



Contributors

In the spirit of the new year, we ask our contributors: where will wanderlust take them in 2014... near or far?

GREG DU TOIT, Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2013, Gallery, p84

I've got the Congo Basin on my radar. It's one of the last remaining wilderness areas in the world. I'd love to photograph the forest elephants because they've been mostly captured with camera traps and I'd like to get some intimate shots of them.

DIMEJI ALARA, stylist, fashion blogger and writer: Looking Good in Lagos, p116

It has to be Paris: although it's my second home, I never get tired of it. There's always something new to discover there. The city never gets old.

NARINA EXELBY, roaming photojournalist and editor: Rainforest Dwelling, p78

The plan, for now, is to move from Greece to Turkey, Spain and Morocco, then South America and back to Asia sometime around July.

Clockwise, from top: Greg du Toit on location. Dimeji Alara. Narina Exelby.

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The SAA Wine Awards selected KWV's Classic Cape Tawny, a fortified wine, to be served to SAA's Premium Class passengers and business lounge patrons during 2014.

KWV winemaker Anneke du Plessis with Captain Gustav Viljoen of SAA.



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Publisher Khanyi Dhlomo

Editor Ingrid Wood

Group Business Director

Elaine Chandler

Executive Assistant: CEO

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FEATURES

Group Executive Editor Fiona Davern

Features Editor Jabulile Ngwenya

Editorial Assistant Vuyokazi Mnyengeza

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Lifestyle Production Manager

Lauren Nicoll

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DESIGN

Creative Director Coralie Elsie

Art Director Shaun Mallett

Picture Editor Siyamthemba Bobotyana

EDITORIAL

Group Copy Editor Gwen Podbrey

Copy Editor Nicola Poplewell

Production Assistant Candice Pretorius

ADVERTISING SALES

Business Development Director

Leigh Rein

National Sales Manager Sally Young

sally.young@ndalomediamedia.com

Advertising Sales Executive (Gauteng & KwaZulu-Natal) Lara Eliot

lara.eliot@ndalomediamedia.com

Advertising Sales Executive (Eastern and Western Cape) Tanya Liebenberg

tanya.liebenberg@ndalomediamedia.com

Advertising Sales Executive (Government) Dumisani Mbatsha

dumisani.mbatsha@ndalomediamedia.com

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Marketing & Operations Director

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WEBSITE QUERIES

webhelp@flysaa.com

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Founder & CEO Khanyi Dhlomo

Directors Lwazi Dhlomo,

Raj Lalbahadur

CFO Christelle Dunn

Financial Accountant Cherise Viljoen

Financial Assistant Cynthia Mukhari

Human Resources Manager Jane Philip

WHERE TO FIND US

Address: Bryanston Corner, 1st Floor,

Building B, 18 Ealing Crescent (Off

Culross Road), Cnr Main Road &

Bryanston Drive, Bryanston 2191

Postal Address: PO Box 2077,

Lonehill, 2062

011 300 6700

011 300 6767

CONTACT US

sawubonaeditorial@ndalomediamedia.com

sawubonasales@ndalomediamedia.com



CONTRIBUTORS: Dimeji Alara, Bevan Barker, Dion Chang, Heather Dugmore, Sias du Plessis, Greg du Toit, Narina Exelby, Kerryn Fischer, Helen Grange, Brett Haggard, Mikail Hansa, Keri Harvey, Debbie Hathway, Gillian McLaren, Kim Novick, Phiona Okumu, Irene Quirk, Daniella Renson, Anton Ressel, Stuart Rothgiesser, Daniel Scheffler, Denise Slabbert, Mzolis Witbooi, Brett Wood

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Langkawi is one of 99 islands that comprise the Langkawi Geopark in the Andaman Sea.



RAINFOREST

ON AN ISLAND KNOWN FOR ITS BEAUTIFUL BEACHES, **NARINA EXELBY** SPENDING RAINY NIGHTS IN A HAMMOCK WAS A FAR CRY FROM THE

DWELLING

WALKED FOR THREE DAYS THROUGH THE RAINFORESTS OF LANGKAWI. COMFORT OF HER VILLA, BUT SHE REVELLED IN WHAT SHE DISCOVERED



From deep within the rainforests of Langkawi, a peak of sandstone rises that's one of the oldest in South-East Asia. It's called Gunung Machinchang and is a mountain that's been at battle with its nemesis, Gunung Raya, for millennia. Locals on this tropical Malaysian island will tell you stories about colossal feuds between two giants, where furious battles were fought and the landscape changed as one giant sliced immense cuts into the other with an axe.

The version geologists tell is no less dramatic. Once part of mighty Gondwanaland, Machinchang broke away from the super-continent about 220 million years ago. As it rose from what's now the Andaman Sea, it collided with a mound of hot magma, pushing it up to form Gunung Raya, which now stands in the very centre of Langkawi. Over millions of years – long

before the rainforest was established – torrential rains battered the island's jagged peaks, eroding them and forming the deep cuts and valleys that exist today. Both mountains now define the landscape of Langkawi, which is one of 99 islands (104, if you count at low tide) that belong to the Langkawi Geopark off the north-west coast of Malaysia, close to the border of Thailand.

You might know Langkawi as a haven of languid beaches and idyllic, lazy, tropical holidays; I did too. But after leaving the luxurious sanctuary of The Datai Hotel and spending three exhilarating days climbing the mountains and walking among the regal trees around Machinchang, I now also know the island for its tangled, rarely explored rainforests, the stillness of nights slept between towering ironwoods and the intricate balance of life in this ancient landscape.

When we set off, it was raining: the kind of hard, bucketing ➤

Clockwise, from top left: Around an early-morning campfire, Shaaban Arshad tells stories of his rainforest experiences. Travel writer Narina Exelby rubs damp tobacco – a natural leech-repellent – on her legs. Locals and holidaymakers relax at the bottom of the Terjun waterfall. The quiet beach in front of The Datai Hotel in Langkawi is virtually untouched. It offers a view of many islands (some of them belonging to Thailand).

Opposite: The gardens at The Datai, a luxury hotel on the north-west coast of Langkawi, have been designed to blend in with the surrounding rainforest.





THE BEST OF BOTH

Langkawi is known for its luxury hotels and The Datai (www.dataihotels.com) is one of the island's finest. It's set on the quiet Datai Peninsula, overlooking a private bay on the Andaman Sea and surrounded by virgin rainforest. The suites are designed for ultimate comfort and privacy, while the spa, three restaurants and beach club will ensure your every need is met. Irshad Mobarak's company, Junglewalla (<http://junglewalla.com>), offers hotel guests complimentary nature walks around the property (highly recommended). Its knowledgeable guides also offer longer day tours to various parts of Langkawi, which are truly special.



downpour that drenches everything within moments. "Do you think it will clear soon?" I asked our guide, Shaaban Arshad, who simply looked towards the sky and smiled. He comes from a long line of medicine men and knows this rainforest better than almost anyone else. As a child, he walked the jungle with his grandfather, learning about the medicinal value of the plants and the delicate roles they play in the rainforest's ecosystem. He also watched the bees, following them to their hives – bees always fly in a straight line, he told us – to gather their wild honey. It's something he still does today.

The rain did ease up, but I didn't notice when, because the deeper we hiked into the forest – where very few people have ever walked before – the more a fascinating world began to open up. As we clambered over fallen durian trees, waded through chest-high grasses, hoisted our bodies over dolomite boulders and ducked under snaking lianas, my attention was diverted from how to keep dry for the night to analysing the shapes of leaves, listening for the call of the great hornbill and identifying the fragrances of various plants. "This one will add much flavour to your rice," Shaaban pointed out. "That one will settle a bad stomach. This one will take headaches away. That one's good for men," he said, clenching his fist for emphasis.

Shaaban, my partner Mark and I climbed for three hours towards the peak of Machinchang before stringing up our hammocks for the night. By that time, I'd honed my leech-removing skills, having learnt from Shaaban that the best way to keep the critters at bay is to rub damp tobacco on your body. I also learnt that holding tobacco (or coffee) against a leech bite is a good way to staunch the bleeding. Once attached to your limbs, leeches release an anaesthetic (so you can't feel them sucking you), as well as an anticoagulant, so that their bites continue bleeding long after they've dropped off you.

We didn't have much use for tobacco that first night: we were too high for the leeches, which are usually found in areas where wild pigs and deer are common. Parasites they may be, but they're an important part of the rainforest's food chain.

Their bloodsucking is one of numerous examples of parasitic and symbiotic relationships in this fascinating ecosystem. These had been highlighted a few days earlier at The Datai, which is surrounded by forest on the quiet north-west coast of Langkawi. From its ultra-luxurious beach villas, a lovely bay sweeps around, bringing a few islands – some of them a part of Thailand – into

view. From the beach club, the property stretches back through beautifully tended gardens that blur into the rainforest and it was on this fringe that I met Irshad Mobarak, arguably Malaysia's most prominent naturalist. He's been guiding tours and walks on Langkawi for more than 20 years and almost every morning, he takes guests of The Datai on a truly memorable ramble through the hotel's property.

From the large poolside deck, which stretches into a canopy of trees, Irshad pointed out the strangler fig, the keystone species of this rainforest because the trees flower at different times, each pollinated by its own particular wasp and providing a continual source of fruit for birds, animals, monkeys and bats throughout the year.

The strangler fig we were looking at would have had its seed dropped into a crevice of its host tree. It would have taken only a few years for the fig to drop its roots down to ground level, establishing the stranglehold into which the host would grow and eventually die. Two species of monkeys were cavorting in the tree that morning: dusky leaf monkeys (also known as spectacled langurs) which, with grey patches around their eyes, have a permanent look of bewilderment, and a troop of

cheeky macaques. In another tree just a few metres from the hotel's reception, a female colugo – the monkey with the "wings" of a bat – huddled against the trunk, oblivious to the scientific chaos that surrounds the description of her species. Although the colugo was classified as a primate in 1757 by Carl van Linnæus, the father of taxonomy, evolutionists in the late 1800s declared it to be of the order *Dermoptera* (a species all of its own), but recent DNA findings show that the colugo may, in fact, belong to a sister group of primates.

On our second night in the forest, the rain again bucketed down and for 13 solid hours we were confined to our only shelter: our hammocks. By that time, we'd already walked a solid eight hours, almost to the peak of Machinchang and then low down through the valleys, finding our way through the tangled rainforest whose roots were established some 12 million years ago. It was a humbling night, spent in this place where continents collide and existence is based on a delicate balance of relationships. Here no species has the arrogance to attempt to live in isolation and, as I plucked another leech from between my toes and flicked it away, I recalled our African spirit of *ubuntu*: "I am because you are." 🌈

Above: Irshad Mobarak is one of Malaysia's leading naturalists.

Opposite, clockwise, from top left: After a night of rain, Shaaban crosses a swollen mountain stream. The Oriental Village at the base of Langkawi's popular cable car offers visitors an array of ways to spend their time. Travel writer Mark Eveleigh sets up camp in the jungle on Langkawi. The Datai Hotel offers guests both a beach and rainforest holiday. A dusky leaf monkey on Langkawi. Horse-and-cart rides at the Oriental Village.