



WEEKEND TRIPPER

The fast and the relaxed

No speed limit, no licence required to jet ski in Bintan, says guide Pearly Koh.

Bintan is all splash and spa, and a spot for romance

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FAST is fun and speed is freedom. The thoughts of McLaren-Mercedes driver Lewis Hamilton? Perhaps. It's also the sentiment of one very experienced — and very savvy — jet ski instructor.

"Speed all you want, no ticket," Pearly Koh, the lithe guide of Jetski Safari said with a chortle as she prepared my group of eight for our three-hour jaunt off Bintan's northern coast. According to Koh, many Singaporeans come to the island to jet ski because they do not need a Powered Pleasure Craft Driving Licence to zip around in the water here.

Launched two months ago, Jetski Safari combines water sport with sightseeing. The trip is different each time, said Koh, varying from beach hopping to visiting *kelongs*, traditional Indonesian homes built on stilts over the sea. It allows visitors to discover Bintan from the water, a boon for those familiar with the Indonesian island that is a mere 55-minute ferry ride from Singapore.

What participants experience of the safari depends on their ability to stay on the jetskis and the condition of the crafts they are riding. Run over one bunch of seaweed too many and the engine may choke, as did our jetskis, but the problem is quickly fixed by a mechanic who follows every group.

Once the basics are mastered, jet skiing is a whooping roller-coaster ride on water. Be prepared to bob on the seats like amateur

horseriders every time the jet ski crosses a wave. The bigger the wave, the higher the jet ski flies, the harder the crash onto the water, the more drenched the riders become.

It's wet, it's thrilling and, for those who express excitement with their mouths open, very, very salty. We landed on the beach at Nirwana Gardens Resort but were soon back on our racers to ride more waves.

For more of the bump and grind, jet skiers can follow up the safari with a 30-minute All-terrain Vehicle (ATV) ride through the jungle. The track takes riders down a steep drop and across a stretch of trench-riddled ground for a truly jolting trip.

Settle into a spa

To scrub away the salt and dirt after a day on jetskis, head to one of the many spas in Bintan.

There are options for every budget. Outside of the resorts, the Aura Beauty Salon and Spa at Pasar Oleh Oleh — a shopping village selling souvenirs, local food and cheap beers (\$5 for three cans) — offers two-hour massage and body scrub packages for \$44.

Across the street is Kampeong Lagoi — a chic shopping area built last year. Nestled within its spanking new, villa-like buildings is the Aroma Day Spa, a traditional Javanese spa that houses a health-drink bar and offers 75-minute body massages for \$55.

For a truly indulgent experience, check out the resorts. Angsana Resort and Spa Bintan takes the pampering experience to a higher level. Literally. Angsana's individual spa pavilions are located at the top of a building. Some have glass for walls on three sides, so guests are treated to a sensational view of the South



Private dinner at the eighth hole.

China Sea. Treatments are expertly carried out, with little touches that make a huge difference. This includes a light refresher mist and the quiet sounding of a gong at the end of the session to stave off sleepiness. There is also a 30-minute calming time when guests can sip their post-treatment teas and take in the sea view at leisure. The two-hour body scrub and massage package is US\$90 (\$125).

Dinner at 8

Go to Bintan for the adventure, stay for the romance. Visitors don't have to be a guest of Banyan Tree to reserve one of its six unique dining destinations. Dinner at 8 is so named

not because it's held at 8 o'clock, but on the Laguna Bintan Golf Club's signature eighth hole. By day, the hole is famous for the inlet that separates the tee from the green and the many balls that golfers lose playing there. At night, the mound is transformed into a candlelit dining area. Situated far from human traffic, it's an intimate space to savour romantic moments over superb food and wine.

The menu is set — a decadent combination of scallops, lobster and tenderloin cooked by a chef a stone's throw away and served by one's personal waiter. A treat, certainly, after the roar of the Grand Prix weekend in Singapore.

SHORT HAUL SUPPLEMENT

IFYOU GO ...

Jetski Safari is open to the public on weekends. To ensure availability, book the tour at least one week ahead on www.jetskisafari.com or call Focus Adventure at 6278 6560. The introductory price is \$350 per person for two to go. The package includes ferry rides from Singapore to Bintan, hotel accommodation, a three-hour jet ski expedition that covers lunch at a *kelong* and a 30-minute ATV ride. The promotion is valid until Oct 31.

The Angsana Spa Bintan is situated on the top floor of the Angsana Resort. Book at spa-bintan@angsana.com or visit www.angsanaspa.com for more information.

Dinner at 8 is priced at US\$168 for a five-course degustation menu. Call Banyan Tree Bintan at 627 7069 3100 to make a reservation. To ensure the availability of the dining destination, book a week in advance.



BINTAN RESORTS

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Hit by cyclone, but still Stranding tall

YANGON has the largest number of colonial buildings in South-east Asia, including colonnaded government offices and sumptuous official residences, but most are dilapidated, neglected for decades.

Surprisingly, however, most of the old buildings appear to have survived relatively unscathed the fury of Cyclone Nargis which devastated the capital on May 3.

The legendary hotel, The Strand, was built in 1901 by the Sarkies brothers, Armenian refugees from Turkey who founded a chain of luxury hotels in the region, including Raffles and the Oriental.

In the 1920s and '30s, it became a favourite hangout of famous writers, British officers, celebrities and royalty. More recently, it has accommodated the likes of rock stars and actors.

But today, the Strand sits mostly empty, just like other hotels in this city of five million people. Since the cyclone swept through the nearby Irrawaddy Delta killing more than 130,000 people, the number of guests has plummeted.

Before World War II, the Strand was reserved for "whites only", but during the Japanese occupation of Burma — as Myanmar was formerly known — it became an army barrack. It received its first Burmese guests only after the war.

Since the early 1990s, the military junta has tried to encourage foreign tourism, and the property was acquired by Adrian Zecha, the founder of Singapore's exclusive Aman Resorts chain, and renovation began.



Electric fans rotate above rattan chairs surrounding tables at the cozy coffee shop of Strand Hotel. AP

The Strand reopened in 1995 as an all-suite, top-of-the range boutique hotel.

"We came to the Strand because of its old-world romantic charm," said Tomas Llobet, from Brussels, Belgium, who was celebrating the anniversary of his marriage with his wife Victoria. "We wanted to be in a place with a lot of history and character, and which is properly renovated without huge concessions to modernity."

The ghosts of the British colonels would have approved of their choice.

STRAND HOTEL: 92 Strand Road, Yangon, Myanmar; <http://www.ghmhotels.com/> or 011-951-243-377. Room rates, as listed on the hotel's website, begin at US\$550.

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