

# view-tiful TREKS

Some of Asia-Pacific's most memorable hiking trails are located at the most unexpected places. By Joan Koh

Diehards may relish the thought of scaling Mount Kilimanjaro or adding Mount Everest to their been-there, done-that list. But intrepid urban warriors have long known that adventures need not always lead to arduous, far-flung journeys. All you need is a good pair of legs (and lungs), a sense of fortitude and an open mind. The following four treks cater to all fitness levels. And the best thing is, they all offer fantastic views.

## HONG KONG

Secluded white sandy beaches are accessible only by foot.



The further you hike, the more rewarding the view.

Just 30km from Hong Kong city, there are abandoned villages in woodlands, jade green waters and secluded beaches accessible only by a tramp through the bushes.

## TAI LONG WAN, HONG KONG

What can highly urbanised Hong Kong offer the avid trekker (and we don't mean trekking around the shopping maze of Tsimshatsui and Causeway Bay)? Just 30km from the city centre, away from 6.8 million people, you won't see a single skyscraper. Instead, you see verdant, undulating grasslands, rugged coastline and white sandy beaches that you never thought could exist in this part of the world.

This is Tai Long Wan (or Big Wave Bay), located on northeast Sai Kung and just a 30-minute ferry ride from Wong Shek pier in Sai Kung Country Park. It seems so wonderfully remote you couldn't have imagined a city was roaring away at its doorstep.

In fact, Tai Long Wan's almost pristine beauty has been compared to the scenic landscapes of Australia, New Zealand and Scotland. There are abandoned villages in woodlands, jade green waters and secluded beaches accessible only by a tramp through the bush.

The gradual climb along the ridge line towards Sharp Peak takes you past a fishing village, a Taoist cemetery and abandoned terraced rice fields before bringing you to a slightly overgrown dirt track. From here, the trail is steep and loose rocks make walking tricky. But the reward is a spectacular view all round. You're inevitably drawn to the five beaches south of Sharp Peak. There, the surf and the odd beach cattle offer blissful respite from the bustle of the city. The further you trek, the more stunning the vistas.

Depending on your fitness level (the hilly terrain can put off the not-so-fit), you can walk to the summit of the 468m tall Sharp Peak - the steep uphill path can be rough but you get the chance to creep up on wild boar or barking deer - or go down to Tai Long Wan's beaches.

**Who to call** Paul Etherington, of Natural Excursion Ideals ([www.kayak-and-hike.com](http://www.kayak-and-hike.com)), has over 25 years of adventure know-how. His kayaking and hiking trips show you a side of Hong Kong that you never expected.

**Where to stay** The Youth Hostels

Association (YHA) has basic accommodation - Bradbury Hall and Pak Sha O Hostel - in Sai Kung. Log on to [www.yha.org.hk](http://www.yha.org.hk) for more information. Or stay in Hong Kong Island and get a guide to arrange transfers to the park.

## TAMAN NEGARA, MALAYSIA

Getting to one of the world's oldest and thickest tropical rainforests is a long drawn-out journey. From Kuala Lumpur make your way to the Kuala Tembeling jetty - a four-hour bus ride - and take the three-hour scenic long-tail boat ride to the entrance of the national park.

Why take so much trouble? The 4,343sq km reserve spanning three Peninsula Malaysian states - Pahang, Kelantan and Terengganu - is 130 million years old. (There are entrances to the park from all three states, though entry via Pahang is most sensible as major attractions are located around this part of the reserve).

Wildlife is abundant of course - at least 80 bat and 300 bird species, 30 varieties of rats, 14,000 types of plants and some 200 mammals have been recorded.

A caveat: You do have to like the jungle as you're in the middle of it and activities are centred around the ancient rainforest. There's plenty to do - explore the many caves in the vicinity, shoot the rapids, visit the Orang Asli community, fish, or trek.

One of the best ways to admire the environs of Taman Negara is from Bukit Teresek. Though standing at merely 344m above sea level, the uphill trek along paved and unpaved paths eventually leads to a commanding view of the surrounds which includes the highest peak in Peninsula Malaysia, the 2,187m tall Gunung Tahan.

The Bukit Teresek Trail also leads to the 450m long canopy walk, touted as the world's longest suspension bridge. You are suspended 40m above ground, just over the forest canopy, with the wilderness beneath your feet.

**Who to call** Entrance to the Pahang side of Taman Negara is at the back of the Mutiara Taman Negara Resort. Licensed guides, guided trips to attractions in the reserve, and transfers from KL can all be arranged by the resort.

The Department of Wildlife and National Parks (tel. 609-266-1122) also has an office here.

**Where to stay** Mutiara Taman Negara ([www.mutiarahotels.com](http://www.mutiarahotels.com)) is the only non-backpacker lodging in this part of the park. Comfortable, air-conditioned chalet-style living on well-manicured grounds.

A three-day, two-night package starts from RM399 (S\$185) per person including breakfast and two jungle activities. Camping facilities and dormitory-style accommodation are also available. Half a dozen frills-free lodges for budget travellers are located across the river opposite the resort for as low as RM10 a night.

## MALAYSIA

The 130-million-year-old forest is a treasure trove of diverse flora and fauna.



(Left) Heaven on Earth: Marlborough Sounds is just a short ferry ride out of Wellington. (Below) The Queen Charlotte Track caters to walkers of all fitness levels.

## NEW ZEALAND

Every turn offers breathtaking picture-postcard views of secluded bays, turquoise blue waters and rolling mountains.



## MARLBOROUGH SOUNDS, NEW ZEALAND

Marlborough, just a short jaunt by ferry from Wellington, may be nicknamed New Zealand's Sauvignon Blanc capital. However, those in the know make it a point to set down their wine glasses for a trek through Marlborough Sounds, the picturesque fjord-like waterways nestled between springy green mountains.

At Queen Charlotte Sound - one of the three Sounds in the Marlborough Sounds region - the 71-km Queen Charlotte Track which winds its way around ridgelines can be traversed in a four-day trek.

Depending on your inclination, you can opt for a brief two-hour trek or do the entire four-day hike. The best short walk should take no more than two hours and spans Ship Cove and Resolution Bay. Expect steep ascents but the scenery makes the effort wholly worthwhile.

Whatever your choice, it is impossible to be blasé about this Queen. It's a walk with stunning views - the highest point may be only 406m above sea level, but with trails towering above a subtropical rainforest, every turn offers breathtaking, picture-postcard views of secluded bays, turquoise blue waters and rolling mountains.



Expect steep ascents but the scenery makes it worthwhile.

It's so scenic you'll find every excuse to make a stop to take in the visual feast.

The Queen caters to all fitness levels, from the gentle stroller to the very fit. For the seasoned trekker looking for something more physically demanding, the section stretching from Punga Cove to Portage Resort Hotel covers 24km of undulating terrain.

**Who to call** For guided treks around the Sounds, try Marlborough Sounds Adventure Company ([www.marlboroughsounds.co.nz](http://www.marlboroughsounds.co.nz)). More information on Queen Charlotte Track is available at [www.qctrack.co.nz](http://www.qctrack.co.nz) and [www.destinationmarlborough.com](http://www.destinationmarlborough.com).

**Where to stay** The beauty about trekking here is you don't have to camp in the bush. Trails lead to accommodation along the bay, some of which are five-star.

The sleek and minimalist Bay of Many Coves Resort ([www.bayofmanycovesresort.co.nz](http://www.bayofmanycovesresort.co.nz)), designed by acclaimed architect Marshall Cook, is the most luxurious place to stay in Marlborough Sounds. All beautifully appointed rooms overlook the bay and the Pacific Rim cuisine is particularly noteworthy. Rates from NZ\$220 (S\$230).

Pete Bossley, the man behind Wellington's Te Papa Museum has added his groovy touch to The Portage Resort Hotel ([www.portage.co.nz](http://www.portage.co.nz)). Check out the lobby's Austin Powers-style lounge chairs. Rates from NZ\$195. Both resorts also offer budget accommodation for backpackers.

## LANGKAWI, MALAYSIA

Heard of air trekking? Langkawi is the only place outside of Costa Rica to offer this *Fear Factor*-worthy activity.

The setting is Gunung Raya, Langkawi's tallest mountain and home to some 400 tree species and an array of wildlife including the flying lemur, mouse deer, loris, wild boar, civet cat and at least 40 species of snakes. A guided trek up the 890m tall granitoid mountain is a popular rough-it-out option, though a different sort of adrenaline rush can be found just one kilometre into the primary rainforest.

Langkawi Canopy Adventure's founder-guide Juergen Zimmerer leads an uphill walk through the bush, to a slab of rock where you're taught how to abseil and perform stunts

that are quite nerve-wracking. Once he certifies you fit to proceed, trek a little further to a network of cables and ropes. Safety is paramount. You're hooked to a multitude of safety devices and - whoosh! - you take the leap of faith and sail, Tarzan-like, through the million-year-old rainforest.

There are three flying stops and you remain six to 40m above the forest floor as you glide from tree to tree. Short treks in between require you to negotiate steep boulders with the aid of a tightrope (and put all your balancing and rappelling skills to practice). At the last stop, you whiz 140m into a fig tree before abseiling down its 30-m tall trunk.

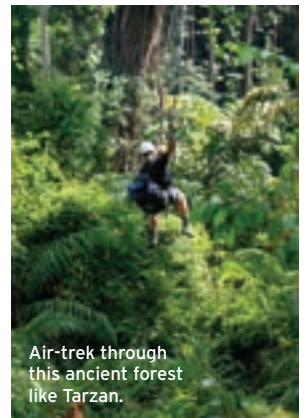
The adventure lasts four hours. But the buzz in your head stays and aching muscles remind you of the terrifying but mind-blowing experience. The view from up there - if you have the chance to stop and admire the forest canopy - is pretty awesome.

**Who to call** Langkawi Canopy Adventure, [www.emmes.net/langkawi-natur](http://www.emmes.net/langkawi-natur).

**Where to stay** Gunung Raya is located in the island centre and is easily accessible via road from all over Langkawi. The beach-front, cabana-style Mutiara Burau Bay ([www.mutiara-hotels.com](http://www.mutiara-hotels.com).) has a lively beach cafe with a Hard Rock Cafe ambience. Rates from RM220.

Five-star comfort and one of the island's best spas can be found at The Andaman ([www.ghmhotels.com/theandaman](http://www.ghmhotels.com/theandaman)). Rates from RM1,000.

**The adventure lasts four hours but the aching muscles remind you of the mind-blowing experience long after it is over.**



Air-trek through this ancient forest like Tarzan.

Glide through the foliage and abseil down tree trunks.

