

Most people who come to Malaysia spend a lot of their time in the capital, Kuala Lumpur. Some pop over to Penang for a few days, which is well worth the trip, too. But if you stop at that, you're missing out on a nearby tropical island that has picture-postcard blue waters and a lush, green interior.

Langkawi is a pure island paradise just off the west coast of Malaysia. From Kuala Lumpur, it's only an hour's flight and from Penang, it's just 17 minutes. To be exact, Langkawi is an archipelago made up of 99 islands, and the landscape is astonishing. Limestone karsts jut out of the azure ocean. Deep green jungle covers tiny uninhabited islands dropped like pins in the middle of a marine park.

Besides the gorgeous beaches and rushing waterfalls, there is plenty of adrenaline-pumping adventure on the main island of Langkawi. Or if shopping is more your speed, the island was designated duty-free in 1987, so you're in luck for bargains.

The first time I went, I planned to plop myself down on a beach and not move. That all changed when I got there and saw all the activities on offer. Then I couldn't sit still. That doesn't mean that I didn't get my fill of beaches. Quite the contrary; it meant I had to explore them all!

The most popular areas to stay, shop, and eat, are Pantai Cenang and Pantai Tengah, near the southern tip of the island. You can drive around the whole island in a few hours, so it doesn't matter where you stay, but if you want any sort of liveliness, these areas are the best. Personally, I like to stay at Ambong-Ambong for

WHEN TO GO

Langkawi is just six degrees north of the equator—it's always hot and humid with a chance of showers.

January to March is when it's driest. September and October are the wettest. And every other month varies in between. There is no distinct monsoon season, and in the rainy months, it mostly storms at night, so your beach days won't be ruined. However, if you plan to dive or snorkel, the visibility will be significantly affected by the rains.



Palms, sagebud groves, and white sand—Langkawi is every inch the tropical Asian paradise.

48 Hours on Asia's Island of Waterfalls

Kirsten Raccuia

boutique vibes, or Pelangi Resort if I'm feeling more indulgent. Both are in Pantai Tengah.

Be warned, there is no public transportation on the island, so you'll have to hop in a Grab (Southeast Asia's version of Uber) or rent a scooter or car.

Day 1: Morning

Start your tour at the highest vantage point on the island. Head straight to the Oriental Village on the west coast, the jumping-off point for Langkawi's SkyCab. It is one of the steepest and also the longest free-span mono-cable cars in the world.

The 2.73 mile-long ride takes you over the 550-million-year-old Mount Machinchang, and gives some wonderful elevated views of the lush forest canopy. As you ascend, be on the lookout for a break in the jungle—it's a nearby waterfall. At the intermediate stop along the way, get out and take in a close-up view of the blanket of hot pink and purple flowers covering the mountain.

Hop back on the Swiss-designed cable

car and ride the rest of the way to the top. At 2,300 feet above sea level, you'll have dramatic 360-degree views of all the nearby islands, including Koh Lipe in Thailand.

Once you're at the top, buy a ticket to the SkyBridge (\$1.50), the longest free-span curved bridge in the world (Malaysia has a thing for breaking records). The 410-foot long bridge is suspended 320

feet above the jungle floor. It had to be airlifted to the top of the mountain by helicopter and assembled in its current spot.

As you walk from one side to the other, you are walking in between the mountain tops. Stop at the

glass panels along the bridge for photo opportunities.

You can buy combination tickets for the cable car, SkyBridge, 3D art museum, and SkyRex multimedia attraction when you get there for \$20 or choose the express lane for \$33. Both tickets include entrance to a few other attractions. But your time is limited, and you have waterfalls to hunt.

If all those Sky activities have you

“You can drive around the whole island in a few hours.”

hungry, there are dozens of local food options to choose from.

Day 1: Afternoon

When you are through with lunch, make your way to that waterfall you spied out of the gondola. It's called Seven Wells Waterfall, or Telaga Tujuh, and it's only five minutes away by Grab. Once you arrive at the car park, it's an easy walk to the top of the waterfall—a perfect time to spot macaques and hornbills.

After cooling off in the falls, head north about 20 minutes (by car) to the Terjun Temurun waterfall; it's the highest on the island. From Terjun Temurun waterfall, you're two minutes away from Sandy Skulls Beach.

Don't let the name fool you. Across the horizon you can see Koh Tarutao, which used to be a Thai penal colony. Legend has it that body parts used to float ashore on this beach, hence the name.

It's one of the prettiest beaches on the island and is quite small, so don't expect any facilities other than a bathroom. There is ample shade under the trees and no watersports in sight, making for a calm place to spend the afternoon.

Day 1: Evening

At 5:30 or so, head back toward Cenang Beach. The ride takes about 30 minutes.

Go to Ah Chong beach bar in time for a sundown drink. The local Tiger beers are cheap (\$1.25), and they make a mean craft cocktail for \$5. I'm a sucker for their Tanqueray Basilikum: gin, fresh basil, lemon juice, a little syrup, and fresh-ground pepper on top. You can't go wrong with their Negroni either.

Ah Chong isn't fancy; it's a wooden bar with rickety chairs and some tables in the sand. But it's the perfect spot to watch the sunset, which will undoubtedly be magnificent—they always are in Langkawi.

After the sun sets, you'll be right in the center of Cenang Beach and within walking distance to all sorts of eateries. For local seafood, try Palm View Seafood. For Western fare and pizza, Red Tomato is delicious.

Day 2: Morning and Afternoon

This morning you have a couple of options. Depending on your need for speed, you can take a leisurely half-day mangrove tour, or hire a jet ski for an

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS FOR RAINY DAYS

If you happen to find yourself in Langkawi on a rainy day, there is plenty to do outside of shopping.

Underwater World—A massive aquarium with more than 4,000 species to marvel at.

Kraf Kompleks—A group of museums dedicated to traditional crafts and artifacts from around Malaysia.

Atma Alam Batik Art Village—If you want to shop for batiks or try to make your own, you can do it here. The artists make it look so easy, but trust me, it's not.

adrenaline-fueled island-hopping tour.

If mangroves are more your pace, take a tour to the northeastern part of the island and the Kilim Geoforest Park. This is a 38-square-mile UNESCO World Heritage nature site with thick mangroves and dramatic karst rock formations. You'll get a close-up view of the limestone outcrops you saw from the SkyCab.

During the tour, you'll spot monitor lizards, macaques, and two types of eagles that nest in the park. The more extended tours take you through bat caves and various neighboring islands. No matter which tour you choose, you'll have time for a swim.

Tour operators are available all around the island, as well as in the park itself. Some of the less reputable ones feed the eagles chicken to get them closer to the tourists. It's not good for the eagles to rely on humans for food, so look into that before you decide.

Also, make sure that the tour has an actual wildlife guide or naturalist on board. Langkawi boasts more than 200 species of birds, and without someone who knows what to look for, you'll miss a lot. Dev's Adventure Tours is good, and eco-friendly.

If you're looking for an adrenaline rush, hire a jet ski and take a guided tour to the nearby islands.

Visit the fjords, where you'll squeak through passageways so narrow that they're sure to test you if you're claustro-

phobic. You'll also visit Dayang Bunting (Pregnant Maiden) Island, which has the largest freshwater lake in Malaysia, separated from the sea by a thin crest of limestone.

Although the shape of the island looks like a pregnant woman lying on her back, strangely enough, that is not why it is called Pregnant Maiden Island. Folklore has it that a princess, Walinong Sari, laid her baby son to rest in the lake and prayed for all women who wanted children. Since then, it's believed that if you take a dip in the lake, you'll become extra fertile.

Depending on the amount of time allotted and the tour company you choose, you can visit up to eight islands on your tour.

Day 2: Evening

No matter what your morning looks like, head back to Cenang Beach for evening drinks. For a laidback sunset, check out Kalut Bar. Grab one of their bean bags on the beach and melt into the evening.

For a more upscale atmosphere, walk to the end of the beach to The Cliff. It's one of the nicest restaurants in Cenang and has a complete view of the beach. They also happen to have good happy hour specials and pour pretty stiff drinks. Kalut Bar and The Cliff are on opposite ends of the beach. Whichever one you choose, you'll still be within walking distance to all the restaurants and nightlife.

If you stay at Kalut, they have bar food and a fire show on the weekends. If you stay at The Cliff, you'll have fine dining in a gorgeous setting. You can't go wrong either way.

Langkawi has a roving night market that is perfect for trying out the local food. Every night it's in a different town; you just need to catch it on the right night. The food is cheap and tasty, and it's a great way to rub elbows with the locals.

After dinner, stroll through the duty-free shops in Cenang and stock up on everything from handbags to TVs. If you go overboard, have no fear, you can buy a suitcase to fill up on your way home.

That covers 48 hours. But be aware that you can easily spend five days in Langkawi and not do it all; this is only the tip of the iceberg. ■

“The local Tiger beers are cheap at \$1.25.”