

Culinary adventures in KL

By Esther Au Yong, my paper | Mon, Jan 31 2011



Writer participates in a cooking class at Bayan Indah, a boutique hotel-cum-cooking school.

MANY Singaporeans head to neighbouring Kuala Lumpur to eat and shop their hearts out.

As a city getaway, it is fun, busy and glitzy. And it can make you crave another holiday just to recover from all the hustle and bustle.

Recently, my husband and I took the chance to do something different in KL. We participated in a cooking class at Bayan Indah, a boutique hotel-cum-cooking school - it calls itself a culinary resort - where we also stayed for a night.

Culinary travel has become popular in the last few years and, as a result, cooking schools have blossomed throughout South-east Asia. Many such schools, especially those in Bangkok, Siem Reap and Hanoi, offer hands-on or demonstration classes on preparing local cuisine.

Bayan Indah's proposition is unique in that it is located in a peaceful rural area that is still conveniently within the city, and it offers a stay-in option.

The Bayan Indah experience, by the way, made it to No. 10 in food, wine and travel magazine *Saveur's* top 100 list of things to do in 2009.

The Bayan Indah experience

If you choose to visit, you will be housed in a two-storey bungalow nestled within expansive grounds fringed by a lush forest, and situated in a Malay kampung.

It is about a 10-minute drive away from Taman Tun Dr Ismail township and 1 Utama Mall. Getting to the venue in Kampung Sungai Penchala was not easy but, with the help of a handy map given to us by the resort's owner, Ms Rohani Jelani, we managed to locate the place.

We checked into one of four rooms (rates start from RM500, or S\$209, per night) and lounged the day away, especially as free Wi-Fi for Internet surfing was available.

Ms Rohani, a multi-talented 52-year-old, has been a food writer and stylist for more than 20 years. She is also the author of cookbooks like *Periplus' Malaysian Cakes And Desserts*, *Homestyle Malay Cooking* and *Malaysian Hawker Favourites*.

She opened her family home to travellers who wish to learn cooking from her, and allows them to couple their cooking classes with a relaxing stay in a modern, kampung atmosphere.



We were put up in a comfortable room that used to belong to one of Ms Rohani's sons.

The next day, we started our class - called "Fishy Business" because we were learning to cook different fish dishes, such as otak-otak and fish-head curry - early at Taman Tun Dr Ismail market.

We met up with about five other classmates and proceeded to buy all the fish, vegetables, fruit and rempah (spice paste) that we needed.

We had mackerel for Thai-style fish cakes, red snapper for otak-otak, and a small unripe mango and some ladies' fingers for the fish-head curry. We also bought the ingredients to make fish with lemon sauce.

Clearly, Ms Rohani is a regular. At intervals during her explanations of the various items and produce at the market, she took breaks to indulge in friendly banter with the shopkeepers who served us.

'Fishy' chefs get to work

When we returned from the market, the class paired off to prepare the goodies, and we were tasked to make fish-head curry and Thai-style fish cakes.



Following recipes, which were laid out in plastic folders for each student, we sliced, diced, pounded, fried and sauteed, and laughed among new friends.

Along the way, Ms Rohani would dispense useful tips, with demonstrations when required.

"Cut dry chilli diagonally so that the seeds will come out easily," she said. "Then, soak the chilli in hot water."

We also took breaks to follow her to the organic-herb garden which surrounds the house, to gather fresh items like daun kadok (betel-nut leaves), an ingredient we needed to dress our otak-otak dish.

Over an hour later, we had a feast on our hands. Ms Rohani taught us how to plate everything attractively and, with rice prepared by her helpers, we proceeded to - what else - eat up!

After the meal, as the Malaysian students went home with doggy bags of food, we adjourned to our room for a nap, and spent the rest of the day reading in a cosy nook of the house, and taking a walk to explore the kampung.

It was definitely a very different, but meaningful, way to enjoy what could have been just another Kuala Lumpur escapade.