Sunday Independent 21 April 2024



# An unforgettable stay where the wild things are

**Madeleine Keane** laps up the luxury at a rainforest resort on Langkawi, complete with chattering macaques

pregnant scorpion stopped us in our tracks. Not that we tourists spotted it. There we were pootling along in our air-conditioned Jeep, en route to a spot of forest bathing, when our guide Dev asked the driver to stop. We screeched to a halt, disembarked, and walked back up the road until Dev located the arachnid, gently moved it to one side, while observing that it was with spiderlings.

It was early November, and I was stay-

It was early November, and I was staying in the Datai Langkawi. I'd flown to Malaysia from Thailand where I followed a pleasurable but fairly ascetic regime at the legendary Chiva-Som health farm. Now I'd swapped wheatgrass shots for Champagne and boiled eggs for eggs royale. And yet, while the five-star Datai has a reputation as one of the world's most renowned hotels and indeed it ticks all the

boxes in terms of ambience, cuisine and service, and its beating heart, wilderness

service, and its beating heart, wilderness.

The late Kerry Hill is due a debt of gratitude. When the celebrated Australian architect was commissioned in the 1980s to design the hotel overlooking the Andaman Sea on Langkawi's north-western shores, he eschewed the typical seafront resort design. His vision was to immerse guests in the majestic rainforest while preserving the coastline. As French architect and interior designer Didier Lefort who worked with Hill on the original project and recently reimagined Datai for the 21st century observed, "if you're in a remarkable setting, allow it to make the statement".

It's some statement. From the moment I

It's some statement. From the moment I arrived at the main lobby where two giant wooden horses – rescued from a Mumbai flea market – framed a view of a pool filled

Continued on next page



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Trash is recycled into biodegradable ash and

icent four-poster bed. To lie in luxurious

the unspoilt wilderness was beguiling. However, delightful as it was to hear the macaque monkeys with their incessant

chatter, I had been forewarned: these

complete chancers will come in and raid

dow. Quite the party animals - literally they've been known to open the mini-bar

and swipe a beer.

evening performance.

your fruit bowl if you forget to close a win-

I signed up for a Rainforest After Dark

dusk, a zoological cast shaped up for their

All manner of creatures came out to

naturalist and nature centre manager Dev pointed out squirrels, pied hornbills, bats,

play for our evening stroll. Committed

geckos, and colugos, also known as fly-

spiderman spied a couple of tarantulas

insect repellent is recommended.

ing lemurs. Even though it was dark, our

hiding in the crevices of rocks. Nota bene:

nature walk. And as the light faded to

Lush - the resort, nestled ongst the foliage Continued from previous page Later I dined at The Gulai House, where the promise of a showcase of Malaysian with bright pink lotuses and hopping with culinary tradition was spectacularly de lime green frogs, I was entranced. livered in a dark and sticky beef rendang For starters, it is an incredibly peace-Among a litany of memorable meals, din ful place. I stayed in one of the rainforest ner in The Pavilion was also outstanding. villas. Perched on stilts beside a rushing The restaurant was suspended high above stream, this was a lush billet with a huge the resort on stilts and I feasted in this arbathroom and dressing area and a magnifboreal canopy on Thai delicacies: prawn

Egyptian cotton sheets, protected by veils soft-shell crab. of mosquito nets, teak fan whirring above as the rain pelted the roof and the inhab-Datai served up the stylish gestures' itants of the jungle kept up their symphoplaylist of a luxury hotel. Every day the reny of chirping and chirruping, all felt very clining sunbathers were treated to a plate Somerset Maugham. of icy watermelon and pineapple or a cou-The combination of deep comfort amid ple of scoops of mango sorbet.

Despite feeling very cossetted, I delighted in the total absence, in such a sophisticated locale, of glitz and bling and the resolutely local nature of everything from the chatty, pleasant staff to Datai's commitment to community. They take the business of protecting this unique special environment seriously, with the Datai Pledge and its four pillars: sustainability conservation, regeneration, and educa-

and lemongrass spring rolls and crispy

They walk the walk here, as a tour of their permaculture garden with its zero-waste organic food production system revealed. I learned how the resort consumed 10,000 bottles in three weeks; many were embedded in the very buildings that surrounded us, the remainder of the walls fashioned from cement made in the Asher - an incinerator that turns everything that cannot be recycled into

Unusually, there's no kid's club. Instead, young guests are encouraged to take part in activities such as the upcycling workshop at The Lab. All the resort's detritus from torn sheets to candlewax, is sent here and I spent an enjoyable couple of hours learning how to make candles, beeswax wrappers and soap - the latter I'm still using a few months later. Kids love this and it's a great way to introduce them to the concept of sustainability.
The team at the nature centre also run

mini labs where guests can learn about ecology. And there is everything families would expect from five-star lodgings on the sporting front: from golf and yoga o kayaking through the mangroves and butterfly walks as well as snorkelling and bodyboarding.

I was there courtesy of Irish company - and leading wellness experts - Healing Holidays, so pampering was also on the menu. The beautiful open-sided spa, accessed by a wooden walkway, was a tranquil space run by an ebullient Yorkshire woman. My radiance facial was first-rate not that my opinion was influenced by the fact that I travelled halfway across the globe to be treated with seaweed-based products from VOYA, the company found ed in Co Sligo

For all the luxe, it was not lost on me that my favourite moment in an idyllic sojourn occurred far from the chatter and the cock tails. The highlight started with our rescue of the expectant spider.

Then along with a cool couple from Lyons and omniscient Dev, we walked past trees that had stood here for millennia



while we inhaled all those good ions, before reaching a wooden platform cantilevered over a babbling creek.

A young local teacher guided us through Senaman Tua, a gentle, mindful mix of Ma lay breathing techniques, stretching and movements from martial arts. Time then to plunge into the crystal-clear waters below in the aptly named Crystal Creek. A breakfast of mint tea, dried fruits and nuts followed.

Between my dawn rise, saving the eight-legged mama-to-be and the icy dip, I felt beyond virtuous, nourished, and happy as the proverbial lark to be where the wild

Healing Holidays can arrange a seven-night stay at The Datai Langkawi, Malaysia, from €1.479pp sharing including transfers, and daily breakfast. Price excludes flights. Subject to



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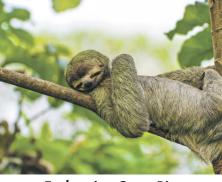
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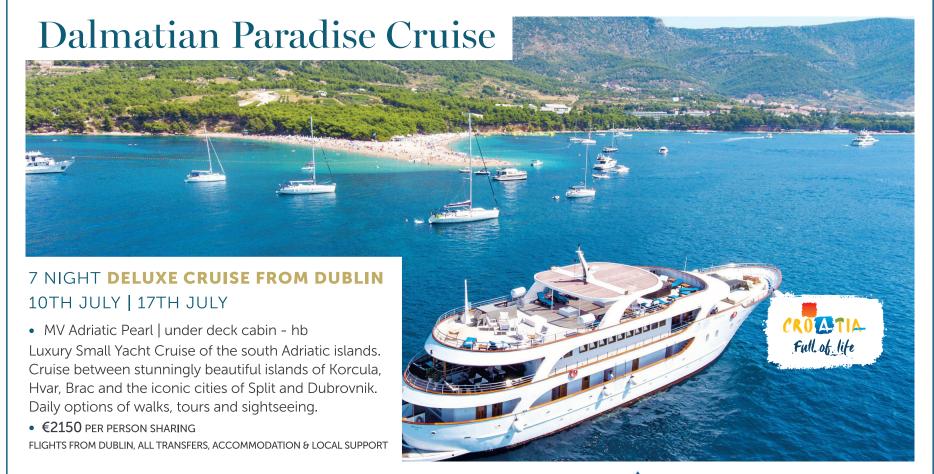
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