



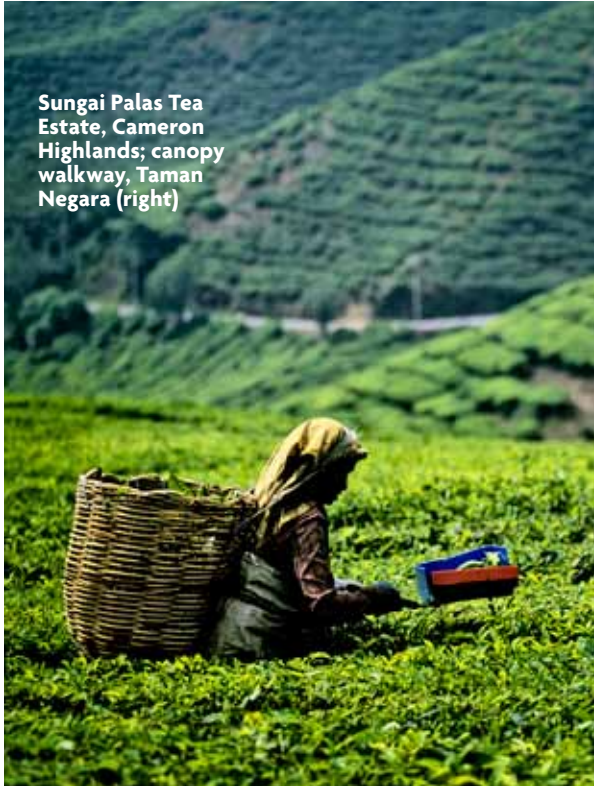
Malaysia's Kuala Lumpur is one of Asia's hot journey breakers, a vibrant, fascinating city. But **Chris Wright** discovers that getting out of town is just as rewarding.

Highland HINING

Tea plantations in the Cameron Highlands

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES

Sungai Palas Tea Estate, Cameron Highlands; canopy walkway, Taman Negara (right)



Cameron Highlands

SOME THREE HOURS' DRIVE north from Kuala Lumpur, the Cameron Highlands show Malaysia in its colonial-era colours. A hill station at about 1500m altitude, it is a cool respite from the humid stickiness of the rest of the peninsula. Tourists come to trek, see tea plantations, or do absolutely nothing in one of the area's spas. Tea was first planted here in 1929 on the Boh Tea Estate, which still operates, and several other estates offer tours. Some have factories where you can watch the leaf-to-packet process, but it's the fields that are mesmerising: neat, sculptured, undulating carpets of vivid green along the hills and up the mountainsides. Spare a thought for the tea pickers, who earn 20 sen (six Australian cents) per kilo and will try to haul in 300kg of leaves on a good day.

Then there are the treks – 14 marked trails and no end of guides available to help – guided forest walks, strawberry and butterfly farms. Rapid tours will take in all these, plus the tea plantations, in a day, or even a morning.

Accommodation covers a range of options. At the top of the tree is the luxurious Cameron Highlands Resort (cameronhighlandsresort.com) a Tudor-style colonial building of fireplaces, reading rooms and snooker tables reminiscent of Singapore's Raffles Hotel. Come back from a trek to have your muddy boots whisked away and returned pristine to your door without you even asking. Also available are a host of boutiques, some within

strawberry fields. The best places put particular effort into their relaxing spas. Backpackers are also catered for.

Another reason people come to the Cameron Highlands is the enduring mystery of Jim Thompson, better known to most people for his old house in Bangkok, today a museum showcasing the extraordinary range of antiques he collected in his days building his silk business. In 1967, Thompson went for a walk in the highlands and was never seen again, triggering many conspiracy theories. A guide called Madi, apart from being a naturalist and authority on orchids, runs a Jim Thompson tour out of the Cameron Highlands Resort, starting from the last place Thompson was seen alive. Read up on the mystery first and be prepared for Madi's version to differ markedly from anybody else's.

Taman Negara

IT IS 8PM WHEN I HEAR a hammering on my door. It is Sabri, the office manager of the Mutiara (mutiarahotels.com), the only resort within the boundaries of Malaysia's ancient Taman Negara rainforest. And he is excited. "Elephant!" he shouts. And there, maybe 20 metres from my chalet, is a wild Asian elephant, wrenching a 5m travellers palm out of the ground with its trunk. Sabri shakes his head. "I've worked here 20 years. This has never happened before." ➤



Taman Negara National Park: fruiting palm; monkey business (left)

Taman Negara covers more than 4000sq km of dense jungle and is believed to be among the oldest rainforests in the world

Elephants on the doorstep are far from the norm here, but it's proof that big game still resides within this accessible and bounteous chunk of pristine land. Taman Negara, which covers more than 4000sq km of dense jungle and has been protected since 1937, is believed to be among the oldest rainforests in the world, at 130 million years.

Part of what sets Taman Negara apart is getting there. The usual approach is to travel to Kuala Tembeling, about three hours from Kuala Lumpur, then to board a narrow, tin-roofed, wooden longboat for a further two to three hours up the Tembeling River to reach the park. You can get most of the way by road much faster, but there's no fun in that.

The boat ride is real *Heart Of Darkness* stuff, powering up the river amid the relentless green mass of the jungle, occasionally passing *kampongs* (settlements) on the shore. The river gives a perfect perspective of the jungle's scale. A rainforest is a fight for sunlight, and therefore life. It is a thick crowd of plants striving upwards by various devious means: the bullying heavyweights, such as the *meranti* trees,

reaching the top through their sheer strength and bulk; the parasites – strangler figs, vines and rattan – clawing their way up on the back of stronger rivals, killing their hosts to thrive; the forest floor dwellers, waiting for a gap in the canopy caused by a falling giant in order to seize their moment in the sun – literally – and grow.

The river is where there is a real sense of all this, where plants and trees on the bank, having run out of land, lean over the water in a tumbling, rolling avalanche, as if they might leap it in search of space and light. Jungles on this scale would be unthinkable to walk through away from the trails. Progress more than a dozen metres through the teeming, buzzing green would be impossible.

Within the park itself, the Mutiara has comfortable huts and chalets. Forget about TV and internet, but they've got everything else you'll need. On the other side of the river, outside the park and beyond the reach of preservation orders, the town of Kuala Tahan offers many other places to stay and shuttles people across the river to the park. ➤



Flower-power rickshaws, Malacca

Sabri – who grew up in the area and loves it passionately – tells me that tourists almost never see elephants no matter how far they trek in the jungle, and certainly not the tigers living deep in the forest. That may be just as well; a wild elephant is a beautiful creature up close, oddly peaceful for its evident strength and bulk, but would be dangerous if alarmed. Most travellers will have to content themselves with barking deer, wild boar, monkeys (the Mutiara keeps them out of its restaurant with a deeply unconvincing toy tiger at the entrance), maybe a tapir, and a lot of insects.

But there's a great deal to be gained from a visit. Locals say they find a purpose for pretty much anything in the forest: this plant is for pregnant women, this cleans your blood, this one helps if you have gas. A canopy walkway, more than 500m long, provides a glimpse from above of the many layers of a rainforest; it's safe, but a touch hair-raising, and I had Dean Martin's (or Michael Bubl 's) *Sway* running through my head by the time I got back to ground level.

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Taman Negara also offers the chance to meet one of Malaysia's indigenous tribes, the Orang Asli. There is always a certain queasiness at these visits, as they feel voyeuristic, but the tribespeople greet the arrival of tourists with equanimity and put on demonstrations of hunting with blowpipes and darts. When I visit, a ragged teddy bear pinned to a board is the target. If a tribal member dies, everyone must relocate, leaving their settlement and most of their possessions behind to set up elsewhere. The Orang Asli don't bury their dead, leaving the bodies on treetop platforms. They have strict rules about nature: don't cut down a tree unless there is a practical use for it, and hunt no mammals that live on the jungle floor, only the squirrels and monkeys.

Boat trips upriver, through choppy rapids, are exciting, and the truly adventurous can take longer treks and camp; the longest, to Gunung Tahan, the highest mountain in peninsula Malaysia, takes a week.

Malacca

MALACCA (OR MELAKA) is an attractive destination for history buffs, since it has kept alive the spirit of the many and varied powers that have ruled the place over the years. It gained UNESCO World Heritage site status in 2008.

The city combines Portuguese and Dutch architecture, Peranakan food, a thriving Chinatown, and many examples of Muslim, Catholic and Buddhist ways of life. While just as hot and humid as any other Malaysian city, sightseeing is relatively painless as the various historical sites are close to one another and flower-adorned rickshaws are everywhere.

The focal point of Malacca is Bukit St Paul (St Paul's Hill) where a Portuguese church was built in 1521. The hill has views over the city to the shipping in the Straits of Malacca, with Sumatra visible on the other side. Around the hill are a host of landmarks, including the unmistakable salmon-pink Stadthuys (town hall), the remains of the Porta de Santiago fortress, and a maritime museum within a replica of the Portuguese ship *Flora de la Mar*. Although less than two hours south of KL, it's like travelling back in time. 