

Condé Nast Traveller

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The world's
BEST FAMILY
holidays 2020

OUR FAVOURITE HOTELS AND ADVENTURES. EDITED BY ISSY VON SIMSON

PHOTOGRAPH: RUPERT PEACE

VILLAS AT ONE&ONLY DESARU COAST, MALAYSIA



FOR THE WHOLE CREW

THE CLEVEREST MULTI-GEN SPACES, INCLUDING A SLICK ARRIVAL WITH A HENRI CHENOT SPA

EXCLUSIVE
FIRST LOOK

ONE&ONLY DESARU COAST

JOHOR, MALAYSIA

THIS WAS ONE OF THE LAST PROJECTS from the late, great architect Kerry Hill, whose roll-call includes the sharp, striking Aman Tokyo and the jungly classic Datai Langkawi. Known for his fusion of cultural traditions and technical precision, Hill laid the foundations for a wildly copied contemporary style. This, his final play on a modern tropical aesthetic, is rooted to the location and draws on both the *kampung*, or village, vernacular and Malaysia's black-and-white colonia-era mansions. There are imposing triple-height pavilions with timber shutters, walls of windows and brushed-steel ceilings. From the lobby, your gaze is channelled down a wide, steep stone staircase to a break in the treeline and a tantalising first glimpse of the South China Sea. It is a suitably theatrical architectural flourish on which the old master can bow out with pride.

While Hill's best hits are spread across Asia, it's curious that One&Only, with its high-octane hangouts around the world, is only now venturing into the continent. After the obvious (Reethi Rah in the Maldives), the urban (One&Only Cape Town), the people-pleasing (The Palm Dubai), and the trailblazing (Gorilla's Nest Rwanda), it is even more interesting that Desaru Coast is the chosen base. Don't worry if you haven't heard of it. I suspect it's unknown territory for even the most well-travelled. This skinny crochet hook of land in the unspoilt south-east of Malaysia is much closer to Singapore than Kuala Lumpur. It had its last moment in the sun back in the 1970s as a popular if modest seaside retreat for Singaporean families. But as the area's hotels grew dated, its appeal waned. It didn't register on the radar again until 2016, with the opening of the first of two golf courses by sporting legend Ernie Els as part of an almost £1 billion masterplan to reinvent itself, and Anantara and One&Only vying to scoop the best spot on the coast.

It's easy to see why they were both so keen for a slice of the pie. Here, 128 acres of wild flora surround a lick of beach and water that turns from a Thai turquoise in winter to a Caribbean cobalt in summer. As I 'om' at its seafront yoga pavilion, the place feels as remote as a private island. The only other sun worshippers are hermit crabs scurrying across slabs of volcanic rock wedged at a dramatic 45 degrees into the cappuccino-coloured sand. With a bit of luck, hawksbill and green turtles can be seen waddling out of the water to lay eggs under the truffid-like trees that shade the shoreline.

In a clever chess move, the group has added the kind of heavy-hitting spa name that will draw expats from Hong Kong, Bangkok and Australia. Henri Chenot is one of Europe's most respected wellness figureheads and a pioneer of the medical-detox diet. At his Italian flagship, programmes revolve around digestion analysis and nutrigenetic testing, broth fasts and mud baths. Denial is not exactly part of the One&Only ethos, so here the offering is more like Chenot-lite. The concept and its diagnostics have been adapted for those on holiday, though are still considerably more results-driven than the usual roster of anti-ageing facials and massages. Treatments are targeted, but there are also experiential ones including the incredible neuro-acoustic deep relaxation, which combines a light-pressure massage with music scientifically composed to trigger theta brainwaves and transport guests to mental nirvana. And Chenot biolight

dishes appear on the menu of the Mediterranean-Malaysian restaurant, which means a guilt-free lunch or two.

Throughout the restaurants, local collaborations feel forward-focused and on-the-button. Two Malaysia-based creatives take centre stage: there is a manga-style mural by artist Abdul Rashade above the dimly lit Japanese sushi joint and Fuan Wong's botanical glass sculptures in the open-air Dusky Monkey bar. This is where mixologist Vijay Naidu serves his own spin on a Negroni: equal measures of gin, Shiraz and Pinot Grigio. His explanation for its origin? 'I ran out of vermouth.' It tastes worryingly moreish.

There's a different vibe down at the beach club, Ember, with its cream-white styling and cabana-lined pools (one for children). The combination of sun, sea, DJs and exceptional food – such as grilled seabass with green-curry sauce – from chef Andrew Walsh, who worked under Jason Atherton and Tom Aikens, will no doubt bring a weekend crowd up from Singapore. It feels more elevated than Phuket, more sophisticated than Canggu. And yet, in the background, there is still a rawness to the jungle environment. The wildlife is up close. A cheeky macaque monkey might slide down a tree and sneak into the villa pool. At the kids' club, youngsters can watch footage from cameras hidden in the nests of oriental pied hornbills.

The elephant in the room is the neighbours. On the way in, the drive passes an adventure waterpark. Beyond that, a Hard Rock Hotel. I am bemused that the brand looked for 10 years and then opened beside a spot that practically hands out guitar plectrums at turndown. But as a sure-fire winter-sun hotspot or a meet-in-the-middle gathering space for families who are spread out globally, this feels smart indeed. SUSAN D'ARCY

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