



Even from the sea the Melina Beach Resort is hardly visible.

Tioman Today

Text and photos by **Morten Strange**

Morten Strange made a recent visit to the stunning Pulau Tioman off the east coast of Malaysia and checked out some of the new developments in eco-tourism.

Not many people today will know of the movie *South Pacific*. It's an old classic Hollywood movie from 1958. They don't make them like that anymore, and some might say 'thank goodness for that'. However, the movie made the locale of Pulau Tioman famous as its exotic and gorgeous location. A few years later Time Magazine voted Tioman one of the most beautiful islands in the world. I don't think many people who have been to Tioman would disagree with that characterization.

I visited the island for the first time in 1981 and have been back too many times to count since then. Always

by water. A couple of times in my own boat, when I had one of those, sometimes by direct ferry from the Tanah Merah Ferry Terminal, when that excellent and pleasant service existed. Most usually by bus across the Causeway and then by boat out of Mersing or from Tanjung Gemok Jetty a little further north. The crossing of the about 35 km stretch of ocean takes anywhere from 3.5 hours by slow bumboat to 1.5 hours by the fastest catamaran service.

Then finally, in July 2009, we flew out to Tioman. Why didn't I do that before? No more jams at the Causeway, no more dreadful road trips through Johor at the mercy of a suicidal bus driv-



From top: Black-naped Terns *Sterna sumatrana* just off the beach; Adam snorkeling the South China Sea.

er. My son, Adam, and his friend Eske from Denmark were with me, and I just loved that trip. We seemed to be on the only flight out of Seletar Airport that day. With just a handful of other passengers, your own personal immigration service, and a small intimate departure lounge, you felt like a movie star leaving Singapore on his private jet. The plane operated by Berjaya Air is a 48-seater Dash 7 prop-job; after just 40 minutes you land on Tioman, walk past the immigration shack and you are there!

Plans to construct a new and larger airport at this spot were officially abandoned in March this year, thanks in part to timely intervention and appeals from our sister organization, Malaysian Nature Society. Well done, MNS!

The entry point on Tioman is Kampung Tekek. MNS lost another battle here against mindless over-building; a new far too big concrete marina was recently put in. But that aside, check out the amazing flock of Island Flying Foxes (*Pteropus hypomelanus*) roosting in the casuarina trees along the jetty opposite the airstrip when you arrive, there are hundreds of them! Otherwise Tekek is just an ordinary chaotically developed village that you want to get out of as fast as you can. There is a taxi boat service to the various coastal resorts. These are some selected rates; prices are per person one way in Malaysian Ringgit (S\$1 is about RM2.4):

Paya Beach Resort RM35
Kampung Genting RM40
Japamala RM70
Nipah RM100
Minang Cove RM120
Kampung Mukut RM120
Asah Waterfall RM150

But the boys and I didn't need a taxi, by sea or land or otherwise. Adam is 1.93 meters tall, and he is the little one, Eske is 1.95, neither of them has a superfluous gram of fat on him. We decided to walk to our destination, Melina Beach Resort near Kampung Genting. It turned out to be a two-hour slog in the afternoon heat, carrying our luggage all the way. You pass the oldest hotel on the island on the way. It used to be the only place you could stay; now the whole island is dotted with resorts.

When we got our room it had a huge bolder sticking out of the floor. Most of the chalets and rooms were built this way, with rocks and tree trunks going through them. This way the buildings existed around instead of across the environment, embracing it rather than replacing it.



At Melina, rooms and guest houses are built into the environment.

Back then the place was part of the Merlin group, but it is now owned by Berjaya, it is 4-star rated and is called Berjaya Tioman Beach, Golf & Spa Resort, no less. Shortly after that, the blacktop road comes to an end, and you walk for another few kilometers across a decent trail to Paya Resort.

Paya Resort is not too bad; there is a small island just north of the beach with nice corals for snorkeling. There is also a mangrove habitat nearby, and from the back of the village you can

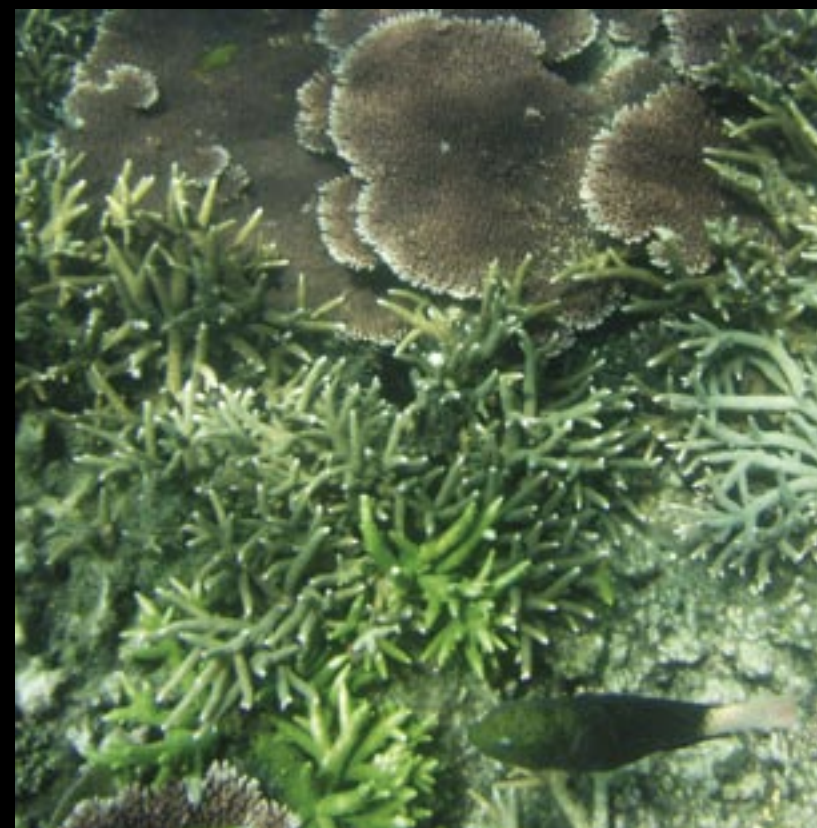
follow a forest trail that will take you up along a stream into the hills of the interior, eventually leading to the 1,038 meter Gunung Kajang. A guide is recommended for this hike.

But this time I wanted to try a new place to stay. Our friend Bridget Hedderman has bought into a different type of resort with a markedly eco-friendly theme, and we wanted to check it out. The boys and I were looking for some sort of sign along the trail to lead us down to the Melina Resort, but there wasn't any.



Bridget Hedderman is director of Ecofieldtrips and proprietor of Melina Beach Resort. Her place is constructed so that it can hardly be seen, not even from the sea.

Corals of Tioman



Marine biologist, Chua Sek Chuan had a look at this image from Bridget's house reef just off Melina Beach Resort. He had this to say: The corals on top are Plate Staghorn Coral *Acropora hyacinthus*, elsewhere they are Branching Staghorn Coral *Acropora grandis*; to the left, just above the left corner are some Encrusting Coral (probably *Astreopora* sp.) and at the right bottom corner maybe encrusting form of *Porites* sp. The fish is a parrotfish (*Scaridae* sp.); from this angle it could be one of three species.

Only when we ended up at the Genting Village did we realize that we had over-shot the place and had to walk back, still carrying our entire luggage. Needless to say, Adam was not too impressed with his father's navigation skills!

In my defense I must say that Melina is well hidden away. "We have done this on purpose," Bridget later explained to me, after we walked along the beach and finally found the resort via the back entrance. "We have constructed the place so that it can hardly be seen, not even from the sea." True enough, even from the ocean it was hard to see that anyone lived in this isolated cove. When we got our room it had a huge bolder sticking out of the floor. Most of the chalets and rooms were built this way, with rocks and tree trunks going through them. This way the buildings existed around instead of across the environment, embracing it rather than replacing it.

Bridget is British, she now runs the place in partnership with a German national, Peter Witzgmann, the founder; who was not present during our visit. Bridget is the director of Ecofieldtrips Pte. Ltd. (see <http://www.ecofieldtrips.com.sg/> for details). At Melina you will meet both school groups from the region and overseas, participating in the company's educational activities, as well as private guests and families.

Adam, Eske and I mainly did what you come to Tioman for anyway: We went swimming! I am not a diver. The equipment and organization involved puts me off. But I love the coral reef, and just snorkeling out to Melina's 'house reef' was good enough for me. Bridget went with me one day and showed me around, she knows the reef and all its inhabitants inside out. Her main concern that morning was to extricate any plastic garbage or rope caught up in the corals. When the boys and I wanted to go further afield we would rent sea kayaks and paddle along the coast to look for rich patches of corals and fish. I will spare the readers any further description of the marine environment. *Nature Watch* is lucky to have a network of contributors far better qualified than me to deal with this!

In the resort Bridget was constantly busy. "So, is this what I studied

marine biology for?" she would joke, as she helped the chambermaids clean out the rooms. At night she would transform into lounge hostess and have beer with the guests. With staff to do most of the logistics and the accounts, Bridget saw her role mainly as a guarantor for the ecological integrity of the operation. She would think out schemes for developing a sustainable and clean freshwater supply, garbage disposal and recycling of materials and waste.

Bridget was proud of the resort's turtle hatching program. The management buys up marine turtle eggs from villagers (at about RM4 per egg) and re-bury them in secure and fenced-off enclosures at the resort to improve morality rates. The eggs are mainly those of Green Turtles, but also a few of the rarer Hawksbill Turtles. During the 2008 nesting season, 30 nests were protected this way, with a total of 2,800 eggs, out of which 2,100 hatched successfully. After hatching, the young are released into the ocean at sunset.

I love the mornings at Tioman, sitting in a deck chair on the beach while the dawn breaks. Far out to sea large flocks of Bridled and Black-naped Terns would follow shoals of fish and dive in. As they emerged, Great Frigatebirds would swoop in and force them to release their catch. Frigatebirds are able to fish, but they prefer the easy way out by robbing other sea birds of their

catch. Occasionally a White-bellied Sea-Eagle would swoop down and pick a large fish out of the water, then fly back towards shore to find a quiet perch to have its breakfast. All this took place so far out to sea it was barely visible to the naked eye; you really needed a good pair of binoculars to be able to appreciate it. Adam was not that impressed; being interested in mathematics he derived at a formula where the value of a nature experience was inversely proportional to the distance to the event squared.

Adam and Eske were more impressed with the Colugo we found one evening. Or rather, the two Colugos that Subaraj found for us. The Colugos on Tioman are of a special subspecies called *Cynocephalus vari-egatus taylori* (see *Colugo: The Flying Lemur of South-east Asia* by Norman Lim for details). They are somewhat smaller and darker than the ones on the mainland and in Singapore, and I had never seen one of those. Luckily R Subaraj (see www.subaraj.com) was there with a group of Scottish students, and he arranged a night walk for us one evening. Off the trail through the forest, behind Melina, we had great views of a pair of Colugos on a bare coconut palm trunk, and Adam held the flashlight right on one of them as it glided obligingly right across our group, you couldn't have wished for a better display.

Our best (or worst?) adventure was the walk to Asah Waterfall. They said it couldn't be done, and in hindsight I tend to agree! Adam wanted to see the biggest waterfall on Tioman, on the south coast near the village of Mukut. I had never been there, but I sailed around Tioman once when I had my own boat, and I know that the coastline along the south and the east, facing the South China Sea, is rugged and desolate. Bridget didn't know if there was a trail, I presumed there would be one. Otherwise, how can the villagers get around the island? Well, it turned out that there wasn't any!

We walked through Genting village without a problem, past an abandoned ghostly resort, to Japamala Boutique Resort, whatever that means. I guess a boutique resort is a place where the staff is forced to dress up in funny costumes and is not too friendly. We were told that the trail ended here, that this was private property, and that we could go no further south. Trust it to Adam to find a way, he lead us under some rocks and across a fallen log into something that might resemble a trail. That trail ended as well, but we basically navigated by following some electric cables strung out along the coastline trashing through the undergrowth and across the rocky patches. The coast alternated between patches of sandy beaches and rough outcrops where we



At Melina you can learn about the astonishing coral reef environment, in the class room.



The dip in the pool below the Asah Waterfall was (almost) worth it.

had to climb across the hills. We passed one more resort on the way, Nipah Beach, a budget place, which is cut off from the rest of the island and doesn't even have a boat pier. After that followed another few kilometers of really slow trekking. The hike wasn't really that much fun, more like hard work. But at that point it was too late in the day to turn around.

Once we got to Minang Cove Resort there was a decent trail onto Mukut village, and on a paved track from there it was another hour's walk to the waterfall. The cool dip in the pool below the fall was (almost ...) worth the struggle getting there! The walk had taken much longer than I anticipated. It was almost dark by then, and by the time we got back to Mukut I couldn't find anyone who was willing to sail us back to Melina. We had to walk in pitch darkness on to Minang Cove Resort where the assistant manager Vicky took good care of us. Although the regular rooms were all full, she fed us and prepared the Beach Front Villa for us, so that we could spend the night in style. Thank you Vicky!

A few weeks after we were there, in August 2009, a group of four Singaporeans were at the Asah Waterfall late in the day just like us. They decided to spend the night on the rocks; but a flash flood during the night caused the water level to rise, and the two ladies in the group got washed away and drowned.

We on our part had a refreshing night's rest at Minang Cove, and the next morning Vicky arranged for a boat to take us back to the Kampung Genting pier. While our walk the day before had taken 6 hours, the ride back in a speed-boat powered by a 225 hp outboard motor took exactly 12 minutes. 🌿

TRAVEL NOTES

Melina Beach Resort is open all year, even during the monsoon season December-January, boats might not operate during that period. Room rates vary from RM220 for a dormitory type room (with aircon and two bathrooms) that sleeps 10 up to RM650 for the penthouse suite. This includes breakfast; a great buffet dinner is put out every night at RM38 per plate, ala carte is also available. Check <http://www.tioman-melinabeach.com/index.html> for current rates and other details. We paid S\$271 per person for a return air ticket to get there, check with Berjaya Air for current rates, <https://www.berjaya-air.com/>. If you go over land, expect to pay about S\$50 for a return bus ticket to Mersing, from there boats leave regularly for Tioman, fare is about RM30-45 for one way, depending on type of vessel. Get off at Kampung Genting and walk north-west a km or so to Melina.

Turtles of Tioman



While most of the marine turtles breeding in this area are Green Turtles *Chelonia mydas* there are occasional landings of hawksbill turtle *Eretmochelys imbricata*. The hawksbill is a widespread species through tropical seas, but it is much rarer than the green and while the Green is listed by the IUCN as Endangered by global extinction the Hawksbill is listed as Critically Endangered. Both are protected from international trade by the CITES treaty. At Melina, here five newly hatched Hawksbill Turtles are being released into the ocean at dusk. An event that was both a conservation effort, as well as a public relations show for the guests. One of the Ecofieldtrips staff, Karen Chen, collects the baby turtles from the hatching pen (1), show them off to the visitors (2) and finally let them make their way to the the sea (3).