

24/08/2001

Tropical tranquility at its best

Shirene Shan

SERENITY is at the heart of Pangkor Laut Resort, a refuge for languid urban dwellers. "Can we not go back?" said a colleague upon arrival at the Pangkor Laut jetty to the sun-soaked tropical island.

Two days later, it certainly was difficult, heading back to the hazy Klang Valley and leaving behind the island enclave of evergreen rainforests, blue-green waters and villas on stilts overlooking the sea.

Four of us decided to car pool to Lumut, where there was a scheduled ferry to take us across to Pangkor Laut. The fifth member of our group decided to fly into Pulau Pangkor, probably a wise move as it took only 30 minutes of flying time from Kuala Lumpur to the island and another 10 minutes of boat ride to Pangkor Laut.

However, had he been a foreign tourist, he would have missed a truly Malaysian scenery in the three-and-a-half hours' drive from Kuala Lumpur. We passed coconut estates, fruit orchards, small towns and old kampung houses as soon as we exited the highway at Bidor in Perak.

We left Kuala Lumpur at 9am and reached Lumut at 12.30pm. After lunch, we headed on to the Pangkor Laut's "transit" office, where the resort's staff tagged our bags and directed us to park the car at the government car park facility behind the office.

This was where our Pangkor Laut Resort's experience began. Not on the island itself, but at its "transit" office. Efficiency was the name of the game and the management of the resort was above the rest.

As soon as we got into the office, cold towels were handed out. In fact, our rooms were assigned to us as soon as we gave the staff our names. Shortly after, our bags were trolleyed to the ferry and we made our 40-minute journey to the island.

Once there, we were ushered to the reception area, where guests were offered refreshments. "Welcome to Pangkor Laut. As soon as you are ready, we will show you to your rooms," a resort staff, keys in hand, said.

Lucky for us, our Royal Bay Garden Villa rooms were just a walking distance from the main reception area and the resort's other facilities. The Hill Villas can be accessed through an elevator going up the hill while those staying at the Sea Villas which are on stilts, have to walk quite a distance to the other end of the resort.

Having checked out the rooms (luxurious sunken bath and spacious bathroom, with lofty woven bamboo ceilings) and its other amenities ("See, no television ... don't say I didn't warn you," a colleague said), we decided to give the resort a walk-through.

Pangkor Laut Resort has won acclaim as one of the world's best islands by Conde Nast Traveller and as among the best resort hotels by Pacific Area Travel Association (Pata), UK. It is reputed for its award-winning standards, excellent cuisine and superb choice of activities.

Every conceivable list of recreational activities is available on the island. The island's two-level fitness centre combines the use of free weights and workstations.

We were, however, not surprised to find we had the gym to ourselves, as the intoxicating outdoors was obviously a more popular option! For utter indulgence, Pangkor Laut resort makes special arrangements for golfing facilities at the nearby Damai Laut Golf & Country Club, which is 10 minutes by water taxi from the port of Lumut.

The resort's tennis courts are situated against a stunning backdrop of a

dense, deep green rainforest. It was here that a stage was built for tenor Luciano Pavarotti's performance in conjunction with the resort's re-launch by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on March 24 1994.

With such a picturesque scenery, one would be easily distracted from his game. We certainly did when a couple of Oriental Pied Hornbills passed by during one session. A friendly bird, it easily makes itself comfortable among humans. Beautiful peacocks also call the resort home, given the freedom to roam the island.

Environmentalists may be impressed to know that nearly 80 per cent of the island is covered by primary rainforest. There are several jungle trekking options that criss-cross the island, ranging from a 25-minute walk to an hour for the intrepid jungle enthusiast.

The resort's naturalist Yip Yoon Wah can arrange for a guided tour. Yip enthralled visitors on his trek with a detailed guide on the Indo-Pacific Strand Flora or perhaps a Brahminy Kite or two.

Yip's interest in forestry dates back to 1958 when he studied at the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia.

"Unlike temperate forests, tropical trees dance to a peculiar drumbeat. While the growth of pine and beech trees is marked by growth rings, in the tropical rainforest there is no seasonal growth. So we paint a ring around the tree trunk and measure it each year to work out the average growth increment," Yip said.

Yip spent five years documenting the treasures of Pangkor Laut, which are contained in a book entitled "Pangkor Laut - A Guide to its Natural History".

If that is not enough to impress the folks back home, perhaps the fact that Pangkor Laut is home to two rare animals will.

A member of the "Pieridae" family, the *Delias Singapura* is one of the rarest butterflies in Peninsular Malaysia. So is the crimson Libellulid dragonfly.

The idyllic island certainly has a vivid past. While the Dutch inhabited Pangkor Island until 1734, there were few residents in Pangkor Laut. It is an isle that is documented in history by Colonel Spencer Chapman, a British resident who spent a day-and-a-half on the island and wrote about it in his book, "The Jungle is Neutral".

Spending a lazy afternoon on the island's Emerald Bay, it is easy to imagine that Chapman used this well-hidden cove to escape by submarine on May 13 1943. Today, it greets beach lovers who enjoy its turquoise waters, white sand and graceful sea almond trees. Families of sea otters have occasionally been sighted along the coast on different parts of the island.

An evening swim at the resort's 35-metre lap pool overlooking the sea presents yet another opportunity to idly take in the sights as the humid afternoon gives way to a gentle sea breeze.

A thoughtful touch, the massage area also faces the sea. A batik sarong is given to those who decide on treatments, which range from the Malay massage, shiatsu, and aromatherapy to foot reflexology or a Swedish massage.

While there are plenty of dining options at the resort, we settle on the Samudra, overlooking the marina, and Uncle Lim's Kitchen for dinner during the two nights that we were there.

At the Samudra, we were entertained by the tinkling sound of the gamelan, which seems to keep pace with the rhythmic lapping of waves while Uncle Lim's Kitchen is perched on a rock overlooking what will soon be the new addition to the resort to be called the Spa Villas.

Our visit to Pangkor Laut Resort was for a brainstorming session. It was a working trip and it was definitely a tough one, having to fight the

temptation to do something else.

We did not request the use of a meeting room but chose instead to "rough it out". We decided to hold our first discussion under some shady trees at Emerald Bay. We managed to get some work done despite the strong temptation to take a dive in the sea, amid preparations of a wedding ceremony there and also a Sports Illustrated photo shoot.

Going home proved to be tougher for some of us. We definitely did not miss some of the offerings of city life. As for television, we found one in the common room at the Hill Villas' elevator building, equipped with Astro service.

And for those who simply cannot live without their mobile phones, do not despair. Users of Maxis and Celcom like us were connected to the outside world, loud and clear.

We believe the island will charm the most hard-to-please travellers and will remain an enclave for those seeking tropical tranquility.

(END)