

THE PERFECT 10 TAIPING, MALAYSIA

In the first place

Rich heritage and exotic wildlife off the beaten track

STELLA MARTIN



Lake Gardens, in the heart of Taiping, top; Bukit Larut hill station, above right; Kuala Sepetang, formerly known as Port Weld, below; night herons are among a large bird population in Taiping, above



GETTY IMAGES



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1 PLACE OF PEACE

Rushing between the Cameron Highlands and Penang, many tourists miss out on Taiping. Originally called Larut Matang, it grew following the discovery of tin ore in 1840, but this prosperity also sparked civil wars that raged until the British intervened in 1874. To commemorate the signing of a treaty, the town's name was changed — Tai-Peng means Eternal Peace. Soon afterwards, the British chose the town as their administrative centre. Many gems of Victorian architecture can be visited; pick up a Heritage Trail brochure from the tourist office. Taiping proudly boasts a total of 33 "firsts" for Malaysia: the country's first town, railway, post office, hospital, museum, golf course, police station and prison as well as, in the 20th century, the first zoo, airport and war cemetery for allied troops killed in World War II.

2 MAKE IT TO THE LAKE

Providing a tranquil heart to the city, the 64ha Lake Gardens surround ponds created when an abandoned tin mine was flooded in the 1880s; it was the first public garden in the then Malaya. Ancient rainforests line the lakes. Landscaped with bridges, islands and pagodas, there are paddleboats, and walking and cycling tracks, a playground and roller-skating rink. Monkeys can be seen in the gardens and bird species include kingfishers, parakeets and even hornbills.

3 WALK WITH THE ANIMALS

As visitors to Malaysia's premier national park, Taman Negara, will attest, it is difficult to find the country's intriguing wildlife in its dense rainforest. Zoo Taiping offers the chance to see many of these animals in spacious enclosures spread over 14ha within the Lake Gardens. Although it also displays African, Amazonian and Australian fauna, the highlights are Malaysia's less familiar natives. For a small extra fee you may be able to enter the Rainforest Experience enclosure. We join a rather surprised barking deer and spot a binturong snoozing on a branch; though not particularly feline in demeanour, this shaggy, dopey-looking beast is the largest civet cat. We also encounter porcupines but stay well back. Elsewhere we find slow lorises, black and white tigers and the mouse deer, the world's smallest hoofed animal. We watch gibbons swinging over their personal island. A tiger swims towards us across an unfenced pond;



though it cannot climb the bank, its steady gaze is unnerving. More: zootaiping.gov.my/.

4 THE NIGHT HAS EYES

Since many animals in the zoo are nocturnal and idle by day, the gates are reopened at 8pm for a night safari. Lighting that mimics moonlight allows visitors to view without disturbing the animals as they wake up. We find the binturong munching on fruit, this time hanging upside down by its tail from a branch. The slow loris is on the move and we see a sun bear, the distinctive pale crescent on its chest and snout standing out from its black fur. Most exciting are the small cats, some with exquisite markings, on the prowl.

5 HITTING THE HEIGHTS

Seeking a retreat from the tropical heat of the lowlands, the British established the country's first hill station at Bukit Larut (Maxwell Hill), next to the Lake Gardens, in 1879. In those days the steep climb to the 1250m summit was by a rough track with senior officers carried on sedan chairs. Even now, getting there is half the fun. Private cars are forbidden and motorised access is restricted to government-owned vehicles (tickets are inexpensive), which ascend the zig-zag bends with ease, taking about 30 minutes to climb the 10km. This hill station preserves much of the atmosphere of yesteryear with colonial-style bungalows and immaculate flower gardens. Be warned: tigers are occasionally sighted.

6 MANAGING THE MANGROVES

Kuala Sepetang, formerly known as Port Weld, is well worth the 15km trip from Taiping. From the Matang Mangrove Forest Reserve education centre, follow a boardwalk through coastal forest and you may even be invited to plant a few trees. The northern end of the reserve, Kuala Gula Bird Sanctuary, boasts more than 160 species. With strict controls on the areas cleared and replanted, the mangroves are harvested sustainably for charcoal production. Kuala Sepetang is an important fish farming and cockle-harvesting centre and the riverbanks are lined with busy seafood restaurants. Take a relaxing cruise on the river, with chances of seeing eagles and Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins. More: kualasepetang.com.

7 FIREFLY FANTASY

In the vicinity of Kampong Dew, the banks of the Sepetang River host one of nature's greatest spectacles when fireflies in the mangroves light up for an evening of seduction. These marvellous bio-luminescent beetles perform only on increasingly rare berembang

trees, the males synchronising their flashing until entire trees are twinkling like Christmas trees.

8 VILLAGE PEOPLE

Batu Kurau, 30km from Taiping, welcomes visitors seeking the relative tranquillity of a traditional kampong (Malay village). We are led to the house of one of the kampong's many craftsmen, a young man who weaves mats and screens using traditional methods but, in 21st-century fashion, sells them online. We then get swept into a party. It's Aidilfitri, the month of "returning to normal" after Ramadan, and villagers are taking it in turn to host the celebrations. For visitors wishing to spend longer, nearby Kurau Stone offers modest chalets with fishing and other activities. More: kuraustone.com.my.

9 TOWN TREATS

Antong Cafe claims to be Malaysia's oldest coffee factory and, in its seventh decade, still cooks the beans in wood-fired ovens and fries them in melted sugar (Malaysians like their coffee sweet). Visitors observe the process then sample the product, including an innovative combination with durian. Don't miss the restaurants devoted to cendol, a mix of coconut milk, palm sugar, pandan juice, noodles and ice. And look out for le-mang, which is sticky rice and coconut milk poured into lengths of bamboo and cooked for three hours. On a Friday or Saturday night, head for the Cross Street bazaar, a market catering for locals. Women cluster around stalls specialising in headgear, while men are drawn to cars kitted out with flashing lights, and boots packed with speakers and video screens. More: antong.my.

BEST BEDS

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Between the Lake Gardens and Bukit Larut, Sentosa Villa is a haven with accommodation and a restaurant set in extensive gardens backed by forested hills. The main building offers standard and family rooms; wooden cottages, villas and bungalows, many suited for family groups, are dotted across the grounds. Our guestroom in the main building is enormous, with two king-sized beds, vast bathroom, balcony facing the rainforest and, via a spiral staircase, an attic retreat with yet another balcony. More: sentosa-villa.com.

Stella Martin was a guest of the Taiping Municipal Council. In Malaysia, a book co-written by Stella Martin and Denis Walls and relating their life there in the early 1980s, is available at amazon.com.

• mptaiping.gov.my
• tourismmalaysia.com.au

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