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*Lost on
Langkawi*

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BAREFOOT IN
FIJI

A FOODIE'S
TASMANIA

SUNSETS IN
SRI LANKA

ALL-BLING
BALI

LEGENDS OF LANGKAWI

Looking out at the St. Regis Langkawi's overwater bungalows from the resort's beach.

Half a billion years seems like long enough to fly under the radar. Now, this prehistoric Malaysian island is making moves with the help of new luxury and old species. **Jeninne Lee-St. John** sails through the ancient trees by land, by sea—and by the power invested in a champagne saber.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY SCOTT A. WOODWARD



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Kayu Puti, a beach house-style restaurant designed by Bill Bensley, at St. Regis Langkawi; the St. Regis's take on tiramisu, which uses white-chocolate foam, coffee panna cotta and coconut sorbet; an elusive, bespectacled dusky leaf monkey; Kayu Puti's hammocks offer front-row sunset viewing; the St. Regis pool; the White Negroni, a combination of gin, Suze and lillet blanc, at Four Seasons; zoning out in Four Seasons' Geo Spa; a tropical salad at St. Regis; Marrakech blue at St. Regis.



LANGKAWI IS THE TYPE OF FANTASTICAL PLACE WHERE THE FISH HAVE LEGS, THE MONKEYS ARE BESPECTACLED AND THE LEMURS FLY.

LANGKAWI, whose name has competing origins but the most commonly agreed upon is a translation of “brown eagle,” is not just another white-sand-beach-ringed Southeast Asian paradise. It has 500 million years of uninterrupted geology: scientists can chart limestone, sandstone and mudstone from each prehistoric era one by one. The only terrain on Earth with similar visible pedigree is around the Grand Canyon. It has fun endemic mammals and majestic birds native and migratory among some of the world’s oldest rainforests as well as manifold mangrove swamps and mudlands and scrublands that make it an ecological treasure.

Once I get to Langkawi, I realize that I’ve been in Asia far too long to have never been there. Just off the northwestern corner of the Malay Peninsula, the famously lush island has never been far, at least as the brown eagle flies, from where I’ve lived, in Bangkok now or Saigon before. In fact, you can see Thailand from the north shore. But Langkawi is not exactly easy to access. The absence of direct flights from Southeast Asian hub cities generally means a connection through Kuala Lumpur or Penang that precludes a quick weekend island jaunt.

One could blame Langkawi’s not grasping that tourism gold ring on a lack of strategic organization by the powers that be, but most folks here prefer a more romantic explanation that’s closer in line with the mythical and mystical character that pervades the island. They blame Mashuri, a young woman who lived in Langkawi in the late 18th century. Accused of adultery, she was executed by stabbing, but her blood flowed white—signifying her innocence. As the life leaked out of her, she cursed the island with bad luck for seven generations... a time period that has just about expired.

And, what do you know? the locals all say to me with a satisfied wink. Langkawi was bequeathed UNESCO Global Geopark status in 2015. Over a couple of decades of nudging by former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad, a native of Kedah State, development has been slowly growing, and the government announced plans for a new airport road. Among heartening hotel news, the highest-end resort on the island has just been renovated coinciding with the long-awaited opening of two more international luxury properties. The rich diversity of the island’s ecosystems is reason enough not to want this place to morph into Phuket or Bali, but it would be pretty selfish of me to try to keep half a billion years of history to myself. Besides, did I mention the entire island is duty-free?

To toast the dawn of a new era, then, it’s only fitting that my first stop on Langkawi is the opulent new St. Regis, which commandeers a shallow bay on the south side. I’ve got a Penthouse suite on the top floor, obviously, with a massive wrap-around balcony fit for a

cocktail party of A-listers at Cannes. The hotel’s four overwater bungalows are in the distance to my left, the Bill Bensley-designed restaurant, Kayu Puti, on a dock to my right. Where I really want to be right now, though, is down in those palm trees lining the private beach. A series of royal blue hammocks is strung in the trunks, just begging you to take a laze under late-day light cascading through the trees (keep it casual so your Instagram audience doesn’t think you were posing). The pool bar staff infuses their own dark rum with star anise, cinnamon and lemon rind; it’s called The 400 and I get it on the rocks because this breakaway island that rose from the sea 220 million years ago seems like the perfect place to combine #piratelife and #luxelife.

Of course, usually my feet are firmly placed in the latter camp, which is why I’m ecstatic that the good folks at the St. Regis have kindly agreed to teach me to saber the top off a bottle of bubbly. We head to Kayu Puti at dusk because that’s champagne hour, and because this stilted beach house has hammocks over the ocean offering a front-row seat to sunset. The alchemy to sabering champagne is equal parts positioning, power and confidence. The weapon they give me looks less like a saber than an oversized frosting spatula—but that turns out to be a good move because my aim isn’t so good the first try. After a few, I hit the bottle lip just right and the top along with the cork sails off into the sea. Success. Just in time to watch the lengthy purple lightshow the sun puts on as it heads beneath the horizon. During this trip I will witness nightfall from four distinct locations and every one is dominated by a different hue of the rainbow.

A DECADENT wine-pairing degustation dinner in oversized *Alice in Wonderland* chairs and a five-hour spa experience (my therapist and I get to know each other really well; she’s in a motorcycle club) that includes afternoon tea in the tub and a champagne finale should be the last signs you need that the new St.



Spot Thailand
out at sea from
Four Seasons' adults-only pool.
OPPOSITE: Hai Yan,
at The Ritz-Carlton,
is the only
Cantonese fine-
dining restaurant
on Langkawi.

Regis is staying true to its gilded brand. It's also opposite in design from my next stop, the newest kid on the block, The Ritz-Carlton Langkawi, all dark-woods and jungle-tucked and barely opened.

Through my new tree-house front windows, the refraction of the sunrise light over the ocean through the leaves has a soft, dreamlike quality. But come afternoon, it's unwise to take a snack out onto the porch. I hear a rustling in the trees and a furry head pops up on a branch. Then another on the porch next door. Soon an entire clan of long-tailed macaques is staring down at me and no sooner have I absconded inside with my coffee than a mother and baby swing onto deck, two scouts dispatched to check out this new intruder. The classical music I have uncharacteristically been playing reaches a crescendo as the monkeys peer in the glass door and trot along the railings, making all my friends and family who watch the cellphone video I have obviously been recording comment wryly on the David Attenborough-style soundtrack, as if I did it on purpose.

Cheeky monkeys are not the only way the resort plunges you in nature. My friend Nicky and I take a hand-building and painting class with professional potter Mohammad Razdi Ismail, whose work is inspired by the aquatic life and the geological and marine history of Langkawi. We also take what is ostensibly a soap-making class with Mardiana Shaari ("Call me 'Mama,'" she says), owner of Datai Valley Coconut Plantation, but is more like cosmetology and science class with your shaman grandma. She grinds up seaweed and applies it for a collagen facial daily. She drinks citronella to clear out her digestive system, and virgin coconut oil to prevent Alzheimer's and reverse the effects of aging—she credits it with helping her formerly all-white hair regrow streaks of black, and, this woman who harvests her 280 mango trees herself, for her fair complexion. "I like to go fishing, so I put coconut oil all over myself and sit out in the sun, on purpose," Mama says. "I get less dark." We

aren't trying to *untan*, but the rest sounds good. All these items and more go into the pot to make our soaps—and it's a much better hour spent with a Bunsen burner than most hotel cooking classes.

The Ritz-Carlton private beach is backed by a row of private-pool villas, and bookended by the two resort pools. The adults-only pool and bar, collectively named Horizon, are positioned to take prime advantage of sunset. But as they are scheduled to open the day after we depart, we take in the blazing turmeric, ochre and periwinkle end-of-day from the deck of Hai Yan, the only Cantonese fine-dining restaurant on the island, where the abalone is fresh, springy and the size of a child's fist. The main pool has a shallow ledge on which I lie half-submerged with my eyes covered by icy cucumbers, just one of the hourly treats delivered by the cheerful staff.

Rolling down a jungly hill as it does, the resort strikes the delicate balance between romantic and convivial, good for couples or to bring a pal, as I have. Plenty of space for everyone to have privacy, but intimate enough that you might strike up a chat with a stranger. Which I do after noticing a guy I had assumed was on his honeymoon remain unaccompanied at the pool for the second day in a row. Just your standard garden-leave professional taking himself on a fancy, fly-by-night vacation. "I was in KL and wanted to go to the beach," says Sepehr, a typically understated Canadian. "This place looked nice." That's not how most people wind up in Langkawi; it's not an island-hopping backpacker haven. But it must be encouraging for not just The Ritz-Carlton but anyone invested in the success of the island that people are down to book last-minute luxe. He'd gone the night before for a few drinks at Pantai Cenang, a beach expanse of restaurants, lounges, hippie bars, a night market and other hotels, and was looking to next investigate the wildlife.

Luckily for him, that's imminent on our agenda. Sepehr comes along for the ride. On a "rainforest at night" trip with Junglewalla Tours, we finally spot some elusive dusky leaf monkeys—far shier than macaques, these adorable guys are black with a shock of toddler hair sticking up from their heads and white rings around their lips and eyes, like a pair of painted-on glasses. We also learn more than I thought could possibly be interesting about swifts: they alternate flapping their wings with gliding, which helps conserve energy to keep them aloft for sometimes months at a time; and having all four toes in the front, as opposed to one in the back like most other birds, prevents swifts from landing in trees but allows them instead to grip the walls of caves where they make their nests. Gazing up at their flap-flap-glide maneuvers, I say a silent apology on behalf of all the bird's nest soup eaters in China for making such hay of swifts' prime evolutionary advantage.

Atop Mount Mat Chincang, we take a walk off-piste for a bird's-eye view of a magenta sky over a bay and paddy fields. We point out shapes in the clouds with a couple of strangers while snuggling their beagle puppy, to the 70s soundtrack coming from one guy's bluetooth speaker. Wishing we'd thought to bring wine, we climb back into our car humming Van Morrison. Prescient, for our guide next takes us to a little park where it turns out to be a marvelous night for a moondance indeed—at least for the lone flying lemur we spot sailing far overhead, eyes shining in the dark like the navigation lights on a tiny furry plane.

FLYING LEMURS are neither lemurs (more accurately called Sunda colugos, they are nocturnal and have a marsupial-like pouch for carrying their young) nor do they fly—though, using the kite-like membranes that connect their necks, arms and legs, they can



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Four Seasons has been newly brushed in blue; Horizon bar at The Ritz-Carlton; sizzling lamb at The Ritz-Carlton; the amiable Ritz-Carlton pool staff dish up cold cucumbers for sun-sore eyes; Four Seasons' head naturalist Aidi Abdullah calls the mangrove forest "utopia;" gin-fueled excellence at Rhu Bar, Four Seasons; *kerabu sotong*, a traditional Malay squid salad at Ikan-Ikan, Four Seasons; flying through the rainforest via an Umgawa zipline; banana-and-chocolate smoothie at The Ritz-Carlton.



THE DETAILS

GETTING THERE

Several airlines fly to Langkawi from Kuala Lumpur. **AirAsia** (airasia.com), **Firefly** (fireflyz.com.my) and **Malaysia Airlines** (malaysiaairlines.com) have flights from Penang, and AirAsia has a flight daily from Singapore.

WHERE TO STAY

I stayed at three resorts: The newly renovated **Four Seasons Langkawi** is awash in azure, and spread along 1.8 kilometers of northern beach. Private seaside pool villas offer incredible real estate indoors and out, but do skip room service for an haute-rustic Malaysian dinner at Ikan-Ikan and a nightcap at Rhu Bar. Don't miss the Ayurvedic spa. fourseasons.com; doubles from RM2,400.

The bright, hotel-style **St. Regis Langkawi** is the most unabashedly opulent property here, with a few overwater bungalows and daily champagne sabering. There's a massive indoor spa, a mixology-minded beach bar, and beach house Kayu Puti, which offers excellent sunset seats and delicious degustation meals. stregislangkawi.com; doubles from RM1,700.

Opened last fall, **The Ritz-Carlton Langkawi** is tree-house chic, rolling down a hill to its private bay. The resort feels cozy—both spatially and with its emphasis on local artisans—but it boasts all the luxe amenities, such as a tennis court and ocean-front villas. In the stilted spa pods, waves below lull you into massage bliss. ritzcarlton.com; doubles from RM2,500.

Another top-end option is rainforest-ensconced **The Datai Langkawi**, which has been closed for a 10-month renovation and is slated to reopen in July with new spa villas, a nature center and a beachfront fitness center. thedatai.com; doubles from RM2,100.

The Andaman is a Luxury Collection resort on Datai Bay. It has an 8,000-year-old fringing reef where you can snorkel and help with the coral nursery. Its spa was the first in Southeast Asia to offer 100-percent certified-organic food-grade products. theandaman.com; doubles from RM1,100.

If you want to be in the middle of the action, **Meritus Pelangi Beach Resort & Spa** sits on a private stretch of central Cenang Beach, and boasts its own man-made lake. A series of wooden chalets house the rooms, with the top-tier suites affording sea views and two private verandas. meritushotels.com; doubles from RM890.

THINGS TO DO

Island tours: Junglewalla A locally owned tour company with 25 years' expertise in leading nature and wildlife educational adventures. Tours include mangrove cruising, jungle-pool swimming, birdwatching, kayaking and trekking. junglewalla.com; tours from RM180 per person.

Ziplining: Umgawa Channel your inner flying lemur on this series of 12 ziplines—some as long as 200 meters and as high as 80—and three rope bridges atop the rainforest. Founded by an American, but employing rigorously trained local guides whose charm will dispel any fears. ziplinelangkawi.com; from RM199 for a six-zipline tour.

Soap-making: Datai Valley

Eco-preneur Mardiana Shaari sells cold-pressed virgin coconut oil to heal all ills. While teaching you how to make her line of craft soaps, she'll drop tons of scientific shaman knowledge on you. mardishaari@gmail.com; soap-making classes at The Ritz-Carlton RM250 per person.

Ceramics: Ilhamstudio

Mohammad Radzi Ismail heads a pottery studio where his designs (spot them on certain resort tables) are inspired by Langkawi island—and sea-life. Shop his showroom, or take a hand-building class at The Ritz-Carlton. rad_mie@yahoo.com; ceramics classes at The Ritz-Carlton RM250 per person.

Mangrove tour: Aidi Abdullah

If you're staying at Four Seasons, you must carve out a morning for the most entertaining biology, botany and evolution class with the resort's head naturalist. fourseasons.com; mangrove tour from RM290 per person. —J.L.S.J.

Horizon, the adults-only pool and bar at The Ritz-Carlton.

glide up to 100 meters between trees without losing much altitude. That sounds like fun, right? Nicky and I get our lemurs on the next day with a trip above the trees with Umgawa Zipline Eco Adventures. The first few rides are cake, relatively low and short. But then our two guides, who manage to be merry jokesters while also deadly serious about safety, tell us we're supposed to get excited for the waterfall and I'm like, *Where is it?* It's way over there in the clearing. I've gone rock-climbing a few times; I know the strength of carabiners. But still. *You want me to jump off this platform and ride this steel cable 200 meters across a canyon so deep I can't see the bottom?* Needless to say I am too distracted by being terrified to properly position myself to see the waterfall til the very end of the ride. Of the 12 ziplines, two are extra-lengthy; there are also rope bridges not for the faint of heart, and I won't spoil the surprise of how you get down, but it involves a leap of faith.

Pumped with adrenaline, Nicky and I head back to Four Seasons Langkawi, where we have moved by now, to do a quick change for their weekly cocktails with the general manager. Architect Bill Bensley originally co-designed this sprawling wonderland, and—as part of an extensive renovation that included adding private spa rooms to some of the villas, perking up the restaurants and bar, and reimagining the entire family-focused section of the property—he swept back through with a giant azure paintbrush. The place is a Turkish and Moroccan hallucination of the Delft blue era, filled with crazy-photogenic keyhole doorways, two-meter ceramic vases, walls of lanterns and painted leaves. Morning yoga takes place on a helipad in a garden; the adults-only pool looks like a majestic version of the Roman Baths; and in the Ayurvedic-focused spa each massive room has four different massage beds depending on the treatment.

The Four Seasons is spread along a 1.8-kilometer ivory beach, and our high-ceilinged seafront manse, with plunge pool, throne-like hammam

tub and outdoor shower, is proportionately sprawling. This is a good problem to have, unless you're late for drinks. This regular event at open-air Rhu Bar is an invitation for guests to mingle with the management over champagne to the backdrop of a sapphire, cornflower, watermelon and tangerine sunset. Observant Nicky sniffs out the fact that they house-infuse their own gin, and in quick order I strong-arm the food and beverage director, Akshay Tripathi, into indulging us with a private tasting. The man started his career as a tea sommelier, so he knows his botanicals. “After six gins, everyone's a poet,” Akshay says. We decide to investigate what kind of artist one becomes after eight... or nine.

The answer is certainly not impressive wildlife photographer and the resort's head naturalist Aidi Abdullah. He picks us up in a boat off the beach in front of the breakfast restaurant and cruises about 20 minutes to a swampland of channels and islets that make up the mangrove forest. I knew mangroves were an important bulwark against erosion. But until this morning with Aidi, I never knew how fascinating they were. First of all, they are trees that live in saltwater. For this to be possible, they had to evolve a natural filter to help them absorb fresh water from salt. And any salt that does get through they either sweat out daily through their leaves, or they stockpile it and wait until the leaves are going to turn yellow, fill them with salt, then let them drop. Mangroves know not only how to help themselves, but also each other. Just look at their roots. Aidi points to four trees, which have grown entwined together. “They share work and food,” Aidi says, then delivers the *aha* kicker: “They each have the same number of roots.” As we marvel at the genius of the trees, Aidi says, “This is the purest manifestation of the writings of Karl Marx in the world. This is utopia.”

Not to be difficult, but I'd more likely call a place where the fish walk “a freak-show Devonian-period time warp.” Pulling up onto a mudbank, we observe fiddler crabs closing perfectly shaped sand roofs above their heads just in time to beat the encroaching tide and the approaching mudskippers—which look like 10-centimeter tadpoles with two front arms. “Literally fish out of water,” Aidi calls them, they have gills but live on land and eat crab eggs, following the waterline up to the trees, which they climb. Mind blown.

Aidi isn't just a naturalist; he's an activist. With so many small, dense islands, Langkawi's ecosystem creates good hiding places for the bad guys. For years, a charcoal factory was operating on one islet; the owners had clear-cut the interior, and the understaffed rangers couldn't see through the perimeter treeline, but the animals knew they were being polluted. “The fish left. The birds left,” Aidi says. “They went to the airport. Then, three 747 engines got destroyed by birds. That's when the insurance companies stepped in, and the government called WWF.” Aidi's aerial photos of the factory helped shut down the operation.

A dedicated effort was enacted to draw the area's beloved golden-brown Brahminy kites back to the mangrove-forest waters, including scattering them with chicken guts and skin—food similar to what they'd naturally eat. Biologists say a population of kites has come back if you can chart one generation plus 10 percent. “It should take about 22 years,” Aidi says, and as it happens that is exactly how long it has been since the WWF project launched in 1996. “The birds” Aidi says, “are almost all recovered.” If that's not sufficient evidence that poor, wrongly convicted Mashuri has abandoned her grudge and is letting Langkawi flourish in accordance with its 500 million-year-old birthright, well, perhaps you still need that sixth gin to awaken your inner epic poet. ➤