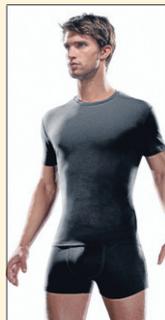


Travel

WANDERLUST

Cool in black

Able to be scrunched into a fist-sized ball, then pulled from your pack pong-free and unwrinkled after weeks of wear, Icebreaker's lightweight Apollo Ts (RRP\$89.95) are seriously versatile traveller's gear. They're made of fine merino wool, loose enough for a tropical evening, warm enough to be a thermal layer (especially under something wind-proof) and smart enough to wear to dinner. Get a black one. icebreaker.co.nz



Winter Festival fun

The end of daylight saving means winter's on the way. So here's some upside: the Southern Hemisphere's biggest winter party, the American Express Queenstown Winter Festival returns, this year from June 24 to July 3. Ten days of snow fun with mountain action, fun and glamour. Street parties, parades, fireworks, live concerts, comedy and theatre will rock the southern ski town. More at winterfestival.co.nz.

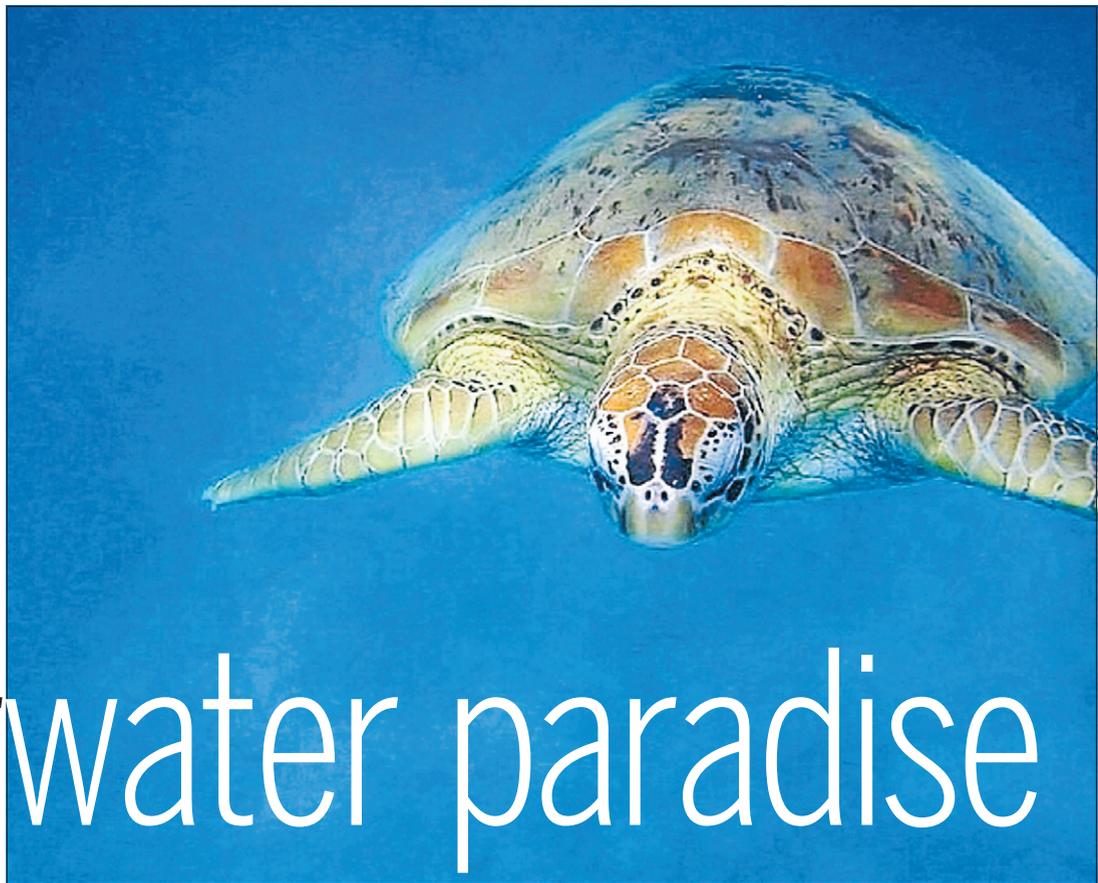


London honeymoon

The celeb wedding of the year brings good value in Will and Kate's London. The four-star Marriott London Kensington is offering an after-wedding deal. Close to Harrods, Hyde Park and Shakespeare at The Globe, all guest rooms feature the Marriott's down mattress toppers and Egyptian cotton linen. The leisure club features indoor pool and steam room and Fratelli Grill has an open kitchen and Nabuca Bar for cocktails. Expedia.co.nz is offering a saving of 33 per cent when you stay three nights, with rooms starting at \$243 a night. Book by May 16 for travel by May 30. Phone 0800 998 799 or visit expedia.co.nz

Malaysia's pretty and relaxed Perhentian Islands both under-promise and over-deliver. **Greg Roughan** falls under their spell.

Underwater paradise



PASSPORT, ARRIVALS card, luggage, phone: everyone has their own mental checklist for leaving a plane, but there's one extra thing to consider when disembarking at Malaysia's Kota Bharu airport – cleavage.

Even for Muslim-majority Malaysia, Kota Bharu is considered a conservative Islamic centre, so – despite Syariah rules not applying to foreigners, or even non-Muslim residents – the girls in our group take a moment to adjust their clothing to avoid scandalising the locals.

One of them, being an Australian (and a Sydneysider to boot) does need a little longer to work out how much flesh is considered normal beyond Bondi (yeah, no – cover that. And those. And that's nice, but maybe a dangly scarf?), but we're soon sorted, and bundle happily into a minivan for an hour's drive to a ferry terminal, from which we'll reach our final destination, the Perhentian Islands.

Located 19 kilometres off the east coast of peninsular Malaysia and just south of the border with Thailand, the Perhentians have a reputation for clear waters that brim with placid sharks and turtles – and have a low-key, backpacker-ish vibe. I'm told the



The heat seeps luxuriously into your bones and the jetty is surrounded by clouds of fish seeking shade under anything that floats.

Getting up close and personal: The Perhentians are brimming with sea life.

unspoiled environment is partly thanks to that same conservative Muslim approach – it's different from the licentious vibe in Thailand, where the party crowd steadily transform islands into trash-covered tourist-traps – but I'll be able to see for myself soon: the taxi pulls up at the ferry terminal and we're ushered onto an open-topped banana-boat. Forty minutes of bouncing over bath-warm water follows before we finally arrive at Pulau Besar, the largest of the 11-island group.

Malaysia is less familiar to Kiwis than, say, Thailand or Fiji, but that's set to change with AirAsia X flying direct to Kuala Lumpur from Christchurch, and Jetstar's new route via Singapore. As a newcomer to the country, and a tropical island virgin, I love my first impressions. The heat seeps luxuriously into your bones and the jetty is surrounded by clouds of fish seeking shade under anything that floats, from dinghies to loose ropes. A couple of barracuda hover near them looking hungry, but are too hot to do anything about it.

The resort itself is on a small crescent of flat land between dense green jungle and a stretch of private beach. The sand is flour-fine and so white that it throws light back off the sea floor, making the water seem to glow. Oh, and judging by the tanned bodies stretched out on the shore, any anxieties about religious decorum seem to have been left on the mainland.

As the resort staff welcome us by putting silly woven hats on our heads and ushering us towards check-in, the Aussies I'm travelling with comment on the metallic din drifting over the resort.

"It sounds like a broken pump," says one.

"No, it's a monkey-klaxon," claims another, "it keeps them out of the resort."

That makes me wonder if I'm part monkey, because it is rather

GETTING THERE

Travellers leaving on a night flight from New Zealand can be in the water in the Perhentian Islands by the middle of the following day. AirAsia X now flies from Christchurch to Kuala Lumpur four times a week. JetStar Asia flies from Auckland to Kuala Lumpur via Singapore.

From Kuala Lumpur, AirAsia, Malaysia Airlines and budget airline Firefly have regular flights to Kota Bharu. From there transfers by taxi to Kuala Besut jetty take around one hour, and boats to the Perhentian Islands take 45 minutes.

Alternatively, Terengganu airport is about two hours from Kuala Besut by taxi and is serviced regularly by Kuala Lumpur airport.

annoying. But it's not until we're in our togs and drifting across the bay that we click: the noise is coming from huge cicadas in the coconut palms. And for some reason, knowing the sound is natural makes it seem almost soothing.

The next morning we set off to try the snorkelling and find that here the Perhentians somewhat under-promise and over-deliver. As we try on masks for size, various locals shake their heads and point to the sky. "Very bad for snorkel – no see shark, no see shark" – then the next thing you know you're suspended in warm, clear water, surrounded by swarms of fish which look as if they have been coloured-in by over-enthusiastic pre-schoolers, while harmless reef sharks cruise by.

"Wow," you say as you clamber back into the boat. "That's the best snorkelling I've ever experienced!" Then someone says "Oh, maybe see turtle then. If lucky, if lucky" and you motor around the corner. At this point I was glad of the Icebreaker T-shirt I'd stuffed in my bag – wet plus wind can make you chilly, even in the tropics.



Island life: Visitors enjoy the low-key vibe.



Paradise regained: Flour-fine sand, shady palms and dense green jungle.

Then someone spots a turtle. And another. And everyone hops over the side, and soon you're swimming an arm's length from an ancient-looking armoured beast with a gentle face. At this point the Aussies decide it's time to find a place that serves beer – and of course there's a turtle noodling in the shallows as the boat pulls up at the beach – and we spend the evening at plastic tables at a restaurant with water around our feet which are slowly sinking into the sand, thinking “OK, I could get used to this.”

A note here on drinking: though the Perhentian Islands were effectively dry until a few years ago, some places are now allowed to serve alcohol to tourists, and do a good cocktail. Finding these bars is easier with a couple of booze-detecting Aussies in your group.

Another option, if you fancy a drink on your tropical island holiday, is to bring your own. Again, our thirsty cousins from over the ditch are well stocked, lugging a huge chilly bin with them wherever they go, and copping no flak for it. It all seems to be part of the low-key Malaysian attitude.

And what of the ravages of development? There is a little trash on some of the beaches, and even the occasional tiny blob of oil – evidence of the mainland's booming industry – but Malaysians seem to be cottoning



The simple life: No roads, ATMs, or rubbish here.

on to the huge value of their natural landscape. An important turtle breeding ground, the whole island group has been granted marine park status; whale sharks occasionally visit, and even on land there's an incredible richness to the wildlife. Crimson dragonflies zig-zag over the paths and huge monitor lizards crash into the water as you pass. On a short jungle trek we even come across a troop of monkeys – spectacled langurs, some with babies clinging to their fur – who peer at us through the leaves, undeterred by the “monkey-klaxon” cicadas.

Above all, the gentle family-values atmosphere seems to have cast a spell over these islands, slowing the development-mania that blights many other beautiful places. There are no roads or ATMs on the Perhentians; they're a wonderful place to luxuriate for a few days and tick all of the right tropical island boxes.

Admittedly, though, it isn't until the final day of our trip, as we pass through Kuala Lumpur, that Malaysia really gets its hooks into me.

In the capital I realise that the beauty of the Perhentian Islands is just one aspect of a proud but tolerant country where ethnic and religious groups have unified under a national identity. I wander the city for an evening, admiring the mix of the boldly new with the contented old, and that night go to bed in the smart modern luxury of a Traders Hotel suite. The next I'm awakened at 6am by the haunting call of the muezzin.



Sail away: Water taxis are the main form of transport.

TRIP NOTES

There are no ATMs on the Perhentian Islands, so travellers need to bring their own cash (though many places accept credit cards). One New Zealand dollar buys about 2.2 Malaysian Ringgit. The season for visiting the islands runs from March til October. Monsoon weather outside of these months closes most resorts.

Perhentian Island Resort on Pulau Besar has higher-end accommodation in a family environment. Prices range from 310-480 Ringgit per night for a large independent suite.

Backpacker accommodation and the best snorkel and scuba scene can be found on Long Beach on Pulau Kecil. Scuba diving on the Perhentian Islands is world class.

Operators Tuna Bay Scuba consistently receive the best reviews. tunabay.com

Water taxis are the only way to get around, apart from walking. These cost around 10 Ringgit per person for short trips.

Opening the curtains, 31 floors up, I watch the sun rise over Malaysia as the ancient song rolls over the city, and think to myself “I'm coming back”.

The writer travelled courtesy of Tourism Malaysia and AirAsia X and stayed at the Perhentian Island Resort on Pulau Besar, Shari-La Island Resort on Pulau Kecil, and Traders Hotel Kuala Lumpur.



Lush: Tropical jungle covers the island.

TRAVEL TALK



Bonnie Thompson is an English actor and host of *Travel 360* on Sky's Travel Channel.

How often do you get away?

As often as I can! I'm not a massive fan of English weather, so my aim is to try to top up my vitamin D levels.

Where was your first trip?

Ever? Probably Wales with my family as a child. I remember there was a freak heatwave and me and my brother and sister had a blissful time playing in rivers and climbing mountains, while my dad dragged us on a long walking trip to find his Welsh grandparents' old caravan.

Why do you travel – business or pleasure?

For me travel is about getting perspective, looking at the world through different eyes. As an actor, people-watching is a bit of a habit of mine. And you can choose to be anonymous on outskirts or in the thick of it. Brilliant!

What is your favourite destination overseas?

I'd have to say Budapest. I wasn't quite prepared for how culturally and politically rich it would be. It is a city with everything and its two distinct sides (Buda and Pest) together encompass fabulous architecture, amazing food and wine, and hospitable people.

Best trip ever?

I lived in America for a year at university and in the fall a bunch of us drove all the way up from Pennsylvania through New England to Maine – it felt like proper “road tripping” with a mix of great company, good tunes and breathtaking views. I'd recommend the north-east of America to anyone at that time of year.

Worst?

Well, when I inter-railed around Europe one summer, my worst stop was Luxembourg. I think we thought it would be a great in-between place, but unfortunately it was France without the finesse and Belgium without the beer.

If you could be anywhere but here, where would that be?

I've just come back from a month travelling around South India. Right now, I would give anything to be back at my beach hut in Goa waking up to the sun and sea every morning. It was paradise.

What is the wildest sight you've witnessed while travelling?

Quite literally the “wildest” was on a recent safari in Karnataka. I was lucky enough to see a leopard – it was only about 10 metres from our van and calling to its mate. The noise it made was unlike anything else I've ever heard and then the subsequent rustling and warning calls of other animals of the leopard threat reminded us all that we are definitely not at the top of the food chain. Very humbling.

The most heartbreaking?

A number of years ago I visited a zoo in the south of France whilst on holiday camping. A poor polar bear was stuck in a tiny enclosure and just swam round and round repeating the same movement – as if the claustrophobia and lack of real environment had driven him mad.

Who (or what) is your favourite travelling companion?

My camera! I'm a bit obsessed with photography.

Where to next?

I'm off to catch up with old friends in New York City in a couple of months.