



A grand stone staircase leads down from The Datal's pool level. Opposite: Batik motifs adorn staff uniforms.

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FRESH FROM A YEARLONG RENOVATION TO MARK ITS 25TH ANNIVERSARY, A LEGENDARY LANGKAWI RESORT HAS BEEN UPDATED AND UPGRADED, EMBRACING ITS RAIN FOREST SETTING AS NEVER BEFORE.  
BY CHRISTOPHER P. HILL PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARTIN WESTLAKE



“THE ENTIRE PALEOGEOLOGICAL HISTORY OF MALAYSIA—MORE

than half a billion years’ worth—happened to this tiny island,” declares Irshad Mobarak over dinner on the terrace of The Datai’s Beach Club restaurant. “All kinds of rock substrate were laid down over the eons: sandstone, limestone, shale, mudstone, chert. So there’s an incredible diversity of soil types too. This means lots of different flora, which in turn means lots of different butterflies—535 species in all, almost nine times what they have in the United Kingdom, and more than twice the number found in Sri Lanka. It’s incredible.”

And there’s plenty more than butterflies lurking in the dense rain forests and mangrove fringes of Langkawi, a 370-square-kilometer island off peninsular Malaysia’s Kedah coast. Just ask Mobarak. The self-taught naturalist has called Langkawi home for the last three decades, during which time he has acquired an encyclopedic knowledge of the local wildlife. His statistics include 260 species of birds, among them three types of hornbills, Asian fairy bluebirds, racket-tailed drongos, and brahminy kites, from which the island derives its name; dozens of different turtles and frogs and snakes; and 51 mammal species. The latter include the enigmatic colugo, a nocturnal oddity that looks like a cross between a lemur and a bat. As if on cue, three of the creatures glide into a sea hibiscus tree next to the terrace, their glowing red eyes flickering momentarily in the shadows.

Anyone familiar with Langkawi will have heard of Mobarak. A fixture at The Datai since the resort first opened on the island’s northwest coast in 1993, he’s something of a legend in these parts, and not just because of his powerful build and charming demeanor. Apart from being The Datai’s longstanding resident naturalist, Mobarak has appeared in numerous documentaries about the unique natural history of Langkawi, which comprises both the main island and a scattering of smaller neighbors. He’s written a book on the subject too, and has spent time in the field with the great British botanist David Bellamy (a boyhood idol of his) and the late lepidopterist Bernard d’Abrera. The founder of a popular nature outfit called Junglewalla, Mobarak also consults widely on conservation. At 60, he is arguably Malaysia’s most celebrated naturalist.

What’s got him excited these days, however, is The Datai’s sharpened focus on the environment. Hidden in a 10-million-year-old

PAGE 88: STYLING: SASHA IVAN; HAIR & MAKEUP: CHARLOTTE YAP; MODEL: DISSICA SHIAO; OUTFIT BY MAGIFESTYLE; PAGE 94: BIKINI BY OZEO SWIMWEAR

The view from The Datai’s lobby lounge stretches across the Strait of Malacca to the Thai island of Tarutao.



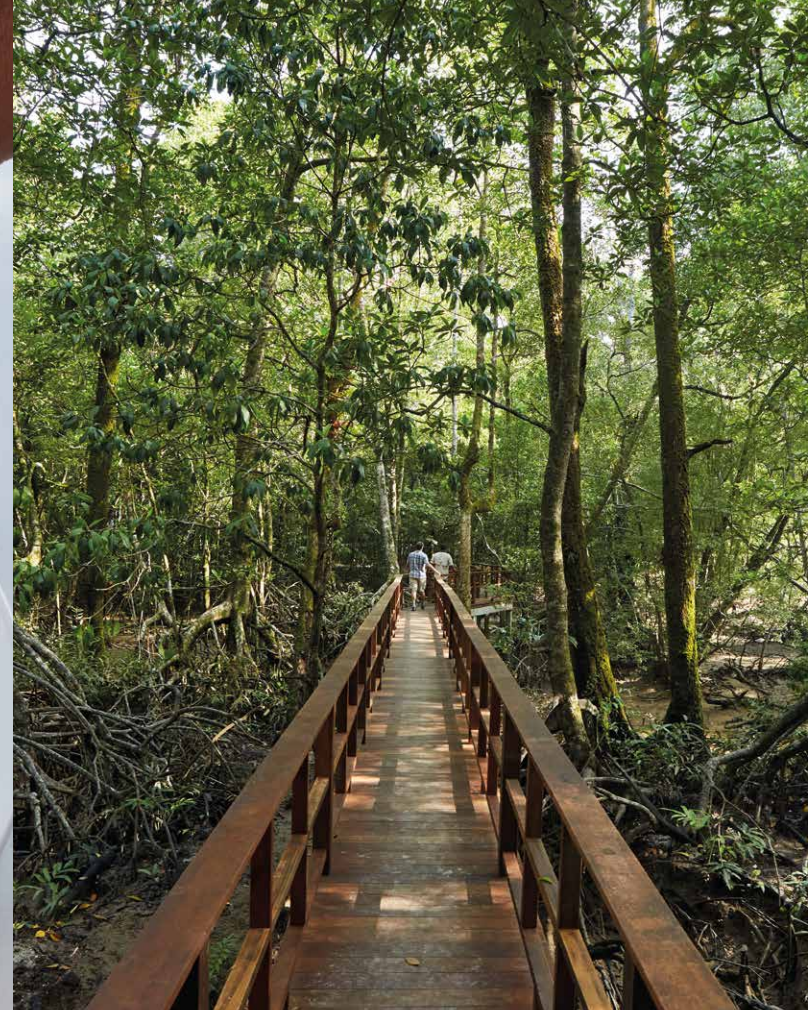




The bedroom of a Rainforest Villa. Opposite: Nature Centre manager Jonathan Chandrasakaran (center) and his team in front of their new longhouse-inspired facility on the shores of Datai Bay.







rain forest at the edge of the Andaman Sea, the resort has always had nature built into its DNA. Indeed, you don't need to leave your room to see macaques and dusky langurs leaping through the trees, or to hear the whoosh of a hornbill flying past. But ahead of its 25th anniversary last year, The Datai embarked on a property-wide revamp that has gone well beyond cosmetic enhancements to its rooms and public areas. Doubling down on its sustainability commitments, the 18-hectare resort has phased out single-use plastics, built a water-bottling plant, and established a permaculture garden to grow organic vegetables for its kitchens. By the end of this year, the plan is to produce zero waste.

Mobarak, for his part, now works out of a purpose-built nature center sited in a sandy grove just steps from the beach. Inspired by the form of a traditional Borneo longhouse, the open bamboo-and-thatch structure houses a small library, a lounge area for nature talks, and a "tea corner" where guests can sample medicinal infusions made from foraged herbs like *pegaga* (Asiatic pennywort). Next to his office is a small laboratory equipped with microscopes and tanks for growing corals, which Mobarak says will be transplanted to the reefs of Datai Bay—a rehabilitation effort that guest can participate in. "Simple science, but real science," he calls it.

Two young marine biologists and his niece (a former Junglewalla guide) have joined Mobarak's team, allowing for a considerably expanded menu of guest activities—everything from reef walks and guided kayaking excursions to bug hunts for kids. There's also a new 65-meter-long elevated boardwalk through the nearby mangroves. Spanning a stream where otters can be spotted, it's part of a nature trail that stretches for almost a kilometer through the resort, the high point of which (quite literally) is an observation deck built 20 meters up around the trunk of a strangler fig. Accessed via a wooden suspension bridge, it provides an up-close look at the forest canopy.

More ambitious yet, Mobarak is heading a community-based initiative called the Datai Trust, comprising three main projects. The first, Fish for the Future, aims to protect the fragile reefs of Datai Bay from overfishing. As Mobarak explains, local inshore fishermen have seen their traditional catches decline due to the en-

croachment of big trawlers from Thailand and mainland Malaysia. "Desperate to feed their families, they're now fishing right on the reef, which is destroying it," he says. The solution? Sinking steel-framed FADs—or fish aggregating devices—at different sites around the bay, to act as artificial reefs where fish can propagate and provide anglers with alternate and sustainable fishing grounds. Deployed in January, the devices have been eagerly welcomed by the local communities, who will

*Clockwise from left: Seating at the resort's beach bar; a spa attendant; poolside cabanas at the Beach Club; one of a pair of Indian horse statues that have stood guard in the lobby since The Datai first opened in 1993; poached halibut with onion cream and seaweed sauce at the Dining Room; the new mangrove boardwalk.*





Left: *Kerabu isi ketam*, a Kedah-style crab salad featuring young papaya, pomelo, and island-grown herbs at the resort's Malay restaurant, the Gulai House. Opposite: On the terrace of a stream-side treatment villa at the spa.

also be able to supplement their incomes by selling fish directly to the resort.

The second project, *Wildlife for the Future*, will establish a network of wildlife corridors across the island to reconnect habitats that have been fragmented by farmland and road infrastructure. As most of Langkawi's animals are arboreal, this essentially means creating "a tunnel of trees." Mobarak has already been collecting seeds to grow at an on-site nursery; when they are tall enough—he estimates between two and three years—the saplings will be planted along corridors that he's already mapped out, enabling monkeys, squirrels, colugos, and other tree-dwelling species to cross over.

Then there's *Youth for the Future*, which Mobarak describes as a club for the island's restless teenagers to learn how to build, paddle, and sail outrigger canoes. With plans for monthly regattas and an annual jamboree, he sees it as a way to both teach Langkawi youth about a fading tradition, and to provide them with a healthy outlet for their energy.

"Tourism as an industry has taken a lot from this island," says Mobarak, who credits The Datai's general manager of the past four and a half years, Arnaud Girodon, with being incredibly supportive of all these initiatives. "Now, we want to show how it can give back."

A quarter of a century ago, The Datai put sleepy Langkawi

on the map for luxury travelers. The concept was groundbreaking: a tropical island resort set not on its beachfront, but crouched on a forested ridge 300 meters back from the sea. (Today's 13 beach villas are a much later addition.) Originally inaccessible by road, the site was selected by Aman resorts founder Adrian Zecha—an early partner in the project—as he surveyed Datai Bay's jungly backdrop from a boat. With Singapore-based Australian architect Kerry Hill hired to design the hotel, the decision was made to place the main structures in the forest. "We felt that the biggest experience here was the jungle, not the sea, even though there's a wonderful beach," recalls Didier Lefort, the French architect and designer responsible for the original interiors. "The sea you can get anywhere, but to be surrounded by tropical forest is very rare. That's what makes The Datai."

The results were visionary. Hill, who passed away last year, integrated the property into its surrounds by splitting most of the accommodation among four low-slung buildings, all connected by breezy walkways and clad in tropical timber and locally quarried granite. Another 40 rooms occupied stilted "rainforest" villas scattered about the hillside. From the sea, the hotel was—and remains—almost invisible. Lefort's interiors, meanwhile, were serene and understated. "Very modern for its time," he says.

But as the resort approached its 25th anniversary, it was recognized that a substantial upgrade was in order. And so, in September





From left: Inside the Nature Centre; resident naturalist Irshad Mobarak on his new canopy walk; the Dining Room; the lily pond off the lobby.

2017, The Datai closed its doors to undergo a yearlong, US\$60 million refurbishment—the most extensive yet for the property.

Longtime fans were anxious. Lefort, who was brought back to oversee the renovations, remembers talking to guests ahead of the closure. “They would say, ‘Please, please, don’t touch The Datai. We like it as it is.’ And I would say ‘Don’t worry, don’t worry’—because there was never any plan to reinvent the place; The Datai has a huge number of repeat guests, and we knew we had to keep them happy. The exercise was to introduce some modernity while respecting the original spirit.”

For Lefort, that spirit had been eroded by a 2006 interior face-lift that gussied up the guest rooms with darker-toned wood and other modifications. He was particularly aghast at changes to the Dining Room, the resort’s fine-dining restaurant. “It was all black!” He shakes his head disapprovingly. “And my horses, they painted my horses!” He’s referring to the two large wooden horses that stand guard in the lobby, which he picked up for the resort while rummaging through Mumbai’s Chor Bazaar. He had left the antique statues in the worn state in which he found them, charmed by their patina of age. But they had since been repainted. One of Lefort’s first decisions was to break out the paint remover and restore the equines to their distressed splendor.

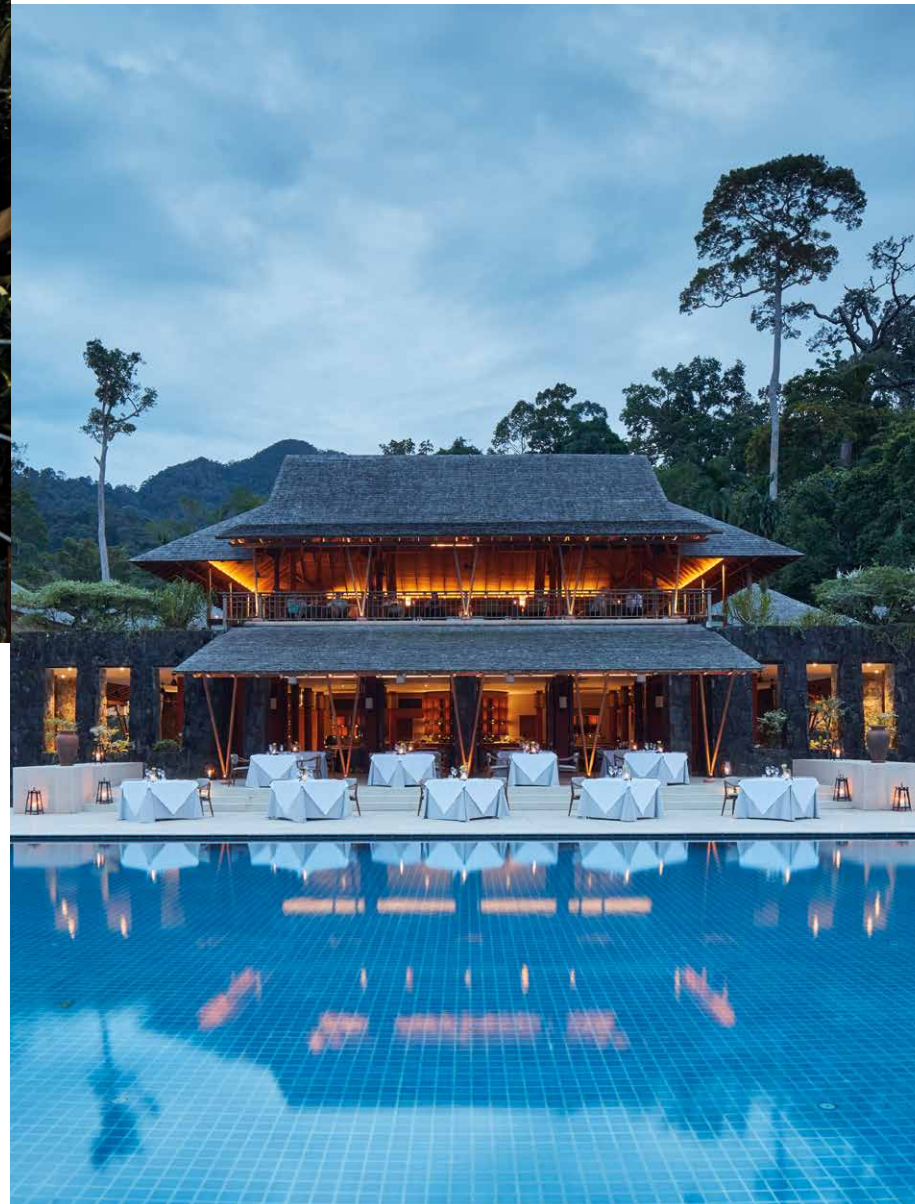
He has also reinstated the rooms’ wooden panels—embellished, as in his original design, with brass Indian door studs. While the layouts of the guest quarters have changed little, all the wiring, light-

ing, and *balau* timber floors have been replaced. Taupe daybeds now frame balcony doors, built-in cabinets are lined with ceramic *objets*; torch-like sconces cast a mellow glow from their mirrored backplates; and bathrooms have been beautifully revamped around free-standing composite-stone tubs. It’s a similar story in the forest villas, eight of which—thanks to the addition of three new units—come with their own pools. Lighter and airier now and with inviting canopied beds, these offer more privacy and space than the regular rooms, though they lack the sweeping views you get from the main wings.

Another hard-to-miss addition is the Datai Estate, which you’ll inevitably pass on the buggy ride to the Beach Club. Built from scratch, the private villa complex spans 3,500 square meters and comes with five bedrooms, two connected swimming pools, games rooms, and the services of a dedicated butler and chef—just the thing for a visiting potentate.

Elsewhere, the gym has been relocated from under the main swimming pool to a thatch-roofed pavilion near the beach, with floor-to-ceiling windows that look out to the Andaman Sea and the Thai island of Tarutao, less than 10 kilometers away. Next door, an enhanced water-sports center lends out snorkeling gear, windsurfers, kayaks, and catamarans—nothing noisy, of course.

At the spa, where treatments revolve around Malay healing traditions and *ramuan* “potions” made by infusing oils with medicinal foliage plucked from the herb garden and surrounding forest, an air-conditioned treatment room has been added to the existing four



open-air spa villas. Also new is a mani-pedi studio by Bastien Gonzalez, the celebrated French nail guru.

The Datai’s restaurants have undergone alterations as well. For the Pavilion, a Thai outlet perched on stilts high above the grand staircase that zigzags down from the pool level, it was a simple extension. Down at the Beach Club, there’s now a seafood counter where diners can inspect the day’s catch, not to mention lighter furnishings and a reworked menu of casual bites like wagyu burgers and a terrific Caprese salad anchored by water-buffalo mozzarella.

Tucked into the forest, the Gulai House is a kampong-style Malay-Indian restaurant that, save for the introduction of a tandoor oven and gleaming show kitchen, remains much as it has for years, with rustic wooden furniture and a chorus of frogs as a soundtrack. But chef Adee Affende BinSudin has retooled the menu to incor-



porate more regional Malaysian dishes; highlights include *umai tiram* (local oysters with chili, ginger, onion, and tomato salsa), *kerabu isi ketam* (a Kedah-style crab salad tossed with young papaya and pomelo), and a toothsome beef *rendang* made from his grandmother’s recipe.

Good as that all is, be sure to book at least one dinner at the Dining Room. Set below the lobby lounge at the edge of the pool, it serves breakfast and lunch by day before transforming into a romantic French restaurant at night. Lefort has banished all traces of black and remodeled the space with natural wood tones and hits of red; a shingled roof now extends over the terrace. Order the olive oil-poached halibut with seaweed sauce if it’s available, and be sure to save room for dessert: the boozy *baba au rhum*, accompanied by a dollop of turmeric-infused Chantilly cream and hibiscus

flower jelly, is the perfect Paris-by-way-of-the-tropics finish.

**At night,** when the forest closes in and The Datai’s man-made structures recede into the darkness, you can join a nocturnal walk with one of the nature guides. Flashlights in hand, you’re led along as the sounds of the jungle are identified and explained—the whir of cicadas, the croak of frogs, the hoot of an owl. You’ll likely spot a flying squirrel or a flying fox, perhaps a colugo or a civet cat. You’ll certainly catch the looks of wide-eyed wonder on the faces of your fellow walkers. Whether repeat guests or first-timers, they’re all pondering the magic of this enduringly unique corner of Langkawi. ©

*The Datai Langkawi, Jl. Teluk Datai, Langkawi, Malaysia; 60-4/9500-5500; thedatai.com; doubles from US\$610*