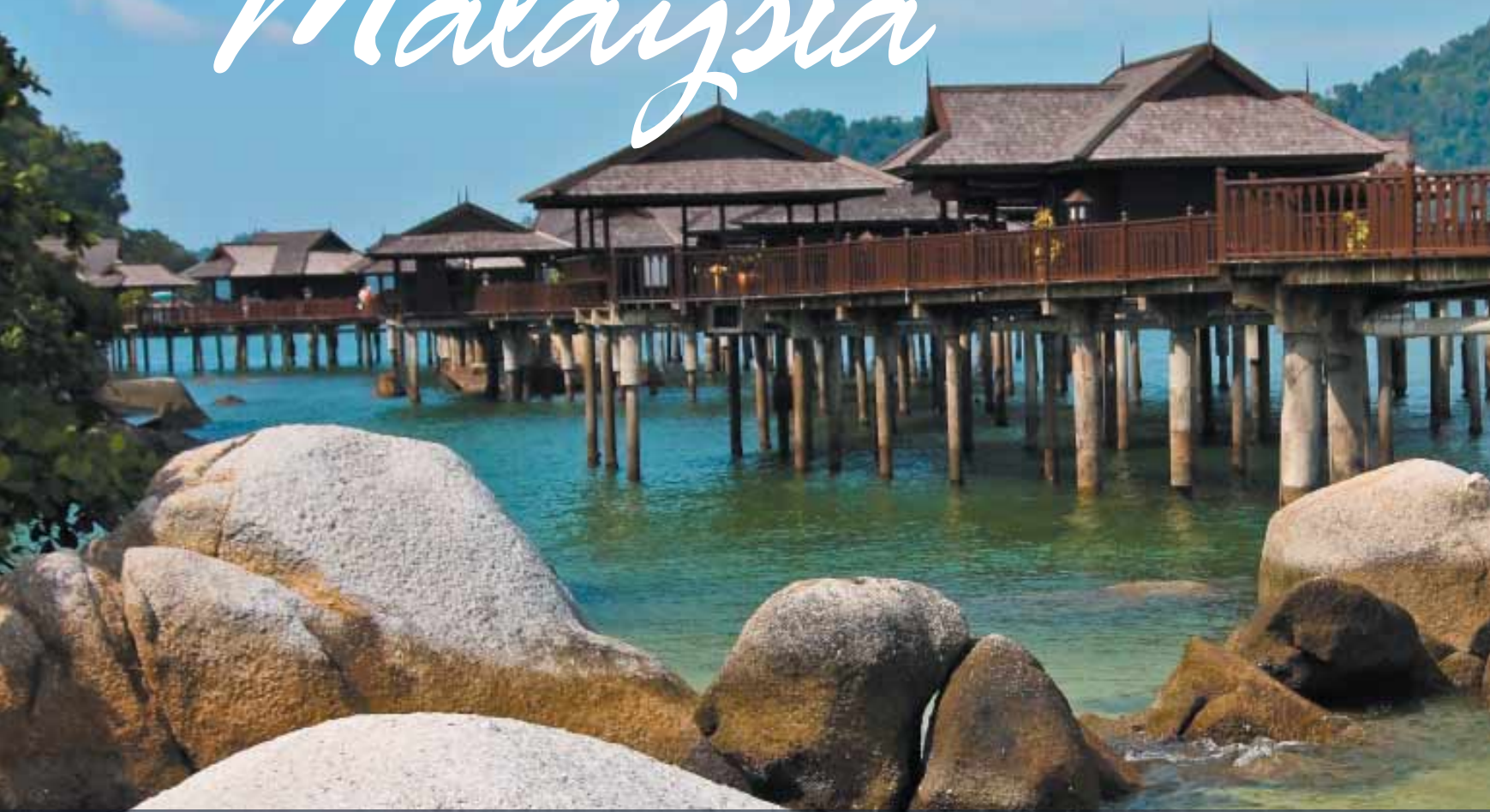


From City to Sea in Malaysia



Exchanging the humid daytime frenzy of Kuala Lumpur for its laid-back nights is one thing, but swapping the big smoke for time on a private island offers an altogether different level of release.

words + photography by Andrew Harris

SEA VILLAS.

Kuala Lumpur

At a quarter to midnight I'm standing in the glow of palm trees traced with neon at Kuala Lumpur's Dataran Merdeka (Independence Square). The square is dotted with families and ringed with groups of young men and women. From the thick dark at the centre of its open manicured cricket field, a little boy tears toward his parents; elsewhere, kids are sitting down to picnics; parents are strolling lazily across the grass. Along the eastern side, across the road, is the Moorish-and-Mogul Sultan Abdul Samad building, elegantly garlanded in fairy lights; along the west is the elite

Royal Selangor Club. The peace and calm of the square, and relative dryness of my t-shirt, are entirely at odds with the overwhelming bustle and heat of the day, and KL's a bit like that – pockets of harmony in amongst the sweltering throng.

Eleven hours earlier, I was crossing multiple lanes of a downtown arterial without waiting for the light, thankful that the regular clog of cars means I don't have to wait in the sun. I reckon lunchtime traffic in KL is gridlocked for two reasons: Malaysians love to eat and they love to dress well. It can be quicker to walk to your favourite eatery than to drive, but then again, it's not that simple.

Twenty minutes outside is enough to ruin your tailored Armani shirt, disturb your hairdo or destroy your make-up; better to spend a half hour in air-conditioned auto comfort.

Speaking of air-conditioning, it's never far away. After a decidedly sticky visit to Chinatown's Petaling Street market, which took in the nearby Sri Mahamariamman Hindu Temple and Sze Ya Taoist Temple, it's a short walk or shorter cab back to the classy, chilled shopping centres of the Golden Triangle, an upscale section of downtown KL. After a spree at Zara at the Pavilion, a mid-to-upper range collection of designer stores, I continue the



ABOVE LEFT: ROOF SCULPTURES AT SRI MAHAMARIAMMAN TEMPLE. TOP: TAXI AT PETRONAS TOWERS. ABOVE RIGHT: INCENSE AT SZE YA TEMPLE.

cultural exchange at the Kenko Fish Spa, where teams of miniature carp give me a tickly, aquatic pedicure.

That evening, at Sky Bar, by day a lap pool atop the minimalist Trader's Hotel, the music's thrumming. The glare of the Petronas Towers, only a couple of hundred metres from the bar, glints in the multicoloured cocktails around the room, and catches in my Singapore Sling (a cliché choice, I know, but I couldn't resist). Stylish drinkers in slinky dresses and svelte suits negotiate the narrow boardwalk by the pool that links comfy booths, like mine. A fresh breeze flows through the half-glassed

walls and ushers in calm, not unlike that of Independence Square.

Pangkor Laut Resort

At the Malaccan port city of Lumut, 250km north-west of KL, I'm proffered a chilled glass of juice extracted from the petals of the hibiscus, Malaysia's national flower. This is how the Pangkor Laut Resort experience begins even before you arrive. One facial refreshment towel later, I board the private boat that will transfer me and other guests to the island.

An hour over the water is 300 acres of verdant

jungle, only eight per cent of which has been cleared for development. Approaching the island, the resort emerges from the beach and trees like a string of gems built into a private-island setting with the precision and eye of a master jeweller. Walking along the jetty to reception, white-washed walls and stone pathways lead to day beds, couches and armchairs under peaked hardwood roofs. A boulder pokes through the floor of one pavilion restaurant, suggesting a connectedness with the surrounding wilderness. Wandering the grounds, hillside villas appear to have grown from the two-million-year old vegetation.

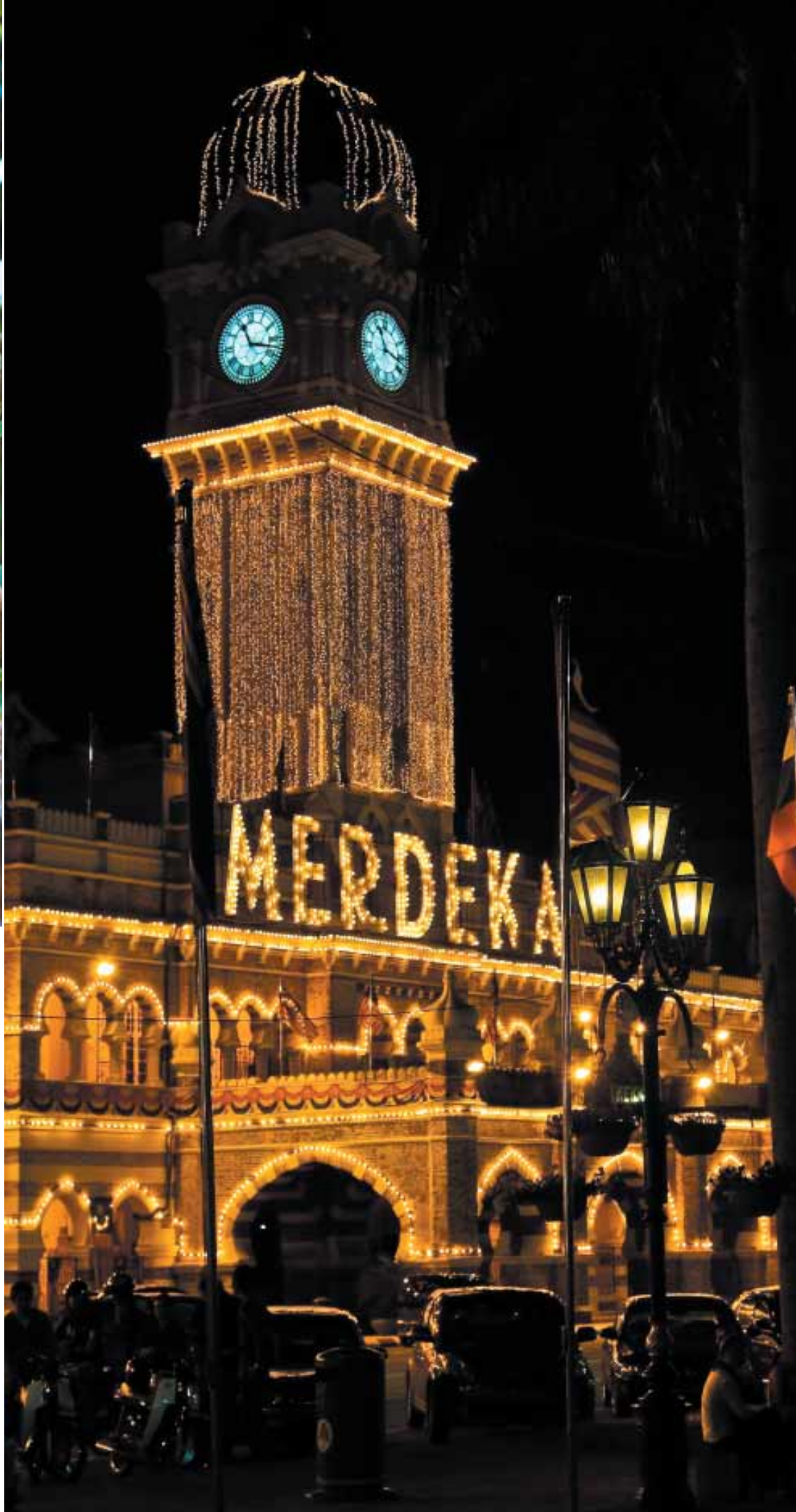


ABOVE: HORNBILL NEAR THE SPA VILLAGE.
RIGHT: FAIRY LIGHTS ON THE SULTAN ABDUL SAMAD.

It's all so effortless, so immediately soothing, a smile forms on my face and takes happy residence there for the next couple of days.

Meanwhile, my garden villa is a rather princely bungalow, warmly decorated in brown and gold, with carved-wood accenting and a predominance of timber. A lovely patio adjoins the bedroom, with its king-size bed dressed in seriously fine linen. Screened off by sliding doors is a his-and-hers bathroom opening onto an extravagant cross-shaped outdoor bath.

With a staff-to-guest ratio approaching one-to-one, and so much space, even at capacity (as it was during my stay) it's as if the island is your own. Actually though, as I find when exploring the island, it very much belongs to the wildlife. Sunning themselves on exposed rocks below the stilted over-water bungalows are lengthy sea lizards, which periodically lumber back into the drink and





BEHIND PETALING STREET MARKET.

swim sinuously away like the mini Godzillas they are. Nearby at the Spa Village, toucan-like hornbills squawk, hop and play around with an agility defying their ungainly beaks. Beyond the hornbills, metres off the beach, a family of marauding sea otters pop up, their sleek heads subtle as submarine periscopes, before they dive and disappear into the glare. Geckos, bats and a few secretive pangolins also call the island home, and a resident naturalist makes sure animal life goes as undisturbed as possible.

Later on, I lie in a treatment room at the Spa Village, listening to the animal hubbub. As my therapist pulls and rubs, lathers and massages, heals and soothes me, there's a tremendous extra dimension to the experience, a natural relaxation that works in synergy with the machinations of the spa. Eventually I do something I've always resisted during a spa treatment – I fall gently to sleep.

Maybe a day later, after I thought I'd been totally spoilt by all the fine dining, fruity cocktails and generally intoxicating atmosphere, I'm spoilt further. We're on one of the Pulau Sembilang, or Nine Islands, a clutch of uninhabited clods of jungle assembled in the Straits of Malacca, an hour or so by boat from Pangkor Laut. I'm lying on my back, the azure umbrella against the aqua sky. The sea is emerald green, nearly opaque in the glare, and I can see our boat bobbing a hundred or so metres offshore. Swimming the distance to the beach was like paddling in a bath. Eagles circle overhead, a monitor lizard stalks the litter, and giant hairless spiders sway in their webs. Our chef is barbecuing a three-course lunch further down the beach while we variously lie on the sand, drift in the water or hunt for scattered oddments by the water line. It's wonderful sensation to be spoilt by the unspoilt.



JAPANESE-STYLE BATHING AT THE SPA VILLAGE.

Address Book

Getting there

Malaysia Airlines flies from major Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide, Brisbane and Perth direct to Kuala Lumpur. www.malaysiaairlines.com

When to go

Malaysia is sticky and steamy the whole year, and there's always a chance of rain, though February/March and October/November tend to be the wettest months.

Where to stay

Pangkor Laut is an island with one resort, the very memorable Pangkor Laut Resort. www.pangkorlautresort.com

Kuala Lumpur has some of the finest hotels in Asia. I stayed at the Shangri-La and the Ritz-Carlton; the former will better suit the classy business traveller, while the latter is more about opulence and relaxation. Both are centrally located and are excellent choices.

www.shangri-la.com

www.ritz-carlton.com

Where to eat and drink

Skybar is on top of the Traders Hotel (part of the Shangri-La group) in north-central Kuala Lumpur.

www.shangri-la.com

One excellent eating choice in Kuala Lumpur is the Old China Café, in Chinatown.

www.oldchina.com.my

Pangkor Laut resort has many and varied eating options, and the most incredible breakfast I've probably ever seen, with Indian, Japanese, Chinese, Malay and Western delights.

www.pangkorlautresort.com

Where to shop and spa

The Pavilion Kuala Lumpur contains a range of mid-to-top-range boutiques and label stores, as well as the Kenko Fish Spa.

www.pavilion-kl.com

www.kenko.com.sg