



BINTAN

BOUNCES BACK

Known for many things – Pirate Island, heart of Malay culture and playground of the rich – Bintan Island is undergoing yet another transformation with an infusion of new spas and resorts, including upscale retail and residential clusters at Lagoi Bay, its latest attraction Writer Pete Wong

If it weren't for a twist of fate in history, the Indonesian island of Bintan could be what Singapore is today. After the Portuguese invaded Melaka in 1511, the Sultan of Melaka fled to Bintan and made it the seat of power from where he ruled the Riau Islands. Before that, Bintan – the largest among the group of 3,200 islands in the Riau Archipelago – was a stronghold for pirates. At the beginning of the 18th century, the Sultan of Johor also moved its base to Bintan and strengthened its position as a trading port. However, by the end of the century, the Dutch had taken control of the island while the British occupied Singapore. While Singapore has leapt from third world to first world status today, Bintan remains largely untapped although it was, for many years, the political, cultural and economic centre of the Malay sultanates. The course

of history would have taken a different path if the British had chosen Bintan instead of Singapore to be a trading hub.

Twenty years ago, both the governments of Singapore and Indonesia saw the potential in developing an 18,000-hectare land on the northern coast of Bintan into an 'integrated lifestyle resort destination' or basically an upmarket playground for Singaporeans. Within the 'protected zone', collectively known as Bintan Resorts, are four designer golf courses, chic restaurants, duty-free shopping and five-star resorts, including Banyan Tree, Nirwana Gardens, Club Med and Bintan Lagoon. Folks within the zone mostly speak English and the currency of choice is the Singapore dollar. A cross-border ferry service was also established to bring tourists to Bintan in less than an hour from Singapore's Tanah Merah Ferry

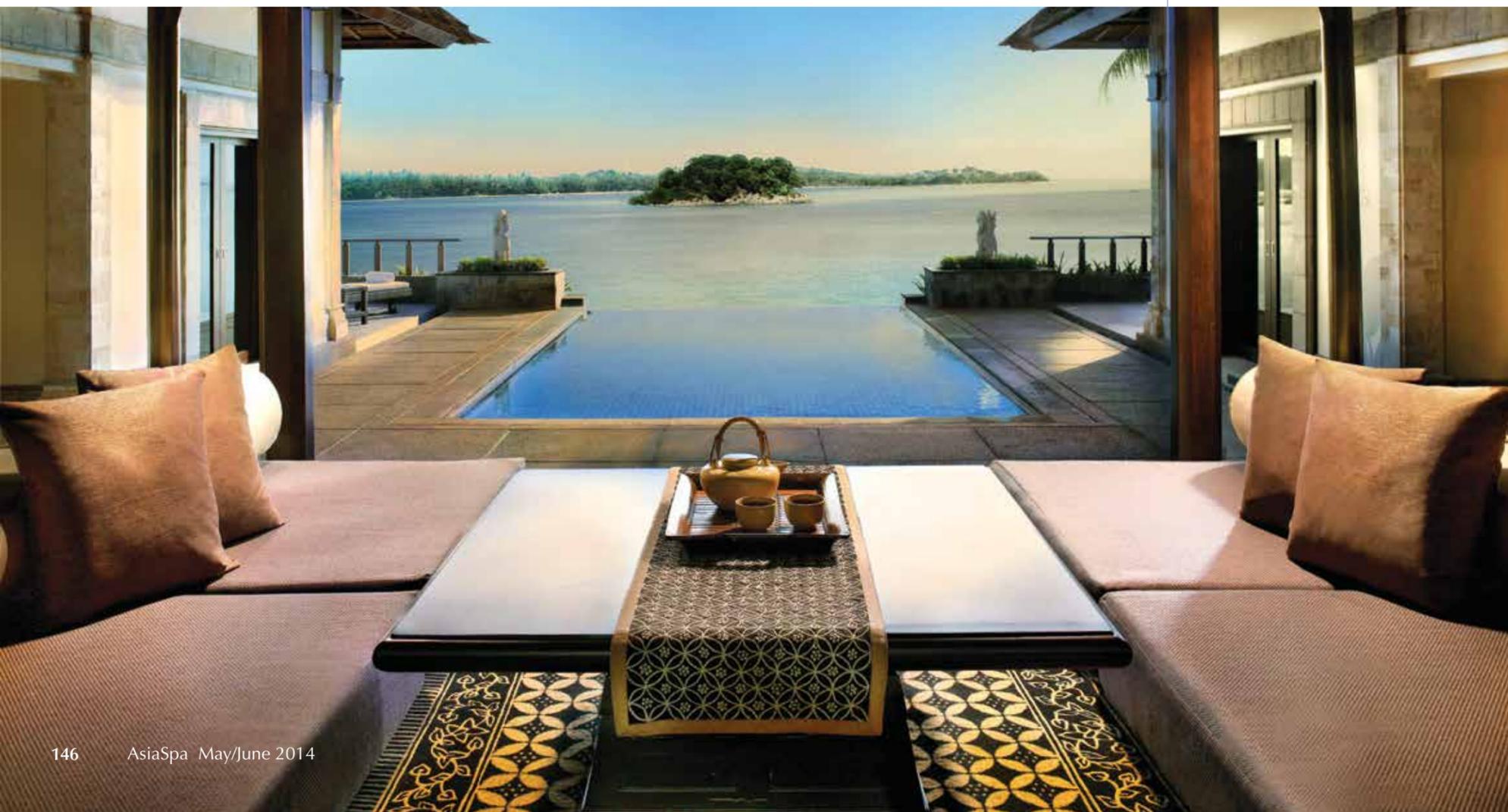
Terminal. The terminal is just 15 minutes' drive from Singapore's Changi International Airport.

Admittedly, Bintan is not a Bali or Phuket, and any attempts to draw comparisons would be pointless. The island – three times the size of Singapore with a population of just 350,000 – is essentially a convenient getaway destination for stressed Singaporeans (or travellers stopping over in Singapore) looking for something they are desperately short of – space. While Singapore is all skyscrapers, Bintan is miles and miles of coconut trees and white sandy beaches stretching as far as the eyes can see. With easy air travel, however, there is no shortage of exotic destinations competing for the attention of discerning holidaymakers.

In an effort to rejuvenate Bintan Island



THIS PAGE: Charming beach at Angsana Bintan. OPPOSITE PAGE: The Pool Villa at Banyan Tree Bintan has a stunning sea view. PREVIOUS PAGE: Club Med Bintan Island



and elevate it to top-of-mind status again, the master planner released another 1,300 hectares of land last year within the zone and called it Lagoi Bay. Another designer golf course will be built and two new resorts will open – namely Alila Villas and Swiss-Belhotel – with more to come later. Most of the new resorts and upscale retail outlets are expected to be operational by the end of 2014.

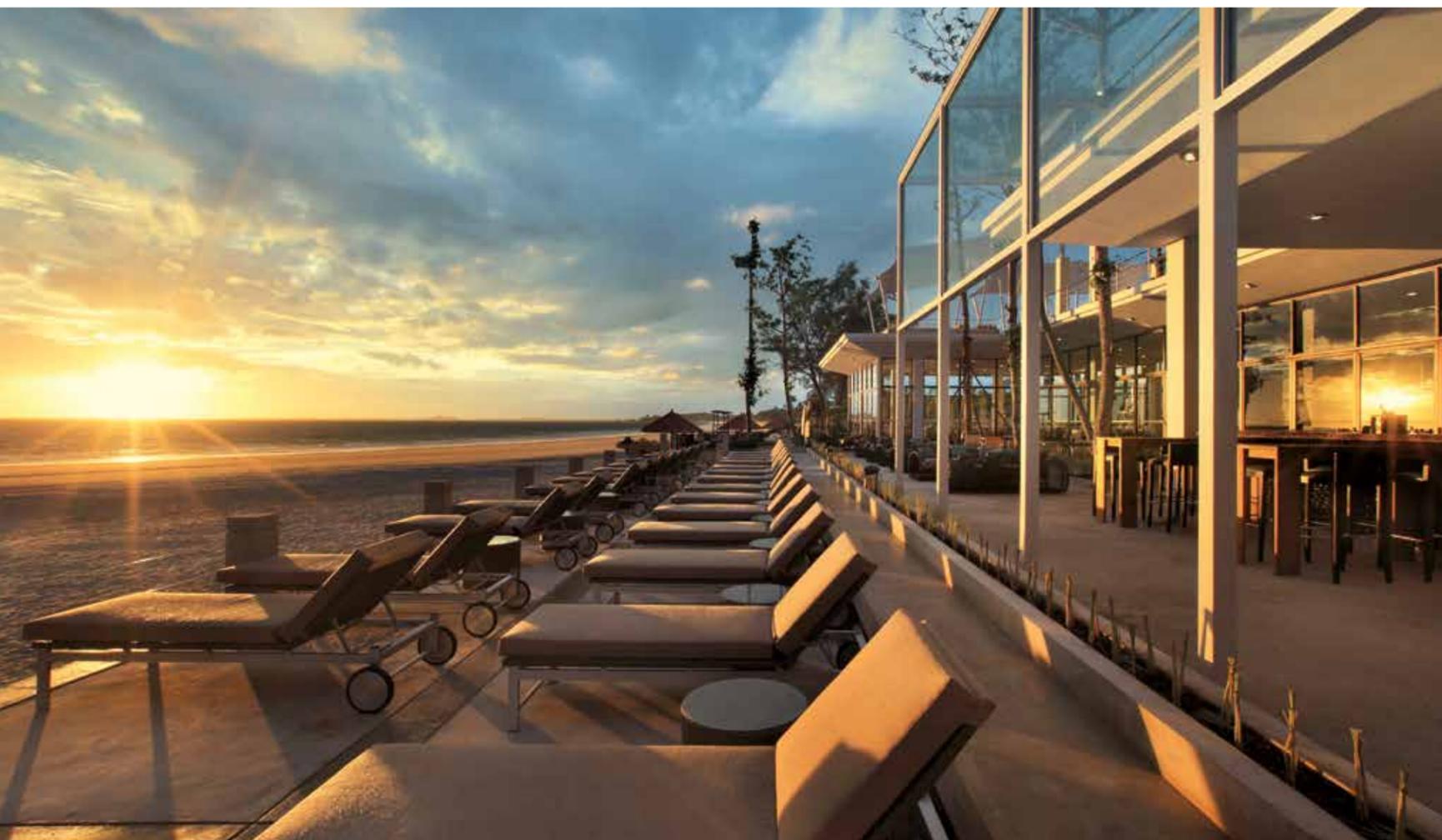
To see the real Bintan, however, you would have to take a drive down south to the capital, Tanjung Pinang, passing through security checkpoints and leaving the 'safe zone'. It's a two-hour journey if you take the scenic route along the eastern shore – passing several fishing villages and possibly the most beautiful stretches on the island at Trikora beach, a favourite spot among locals and budget travellers.

The capital is a typical busy Indonesian port town with narrow streets, houses built haphazardly and a population of 200,000. There are a few temples worth a visit, thanks to the presence of a strong Chinese community, like Guan Yin Temple, which has the largest sitting Guan Yin (Goddess of Mercy) statue in the region, and the Temple of 500 Lohans (Buddhist guardian angels). Chinatown (Jl Pasar) and the old market there are also worth exploring.

For dinner, locals will point you to the hawker centre called Akau (Jl Potong Lembu) where you can enjoy cheap al fresco dining with a wide selection of local foods. Another favourite is Sam's Anna Seafood Restaurant (Jl Yos Sudarso) but if you are out looking for fireflies on one of those mangrove discovery night tours, a dinner stopover at Kampoeng Kelong Seafood Restaurant is recommended. The restaurant is built on top of wooden stilts on the riverbank and the food is so good, even local chefs recommend it.

To understand Bintan's historical roots, take a short boat ride to Penyengat Island from the town jetty. Penyengat is home to a small Malay community with many of them being descendants of the royal family. Upon arrival at the jetty, you will see a bright yellow mosque called Masjid Raya Sultan Riau that was built in 1803 and scattered around the island are a few royal cemeteries. You can get around the island by hiring a motorbike taxi (called ojek) but don't get too fixated on the wobbly wheels – the ojek don't go very fast and you only need to say a prayer on the downhill stretches.

On the opposite bank, across from Tanjung Pinang jetty, you can visit a small community of Chinese fishermen of Chaozhou dialect group living in wooden



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Enjoy a breathtaking sunset at Rice at Bintan Lagoon Resort; villas at Indra Maya Pool Villa all come with a beautiful private pool; swimming pool at Club Med Bintan Island

houses above the sea. Called Senggarang, many locals and Singaporeans make their way there to pay tribute at the famous Banyan Tree temple, so named because of the huge banyan tree that seems to grow and merge with the temple building.

Between the upscale and segregated Bintan Resorts strip on the northern coast and the capital city of Tanjung Pinang down south lies a sparsely populated hinterland trapped in time. Because of its size and geographic proximity to Singapore, Bintan Island has a lot of potential for growth. Besides Singaporeans and expatriates living in Singapore, the island is also beginning to attract a growing number of tourists from China.

So where to stay in Bintan? We round up seven of the best resorts on the island.

BANYAN TREE BINTAN

The grande dame of resorts on the island may be 20 years old and ageing, but it is



still setting high benchmarks in terms of service standards. You get personal attention the minute you step into its small but cosy lobby. After the brisk formalities of checking in, you are whisked off to one of their 61 villas built on a slope tucked between the rainforest on one side and the sea on the other. You may get sea view but to get to a beach, you need to hop over to their sister resort next door at the Angsana. Because Banyan Tree's resort ground is quite big, you need to call for a buggy to get anywhere – or be prepared to get a good workout walking up and down the slopes. Its Banyan Tree Spa is possibly the best on the island with sessions held inside one of its villas that offer a panoramic sea view. Banyan Tree is famous for its handpicked and well-trained therapists. One of its local therapists, Ester, for instance, is not only exceptional at what she does, but can also pass off as Miss Bintan, if there is ever a beauty pageant on the island. www.banyantree.com

ANGSANA BINTAN

It may be the smaller and slightly cheaper alternative to Banyan Tree but Angsana has several surprises up its sleeve. For one, it has a beautiful beach all to itself. Hotel rooms are in modern buildings instead of villas and the room interiors are also newer and more contemporary while all amenities are within

a short walking distance – just be careful they do not check you in at the extreme ends of their building wings. Here's an insider tip: the spa therapists between Angsana and Banyan Tree are often rotated, so you get the same standard of service whichever spa you go to. Their therapists come from all over Indonesia and if you were lucky to get Eliza from Aceh, Sumatra, you would be wishing your session could go on forever. www.angsana.com

CLUB MED BINTAN ISLAND

For active holidaymakers looking for fun in the sun, Club Med would make a perfect choice. Chock-a-block with activities like archery, yoga, windsurfing and snorkelling, there is never a moment when there is nothing to do. Their Genteel Organisers (GOs) will see to it that you have company for dinner, if you happen to check in alone. Kids are not left out as there are nightly games, dress-up parties, make-up sessions and parades to keep them entertained. Club Med is also popular among Singapore companies for team-building events and company get-togethers so their rooms have to be booked way in advance. www.clubmed.com.sg

INDRA MAYA POOL VILLA

Within the greater Nirwana Gardens estate

are five resorts and Indra Maya is one of them. If you are travelling in a group, you would probably be looking at these villas which come in two-, three- and four-bedroom types. All the villas have a private pool and a personal buggy for you to drive around the ten-hectare site. In total, there are 14 villas, which are quite spacious, so you can have fun within your group without having to rub elbows with tour group members who come by the busloads.

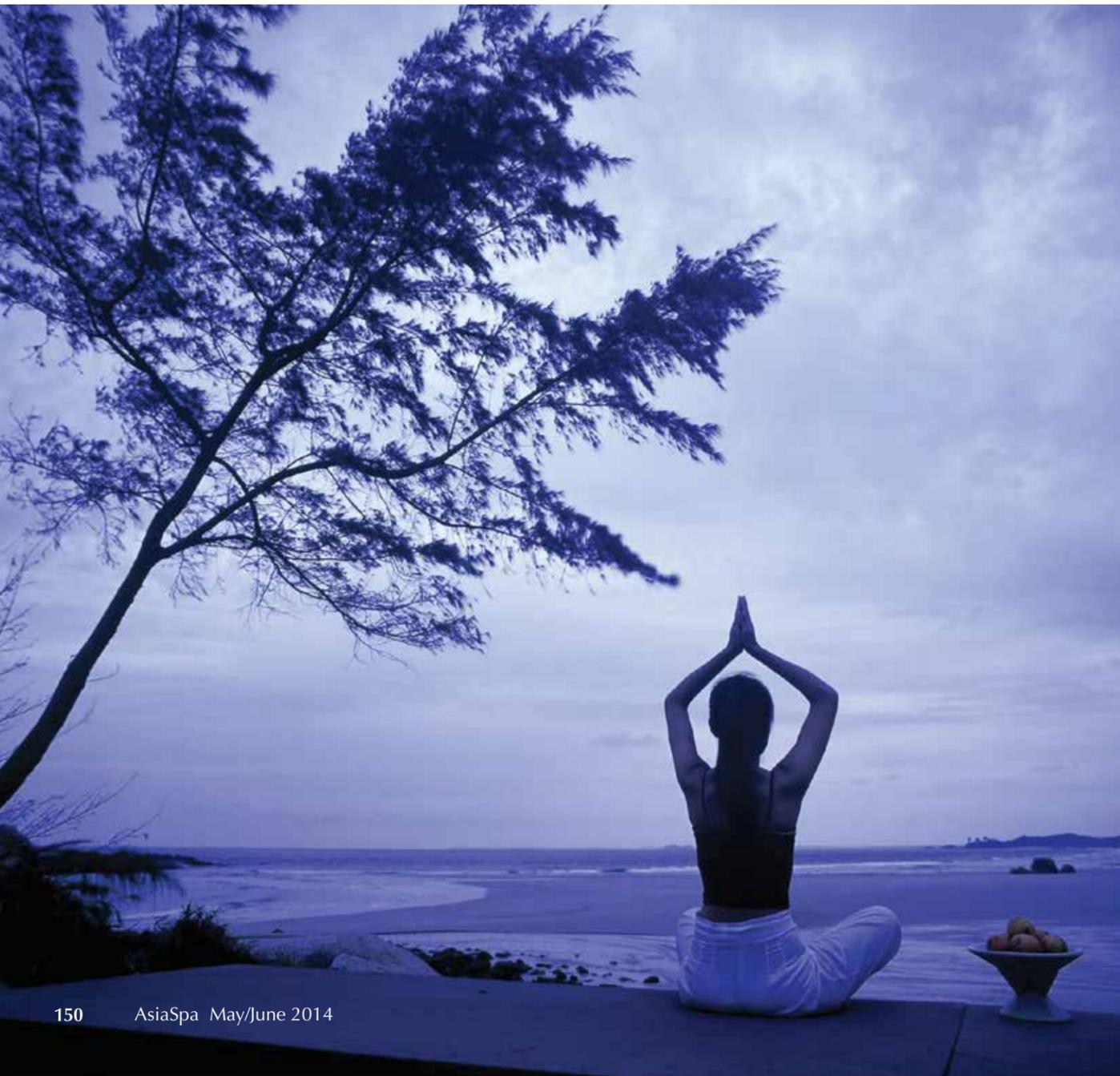
The resorts at Nirwana Gardens share a common spa, Anindya Spa by Andaru, which is tucked away as a standalone building in a quiet corner of the estate. Surrounded by greenery, the spa has a team of 60 therapists offering Indonesian-style treatments and traditional remedies for body ailments using local herbs and essential oils. Signature treatments offered include the Savitiri 'Seven Flower' Sense, Savitri Herbal Thermal Massage and Balinese Ritual

Treatment, among others.
indra.nirwanagardens.com

VILLA AARYA

Those looking for a more unique experience akin to dropping by at a friend's house will like Villa Aarya. Thai chef Aarya Niyomsub first came to Bintan to start a Thai restaurant called Baan Aarya 16 years ago. While living at one of the nearby villas, Ms Aarya hit on the idea of buying two more units to turn

THIS PAGE: Revel in moments of calm at Bintan Lagoon Resort. OPPOSITE PAGE: Villa Aarya offers homely comforts and an amazing sea view; luxurious villa at The Sanchaya



into guest houses and that's how Villa Aarya came to be. Her portfolio now includes a collection of villas in places like Singapore and Chiang Mai. Aarya's interiors are well maintained as a home should be. There are only two villas, a two- and a three-bedroom, and both are self-contained with a private pool and sea view. There is also a kitchenette, but you won't be using it much as breakfast is complimentary at the nearby Baan Aarya. Villa residents can also enjoy resort facilities within Nirwana Gardens.
www.villaaarya.com

BINTAN LAGOON RESORT

Another pioneer on the island, Bintan Lagoon Resort has been accommodating tour groups

for the past 20 years. The architectural design is typically Indonesian with generous use of timber panels and warm colours. Everything about the place is huge – from the grand entrance to the swimming pool and the resort grounds. It offers 470 rooms spread across a vast 310-hectare property fronting a private beach stretching one-and-a-half km long. Dining options include a choice of ten restaurants and cafes, and Rice is worth checking out for its chic design and romantic sunset dinners. Because the resort has been around for many years, some of its amenities may not be in tip-top condition but like most big resorts, they have a wide selection of activities to keep you occupied.
www.bintanlagoon.com

THE SANCHAYA

The beachfront resort has just opened its doors this month and has already been creating excitement in the travel industry prior to its launch. The Sanchaya (Sanskrit for 'collection') offers 19 individually styled villas and nine suites adorned with luxurious fittings like Egyptian cotton percale beddings, B&O audio-video systems and iPads, among others. The villas are styled with Thai, Vietnamese or Southeast Asian designs and guests can arrange for the resort's private yacht, a Cranchi 54-foot Fly, to pick them up at the ferry terminal in Singapore, or for sunset cruises around the island. www.thesanchaya.com

