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Underwater cleanup

At a marine conservation event on Redang Island, Zulkifly Ab Latif stays at the luxurious Taaras Beach & Spa Resort while cleaning up the sea of driftnets

FAMED science writer Arthur C. Clarke, the author of the novel *2001: A Space Odyssey*, is often attributed for the quote: "How inappropriate to call this planet Earth, when clearly it is Ocean."

And indeed, with more than 70 per cent of the Earth's surface covered with water, Arthur C. Clarke's quote makes for a sound argument. Having said that, what is truly inappropriate is how humans treat the ocean, since despite its important role in sustaining our lives, we treat it with disregard.

It is no surprise then that when the opportunity to attend Redang Island Conservation Day (RICD) in Terengganu waters came, I saw it as a personal means to contribute something beneficial back to the ocean, however small.

A joint collaboration between Malaysia New Zealand Chamber of Commerce, Aquana KLCC, Reef Check Malaysia and The Taaras Beach & Spa Resort, the Redang Island Conservation Day was a four-day marine conservation event aimed at preserving the marine environment, in particular the nearby waters and coastal areas of Redang island.

RESPLENDENT REDANG

With a total coastline of 4,675km, fringed with hundreds of tropical islands and bordering both the South China Sea and Andaman Sea, Malaysia is a country that

is inextricably intertwined with the ocean. This deep connection is perhaps best exemplified by Terengganu, with its stunning coastline that stretches some 200km, picturesque fishing villages and, of course, its dazzling tropical islands.

I am on a speedboat heading towards Redang Island, one of Terengganu's crown-jewel island getaways. Departing from Merang Jetty, some 40 km away from Kuala Terengganu, the boat ride is a 45-minute journey. With the sea calm and almost without waves, it feels as if the boat is gliding smoothly on the water's surface. Seven kilometres long and 6km wide, Redang Island is part of Redang Island Archipelago that includes nine other smaller islands, and has been gazetted as a protected marine park since 1991.

My point of arrival on Redang Island is the jetty of Kampung Baru, the main village on the island. The jetty is abuzz with activity as boats and public ferries from Kuala Terengganu Lining arrive and depart.

As I lean against the jetty's hand rail waiting for the resort's transfer van, a large sack suddenly lands near my feet with a thump. Looking up, I spot a man standing on top of the deck of a nearby docked ferry. He puts up his hand and offers me an apology and then a young boy comes and heaves the heavy sack, which is full of corn, onto a beat-up pushcart. I assume the corn will be prepared and sold at one of the many small wooden stalls that line the main road



Swimming with turtles at Teluk Dalam Besar. PIX BY MONAMED AKIL ABU BAKAR



Participants of Redang Island Conservation Day.



Coral planting using the method of affixing coral fragments to an underwater structure.



A diver with a net full of trash ascending to the surface near Teluk Dalam Kecil

near the jetty.

A white passenger van takes me to The Taaras Beach Resort & Spa, a luxurious resort tucked away at the secluded bay of Teluk Dalam on the north side of Redang Island. Featuring a breathtaking private beach of powdery white sand overlooking azure waters, the resort is without a doubt, the first choice for visitors looking for lavish accommodation when visiting Redang Island.

Checked in and registered for the Redang Island Conservation Day event, I make my way towards my lodgings for the next three nights: a garden deluxe chalet situated close to the main reception building. As the name implies, the chalet is nestled amidst a tropical garden, with a raised wooden walkway that enhances the aesthetically pleasing landscape.

The tropical atmosphere is also reflected in the interior of the chalet, with natural hues and deep brown wood flooring. Having gone through a six-hour land and sea journey from Kuala Lumpur, I find the warm and soothing ambience a much welcome respite.



FAST FACTS

THE TAARAS BEACH & SPA RESORT

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FAX: 09-630 8880
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WEBSITE: www.thataaras.com

STAY One hundred and ninety units of stylish suites and rooms plus a stunning five-bedroom Private Villa. The resort sets itself as a "home away from home", complementing the high-end resort facilities with a dedicated and interesting staff.

EAT The resort's all-day dining/ buffet restaurant serves a spread of International as well as Asian and Fusion-inspired dishes while its Beach Brasserie offers Western cuisine set in an intimate beachside surrounding. For something a little more local and casual, try Alma Grill Fish Restaurant within walking distance of the resort's gate entrance.

DO Plenty to do - from relaxing by the beach to going all out with adventure-packed water activities. But for those who prefer to stay indoors, there are a fitness centre, a cooking class, an X-Room (visual games), a pool table and indoor board games.

GO Go on a short trekking trip to the beach at Teluk Dalam Besar. The trail starts next to the resort's gate entrance. Or go exploring the nearby village of Kampung Baru on rented motorcycles.

HIGHS The upscale resort offers privacy and luxury set in a tropical landscape.

LOWS Due to its distance from the main village and other public areas, some visitors may find it a little too quiet.

REDANG ISLAND CONSERVATION DAY
 As a certified scuba diver, I am participating in RICD as a diver volunteer in the event aimed at preserving the marine environment, in particular the nearby waters and coastal areas of Redang Island.

Split into groups with other diver volunteers of the programme, my first task is an underwater cleanup near the waters of Teluk Dalam Kecil, the bay that the resort faces. Descending to a depth of 10 metres, our group of divers reaches a vibrant fringing reef of coral. Underwater visibility is exceptional, making my task of searching for and collecting marine debris between the coral formations a little bit easier.

Although more of a snorkelling spot rather than a sought-after dive site, the reefs of Teluk Dalam Kecil are a pleasure to behold. As I scour and peer into the nooks and crannies of the coral formations, I cannot but notice the abundance of giant clams, their mantles covered in unique patterns and bright colours.

A more challenging underwater task comes in the form of clearing entangled driftnets and rope near Teluk Dalam Besar, which is Teluk Dalam Kecil's equally beautiful and larger sister bay. Lost and abandoned driftnets are a threat to marine life, as they trap and kill whatever that is unfortunate enough to get entangled in them.

As we cut through the tangled mess of algae covered net and rope, I notice a large green turtle gracefully swimming towards us, as if curious about what we are doing. It is by no coincidence then that turtles are also one of the animals threatened by driftnets, in which they are trapped with no access to the surface to breathe, and this results in drowning.



A Crown of Thorns eating away at a cabbage coral.



Marine debris include consumer items such as glass or plastic bottles

I spot another smaller green turtle swim past a fellow diver before abruptly ascending to the surface. Also called Turtle Bay by local travel operators, Teluk Dalam Besar is a popular tourist spot for spotting and perhaps even swimming with sea turtles.

Although scuba diving tasks make up a substantial bulk of the marine conservation activities during Redang Island Conservation Day, other activities have also been arranged to involve non-diver volunteers such as beach cleanups, coral planting and environmental talks aimed at educating and creating awareness.

One such talk is by Dr Teo Eng Heng, co-founder of the Turtle Conservation Society of Malaysia and whose efforts helped pave the way in the establishment of Chagar Hutang Turtle Sanctuary, a protected and important sea turtle breeding ground found on Redang Island. Sitting through her talk, I find her passion for turtle conservation truly heartfelt and endearing.

Framed against the backdrop of Redang Island's innate natural beauty, and choreographed with varied activities that are at the same time personally rewarding, educational and environmentally beneficial, Redang Island Conservation Day is a commendable effort, and something that should be continued for many years to come.



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