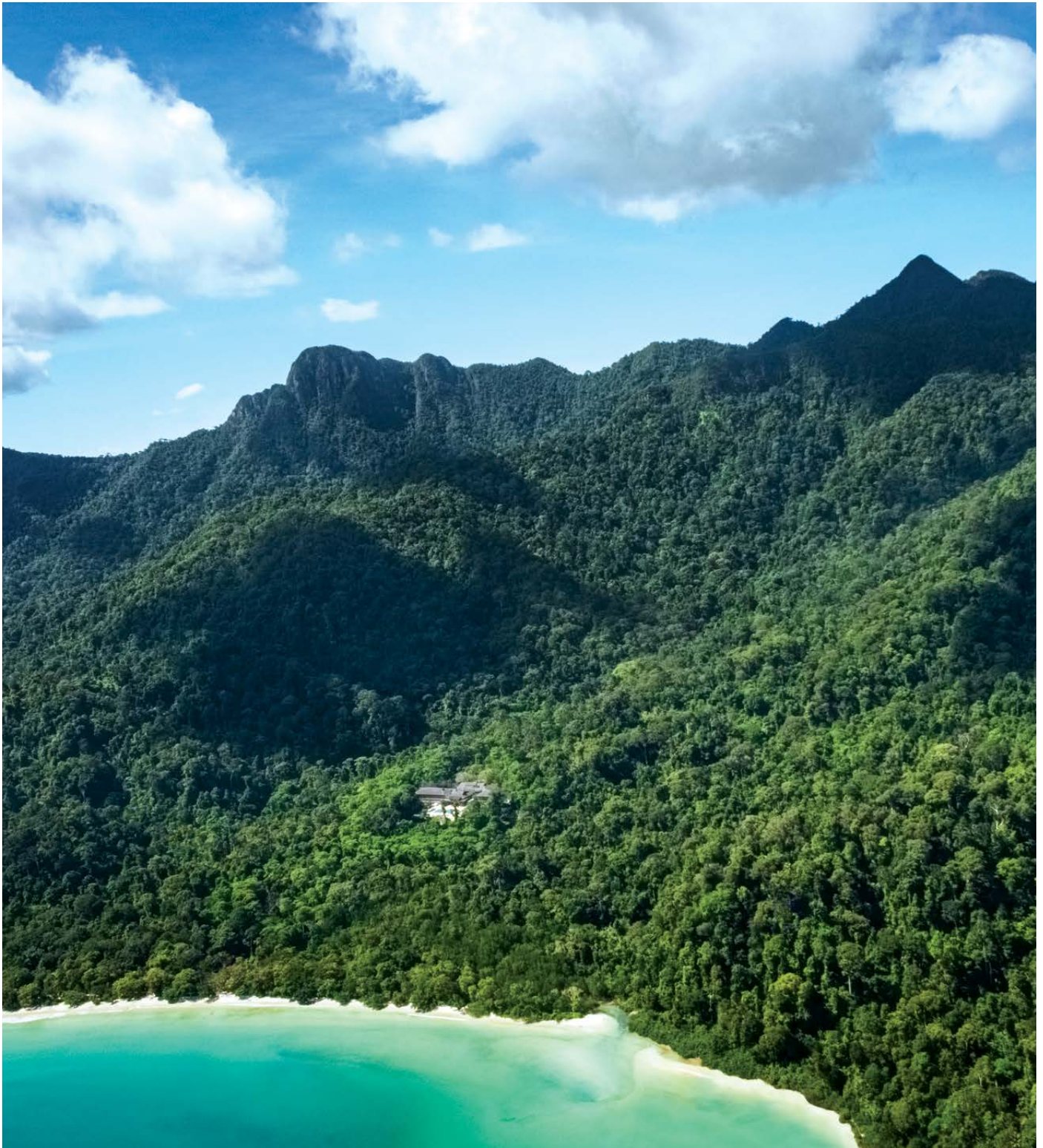


ISSUE #3

# IKHILAS

THE MAGAZINE OF THE DATAI LANGKAWI



THE  
PERANAKAN  
ENIGMA

AUTHOR IN  
RESIDENCE  
MAX HASTINGS

BUKIT PITON  
DEFENDERS  
OF THE JUNGLE

THE  
RAINFOREST  
MANDI EMBUN

# WHAT A YEAR IT'S BEEN!



Welcome back to The Datai Langkawi and to the end of a momentous year in the history of our resort. It's been an exciting year since The Datai Langkawi reopened after its extensive renovation at the hands of acclaimed architect Dedier Lefort, and it has been a joy to welcome so many of our loyal returning guests, as well as first-timers, to the new look of The Datai. It seems like it was only yesterday that I was wandering the then-closed resort, construction crew hard at work on our new Rainforest Villas and The Nature Centre, and to now see couples and families once again enjoying sunset on our beach or exploring the property with the naturalist team, and to welcome back so many familiar faces, is brilliant.

Of course the work behind the scenes to prepare and transform the resort has been going on much longer than a year, and I'd like to take this opportunity to not only thank our supportive guests but also everyone in the team, who has poured their love and passion into the project to revitalise The Datai Langkawi and to prepare the resort for its next chapter as a luxury benchmark in the region. I believe that everyone is as thrilled as I am with the results.

And we're not the only ones; The Datai Langkawi was recently included in TIME Magazine's list of the World's Greatest Places, as well as Condé Nast Traveler's 2019 Hot List, and was awarded the top spot in the Grand Redesigns category of National Geographic Traveler's Big Sleep Awards (you can read about more of our recent accolades on page 11).

The adventure is far from over; we continue to innovate and improve, both behind the scenes with our permaculture garden, our sustainability initiatives, and the launch of The Datai Pledge, our conservation and community foundation, and with new experiences for guests, including an exciting new Chef Series, where talents from the world's leading kitchens will visit The Datai Langkawi for special dinners and workshops.

Whether this is your first visit or your most recent, we welcome you to The Datai Langkawi, our special enclave where man and nature live in harmony.



Arnaud Girodon  
General Manager



# IKHLAS

## MAGAZINE

GENERAL MANAGER  
Arnaud Girodon

DIRECTOR OF SALES AND MARKETING  
Celine Maginel

PUBLIC RELATIONS AND  
MARKETING CONSULTANT  
Michelle Gomez

MANAGING EDITOR  
Nick Walton  
nickwalton@artemiscomms.com

ART DIRECTOR  
Don Pierre Riosa  
driosa84@gmail.com

MARKETING AND ADVERTISING  
sales@dataihotels.com



### THE DATAI

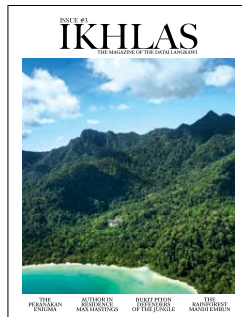
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## Contributors



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.



People, places, and culture remain a constant source of inspiration and wonder for Kuala Lumpur based writer **Chin Mui Yoon**, who has 15 years of experience as a journalist. She currently writes freelance and produces short films and commercials, with downtime dedicated to travelling, reading and playing Scrabble.



**Marco Ferrarese** has lived in Penang with his Malaysian photographer wife Kit Yeng Chan since 2009, from where he covers Malaysia, India and the larger Southeast Asian region for a number of international publications. After earning a PdD in subcultural anthropology from Monach University Malaysia, he followed in the footsteps of Marco Polo and hitchhiked from Singapore to Italy across Silk Road routes and the Middle East.



**Sir Max Hastings**, our Author in Residence, is the author of 27 books translated into many languages, of which the most recent, Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy, was Britain's best-selling history book of 2018. A former war correspondent, mostly for BBC TV, between 1996 and 2002 he was editor of the Daily Telegraph, and then Evening Standard.



Resident Naturalist **Irshad Mobarak** has been a keen naturalist since his childhood. Inspired by the lives and deeds of pioneer naturalists and explorers such as the legendary Alfred Russel Wallace and the renowned botanist, writer and environmental campaigner Professor David Bellamy, Irshad left his banking career and walked down the path of natural history. At The Datai he oversees all activities of The Nature Centre.



Always ready for her next adventure, **Gayatri Bhaumik** took her first flight at 10 days old and hasn't looked back since. After long stints in Bangkok, Melbourne and London, she's now based in Hong Kong when she isn't globetrotting. She contributes travel and lifestyle content to titles like Destination Deluxe, The Loop HK, and RBS ContentLive.



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## ■ Ironman Malaysia Langkawi

October 26, 2019

### LANGKAWI

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The scenic island of Langkawi will once again host the Ironman Malaysia race, giving participants the chance to pair their exertions with a little cultural immersion. Athletes from around the world will converge on the island to run, bike and swim through demanding hilly terrain, traditional villages, mangroves and tropical rainforests.

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## ■ Deepavali

October 27-28, 2019

### MALAYSIA

---

Traditionally celebrated by the local Hindu community to commemorate the return of Lord Rama and his wife, Sita, to Ayodhya after a 14-year exile, the Festival of Lights is a time for all races and religions in Malaysia to get together with open houses, fireworks and a feast of Indian delicacies. As part of the celebrations, Hindu households will spring clean their homes and light oil lamps.

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## ■ Moto GP Malaysia

November 1-3, 2019

### KUALA LUMPUR

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In this high-octane event, the world's best motorcycle racers go head to head on one of the most challenging courses in Southeast Asia. Since 1999, the Sepang International Circuit has hosted the Malaysian leg of this race; the 5.5km track with its 15 corners is made even more challenging by Malaysia's intense heat and humidity. This year, punters will be looking to see if Honda's Marc Marquez can take pole position once again.



■ **Sarawak Regatta**

November 1-3, 2019  
**KUCHING, SARAWAK**

Taking place along the Sarawak River, this regatta sees 14 types of boats compete in 24 qualifiers and 12 final races for the grand prize of the River King Trophy and a cash prize of RM10,000. The annual event brings together government departments, the private sector, and participants from neighbouring countries. The regatta's history began in 1872 and was intended to stop wars between local tribes.



■ **Museum Night Trails**

November 1-9, 2019  
**KUALA LUMPUR**

Launched just last year, this nocturnal event was designed to give locals and tourists a different perspective on Malaysia's capital city. For just a few days, visitors will be able to access Kuala Lumpur's top museums after dark, giving them the chance to explore the collections of the National Museum, the Textile Museum, the Royal Museum and more, in a new light.



■ **Melaka River International Festival**

November 30 – December 10, 2019  
**MELAKA RIVERFRONT**

Initially designed to promote Melaka as a tourist destination, this all-encompassing festival brings together all the cultures and arts of the region's different ethnic groups and showcases the natural beauty and attractions of this UNESCO-recognised World Heritage City. Visitors will be able to engage in the local culture with a showcase of more than 50 activities, including dragon boat racing and a float procession.



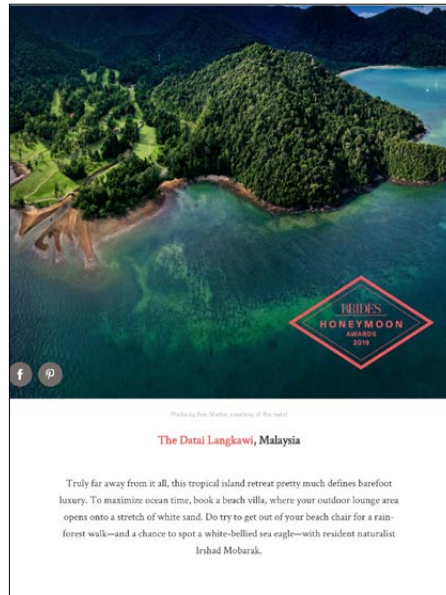






# GLOBAL RECOGNITION

The Datai Langkawi has been topping the luxury lists of the world's leading travel titles since its reopening. Here are some of the recent accolades.



We all know how beautiful The Datai Langkawi is but it's always nice to be recognised internationally. TIME Magazine recently included The Datai Langkawi as part of its annual list of the World's Greatest Places, a collection of groundbreaking hotels, restaurants and attractions chosen for their quality, originality, innovation, sustainability and influence by editors and correspondents from around the world.

Since the completion of its extensive renovation, which saw the refurbishment of guest rooms and public spaces by award-winning designer Didier Lefort, as well as the addition of new Rainforest Pool Villas, a stunning The Datai Estate Villa, a new-look spa and a new Nature Centre, The Datai Langkawi has regularly been recognised. National Geographic Traveller included the resort in its Big Sleep Awards 2019 list, under the 'Grand Redesigns' category, with the travel magazine commending the resort for its mesmerising natural surrounds and visionary architecture.

Following the 12-month renovation, The Datai Langkawi was also included in Condé Nast Traveler's 2019 Hot List, an annual awards list that recognises the best newly opened and renovated properties around the world. The Datai Langkawi was named the United Kingdom edition's Best New Hotel in Malaysia as part of the Best New Hotels in the World list, and among the Best New Hotels in Asia & The Indian Ocean by Conde Nast US, as well as making the American magazine's

Best Resorts in the World list, part of its 2019 Readers' Choice Awards.

In keeping with its romantic persona, The Datai Langkawi has also made the Brides Honeymoon Awards 2019's Most Romantic Spots to Travel selection, an annual list of inspiring properties from around the world, under its Best Honeymoon Beach Resorts list. Other recent accolades include the top Malaysian spot of the Top 25 Luxury Hotels component of TripAdvisor Traveller's Choice Awards 2019; and the Best Hospitality Newcomer for a reopened resort from Connoisseur Circle Magazine's Connoisseur Circle Hospitality Awards, presented at ITB Berlin 2019, while The Dining Room was recently bestowed the Award of Excellence from the US edition of Wine Spectator.

"The awards are a testament to the hard work and talent of an amazing team," says general manager Arnaud Girodon. "Even before the resort reopened during the year-long renovation, there was a great sense of unity and purpose in creating an exceptional guest experience though the resort's Datai Investing in People (DIP) education programme for staff, working together with the 'original' interior designer and architect Didier Lefort for the complete refurbishment especially the new The Datai Estate Villa and The Nature Centre, as well as to stay true to our DNA of respecting nature, local culture and traditions."



# The Peranakan Enigma

A true blend of two ethnicities and cultures, the Malaysian Peranakans are a people who created a world all of their own, discovers **Gayatri Bhaumik.**



Malaysia has always been a land of diverse cultures, ethnicities, languages and religions come together. Perhaps it was this unique melting-pot environment that allowed the Peranakan culture to truly come into its own as a community that blended the ethnicity, traditions and cuisine of two distinct cultures to create a third, wholly separate identity.

Peranakans are descended from southern Chinese settlers who arrived in British Malaya (now Malaysia and Singapore) between the 15th and 17th centuries. Many of these traders began assimilating into the local communities by taking on their customs, and sometimes marrying into local families. In Malaysia, Peranakans usually refer to themselves as Baba Nyonya – the two words being the Malay equivalent of men and women respectively. Significantly, the word Peranakan means descendent in Malay, and does not connote any ethnicity on its own. Those with Chinese ancestry would correctly be referred to as Peranakan Tionghoa, or Cina.

From left:  
*Modern jewellery, inspired by Peranakan design, can be found in The Boutique; the intricate fabrics and patterns of Peranakan culture have been lovingly preserved and are now being incorporated into modern interpretations.*











From top:  
 Classic Peranakan dish Ayam Kapitan, braised organic chicken curry and potato, served at The Gulai House; Royal Selangor incorporated Peranakan motifs into its Straits Expression collection, available at The Boutique.

The local Peranakan culture is a unique blend of Chinese ethnicities and religions and the Malay language and culture. The most evident expression of Peranakan culture is its food. Often referred to as Nyonya cuisine, these dishes combine Chinese ingredients and wok cooking techniques with a heavy infusion of Malaysian spices. The result is a rich, tangy and aromatic cuisine where coconut milk, tamarind, lemongrass and pandan leaves are used unsparingly. Dishes can vary depending on their originating region; wildly popular laksa, for example, comes in a hot and sour version in Penang, called asam laksa, while in southern Malaysia, the dish is given a creamier spin with coconut milk.

Even in language, Peranakans have traditionally set themselves apart with a creole version of Malay that incorporates many words from the Chinese Hokkien dialect. Called Baba Malay – or Bahasa Melayu Baba, locally – the language has largely fallen out of favour. While it is still used among the older generation, young Peranakans now use English as their main language.

When it comes to religion, most Peranakan families adhere to Chinese belief systems such as Taoism, Confucianism and Chinese Buddhism. Chinese festivals, such as Lunar New Year and the Lantern Festival, are still a big part of the Peranakan culture. However, many have adopted a strain of Christianity in their religion, and some families have

remained staunchly Catholic as a result of European influences in the region.

Another distinctive part of the traditional Peranakan culture is the clothing, particularly that of Nyonyas. Inspired by the Malay Baju Kurung, the Baju Panjang is a women's outfit made up of a long-sleeved blouse and batik sarong (skirt) held together with three gilt brooches. It's usually worn with handmade Peranakan beaded slippers called Kasot Manek.

Of course, the best way to understand Peranakan culture is to experience it first-hand. Nyonya cuisine is an important part of Malaysia's varied culinary landscape, so there are plenty of restaurants to indulge in the spicy, flavourful dishes. The country also has plenty of museums dedicated to preserving Peranakan heritage, and these are a great place to get some insight – it's worth having a look at the Baba Nyonya Heritage Museum in Malacca and the Pinang Peranakan Mansion in Penang.

You'll also find the influence of Peranakan culture on the works of iconic Malaysian brand Royal Selangor, which has incorporated ceplok patterns, Peranakan-styled floral motifs, into its Straits Expression pewter collection, a homage to Peranakan tradition porcelain or Nyonya ware, items from which are available for purchase in The Boutique.







# Mandi Embun

The rainforest surrounding The Datai Langkawi isn't just beautiful, it's also good for you, says Resident Naturalist **Irshad Mobarak.**

For centuries, the Malays have been practising a natural system of wellness and longevity called Mandi Embun and Mandi Maal Hayat. It entails an early morning leisurely walk into the rainforest, followed by immersing oneself in the waters of a jungle stream. With the passage of time and the pressures of modern society, this ancient practice was almost forgotten until a famous Malay warrior from the mid-1880s was discovered very much alive in December 1969. After a stringent verification process by the authorities, they concluded that he was the warrior Mat Kilau, now at the ripe old age of 119 years old! After the fanfare of his rediscovery had quietened down, it was found that he was an avid practitioner of Mandi Embun and Mandi Maal Hayat along with a moderate diet that was rich in organic herbs.

It could be suggested that this odd discovery and the wellness concept behind it has very little science to back it up. However, today, research from Japan shows measurable health benefits of spending time in the forest. Studies suggest a reduction in levels of the stress hormone cortisol, a moderation of blood pressure levels and a substantial increase in the levels of Natural Killer (NK) cells, which are essential in the body's defence against cancer cells. Studies by Dr Qing Li of Nippon Medical College suggest that trees release phytoncides into the air, which are natural chemicals that trees produce to protect themselves from being attacked by viruses and plant-

eating insects. When we humans breathe in these phytoncides, our body naturally increases its own levels of NK cells to protect us in kind. In addition, research indicates forest therapy helps elevate one's mood, positively improves memory, increases cognitive ability by clearing the mind of distractions, enhances creativity, improves attention capacity, and increases our ability to focus.

Langkawi's Machincang Formation is surrounded by many beautiful trees and herbs. It is a slightly hilly terrain with numerous water sources that traverse its beautiful landscape. On The Datai Langkawi's Mandi Embun and Mandi Maal Hayat nature walk, your naturalist guide will lead you on a gentle sensory walk through these ancient hills and valleys covered in lush tropical trees. The walk ends at the edge of a forest stream where a Malay wellness therapist will lead participants through some light breathing and stretching practices before we immerse ourselves in the cooling waters of The Datai's very own natural, crystal-clear jungle stream.

Join us for the Mandi Embun and Mandi Maal Hayat activity and surrender to the gentle healing benefits of forest therapy while immersing all five of your senses as you swim and play in its inviting and refreshing waters. There are benches, decks and quiet niches where you can sit, relax, meditate or even take a short nap in the bosom of nature's healing care, while totally immersing yourself in the restorative and healing rainforest and waters of Teluk Datai.





# One Noodle TO RULE THEM ALL

An edible expression of Malaysia's cultural melting pot, Mee Mamak is a beloved national dish that can be enjoyed at any time of day, says **Gayatri Bhaumik**.



## THE DISH

Food is a way of life in Malaysia, so much so that its presence is notable at more than just mealtimes. In a country where food is never an afterthought, even the simplest dishes are given a proudly local spin, and the humble Mee Mamak is just one of these.

Popular throughout Malaysia, Mee Mamak is a local variation of mee goreng – literally, fried noodles (in Malay) – beloved throughout Southeast Asia. The dish is inspired by a classic Chinese stir-fried noodle dish that was brought to the region by Chinese immigrants in the early 20th century. In fact, it's said that the first purveyors of Mee Mamak in Malaysia were Penang's Bangkok Lane Mee Goreng, which started selling its fare around this time.

Traditionally, mee goreng is made by stir-frying yellow wheat noodles with shallots, onions, garlic, soy sauce, eggs, vegetables and some type of protein. Over time, the dish was imbued with local ingredients and spices to create different styles of mee goreng across different countries.

In Malaysia, Mee Mamak was created by Indian Muslim immigrants who added their own spices and twists to mee goreng. Taking its cues from the traditional recipe,

Mee Mamak gets an added dose of flavour from chilli, curry spice, tomato sauce and potatoes. Catering to the 21st century need for instant gratification, Mee Mamak also comes in a variation that uses Maggi instant noodles instead of the original handmade yellow noodles.

One thing you won't get in any version of Mee Mamak, though, is pork. Since "mamak" refers to Malaysians of southern Indian origin – usually Tamil Muslims – beef and chicken are the only meats you'll find in this iconic dish.

Like every other mee goreng dish in Southeast Asia, Mee Mamak is widely available at hawker centres – unfussy local food courts – throughout Malaysia. But if you really want to experience the dish at its best head for the mamak stalls and restaurants that specialise in this cuisine.

At The Datai Langkawi you can sample this local favourite for lunch at The Beach Club, where it's done with egg noodles, wok-fried chicken, bean curd, potatoes, choy sum and tomato. In The Dining Room (lunch menu), a slightly different version replaces potato and choy sum with prawns and bean sprouts.



*Teh Tarik  
ice cream  
paired with  
Tapai Pulut*

Another iconic Malaysian treat is Teh Tarik or 'pulled tea', a popular hot milk tea commonly found in hawker centres across the country. The name comes from its preparation, which involves strong black tea and condensed milk being combined as the drink is poured from vessel to vessel, often with a touch of theatrics thrown in. At The Gulai House, Chef Adee has adapted this sweet drink into a tempting ice cream dessert.



# DATAI DISTILLING

Blending traditional ingredients with accents of Asia,  
The Datai Langkawi's new house gin captures the  
essence of Southeast Asia to perfection..



Gin's renaissance shows no hints of slowing, as innovative distillers around the world create thoughtful and inspiring spirits that offer a true sense of place. Riding this wave of global gin popularity, The Datai Langkawi's culinary and mixology teams, led by Director of Food & Beverage Indra Mohan, have come together to create a signature gin and vodka designed that capture the spirit of Langkawi to perfection.

"Many guests at The Datai Langkawi love gin, which is why the Lobby Lounge has such an extensive collection from around the world," says Indra. "Guests want something different, something that offers a sense of place, and as the resort is well known for having a very hands-on approach when it comes to the dishes and beverages we offer, we decided to extend this to our own gin and vodka creations, spirits which capture the elegance and luxury of The Datai Langkawi in every drop thanks to the use of locally available botanicals."

The Datai's gin has a herbaceous and spicy foundation that's uplifted by the

addition of citrus, namely sweet orange and grapefruit peel, as well as coriander. The gin's herbaceousness comes from the addition of wormwood, an ingredient better known for its use in absinthe, and gentian, a root acclaimed for centuries for its medicinal properties. To this base, the team has added flavours of the maritime spice route, including cinnamon and nutmeg, which leave a pleasant warmth to the spirit.

The gin is harmonised with a touch of Florentine iris root, also known as orris, a plant native to Italy that's famed for its violet aroma. The team naturally macerate these hand-selected botanicals in a base spirit before distillation to ensure a smooth, warm spirit filled with complex flavours and aromas. Once the heart – the very best part of the distillate – is collected, demineralised water is added to sooth the spirit and prepare it for bottling.

Indra suggests enjoying The Datai's gin with Fentimans Connoisseurs Tonic Water and slices of fresh lime and green bell pepper.





# PASSION PROJECT

Produced for one of the United Kingdom's leading restaurants, Champagne Michel Roux The Waterside Inn Brut is one of the most special wines available at The Datai Langkawi.

In France, champagne house Philipponnat has been producing exclusive wines since 1522. For over 30 years chef-patron Michel Roux oversaw The Waterside Inn, an exclusive French restaurant set in the bucolic English countryside outside Maidenhead. So, it makes sense that when Roux wanted to produce a rare champagne for his legendary restaurant, he asked Philipponnat to take the lead.

The result is Champagne Michel Roux The Waterside Inn Brut, produced at Philipponnat's winery in Ay, in the heart of France's Champagne region. Created from chardonnay, pinot noir, and pinot blanc grapes, this is a creamy, beautifully blended wine that offers plenty of light, bright fruit notes. Champagne Michel Roux The Waterside Inn Brut is an easy-drinking wine that can be taken from aperitifs through dinner. The versatile drop pairs well with pork, rich seafood

like salmon and tuna, an array of shellfish, and mild, soft cheese.

The champagne is so limited that only three vintages have been produced. It's also nearly impossible to find anywhere except in Bray, the picturesque English village where The Waterside Inn is located. That is, unless you happen to be feasting at The Dining Room at The Datai Langkawi. The resort is one of the few places where this exclusive champagne has a permanent place on the drinks list.

With lobster, crab, langoustine, prawns and a wealth of other seafood and light meats on the menu at The Drawing Room, it's no surprise that Champagne Michel Roux The Waterside Inn Brut was picked to join the carefully curated collection of wines at the hotel's extensive wine cellar, where each coveted bottle's label proudly exhibits the resort name.



# For Art's Sake

The Datai Langkawi's Artist in Residence series continues to introduce local talents with regular exhibitions held at The Atelier.



## Sister Act

Talent often runs in the family. This is certainly the case for Ranong and Ladia Peru, two sisters who will showcase their skills at The Atelier at The Datai Langkawi.

Ranong, founder of Ran & Non Creations, is an ethnic Lun Bawang from the northwestern highlands of Borneo, and specialises in stunning handcrafted beaded accessories. Born in the remote village of Bakelalan, she trains women in creative modern handicrafts, empowering communities and giving women a livelihood that supplements the household income. Her passion for intricately designed 3-D necklaces, bracelets, earrings, brooches, corsages and anklets has turned a hobby into a business with international orders, with her exquisitely handmade pieces. Ranong's workshops, conducted in collaboration with government ministries, community colleges, ethnic associations and NGOs in both remote rural communities and urban centres focus on empowering women, particularly single

mothers. Ranong has also turned her artistic eye to handcrafted crochet, knitting, tatting and leatherwork and was recently invited to be a part of the ASEAN Fashion Designers Showcase, as a Fashion Ambassador for Malaysia.

Ranong is joined at The Datai Langkawi by her sister Ladia (fondly known as Lydia), a talented artisan and Creative Director behind the handicraft brand Naru. Her line of handmade crochet products includes contemporary earrings, necklaces, chokers, corsages, brooches, stuffed animal-shaped dolls, baby products, and women's swimwear. A former civil servant, Ladia is also known for her hand-sewn bags made from Pua Kumbu, a traditional patterned multicoloured ceremonial cotton cloth used by the Iban people of her native Sarawak. Ladia's handcrafted crochet products and fashion accessories are frequently showcased in fashion and lifestyle exhibitions and expositions in Kuching and Kuala Lumpur and has developed a thriving online business that reaches across the globe.



From Top Left:  
*Ladia Peru; an intricately designed necklace by Ran & Non Creations; Ranong Peru; Ramtiniwaiti Ramlee; Derek Sui; a handbag in songket fabric.*



traditional fabric made from silk or cotton and threaded with gold or silver that creates a mesmerising shimmering effect. After learning her art as a weaver at Yayasan Tuanku Nur Zahirah, a non-profit cultural arts organisation in Kuala Lumpur, and Tanoti, a boutique songket atelier and community of master weavers and designers in Sarawak, Ramtiniwaiti started her own songket weaving programme. She now teaches this timeless practice at CENTEXS, the Centre of Technical Excellence in Sarawak, and has participated in national events including the Sarawakiana Carnival 2016, the Sarawak Craft Carnival 2017, and National Craft Day 2018.



### The Language of Art

Another artisan who will be showcasing his talents at The Atelier is Derek Sui. Deaf and mute, the young artist will visit The Datai Langkawi to present his breathtakingly lifelike paintings and hand-painted animated postcards that capture the colour and diversity of his native Sarawak, with a particular focus on its endemic wildlife, including orangutans and hornbills. A member of the Sarawak Society for the Deaf, Derek is a graduate in graphic design and animation, and often travels to exhibitions with his mother Nelly, who acts as a sign language translator.

### Wonder Weaver

Traditional weaver Ramtiniwaiti Ramlee is gifted with the art of traditional Malay weaving known as songket. Hailing from Gedong in Sarawak, Ramtiniwaiti has more than 12 years experience crafting songket, an intricate and beautiful





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# CAPTURING MAGIC ON FILM



We speak with Chilean director **Juan Olea**, who recently created a groundbreaking new film that captures the beauty of The Datai Langkawi like never before.

What first inspired you to become a film-maker?

When I was a child, I made lots of homemade short films with a VHS camera. When I got out of school, I lasted only two years studying industrial engineering before quitting to pursue my passion for filmmaking.

Coming from Chile, what were your initial impressions of The Datai Langkawi?

Before I got to The Datai, I saw a lot of pictures and videos, so I thought I had a sense of the resort. However, as soon as I arrived my perceptions totally changed. The place was magical; being surrounded

by all that nature and wildlife was quite overwhelming. Visiting the hotel gave me a completely new perspective of what makes The Datai so amazing; from the food and the ocean to the lovely staff.

You've taken an inspiring step away from conventional hotel videos, with a story theme that lingers behind the imagery. What was the motivation behind this move and how do you create a narrative in these instances?

My passion in filmmaking lies in storytelling. Hotels are all about experiences and the best way of expressing those experiences is by telling stories. I wanted this film to be like watching

“  
When I left The Datai,  
my first feeling was “I have to  
come back”. I know that every  
time it’s going to be a new  
experience, a new adventure.  
This story is just one of a million  
stories that can be told  
in this magical place.

”

a movie. General manager Arnaud Girodon and I wanted to tell the experience of a couple, something inspiring and profound. After my first visit to The Datai I was completely overwhelmed. I wrote the whole script on the plane home!

How important is capturing the emotion of the viewer in what is effectively commercial work like The Datai Langkawi film?

Nice images capture your attention. Emotions capture your heart and make films memorable.

What were the aspects of The Datai Langkawi that most inspired your work?

I kind of narrated my own experience in this film. I narrated exactly my entrance, by the lily pond, and walking to the end of the bar with the amazing view of the bay. The food sequence, walking around with resident naturalist Irshad Mobarak, swimming in the ocean after sunset, the unique sounds of the rainforest - experiencing the hotel previous to writing the story was essential.

You’re also an accomplished musician and compose original scores for your works, including for The Datai Langkawi. Can you tell us about this process and the music you created for The Datai’s film?

It was quite a challenge, because music’s purpose in these kinds of films is to guide you through all the emotions quickly, condensed into only four minutes. My music design for this film was like this (spoiler alert): at first we have the opening, which I designed like a movie trailer, with suspense and mystery setting up the plot. Then we have an ‘epic’ moment but with an exotic twist showing us the whole resort area, before we move on to the ‘dream remembering’ sequence, which resembles something like



Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata. Next we have that waltz to show our characters interact romantically and playfully with each other; falling in love. Then we have the suspense moment, in which the violin runs freely because we don’t know what’s going to happen with them, followed by the grand finale with the twist in the story. As you can see music is telling a deeper story.

What do you hope The Datai Langkawi film inspires in viewers?

When I left The Datai, my first feeling was “I have to come back”. I know that every time it’s going to be a new experience, a new adventure. This story is just one of a million stories that can be told in this magical place.





# PROSE IN PARADISE

The working lives of writers are essentially lonely. Hour after hour and week after week, we sit before screens dreaming of another world - whatever world we are seeking to tell a tale about. My father, who was a novelist and journalist, used to talk to me as a teenager about what he called “the challenge of a blank sheet of paper”. I did not then understand what he meant. Today, I jolly well do, though the paper of his day has become a screen. Meeting the challenge is always exciting, but also endlessly daunting.

## AUTHOR IN RESIDENCE

Nothing matters more, as one taps the keys, than the tranquillity and beauty of the setting in which one writes. Our home in England is pretty good at providing that: I gaze from my study window upon an enchanting garden, with the countryside of West Berkshire beyond. The Datai Langkawi is better, however, because no telephone rings; there is no shopping to be done nor dishes to be washed; no dinner parties to dress up for - instead sublime beauty; wonderful solicitude from staff who are almost always smiling. The only distractions are our greedy thoughts about the next drink or meal.

I have written large parts of four books in the same beach house above the shore of Datai Bay. Each summer, I ask my wife Penny: "is there anywhere else in the world to which you would sooner go in February?" She knows that I am serious - if she voted for the Pacific, Caribbean or South Africa, we would change course. Instead, however, she always ends up saying: "where else will be nicer than The Datai?" Both of us love walking the beach; eating especially in the Thai restaurant; taking trips on the hotel's delightful boat, the company of its German captain alone worth the outing; massages in the spa; the flicker of countless candles in the warm night air; the fabulous silence.

We often talk destinations with Victoria Mather, a friend who was the legendary travel

editor of *Vanity Fair*. She said again this spring about The Datai Langkawi: "you won't find anywhere that works as well for you". Scores of couples and families have been making the same choice year after year, indeed for much longer than us.

Having been fortunate enough to stay at some of the greatest hotels in the world, I ask myself: what is it that The Datai Langkawi does as well or better than any other? First, it has a heart and a soul, as many resorts do not, however luxurious they may be. This must owe a lot to Arnaud Girodon, the general manager, whom Penny and I shamelessly love. He has all the French virtues, notable among them wit, charm, a natural gift for hospitality, and a droll Gallic sense of fun.

Then there is that peerless view of the hills of Thai islands across the water - I doubt that we are the only guests who on misty mornings think of Bali Hai, in South Pacific. After a delicious breakfast and swim, Penny goes walking, invariably returning to report a sighting of something fun or wonderful, a sea otter or exotic bird, a butterfly or exotic fellow-guest.

I sit in our room before my laptop, on a high office chair provided by the butler because I am absurdly tall, thinking about long-ago campaigns in faraway France, the Pacific, most recently Vietnam and Operation Chastise, the RAF's







World War II raid on Germany's dams, breached by the 'bouncing bombs' invented by brilliant engineer Barnes Wallis. Occasionally my reveries and typing are interrupted by the chattering of monkeys, or by a glimpse of paddleboarders sliding more or less elegantly over the wavelets inshore.

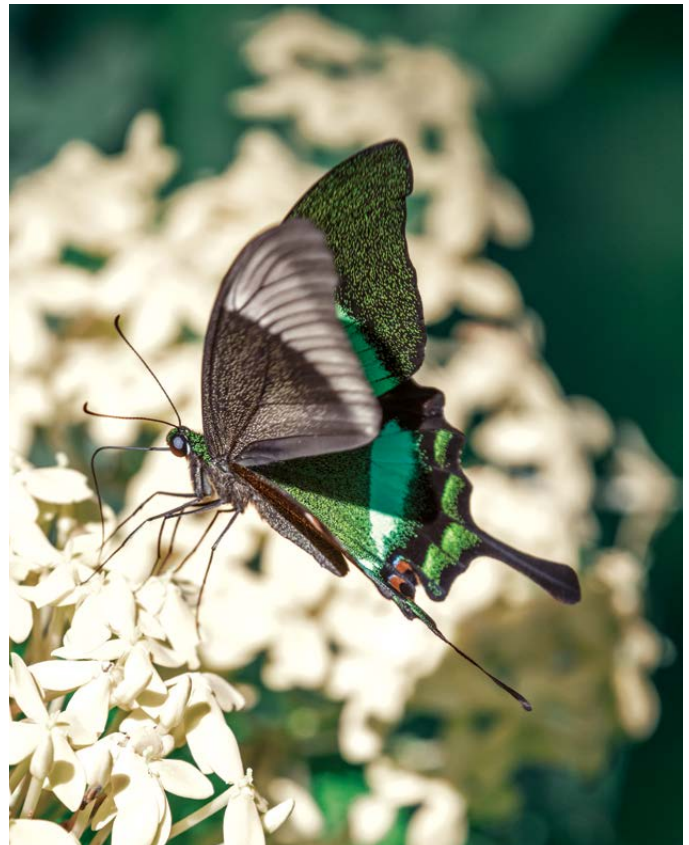
There is usually a half-hour break to swim in the sea, wearing a snorkel mask: although fish are not that plentiful nor remarkable, each one gives pleasure as it glides or darts between coral outcrops. Maybe once a trip, we head up to the golf course. I would qualify for an Olympic team of the world's worst golfers, but The Els Club greensward is so beautiful, especially its holes beside the sea, that it never seems to matter how many balls one whacks into the rainforest that crowds around the fairways.

Many Datai guests are madly sociable because they have developed holiday friendships over years. It is a joy to see a lot of young on the beach, especially during school holidays: they mingle with our own grandchildren when they come, digging up some of the best sand in the hemisphere. We are pretty anti-social, I am afraid. To earn my living, to meet implacable deadlines for delivery of the books, I need to write frenetically, and to pass each day in a universe of thoughts, ideas, chapter headings, and paragraphs that I can share only with supremely long-suffering Penny.

The climate of Langkawi seems to us near-perfect, especially in February. It is hot enough, but never too hot; there are people on the beach, but never too many. The rainforest walk, and especially the high platforms, have added a new interest. The night air seduces us for strolls along the sand in which we find romance, even in our seventies. By day and night, from the shoreline or high on the hill around the reception area, glorious views of the sea are always with us.

It is almost a paradox, that we fly home after three weeks during which I have written maybe 50,000 words, having also achieved a precious peace and serenity. We do not merely like The Datai Langkawi, we love it, as do hundreds of equally devoted fellow-guests, most of whom are not even writing books. It offers a combination of privacy, comfort and exotic beauty that make our long, long journeys from the other side of the world seem worth every hour and every mile.

*Sir Max Hastings is the author of 27 books translated into many languages, of which the most recent 'Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy' was Britain's best-selling history book of 2018. A former war correspondent, mostly for BBC TV, between 1996 and 2002 he was editor of the Daily Telegraph, then Evening Standard.*





# THE FRENCH CONNECTION

Having worked alongside acclaimed Michelin-starred chefs and at leading restaurants in London, Paris and Los Angeles, French chef **Jérôme Voltat** has joined The Datai Langkawi as Executive Sous Chef, bringing with him a passion for Franco precision and a desire to please palates with sustainable, irresistible cuisine.

What drew you to a career in the kitchen?

I've always been fascinated by food. One of my earliest memories was the scent of sugar as it caramelises, and the delicate balance of simmering spices. While some grew up reading comic books, I would purchase culinary magazines. Intrigued by these pictures of beautiful dishes, it became the obvious choice for me to start an apprenticeship and create a career for myself in this industry.

What do you consider the standout moment of your cooking career?

There are too many to name just one. What I'm most grateful for is the privilege of having worked with some of the best chefs in the world, including Eric Fréchon, Raymond Blanc, Michel Roux Jr., and Anne-Sophie Pic. They have collectively taught me about the commitment, passion and discipline needed to work in this industry.

How would you describe your culinary philosophy?

My philosophy is simple: I work tirelessly and am always inspired to try new things.

For me, the greatest reward is when the dishes I create bring pleasure to the table. I am not interested in having my name above the door.

You've worked around the world, from the Maldives and France to London and Los Angeles. How has this influenced your culinary style?

I've always had a thirst for learning about new produce, new ingredients and new techniques. While my culinary style is primarily French and European, travelling extensively has helped shape my creative process and made me appreciate exotic or obscure flavours and how they can be paired to produce something incredible.

The Datai Langkawi has created an on-site sustainable food production system. How does this change the way you develop dishes and menus?

The Datai is truly a market leader in sustainability. We're still fine-tuning the concept, but our goal is to design signature dishes made entirely from fresh vegetables, fruits and herbs grown in the resort's permaculture garden.



# THE LAD FROM LANCASHIRE



A recent chef at The Datai Langkawi's relaunched Chef Series, **Nelly Robinson** is a creative culinary powerhouse, with a determination that belies his youth, discovers **Gayatri Bhaumik**.

There aren't many teenagers who could withstand the high-pressure environment of a Michelin-starred kitchen but that's exactly what Nelly Robinson did when he began his career at 14 years old, as a dishwasher at Northcote Manor in Lancashire, England. He's since spoken candidly about what he experienced when hot tempers flared in these intense surrounds, but clearly wasn't deterred; Robinson began a full-time apprenticeship in this kitchen at 15-years-old, and this baptism of fire gave him the tools he needed to step into his first head chef role at 22 years old, at another Lancashire country hotel, Stanley House.

Wanting to broaden his horizons, Robinson then worked his way around the United Kingdom, and later through Sweden and Hong Kong. While refining his skills and improving his repertoire, Robinson developed his own approach to food, stamping his personality on the dishes he created.

At 29 years old, Robinson decided to strike out on his own and opened *nel.* in Sydney, Australia. Offering a relaxed yet sophisticated dining experience, *nel.* takes full advantage of high-quality produce from around the world, with seasonal degustation menus that change every few months.

Each of *nel.*'s degustation menus follows a specific theme. Previous themes have included 'Australia', and 'Land + Sea', but in his most recent reveal, Robinson returned to his English roots, with a 'British Pub Classic' menu, including classics like Potted Salmon, Steak and Chips, and Lemon Meringue Pie – staples that can be found in many countryside pubs across Britain.

Through his dedication to his craft Robinson has become one of Australia's top chefs, earning him a number of accolades and a loyal international and local following. In fact, he's made such an impression on the global culinary scene that he's frequently invited to



bring his talents to special occasions, from competing at the Taste of Abu Dhabi World's 'Best Dish' competition, to making a guest chef appearance at Vinum restaurant in the Maldives, and designing a menu for Queen Elizabeth II's 90th birthday celebrations at the British High Commission in Canberra, Australia.

Over the years, Robinson and *nel.* have also been recognised with several awards. The restaurant won the 'People's Choice' award by Time Out Magazine in 2016, the 'Certificate of Excellence 2016' by TripAdvisor, with Nelly notably nominated for the 'Gault & Millau' (Chef of the Year) award both in 2016 and 2017.

Robinson recently brought his culinary talents to The Datai Langkawi as part of the ongoing signature Chef Series. Over three days, he dished up a five-course meal at The Dining Room; hosted a cooking demonstration by the beach; and taught a class at the property's dedicated cooking school, The Dapur. To complement Robinson's cuisine, Sidewood Wines offered a wine-pairing experience selected from the company's Adelaide Hills winery.



# SHOWCASING MALAYSIA ONE SIP AT A TIME



At The Beach Bar, mixologist Osman Hanif captures the essence of Malaysian culture and tradition with his innovative cocktails.

## OUR PEOPLE

As the sun begins to set behind the mountains of Langkawi, and guests stroll on the beach or take up perches at The Beach Bar, bartender Osman Hanif shakes up a storm, creating imaginative and intriguing cocktails laced with curious ingredients.

“We try to use as many ingredients produced at The Datai Langkawi as possible, and many of these ingredients, like lemongrass, turmeric and kaffir lime leaves, have great childhood memories for Malaysians,” says Osman as he pours a martini into a chilled glass, garnishing it with a waxy betel nut leaf. “This was a very common medicinal herb in Asia, but no one really appreciates it these days,” he says referring to the dark green leaf, which glides atop his latest creation. “I’m trying to bring ingredients like betel nut leaves back by adding them to our drinks. In this case it’s like a vesper martini, Asian style.”

Shy, ceaselessly smiling and clearly passionate about both mixology and Malaysia, Osman has helped spearhead The Beach Bar’s mixology programme, increasingly incorporating traditional Malaysian ingredients - some revered for their medicinal virtues - into classic concoctions. “If you go to the villages, the elders will know about these ingredients, but if you go to town their benefits have been lost on younger generations,” says the bartender as he welcomes more guests to the bar counter.

While he likes making classic cocktails at The Beach Bar, from pina colodas and margaritas to the ever-popular lime cooler created by Director of Food & Beverage Indra Mohan (LangKooler),

Osman, who has worked in Thailand and Singapore and trained under award-winning Kuala Lumpur mixologist Shawn Chong at his innovative bar Omakase, is always experimenting with ingredients that are closer to home. These include everything from *gulu melaka* or coconut palm sugar, and *cermai* or Malay gooseberry, to preserved plums, which have been a part of Chinese culinary culture for over 1,000 years.

“When we were kids, dried sour plums (*asam boi*) were the best. We didn’t have money for things like chocolate but for 10 cents, you could get three of these tiny plums, so all Malaysians know them from their childhood.”

His favourite new creation is a combination of galangal, salt, lemongrass, and single malt whisky. “It’s a weird combination but I think it works. It’s quite nostalgic for me as it tastes like a tonic my grandmother used to make in the summer that’s sweet and salty and spicy all at once.” Previous experiments have included the use of Bandung or rose syrup with evaporated milk in a creative take on popular street snack *ice kacang*, and even a drink inspired by *nasi lemak* or coconut rice. He’s also keen to incorporate the medicinal tea selection at The Nature Centre into cooling cocktails and mocktails.

“We try to make drinks with a story behind them,” says Osman. “This means guests are learning about the destination while they sip. I want guests to understand our culture, the way we lived before and now, and to showcase our ingredients through each drink. I want guests to taste a cocktail and say, ‘this is Malaysia, this is The Datai.’”



From Left:  
LangKooler;  
Osman's  
turmeric-laced  
Datai Bay cocktail





# OLD TOWN NO MORE

Nestled on a plateau dominated by towering limestone peaks, Ipoh is a quiet, welcoming place that has always resisted change. However, new generations are infusing this foodie capital with eclectic flare, discovers  
**Nick Walton.**

The café is packed to the rafters with trendy young things sipping espresso and digging into towering hamburgers. Punters at tables made from recycled doors are bathed in mid-afternoon sunshine thanks to skylights in the ceiling, which accentuate the tones of the colourful murals decorating the walls of the time-weathered shophouse. A tree grows from the floor, its branches outstretched to the light. We could be in Singapore, Hong Kong, or even trendy Bangkok, but we're not. This is the new face of the sleepy, unassuming but utterly endearing Malaysian mountain town of Ipoh.

Ipoh's Old Town has been going through a metamorphosis over the past few years. The traditional two-storey shophouses of this quiet but historic quarter have been lovingly reincarnated by a generation of Ipohans who have returned home after studying abroad or in Kuala Lumpur, bringing back with them the cool charm and culinary

innovations of the big city. This might not be surprising to outsiders – many cities go through such regenerations, and many traditional enclaves across Asia have been gentrified, from Hong Kong's Kennedy Town to Singapore's Chinatown – but it's that it's happening in typically stoic Ipoh, a city that's built a culture out of resisting change, that's most surprising.

Ipoh is a living time capsule; with a rich Chinese tradition, a food culture renowned across Asia, and a proud sense of place, the tiny plateau city, ringed by towering limestone peaks, has always shunned the trends so eagerly adopted in Malacca or Penang, preferring instead to be a bastion of tradition in a world obsessed with change. Until now.

"Ipoh has always been a city that's quite happy staying the way it has always been, and that's great when it comes to preserving our heritage, especially our food culture," says Ipoh-born foodie Maggie Chooi. "But this







resistance to change isn't sustainable; the next generation of Ipohans need to create their own take on those traditions, as we see in the cool cafes and boutiques of Old Town."

Much of the new face of Ipoh Old Town is centred around Burps and Giggles, a café-cum-restaurant housed in a former dressmaker's shophouse. Created by former finance and logistics professional Dexter Song and his mother Julie Song, who cut her teeth on equally racy restaurants Indulgence (you'll see some of their favourite pastries and desserts on the menu) and Allegra, Burps & Giggles isn't just a new kid on the block enjoying the limelight; it's a unique blend of eye-catching industrial-chic décor and innovative, often eclectic comfort food that would win favour anywhere in Asia. Think the likes of mu shu lamb man tao-style pancakes; lamb sausages with pesto egg custard and spicy beans; towering signature Wagyu burgers; and soul-soothingly-good canelés from the café counter. A sign above says, "Good Food, Like Good Things, Takes Time."

Just steps from Burps & Giggles is Plan B Café, a sun-kissed, airy glass-encased space with industrial chic décor







and al fresco seating, and where the red velvet cake is already reaching legendary status. Durbar was once a favourite with Ipoh's tin mining clans and has been lovingly restored into a turn of the Victorian styled restaurant and café, while The Market Place Waffle Bar & Café offers both savoury and sweet versions of its fluffy namesake.

But these hipster havens are just the beginning of Old Town's new persona. Step through the old shophouses or amble down the narrow alleyways, with their fun murals and leafy canopy, and enter an ancient courtyard that's half alfresco dining and half vintage garage sale. Here you'll find the remains of a beautiful neo-classical building that now houses Sekeping Kong Heng, a cool, ten-room boutique hotel. Much of the original brick building, with its distinctive colonial touch,

has been preserved, with guests offered direct access into the shaded courtyard behind.

To one side of the courtyard, opposite a bench where old men escape the afternoon heat, the Ipoh Craft Nerds have set up shop, selling homemade arts and crafts on stands and old kitchen tables. A gleaming brass gramophone stands atop a tower of old cook books. Above is a collection of chipped but beautifully decorated Chinese tea sets from the 1930s.

"It's amazing to see such a transformation, and to play a role in it," says Alex, owner of Legenda, a cool local fashion boutique housed in a crumbling former kitchen. A banyan tree grows from within the middle of the boutique and 1960s Cantonese pop plays on an old record player. The whole space is flooded with light from cracked skylights high above.









Outside in the shade of the courtyard, there is a more modern touch to the time-worn space. In a pint-sized, glass-encased barber shop, seventy-five-year-old Thirunavu Karusu al Krishnan, known by generations of customers to his Star Air-Conditioned Hair Dressing Salon, now part of the Burp & Giggles café, as Uncle Thiru, continues to cut hair with patience and dexterity. As he gives me a trim, much to the interest of café goers beyond the glass façade, he points to a black and white photo on the wall. “I was just 13 when I started at the barber shop, sweeping up hair and helping out.” The shop closed in 2011 when the shophouses were redeveloped, but instead of retiring, he incorporated his barber’s chair into the new vibe, setting up the New Star Salon at the centre of the courtyard. “It’s good to see some vitality in the Old Town. It’s good to see people enjoying, young people. Everyone makes their own future.”

Freshly timed, I head beyond the cool cafes to Lorong Panglima, otherwise known as Concubine Lane, a long, narrow lane of shophouses, some beautifully preserved, some worn and abandoned. An empty lot beyond a rusty Chinese moon door is filled with tall green grass. Yet change is afoot here too; Tiny Art Space is a fascinating little boutique owned by Yu Zhen that specialises in arts and crafts made in Ipoh and its surrounding state of Perak. “It’s important to foster the local arts movements, not just try to make money,” says Zhen, standing in the tiny space that’s part art gallery and part craft shop. “We need to ensure that local artists have a chance to show their talents, especially here in Ipoh.”









# DEFENDERS OF THE JUNGLE

In offbeat Lahad Datu, the Bukit Piton reforestation project is giving a new home to endangered orangutans, discovers  
**Marco Ferrarese.**

We freeze and fall into silence as the pickup slows to a crawl, approaching as close as possible to a particularly low-hanging branch. For sure, we're probably now the most annoying of intruders, but as the wild orangutan rolls placidly onto his side, locking his gaze onto ours as he slowly rises to sit inside his nest and observe us, we also feel the mesmerising power of this wild exchange with nature.

This is all in a day's work at Bukit Piton, a former World Wildlife Fund-protected Class 1 forest reserve in Sabah's southwest, set in the Ulu Segama-Malua forest, a 45-minute-drive from Lahad Datu. In the past year, the area has emerged as an eco-alternative to expensive Mount Kinabalu hikes and packed river cruises on the nearby Kinabatangan River.

"We are working on this project since 2016," says Swiss-born Simon Werren, a pioneer of Lahad Datu's eco-tourism scene. His travel company and upscale namesake bed and breakfast Bike and Tours, which he runs with his Malaysian wife Itisha Ismail, pair luxury with sustainable adventure.

In turn, they use tourism revenue to fund the ambitious Bukit Piton reforestation plan, aimed at creating an improved habitat for the area's large population of wild orangutans. There are more than a hundred apes in Bukit Piton, stranded here by encroaching palm oil plantations and the fast-flowing Segama River, which, running to the south of the reserve, prevents the animals from migrating to the nearby Danum Valley forest, a potentially perfect habitat.





“In Bukit Piton, we work on a five-year plan. We don’t just plant the saplings and leave: we keep taking care of the new trees for a minimum of five years, and after that, we hope that the young forest can maintain itself,” explains Werren. The five-year support benchmark was suggested by Werren’s local partner, Dr. Teoh from Kontraktor Malaysia, an experienced planter and forester who has worked on and off in Bukit Piton for the past 20 years. “We are halfway through with the first section”, says Teoh, “and we will only know if five years is enough in another two years.”

Bukit Piton is one of Werren’s dearest projects, and one which he supports via Swiss-based NGO Brothers Cycling, which he started with his brother Philipp as they completed an ambitious cycling odyssey from Switzerland to South Africa in 2010. “The NGO helps us get donations and membership fees,

but we also rely on tourism activities, as well as sponsorship from Bike and Tours,” explains Werren.

Tourists visit for two days and one night, and the first thing they do is plant a few trees. The rest of the time is spent exploring the reserve by pickup truck, with very high chances to not only experience multiple wild orangutan sightings, but also to spot wild Borneo pygmy elephants, slow lorises, monitor lizards, and an array of tropical birds. At night, after dinner and educational talks on orangutan conservation, guests set out again to experience the jungle under the cover of darkness, before bunking down in a wooden forest longhouse amidst the sound of screeching insects.

The team’s latest achievement in Bukit Piton is the planting of over 1,200 new fig trees. “They’re a great food source for orangutans, hornbills, and many other animals living in the reserve,” says Werren, who is positioning the figs between existing patches of forest to enrich and alternate the food source of the animals. “We are trying hard to support this region in the hope that it remains a first class reserve,” he concludes. “Hopefully, it will regrow even healthier in the future.”









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NILS HENKEL  
(Germany)

—  
*January*

2 Michelin-starred  
Restaurant Schwarzenstein Nils Henkel, 2017

—  
VALENTINO UGOLINI  
(Italy)

—  
*February*

1 Michelin-starred  
CIAK In The Kitchen, 2015

—  
JOHNSON WONG  
(Malaysia)

—  
*June*

A member of the  
Secret Table community

—  
LARS VAN GALEN  
(Netherlands)

—  
*August*

1 Michelin-starred  
't Lansink, 2013

—  
TOM AIKENS  
(U.K.)

—  
*December*

2 Michelin-starred  
Tom Aikens Restaurant, 2008

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# FOR THE LOVE OF VIRGIN COCONUT OIL

One Langkawi local has turned her passion for the health benefits of virgin coconut oil into a growing grassroots business, discovers **Vanessa Workman.**

Think tropical islands and images of swaying palms and coconut drinks typically come to mind. And thankfully Langkawi has no shortage of palm trees, especially the oh-so-sustainable coconut palm. This iconic symbol of island life is a resource in so many ways as the entire tree is completely usable and has provided food and building materials to generations of Langkawi islanders. In fact, coconut is a mainstay in Malaysian kitchens, with coconut milk and shredded coconut meat found in many Malaysian recipes. However, coconuts are also prized for their oil, which can be used for everything from cooking to wellness.

There are two types of coconut oil; coconut cooking oil and virgin coconut oil. Normal coconut cooking oil is made by heating coconut milk, a process in which the oil from the coconut meat rises to the top for collection. The more mature the coconut is, the more oil the coconut meat contains. The oil from this process is brownish in colour and is known as *tahi minyak*. In some countries it will often be mixed with other oils, such as safflower or corn oil and passed off as 'pure' coconut oil.

However, in recent years the dynamic benefits of virgin coconut oil have been realised. Virgin coconut oil has been discovered to contain 50 per cent lauric acid and has scientifically proven health and healing benefits.

One Langkawi local has embraced the everyday use of coconut oil beyond the kitchen. Datai Valley Virgin Coconut Oil has taken coconut oil from a hobby to a well-known family business. Mardiana Shaari has been experimenting with virgin







”  
 Virgin coconut oil has been  
 discovered to contain  
 50 percent lauric acid and has  
 scientifically proven health and  
 healing benefits.  
 ”

coconut oil for over five years, having once witnessed its positive affect on a family member’s nasty skin burn. She now uses Datai Valley Virgin Coconut Oil daily on her own skin as well as a dietary supplement and has perfected her craft to a revenue making passion, producing and marketing her oil in elegant, up market gift shops or selling it direct as mail order.

“Virgin coconut oil has done a lot of good for me. Today, I look so different from several years ago, so I’m a good testament to its many benefits,” Mardiana exclaims.

The human body turns lauric acid into monolaurin; an important chemical found in both coconut oil and human breast milk. Monolaurin is used to build cells and body tissue as well as help kill harmful pathogens like bacteria, fungus and viruses. The purer the coconut oil, the greater the nutritional and health benefits.

Although a time-consuming process, virgin coconut oil is very easy to make once you have the formula down pat. Mardiana has met that goal and then some.

The basic ingredient is, of course, coconut milk. It takes about 20 coconuts to extract enough milk to eventually make about one litre of coconut oil. In the early days Mardiana grated and hand-pressed all those coconuts herself, but to keep up with supply and demand, she now buys her coconut milk from a trusted local supplier who specialises in mature coconuts.

Mixing two to four bags of coconut milk with water, Mardiana then allows the mixture to ferment for several days. The fermenting process brings the

coconut oil to the top where it is then removed and filtered three times. The slow drip filter system used is time consuming yet yields the purest of virgin coconut oil, with the end product fragrant and clear as water.

The entire process from milk to bottled final product takes about one week. No heat is used and the nutritional value and health benefits far outweigh any mass-produced coconut oil. “The most important thing for me”, Mardiana explains, “is that it is natural and pure.”

Although not a plant that’s indigenous to Langkawi, the fast-growing coconut palm and its continuous year-round yield provides a sustainable supply of fruit for island locals. As long as the trees are left to naturally mature, age and die, new coconut saplings will grow, resulting in an endless supply. This also ensures that Langkawi-made virgin coconut oil will be available for the health and beauty needs of future generations.

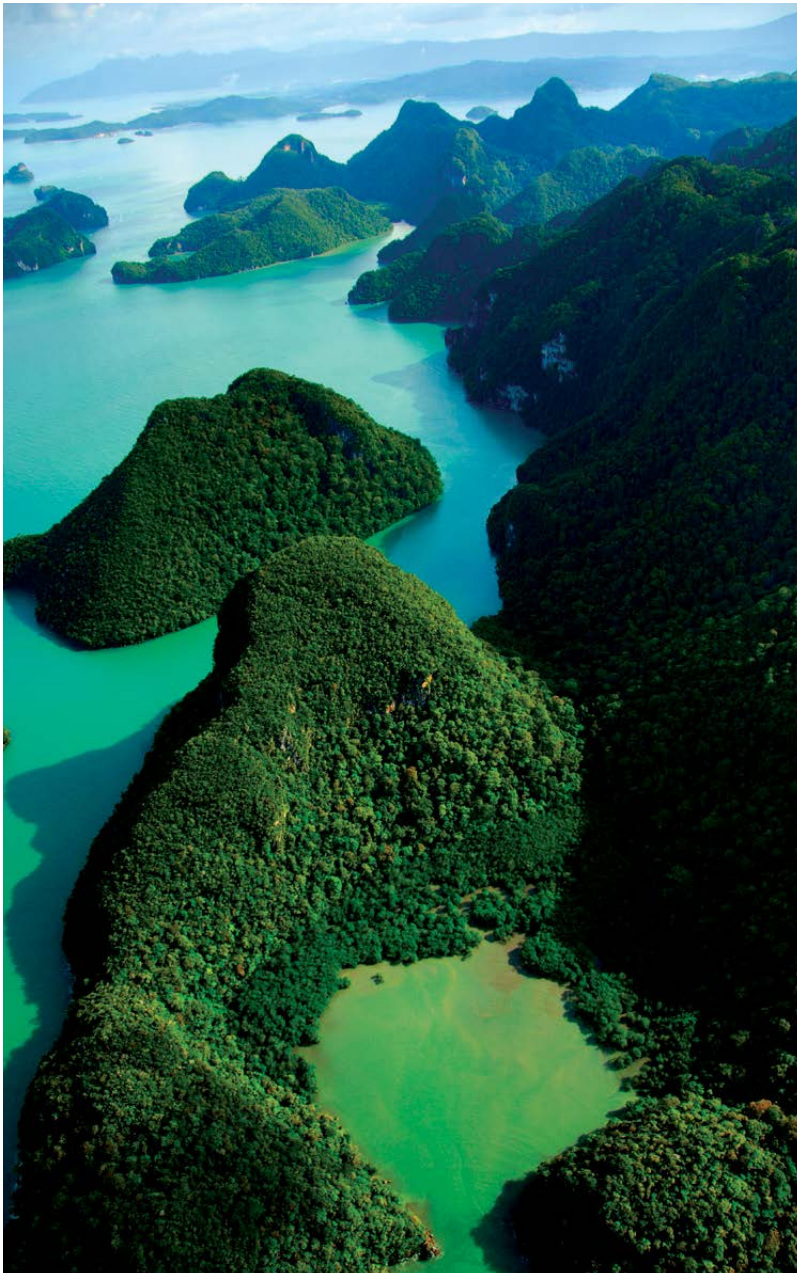


Clockwise from top:  
 Mardiana Shaari using the time-consuming slow drip filter system; Datai Valley Virgin Coconut Oil has made a name for itself for its pure oils; Datai Valley products are available at The Boutique at The Datai Langkawi



# FERTILE GROUND

Genies, mermaids and lost love – the myth of Langkawi’s Dayang Buting island and its hidden pool is a story that has a little something for every traveller. By **Gayatri Bhaumik**.



The second largest island in the 99 islets that make up the Langkawi archipelago, Dayang Buting is home to a freshwater lake that’s believed to have magical properties. There are several versions of the legend of Tasik Dayang Bunting, some more believable than others, but the myth that has found most traction over the years may require a stretch of the imagination, if only because it involves genies.

According to the legend, Mambang Sari was a beautiful princess with mythical powers who used to visit the island with her attendants. On one outing, Mat Teja, a mortal man, fell in love with her from afar but didn’t know how to go about declaring himself.

One day, while roaming the island in search of his beloved, Mat Teja met an old man in one of the villages he passed. Tok Diang told him that if he wiped mermaid tears over his face the next time he saw Mambang Sari, she would fall in love with him instantly. The tactic worked, and the two were soon married.

Eventually, so the legend goes, Mambang Sari became pregnant and chose to give birth at her favourite bathing pool, Tasik Dayang Beranak, a freshwater pool known today as Lake Guillemard or the Lake of the Pregnant Maiden. Sadly, the child died after just seven days, and despite her unbearable grief, Mambang Sari laid the child’s body to rest in the lake’s waters, blessing them with fertility-giving powers before returning to her heavenly abode.

Today, Tasik Dayang Bunting is still said to hold a mystical power and that by bathing in it, barren women can become fertile and bear children. Dayang Buting is located 20 kilometres from Kuah town and can be reached by boat from Kuah Jetty or at Pantai Cenang beach.



# A PLEDGE FOR CHANGE

A brand-new programme launched by The Datai Langkawi, The Datai Pledge, pioneered by Resident Naturalist **Irshad Mobarak**, will be an essential partnership between the resort and local conservation NGOs, dedicated to protecting and supporting Datai Bay and Langkawi island.



Very few resorts can claim to have the beautiful natural surrounds of The Datai Langkawi. The ancient rainforest that wreaths the property is one that The Datai Langkawi loves and fiercely protects in a groundbreaking ethos that is at the heart of the new The Datai Pledge initiative. Led by Irshad Mobarak, one of Malaysia’s most celebrated naturalists with over 23 years of experience in the field (all of which have been spent at The Datai), The Datai Pledge will safeguard its pristine surroundings, while reducing the harmful effects of environmental and human impact on our natural world.

Built on the resort’s cornerstone philosophies, which have seen the property recently receive Green Hotel status from the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture of Malaysia, and an EarthCheck Silver certification from EarthCheck Australia, The Datai Pledge will create a symbiotic relationship between our business and our natural world – the sea, the land and the people – that will further integrate sustainability into every aspect of the resort’s operation, with the help of specialists, researchers, NGOs and guests.

This initiative is all about maintaining balance with nature, with

key objectives including maintaining the resort’s natural beauty and its unique environment, while creating innovative sustainability practices that meet or exceed international benchmarks; pioneering sustainable and ecotourism activities; and actively seeking the participation of both local communities and guests, so that they can understand the task at hand, the challenges the resort faces, and ultimately, reap the rewards of a protected natural environment.

The Datai Pledge will focus its activities based around four pillars – Pure for the Future, Fish for the Future, Wildlife for the Future and Youth for the Future – and we will be highlighting the reasons, challenges and initiatives of each pillar in subsequent issues of IKHLAS. By focusing on these four pillars The Datai Pledge will be able to ensure positive benefits to both the environment and the people of Langkawi in a trailblazing effort that will place sustainability, conservation and education at the forefront of every aspect of the resort.

This is the beginning of an exciting chapter at The Datai Langkawi and we look forward to encouraging guests to take this journey with us.

*Corridors will be created through rope bridges attached to trees located on opposite sides of a road, to facilitate a safe crossing for wildlife*

## DATAI PLEDGE

Clockwise from top:  
A database on Langkawi's terrestrial vertebrates via camera trapping is currently in development; Five custom-made artificial reefs were created and laid in Datai Bay this year; As part of our No-Single Use Plastic Policy, sustainable in-room amenities have replaced plastic toiletries





© Eric Martin



# THE NOT SO SHY COLUGOS OF DATAI BAY

## One of The Datai Langkawi's shyest residents has been the subject of recent research, with scientists from the Night Spotting Project working with the resort's naturalist team to better understand the elusive Sunda colugo.

The Datai Langkawi is well known for its repeat guests but even regular visitors can be forgiven for having never seen one of the resort's resident Sunda colugos. Also known as Sunda flying lemurs or Malayan flying lemurs, the Sunda colugo neither flies nor is it a true lemur, but that doesn't mean these shy little daredevils aren't fascinating. In fact, a recent study of Sunda colugo populations at The Datai Langkawi and The Els Club Teluk Datai has uncovered a thoroughly social animal that's thriving in the protected canopies of Datai Bay.

Native to the temperate forests of Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia, the Sunda flying lemur can glide for up to 100 metres, which allows it to patrol its territory and search for food without leaving the safety of the canopy. Strictly arboreal, the Sunda colugo feeds at night on young tree leaves and shoots, as well as fruit and flowers. Given its diet, it's no surprise that the rainforests surrounding The Datai Langkawi are a perfect home for these little leapers, especially for nursing mothers who carry their young in a pouch on their abdomens.

However, not all colugos are as lucky and despite protective legislation across the region their populations are threatened by deforestation, hunting and competition from the plantain squirrel, an equally cute rodent with a big appetite for fresh fruit. To protect colugo populations, more research is needed, which led to the Night Spotting Project.

Supported by the Malaysian Primatological Society and the School of Biological Sciences at Penang's Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), as well as The Datai Langkawi and The Els Club Teluk Datai, the Night Spotting Project is led by Dr Nadine Ruppert and Dr Nik Fadzly N. Rosely and seeks to study and track these high-flying lemurs-in-disguise.

One of the Night Spotting Project researchers is Priscillia Miard. With a masters in Primate Conservation, she first fell in love with the

Sunda colugo during the first years of her PhD at USM, where she is studying the biodiversity of non-volant nocturnal mammals such as the slow lorises, colugos, flying squirrels and civets.

"When I started [at USM] I could see colugos everywhere on Penang Island, and soon realised that there was very little research about them," says Priscillia. "We lacked knowledge about the Sunda colugo's behaviour and social ecology as well as their distribution. When I moved my research to Langkawi, we started communicating with Irshad Mobarak (The Datai Langkawi's Resident Naturalist) about doing research on the colugos at the resort. It was a great opportunity because we could see them really close and were able to follow them every night."

The project's goal was to follow Sunda colugos in the wild and study their behaviour while also identifying individuals. "Guests are really interested in knowing about the colugos and wonder what they are when they see them on tree trunks near the beach villas," says Priscilla. "With this first study we found that they are highly social, with more than 25 individuals in the 300 metres of coastline in front of the resort. For a nocturnal animal this is a huge number and they can no longer be considered solitary. However, we had limitations when the animals were gliding so we moved our research to The Els Club, where we could better study their movement. There we also found a great number of colugos and were able to ID and sex them all."

She says the most surprising find of this preliminary study was the extent that colugos use ultrasonic sound to communicate, something that had previously been studied and was now being recorded. Priscilla says the project's next step is to tag colugos using VHF and GPS collars so that they can form a more detailed picture on their behaviour. "We are also doing more outreach talks and activities with the local populations to create greater awareness on this little-known species."



# SEASON OF LOVE AND COURTSHIP

At The Datai Langkawi, during the dry season, love is literally in the air, says Resident Naturalist **Irshad Mobarak**.

For me, December at The Datai Langkawi is the best time of the year to be here because love is literally 'in the air'. With the wet season of August, September and October coming to a fold, the south-westerly winds have lost the tussle with the north-easterlies and we are once again at the threshold of the dry season, which will last for at least three months. This change in rainfall will gradually put the 'rainforest' trees under stress, and when the trees of the rainforest do not get enough water it triggers their flowering processes.

While some tree species may need just three weeks of little or no rain to trigger this event, others may need up to 10 weeks before the process begins. Then there are those species of trees that need the arrival of the first substantial rains after the 'big dry' to trigger their flowering action. The flowering season is staggered and therefore so is the fruiting season that follows.

Many animals and especially the birds of our rainforest will choose the months of December, January and February for courtship and nesting. This means that when their babies arrive, it will be in time for the season of plenty - plenty of flowers for the nectarivores, plenty of fruit for the frugivores, herbivores, omnivores, and plenty of food for those that eat nectarivores, frugivores, herbivores and omnivores!

By the time you read this article you will find that our very familiar resident pair of White-

bellied Sea Eagles will already be nesting. This will be their 18th year together, with 18 successful fledglings. In February, the resident pair of Great Hornbills will also begin to nest, and they've been together for an impressive 24 years! Last year they had a baby boy and this time around, like an expectant godfather, I hope to be there once again when they present their new fledgling. If you've not guessed by now, the White-bellied Sea Eagle and the Great Hornbills are monogamous.

Also, watch out for the acrobatic display of the Oriental Broad-billed Rollers, also known simply as Dollarbirds. These noisy birds use cavities in trees to nest and with so few vacancies available, this territorial species puts on a highly charged acrobatic show near its nesting tree in the hope of discouraging competitors.

As for our Dusky Langurs, their season of love and courtship began much earlier, usually in the months of August, September and October. They have a gestation period of a little more than four months, and this allows for their newborns to also arrive during the months of December, January and February. Dusky Langur babies are born a golden orange so keep a keen eye out for them as you sip on your morning coffee or tea on your balcony.

Of course, if you and your partner decide to join our naturalists on one of our morning nature walks, you're welcome to hold hands. After all, tis the season of love and courtship.

*The newborn Dusky Langurs are orange in colour with a pink face. Within six months the colour of the fur changes from orange to grey or brown.*











*Ling Goh performs a traditional puppet show*



# THE LADY SAVING TEOCHEW PUPPETRY & OPERA

**Ling Goh** and her Teochew Puppet and Opera House in Penang are doing much more than picking up the pieces of a dying heritage, discovers **Marco Ferrarese.**

*Photographs by Kit Yeng Chan.*



*Her Teochew Puppet and Opera House in Penang has kept this timeless art alive*



(from top)  
Teochew puppetry is known for its striking, colourful marionettes; a workshop for the opera house's puppet stars



At the end of Armenian Street, one of Penang's most iconic lanes, a traditional Chinese shophouse stands out among its neighbours. Tucked behind the thick wooden shutters of a door engraved in gold, the Mun Hor Club is just a couple of doors down from the former George Town residence of iconic revolutionary Sun Yat-sen. If you come here at night, you'll still hear the old-world clatter of mahjong tiles spilling from the open windows of the club's first floor.

However, the main reason to visit the Mun Hor Club is not gambling: on the ground floor is the Teochew Puppet and Opera House, opened daily except Mondays from 10am to 6pm. Since 2014, this compact gallery has offered a window on the fascinating world of Teochew traditional iron rod puppetry and opera. Its filled with stage costumes and flamboyant headdresses, marionettes and rare musical instruments, and sheds light on an ancient tradition brought to Malaysia by early southern Chinese settlers.

"Our goal is to preserve these arts by teaching people how to sing the Teochew Opera and build and play with the traditional puppets," says Ling Goh. At 37, she's one of the last performers of Teochew traditional arts in Malaysia. A celebrated and retired opera performer, Goh learned the art from her mother; since she was young, she has dedicated her life to the conservation of her artistic heritage, and is now directing the Teochew Puppet and Opera House.

Teochew puppetry, known in the local dialect as *zhuah yiah hi* (paper shadow show), originated in the central plains of China during the Southern Song dynasty as a form of shadow play. The art slowly spread south to Chaozhou city in Guangdong Province where, from the 17th century, Teochew puppets started to be built three-dimensionally, using a mixture of straw, clay and plaster, with hollow heads painted with great detail. The puppeteers manipulated three long iron-rods attached to the marionettes' arms and torsos, giving them life.

Teochew puppetry was originally performed by men, but with changing times women started to work as puppeteers and opera singers. Ling Goh represents the fourth generation in her family's legacy of female performers; her grandmother Yang Qingying learned the art from her father Yang Binjing, a Chinese migrant who found his fortune in Singapore. Ling's late mother, the famous opera performer and musician Toh Ai Hwa, joined the Lao Yong Siew Choon Teochew opera troupe when she was only 12, and went on to inherit the company in 1989. Toh renamed the





From top:  
Traditional headwear used by opera actors; the more detail the puppet has, the more important their role; the opera house now collaborates with Malay artists to write and localise new plays.

troupe Kim Giak Low Choon and left it to her daughter when she passed away.

“We only perform opera and puppet shows when festivals and private event organisers hire us. This museum is only open to teach students and showcase Teochew arts to tourists,” explains Goh. For a mere RM100 (US\$25) per month, students can participate in a weekly class where they learn the ropes of singing, acting, and puppet manipulation.

However, like other traditional arts in Penang, Teochew opera risks being overshadowed by the commercial success of the burgeoning street art and cafe scene. “It’s a double-edged sword,” says Goh. “On one hand, it’s distracting people from discovering Penang’s real living heritage, but on the other, it’s also bringing more people to George Town and exposing them to our heritage”.

Which brings to the question of the sustainability of traditional arts. “I think that our heritage needs updating. We are now collaborating with Malay artists to write and localise new plays using a well-balanced mix of local characters,” concludes Goh. She believes that it’s now time to abandon Chinese settings and start telling more ‘Malaysian’ stories. “I think it’s crucial to make Teochew puppetry and opera more exciting to the young, for they are the only ones who can keep this, and other traditional arts of Penang, alive”.









# A HEALING TOUCH

Formerly reserved for Malay royalty and handed down to families, traditional Urut Melayu massage can now be experienced at The Spa, discovers **Chin Mui Yoon**.

With a colourful diversity of ethnic groups, Malaysia is truly Asia in one nation. Aside from the variety of cuisine and culture, one of the most thrilling discoveries lies in the area of wellness, with many of Malaysia's ancient native healing traditions now becoming better appreciated.

The Datai Langkawi embraces its spectacular location on Langkawi, itself an island of myths, legends and rich traditional culture, by offering authentic Malay wellness experiences, known as *ramuan*, and which include Urut Melayu (meaning 'Malay massage'). The Spa's concept is one that's sustainable both in terms of the environment but also local culture. The wellness ethos lies in harnessing the best native healing traditions found in Malaysia, and this extends to the spa's own retail spa collection, called Akar, which means 'root' in Malay, and represents The Datai Langkawi's aim to honour the roots of the

resort's island home and the wealth of wellness traditions found in Langkawi.

The Datai Langkawi is the only spa resort offering Urut Melayu, which has been handed down from generations to generations through oral teaching and training. Only specific hospitals and clinics have been offering this treatment in the past, particularly for mothers during their postnatal care and post-stroke patients to help them in their rehabilitation.

It was the resort's former in-house physician, the late Dr Ghani, who once guided visitors on walks through the rainforest to discover its treasure chest of natural remedies, who introduced this massage to The Datai Langkawi. The method focuses on massaging the body's meridian points to enhance, release, and channel blood flow.

The Spa has three certified therapists. Traditionally done on the floor at the healer's home, this full-body, deep tissue massage



involves long kneading strokes using oil blended with local herbs, and focuses on “*urat*” (veins), to help improve blood circulation and stimulate the nerves. Strokes directed toward the heart (*buka urat*) aim to invigorate, while strokes going away from the heart (*tutup urat*) are calming.

The ‘wind releasing’ benefits of Urut Melayu is one of the underlying principles of acupuncture, as practised in Traditional Chinese Medicine. It’s a therapeutic massage, which functions like a session with a physiotherapist. It’s not intended as a zen massage as compared to a relaxing aromatherapy treatment, but as with other treatments is designed to unwind and align, while delivering results and a sense of renewal.

Therapist Eny warmly greets me for my session with a cup of warm spiced tea and cold towel at the spa’s little bamboo tea pavilion, which overlooks a meandering stream, before leading me to one of the private treatment villas. Immersed in verdant greenery and birdsongs, the environment itself is already therapeutic.

Eny explains that she chose to learn this traditional massage technique because she has seen how it has helped stroke patients regain movement. Originally from Kuala Lumpur, she says Langkawi is the perfect place to master this healing tradition of her ancestors.

After changing into a batik sarong, a foot bath ritual with floral water and a gentle

salt scrub starts off the session on the villa’s deck. The massage itself is conducted on a mattress laid on the floor to allow Eny unrestricted movement.

“Urut Melayu was once conducted only for the royal families and in private homes in villages,” she explains as she begins at my feet.

There are a lot of long kneading strokes to release tension and knots in the muscles, and Eny utilises her elbow for more strength. Urut Melayu is meant to deliver real results, instead of just relaxation through touch therapy. As such, it isn’t long before I start grimacing from areas in my legs that had been tight and sore for a while.

The pain can become more intense near the shoulder blades and neck, which are often under additional tension. However, expertly applied pressure from Eny’s thumbs slowly dissipates the knots to release tension for a full range of motion that I’ve not experienced for weeks.

“I have seen a middle-aged man with a most debilitating frozen shoulder,” says Eny. “After just one session, he could lift his arms in the air again. The look on his face was pure joy and I vowed to be able to use my skills to bring relief to people who are also suffering in that way.”

If this is the type of result from only one hour of Urut Melayu, all I can say is a silent thank you to the learned late Dr Ghani for ensuring that this precious massage has been preserved at The Datai Langkawi.



# GOLF SCHOOL IS IN SESSION

Golf is a sport in which technique is key. Fortunately, The Els Club Teluk Datai on Langkawi island has both existing and new players covered with PGA Head Professional P-J Van Merch.



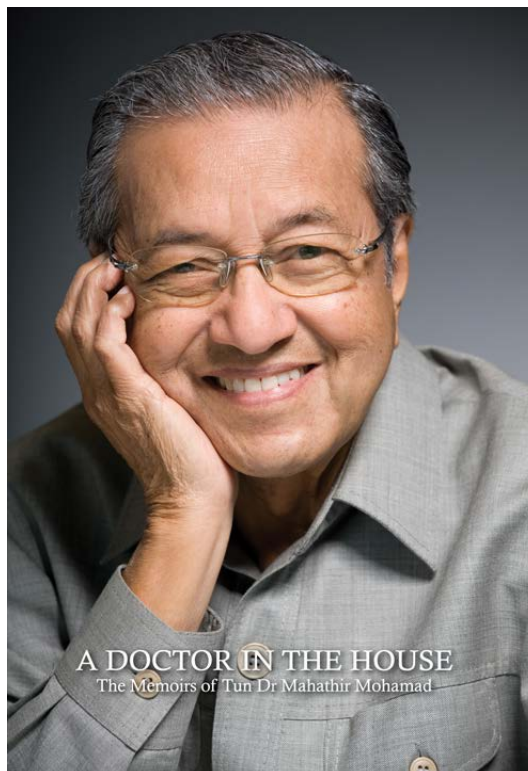
P-J's passion for golf and golf instruction started at a young age, when he became one of the first students to enroll at the renowned Fancourt Academy Development Programme in South Africa. After graduating in an Advanced Certificate in Golf Directorship and Club Management, his career aspirations led him to the UAE and eventually Malaysia, where he spent two and a half years at The Els Course Desaru Coast in Johor.

A PGA qualified and TPI certified golf instructor with over 8,000 hours of coaching under his belt, P-J is passionate about helping golfers

achieve their goals. Inspired by learning about and understanding different cultures, P-J has a basic understanding of Italian, Bahasa Malaysia and Tagalog/Filipino, as well as English, which means that he can communicate and help golfers of all ages and skill levels at The Els Club.

Individual lessons with P-J start from RM295 and include unlimited use of the course's practise facilities on the day of the lesson. To make a booking please call P-J at 019 280 2433, email him at [pj.vanmerch@elsclubmalaysia.com](mailto:pj.vanmerch@elsclubmalaysia.com), or contact The Datai Langkawi's concierge team.





**A Doctor in the House:**  
The Memoirs of Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad

*Author: Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad*

*Publisher: MPH Publishing*

*RM59.90*

On trial in 1953 for the rebel attack that launched the Cuban Revolution, former Cuban leader Fidel Castro displayed an unwavering belief in his actions, saying “Condemn me, it does not matter. History will absolve me.” In his autobiography, which was written after his first 22 years as national leader, former and now current Malaysian Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad seems to take a similar approach, offering a compelling insider’s look at his first reign in office that’s neither an apology nor a defence of his actions. Among his followers, Mahatir was a tough, renegade statesman who did what was necessary to transform an agricultural, underdeveloped country into an economic powerhouse once ranked as the 17th largest trading nation in the world. Of course, this remarkable achievement came with plenty of controversy, and Mahatir’s detractors are quick to point out his mistakes and failings. With his book, Mahatir attempts to set the record straight, with an easy-to-read account of his life as one of Malaysia’s most significant political players.

While his politics are easily gleaned from his speeches and public remarks, Mahatir’s autobiography offers a rare first-person glimpse at how he made the jump from village boy to doctor to politician and offers an unflinching personal opinion of Malaysian politics and the events he helped shape. Perhaps more crucially, the book is a fascinating glimpse of the world that helped shape a political powerhouse. Mahatir’s frank, to-the-point narrative weaves across numerous topics, from his childhood and family to life in a British colony and the realities of the Japanese occupation.

The book is likely as divisive as the man himself, but its value is in its ability to bring out the nuances of public personas and events that have until now remained rather one-dimensional. All prices were correct at the time of publication.

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*All books are available at The Boutique, The Datai’s retail concept, or at Borders bookstores in Kuala Lumpur, or online at [www.borders.net.my](http://www.borders.net.my).*









**THE DATAI LANGKAWI**

Jalan Teluk Datai  
07000 Pulau Langkawi  
Kedah Darul Aman, Malaysia

T +6 04 9500 500

[www.thedatai.com](http://www.thedatai.com)



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