DISCOVER

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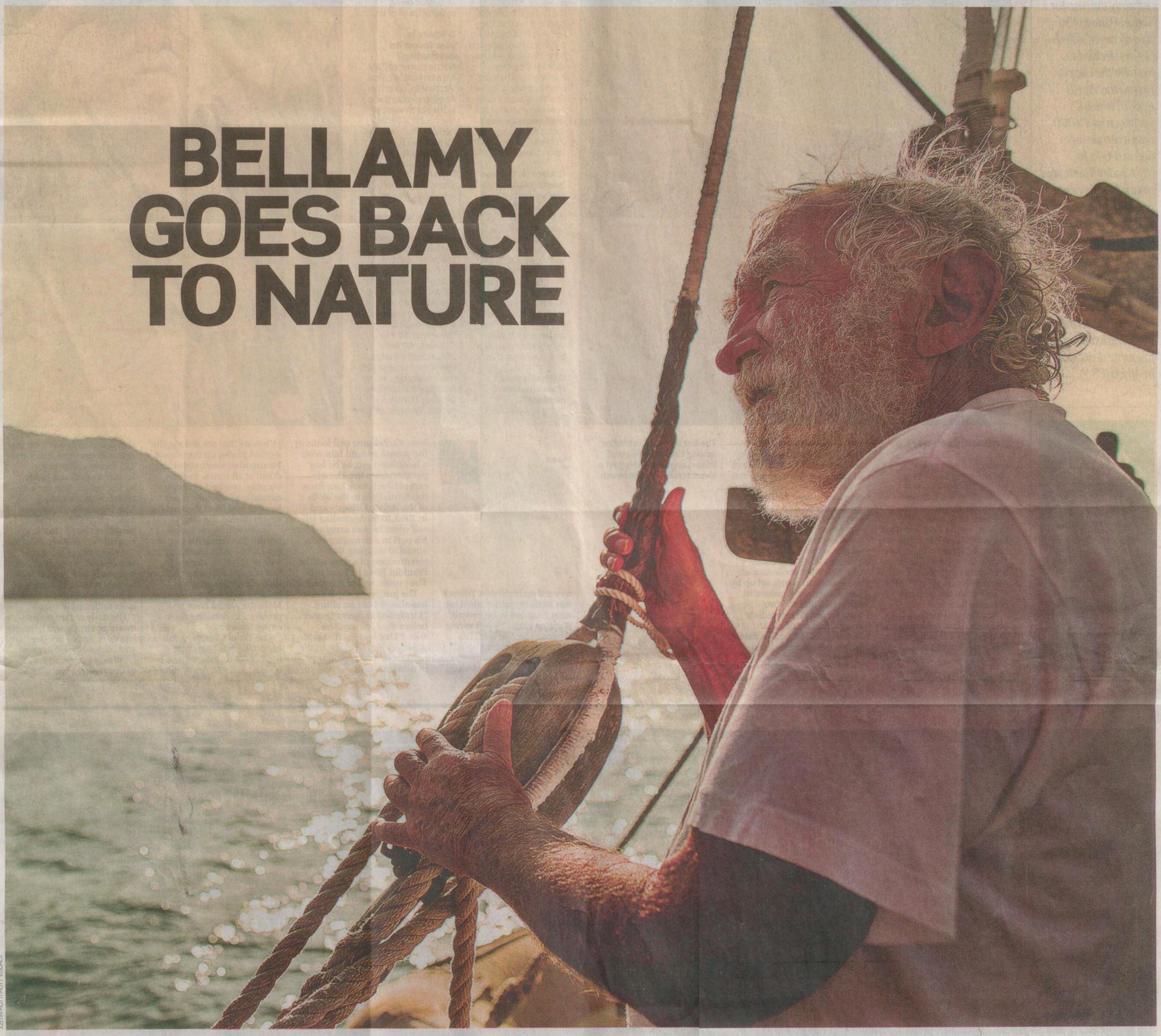
BELLAMY GOES BACK TO NATURE



JUSTIN MOTT/MOTT VISUALS

The British naturalist returns to Malaysia to explore its botanical bounty – and enjoys a poignant encounter with an old friend. **Chris Leadbeater** observes a rainforest reunion

The morning's topic of conversation has turned to the strangler fig. The parasite in question stands there tall, defiant and entirely unrepentant, wrapping all of its sinuous energy around the ironwood tree which has found itself the choking focus of its attention.

Five yards away, Irshad Mobarak breathes deeply and prepares to play devil's advocate. "In the business world, this would be fully understood," he muses, arm extended, tracing the long shape of the arboreal aggressor to his left. "Just think of it as a hostile takeover."

A powerfully built man, well over 6ft, he says these words with a composure that is impressive for two reasons. The first is that, directly behind him, a five-star resort swimming pool shines in the 10am daylight, the sun-worshippers around its fringes listening as they lie on the loungers. The second is that one of Britain's most fabled – and recognisable – botanists is his main partner in this discourse. David Bellamy nods quietly as Mobarak speaks. He knows this stuff, of course – but he is also happy to hear it from a fellow expert.

David Bellamy, now 82, still looks at the world around him with a fascinated eye

"The strangler fig has a terrible image problem," Mobarak continues. "It can take up to half a century to kill its host. Yet it also has a positive effect. It only picks on trees which are past their best. Birds drop its seeds, but if the cavities in the bark of this ironwood – which let the invader lodge itself – had not existed, then the strangler fig would not grow.

"It is one of the keystone species of the rainforest, taking over a tree with weaknesses, a tree which was going to die. The death brings nutrients and renewal which benefit the surrounding ecosystem. It is not a hostile takeover as such, more company restructuring."

This might seem an odd topic for just after breakfast on a warm

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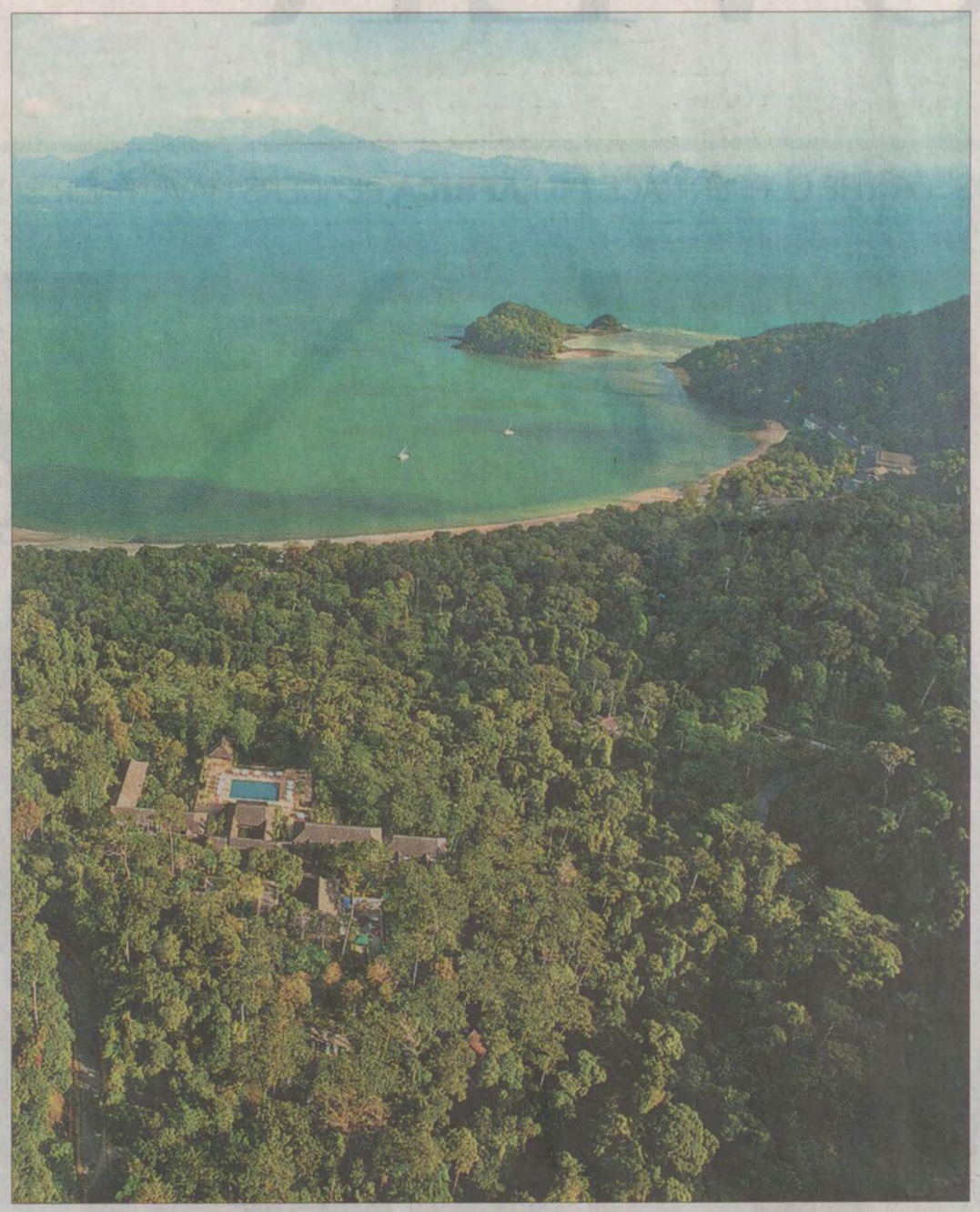
'Ferns so old that dinosaurs used to



DAVID BELLAMY'S TRAVELLING LIFE

You must have seen some incredible locations during your career...
I've been fortunate enough to stand on the top of the planet, having arrived at the North Pole by plane. I only had 20 minutes to take it in because they couldn't stop the engines, but I found it mind-blowing to know I could only walk in one direction – south. I did what everyone else does: planted my umbrella and "walked around the world".

Where is the most beautiful place you've visited?
I spent a large amount of time in the Indian Ocean in my early career, looking at the impact man has had on the coral atolls. I was there for nine months, working with some of the best divers in the world. I must have spent every day during that time underwater. It was very hard to get back to reality after that.

What is your favourite travel memory?
Being at Ayers Rock (Uluru) on New Year's Eve. Rosemary and I had four of our children with us. I remember the light on the rock at sunset being magical for all of us.

Where is your favourite destination?
A little corner of Italy. It's a tiny place called Vezzanello, up in the Appenine mountains in the north-west of the country. We've had a house there for 25 years. In spring, the slopes are sheets of orchids, and the limestone looks like snow. We go there whenever we can.

Where is next on your travel to-do list?
Rosemary and I want to go back and walk the west coast of Scotland. We did it, youth hostelling, before we were married. That was during June and July, and we made it all the way up to John O'Groats. We were still undergraduates. I think we managed 15 miles every day. We're probably still capable of doing 10 now, I reckon. We walk a lot.

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Friday in a luxury hotel. But then, the Datai is no ordinary hideaway. It is slotted into thick foliage on the north-west corner of Pulau Langkawi – the tropical island which is itself the north-west corner of Malaysia, lying so close to Thailand that the over-the-border outcrop of Ko Tarutao, seven miles away, is clearly visible from the retreat's powdery beach.

Not that you can see it if you step a few yards inland. Vast trunks – sturdy tualang daing trees, elegant merantis – hem the paths and envelop the villas that are a short walk from the shore. Dusky monkeys leap in the boughs. The whisper of wind in the canopy is ever-present.

Beautiful as it is, it is not a new experience for Bellamy. This is his second visit to the Datai, having stayed 13 years ago when he was a keynote speaker on conservation issues at the 2002 Asia Pacific Ecotourism Conference (Apeco). His appearance at the event was partly set up by Langkawi-based naturalist Mobarak, and the two men forged an immediate connection – not least because, in Mobarak's case, he was meeting his hero.

"I grew up watching David on television," he grins. "I was weaned on his shows. When I was nine, my father asked me what I wanted to be... I recall pointing at the TV and saying 'I want to be like him'. His enthusiasm was infectious."

The Datai, above, is hidden among the lush foliage of Pulau Langkawi but is just a short stroll from the beach

That trademark enthusiasm is still wholly apparent today. Now 82, Bellamy still looks at the nature around him with a fascinated eye, as he has done across a five-decade career which took him from the North Pole to the atolls of the Indian Ocean – and in 1983, to an Australian jail cell when he was arrested for his part in a demonstration aimed at stopping the construction of a dam on the Franklin River in Tasmania. The protest would succeed.

The jungle, he explains, has always held an allure. "I travelled to Sierra Leone before the civil war," he says. "That was my first real experience of working in the rainforest. And I spent time in northern India, in Assam, in forests that are among the wettest places on the planet. I remember water streaming down at all times. In the evening, you had to check carefully to see how many leeches had fixed themselves to you during the day."

There will be no such hardships during his stay at the Datai – with Rosemary, his wife of 55 years, alongside. But it is not difficult to believe that, should an army of leeches suddenly materialise, Mobarak would have no problem in detailing their entire life story.

The Datai's resident nature expert, he has been part of the hotel's furniture since it opened in 1993. And while this is certainly a retreat that revels in creature comforts – 125 rooms, villas and suites; a small spa hidden by the beach; four enticing restaurants, including The Dining Room, where miso-glazed black cod is served under the tutelage of executive chef Richard Millar; the Naga Pelangi, a grand wooden schooner, anchored and ready to take guests on genteel cruises in search of orangeade sunsets – Mobarak is its undeniable star.

His daily nature walks – morning strolls and leisurely jaunts at dusk – are popular and informative. Nor does he need to go far in search of discussion points. Indeed,

eat them hang from the rock walls here'

JUSTIN MOTT/MOTT VISUALS; ALAMY

David and Rosemary Bellamy and Irshad Mobarak, main image; Mobarak leads guests on tours of the island, above; a resident proboscis monkey, inset; and the Datai, left

Essentials

GETTING THERE
Malaysia Airlines (020 7341 2000; malaysiaairlines.com) flies direct to Kuala Lumpur – and on to Langkawi – every day from London Heathrow. British Airways (0844 493 0758; ba.com) also serves KL from Heathrow.

WHERE TO STAY
The Datai (0060 4 950 0500; thedatai.com) offers doubles from 1485 Malaysian Ringgit (£266) per night, room only. Irshad Mobarak hosts (free) wildlife walks twice a day.

PACKAGE
Cleveland Collection (020 7843 3531; clevelandcollection.co.uk) can arrange a seven-night stay at the Datai from £1,495 per adult sharing. The price includes BA flights to Kuala Lumpur, domestic flights, transfers, accommodation in a Deluxe room, daily breakfast, a trek with Irshad Mobarak, a 60-minute massage and a bottle of house wine on arrival. Valid for stays up to December 22 2015. Minimum seven nights.

MORE INFORMATION
tourism.gov.my
mylangkawi.com

an evening amble with the Bellamys has barely escaped the hotel's alfresco reception area before Mobarak spots a local character. The colugo is an odd beast – a winged mammal which seems to be a close relation of the bat, but is nearer in genetics to the primate clan.

Closely camouflaged against a tree trunk, she – Mobarak is able to identify her gender – suddenly switches from stillness to motion, racing up the bark before spreading her wings and gliding some 50ft down to the next cluster of branches, in an act of remarkable grace. "I've only ever seen these animals in books," Bellamy admits, with a broad smile.

On an island as verdant as Langkawi, there are, of course, options for exploration further afield – not least on the north-east coast, where Kilim Geoforest Park fans out as a haven of Unesco-listed limestone karsts, forested flanks and rippling waterways. Mobarak again joins the Bellamys for a soft-paced voyage along the Kilim River, chattering with his childhood hero about the cycads – fern-like plants so old that dinosaurs used to eat them – that hang on the rock walls here, and the crab-eating macaques which haunt the geopark's ledges, darting down to the water to grab crustaceans from the shallows. In the sky, a pair of white-bellied sea eagles swoop and soar in a dance of perfect symmetry.

It is obvious that the respect between the two naturalists is mutual. "This man can walk you anywhere and tell you anything," Bellamy says approvingly. "You would think he cannot possibly know everything about the ecosystem here, but he answers all questions."

The day's crowning episode is saved for its fading embers. Gunung Raya rears up at the heart of Langkawi – a granite bluff, 204 million years old, which reaches 2,890ft. Its peak is a fine spot from which to watch the sun dip below the horizon, but the final minutes of the afternoon are also the moments when some of its bird population are at their most active.

And so it proves, midway up the mountain. Mobarak calls the car to a halt and beckons its passengers on to the roadside verge. A group of great hornbills – brightly exotic birds, extravagantly curved of bill, common and colourful inhabitants of the Malaysian heavens – has gathered in the canopy. As the light starts to slip, they take off one by one from their perches, floating without any perceptible effort across to a meranti tree whose fruit has reached ripeness. There they dine amid a whoosh of wings as the entire flock flutters in.

On the ground, the two naturalists stare at the scene in raptures. "I've only seen these birds when I'm with him," Bellamy says, tilting his head at Mobarak. As they gaze on, the feast above continuing, each of them could be an enthralled