

# A Very Grown

As Roy and I dined in splendour at a beautifully laid table for two on a rock jutting into the balmy sea, I felt a pang of regret that we were already married. It was the most romantic spot imaginable, the perfect place for a proposal.

by Verne  
Maree

The Banyan Tree is part of Laguna Bintan, which also includes the neighbouring Angsana Hotel and a magnificent Greg Norman-designed golf course with clubhouse. The Angsana is a good choice for the family. But for a special weekend away, just you and your partner, the Banyan Tree is wonderful, and it's less than an hour by sea from the Tanah Merah Ferry Terminal.

The resort is situated on a slope that rises from one end of an effectively private 900-metre beach. The idyllic sandy curve is powdery white and naturally pristine. Shoals of little fish dart through the shallows; hermit crabs go about their impenetrable business and small pansy shells come and go with the tide.

From founder Claire Chia and General Manager Francois Huet to the sunburnt guys at the marine centre, the staff are not only passionate but also knowledgeable about ecological conservation.

"This is the last coastal rainforest resort in Southeast Asia," says Francois. He admits that there's a fine

line when you are committed both to providing at top-notch luxury resort experience and protecting the rainforest and its numerous denizens – from monitor lizards, monkeys and squirrels to spiders and mosquitoes. And sand-flies on the beach can be a problem. The usual insect repellents are no protection at all, so before venturing onto the beach be sure to cover every inch of exposed skin with oil: that way, the little buggers slide straight off you.

## The Villas

The 55 delightful Jacuzzi villas and 15 bigger pool villas (with either one or two bedrooms) were built 10 years ago with sensitivity to the existing vegetation. Depending on their location and outlook, they are grouped into four categories: Sea View, Seafront, Bay Front or On the Rocks. We had a Jacuzzi villa on the rocks with a view of the sunset over the sea.

Furnished simply and elegantly, our villa was completely private: we threw open the floor-to-



# -Up Getaway

ceiling bathroom window to enjoy the view from the shower. His and hers vanity basins were stocked with bags of eco-friendly toiletries from the Banyan Tree's own Gallery range and shampoo, conditioner and body lotion came in refillable ceramic rather than disposable plastic. The housekeeping was discreet but ever-present; we would come in after dinner and find a delivery of home-made cookies and preserves, or a bottle of the local spirit Arrack with a jar of locally grown peanuts. Mosquito coils would be lit on the deck in case we felt like a pre-bedtime session in our Jacuzzi.

There are two lovely public pools, the first a circular beauty at the Tree Tops complex (where the spa is) and the other a longer, freeform infinity pool almost on the beach.

Peaceful silence reigns. There is no band, no karaoke, no noisy bar. From the minute you get into one of the hotel cars at the ferry terminal, you hear only soothing background music, the kind they play in spas. No noisy children, either – you *can* take your children along, but it's not actively encouraged.

I would like to go back with another couple and share one of the pool villas. They are spacious enough to accommodate a barbecue for up to 20 people. And this resort is a great venue for a wedding; guests would have the option of staying at the less expensive Angsana, which is right next door.

## Dining

The food is excellent, with plenty of variety and never a dull moment. Daily breakfast is a lavish buffet affair at the Tree Tops restaurant, either in the glass-walled air-conditioned interior or out on the deck with a delightful view of the sea. We also had dinner there – I had a delicious



as one of the best Thai green chicken curries ever.

For fine dining there's the Saffron Restaurant, described as Asian fusion and Thai cuisine. The Cove serves up an interesting variety of flavoursome Mediterranean dishes. You can order light meals including sandwiches and salads from either of the pools, too – each has a different menu – and anything you like can be served to you in your villa, including a private barbecue.

But if you *really* want to spoil yourselves, experience one of the Banyan Tree's innovative new 'destination dining concepts'. We were treated to Dinner on





the Rock, which is almost too exotic to describe adequately. You are picked up at your villa, driven down to the beach and escorted along a wooden jetty onto a flat rock. On it stands a lit-up jewel of a private dining-table – just one – where a lovely butler serves you a five-course meal from the Saffron fine-dining restaurant, while gentle waves lap against the surrounding boulders.

Or you could try the golfer’s dream: Dinner at 8, a similarly private event with magnificent sea views from the tee of the eighth hole; or Massage of the Senses – a cosy private massage for two in a tent on the beach, followed by an intimate dinner at a table laid within metres of the waves, the area seductively lit by the flames of torches stuck in the sand.

**Spa**

No romantic getaway would be complete without a spa treatment for two. Our 90-minute session started with a relaxing footbath followed by an hour’s massage. The highlight for me, though, was a free yoga class with instructor Balan. As I was the only participant that day, I had a private class and with his help came closer than ever to getting my forehead onto my shins - a long-cherished aspiration.

**Out and About**

The marine centre has everything you need for snorkelling, windsurfing, jet-skiing and so on. We took out 125cc quad-bikes (also known as ATVs or all-terrain vehicles) out through the coconut groves and onto the most amazing beach, known locally as The Beach of A Thousand Crabs. The sands were alive with literally millions of the little crustaceans, which sank in waves below the surface as we approached. It was a wonderfully isolated spot: no sign of human habitation as far as the eye could see. On the way back we stopped at an *attap* hut to drink the fresh juice of giant green coconuts picked and hacked open specially for us by

our guide – wonderful!


There are also plenty of shopping, dining, sightseeing and jungle-trekking excursions to try if you can bear to leave the resort. I recommend the Mangrove Eco-Tour: it was fascinating.





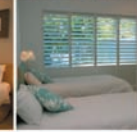
As you’d expect from a resort of this calibre, the service is of the sort that not only responds to your needs but even tries to pre-empt them. The Bintan Banyan Tree is a great spot and it’s right on your doorstep: you can offset the price of airfares against the accommodation, which makes it more affordable, too. If you need any more convincing, why not pop across on the ferry one day (\$52 return) and see it for yourself?

**Getting there**

**Book tickets for the ferry from Tanah Merah Interchange to Bandar Bentan Telani on [www.brf.com.sg](http://www.brf.com.sg). Go by taxi or park your car at the terminal. Make reservations for The Banyan Tree Bintan on +62 770 693100, email [bintan@banyantree.com](mailto:bintan@banyantree.com) or visit [www.banyantree.com](http://www.banyantree.com).**

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