





SINGAPORE

HOPPING

THE

Story & Photographs by Keith Harmon Snow

RIAU

There are ten thousand islands in the Riau Archipelago, southeast of Singapore, and I was on a small skiff, winding among some of them in a hard rain that fell like broken glass. Charlie Yung Sook, my Malayan boatman, and I had set off under blue sky in an emerald sea, but a sudden storm whipped itself up midday and caught us out in the channel. Rain fell across the sun and beyond our tiny boat everything was white.

Charlie bailed water with one hand and steered with the other, leaning into the rain, but we went nowhere: every effort ended where it started, far off a certain point of land. I kept thinking of those old mariner's tales—you know, the compass gone haywire, the mast toppled by the storm, faded maps and haunted islands—of sailors and ships condemned to purgatory. We were going in circles and the boat was filling up with water. The ghost ship was out there, too, but we never saw it coming.

Island hopping in the Riau Archipelago—wow! One launches into such an adventure with hopeful fantasies. Nothing turns out to be true in real life, and yet all of it does. Forgive me for this, but such an adventure becomes very personal, and so I will write about it in the first person. It would never be the same for you (and that is why we travel).

The Indo-Malaysian word for island is *pulau*, and the assorted *pulau*s off Singapore present to mariners and simple island-hoppers a geography of hazard and chaos: on a map they look like icebergs of unusual shapes and fragments. To see them up close and in person is to understand them even less.



The Riau Archipelago is bounded by Sumatra, the Straits of Malacca, the Lingga Archipelago in the southeast, and the remote Natuna Islands to the northwest. There are countless bays and harbors from which pirates plied the seas and plundered passing ships. Local ferries today connect the ports-of-call of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. Here you will find a clash of civilizations and contradictions of culture that persist, and traditions that live side-by-side with an unrelenting globalization.

But there is something about boats floating that is very dreamy. Hopping the ferry out of Singapore, I see seascapes abounding with drifting boats, boats stranded at the whim of the tide, boats overturned on shore, boats strung on long, empty piers where they shift and jostle like horses tied to a hitching post in some sleepy ghost town of the wild, wild American West. I drift with intention and intrigue like a boat without a sail or anchor.

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Bintan Contrasts

The Riau is renowned for sea gypsies, the Orang Laut, nomads of the sea. They are a fishing people whose romantic existence is checked by the imperatives of survival on their rustic boats. In contrast, the boats at Bintan Lagoon Resort are sleek and shiny and fast—catamarans, cabin cruisers and other assorted floatables. “You can windsurf, sail, jet-ski—we have everything,” says resort manager Rie Yanagisawa. I spend the afternoon in my wild windsurfing fantasy: climb on the board, blow a few feet, fall off, do it again.

“This is the longest beach on Bintan Island,” Ms. Yanagisawa told me, “four kilometers.” As I walk farther the beach becomes wilder and wilder. Sea eagles and hawks work the shore, swooping in on reptiles or carrion washed up by the sea. The incoming tide sculpts the shifting sand, obliterates dunes, catches careless crabs and rolls them. A leathery old fisherman walks the beach collecting buoys and rope from the flotsam.

The long beach ends in a rocky promontory where a footpath winds through tall grasses and palm trees; beyond is a local village. At midday, Peng Udang is a sleepy hamlet where roosters scratch and crow and chase after wary dogs. The floatable elevated homes of the fisherman, called *kelongs*, drift in shallow pools, tied to shore like oil tankers in a port. Fishermen young and old gather under the shade of the huts to repair their nets and tell stories of sea serpents and ghost ships. By the time I leave there



are herons flying across the setting sun, and the surf has drowned the trail that brought me.

There are no sharks in pools at Bintan resorts. Instead I find water polo and rubber ducks. A mile swim in the curvaceous pool is followed by dinner and dancing at the Silk nightclub. The place is spanking new, with red lights, mirrors and chrome, a popular choice for people foolishly sunburned. Manager Eidel Wise is 25 and single, and I complain about being underdressed. “You are at a resort,” she scoffs, “and it’s in the middle of the jungle.” She pushes me into the DJ’s booth, and together we spin a little vinyl.

Nothing But Bubbles

From Bintan Lagoon I hop on a sampan and motor up-river into the heart of Bintan’s jungle. The estuarine ecology supports some 300 species of birds. Mangroves sprout along the shores of all the islands here; they are the filters and purifiers of aquatic systems, but mangrove environments are everywhere under siege.

With the boatman inching us closer I stand on the bow of the sampan and stick my camera into the face of a yellow-banded mangrove snake. “Be careful,” whispers



Aloot Nihoy, my driver, “that is very deadly snake.” No one on the boat is breathing, including me, and the snake is purportedly sleeping. I pull back suddenly, remembering a Somali proverb: “If your enemy

has warned you, he hasn’t killed you. Yet.”

We count seven pythons, three green snakes and four mangrove snakes in a brief one-hour survey amidst low-hanging vines and gnarled trees. The otters elude us. Kingfishers plunge into pools and fly back to some perch, silver fish tails flopping from their bills. The water is cool and fresh, and I dive in: the crocodiles are long since gone here; riptides and currents are, apart from the snakes, the only dangers.

Sitting in the lifeguard chair at Mana Mana, another Bintan resort, dive manager Witjak Santoso is polishing a brass bell. “It was salvaged from the wreck of the schooner *Emily Bouchard*,” he says, “She sank off the coast here in a storm in 1980. The divemaster got the bell off the wreck.” Witjak says he himself wouldn’t have taken the bell. “Take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but bubbles.”

At 35 meters the *Emily Bouchard* is one of many hot dive spots around the Riau; the wreck of the *Turtle* is another. You can certify here for S\$75 (about US\$48),



which includes a boat dive off Barracuda Point. “The best diving is Sumpat Point,” says Witjak, “or you can go to Mapur Island—that is the real paradise.”

Gone Fishing

Bintan’s long Trikora beach begins and ends with fishing culture. In the middle are long stretches of white sand and coconut trees; boats and anchors are high-and-dry. Kelongs everywhere rest on the beaches, waiting to be dragged by boat out to sea for long stretches of night fishing.

Pantai Trikora is attractive, but my taxi speeds on to find some yet unidentified port—a hopping-off point to my fantasy island. The search ends at a long pier in a harbor full of boats where a man they call “Captain Elly” does not yet know that he will take me to paradise: Mapur is the new island of my dreams.

The long pier at Teluk Batau opens through a few dark rooms where the night’s catch of fish will be sold before breakfast is eaten. Walking the planks seaward I find a quaint family “restaurant” run by three sassy Indonesian gals. My dinner, this day, will be pepper crab with





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fried rice, carrot-orange juice, and fresh coconut. I write in my journal: “Just ate the absolute best seafood dinner I have ever eaten.” This is true again and again.

The planked walkway extends far out over the water to a giant corral. Nets are strung through the corral to hold fish and trap others that swim through loopholes. An immature fish eagle hovers around, scavenging scraps, while the local sharks of Teluk Batau hover over the green felt of the pool table and prey on cynical foreign journalists. A giant banner stretched over the outside wall announces “TOM CRUISE” in black leather and fiery colors. Tiny sampans dangle off the backs of greasy trawlers tied along the pier.

As the sun sets over the pier the little fish eagle sleeps with one eye to the water. Tourists in the bungalow next to mine cast lures from fish poles. A slim silver fish takes the bait and runs with it, breaks the surface and bounces over the water like a skipped rock, and cuts loose. The excited fisherman wilts. Onshore, boys pay to dance with girls to music blasting over loudspeakers. It’s a festival: Muslim women in colored scarves peddle Western noisemakers and little pistols that go POP! once or twice and then break.

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For S\$20 (about US\$12) I sleep out over the water in a breezy bungalow. The lights of the pier paint everything metallic blue. After the dancing, after the tinny music has stopped and the night’s lovers have been decided, you hear the creaking of planks and the knock of drifting boats and the splash of fish. At twilight I hear the *chug chug chug* of a boat: out the window I see a tiny flash of light every three seconds but the boat slips into the harbor in blackness. The engine dies and silence is broken only by waves lapping the pier.



Bintan


Ticket to Paradise

At sunrise we negotiate. Mr. A. Hiong of Kolam Kelong Trikora Fishing—a.k.a. “Captain Elly”—is the man, a Chinese businessman who seems to own the pier and everything on it. On the walls of his joint at pier’s end are photos of monster fish the likes of which I’d never imagined. The customers in these photos are smiling, but the photos are faded and curling off the walls. I ask about one ugly and very large fish—twice as long as the guy who supposedly caught it. It has floppy ears, the head of an elephant, and a daunting, toothy, overbite.

“Dass big tiga sha-hak,” Captain Elly tells me. He looks serious. “No, it ain’t.” I know a tiger and that’s no tiger. “Dat tiga sha-hak.” Elly is insistent. Suddenly I am uncertain about the man whose boat I will take on the open seas. On a fish chart nearby I find its image: it is no tiger. Do you know how many species of shark live in the South China Sea? One hundred and ten.

We turn to the round-trip price, with the drop-off on Monday and the pick-up on Friday. Captain Elly starts off. “Too hunda Sing dolla.” I laugh and shake my head, countering with S\$100. Now he laughs and shakes his head, offering S\$175. We finally settle on S\$155, and he seems pleased with himself. I talk him into including a snorkel, mask, fins and swim time. His 16-footer is all wood, with a clean, shiny V-6 engine amidships, and he sends me off with two young boatmen after the morning market has closed.

By 10:00 A.M. I am flipper-finning in the big blue sea off Pulau Beralas Pasir. I hover over corals and drop off



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Mapur

the reef into deep dark water. Schools of bright fish dart through giant polyps above me, silhouettes against the sky, while a manta ray glides dreamily through inner space below. Bubbles gurgle into silence. I laugh out loud at my marvelous good fortune to be island-hopping in the Riau.

Four Days in Heaven

We eventually reach Mapur Island, and the boat drops me at the docks of the Battuta Resort, a collection of bungalows, stilted out over the water, tied to a central lodge on a long dock. But the “resort” is closed for repairs, and the owner will not negotiate a reduced rate for a single traveler with no reservations. I shrug. My heart is still singing in suboceanic bliss. What happens, happens for a reason.

By chance I meet Daisy, the only English-speaker on the

Instant Asia

Singapore is itself an island, and the place to begin hopping the Riau. I checked into a hotel in Chinatown—the cultural heart of the place—and then boarded the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) to tour the city. A 30-minute walk from any station offers an exploration of all things Asian, with Taoist, Buddhist and Hindu temples and Islamic mosques scattered incongruously amid the shiny modern architecture.

In 1299 A.D., legends say, the Sumatran prince Sang Nila Utama was sailing in the seas of the Temasek Empire when a big cat—the terrified crew yelled “*singa*” for lion, but it was probably a tiger—leapt out of the sea, landed on all fours on the deck of his ship, and mauled the ship’s captain. The beast leapt back into the sea, swam to shore and bounded into the forest. The prince founded a city on the spot and named it Singapura.

Hopping the MRT to the Maritime Museum I find “ancient artifacts”—nets and traps and tools—that I later see in daily use on more remote islands. The MRT also connects to Sentosa and Ubin, two islands on the city’s fringe that couldn’t be more different: one is rustic traditionalism, the other a luxury theme park where tourists swim with pink dolphins.



Mapur

island. She and her husband have eked a farm out of the rainforest in the center of the island. Her dream, she says, is to become tour director at the resort, so I give her the chance to practice, and for four days we explore the island.

Everywhere there are cats, chasing each other on the beach beneath the neat, pastel-colored stilted houses, leaping in and out of stranded boats. My short time on Mapur is spent diving off docks, hiking remote beaches, sunbathing naked, snorkeling coral reefs, and exploring mangrove swamps at low tide. At one point, Daisy arranged a boat to circle Mapur and together we explore Pantai Belakang, another empty

white sand beach. Yawn... My shy friend Jungjim—a 12-year-old who has never seen the back of his own island—plays in the emerald surf. Fish fly out of the waves and flash in the sun. There are sandbars and rock cliffs and freshwater lagoons. Macaques swoop and howl in the

forests when sea eagles fly over. We depart in time to make evening prayers at the village mosque, after searching the beach for booty.

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Wives and Wishes

Leaving Mapur, rather reluctantly, I have hopped to yet another island, Pulau Penyengat (“Biting Island”), named





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for the bees that attack (and allegedly kill) sailors. With tuk-tuk and driver I am chasing down treasure and ruins here, where ethno-archeological excavations of culture and history reveal myriad philosophical and spiritual realities.

Chinese junks trading with India and Sumatra once ruled the Riau; ceramics of the Song dynasty (960–1279) have been found throughout the archipelago. During the rule of the Sultan Mansur Shah (1459–77), the Malacca Sultanate controlled the Riau: Islam predominated, and massive palaces were constructed and fortified.

“Here, there are little islands,” wrote Ibn Battuta, an Arab explorer of the 14th century, “from which armed black pirates with poised arrows emerged, possessing armed warships; they plunder people but do not enslave them.”

Portuguese galleons armed with crosses and cannon conquered Riau far and wide in the early 16th century, but an unremitting sultan named Mahmud set up warrior fiefdoms, conquering islands in turn. Pulau Penyengat was one of these, and the history of conquest and resistance is written in palaces, mausoleums, mosques and old forts on this little dot of land. Spanish conquistadores also pillaged here.

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came, they plundered, they fled for their lives. The Mausoleum of Raja Haji Ali Fisabilillah commemorates the war on terror waged by the local sultanates against foreign infidels seeking to control the trade in spices, opium, tea, porcelain and silk.

“This island was gifted to Engku Puteri, Queen of Sultan Mahmud,” says Maradou Simangunsong, my driver of tuk-tuks and explainer-of-her-story, “as part of her marriage dowry.” Locals worship

the mausoleum of Engku Puteri and other royal gravesites for their powers of *keramat*—miracle working—and *berniat*—guidance or blessings on their wishes. “You must make wish,” says Maradou, “maybe wish good luck and protection for boat to go to ‘nudder island.”



Penyengat



Mapur

Black on White

Under the spell of fate cast by the spirit of Queen Engku Puteri, I left Pulau Penyengat, and that was when I met the boatman Charlie Yung Sook. That morning, the sky was blue and the sea green, and the pier behind was fast disappearing. The storm rose out of the ocean like a sneeze. There were no clouds, just that hard, cutting rain that sparkled as it washed over the sun and fell on us. Everything was white.

Charlie's eyes were wide with uncertainty and his hair hung soggy and flat over his face. He unrolled the curtains down the sides of the skiff, but the rain blew right through. Painted on the curtains was a girl in a low-cut dress selling Black Cat batteries with alluring eyes and a seductive smile. Charlie pointed at the girl and yelled, "she real beauty." But he wasn't thinking about girls. He was worried: he didn't know if I could swim. He sucked the rain through the gap in his front teeth (caused, he later told me, by fighting, while drunk, with a huge fish he'd dragged into his boat).

As I mentioned at the beginning, this is when the ghost ship suddenly appeared, cutting through the waves and the white rain. With our engine roaring Charlie didn't hear it, and we couldn't see it for the rain. It came on us fast, like a torpedo about to ram us amidships. It was a grimy black ship, made blacker against the white rain, and the men on it stood straight and tall and thin as the boat was long, like tombstones in some ghost town.

Their clothes were black, and even their faces seemed to be, and the rain soaked them, but they stared straight

Upmarket Relaxation

At the Angsana Spa on Bintan, all my dreams come true—within reason. Angsana offers a luscious, pampered, self-care retreat, a luxury resort in sharp contrast to the rough-and-ready life of an island hopping nomad. I do yoga, visit the spa, swim miles along the beach or in the pool, sleep, and chill out in general.

Angsana was built in 2000, designed for the "family market." Next door is Banyan Tree, designed for couples and honeymooners. Together, they claim the auspicious title as the last coastal rainforest resort in Southeast Asia, with 20 endangered species. Banyan Tree has 62 villas, many with their own swimming pools. I had never seen anything like it.

The masseuse offers classic Ayurvedic (Indian) or Ayuthayan (Thai) massage, or signature massage designed by Angsana. It is relaxing indeed. "We want all our guests by the time they leave the resort to do so with body-mind centering," says manager Pak Erwin. "We get many Japanese tourists, people from Singapore, and Europeans. There are very few Americans like you."

My days at Angsana were matched by my days at Mapur, but the two couldn't be more different, and I loved each in its own way. It was here, relaxing into yoga and meditation, that I came to the realization that I wouldn't want to live in either world without the other, and some better way needs be found to bridge the two.



ahead as if they had a mission, a purpose, a place they had to get to, and maybe never would. It wasn't until the ship passed behind us that the three men on the ship turned their heads—all at once—and looked at us. Even their eyes were black. Charlie gasped, and I did, too.

But then in an instant, the ghost ship vanished as suddenly as it had come—a black smear swallowed up by whiteness. Charlie crossed his chest and mumbled a prayer. Then he ramped up the motor, and drove us into oblivion.

