

garden tour

Carol Bucknell makes a plant-lover's pilgrimage to Malaysia, where gardens are the newest tourist attraction

The woman sitting opposite hands me a piece of a dark red-skinned fruit like a large guava with a soft white translucent centre. I bite into it, the juice dripping down my chin. It is indescribably delicious.

My fellow travellers attempt a comparison – citrus mixed with guava and gooseberry with a touch of honey perhaps? “It’s mangosteen, the queen of fruit,” the woman declares, reaching forward to peel us another of the colourful, exotic fruits laid out before her on the floor – spiky cerise rambutan, yellow-skinned dokong, football-sized dragon fruit. We love them all.

Our group is seated cross-legged in the shade of a pergola, at the Taman Warisan Pertanian (Agricultural Heritage Park) on the Malaysian peninsula. The slim, elegantly dressed woman feeding us fruit and eulogising her country’s bountiful produce and beautiful flora is Dr Ng Yen Yen, the minister of tourism.

A passionate gardener who spends at least two hours every morning tending her plants before she sets out on her ministerial duties, Dr Ng is a woman with a mission – to make the rest of the world more aware of Malaysia’s beautiful gardens. The agricultural park is just one of more than 30 botanical gardens in the country along with scores of smaller public gardens. Promoting these and opening private

gardens to the public as we do here in New Zealand is a key part of the minister’s tourism strategy for Malaysia. In fact it was a tour of gardens in New Zealand in August last year that strengthened her belief that gardens should be among the nation’s major tourist attractions.

“We talk about Malaysia’s food, shopping and hotels but not its gardens,” she says. “And yet we’re regarded as one of the top seven regions in the world for the diversity of our plants. Making gardens a tourist attraction is a way of helping to preserve and conserve our natural landscape. That is our future.”

After a week looking at stunning gardens in the Malaysian Peninsula (also known as Western Malaysia) and Malaysian Borneo (aka Eastern Malaysia), her plan makes a lot of sense to me. The country is a dream destination for plant lovers. Growing in its pristine parks and lush forests is an amazing variety of tropical species – particularly orchids, alocasias, gingers, viyera rhododendrons and pitcher plants, many of them very rare and found naturally only in Malaysia.

A good place to start your garden odyssey is Putrajaya, a former palm oil plantation just outside Kuala Lumpur, which the locals call the city in the garden. A planned city built only 12 years ago to house the Malaysian federal government administration, Putrajaya is surrounded by several large interconnecting

“MAKING GARDENS A TOURIST ATTRACTION IS A WAY OF HELPING TO PRESERVE OUR NATURAL LANDSCAPE”



Canopy walks offer spectacular bird's eye views of the lush rainforest.



The rafflesia flower can reach a metre in diameter.

parks including a botanic garden, wetlands, forest park and a fragrance garden.

Taman Warisan Pertanian, the 55-hectare agricultural heritage park where we met the minister, is one of Putrajaya's largest parks. Here you can not only check out the huge range of delicious fruit that can be grown in Malaysia, you can also tap rubber trees and see how the thick white sap is processed to become rubber, or wander through the herbs and spices garden.

Malaysians take a holistic approach to gardening. Plants are used not just as food and decoration but also as aphrodisiacs, teas, dyes, essential oils, ointments, medicines and cosmetics. Take the mango tree. As well as the numerous culinary uses for its fruit, the rind is made into a tonic, the leaves are used to treat fever and cold, the bark to stop bleeding, the seeds to treat colds, coughs and diarrhoea, and the resin for skin diseases. Not bad for one plant. Most of the locals I met were very knowledgeable about plants; indeed gardening seems like second nature to these hospitable people.

Gardens occupy every spare centimetre in the cities; the roofs of parking buildings, roadside verges, traffic islands, median strips and, of course, parks are planted with lush ginger, flowering shrubs, palms or evergreens

pruned into an eclectic variety of shapes and sizes and all immaculately maintained.

Like the people themselves, who are a mix of Malay, Chinese, Indian, Portuguese, Dutch, Tamil and many other ethnic groups, the region's gardens can be an exciting hybrid of styles. The practical Malay gardening sensibility is often overlaid with Islamic, Japanese, English or Portuguese design elements, creating gardens with their own distinct identity. The KCC Park in the centre of Kuala Lumpur is a good example. It's one of the last parks created by the godfather of modernist garden design, the Brazilian Roberto Burle Marx, who died in 1994, not long after he completed the design. Curving sensuously around the base of skyscrapers including the Cesar Pelli-designed Petronas Twin Towers, the KCC Park includes a lake, children's pool, water cascade and bird sanctuary. Time your visit for the water symphony on the lake which plays at set times during the day.

BOTANICAL PARADISE

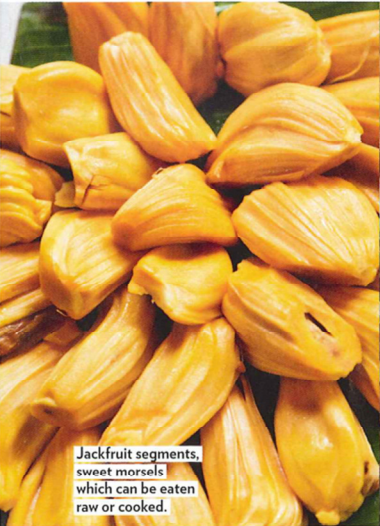
A visit to Malaysian Borneo is essential for botanical enthusiasts, if only to glimpse the world's largest individual flower, the rafflesia. Flowers of this parasitic plant can reach a diameter of one metre and smell like rotting flesh, I'm told, which is why rafflesia is also known as the corpse flower.

Found only in Borneo or parts of Indonesia, we were lucky to see a rafflesia in flower, to the delight of the botanists in our group. Timing is everything with rafflesia; even though the bud takes months to develop, the huge reddish brown blooms last only a week. Mercifully, I didn't get close enough to smell its putrid odour.

I did, however, get up close and personal with some gorgeous butterflies in Borneo. Our tour took us to Kipandi Butterfly Park, 700 metres above sea level in the hills of the Crocker Range in the state of Sabah. The park has an extensive insectarium, with more than 500 butterflies and over 3000 beetles on display. But to my mind dead insects don't compare to watching live ones, especially the butterflies that float about like huge psychedelic snowflakes in the gardens.

The air is much cooler in the hills of Sabah than by the coast, making the stroll through the park even more enjoyable. More than 8000 plant species have been recorded in the Crocker Range; many of these are on show in the park ▶

A VISIT TO MALAYSIAN BORNEO IS ESSENTIAL FOR BOTANICAL ENTHUSIASTS, IF ONLY TO GLIMPSE THE WORLD'S LARGEST INDIVIDUAL FLOWER



Jackfruit segments, sweet morsels which can be eaten raw or cooked.



The minister of tourism offers Carol her favourite scented flower, the chempaka.



The KCC Park in Kuala Lumpur.



Tapping rubber.



An endangered pitcher plant in Borneo.



KCC Park with the Petronas Twin Towers at the rear.



Borneo is home to many rare orchids.

The baby orangutan... so playful, so gentle, and genetically so like us.



Kundasang Memorial Garden.

including endangered orchids and pitcher plants.

The highest peak in the Crocker Range is the magnificent 4095-metre-high Mt Kinabalu. Locals call it the mystical mountain, believing it to be the resting place of their ancestors' spirits. Kinabalu National Park, a World Heritage site in the surrounding hills, is a must for those who are keen on cool air, spectacular scenery, bird life (more than 300 indigenous species) and, of course, plants. There are more than 800 species of orchids native to this area as well as rhododendron, pitcher plants and ferns, many of them threatened.

One of the most famous endangered mammals in Borneo is the orangutan. Your chances of seeing them in the wild are low; it's far easier to visit one of the rehabilitation centres such as that run by the Shangri-La Rasa Ria Resort in Kota Kinabalu, the capital city of Sabah state. Here baby orangutan found in logging sites and palm oil plantations or orphaned by hunters are cared for until they can be returned to the wild.

You can watch the orangutan at feeding times from a viewing platform in the jungle a short walk from the hotel. We glimpsed them swinging through the trees but it was only after the keeper took one by the hand that they seemed to gather enough confidence to make a proper appearance. Like young children, they threw their long limbs around with casual grace. The genes of orangutan have a 96.4% similarity to ours – and after watching these gentle creatures at play, I'm sure all of us felt that strong connection.

In fact connectedness was one of the things that struck me about Malaysia. From the garden guides and orangutan keepers to the roadside stall holders, all those I met seemed to have a strong connection to the land and wildlife. It remains to be seen whether opening up the gardens and parks more widely to the world will somehow ensure this bond is preserved. **N**

WHAT THE LOCALS KNOW

CHECK OUT THE EXOTIC BIRDS

A great place to view Malaysia's unique birdlife is Poring Hot Springs in the Kinabalu Park, East Malaysia. You can also grab a relaxing swim while you're there. Some of the exotic bird species you might glimpse in this area include the white-bellied woodpecker, the gold-whiskered barbet and blue-banded pitta. Early morning or late afternoon when there are fewer people about is the best time to visit. Take a hire car or minibus from Kota Kinabalu.

WALK ABOVE THE TREETOPS

Many of the public gardens in Malaysia offer swinging bridges above the treetops to give you a bird's eye view of the tropical rainforest below (definitely not for those who are afraid of heights). It can be quite a hike to reach some of the more spectacular ones such as the 400-metre-long Taman Negara canopy walk in West Malaysia. However there's an easily accessible, albeit much shorter, canopy walk at the Putrajaya Botanic Gardens near Kuala Lumpur and also at Poring Hot Springs in Kinabalu Park.

MEET THE MEAT-EATING PLANTS

A large proportion of the world's amazing carnivorous pitcher plants are native to Borneo. There's an excellent collection at the Tenom Agricultural Park in Keningau, a 2.5-hour bus ride from Kota Kinabalu.

TAKE A MOMENT TO REFLECT...

One of the most emotionally moving gardens in Malaysian Borneo is the Kundasang World War II Memorial Garden in the Kinabalu Park. The garden is dedicated to Australian and New Zealand POWs who were forced to march through the jungle by the Japanese during the war, with many hundreds dying on the way.