

THE JUNGLE BOOK

PULAU GAYA IS A WORLD OF ITS OWN. ONCE YOU WRAP YOURSELF IN THIS SPRAWLING ECOSYSTEM OF WHALE SHARKS, PYGMY ELEPHANTS, COUNTLESS TYPES OF CORAL AND, OH YES, COCONUT-AVOCADO SCALP SCRUBS, YOU'LL WANT TO SET UP A TREEHOUSE AND MOVE IN. **BY DIANA HUBBELL.**
PHOTOGRAPHED BY AUSADAVUT SARUM.

STYLIST: ALEXA OUMERMAN. MODEL: ATIPORN IN. HAIR AND MAKEUP: ANIPORN/SUPER RED. PHOTOGRAPHER: AUSADAVUT SARUM. KAOON, MUAYAJARA



The view from the porch (swimsuit, robe and accessories by Chanel).





“*Finding Nemo* got it wrong,” says Hedy Bin Soonny, my snorkeling instructor for the day.

“Come again?”

“Look down.”

I attach my mask and lower my face below the surface. The water is shockingly clear. What looks like an undulating kaleidoscope of cerulean and lapis lazuli from above turns out to be an underwater metropolis. The coral-studded ocean floor stands out in hyper-definition no nature documentary could hope to match. This is *Planet Earth* times 10, real and live and so sharp you can see the scales on the fish at the bottom.

Near the brain coral and below a spindly school of needlefish, I spot two clownfish hovering around an anemone’s protective tentacles. The smaller of the pair darts for cover, but the larger, darker one is fearless. It rushes right at us, stopping a meter away, before diving back to home turf. Moments later, it’s back again, mouth agape.

“That bigger clownfish is the female,” Hedy tells me. “And the smaller one is her husband. Here’s what they didn’t tell you: all clownfish are hermaphrodites. They’re basically male when they’re young, then the biggest and strongest ones change into females. If something happens to the female though, her husband will change sex within two months and become the new dominant female.”

Wait, so Nemo’s dad should’ve turned into Nemo’s new mom?

“Yes, but Disney and Pixar didn’t show that part. They lied to little children,” he adds with a smirk. “So unethical.”

Sex-swapping clownfish are far from the strangest things lurking just a few meters down. Hedy shows me a pair of blue-and-purple-mottled giant clams, each at least 20 years old. There are 17 more just like them on this reef, all rescued from illegal fishermen. The two clams slam shut as we swim by, still skittish from nearly becoming sashimi. Damselfish dance about in a frenzied mating display, their silver-streaked bodies shimmering in the light, while triggerfish scurry, and clusters of sea urchins waggle their spines. Whale sharks have been spotted nearby, and many of these creatures of the deep have yet to be discovered.

Welcome to Pulau Gaya in Malaysian Borneo, one of the largest biodiversity hotspots in the world, the oceanic answer to the Amazon. The seas between here, the Philippines and Papua New Guinea—the “coral triangle”—host more than 500 species of coral and 3,000 of fish. Keep in mind that marine biologists have only tallied around 700 kinds of coral and 7,000 of fish on the whole planet.

Even after nearly two years of working overtime with the Marine Centre’s team, “we haven’t even begun to tabulate everything,” Scott Mayback, the resident marine biologist tells me.

Pulau Gaya is no less impressive above the water. This island is home to many of Borneo’s 200-plus species of mammals, including the not-so-diminutive Borneo pygmy elephant, rare proboscis monkeys and wild bearded pigs. Lush mangroves provide shelter for everything from megapodes to hornbills to 2-meter monitor lizards plucked from the Jurassic period.

In the midst of all this biological proliferation, surrounded by Tunku Abdul Rahman Marine Park, sits Gaya Island Resort. Swathes of foliage encircle the 120 earth-toned villas and two-bedroom suite. Large parts of the resort are perched on elevated walkways above mangroves. There are few straight lines in the whole place; instead, the paths weave and wind, as if they grew organically along with the rest of the vegetation. This is the rare sort of resort not defined by the opulence of its interiors—a seamless blend of contemporary minimalism and classic Malay style—but rather by the gloriously unfettered, unplanned luxury of its surrounds. Yes, there are eggs Benedict dripping sunny hollandaise in the morning, *sambal*-slathered local slipper lobster served seaside by candlelight in the evening, and potent cocktails in the pool all day long, but



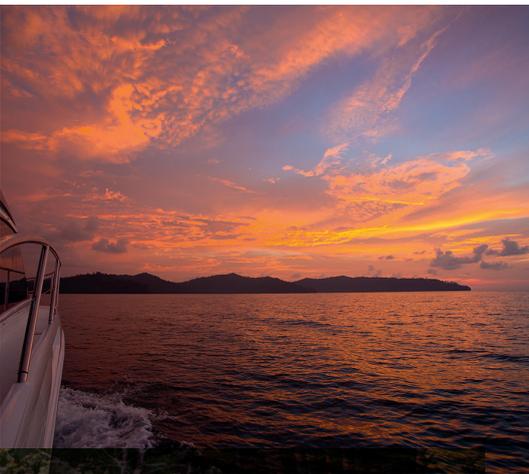


Catching some sun (dress, Emilio Pucci; headscarf and cuffs, Hermés; sunglasses, Chanel; shoes, Jimmy Choo).
Opposite from top: Outside the library (caftan and cuff, Chanel); eggs Benedict for breakfast; a villa tucked in the trees.





Clockwise from left:
 Unwinding at Spa Village
 (T-shirt, Diane von
 Furstenberg; swimsuit,
 necklace and cuff, Chanel;
 shoes, Valentino); villas
 are contemporary and
 classical; cocktails by the
 beach (blouse, Diane von
 Furstenberg); all hands on
 deck for a yacht cruise;
 welcome to the resort;
 slipper lobster on the
 beach (scarf as top,
 Hermés; earring and cuffs,
 Chanel); taking in the sun.



Clockwise from top right: The sun sets over Pulau Gaya; a walk in the jungle (scarf as dress and cuffs, Hermés); barbecue and beverages on the lunch board at the resort's private beach; local seafood shines at Fisherman's Cove restaurant.



what you'll remember most from Pulau Gaya is ancient and far more grand. After all, the resort opened its doors little more than a year ago, whereas many of these trees have stood here for a millennium.

One afternoon, I meet one of the island's old-timers, a deadly predator known for taking on king cobras and turning them into lunch. Silent, lethal and prone to nocturnal attacks, this beast and his ancestors have sat at the top of the Bornean food chain for ages.

Right now though, the barred owl is more interested in snapping up bits of raw chicken from my hand.

"You have to make him pull," Justin Juhun, the resort's resident naturalist, reminds me. I close my fingers obediently and the owl glares at me with huge, liquid eyes. He's smaller than many of the eagle-size members of his species, but when his wings flare up I have to lean back. He rips the morsel away from me before settling down again, feathers literally and figuratively ruffled.

The barred owl's shattered leg is still wrapped in plaster, a mark of the injury that landed him here in the first place. Like the wounded sea turtle the resort's Marine Centre released back into the ocean just the week before, the owl was near death when Gaya Island took him in. The staff has been slowly nursing him back to health for months.

But the owl is far from domestic. He still must work for his food. He does not have a name. "For me, wildlife is always wild," Justin says. He would know. He has been raising and rehabilitating animals since childhood. Growing up, his backyard in a softwood plantation three hours from Sabah was the temporary resting place of dozens of injured or orphaned creatures. Here on Pulau Gaya, he oversees the immense and, in many instances, unknown environment.

The next morning, he takes me for a walk in the woods, with stops to plant stray mangrove seeds (the barbed pods need only be dropped in shallow



A sun-speckled stroll (skirt, **Emilio Pucci**; scarf, **Hermès**; cuff, **Chanel**). Opposite top: Letting loose at Tavajun Bay (bikini, **Emilio Pucci**; cuffs, **Hermès**). Opposite bottom: bearded pigs call Pulau Gaya home.





water) and to rip out an invasive species. He leads me past vine-strangled eucalyptus and termite mounds strong as bulbous, bronze sculptures. He points out a leaf with antiviral properties; a plant good for healing open wounds—and even better for facials; a parasitic fungus capable of killing an entire tree, but highly prized in Chinese medicine; and *curculigo officinalis*, a berry much like the popular “miracle fruit,” which can make bitter flavors taste sweet.

“It’s a vast jungle. We just finished identifying all the plants. There are currently 276 just along the trail. We also have about 18 species of snake and 40 of birds and four species of gecko and four types of flying lizard...” The list goes on.

At one point during the walk, Justin reaches down and snatches a viper up as casually as if it were a twig. The serpent, long, whip-thin and a venomous shade of green, coils around his arm and turns to look directly at me.

“Is it poisonous?” I ask.

“Oh, only a little,” he shrugs. It turns out to be an Oriental vine snake. “But it is not aggressive. It won’t bite me. Look—it’s beautiful.”

He speaks in an almost reverent tone, and indeed, it is. I relax just a little after he releases it and watch as it slithers, lightning-quick, into the undergrowth. Justin describes many parts of the forest as “beautiful,” using the same hushed awe regardless of whether an outsider might tend towards “weird” or even “revolting.” Where others might see a millipede, he sees a sign of a thriving, healthy ecosystem.

That same respect for the jungle’s abundance extends to the more refined parts of the resort. On my visit to the spa, I notice the treatments draw more from the Earth than a laboratory. My therapist gently massages my scalp with a bowl of coconut cream laced with fresh avocado, and scrubs the city-soot from my skin with a blend of soaked red rice and more avocado heady with cinnamon. I’ve never smelled better or felt smoother.

Thoroughly blissed out, I step outside the spa and stumble across a family of long-tailed macaques. The monkeys eye me with silent, wizened faces, before lazily hopping off the path and vanishing. My treatment room, like the yoga studio where I had saluted the tropical sun that morning, was only barely removed from the forest canopy. On Pulau Gaya, you’re wrapped in the wild. The jungle was here first, and it’s here to stay. ✦

T+L Guide

Getting There

Malaysia Airlines (malaysiaairlines.com) and Royal Brunei Airlines (flyroyalbrunei.com) fly directly to Kota Kinabalu from several major Southeast Asian cities. AirAsia (airasia.com) offers flights from Kuala Lumpur. The resort provides speedboat transfers directly from the airport.



Gaya Island Resort Malohom Bay, Pulau Gaya, Tunku Abdul Rahman Marine Park, Kota Kinabalu; 60-18/939-1100; gayaislandresort.com; doubles from RM810.

