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Ethereal beauty of Langkawi

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THE bumpy flight, caused by bad weather, during the short hop from Penang to Langkawi didn't bode well.

That's it, I thought. La Nina's making her entrance and I'm doomed to remain indoors with the TV as company, and my beach outfit staying put in the suitcase.

Visions of a soggy break, however, disappeared as the plane descended over rain-drenched padi fields. A rainbow peeked from behind clouds.

A drizzle welcomed passengers on the tarmac and my spirits rose at the sight of a spectacular sunset, as I made my way to Pelangi Beach Resort at Pantai Cenang.

Things got better when I found out that the resort had upgraded me to one of the best rooms in the house, the Commonwealth Bungalow, a double-storey wooden chalet occupied by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad during the Commonwealth Heads of Government weekend retreat in 1989.

The Commonwealth Bungalow is one of five similar beachfront bungalow chalets that have housed world politicians, such as then British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Pakistani President Benazir Bhutto, during the retreat.

The bungalows were also home to Malaysian royalty during the Rulers Conference in 1991.

The exquisite bungalows are designed kampung style, with modern amenities.

The non-stop rain for the next two days did nothing to dampen my enthusiasm as I began to discover the legends of the island.

Renting a car to see the island is recommended because you can stop and take in the mist-covered mountains, buffalo-populated padi fields and hills which dot the island.

The best introduction to Langkawi's legends is its book village, Kampung Buku Malaysia.

The tranquillity offered by Southeast Asia's first and only book village is a balm to tired nerves and a haven for book lovers.

Set in lush green forest at the foot of Gunung Raya, the island's highest peak, Kampung Buku is 10 minutes from Langkawi International Airport and 15 minutes from the ferry terminal in Kuah.

A stream runs through the book village and book lovers can pack a picnic and stay there the whole day, reading books from across the world.

The village includes six houses which are stocked with books on Malaysia in English and Bahasa Malaysia, books on Islam, sports, travel and also second-hand, rare and antiquarian books.

Mahsuri's Tomb is the starting point in getting to know Langkawi's legends. Here lies the resting place of the beautiful and virtuous Siti, or Mahsuri, who was unjustly condemned to death for adultery.

The curse she placed on the island as she died devastated Langkawi and only made it habitable to castor trees and doves.

Seven generations after being cursed by Mahsuri, who drew white blood when pierced by a kris, Langkawi today has finally emerged.

The origins of Langkawi's hot springs, Air Hangat, can be linked to another legend. The Balinese-like surroundings tell the tale of two families who fought over a rejected marriage proposal.

As the women's village was raided by her rejected suitor's family, a

battle followed where a jugful of hot water was splashed to become the source of Langkawi's hot springs.

Had it not been for the drizzle, I would have been tempted to pretend to be a mountain fairy at the engrossing Seven Wells (Telaga Tujuh).

The Seven Wells are made up of a series of water cascades connected to seven pools. Legend has it that this used to be the playground of fairies and genies. Generations of children have grown up on grandmothers' tales of mischievous fairies who came out of hiding when all was quiet to bathe in the pools.

Sadly, I saw no sign of fairies, although I sniffed the air for the tell-tale sweet scent which is supposed to pervade if a fairy had been lurking around.

Pulau Dayang Bunting or the Lake of the Pregnant Maiden is the second largest island in the Langkawi archipelago. It is a favourite destination for childless couples; the water in its freshwater lake is reputed to have magical powers and barren women are said to have become fertile after bathing in or drinking its water.

This belief dates back to a story of the beautiful court maiden Telani and her prince Telanai, whose indiscretions had resulted in a pregnant maiden and a drowned baby. The lovers later turned into a rock and island.

Tales of poisoned wells and burnt rice are often told to Langkawi visitors of a time when the islanders stored their staple food (rice) in underground chambers from their Siamese enemies.

Wells were dug and poisoned and these killed thirsty Siamese soldiers.

In retaliation, the army massacred the village, but not before the villagers set fire to their homes and their rice.

Thanks to the rain during my stay, there were traces of burnt rice which resurfaced at the Field Of Burnt Rice.

These tales and others are enough to lend an ethereal quality to the island.

If Langkawi's legends are not enough, head for Kuah and shop till you drop on bargain silk fabrics, glass-blown Langkawi crystal and its famed marble, kitchenware, luggage, electrical appliances and chocolates.

Eateries abound on the island and these include the warung found in Kuah, restaurants run by expatriates and five-star establishments with gourmet dining at Pantai Cenang and Teluk Burau.

I had a memorable dinner at Bon Ton at the Beach Restaurant Gallery at Pantai Cenang. The restaurant is set in a home and garden reminiscent of Bali and serves Malaysian and western food.

Most of Langkawi area is covered in jungle. Its highest point, Mount Raya, rises to 870m above sea level. Langkawi is accessible via sea and air.

Although the island has traditionally relied on farming and fishing, it was awarded duty-free status in 1987 and has since become one of Malaysia's leading tourist destinations.

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