

Although not much bigger than the Isle of Wight, Malaysia's Langkawi Island is home to an array of unique wildlife, including flying lemurs, which can be found living on the jungle-covered slopes of the country's oldest mountain. Just don't mention the polar bears...

WORDS BY MARK EVELEIGH

*The imposing mountains and beautiful beaches of Langkawi tempt sunworshippers and wildlife lovers alike*

# A FLYING VISIT



# WE DON'T MENTION snakes

## IN MY FAMILY.

The fact that my girlfriend is South African and grew up on game reserves doesn't seem to have done anything to diminish her fear (bordering on panic) of serpents. So we refer to them – and only when we absolutely have to – as polar bears.

*Clockwise from top: Temurun Waterfall is a popular place to cool off; a group of dusky leaf monkeys; the swimming pool at The Datai Langkawi hotel; the Junglewalla; Irshad Mobarak; a long-tailed macaque spies on Mark's girlfriend Narina*

It turns out that there are a lot of polar bears on Pulau Langkawi, the largest island of the Langkawi archipelago off the coast of northwestern Malaysia. And the locals seem to talk about them a lot.

Even before the hotel car had purred away from the airport the driver was telling us about snakes that are so numerous, and of such spectacular size, that you frequently see them from the road.

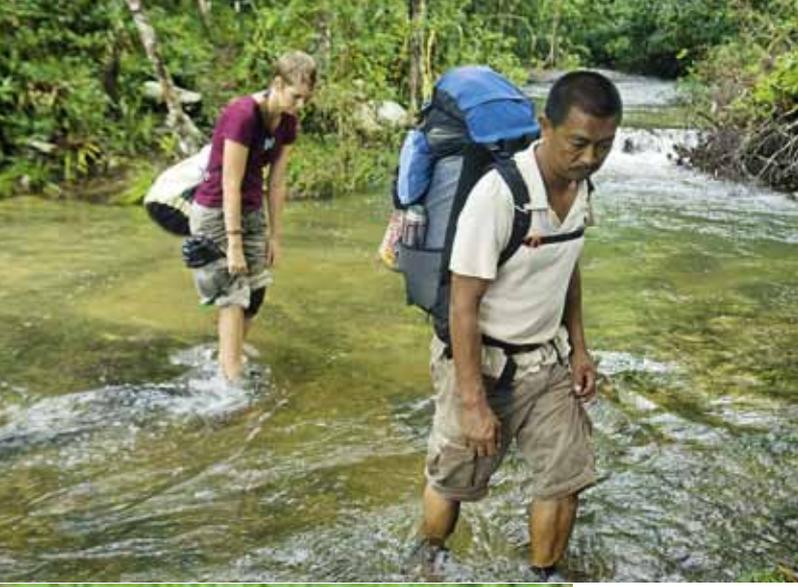
"But don't worry," he said, "the poisonous ones aren't on the roads. They stay deep in the rainforest."

An hour later we were in the lounge at The Datai resort sipping frosted glasses of Tiger beer with resident naturalist Irshad Mobarak. Malay TV's famous 'Junglewalla' was recalling his experiences while filming a TV documentary on forest elephants on the mainland when he dropped the bomb.

"The biggest wild creature I've seen on this particular island though," he said, pausing for effect, "was an absolutely huuuge reticulated python."

We were due to venture deep into the rainforest – in virtually the same region this monster had been seen. Fortunately, despite her ➤





**Above:** Narina and guide Shaaban Arshad cross a jungle river. **Left:** a placid water buffalo



phobia, Narina is used to trekking in snake country – it's just a matter of practice after all. You keep your eyes peeled, watch the trail and, if you're obsessive enough about it, you very quickly become adept at untangling the camouflaged pattern of polar bear skin from the tangled roots all around your feet. You just keep your eyes fixed on the trail and...

"Langkawi is home to what I call the Fabulous Flying 5," Mobarak continued. "Africa has its Big 5 but we have flying lemurs, flying squirrels, flying foxes, flying dragons...we even have flying snakes."

Needless to say, Narina and I hadn't come to this remote island in the Straits of Malacca looking for flying polar bears. We were in search of the mysterious colugo, the fascinating creature that's also known as the flying lemur, cloaked monkey or skin monkey.

**THREE DAYS LATER** we were in the middle of a tropical monsoon, staggering up the slope of Langkawi's Machinchang Mountain with our eyes peeled for this flying primate. Mobarak had left us to return to the Malaysian mainland and I imagined that he'd been disappointed to miss out on our badly timed, late monsoon jungle trek, but he'd actually seemed quite relieved to be handing over the responsibility to his deputy, Shaaban Arshad.

Arshad looked every inch the tough jungle man with his short Malay parang (machete) tied around his belt with a piece of no-nonsense rattan vine. He had already proved his worth with softly spoken advice on which plants to use to treat cuts or ease upset stomachs, between

## Colugo confusion

How the flying lemur (or should that be cloaked monkey?) defied scientists

The fascinating colugo is often known as the flying lemur or the cloaked monkey, or even the skin monkey. In fact, from the time it was discovered naturalists seem to have been unable to decide just what to call this bizarre creature.

"It's certainly the strangest animal on the island and has caused science no end of confusion since it was first described in 1757," explains naturalist Irshad 'Junglewalla' Mobarak. "Carl Von Linnaeus, the father of taxonomy, first classified it as a gliding primate – *Dermoptera* (you could call it a 'skin monkey')."

"Later he was declared wrong, and in subsequent years the colugo continued to be shifted from one pigeonhole to the next. Now it seems that new DNA evidence suggests that Linnaeus was indeed correct and that the colugo may be a type of flying primate after all."

These bizarre creatures seem to do most of their arboreal base-jumping only in the evenings, and during the day it is only the paler-coloured females you tend to see hanging, wrapped inside their leather capes, on the trunks of the tallest trees. The Datai Resort ([www.dataihotels.com](http://www.dataihotels.com)) is one of the best places in the world to see these unique creatures in action and resident nature guide Mobarak is delighted to count them as the stars of his popular nature walks.

Far beyond the normal realm of nature walks, Mobarak's enthusiasm for the field of biomimicry has enthralled everyone from the most high-powered company CEO to animal-avid children.

"We just have to watch and learn," he smiles in delight, as he relates how the beak of the kingfisher has given us a model for more efficient high-speed trains; how the humble begonia plant can teach us how to maximise solar energy; how we've learned from the coral polyp how to make cement at ambient temperatures."

Irshad Mobarak describes himself as an 'optimistic conservationist', not what you usually find.

"We're rare creatures," he admits, "but basically I believe that if we are intelligent enough to learn from nature, and to adapt as evolution has taught us, then we still have a chance of undoing the harm we've done to our planet."



recommending the leaves that make good substitutes for toilet-paper. He even showed us how to milk a tree, releasing prodigious quantities of a liquid that looked and tasted very like milk, with a shallow machete slice in its bark.

He shunned our plastic bottle of leech repellent lotion and showed us instead how to mash a cigarette in palms moistened with spit, and to plaster the resulting tobacco mulch around our ankles. The jungle floor is crawling with leeches during the wet season and Arshad explained that simple instant coffee is the best treatment for stemming the bleeding. (Presumably it also disguised the scent of blood that brought other thirsty leeches looping towards us).

Narina handled her first leech attacks staunchly and only seemed to be minimally grossed out by the bloodsucking critters that tried to work their way optimistically ever northward up our legs, leaving spreading circles of scarlet even after they had drunk their fill and fallen off. More impressively, she seemed not to have been permanently traumatised by the bright-green, metre-long polar bear that had prompted her to perform an impromptu and impressive sword-dance as it slithered between her boots.

**WE TRUDGED DOGGEDLY ONWARDS** for several hours – blood and mud squelching in our boots – towards a pass just below Machinchang's highest peak, somewhat awestruck by the fact that we were climbing the oldest mountain in the Malay Peninsula. Some 550 million years ago this ancient rock had been part of the supercontinent of Gondwanaland (comprising what would later become Australia, Africa and South America). Then, 250 million years ago, tectonic forces pushed Machinchang Mountain above the surface of the sea to create Langkawi. Glacial dropstones from the Antarctic have been found on Machinchang that date back an incredible one-billion years.

After the mountain rose above the sea, continuous weathering has eroded the great ridge into a series of dramatic peaks. Beneath the canopy of this dense rainforest it was difficult to see anything at all and we had to take Arshad's word for it when he said that the locals had counted no fewer than 44 peaks running along Machinchang's ridge.

The 'weathering' seemed to show little sign of letting up as we climbed ever upwards, and had barely eased at all by the time Arshad led us to a relatively open patch of mountainside where we made a camp of jungle hammocks fitted with mosquito-nets and roofs (tents are almost useless in steep, densely forested terrain).

That evening we sat around a fire that was



*Clockwise from top: the Machinchang mountain range and forest reserve; keeping up fluid levels is vital in the humidity; a water monitor; a dusky leaf monkey; Shaaban Arshad showing how to milk a tree*

## Ancient oak woods crowd out the fir plantations and the pure air carries only the scents of sea and forest

puffing generously with insect repellent smoke from a heap of carefully selected leaves, as Arshad told us about his jungle apprenticeship. His first few trips up here had been with the famous Langkawi shaman who was his grandfather: "We camped here while we looked for jungle medicine. Especially a plant called tongkat ali," he cast a bashful glance towards Narina. "Some people believe it's traditional Viagra."

He told us they'd also collected wild honey and, in the monumental 40m trees, would often find as many as 15 hives. They had a special system for harvesting from these dangerously buzzing skyscrapers: "When the tree was that infested we had to tackle them at night. I'd leave a lantern at the bottom of the tree and climb up in the dark with just a smouldering coconut husk. When I got close I'd blow on the husk so that the sparks would fall. The bees would get angry and chase the sparks down. While they tried to attack the lantern I'd be cutting the honey out of the nests," he laughed.

In those days traditional hunting was still considered sustainable. They could harvest the same nest twice and still get up to 20kg of honey the second time. After that, however, they would move on and leave the bees in peace. In his teenage years Arshad would come with his friends and a pack of dogs to hunt mouse-deer. In one hunting trip he claimed they could bag 60 of the little deer and it's hard to imagine that any population could sustain that sort of onslaught.

**HOWEVER, TIMES HAVE CHANGED** and hunting is prohibited here now. The chic tourist resorts down on the coast have brought an alternate source of revenue to the area and Arshad is now one of the region's leading guides. These days he spends his time trekking these remote hills with adventure-seeking tourists via Irshad Mobarak's Junglewalla operation.

As I boosted the fire under the smoke-blackened kettle next morning, I was surprised by the harsh cackling call of a flock of curious hornbills that had come to investigate this bizarre invasion of their mountain. Across much of South East Asia hornbills are considered to be good omens, and as we clambered up the treacherously slimy slope towards the mist-shrouded peak of Machinchang we could only hope that they would provide a boost to our own



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efforts, but the monsoon mist was here to stay and allowed us just the merest glimpse of the view northwards to the islands of Thailand.

**ON OUR DESCENT DOWN** the other side of the mountain we had several rivers to cross and the coffee-coloured current swirled and tugged powerfully around our legs. The rain began to lash down even more persistently when we reached our last camp that afternoon and continued to fall unrelentingly for 13 hours. There was a brief pause that brought a squadron of flying ants battering optimistically at the mesh of our mosquito-nets and once I heard a ghostly cry from the trees above us and wondered if maybe it was a colugo, a cloaked monkey. I remembered hearing a similar call while staying in a camp in central Borneo, where the noise had worried my Dayak guides: "If a colugo calls," they whispered, "it means someone in camp will die."

It's strange how human beings often feel a need to endow even the most harmless of creatures with deadly traits, but the following morning our final descent passed without incident. I couldn't help being disappointed. After surviving the mountain's leeches and polar bears, I only wished its magnificent flying lemurs had been so keen to grace us with their presence.

*Above: the tropical paradise of Datai Bay.  
Below: the peculiar little colugo or cloaked monkey*



## TRIP ADVISER

**COST RATING** ★★★★★

**SAMPLE PACKAGE TOUR:** The Datai Langkawi can tailor specific accommodation and wildlife tour packages together with Junglewalla. The rate for a five-night stay in a deluxe room with breakfast, non-motorised water sports, paired with a Junglewalla jungle trekking tour starts from GBP 1,175 for two persons (flights not included). See [www.dataihotels.com](http://www.dataihotels.com) and for more information on the Junglewalla's Natural History Tours see [www.junglewalla.com](http://www.junglewalla.com).

**GETTING THERE:** Return flights from Heathrow or Manchester to Langkawi – for example via Kuala Lumpur with MAS – cost from £519 and take approximately 15 hours (visit [www.roundtheworldflights.com](http://www.roundtheworldflights.com); Tel: 020 7704 5700).

**VISA REQUIREMENTS FROM THE UK:** British nationals do not need to apply for a visa to visit Malaysia. You will normally be given a stamp (no charge) on arrival for a stay of up to 3 months.

**TIPS & WARNINGS:** Langkawi is a popular tourist island so there a good choice of shops and places to eat in and around the main town, Kuah, and at the resorts. The island follows the Kedah state practice of having Friday and Saturday as the weekend. Taxis can be hired for exploring but have no meters so the price should be fixed with the driver before the trip. There are some dangerous jellyfish present in the sea between May and October.

**WHEN TO GO:** The best time to visit is between March and September, when humidity is lower and rainfall is relatively isolated (although there's a reason why they call this the rainforest). Sea breezes stop temperatures from climbing much above 30°C. September and October tend to be the wettest months. Monsoon-style downpours will limit the trekking potential and few boats will operate in stormy rainy season conditions.

### TOUR OPERATORS

**STEPPE TRAVEL**

Tel: 0843 634 7162  
[www.steppestravel.co.uk](http://www.steppestravel.co.uk)

**KUONI**

Tel: 01306 856 729  
[www.kuoni.co.uk](http://www.kuoni.co.uk)

**JASMINE HOLIDAYS**

Tel: 0333 7000 747  
[www.jasmineholidays.co.uk](http://www.jasmineholidays.co.uk)