

## High Anxiety

It's only 200km from Kuala Lumpur to the Cameron Highlands, but once you leave the North-South Expressway at Tapah, the final 50km stretch is a hair-raising 80 minutes of tortuous corkscrewing upwards through mountainous terrain.

Our hosts at the Cameron Highlands Resort arranged a car and driver for our trip from and back to KL, a good three-and-a-half-hours each way (RM600 per car each way from Kuala Lumpur International Airport; RM550 from the city). The massive shoulders of our Sikh driver, Harwilla, were a reassuring sight as he drove us safely and expertly both there and back.

## What are the Cameron Highlands?

The Cameron Highlands is a cool, picturesque hill station in the State of Pahang, about 200km north of KL. It's lushly green, extremely pretty and blessedly cool: temperatures seldom rise higher than 24°C during the day or fall below 12°C at night.

The plateau, set 1,467 metres above sea level, was discovered by Scottish surveyor William Cameron on a mapping expedition in 1885, and soon became a popular place for British expats to escape the tropical lowland heat. Tea plantations have been cultivated on the fertile slopes, as have a multitude of strawberry, flower and vegetable farms. Its distinctive tropical rainforest habitats are home to a huge variety of species, some of which can be found only here, and include a number of fascinating hiking trails for nature-lovers.

Mushrooming hotels and resorts attest to the area's popularity as a place where children can pick their own strawberries and visit butterfly farms. Hikers, tree-spotters and bird-spotters can do their respective things in the great outdoors, and the whole family can generally commune with Mother Nature in the rarefied mountain air.

As we drove through the three main towns of the Cameron Highlands – Tanah Rata, Brinchang and Ringlet – I was fascinated by the architecture. It's a peculiar mixture of alpine chalet and Tudor, with more medium-rise buildings than you'd expect in such an out-of-the-way place.



by Verne Maree

It had always been a tantalising prospect – but was it possible? Was there really a cool, beautiful, rural mountain retreat just three hours from KL? High time we found out!



# Highland Fling



## High Style

On the outskirts of Brinchang, the 18-month-old Cameron Highlands Resort is the first five-star hostelry in the area, and judging by the amount of development going on, probably not the last. There are already dozens of hotels to suit all budgets. The YTL hotel group took an old hotel with an excellent location and transformed it into a stylish, atmospheric resort with a distinctive appeal.

It was a clever idea to link the resort with the story of the American Jim Thompson, founder of the Thai silk industry, who apparently disappeared off the face of the earth in this area in 1960. In redesigning the long, two-storeyed building, high ceilings have been retained and picture-windows make the most of the lovely light and splendid views over a golf course to the mountains beyond. An air of casual elegance has been achieved in the colonial-era-inspired décor; there's an abundance of wicker, wooden panelling, warm teak strip-flooring, Chinese lamps and soft furnishings in subtle and jewel-coloured raw silks. There's even a Jim Thompson shop on the premises.

Our gorgeous room was one of the Deluxe ones; all accommodation is spacious with four-poster beds, elegant but comfortable seating areas, small patios and sweeping views. All that was missing was a bath – especially in a chilly place, a shower alone does not do the trick.

## High Spa

Each of the YTL hotel group's spa villages has its own signature experience, based on distinctive environmental or cultural elements of the particular destination. It's no surprise, then, that The Cameron Highland Resort's Strawberry Escapade package features tea, grown on nearby hills, and fresh strawberries, probably from the farm next door. Tea and strawberries are both powerful antioxidants.

You start off with a 45-minute soak in a bath of hot tea garnished with slices of ripe strawberry and pandan leaves. As you stew in the amber liquid, scenes from nature unfold on the TV monitor in front of you. Using ingredients laid out on a little tray, you can exfoliate your face with a mound of wet tea-leaves, rub your knees and elbows with slices of fresh lime dipped in rock salt, then soothe your eyes with damp teabags.



Next is the wrap. The therapist mixes up freshly mashed strawberries with raw oats and yoghurt, and then – instead of tucking in for a healthy breakfast – covers you with the stuff, wraps you up in plastic, covers you in warm towels and lets you bake gently for 30 minutes. You’d expect her to take advantage of your cocooned state to nip off for a coffee, but no – she kindly massages your head while you drift off to la-la land.

In the shower, you can help your partner to rub off the strawberry gunk, before settling down again to 80 minutes of massage. Our therapists, both young Malay women, had excellent technique: firm and effective, yet rhythmic and soothing.

## High Dining

This resort has a very good chef. You can tell from the little things: you order a poached egg, and it comes just right. You want something that’s not on the breakfast menu – oatmeal, say – and it’s no problem.

Lunch each day is tiffin (assorted curries and condiments served with steamed rice) in the Jim Thompson Tiffin Lounge; it alternates daily between Malay, Nonya and Indian versions. In the afternoon, high tea is served there, too – a tasty assortment of tiny, hot pastries, assorted mini-rolls with savoury fillings, fresh strawberries with various dips, and – best of all – freshly baked scones with thick cream and strawberry jam made on site. You choose from nine local BOH teas, and they’re superb. (More on this below.)

Every evening at seven, a fire is ceremoniously lit in the grate; on our first night, I was asked to do the honours. Sitting and basking in the welcome warmth of a glowing fire, Roy wearing a sweater and me wrapped in a pashmina, it was difficult to believe we were in Southeast Asia, and just 500km from Singapore.

Before dinner, I let the barman knock my socks off with a green tea margarita. “Bloody hell!” said Roy, when I let him taste my first one. His was a much more girly concoction of mint tea, Pimms, gin and diced fruit. Meanwhile, *As Time Goes By* and other period favourites tinkled from the gorgeous grand piano in the lounge.

Dinner was a five-course affair; you pay for the number of courses you want. Roy’s mulligatawny soup and honey-glazed cod were excellent. The culinary highlight, though, was the steamboat dinner for two we had on our second night – one of the resort’s special ‘experiences’. It was served by our private butler in a romantically lit gazebo at the edge of the hotel property; he popped selections from the vast array of seafood, meat and vegetables into either tom yam or chicken broth and told us when it was ready. The steaming soup, together with a bottle of Bordeaux, did a superb job of warding off the evening chill.

Apparently, the town of Brinchang is famous for its steamboat cuisine. This was puzzling, until we discovered that the majority of the 50,000-strong population of Cameron Highlands is Chinese, comprising mainly farmers.





## High Tea

Our first outing was a Nature Discovery Tour with a guy called Bob. Roy was delighted that he wasn't expected to hike to the top of Mount Brinchang, at 2,032 metres the highest peak in the Cameron Highlands, and that the legwork would be done by 4WD. We wound through the popular village of Kea Farm, where there is "everything for the tourists", according to Bob – butterfly farm, bee farm, strawberry farm and Market Square, which was a riot of colourful vegetables for sale – and then up idyllic lanes to the summit.

Apart from the tropical rainforest and small vegetable farms, this is tea country. The verdant, tea-planted hills stretch on for miles. Bob was a mine of information; it seems that the art of tea cultivation and appreciation is a

whole study in itself, potentially just as complicated as viticulture. At Sungei Palas BOH Tea Centre, there's a gallery with a fascinating display of information on the history of the plantation. Best of all, we sat on a large deck that stretches out into the green valley, and tasted a perfectly three-minute brewed pot of their finest. Afterwards, it was time to buy a couple of tins from the shop.

## Tea Facts

- BOH, where we are, is the biggest tea estate in Southeast Asia, producing an amazing 4 million kilograms of tea a year – that's 5.5 million cups a day!
- The BOH estate was established by Scotsman J. A. Russell, whose descendants live in Kuala Lumpur and still own the plantation
- It produces a huge variety of tea in different styles and grades, from the revered Palas

Supreme to fun new 'iced tea' products

- The tea plants in the photograph above are 75 years old
- The tannin in the tea plant is a natural insecticide, so no pesticides are used
- Though there are 3,000 species of the tea plant, almost all come from *camellia sinensis*, the 'mother plant'
- Tea from Darjeeling is regarded as the best in the world, because of its special elevation and because the method of processing it is a secret
- All tea has caffeine in it
- The tea tree is not the source of tea tree oil – that comes from another plant altogether
- If you're looking for an outstanding English breakfast tea, you can't do better than BOH's Bukit Cheeding variety. We're hooked! Look for the tin on your supermarket shelves.

## High Adventure

Another highlight of our stay was meeting the resort's in-house naturalist, Sharil. A plant biologist and published expert on orchids, he takes guests on a hike along the 2.3km forest trail that he himself created just over a year ago, the Jim Thompson Mystery Trail.

As we stand with Sha in the cool, deep forest, surrounded by mosses, ferns, orchids and verdant trees, he puts this magical spot in context for us. Peninsular Malaysia is the southernmost tip of the mainland of Asia, "sticking out like a sore thumb", according to him. This gives it some of the features of an island: it's home to a number of endemic species that are found only here.

The 600km-long Titiwangsa mountain range is one of the longest continuous mountain ranges in the world. Up to about 1999, it was used by the Communist Party Malaya, and much of it was a no-go area. For their own protection, and no doubt to shield them from Communist influence, the indigenous people were moved from their small villages and resettled in larger ones where the authorities could keep an eye on them.

Within the first 10 metres, he points out a brightly banded, 3cm-long millipede, and shows us its brilliant defence mechanism: sensing vibrations, the creature rolls itself into a perfectly round, hard, impregnable ball, just like one of those striped marbles we played with in primary school. The next is a teeny brown frog – how Sha spotted it on the brown bed of leaves on



the forest floor was a mystery. Frogs are an indicator species, he explained. Their presence indicates the integrity of the habitat; and they are the first to leave an ecology that is out of balance.

You can no longer take the trail up to Moonlight Bungalow, which was Jim Thompson's Malaysian residence before his mysterious disappearance. It has been bought by a private individual and is closed to the public. Even worse, it appears that the new owners plan to demolish it and build a big new house on the site. 🏠

## Without a Trace ...

The story goes that Jim Thompson went off for a walk at 3pm on Easter Sunday in 1960. He waved to the gardener, who was the last person to see him. And though the jungle was thoroughly searched, including by an indigenous commando regiment that knew every inch of it, not a trace of him was ever found.

There are all sorts of rumours. One is that he was eaten by a tiger; but, says Sha, a tiger probably wouldn't have eaten the bones, and would have left some kind of a mess, somewhere. Another is that, as a CIA agent affiliated to MI5, he was kidnapped and taken away. There is also the far-fetched theory that he was killed by Japanese *yakuza* (gangsters) because he was hot on the trail of the Hirohito gold that was rumoured to have been buried in the area. It has also been speculated that local Malays who were angered by his homosexual proclivities did away with him. What does Sha think? "I think he staged his own disappearance," he says. "They found not a trace of him; not a belt-buckle, not a button."

For more information on the Cameron Highlands Resort, call 001 800 9899 9999 or visit [www.cameronhighlandsresort.com](http://www.cameronhighlandsresort.com).