



WHY LANGKAWI  
IS A HAVEN  
FOR THE WILD  
AT HEART



**Nostalgia trips:**  
our writers  
revisit cities  
a decade on

**Weekend  
warriors:**  
two ways to  
enjoy KL

**Private island  
paradises a  
short hop from  
Singapore**




# Encounters

This issue: dining in Jinan, chilling out in Phuket, rafting in Guilin



## go... jungle trekking in... langkawi

*Keen to spend a weekend in the wilderness, Singapore city slicker Jane Leung heads deep into the rainforest of the UNESCO World Geopark*

Turn the page for more exciting encounters 



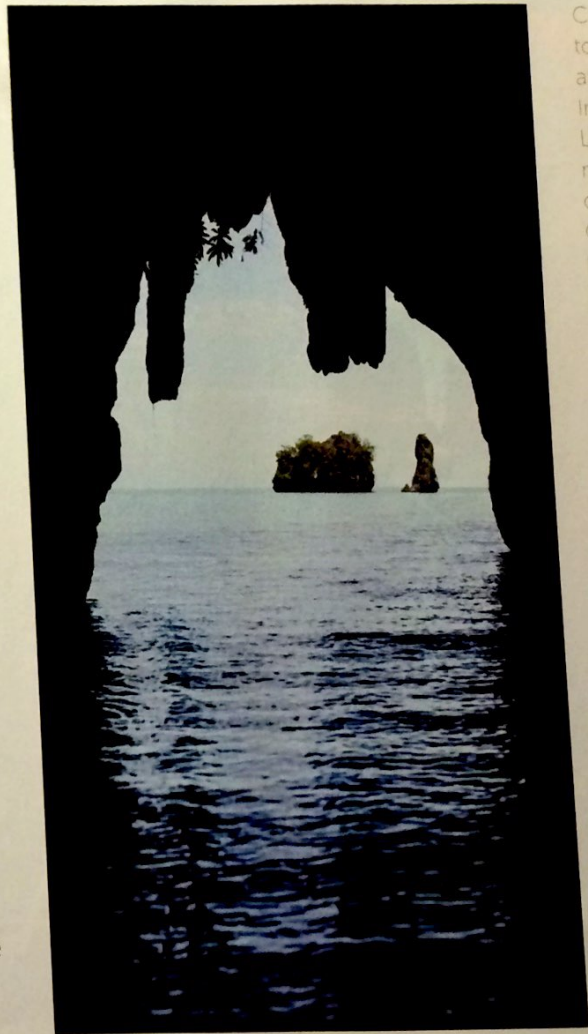
Getting from the skyscrapers of Singapore to the middle of nowhere is surprisingly easy. Leave the office at 11.10am, touch down at 2.30pm in Langkawi and drive 30 minutes to a nature resort like The Datai Langkawi.

It's here that I drop my bags at the entrance to a 10 million-year-old virgin rainforest. In less than four hours door to door, I've gone from tapping out my metro card to beating my own path beneath a lush canopy alongside spectacled langurs.

For me, blowing off steam on a Friday in Singapore generally means downing an icy Asahi or two on Club Street, but this weekend I want to hide out in the wilderness. Langkawi, a UNESCO World Geopark, is on the north-west coast of Malaysia. Made up of 99 islands, it's home to 550 million years of geological history. It's not the sexiest tropical hotspot you're likely to find, but Langkawi was the first landmass in South-East Asia to rise from the ocean with landscape formations directly linked to the original super continent, Pangaea. With this in mind, I feel far from the city in terms of both space and time. **Scar**

The Datai Langkawi is nestled between the Andaman Sea and Mat Cincang mountains, where I swap my suitcase for a backpack and hike to Datai Bay, a white-sand beach exclusive to the hotel. It's the perfect launch pad for a host of trails. I meet up with Malaysian naturalist Irshad Mohd Yusoff, the founder of JungleWalla Tours, who has consulted for National Geographic and the Discovery Channel. To put our surroundings in perspective, he tells me, "The volcanic island of Bali is young in comparison to Langkawi; it only rose from the sea five million years ago." With





Clockwise from top left: guide and naturalist Irshad Mobarak, Langkawi's 10 million-year-old rainforest; Opposite page, from top: Langkawi island; overhead view of The Datai Langkawi

sunlight struggling to squeeze through dense foliage, he points up at what looks like a giant toucan with a sliced mango on its forehead. It's actually one of the Datai's resident male hornbills. Irshad tells me that this famously monogamous bird is probably on its way to meet its "wife".

The khaki-clad naturalist is a fantastic storyteller. He explains that non-native plants can't cope with parasitic locals, or "plants that don't pay rent" as he puts it. Speaking of parasites, my mosquito-bite count is up to 10. I need a quicker way to cover more ground, so I get some hooves.

I take a taxi to Perdana Stables in the island's south-east. I'm shown to a steed sporting a blonde emo fringe. My guide, a statuesque, 22-year-old South African named Briette, leads me into the jungle. We cross a muddy creek and my emo horse's fairy-tale white coat fades to the shade of grey summer-camp gruel. We begin to clip-clop up the mountain to the Seven Wells waterfall. Briette tells me that she was sailing with her family four years ago when they docked in Langkawi. »



Jane says farewell to Langkawi on a Blue Water Star Sailing sunset cruise.

**THE DETAILS**



**The Datai Langkawi**

A luxury nature retreat.  
Jln Teluk Datai,  
[thedatai.com](http://thedatai.com)

**The Perdana Stables**

A family-run facility that offers jungle tours.  
[langkawihorses.com](http://langkawihorses.com)

**JungleWalla Tours**

Tour guides educate travellers on Langkawi's natural history.  
[junglewalla.com](http://junglewalla.com)

**Blue Water Star Sailing**

Private yacht charters that sail the Langkawi archipelago and Andaman Sea.  
[bluewaterstarsailing.com](http://bluewaterstarsailing.com)

"It was just a stop but my parents fell in love with the island, so we stayed." Briette and I duck beneath low-hanging branches and she continues, "Compared to Cape Town it's humid, but it's the most beautiful jungle I've ever seen. I love taking the horses to Pantai Kok [beach]." Nodding, I look on as her mare seems to struggle on the uphill grade, but she tells me it trains them for endurance rides. Finally, we arrive at the falls. It looks to have come straight out of *The Jungle Book*: the water plunges from a 90m cliff into seven turquoise pools.

On the last day of my visit, it's a sweltering 37°C and Irshad and I take a boat into The Kilim Karst Geoforest Park, home to a thick mangrove forest and Malaysia's oldest limestone formations. Mangrove swamps always look post-apocalyptic to me, like sunken forests. In reality, mangroves are just freshwater plants that have adapted to their saltwater environment. "Lick this," Irshad says as he plucks a leaf from a mangrove. It tastes like a potato chip. "They need fresh water, so they have special adaptations, glands that take in the fresh water and remove sodium particles, so they're really sweating it out." Holding the salty leaf in the sun, my skin mimics its behaviour. The tide is low enough for us to glide through a cave embedded with fossils dating back 250 million years. While examining some rock oysters, I mentally prepare myself for my return flight to Singapore. I only wish it wasn't such a short trip back to the concrete jungle. ☹



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