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This trio of Malaysian spa destinations  
comes with a rejuvenation guarantee.

# malay daze

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS: ANDREW HARRIS

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## PANGKOR LAUT RESORT

I'm lying in a wood and stone treatment room in the middle of a 'Malay Day', the spa's signature treatment. I've already come from the multi-stage bathhouse ritual, a hot and cold, soap and scrub cleansing that takes its inspiration from the local rural practice of river bathing, as well as from other Asian bathhouse cultures. All treatments are prefaced with this lengthy preparation, which serves to soothe the mind as much as prime the body.

The sun has almost set and the room is sparsely lit, with a subdued orange glow. Gun, my Balinese therapist, has left me for a moment. The CD of traditional Gamelan music has run its course and the space echoes with the calls of birds, monkeys and bats. Behind, above and all around, the jungle is thick and alive. There is nothing artificial about the atmosphere of Pangkor Laut Resort. The privately-owned island of Pangkor Laut is located just off the west coast of Malaysia in the Strait of Malacca.

Seafaring monitor lizards, armadillo-like pangolins, heavyset hornbills, elusive sea otters, flitting geckos and shadowy bats share the 300-acre island with around 200 guests, who are attended to by 150 or so staff. There are four styles of accommodation: over-water sea villas, leafy garden villas (like mine), secluded hillside villas and serene spa villas by the Spa Village (as the YTL Hotel Group calls its treatment centres). Everything has the sheen of a coffee-table book - the colours, materials and décor meld naturally to remind you that all this high-end luxury exists within the jungle.

In my bungalow, polished boards cover both the floor and ceiling in warm golds and browns, and carved Malay motifs skirt the tops of the walls. The mini bar, tea and coffee facilities and safe are all hidden behind rich timber cabinetry. A plush king-size bed lies behind sliding sound-proof, black-out doors, a broad couch at its feet and a charming patio leading out the far end of the room.

His'n'her sinks and mirrors grace a symmetrical light-marble bathroom, together with a tropical-downpour shower. The crowning glory is a vast, outdoor cross-

shaped bath with four high walls to ensure privacy.

Gun has slathered me with a camphor-based paste with galang gal and mee flower, topped me with steamed towels and wrapped me in five layers for my pores to open and my muscles to relax; this is the Lapis Lapis wrap. Inside my cocoon, it's so warm and cosy that I feel I could well metamorphose. Gun has already rubbed a mixture of coconut milk and yoghurt into my hair and I wonder whether the fine-smelling stuff is to sustain me through the process.

Gun returns, runs a shower for me to rinse off, ceremoniously unwraps me and soon we're in the midst of a hybrid Thai-Malay massage, the 'Campur Campur'. He pulls and cracks each of my fingers and toes, flexes all my joints and spends a fair length of time on the table himself, manipulating my feet and legs. Pulling and stretching becomes long, healing strokes with essential oils infused with cinnamon, garlic and onion, as well as cheesecloth-wrapped bundles of lemongrass and pandanus. When it's all over, Gun sits with me while I drink an entire pot of ginger tea. It's thirsty work, believe me!

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### CAMERON HIGHLANDS RESORT

Cameron Highlands Resort, a few hours' drive north of Kuala Lumpur, is a sophisticated colonial outpost in cool, rolling hills that offer some relief from the capital's heat and humidity. It's holiday house territory for the likes of Michelle Yeoh and the prince of Oman. As for me, there is a vast four-poster in my suite and a black-and-white-tiled bathroom fit for royalty. The widescreen TV breaks with tradition, but watching it from a plantation-special rubberwood armchair is an anachronism I can handle. The resort's staff are impeccably presented; some are white-gloved. A wood-panelled library offers respite from worldly worry. High tea is a standard late-afternoon appointment, unless you prefer to take your tea externally, with an ensemble of Cameron's Mint treatments.

Immersed in tannin-infused water, I close my eyes and conjure the rolling rows of the bright green plantation I've seen earlier in the afternoon; surrounded by floating mint leaves, I channel my inner tea bag. Think supple. Think porous. Think full of leaves. Suspended across the bath is a long wire tray with, from left to right, a pile of raw sugar, some freshly cut lime, a handful of dried tea leaves mixed with a little honey, two wet tea bags, a floral-infused facial towel and a sweet, cool lemon tea. As Wati, another brilliant Balinese therapist, had instructed me, I rub the sugar into my knees and elbows, followed by the lime. The tea leaves go on my face, and I lie back with the bags on my eyes. Lovely. I'll never look at a cup of tea the same way again.

Wati retrieves me from my steeping and I calm down on a day bed with a heat pack on the back of my neck and a magazine in hand. The main event is upstairs. Wati massages a paste of dried soybean, crushed mint and thyme over my body. The mint slowly heats up on my skin. She massages the back of my neck and my scalp, wraps me up and leaves me.

After a rinse-off, face down under the towel, Wati lays a hot towel over my back and runs a two-wheeled massage tool down my spine. She pounds my feet with balled sticks and applies the acupressure massage with easy skill, working her way up and down the pressure-point lines on the inside and outside of my arms and legs, along my back, neck and shoulders, and up and across my abdomen.

With the addition of peppermint oil, Wati's movements shift down a gear, becoming soothing and rhythmic. I'm nearly unconscious when she breaks the news: "Your massage is finished, Mr Andrew."

### RITZ-CARLTON KUALA LUMPUR

The gleaming Golden Triangle district of Kuala Lumpur is bejewelled with towering monuments to the national shopping obsession by day, and speckled with endless fairy lights at night. In its midst, the Ritz-Carlton, with its urbane Spa Village, is old-world luxury with a new-age approach to relaxation.

Although it all starts innocently enough – with a change into yoga pants and a wait in a darkened room – I was forewarned that the 'Sensory Exploration' would be a departure from the usual spa treatment.

I'm led into another darkened room, cushioned mats arranged on the floor. My therapist, Sania, takes her place by a gong at the front of the room and crosses her legs. The lights go down, deep bass wells up from the floor, the ceiling twinkles vaguely and Sania reads a script about the benefits of being in touch with your senses. Some time passes and I sit up and am taken through a process of sampling four tastes (sweet, salt, sour and bitter), smelling peppermint oil and breaking through a florally infused cloth. Sania strikes the gong, waits, then impatiently goes to retrieve my massage therapist, who gets down to the real business of massaging my head, neck, feet and lower legs. That's more like it. Mahmud soon releases the (admittedly limited) store of tension I've built up since my last treatment and undoes tightness in my shins and calves. Once he's done, I take some hot tea and change back into clothes, ready to face the hub-bub and humidity of Kuala Lumpur.

Many, many other treatments are available at the Spa Village, including a men's face-shaving service that unfortunately I didn't have time to experience. Back in my room - with its couch-dotted lounge area, alcove study and massive marble bathroom - I see there is a Gentleman's Bath on the bath menu that hangs from the faucet. It's a herbal relax accompanied by a Rey Del Mundo Cigar and a shot of Remy Martin VSOP. Now that's class!

PHOTOGRAPHER NAME HERE



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## Malaysia heading here

### DO:

- +Stalk hornbills at Pangkor Laut Resort.
- +Tour the tea plantations of the Cameron Highlands.
- +Sample Kuala Lumpur street-hawker fare in Bukit Bintang.

### SEE:

- +Dramatic sunsets at Pangkor Laut's Emerald Bay.
- +The villages of the Orang Asli ('original people' or 'Malaysian

Aborigines') on the road up to the Cameron Highlands.

- +The view from the 44th-floor bridge that links Kuala Lumpur's 88-storey Petronas towers.

### EAT:

- +Breakfast at Pangkor Laut Resort, for all the best from India to Japan.
- +Old China Kafe for hot, tangy Nyonya (Chinese-Malay cuisine).
- +Ye Olde Smokehouse

for eclectic décor and fine fish and chips.

### BUY:

- +Perspex-encased insects from Pangkor Laut Resort.
- +Scone-specific strawberry jam from the Cameron Highlands.
- +Designer goods in Kuala Lumpur's myriad malls.

### WHEN TO GO:

Pangkor Laut and Kuala Lumpur are warm and humid throughout the

year. Kuala Lumpur has a hot (up to 35°C), tropical climate with heavy rain storms occurring throughout the year, mostly in the early evenings. June through to August are the drier months. The Cameron Highlands are significantly less humid and hot, year-round.

### GETTING THERE:

Pangkor Laut Resort is one hour by water from

Lumut and three hours by car from Kuala Lumpur. The Cameron Highlands are also three hours by car from Kuala Lumpur. Jetstar flies to Kuala Lumpur from Sydney.

### MORE INFORMATION:

Pangkor Laut Resort, The Cameron Highlands Resort and Ritz-Carlton Kuala Lumpur are all YTL hotels. For more information, visit [www.ytlhotels.com](http://www.ytlhotels.com).