

# Travel & Outdoors

WISH YOU WERE HERE



Photograph: Eric Martin

## A glimpse of paradise

One of Malaysia's most beautiful islands brings nature into focus; and more wildlife can be found in the capital, Kuala Lumpur, finds **Laura Millar**

As the sun starts to sink behind the horizon, the day is ending for most people. But for the creatures who live within the 10 million year old rainforest on the island of Langkawi, a UNESCO Global Eco Site to the northwest of mainland Malaysia, it's just beginning. Cicadas ramp up their frenzied chirping, dragonflies dart between trees, and the distinctive whistle of the hill mynah bird rings out through the dusk. I'm on an evening nature walk with naturalist Shakira Mobarak, who is one of several experts who work on site at the hotel I'm staying in, The Datai.

One of Langkawi's first luxury resorts, it was established on the quieter, northwestern corner of the island in 1993. Thanks to its location within the rainforest, and its own, private strip of beach, it has long been a firm favourite with guests, many of whom have been returning for years. It's not hard to see why; even before its recent multi-million dollar renovation, its blend of low-key, unstuffy service, thoughtful,

elegant design, and fantastic food add up to a truly beautiful place to stay. In addition, the renovation heralded the construction of a new nature centre, a base for its naturalists and conservation experts. And conservation is a key word here; the Datai goes to great lengths to ensure eco-friendliness and responsible tourism. All wood used as building material comes from fallen trees; there is no single-use plastic; toothbrushes are made of bamboo, while cotton buds are compostable; there is a water-filtration plant on site, and also a permaculture garden, where waste is collected to be used as compost, and rainwater is stored. They also grow an impressive amount of their own fruit, vegetables and herbs for use in the kitchens, including pumpkin, jackfruit, okra, sweetcorn, mint, Thai basil and turmeric.

But for many guests, the real draw

*Our taxi has to stop for a group of langur monkeys crossing the road*



Langkawi island, main; a great hornbill in flight, above

is the wildlife, and there are several guided walks you can go on which maximise your chances of spotting some interesting indigenous critters. For now, Shakira has her little group agog when she points out a cluster of tiny, sparkling orbs with her torch, located by the banks of the small stream that runs through the resort. Dew drops? Rainfall? No; spiders' eyes, apparently, gleaming in the dusk – which makes this arachnophobe shudder a little. And then, an odd sound, 'Toe-kay, toe-kay', pulses through the gloom. "Look at this!" exclaims Shakira excitedly, directing her light onto the wall of one of the villas. What looks like a large lizard is planted firmly on the vertical surface; it turns out to be an example of the world's largest gecko, the Tokay,

named for the sound it makes.

"This incredible creature inspired a key scene in a movie," reveals Shakira, explaining that the gloves Tom Cruise wears to seemingly scale the world's tallest building, Burj Khalifa in Dubai, in *Mission: Impossible – Ghost Protocol*, were based on the gecko's feet. The reason it can adhere to vertical surfaces is not because they are covered in suction pads, but because the attraction between the surface and the sole is caused by molecules pressing together, a phenomenon known as the Van der Waals pressure principle. Who knew? And as if all that wasn't fascinating enough, our stroll is rounded off by the amazing sight of a couple of flying squirrels gliding from tree to tree, their wings spread out like furry parachutes.

The next morning, my boyfriend and I explore beyond the resort, and make for Machinchang mountain, to be whisked up to the top of some of the oldest rocks on the island by what claims to be the world's steepest cable car. As it chugs up the side of the sheer cliff face, the views back across to the sea are impressive, and get more so the higher we go. At the top, you have the option to walk across the SkyBridge, itself another superlative: the world's highest pedestrian bridge.



Suspended over, well, nothing, I try to drag my gaze upwards, rather than down, and am rewarded with the sight of a sea eagle in full flight, its wide, white-tipped wingspan soaring majestically above.

On our way back to the hotel, our taxi has to stop for a group of dusky langur monkeys, which are casually crossing the road. No wonder many of the road signs here read 'Drive slowly; animals at play'. One of them is carrying a baby, notable for its bright ginger fur, in contrast to the black coats of the adults. We learn later, from expert Irshad Mobarak, Shakira's uncle, that they have evolved to be this colour when young, as eagles are blind to it. During a nature walk with him, we explore the flora and fauna around the beach, where we marvel at the intricate lace-like patterns left in the sand by the aptly named sand crabs, identify some sand snails, and spend a lot of time peering intently at a starfish making its way very slowly back down to the sea from its little burrow below the surface.

It's with the deepest regret that we come to the end of our stay, and swap the calm and quiet of the island for a stint in the capital, Kuala Lumpur. Less than a 90-minute flight away, it provides a vibrant, buzzy contrast, but pockets of nature can still be found here, if you know where to look. Our hotel, the brand new RuMa, is as slick and stylish an urban getaway as you could wish to find, but, gratifyingly, it's barely a ten-minute walk from KLCC Park. This 50-acre sprawl of greenery is possibly most notable for the iconic spikes of the Petronas Towers which rise from within it (jogging highly entertaining memories of Sean Connery drooling over Catherine Zeta Jones in a catsuit in the 1999 film, *Entrapment*). Here is a pleasant place to stroll or picnic, with its many shaded spots, lakes and pathways.

Aviophiles should definitely visit KL's Bird Park; a giant, enclosed aviary, it's home to around 200 species, some of which roam freely around the grounds. It's here I see a peacock displaying its magnificent plumage for the first time, as well as emus and ostriches, and I can't resist the opportunity to feed the primary-coloured parrots. Elsewhere, I'm



captivated by powder-pink flamingos, the amusingly named flaming galah, the beautifully patterned male Mandarin duck, and more.

But perhaps my favourite experience comes just outside the city centre, at the Batu Caves temple complex. This is a collection of Hindu temples built into naturally occurring caves, located at the top of a set of 272 steps. These were recently painted in an array of rainbow colours, adding to the area's natural beauty. Any brave visitor scaling them has to also run the gauntlet of the residents of the caves and the surrounding areas: the incredibly cheeky macaque monkey. They throng onto the steps, looking for any unwitting tourist who does not have a firm grip on his or her bottle of fizzy pop (they are patently uninterested in anything as boring as mineral water). Once they've dislodged it from unsuspecting, slow-to-react hands, they unscrew the top, pour the contents onto the ground, and lap away to their hearts' content. And as for anyone who's been foolish enough to bring their own fruit or sandwiches...well, there's no sight funnier than that of a monkey scaling a tourist's legs like a tree and divesting him of his food parcel like the Artful Dodger would a pocket watch. Whether you're in the city or on an island, Malaysia delivers entertaining nature the whole way. ■

**BA (ba.com) flies from Edinburgh to KL via London from around £547 return; AirAsia (airasia.com) flies between KL and Langkawi from around £33 return. Rooms at The Datai Langkawi (thedatai.com) start from around £463, including breakfast. Rooms at The RuMa (heruma.com), Kuala Lumpur, start from around £155, including breakfast.**



A room at the Datai Langkawi hotel, above; The RuMa, top

CITY BREAK



Havens in the hubbub

In Mayfair and Hyde Park, two hotels are quietly delivering luxury, writes Emma Newlands

It was once the epicentre of 90s celebrity debauchery, but the former Met Bar in Mayfair is now part of a hotel that is putting wellness and relaxation centre-stage – serving as a calming oasis rather than hosting rowdy members of Oasis. The hotel is now known as COMO Metropolitan London, and I feel calmer as soon as I enter the spa-like reception area. We're shown to our rooms (there are 144 including suites) which have been decorated to be as decluttered as possible.

Mine is mainly cream, with touches of brown and lime green, while vast windows flood the room with light and capitalise on the jaw-dropping view across Hyde Park and beyond. Landmarks such as the Albert Hall will later appear when the sun goes down, sparkling in the darkness.

There's a yoga mat in the wardrobe and yoga and meditation channels on the in-room TV, while the hotel embraces the COMO Shambhala wellness concept, which promotes a healthy way of living, learning and eating well (shambhala means 'peace' in Sanskrit).

The hotel houses the COMO Shambhala Urban Escape where I enjoy a relaxing signature massage, choosing a warming option from the choice of oil blends.

Also on offer are private yoga classes – ours is taken by highly knowledgeable teacher Kelly Brooks – and there is also acupuncture, Dr Perricone, Dr Hauschka and Guinot facials – and much more besides.

And then there is the food. We dine in live-fire grill restaurant Gridiron – located in the former Met Bar and a collaboration between chefs Richard Turner and Colin McSherry.

We plough through a bonanza of delicious dishes, and along with my excellent main course of steak, I sample sides such as Tunworth mashed potato with thick, crisp pork crackling, ash-burnt leek with hazelnuts (a surprisingly good combo), and beef dripping galette potatoes, which is one of the most delicious things I've ever eaten.

The hotel also houses a branch of celebrity favourite Nobu, which specialises in Japanese-Peruvian cuisine.

A short walk away is another hotel in the group, COMO The Halkin, where we also stay and which is located on a quiet side street near Hyde Park Corner. A more compact offering at 41 rooms and suites, the purpose-built hotel has a Georgian-styled facade. My room again has a calming cream colour scheme,

but is slightly more classical in style than the Metropolitan, with a seating area where I eat breakfast of Belgian waffles and berries and a healthy 'waterfall' juice including cucumber, celery and fennel. The room uses the same tablet touchscreen interface as at the Metropolitan to control everything from the lighting to the 'do not disturb' sign, while the bathroom boasts a huge tub where I make use of the amazing 'INVIGORATE' bath salts and loofah. Duly relaxed, I bury myself in the bed's Egyptian cotton linen and sleep like a log. As for in-house dining, there is the

Clockwise from main; cocktails at The Halkin; one of the bedrooms; a room with a view at the Metropolitan

the Halkin Bar and lounge and we try some of the components, including a miniature waffle with egg. Delicious.

We're also treated to a foodie's delight in the form of a Sweet Tooth Tour, a concept founded in 2017 by Lynne Staartjes while studying pâtisserie at Le Cordon Bleu.

She proves a friendly, authoritative guide, and stop-offs include the floral, Instagrammable delight that is the cafe of Peggy Porschen – who made Kate Moss' wedding cake – as well as a branch of macaron specialist Pierre Herme (Staartjes has worked for both) where we sample some wares blindfolded to guess the flavour.

All told, the hotels offer their own takes on a tranquil haven from reality, plus utterly mouth-watering cuisine and within easy reach of London's highlights. I'm turning off my mobile, buying up the contents of my local bookshop, and booking myself in for a month each – at the very least. ■

**Rates start at £275 at COMO Metropolitan London (Old Park Lane, London W1K 1LB, met.lon@comohotels.com, 020 7447 1000) and £340 at COMO The Halkin (Halkin Street, London SW1X 7DJ, thehalkin@comohotels.com, 020 7333 1000). Sweet Tooth Tours (www.sweettoothtours.com) from £58pp.**

48 HOURS IN

Quinta do Lago

Friday, midday

Check into the Martinhal Quinta do Lago (doubles from £160, www.martinhal.com), where the villas come with private swimming pools and lashings of space.

1pm

Rent a bike at the resort and pedal down to the famed beaches that are scattered along this sweeping stretch of Portuguese coastline.

1:30pm

Boat fresh langoustines and salt baked sea bass star, along with clams from the surrounding Rio Formosa National Park, at the beachfront 2 Passos (www.restaurante2passos.com). Book a window seat.

3pm

Take a walk along the sands, enjoying either a dip if it's sunny and calm, or just admiring the big Atlantic surf if the weather has turned.

6pm

Sip a sundowner at Gigi's Beach Bar (tel: 964-045178), before cycling back. A mocktail might be best.

8pm

Dine in overlooking the pool at Terraco, with locally landed tuna on the menu as well as a tempting choice of bone dry Portuguese white wines.

Saturday, 10am

Head to Zoomarine (www.zoomarine.pt) where you can learn about their bottlenose dolphins in depth before being allowed into the water for a unique chance to interact with them in a closely supervised environment.



1pm

Enjoy a light lunch at Zoomarine before losing an hour or two hopping between a sun lounger and a wave pool where the surf is always easily manageable.

3pm

Make sure to tick off any of the animal or bird shows you haven't seen before the park closes its doors.

7pm

Handily Zoomarine sits right next to Guia, the town famous as the birthplace of peri peri chicken, so tuck in – it's served at all of its restaurants.

Sunday, 9am

Either relax by the outdoor pool at Martinhal or head out for a round of golf – Quinta do Lago is famous as a year-round golf resort. ■

Robin McKelvie

**EasyJet fly to Faro (www.easyjet.com) from Glasgow with returns from £73.72. A car is the best way to get around the Algarve. Holiday Autos can arrange car hire (www.holidayautos.com). Tourist information, www.visitalgarve.pt**

BARGAIN BREAKS

Big fun in the Big Apple

Prices start from £813pp for a five night holiday in New York with Travel Republic. This includes room-only accommodation at the three star Newtown Hotel and return flights from Glasgow departing 4 June.

Call 020 8974 7200 or see www.travelrepublic.co.uk

Belfast adventure

Book with Superbreak and visit Belfast to see where *Game of Thrones* was filmed. Take a coach tour that includes the Dark Hedges, where Arya Stark made her escape, and Ballintoy Harbour, aka Pyke Harbour

on the Iron Islands. From £83pp, they'll chuck in the tour tickets, and an overnight stay at the five star Hilton Belfast hotel. Price quoted is based on 28 May arrival. Call 01904 717 392 or see www.superbreak.com.

Make for Marylebone

You've got until the end of May to take advantage of the Spring Sale at five star hotel, The Arch London, in Marylebone. It's offering 25 per cent off room rates if you stay before the end of the month, with prices starting from £301.50 after discount for a Superior Room. Call 020 7724 4700 or see www.thearchlondon.com