

My Very Own Swamp.

My Very Own Swamp. Weekend Telegraph. April 1997. Deep in the Malaysian rainforest, Paul Mansfield does his bit for nature conservation-by planting mangrove.

On the Malaysian island of Langkawi, there is some corner of a foreign field that is forever â€˜mine. Early one morning I set out with a naturalist, Irshad Mobarak, to replant some of the local flora. We skimmed up the Kilim river by boat, heading deep into the rainforest, with limestone cliffs towering above, and a riot of green vegetation reaching down to the banks. At a bend in the river Irshad stopped the boat and gathered up a clutch of mangrove stems, shiny and pointed, like small spears. We found a clearing on the opposite bank, and inserted the stems into the mud, where, Irshad assured me, their seeds would take root with amazing speed. "So how does it feel," he asked, "starting your own swamp?" It felt pretty good â€˜and especially on Langkawi. This small island near the Malay Thai border is hanging in the balance, somewhere between pristine beauty and overdeveloped ruin, and it needs all the ecohelp it can get. Since the government declared it a dutyfree zone in 1987, hotels have gone up along Langkawi's coastline at alarming speed. Left to their own devices, local entrepreneurs would probably turn the place into yet another Asian resortisland, with beaches cateringto pampered Westerners and an interior left neglected. Langkawi is a relic of the kingdom of Langasuka, founded in the 1st century AD, and one of the earliest Hindu settlements in South East Asia. Flying in from Kuala Lumpur the plane descends over glorious, palmfringed beaches, tiny kampongs and rolling hills. But almost the first thing to catch the eye on the road from the airport is the island's cement works. Langkawi is less relentlessly picturesque than other "paradise" islands, which may yet save it from death by tourism. Kuah, the capital is a dusty shambles, with a bizarre style of architecture ranging from utilitarian white concrete blocks to the pink towers and turrets of the new Tiara Hotel. A giant stone eagle (the island's emblem), 60ft high, sits in a park overlooking the water across a band of glittering front, where ferries skim out blue sea are the hazy out across the bay to Thailand and the offshore islands. Kuah's trafficclogged boat, are full of dutyfree stores selling booze, cigarettes and electronics. Restaurants crowded with fishermen and dockers do a brisk trade in mee gulong, a local pancake, and spicy Thai dishes from across the border. Kuah may not be pretty, but it is a working port with a robust atmosphere. Across a band of glittering blue sea are the hazy out-lines of Langkawi's 90odd offshore islands. I hired a boat, a skiff with a tattered canopy manned by two piraticallooking fisherman, and set off to explore. First stop was the "Island brisk of the Pregnant Maiden", where a freshwater lake lay encircled by a punchbowl of rock. The lake is said to be inhabited by a giant white crocodile, and you swim at your own risk. I had assumed this to be so much colourful local folklore, but the two "pirates" could not be persuaded into the water. In the end I plunged in by myself, and spent a glorious half hour floating on my back in the cool water, looking up at the sky. When I emerged the boys tried hard to hide their relief. We spent the rest of the day flitting from one empty island to another, snorkelling over multi-coloured coral, fishing off the boat and cooking our catch on a deserted beach. Like most Asian islands, Langkawi has its share of backpackers. In a hire car I headed for the west coast, calling into tiny marinas and beach bars on the way. At Pantai Kok, an unbroken sweep of white sand set in an unbroken sweep of white sand set in a glorious bay on the west coast, I had a lunch of fresh shrimp and beer (at dutyfree prices, about £2), and chatted to the motley collection of budget travellers who had fetched up at the bay's small hotels. Fishing boats were drawn up on the sand, nets were being mended outside wooden houses on stilts, children and dogs scampered around. Unlike most backpacker "scenes", Pantai Kok had a healthy balance of foreign and local and yet it was all about to disappear courtesy of a runway extension at Langkawi airport and the arrival of a new resort hotel. "Time to move on," said one longhaired Frenchman, grimly. Not all tourist development on Langkawi has been heavyhanded. Up in the northwest corner of the island, hidden in the rainforest and overlooking a deserted bay, lays the Datai Resort. I arrived after dark, and was given a spacious villa built of local hardwood and hung with Thai silks. At dawn the next morning I woke to what seemed like a chorus of ringing bells. In fact, it was the jungle coming to life, a whirring, screeching and chattering which began with the sunrise and stopped abruptly after 15 minutes, leaving nothing but the sound of trickling water. From my wooden deck I gazed up into a dense canopy of foliage. Flying squirrels swung through the trees; there was the unmistakable whooshing sound of a hornbill far above: monkeys scampered below the deck. That was the morning Irshad Mobarak turned up. Irshad was 37, ponytailed, land with family links in Pakistan, Ireland and Portugal. He leads nature walks from the island's major hotels, and functions as a sort of one-manband trumpeting the cause of conservation on Langkawi. Goodhumoured and articulate, Irshad is mercifully devoid of the selfrighteousness that so often afflicts ecoactivists. Not only that, he's realistic. His first function, he said, was damage limitation. "We can't stop new hotels going up. But if we can keep them on the coast we can save the interior." His method, he said were traditionally Malaysian. "It's important to show respect to elder and not to be rude. You try to persuade people, not alienated them. That morning 16 guests had sacrificed a lie-in to accompany him into the rainforest at dawn. We set off by boat around the north of the island, where rainforest and mangrove swamps existing sidebyside in a riot of exuberant greenery. As we headed upriver, limestone formations rose around us in strange statues oddly reminiscent of the manmade ones at Angkor Wat in Cambodia. We disembarked and paddled through stone archways into limpid rock pools. Irshad pointed out the various species of flowers and butterflies; the birdlife in the forest; the names of trees in the jungle. All this was utterly absorbing, made more so by the all encompassing sense of peace. Giant ferns and creepers hung across the trail as we moved deeper into the forest. Sitting in the shade of a banyan tree, we dipped our feet in a pool and talked about the future for Langkawi. Irshad plans to introduce electricity powered boats on his tours; to extend his treeplanting scheme ("Good PR for the hotels"); and to ask the government to crack down on the illegal Thai foresters who are chopping down mangrove forest for charcoal. All this might seem noble but quixotic, but for Irshad's unshakable confidence and for an article that appeared that day in the New Straits Times. Dr Mahathir Muhammad, Malaysia's formidable prime minister, once practised medicine on Langkawi, and takes a personal interest in its affairs. That morning he'd gone on record as saying that development in Langkawi should "slow down" â€˜and what Dr

Mahathir wants, he usually gets. Irshad for one was optimistic. "With the prime minister on your side, anything is possible." But if overdevelopment continued, he said, he would step up his campaign and include direct action. "I'm not one to lie in front of bulldozers," he said. "But I will if I have to." He may not need to just yet. In any case, there's one part of Langkawi's natural heritage safe for the foreseeable future. If you visit Langkawi, look out for my mangrove swamp. I hear it's coming along nicely. From Helinmatkat.fi