

LIFE&TIMES **GREEN**Tongkat Ali (*Eurycoma longifolia*).

# Jungle cures

The tropical forest is a veritable treasure trove of cures for many of our everyday ailments, discovers **Aneeta Sundararaj**

**T**HE mini van comes to a stop by the side of a road and the seven of us members of a jungle trek, alight. Our guide, Shaaban Arshad, 47, from JungleWalla Tours gives us a big smile and invites us to enter the jungle. Moments later, we leap across a monsoon drain, climb a few small rocks and we're inside a primary rainforest called Hutan Simpan Teluk Datai. This short trek, organised by the Andaman Hotel, Langkawi, is aimed at uncovering some of the many plants used in traditional Malay medicine.

We were introduced to Shaaban, a local medicine man, which of course translates to *bomoh*. He was quick to explain that he doesn't do "all that *jampi-jampi*" but uses his knowledge for medicinal purposes. Furthermore, he has learnt everything from experience and observation rather than formal training. "I used to follow my grandfather into the jungle" this

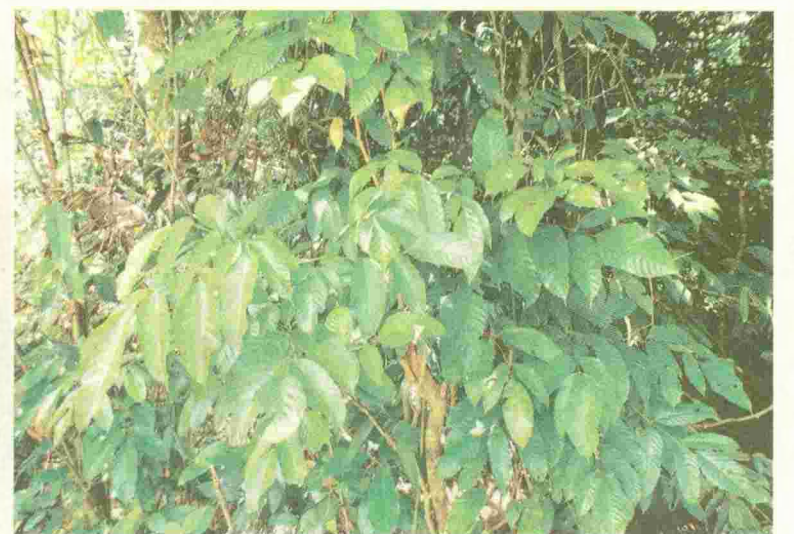


A tree growing inside the Strangler Fig tree.

native of Langkawi tells us.

#### JUNGLE TEACHER, HEALER

It doesn't take very long to realise that Shaaban has intimate knowledge of this place. He can tell you which plant is new, how many years another has been leaning against a rock,



The leaves of the Memali plant can be grounded and applied on wounds.

when to whistle to alert the birds that humans have entered the jungle, which bit of soil gave way during the last monsoon and even which tree will die soon.

Shaaban shows us a tree with an enormous girth. "This," he says, "is the Periang tree. It's like a sycamore tree." He then leans against a solid piece of wood and adds: "If the tree roots cannot grow

into the ground, the tree will create these buttresses for stability."

A liana, we are told, also stabilises a tree. "A liana is like a vine," says Shaaban. "They grow upwards and provide support for the tree by hooking the stem and growing with the tree." When the liana reaches the top of the tree, it

will spread to another tree. Soon, a network of vines develops which hold things together and creates a natural canopy in the jungle. Shaaban says that this particular network is so dense that the soil below has been protected from harm. Indeed, there is hardly any ground cover which is common in a rubber estate or oil palm plantation.

Suddenly, one member of our group sneezes. Quickly, Shaaban reaches for a plant, whips out his knife and hacks some bark off. "You take this bark, dry it, then smoke it like a cigarette. It will help your sinus problem," he says. This bit of bark comes from an epiphyte. "It is not a parasite but grows on other plants. The local name for this is *pokok mempisang*" (*Monocarpia marginalis*)."

He picks up a large millipede and holds it out for us city folk to gawk at. Unfazed, he drops the millipede back to the ground before pointing to another bit of jungle and shares: "That is an ant hill for *anai-anai*." An anthill for those horrible



An ant-hill of white ants that are actually black in colour.



Mempisang is great for those with a sinus problem.



Shaaban Arshad standing next to a 'Tongkat Ali' tree



The Strangler Fig has woven a cloak around its host.

white ants that eat our furniture into dust? Not exactly. It's an anthill for white ants that are actually black.

"They are good white ants," Shaaban explains. "They only eat rotten trees. So, they are very necessary for the jungle as they clean it up."

#### TREASURE TROVE

We come to a clearing and Shaaban tells us to rest for this is our half-way point. Moments later, with a sweep of his arms, Shaaban says: "This wildlife is like the shopping centre for a fig tree." This curious statement, we soon learn, is a preamble to a story that demonstrates how the Strangler Fig has a growth pattern that strangles its host plant. He points upwards and asks: "Can you see the tree within a tree?"

The tree on the inside is the host tree and the tree on the outside is the Strangler Fig. What happens is that, at first, the seeds of these stranglers start off as epiphytes that lodge in the little clefts of the host tree. Slowly, they start to send aerial roots downwards. Once these roots take hold in the ground, the plunder begins. With each vine that grows, the strangler fig weaves a cloak around its host, takes all the nutrients

and grows at an unprecedented rate. In the end, one of two things can happen: either the Strangler Fig tree is strong enough to stand on its own or, together with its host, it dies.

In the ensuing silence, attempting to lighten the sombre mood, Shaaban points to a plant with luscious Memali leaves. "Take this leaf," he instructs, "grind it into a powder, make a paste and apply to any wound." He assures us that this is a cure-all remedy including snake bites.

Shaaban shows us Balik Adab or Perapat (which is used for women during their confinement or possibly as an abortifacient drug), before he introduces the Tongkat Ali tree. Shaaban says: "You must boil the roots of this tree. You can't take it from a big one like this. You must look for smaller ones, take the root, boil them, then drink the liquid. It takes months, not just one drink and *semua jadi*."

Having shared his knowledge with us, we have come to the end of the trek. Reluctantly, we make our way out of the forest. Back on the road and with the heat of the mid-morning sun on our backs, all of us are united in our appreciation for this jungle which is, perhaps, one of the real treasures of Langkawi.

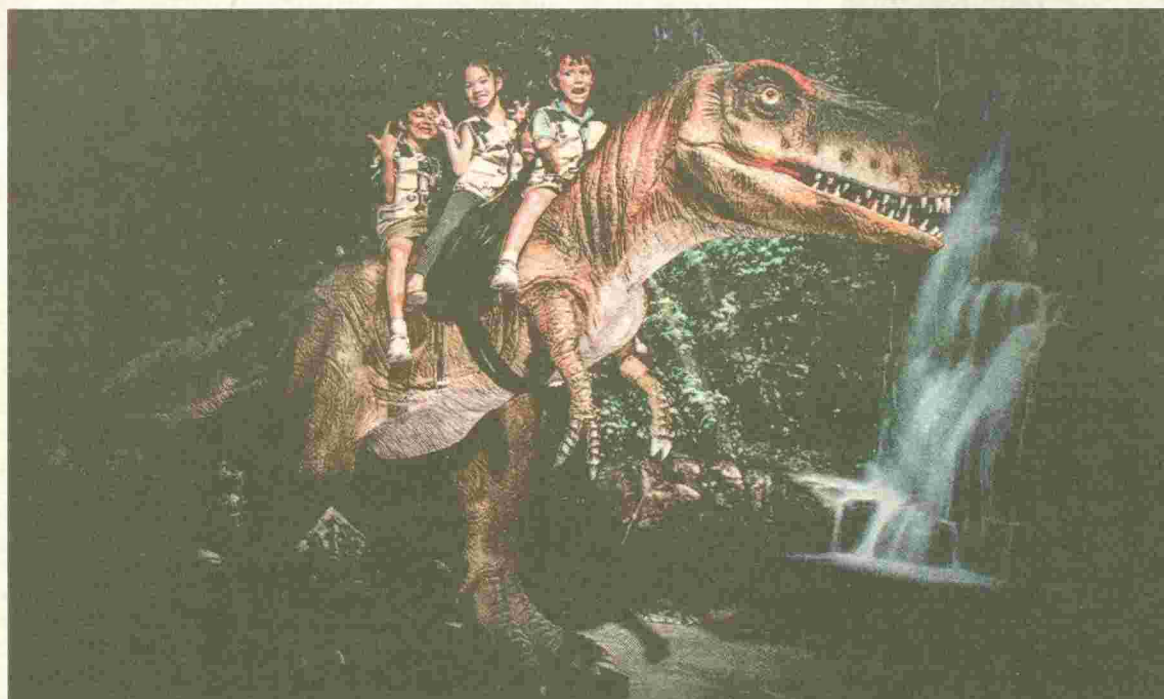
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Thrilling fun atop the T-rex.

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