

MAGNIFICENT MALAYSIA

Great beaches, fine resorts, good golf jungles, lakes...

By KENT GILCHRIST
For Postmedia News

There are lots of ways to describe it, but Malaysia simply is... special.

It has history and variety that only a multi-cultural society living in harmony can offer.

It has big cities with great shopping and must tours to the oldest Muslim mosque The Masjid (55 per cent of the population is Muslim) and oldest Indian temple (Sri Maha Mariaman) and St. Mary's Anglican Church that is only 116 years old.

And it has rain forests and mountains with jungle scenery. It has islands, about 878 of them including Langkawi and Penang, two we visited. That, of course, means it has great beaches with grand resorts... as grand as anywhere in the world.

It has golf courses, of course, with smiling, entertaining caddies willing to line up your putts and give as good as they get in the one liner department.

They speak excellent English because it was the language taught in the schools since the country was under British rule for so long.

Best of all, its inhabitants sincerely enjoy having foreigners come for a visit or even to stay, if they want.

Being within eight degrees of the equator, Malaysia has a year-round climate that can be overwhelming until you get used to the heat and humidity.

Bring your golf gloves and shoes, but leave your mitts and galoshes at home.

In reality, golf is a minor player in the burgeoning tourism industry, for this is a country with as diverse a culture as it's humming economy.

There are skyscrapers and KL (you refer to Kuala Lumpur as KL when you are no longer a rookie) is an exotic yet modern, bustling metropolis of more than four million. It is a treasure trove of history, and shopping with fine hotels and restaurants.

And our hotel in KL, the Royale Chulan, as good as any in North America, offered English-language newspaper at your door each morning. Great with morning coffee.

It has the fourth-tallest building in the world and the iconic and distinctive twin towers (one built by the Japanese and one built by Koreans) with a connecting bridge 36 storeys above the ground.

In 1505, the Portuguese occupied Malaysia for 135 years before losing a three-year war to the Dutch and finally the British booted the Dutch and introduced bricks and brick construction to the country which was a good thing since Kuala Lumpur burned down three times before the British brought their bricks.

Independence from Britain was granted the country only 54 years ago in 1957.

We also went to Melaka, Langkawi and Penang, where the weather and water frontage translates into lots of wonderful resorts with huge soothingly inviting pools and beaches. Anything you can think of to do in the ocean, you'll find someone to guide you.

There are lots of things to do in the jungle/forest away from the ocean.

Sixty per cent of the forest is virgin and some if it is 130,000 years old.



THE WATER COLOUR and views at Le Taha'a Island Resort and Spa are truly unforgettable.

POSTMEDIA NEWS

Top reasons why you must travel to French Polynesia

By MHAIRRI WOODHALL
For Postmedia News

Picture perfect only begins to describe what awaits you in the French Polynesian islands of Tahiti, Moorea, Huahine, Taha'a and Bora Bora. Rugged volcanic hillsides blanketed with lush tropical foliage juxtapose talcum white powder sand fringed by turquoise crystalline water.

Like a song with perfect pitch, the landscape in French Polynesia touches the soul and releases a flurry of emotion.

Here, there is no shame in spending hours daydreaming on the veranda of a thatched-roof hut while gazing in wonder at nature's creation.

During our 10 days on these fairy tale islands, we experienced some of French Polynesia's greatest gifts.

WARM AND WONDERFUL

Like the sun's rays, the people of Tahiti are warm and welcoming. Smiles here are genuine and locals seem to go out of their way to offer directions, recommendations and a helping hand.

When a local says farewell by kissing both cheeks and inviting you back it's both sincere and heartwarming.

A PRIVATE ISLAND

If you've ever fantasized about having your own private island, then Taha'a might just make your dreams come true.

Ideal for honeymooners and lovebirds looking for an intimate and exclusive vacation, this somewhat undiscovered haven features the Coral Garden for fabulous snorkelling, luscious vegetation with beautiful tropical flora, an emerald coloured la-

goon and the exceptional Relais & Chateaux Le Taha'a Island Resort and Spa.

Voted by Conde Nast Traveller as one of The World's Best Places to Stay, Le Taha'a offers 57 private overwater bungalows and beachfront villas inspired by traditional Polynesian architecture, a treetop restaurant and tranquil spa amid an exotic garden.

ROMANCE ABOUNDS

It is difficult to imagine a setting more romantic than French Polynesia, and it's no surprise that this is the top honeymoon destination in the world. If the idyllic scenery isn't enough to spark flames of passion, the selection of activities for two offered throughout Tahiti's islands will have your heart melting.

HAWAIIKI NUI VA'A

Va'a (canoe racing) is one of the traditional sports of Tahiti. It is said that a Tahitian's umbilical cord is cut with a rock and a canoe paddle, which is apparent in their dedication to, and appreciation of the sport.

Every year, upwards of 7,000 spectators and fans take to the waters in a myriad of small and large craft boats to support their favourite team in a three-day,

124.5-kilometre paddling race between the islands of Huahine, Raiatea, Taha'a and Bora Bora.

Each day, in the blistering hot sun, we were in the heart of the action as our fishing boat navigated rough waters and large swells to cheer on the rapidly paddling teams.

SHARKS, STINGRAYS AND CORAL REEFS

One of the most popular excursions in French Polynesia is the Shark & Stingray tour.

Depending on the outfit you book with, an outrigger canoe or powerboat will take you to the beautiful outer reef.

From there your experienced guide will feed the Black-tip Reef Sharks while you snorkel or watch from the safety of the boat.

On our excursion in Bora Bora, more than 20 sharks ranging from one to two metres in length surrounded us.

After our great encounter we went to the shallow blue lagoon to swim with stingrays.

PRETTY PEARLS

The warm lagoon waters that surround French Polynesia's island and atolls are the perfect setting to create the Tahitian Cultured Pearl.

Often referred to as Black Pearls, these fine gems range widely in size, shape and colour. Dark black and grey with a shimmering palette of tints and hues which range from green, blue, bronze, aubergine and even pink.

Pearl oysters are nurtured and carefully monitored from birth through their pearl harvest five years later.

Better conditions and care produce higher quality pearls with brilliant lustre.

Shopping for pearls can be done at galleries or hotels on Tahiti, Bora Bora and Moorea, or at family pearl farms on Taha'a and Huahine.

To learn more about the history and legend of the Tahitian Pearl visit the Robert WAN Pearl Museum in Papeete.

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