



Waters and the wildlife – The Datai's rainforest pool

An unforgettable stay where the wild things are

Madeleine Keane laps up the luxury at a rainforest resort on Langkawi, complete with chattering macaques

A pregnant scorpion stopped us in our tracks. Not that we tourists spotted it. There we were pootling along in our air-conditioned Jeep, en route to a spot of forest bathing, when our guide Dev asked the driver to stop. We screeched to a halt, disembarked, and walked back up the road until Dev located the arachnid, gently moved it to one side, while observing that it was with spiderlings.

It was early November, and I was staying in the Datai Langkawi. I'd flown to Malaysia from Thailand where I followed a pleasurable but fairly ascetic regime at the legendary Chiva-Som health farm. Now I'd swapped wheatgrass shots for Champagne and boiled eggs for eggs royale. And yet, while the five-star Datai has a reputation as one of the world's most renowned hotels and indeed it ticks all the

boxes in terms of ambience, cuisine and service, and its beating heart, wilderness.

The late Kerry Hill is due a debt of gratitude. When the celebrated Australian architect was commissioned in the 1980s to design the hotel overlooking the Andaman Sea on Langkawi's north-western shores, he eschewed the typical seafront resort design. His vision was to immerse guests in the majestic rainforest while preserving the coastline. As French architect and interior designer Didier Lefort who worked with Hill on the original project and recently reimagined Datai for the 21st century observed, "if you're in a remarkable setting, allow it to make the statement".

It's some statement. From the moment I arrived at the main lobby where two giant wooden horses – rescued from a Mumbai flea market – framed a view of a pool filled

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Lush – the resort, nestled amongst the foliage

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with bright pink lotuses and hopping with lime green frogs, I was entranced.

For starters, it is an incredibly peaceful place. I stayed in one of the rainforest villas. Perched on stilts beside a rushing stream, this was a lush billet with a huge bathroom and dressing area and a magnificent four-poster bed. To lie in luxurious Egyptian cotton sheets, protected by veils of mosquito nets, teak fan whirring above as the rain pelted the roof and the inhabitants of the jungle kept up their symphony of chirping and chirruping, all felt very Somerset Maugham.

The combination of deep comfort amid the unspoilt wilderness was beguiling. However, delightful as it was to hear the macaque monkeys with their incessant chatter, I had been forewarned: these complete chancers will come in and raid your fruit bowl if you forget to close a window. Quite the party animals – literally – they've been known to open the mini-bar and swipe a beer.

I signed up for a Rainforest After Dark nature walk. And as the light faded to dusk, a zoological cast shaped up for their evening performance.

All manner of creatures came out to play for our evening stroll. Committed naturalist and nature centre manager Dev pointed out squirrels, pied hornbills, bats, geckos, and colugos, also known as flying lemurs. Even though it was dark, our spiderman spied a couple of tarantulas hiding in the crevices of rocks. Nota bene: insect repellent is recommended.



Trash is recycled into biodegradable ash and used as soil conditioner at Datali Langkawi

Later I dined at The Gulai House, where the promise of a showcase of Malaysian culinary tradition was spectacularly delivered in a dark and sticky beef rendang. Among a litany of memorable meals, dinner in The Pavilion was also outstanding. The restaurant was suspended high above the resort on stilts and I feasted in this arboreal canopy on Thai delicacies: prawn and lemongrass spring rolls and crispy soft-shell crab.

Datali served up the stylish gestures' playlist of a luxury hotel. Every day the reclining sunbathers were treated to a plate of icy watermelon and pineapple or a couple of scoops of mango sorbet.

Despite feeling very cossetted, I delighted in the total absence, in such a sophisticated locale, of glitz and bling and the resolutely local nature of everything from the chatty, pleasant staff to Datali's commitment to community. They take the business of protecting this unique special environment seriously, with the Datali Pledge and its four pillars: sustainability, conservation, regeneration, and education.

They walk the walk here, as a tour of their permaculture garden with its zero-waste organic food production system revealed. I learned how the resort consumed 10,000 bottles in three weeks; many were embedded in the very buildings that surrounded us, the remainder of the walls fashioned from cement made in the Asher – an incinerator that turns everything that cannot be recycled into ash.

Unusually, there's no kid's club. Instead, young guests are encouraged to take part in activities such as the upcycling workshop at The Lab. All the resort's detritus, from torn sheets to candlewax, is sent here and I spent an enjoyable couple of hours learning how to make candles, beeswax wrappers and soap – the latter I'm still using a few months later. Kids love this and it's a great way to introduce them to the concept of sustainability.

The team at the nature centre also run mini labs where guests can learn about ecology. And there is everything families would expect from five-star lodgings on the sporting front: from golf and yoga to kayaking through the mangroves and butterfly walks as well as snorkelling and bodyboarding.

I was there courtesy of Irish company – and leading wellness experts – Healing Holidays, so pampering was also on the menu. The beautiful open-sided spa, accessed by a wooden walkway, was a tran-

quil space run by an ebullient Yorkshire woman. My radiance facial was first-rate – not that my opinion was influenced by the fact that I travelled halfway across the globe to be treated with seaweed-based products from VOYA, the company founded in Co Sligo.

For all the luxe, it was not lost on me that my favourite moment in an idyllic sojourn occurred far from the chatter and the cocktails. The highlight started with our rescue of the expectant spider. Then along with a cool couple from Lyons and omniscient Dev, we walked past trees that had stood here for millennia



A pair of Dusky Langur with babies

while we inhaled all those good ions, before reaching a wooden platform cantilevered over a babbling creek.

A young local teacher guided us through Senaman Tua, a gentle, mindful mix of Malay breathing techniques, stretching and movements from martial arts. Time then to plunge into the crystal-clear waters below in the aptly named Crystal Creek. A breakfast of mint tea, dried fruits and nuts followed.

Between my dawn rise, saving the eight-legged mama-to-be and the icy dip, I felt beyond virtuous, nourished, and happy as the proverbial lark to be where the wild things were.

GETTING THERE

● **Healing Holidays can arrange a seven-night stay at The Datali Langkawi, Malaysia, from €1,479pp sharing, including transfers, accommodation and daily breakfast. Price excludes flights. Subject to availability. healingholidays.com**



Madeleine Keane in Datali Langkawi

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