

Travel

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Island in the sun

The financial crises of 1997 and 2008 winded Bintan, but the Indonesian resort destination has got its development plans back on track and is now rolling out its second phase and a fresh face. By Audrey Phoon

PICTURE this: A wreath of interlocking cubes, each one housing a chic guest room, rising majestically on stilts from the middle of a shimmering lagoon as if proffered by Neptune's own hand. From this doughnut-shaped resort, an elaborate banquet hall is suspended, dipping downwards into the man-made lagoon that is filled with seawater rendered Evian clear by a special type of filtering technology.



SIGHTS TO BEHOLD

Clockwise from above left: A villa under construction in Pantai Indah - the estate, soon to be officially launched, will eventually have a total of 162 villas; Bintan Treasure Bay, a massive 338-hectare project that will be divided into three precincts, is designed by award-winning Thai design studio Department of Architecture

It's a scene that would be quite at home in the United Arab Emirates, where the creation of fantastical somethings-from-nothing (palm-tree-shaped islands, underwater restaurants) never seems impossible. Yet it's nowhere close. This, in fact, is Bintan - or at least it will be in the not-so-distant future, when the Indonesian island completes its second phase of development, currently underway.




The makeover is timely, because while yearly tourist arrivals have increased four-fold from 113,490 visitors in the mid-1990s to 433,674 last year, it can't be denied that the island hasn't made it onto many travel lists for a while now. Nearly two decades have passed since Bintan - whose closest major city is Singapore, 50 kilometres away - first attracted holidaymakers' attention, and both its paintwork and appeal are getting worn.

The island was set up as a tourist destination in 1990, when the governments of Indonesia and Singapore agreed to an extensive growth plan for an 18,000-hectare swathe in Bintan's north. (The agreement was part of the bigger Sijori Growth Triangle arrangement, which looks to optimise the strengths of Singapore, the Riau Islands and Johor.) The plan called for the segment, known as Bintan Resorts, to be developed with resorts and recreational facilities, which would bring tourism to the island as well as establish an attractive sun-sand-sea playground on Singapore's doorstep.

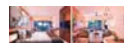
In 1994, Bintan Resorts' first accommodations, the beach cabins of Mayang Sari, opened; the year after, Banyan Tree Bintan was set up. People poured in and other resorts followed, but when the Asian financial crisis of 1997 hit, growth slowed, then ground to a standstill after Angsana Bintan (also run by Banyan Tree) was built in 2000. Less than a third of the total 18,000 hectares was developed.

It was only in 2003 that 'we were able to re-secure the lands that were suspended during the crisis', says Asad Shiraz, director of marketing for Bintan Resorts International, the tourism agency that manages the area. Subsequently, a public company called Gallant Venture (under which Bintan Resorts International operates) was formed in 2006 to oversee and inject funds into the Bintan project, and in 2007 it came up with a masterplan for the second-phase development of the Bintan Resorts area, a central section called Lagoi Bay.

According to Chia Tek Yew, Bintan Resorts International's executive director of strategy and marketing, the masterplan was mooted to 'create a high-quality development which offers a variety of tourism, resort and residential accommodation, and accompanying commercial and

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recreational opportunities, while protecting the natural attractiveness of this valuable coastal area'.

This, he adds, suits Bintan's evolving tourist demographic, which tracks Singapore's to some extent - it's largely made up of increasingly affluent Singaporeans and Singapore-based expatriates, as well as an emerging higher-end group of visitors drawn to tourist and MICE offerings.

In 2008, however, the project ran into more complications, thanks to the Great Recession. 'It was a bit of a setback for us,' recalls Mr Shiraz. 'Everything went into slow mode and nobody was willing to part with money.' Fortunately, 'in 2010 and 2011, everything came back again' - and so over the past year, those involved in the development have been in overdrive to bring it up to speed.

That's no small task, considering that the projects - most of which are managed by independent developers - within Lagoi Bay are ambitious ones. There are several residential estates of sumptuous villas (which make land in Bintan Resorts available for long-term lease to private investors for the first time); a vast retail mall called Lagoi Beach Village; and a 2.5km-long lake on which boats can be taken out.

That aside, 'other confirmed projects in Lagoi Bay include a resort by Alila, holiday villas by a Russian developer on a nine-hectare beachfront site, a beach motel by an Indonesian developer and a boutique hotel by a Singapore developer', shares Mr Chia.

Also in the pipeline: a water theme park, an adventure canopy walk, a cable ski facility, a motocross racing track and a safari park.

Meanwhile, within the Bintan Resorts area but outside of Lagoi Bay, Malaysian company Landmark Ventures is building Bintan Treasure Bay, a massive 338-hectare project that will be divided into three precincts and encompass the aforementioned 'ring resort', designed by award-winning Thai design studio Department of Architecture. The resort will be complemented by luxury villas, a round-the-clock activity hub and a crystal-clear swimming lagoon, among other things.

Says Treasure Bay's chief operating officer, Paul Leong: 'Surveys have revealed that people find Bintan today a little boring - it's all sand and sea and there's nothing much you can do in the evenings besides having dinner. Also, the existing resorts seem to be quite isolated from one another. You stay in one and you are basically cut off from the rest; if you want to travel out, it's very dark. There's no motivation for you to move out.'

'So we are going to provide both day and night activities in the southern precinct. It will be the nerve centre of the development, very well lit and bustling, and it will have enough to keep children and older gentlemen like myself well occupied. The idea is to increase the number of footfalls into Treasure Bay and the island in general. When we're done, Bintan will be a bit more happening.'

The entire second phase - which will increase the number of accommodation keys in Bintan from 1,400 to 3,300 - is expected to be finished in 2015, but some of the very first projects are already touching completion.

Lagoi Beach Village, for one, has part of its structure up and should be operational by the middle of next year; according to Mr Chia, the 20-hectare mall will be 'what Patong Beach is to Phuket, and Kuta is to Bali'.

At the same time, workers at a residential estate, Pantai Indah, are putting the finishing touches on three of its villas, which come with rooftop swimming pools and indoor gardens. (The estate, soon to be officially launched, will eventually have a total of 162 villas, six of which have already been sold.)

And it's not just the new projects that are giving the island a fresh sheen. In line with Bintan's born-again image, and to ready themselves for the bigger, broader crowd that is expected once the second phase is rolled out, operators of existing resorts and services are rejuvenating their facilities or creating new ones that are tailored to a more sophisticated audience.

Just this week, for example, Angsana Bintan completed a six-month renovation at the cost of 'a few million US dollars', says Jamal Hussain, Banyan Tree's area general manager for its Bintan properties. All its rooms were given a facelift and an expansive 240-square-metre covered recreation deck was built on the property, where guests can play table tennis, pool, darts or board games, or simply lounge in comfy chairs. 'We also added a new gym to the guest facilities, as well as a lounge, music and cocktail element to the Pantai Grill & Bar outlet by the beach,' says Mr Hussain. 'This way, guests can enjoy the beach area even after dining hours.'

For its part, Bintan Resorts International recently started an exclusive destination dining service within Bintan's mangroves that includes a private cruise down the River Sebang, and last week it launched a new Emerald Class lounge at Tanah Merah Ferry Terminal, which allows

passengers in its growing top-tier Emerald Class to 'relax and start their holiday even before they leave the Singapore shores', says the company's Mr Chia.

By 2015, the construction of an airport will also help make the island more accessible - approval for this was granted in February, and the authorities are working towards starting a seaplane charter service as well.

Once that's in place, Bintan's makeover will be complete, and the island will surely take off as a more exciting tourist destination. Better yet, the best thing about it won't change - this tropical paradise remains just minutes away.

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