

MAX HASTINGS



Forgo Phuket. Make for Malaysia, home to Asia's finest stretch of sand

Among the most beautiful beaches on earth — because the emptiest — Coldbackie, in Sutherland, takes the palm, but even in July swimmers need ice axes. The sands south of Lamu, on the Kenya coast, were once marvellous for shell-gatherers, but nowadays Somali pirates pick up too many to be funny. Nine Mile Beach, in Tasmania, is an idyllic stroll, but beyond the pleasure of visiting the novelist Nicholas Shakespeare, who lives there, the area offers less fun than Devil's Island.

We have found a new stretch of shoreline, however, that seems better than any of the aforementioned: Datai, on Langkawi island, off the coast of Malaysia. The beach has sand crisp enough to build sandcastles, and it feels fresh polished every morning. Sure, there

I would recommend Phuket only to Ed Balls or someone else to whom I wished serious ill

are other people there, but not remotely enough to make a crowd. One steps into sea warmer and clearer than most swimming pools, perfect for kayaking and dinghy sailing.

We found ourselves walking Datai beach on the first leg of a three-stop Southeast Asian trip, taking in Phuket and Singapore. The Datai estate, where we stayed, has a hotel building at the top of a steep hill, with villas set in the rainforest below and along the beach, which are models of taste and comfort. My wife, Penny, had a spa massage that she said was the best of her life, while I got on with a book, which gets more

readily written in some tropical paradise than in an English February.

The food in the estate's four restaurants never fell below excellent. The only bad news is that wine costs a fortune throughout Southeast Asia — there's not much at the Datai for than £35 a bottle.

The Hastingses are hopeless golfers, but we played a round on the estate course for the pleasure of putting on the greens beside the sea. There is also a masochistic thrill about whacking a ball off the tee knowing that it can achieve only one of two destinies: to stay on the closely cropped fairways or disappear

Winner Above, the Datai's beach: 'The sand feels fresh polished every morning'



I've found the b



Best beach in the world

forever into impenetrable rainforest on either side. There ain't no rough. Penny and a friend went on a wildlife walk around the rainforest with the Datai's resident naturalist, Irshad Mobarak, a terrific guide. The hornbills are wonderful, and so too is the colugo, which thinks it is a monkey, but looks more like a bat. Public opinion is more divided about the common monkeys that roam freely among the Datai's villas and periodically break in and steal everything not nailed down. As an anti-simian, Penny said "Shoo!" every time they appeared, but they took less notice of her strictures than I do.

We fell in love with the Datai, rating it one of the most delightful hotels we have visited anywhere in the world, a view shared by scores of repeat visitors. Some 65% of its clientele are British, and one couple we met were in their 17th year.

We flew onwards for a few days to Phuket, which friends have raved about for the past 30 years. Trouble is, so many people around the world have taken notice of the ravers that the island is now a living hell for anybody who values peace and quiet. Most of our fellow tourists on the plane were young, tattooed and apparently panting for either a high or a beach bonk. British travellers can nowadays everywhere be identified by weight – a tad lighter than Australians, but four times the bulk of the locals.

Our hotel, the Amanpuri, was once rated among the finest in Asia. Today, it still tries hard, but how can it win when the whine of wetbikes in the bay makes it hard to hear the waiter announcing today's specials? The place is said to be great for snorkelling, and a couple of decades ago it surely was. Now, however, most of the coral is dead and the fish, which gather for a feeding frenzy when hotel boatmen toss in yesterday's bread rolls, look as if they have been hired for the day from an aquarium.

We had a heavenly villa, but the Amanpuri's tennis courts lie beside a road buzzing with traffic day and night, and the hotel beach is a narrow strip of sand dominated by dispirited French refugees from François Hollande. The

food is pleasant enough, especially in the Italian restaurant, but why offer a Japanese menu at the beach club? Who goes on holiday to eat sushi? Our verdict on the hotel was that it faces a choice: halve the bills – a third higher than the Datai's – or shift the whole place somewhere quieter and prettier. Silverstone, for instance. Having

had a good look at Phuket from several angles, I would recommend it as a holiday destination only to Ed Balls or someone else to whom I wished serious ill. It is the fate of most of the world's most beautiful places to become too popular for their own good. Bye, Phuket: the kids can have you.

Before flying home, we spent a couple of nights at the Shangri-La in Singapore, a city hotel that I would recommend to anybody. Singapore is what Lady Thatcher wanted to make

Britain. The place is so hard-working, prosperous, clean, efficient that you could eat your dinner off it. Do I hear you say something about a shortage of civil rights, hanging drug-dealers and suchlike? Mrs T would have said firmly: you can't have everything. Our dinner at Chopsuey Cafe, in the old Dempsey Barracks, was one of the most delicious meals I have ever eaten in Asia. A stroll around the old colonial heart of the city only takes a morning and makes one proud to be descended from imperialists.



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 TRAVELLER

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— and the worst

Loser Above, a rare moment of peace on Phuket. **Right**, a rainforest excursion with the Datal's naturalist, Mrshad Mobarak. **Below**, a Langkawi local – a long-tailed macaque



Alamy, Getty, Justin Mott



Singaporeans seem to feel the same way: whereas African dictators rename every street in their capitals after themselves, Singapore has the self-confidence to preserve the old ones. For a passing tourist, as distinct from a business visitor, 24 hours in the city is enough, but I shall plot to find a work excuse to go back.

For years we have been passionate Africa winter holidaymakers.

Kenya is now pretty rough, but South Africa is nearer than Asia to fly to, and at current exchange rates, much cheaper once you get there, with lots of delicious wine.

Nonetheless, we have already booked our return to the Datal. Langkawi's weather is perfect outside the rainy season, whereas it has become unreliable across much of Africa. We found

local people and hotel staff among the friendliest we have met. It is a great place to do nothing. Or maybe it might inspire you, like me, to write a book.

THE BRIEF

Cleveland Collection has an eight-night trip to Langkawi and Singapore from £1,680pp, including seven nights at the Datal and one at the Shangri-La in Singapore, economy flights and transfers (020 3111 0807, clevelandcollection.co.uk). A three-night extension to the Amanpuri, in Phuket, starts at £835pp, including flights from Singapore.

Or try Tropical Sky (01342 886190, tropicalskey.co.uk) or Travelbag.co.uk (0871 911 0073).

● Max Hastings's new book, *The Secret War*, will be published by William Collins in September