

SECRET PATHWAYS

By Kamila Delart

The longer I live on the island, the more curious I get about the nature around. There is the obvious beauty: the lush jungle, tropical plants, colorful birds... And there are the famous places of interest. But once you scratch the surface, you want to go deeper. Explore places off the tourist tracks, understand the mystery of the mangroves, learn about the fascinating cycle of death and rebirth of a cicada that spends his short life singing a love song...

And so I book an adventure trip with **JUNGLEWALLA TOURS**. Founded by Irshad Mobarak, a passionate Naturalist who appeared in an array of documentaries on National Geographic and Discovery Channel, JungleWalla Tours will bring you to hidden places, barely touched by man. Also the team of guides is unique: There is a 'Snake Man', 'Butterfly' and 'Medicine Man', 'Swamp & Mangrove Girl'... If they cannot answer my questions, who will?!



As if going on an amazing adventure trip was not a treat enough, when I arrive at the meeting point, I learn that the other guests who were supposed to join us didn't reach Langkawi yet due to a flight delay. Although the minimum of participants is four, JungleWalla generously decides not to proceed with a last minute cancelation. And so I find myself alone with Shah, a young Marine Biologist with the looks of Tarzan. So not only will I enjoy a truly personalized experience, but also get to play Jane for the day. It should be fun!

The first part of our adventure is kayaking in the mangroves. To my surprise, we don't drive towards the usual mangrove tour spot but park in a deserted place untouched from tourism. Apart from a few local fishermen there is not a soul. As we board our kayak, the tide is still low - an excellent opportunity to truly explore the otherwise invisible life within the mangroves. Shah enthusiastically talks about the intriguing eco-system of the mangroves, explaining the unique nature of the swamp trees that manage to thrive in mud without oxygen, adapting to alternating temperatures, changing saline levels, the high and low tide...

On our left appears a small island with a shipwreck - a monument to a tsunami that dragged the boat from the sea all the way in the heartland. I notice some motion around it, and as we come closer, I see the bizarre mud skipper and hundreds of Fiddler Crabs, ecstatically waving with their single claw. A mating ritual as I learn. And once I know what to look for, I do notice that the colorful males stand in a circle around a plainly looking brown female, trying to lure her, competing for her attention. What an amazing spectacle!



After our kayaking adventure, we go for a short hike through the rainforest. As we follow the narrow path surrounded by dense foliage, I believe to hear the sound of gurgling water. And finally there it is. The promised secret jungle stream. The river boulders built on one spot a natural barrier, creating a deep pond. Before I know it, my guide jumps from the top rock into the water. His lean dark limbs reflect the sun, his long hair floats on the water surface... He really does look like a Tarzan☺. Being the less adventurous Jane, I find a tiny pathway to enter the pond. The chilly water is refreshing after a hike in the hot sun. What a bliss. I swim towards the small waterfall-like part, hold firm on the surrounding rocks, and let the water massage my neck and shoulders. A spa experience in the middle of nature... The water is crystal clear, so I can see tiny fish swimming around, and on the rock next to me there is a big frog. Instead of jumping away, he watches me with this intense look in his eyes, as if he wanted to say something. I wonder whether a kiss would turn him into a prince just as in the fairy tale. But before I make up my mind, he swims away.

I turn on my back, allowing the water to carry me. Floating around, I watch the sky above. Peacefully blue, with a few cloudlets that resemble candy floss. Then there is the forceful sound of wings beating against the air and just above our heads appears an eagle. Circling around, proudly watching his territory. I cannot believe this place! I really am in the wilderness. And part of it! What an amazing experience...

Hesitant to leave this magical place, we nearly miss our lunch at the TIGA Restaurant next to the dreamlike pebble beach. Which really would have been a shame. The 'Cencaru Sumbat Basah'- a jacket fish stuffed with tamarind and lemongrass, the green curry beef and all the other dishes I taste are delicious! And the place, framed by bamboo, has a dreamlike view of the Andaman Sea, and monkeys joyfully playing in the surrounding jungle trees. The perfect ending to a brilliant day!



Reluctant to end this wonderful adventure, I ask Shah about other tours **JUNGLEWALLA** is offering. And before I get back into the car, I highlight in my calendar next Wednesday. A Bird Watching trip it is! Something to look forward to...