by Dain Said for Malaysia Day, and has also played a part in a commercial created to celebrate the country’s diversity, which was praised for its use of multiple languages, including the native Kenyah dialect. One of Mathew’s four sons, Jackson Liang Ngau, is currently playing the sape in his own band, At Adau.

The music that Mathew writes and continues to play is about Orang Ulu folklore and traditions, and about his childhood growing up in a longhouse community that still exists within the rainforest, despite the march of modernisation. As long as there are still students willing to learn this instrument, the gentle music of the rainforest will continue to mesmerise all those who hear it, and in some ways, preserve its own living heritage.



# Making it Look Easy

One of golf's most influential players is also the creative visionary behind one of Asia's most spectacular golf courses, discovers **John Whitehouse.**

Situated on the magical island of Langkawi, nestled between ancient rainforests and the resplendent Andaman Sea, The Els Club – Teluk Datai has become one of Asia's premier golfing destinations, earning it a place on Golf Digest's prestigious Top 100 Courses list. While golfers can thank Mother Nature for the dramatic setting, the challenging fairways and postcard perfect greens of the majestic Langkawi course was the brainchild of iconic golfer Ernie Els.

Nicknamed "The Big Easy" for his imposing stature and effortless, fluid swing, Els is one of golf's greatest players. A former world number one, he has 70 professional career victories to his name – including the renowned US Open – and was inducted into the World Golf Hall of Fame in 2011. He has dominated the fairways from Europe and the US to Asia and the Middle East and continues to be a force to be reckoned with on the global PGA golf circuit.

A natural-born athlete, Els discovered his passion for golf during his early teens, at a time when he was already a world-class tennis player and avid fan of both cricket and rugby. He played his first professional golf round at just 16 and quickly earned both his Junior and full Springbok colours – a mark of national representation – soon after.

However, Els is much more than just a professional golfer. When he's not playing on the international tour, Els runs a charity supporting children with autism inspired by his son Ben, a foundation bolstering young athletic talent, a Stellenbosch winery renowned for its signature Cabernet Sauvignon, and several lifestyle companies.

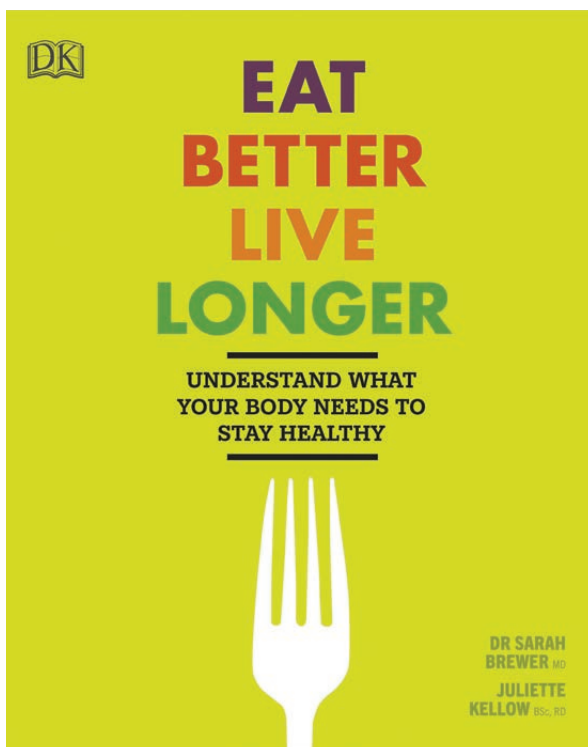
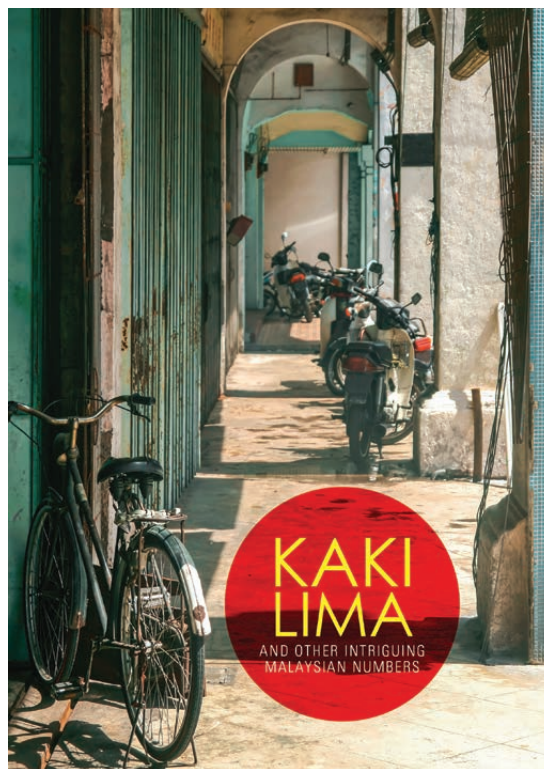
Els has also created the highly-successful design consultancy that helped shape his eponymously-named courses in Langkawi – which Els described as "without doubt, the most spectacular golf course setting I have had the pleasure of working on" – and Malaysia's Desaru Coast to international acclaim. The golfer continues to visit Malaysia regularly to play in major events like at the recent Maybank Championship.

**Kaki Lima  
and Other Intriguing  
Malaysian Numbers**

*Authors: Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia  
(National Library of Malaysia)*

*RM32.90*

Numbers may not mean much by themselves but compile the stories of a nation by the numbers and you have an alluring and enticing look into the formation of nationhood. *Kaki Lima and Other Intriguing Malaysian Numbers* is a fascinating compilation of Malaysian facts tied to the numbers one to 60, which in turn were chosen to recognise the years since Malaysia became an independent nation when the book was published. This unique work also offers the outsiders and Malaysians alike an opportunity to understand the diversity and complexity of the nation through the numbers that have forged a nation.



**Eat Better, Live Longer:  
Understand What Your  
Body Needs to Stay Healthy**

*Authors: Juliette Kellow and Sarah Brewer*  
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Ever wondered what's really going on in your body as you age? Can you really eat to beat cancer or prevent heart disease? These questions and more are answered in *Eat Better, Live Longer*. As the title suggests, this book will help to future-proof your life using a superfood transformation of your diet that's delivered through 10 simple but meaningful adaptations you can make over a four-week eating plan (including over 110 nutrient-packed recipes) that can help to reduce your risk of certain diseases and lessen the effects of others.

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*Emerald Peacock  
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