

Destination

Growing appreciation for nature

Juxtaposed against the steely skyscrapers of nearby Kuala Lumpur, Selangor state has emerged as an up-and-coming destination that can offer travellers what they crave for nowadays – a large dose of local culture coupled with unique rural experiences, discovers S Puvaneswary



Selangor's countryside charm is fast winning the favour of tourists, with growing demand for nature and local experiences stemming from the region and beyond.

Adam Kamal, general manager, Tour East Malaysia, said: "Asians and regional markets used to be attracted to big cities in Malaysia for its shopping, entertainment and cosmopolitan ambience. But these days, there is more demand for authentic local experiences, and these draws can be found outside of major cities.

"Repeat visitors especially wish to see new attractions other than Selangor's traditional draws such as Sunway Lagoon theme park and Batu Caves. They also want to enrich their holiday experience by meeting with locals," he added.

Manfred Kurz, managing director, Diethelm Travel Malaysia, agreed: "The attractiveness of Selangor countryside – be it Kuala Selangor, Sepang, Gombak, Sabak Bernam, Hulu Langat and Ulu Selangor – is its easy accessibility, a 1.5-hour drive from the nation's capital.

"Selangor is also rich in ecotourism, culture and historical places that make it ideal for day tours," he added.

One such tour that Diethelm runs

is a day trip to Bukit Melawati, a 300-year-old historic site filled with local lore. The visit is followed by a seafood dinner in a local restaurant, as well as a night boat ride to watch fireflies in Kampung Kuantan. The company also works closely with local communities and runs homestay programmes in Gombak and Sepang, as well as overnight cycling tours where guests get to stay in local properties.

"We find that even middle-aged Europeans are willing to spend a night or two at homestays, as they are keen to experience local living and participate in activities such as learning to cook local dishes or learning how to weave baskets and mats," Kurz elaborated.

Arokia Das, director of Luxury Tours Malaysia, agreed: "Visiting the Selangor countryside used to be sold as an optional add-on for tour packages (centred on) Kuala Lumpur. Thanks to increased demand for unique experiences, it is now part of packages (being sold to) Indians, Europeans and Filipinos."

For Arokia, his company works with local fishermen, farmers and plantations to create experiences for travellers such as collecting bamboo clams and cooking them the local

style, learning about the process of tapping rubber trees, or harvesting paddy fields.

Kamal attributed the growing interest in Selangor's countryside tours to "the efforts of Tourism Selangor, to promote new products and attractions such as Sky Mirror at Kuala Selangor Beach, and agrotourism in Sekinchan".

Rural tourism is indeed gaining popularity with Malaysia's traditional inbound markets such as China, Japan and regional countries, shared Tourism Selangor general manager, Noorul Ashikin Mohd Din.

"From this year onwards, we will also be promoting Selangor and rural tourism to emerging markets such as Taiwan, Japan, Hong Kong and Europe through our marketing representatives," she said.

As part of its efforts to promote rural tourism, Tourism Selangor has trained local communities in Sabak Bernam and Kuala Selangor to be local guides in the areas they live. This

Sekinchan, with its lush green fields, has proven a hit as an agrotourism destination in Selangor

year, the training will continue in Ulu Langat, Gombak, Hulu Selangor and Kuala Langat. This Community Host Programme is endorsed by the Selangor State government. So far, 21 have already undergone training and are active guides.

Noorul said the pilot project was initiated to create community experts who are knowledgeable in their area's lore and history, culture, heritage and food, which they can share with tourists.

She added that this project will assist rural communities by allowing them to earn extra income through guiding, and the sales of local crafts.

As part of efforts to help market the services of community guides, Tourism Selangor has produced culture maps of Klang, Kuala Selangor and Sabak Bernam respectively which includes a list of places to eat, things to do, historical sites, as well as contact information for local guides and inbound agents.



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WHAT'S HOT

Tours & Activities

Multifaceted explorations

Meet with Orang Asli

This Diethelm Travel Malaysia tour offers visitors a glimpse into the lives of the local aboriginal people in Gombak, Selangor. Travellers will be able to try their hand at weaving bags and baskets with the local women, building a shelter in the jungle using leaves, starting a fire with wood and cooking a meal in a



traditional way, joining a blow-pipe competition, among other activities.

Paddle through a national park

Dev's Adventure Tours offers a kayaking adventure at Kilim Geoforest Park in Langkawi. A naturalist will lead the expedition through smaller river channels, with snack breaks in between and

Above: Kayaking in the Kilim Geoforest Park, Langkawi

a stop at Eagle Point to observe eagles in their natural habitat.

A jaunt by the countryside

This three-hour Selangor tour by Ping Anchorage takes visitors to the Royal Selangor Visitor Centre, where they can see craftsmen at work with pewter and try their hand at designing a pewter bowl. This is followed by a visit to a batik centre before proceeding to Batu Caves, where visitors have to climb 272 steps to reach a temple.

Sabah jungle expedition

Spotlighting Sabah's rich natural beauty, this 3D2N Sukau Wildlife Adventure by Big Blue Holidays includes a river cruise on the Kinabatangan River – which teems

with indigenous species such as the Proboscis monkey, Bornean orangutan and Borneo pygmy elephant – and a visit to the Gomantong Caves, renowned for its edible swiftlet nests.

A romance in the wilderness

Ecogreen Holidays offers a five-day ecotourism experience in Selaan-Linau, Ulu Baram, in northern Sarawak. Tour highlights include meeting with the Penan and the Kenyah ethnic groups, and trekking to the Sela'an Linau waterfall surrounded by dense dipterocarp forest. Guests depart for Ulu Baram area from Miri, the main gateway to Sarawak's northern region. This tour takes a maximum of eight in a group.

Hotels

Labour pains

Recruitment and employee retention are growing challenges for Kuala Lumpur's hospitality sector, especially as more hotels are added to the city. By S Puvaneswary

The expanding hotel supply in Kuala Lumpur is compounding the perennial shortage of a qualified workforce that the hotel sector is already grappling with.

Last year, five luxury brands – Banyan Tree, W and Alila, among them – started recruitment drives in 1Q2018 ahead of their openings in 2H2018, but the hiring exercises turned out to be a human resource challenge, TTTG Asia understands.

Industry leaders pointed out that local salaries are generally on the low side, which results in Malaysian hospitality professionals voting with their feet by seeking greener pastures overseas in such cities as Dubai, Macau, Singapore and Hong Kong.

Colin Rozario, director of human resources at Banyan Tree Kuala Lumpur and The Pavilion Kuala Lumpur Managed by Banyan Tree, shared: "Some (interviewees) told us they had applied to other hotels and were waiting for results; basically, they were 'shopping' around."

A far cry from "two decades ago", the current labour market is "generally an employees' market where there is little brand loyalty", Rozario contended.

Furthermore, with the prioritisation of work-life balance and empowerment of the millennial workforce, new-gen staff typically work for a property for two years or less before seeking higher salaries and

faster career advancement opportunities elsewhere, he added.

Christian Metzner, general manager, W Kuala Lumpur, commented: "Hiring rank and file staff for entry level positions is the hardest. Part of the reason is that many young people are not willing to put in the long hours required, and dealing with guests is not always easy."

To encourage more locals to work in hospitality, Kamal Munasinghe, general manager, Alila Bangsar Kuala Lumpur, suggested that the sector "should collectively come to an agreement for better compensation of operational staff".

Malaysian Association of Hotel Owners' executive director Shaharuddin Saaid also sees a need to tackle the paucity of "a ready pool of capable, local manpower" through the management of hotel supply.

"There must be a programme in place to address the supply issue, otherwise hotels will continue to pinch experienced staff by offering higher salaries and better benefits, but without corresponding increase in skillsets," he opined.

Kamal proposed: "A possible solution is to attract more international events to the city to help increase average occupancy rates, which in turn will help raise room rates."

"Once room rates increase, hotels will be able to deliver better services, as well as find the right balance between revenue versus overheads."



NEW HOTELS

The Datai Langkawi

After an extensive US\$60 million refurbishment, The Datai Langkawi has reopened with 121 rooms, suites and villas, all featuring views of the lush tropical rainforest and Andaman Sea. Other amenities include five F&B outlets and a new Nature Centre that allows guests to discover more about the surrounding environment.

Alila Bangsar

Occupying the 35th to 40th floors of The Establishment, a mixed-use development in Kuala Lumpur's Bangsar district, this urban retreat offers 143 rooms and suites across six categories. Aside from four meeting rooms, a pool on level 40 and a gym, F&B options include the pool bar, French semi fine-dining restaurant Entier on level 41, Pacific Standard cocktail lounge, rooftop bar Lido and all-day diner Botanica + Co.

Hard Rock Hotel Desaru Coast

The brand's second opening

in Johor features 365 rooms, all of which are music-inspired. Facilities on-site include four dining outlets, the Rock Spa, three meeting spaces and a kids' club. The hotel is part of the Desaru Coast integrated destination resort which boasts a waterpark, man-made beach, restaurants, shopping and golf courses.

Hyatt House Kuala Lumpur, Mont'Kiara

With 298 guestrooms and fully-equipped kitchens, this Hyatt House hotel features a restaurant, 300m² of meeting space, a 24-hour gym, game rooms, outdoor infinity pool and the Ten37 Skypool Bar. It stands near to the Malaysian International Trade and Exhibition Centre.

Hilton Garden Inn

The 255-key hotel features five meeting spaces, an F&B outlet, a 24-hour fitness centre and a 22m-long outdoor saltwater pool and heated outdoor jacuzzi. The hotel is a short walk to the Puchong Perdana RapidKL Light Rail Transit station, and it also offers free shuttle service.

Alila Bangsar's Studio room

Fresh Eyes

Curating traditions

As interest in local heritage experiences grows, so do opportunities for an activity booking platform, finds S Puvaneswary

A substantial funding injection from South Korea venture capital firm BonAngels will enable LokaLocal, a Malaysian travel technology start-up, to ramp up its product range and fuel its expansion goals.

The experienced-based travel platform currently lists more than 800 activities throughout the country, ranging from paddy harvesting and cooking classes to traditional lantern and shadow puppets making. Small tour operators can also list their day tours, or two- or three-day itineraries on LokaLocal.

With the funding boost, LokaLocal's founder Chin Yoon Khen hopes to grow the platform's stable of activities to 1,500 by the end of this year.

Part of the funding will also be

invested into a merchant solution to enable sellers to easily track their daily and monthly sales activities, as well as to provide quicker responses to enquiries and booking confirmations. The website will also be upgraded to provide faster loading times for users.

LokaLocal was established by Chin in April 2016, an idea born after the documentary photographer turned photographers of local artisans into a 500-page full-coloured book titled *Traditional Trades in Penang*.

Chin saw a growing demand from tourists seeking unique local experiences, leading to the launch of LokaLocal with a focus on matching traditional artisans as local guides for travellers. These cultural and heritage experiences are marketed creatively

on the website through professional photographs and videos.

Some of the artisans featured in his book project are also experts on LokaLocal, providing workshops such as joss stick making and hand-beading Peranakan shoes.

"More than 80 per cent of sales comes from the local expatriate community living and working in Malaysia, as well as tourists from the US, Australia and New Zealand," he shared.

"Most are between the ages of 25-34, and are looking for authentic local experiences and opportunities to make new friends."

And although the portal has received competition in Airbnb's Experiences, TakeMeTour and Withlocals, Chin believes that competition is

We believe we have an edge over the competition because we are homegrown, and who knows Malaysia better than a native?

Chin Yoon Khen

Founder,
Lokalocal



good for business.

"These giants have helped build the ecosystem faster, helped to educate suppliers on how to be good local experts, and how to market their business," said Chin.

"We believe we have an edge over the competition because we are homegrown, and who knows Malaysia better than a native?"

Tried & Tested Movenpick Hotel & Convention Centre KLIA

The newest landmark standing near Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) and KLIA2 in Sepang, Malaysia sports a very distinctive architectural style. S Puvaneswary stays a night

LOCATION Movenpick Hotel & Convention Centre KLIA is located less than a 10-minute drive to both KLIA and KLIA2, which makes it a perfect hotel for those in transit and unexpected flight delays. For guests' convenience, the hotel provides a complimentary air-conditioned shuttle



service to and from the airport every two hours.

It is also about a five-minute drive to Mitsui Premium Outlet Park. The factory outlet also provides complimentary shuttle service every hour to and from the hotel, from 10.00 to 22.00 daily.

ROOMS There are 333 rooms in total. The Deluxe Room I stayed in was modern, with sensors that detect a guest's presence whenever the room door opens, automatically turning on the lights and air condition.

Each room has a smart TV, which in addition to its offering of 36 channels and five radio stations, also provides the latest flight information at both airports.

What I loved best about my room is its expansive size at 46m². It is outfitted with a king-sized bed, two lounge chairs, two work chairs, a small work table and a long coffee table, but still leaves plenty of walking space.

The bathroom is also impressively large, offering two sinks, a small round bathtub with shower facilities and a rainshower.

F&B Temasya, a swanky coffee house on the ground floor, stands out for its unique concept, with flat stones lining the clear glass flooring that leads to the outlet.

The spacious eatery features live cooking stations, serving a mixture of local and international food. I strongly recommend Malaysian favourites such as *satay* and *kuey teow*, and the chicken fajita sandwich. The food was remarkably delicious.

At 17.00 daily, the hotel holds its chocolate hour at Sira Lounge in the lobby. Guests are welcome to indulge in as much chocolates, biscuits, truffles and brownies as they can possibly devour. The desserts were made just right – without them being saccharine – which resulted in my overindulgence.

There are four other F&B outlets, ranging from fine-dining restaurant Bara, to Redup which specialises in light snacks.

FACILITIES There are separate recreational facilities – swimming pools, gyms and spas, etc – for men and women. There are also 12 spa pods and a kids' club.

SERVICE Excellent. I called for help way past midnight as I didn't know how to connect the TV to Netflix and someone came to assist right away. I also loved the hassle-free check-in service – I was handed my room key in less than five minutes.

VERDICT Fantastic hospitality. Staff were also attentive, friendly and made me feel right at home.

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