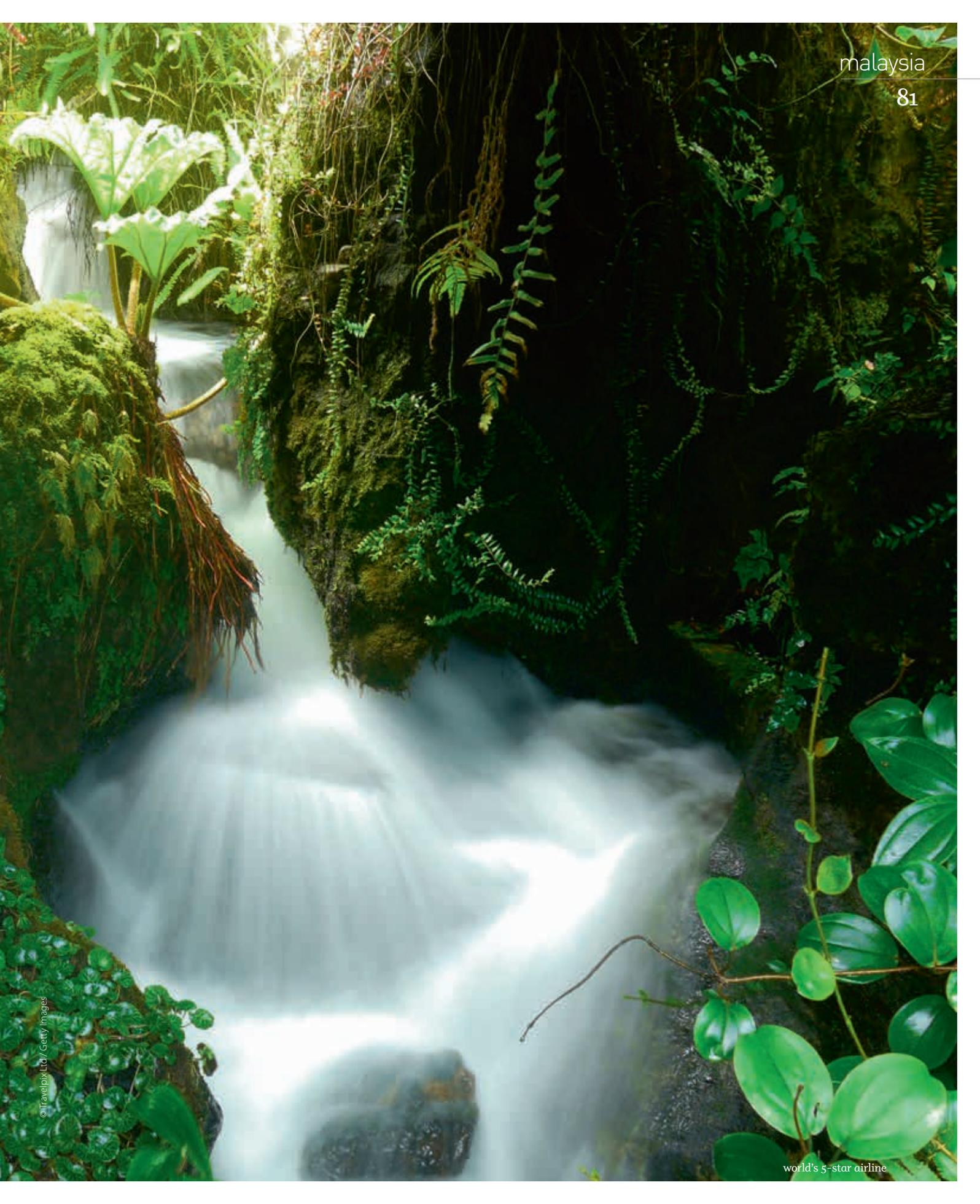


MALAYSIA'S NATURAL WONDERS

Malaysia is home to some of the most exciting wildlife-watching in South East Asia. Mark Eveleigh enlists the help of celebrity 'Junglewalla' Irshad Mobarak for recommendations on some of his country's greatest parks and a couple of unexpected secret spots.





“Africa might have its Big Five, but Malaysia is home to what I call the Fabulous Flying Five,” says Irshad Mobarak. “We have flying snakes, flying squirrels, flying foxes, flying dragons, and even the world’s only flying primate.”

As Malaysia’s favourite celebrity-naturalist, **Mobarak** is known to TV viewers as ‘The Junglewalla’ (see junglewalla.com). We’re walking through the rainforest at **Datai Bay** on **Langkawi**’s north coast watching one of the world’s most unusual creatures, the flying lemur, as it flails across the canopy with all the finesse of a hurled coal-sack.

It’s hard not to fall in love with the apparently clumsy flying lemur though, and Mobarak’s enthusiasm for his country’s wild areas in general is infectious.

“I grew up playing in the jungle and have always loved the outdoors,” he says. “Malaysia’s incredible natural reserves are still the perfect Junglewalla playground.”

The immense **Taman Negara National Park** (4,343km²) is the pride of Peninsular Malaysia’s wilderness areas. This mountainous expanse of ancient rainforest – often estimated to be the world’s oldest at 130 million years – is still home to the Sumatran rhinoceros, the Malayan *gaur* (a sort of bison), tapir, clouded leopard, sun bear, the Asian elephant, and even the Malayan tiger.

“A must-do at Taman Negara is a river trip with the chance of seeing hornbills and other wildlife, and the adrenalin rush of shooting the rapids,” says Mobarak. “There’s something about a jungle river experience that brings out the child in you.”

To the west, **Cameron Highlands** was actually established as a hill-station where ‘heat-oppressed’ colonials could escape in an idyllic English-inspired highland haven, complete with Tudor-style architecture and afternoon tea. Stretching across an area roughly the

same size as Singapore, ‘the Camerons’ offer some of the most uniquely pleasant jungle trekking in the world.

Far to the south, and way down almost at sea level, you find **Endau-Rompin National Park** (the mainland’s second biggest). With no less than 26km of trails, this lowland forest wilderness is a favourite escape for other frustrated junglewallas from the steel-and-glass canyons of nearby Singapore. Keep your eyes peeled for bear cats, gibbons, and hornbills, and if you’re very lucky, you might even bump into a rhino or tiger.

“Malaysia is nothing short of an ecological gem,” says Mobarak. “From the mountains to the reef, the ease of accessibility and quality of accommodation make it second to none.”

While mainland Malaysia often surprises visitors with some of South East Asia’s most accessible wildlife experiences, wilderness aficionados are understandably drawn by the excitement and allure of **Borneo**,



Niah National Park





Cameron Highlands, Malaysia

with its tradition of fearless headhunters and swashbuckling **White Rajahs**. Just two hours from **Kuching** – once the ancestral seat of the Rajahs of Sarawak – you find **Gunung Gading National Park**. If the dense forests of this great jungle island seem daunting, then **Gunung Gading**, with its good infrastructure and well-marked trails, is your ideal introduction to Borneo. If you're lucky, you might even coincide your visit with the blooming of the rafflesia, the world's biggest flower, with a one-metre diameter.

Niah National Park lies far up the South China Sea coast of **Sarawak**. "Getting to Niah is half the fun," Mobarak points out. "First you boat along the river, then there's a trek... and finally the jaw-dropping enormity of the caves."

Archaeologists have established that as early as 40,000 years ago humans were sheltering under the 75m-high ceiling of the **Great Cave** here. Even today the local communities harvest bird's nests (for soup) from the swiftlet colonies that cling to the rocky walls.

Gunung Mulu far overshadows even Niah as the largest cave chamber in the world. The so-called **Sarawak Chamber** is so massive that it could accommodate 40 Boeing 747s without overlapping their wings. More than just a cave complex though, Gunung Mulu National Park is a wildlife-watcher's dream, with sun bears (South East Asia's only bear species), eight species of hornbills, and 27 species of bats, including a colony of wrinkle-lipped bats that numbers into the millions.

The most famous tourism drawcard in all of Borneo is certainly **Mt Kinabalu**, in the Malaysian state of **Sabah**.

Kinabalu Park was established in 1964 and is crowned by the highest mountain on the island of Borneo. Because it takes in such a vast range of climatic zones – from dense lowland forest to the stunted alpine shrubs of the summit – this is one of the richest natural habitats

in the world, with more than 4,500 species of flora and fauna, including 326 bird and around 100 mammal species. Particularly unusual endemic sightings that might stick in your memory would be the Kinabalu giant red leech and the Kinabalu giant earthworm.

Each year as many as 400,000 visitors come to gaze on Mt Kinabalu and around 50,000 climb to the 4,095m summit (which is actually still rising by a height of about 5mm a year).

The **Crocker Range National Park**, by comparison, is relatively unknown, despite being the largest park in Sabah (1,399km²). The Crockers are known for five species of primates, including orang-utans, gibbons, the fluffy teddybear-like tarsier, and the ubiquitous macaques. In the mangroves you'll also find proboscis monkeys – distinctive for their bulbous noses.



Climbers at Low's Peak, on the summit of Mt Kinabalu at dawn. Kinabalu National Park, Sabah, Borneo, Malaysia



The Borneo pygmy elephant

“Malaysia is the only country that is home to two species of elephants,” says Mobarak with obvious pride. “The Asiatic elephant is found on the peninsula and the Borneo pygmy elephant lives in Sabah.”

While Malaysia clearly offers a lifetime of challenges for the most intrepid junglewalla, it’s also true that great things often come in small packages in this country. Although the island of Langkawi is just a little over half the size of Singapore, it boasts as many different species of birds as there are in the whole of England.

Even while you’re lying on the beautiful beach at Datai Bay you’ll be entertained by elegant dusky leaf monkeys, browsing deer, and swooping hornbills. Since this is also one of the best places in the world to watch

that star of the ‘Fabulous Flying Five’, there’s even a chance that your sun-lounger could become a landing pad for a flying lemur.

As Malaysia’s ace-Junglewalla puts it: “Love is always in the air in Langkawi.” 🌿



A Sunda Flying Lemur



Sky Bridge, Langkawi, Malaysia

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