

Malaysia's 'Devil's Island' Former prison now a first-class resort

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By Mark Sissons

Imagine Papillon deciding to revisit the infamous French penal colony known as Devil's Island decades after he made his incredible escape. After paddling through shark-infested waters off the French Guianian coast on a bag of coconuts (for old time's sake), he lets out a dumbfounded mon dieu!.

The hellhole author Henri Charrière (a.k.a Papillon) spent years trying to flee has been transformed into a luxury resort and spa. Even more incredible, his old pal, Louis (Dustin Hoffman in the film version), now guest activities director, is waiting to welcome him at the jetty.

Farfetched scenario? Not on Pulau Jerejak, a tiny island of lush jungle terrain in the Straits of Malacca, within swimming distance of Penang. As recently as 1993, Malaysia's version of Devil's Island housed some of the country's most dangerous criminals in brutally harsh conditions.

It also served as a leper colony, a quarantine area for tuberculosis victims, and reputedly, a secret Second World War German submarine base. Today, little more than a decade after the last prisoners departed, Pulau Jerejak is the site of the gleaming new Jerejak Resort, Malaysia's newest upscale eco-adventure retreat and spa.

Visitors taking the 10-minute ferry ride from Penang's George Town jetty are met by cheerful resort staff in tan safari suits instead of sadistic guards. They are then whisked in golf carts to the posh reception area adjacent to the open-air dining pavilion and pool, constructed on the very spot where the leper colony's sanatorium once stood. In a place more accustomed to putting its visitors behind bars, luxurious, amenity-rich, semi-detached chalets await.

Surrounded by dense tropical jungle, Jerejak Resort offers guests a range of outdoor activities, including abseiling, rock climbing, mountain biking, fishing, jungle trekking, camping under the stars, and wildlife watching. Jerejak is home to the majestic white-bellied sea eagle, among other rare flora and fauna. Thrill seekers can get an adrenalin rush traversing a swaying steel suspension bridge or zipping in a "flying fox" over a ravine where giant monitor lizards and snakes watch from below. And where despondent inmates once climbed the stone prison walls, resort guests can now test their mettle on an artificial climbing wall.

Pulau Jerejak is quickly becoming a choice spot in Malaysia for corporate team building activities. Along with guided heritage tours, eco-adventure outings, and sports activities, the resort provides banquet halls and special function rooms catering to company retreats of up to 500. A petting zoo is also in the works, featuring a menagerie of goats, geese, rabbits and other tame animals. About the only thing guests can't do is swim off the island's beaches because of the poisonous jellyfish.

For those who prefer pampering to jungle hiking, Jerejak Resort's newly opened Spa Village offers a relaxing and rejuvenating alternative. Nestled atop an emerald hill, the immaculately landscaped retreat offers serenity and head- to- toe pampering. The gracious staff are expertly trained in Javanese, Sundanese, Balinese and Thai aromatherapeutic massage techniques. Spa chalets are spacious and furnished with amenities like king-size beds, TV, safe box, individually controlled air-conditioning, VCD and CD players, even mini bars. Other corporeal indulgences include body scrubs, manicures and pedicures, facials, and soaks in the sauna or jacuzzi offering panoramic views of George Town across the channel.

The setting and amenities may be topnotch, but it's the island's fascinating history that makes Pulau Jerejak unique in the region. In 1797, Colonel Arthur Wellesley, later Duke of Wellington who defeated Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815, proposed Pulau Jerejak as a military post and British foothold in the lucrative spice trade. But that role eventually went to Singapore, and Jerejak remained virtually uninhabited until the early part of the 20th century, when a leper colony was established in the island's southeast zone.

At the start of the Second World War, the lepers were relocated and Jerejak became a quarantine area for contagious diseases, including tuberculosis. It is also believed, but not confirmed, that part of the island was used by the Nazis as a wartime submarine base. While no trace of such a base has been found, there is, among the myriad cemeteries that dot the island, a war memorial dedicated to two Russian soldiers who were reportedly killed in a German attack in 1944. Their mortal remains, however, have never been found.

In 1969, Pulau Jerejak welcomed its first batch of criminals - murders, rapists, bank robbers, political undesirables and drug dealers - to a newly opened penal colony on its northwestern tip. By 1991 the island housed over 800 inmates, the last of whom didn't leave until 1993. During its time as the Alcatraz of Malaysia, only seven "Papillons" ever managed to escape from Pulau Jerejak.

Today, knowledgeable guides will escort you through winding jungle mountain biking trails to visit macabre heritage sites. You can still view deranged inmates' scribbles on crumbling cell walls, or descend into gloomy underground solitary confinement bunkers where the worst offenders rotted away. While sitting in the remnants of communal leper baths, you can also try to imagine the horrors that until recently were a daily part of life here on what are now the immaculate grounds of the swank new Jerejak Resort and Spa. As much a hedonist as he was an escape artist, Papillion would surely have approved. Like the rare rehabilitated criminal, Pulau Jerejak too managed to completely change its stripes.

IF YOU GO:

Most South East Asian airlines offer flights to Penang. Malaysia Airlines and Air Asia service Penang from Kuala Lumpur several times daily.

For more information about the recently opened Jerejak Resort & Spa, visit www.jerejakresort.com