

## LIFE

For several seasons on *Lucifer*, I had to straighten my hair. I'm not missing those days, and I'm very much embracing the curl

ACTOR TOM ELLIS, ON THE END OF THE HIT SHOW • ENTERTAINMENT B9

## Fruit of their labour

Planting fig trees could make Sabah, in Malaysian Borneo, Asia's top wildlife tourism destination and help restore its denuded forests

Marco Ferrarese  
life@scmp.com

The first time I saw an orangutan in the wild, in Sabah, Malaysian Borneo, I was cruising on the crocodile-infested Kinabatangan river looking for proboscis monkeys. I was lucky, even though the ape was high up in the forest canopy and all that could be discerned was a maroon spot hovering against a wall of foliage.

I had a closer encounter with Borneo's endemic primate in the highly protected Danum Valley Conservation Area, but for that I had to hire a local guide with an eagle eye and deep knowledge, wake up at the crack of dawn and sweat along dark jungle paths for a couple of hours.

"Wildlife viewing in Africa, India and South America normally involves driving across grassy plains where large groups of animals congregate to graze," says naturalist Quentin Phillipps. "Many lodges have waterholes and salt licks in front of their verandas so that at night, all the animals come to drink in front of the lodge. But until now, wildlife tourism in Borneo has been completely different."

Phillipps, author of the seminal *Field Guide to the Birds of Borneo* (2012) and *Field Guide to the Mammals of Borneo and Their Ecology* (2016), says the nature of the dense forests on Asia's largest island, which is shared by Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei, means wildlife such as orangutans, gibbons and hornbills stay hidden in the canopy.

Jungle spotting is hard work for local guides and uncomfortable for most tourists, who have to get hot and dehydrated, and be bitten by mosquitoes and leeches before seeing the few creatures that do expose themselves.

The only exception, Phillipps says, is when a big fig tree is fruiting. "You just wait by the fig tree and all the hornbills, primates, civets and squirrels come to you,"



generation of figs that can fruit much earlier.

Bora's goal is to plant these along riverbanks and next to palm oil estates where the vegetation has been damaged.

Today, even Bukit Piton is being replanted with figs, by the Bukit Piton Orangutan Project initiated by Swiss tour operator Simon Werren and his Malaysian wife, Itisha Ismail, who started the project in 2017.

I have been to every corner of Sabah, and whenever there is a fruiting tree, there is wildlife

SHAVEZ CHEEMA, 1STOPBORNEO WILDLIFE

"Not all of our trees are figs because our main aim is to recover and connect the canopy," Itisha says. "The first step is to focus on all pioneer trees such as *talisy* (Indian almond tree), *laran* (Leichhardt pine) and *binuang* (ilimo), which provide a food source and shelter for the orangutan and endemic birds species."

Brunei-born Shavez Cheema, of NGO 1StopBorneo Wildlife, is another young researcher who has embraced the promise of fig tree planting after meeting Phillipps and Zainal.

"I have been to every single corner of Sabah, from Long Pasia to Sipadan, and whenever there is a fruiting tree, there is wildlife," says Cheema, who operates out of Sabah's south-easternmost town of Tawau, near the border with Indonesia's Kalimantan.

Cheema started fig tree nursing and conservation tourism in the Sabah Softwood plantation, near Tawau, after a herd of wild pygmy elephants occupied parts of the estate.

Before the pandemic, the Plant4Elephants project relied on tourism to pay for the maintenance of the fig-tree nursery, the saplings of which supported a long-term project to establish a wildlife corridor to give the elephants safe passage into the southern side of the Danum Valley Conservation Area.

But with no tourists to join elephant safaris, Cheema has focused on another of his projects, Plant4Tawau/Plant4Hornbills, the goal of which is to connect the Tawau Hills Park reserve to the lesser-known Gemok Hill, about 10km to the south. The future fig tree corridor will help protect and feed wildlife such as gibbons, the civet-like binturong and Sabah's eight hornbill species – including the helmeted hornbill, which is among the most endangered birds in Southeast Asia.

"The hundreds of fig trees we have planted [during lockdown] will soon become thousands, and whenever they will fruit, everyone will reap the benefits and wildlife conservation tourism will thrive," Cheema says.

An aerial view of the Bukit Piton Reserve (left); *Ficus racemosa*, or cluster fig, is one of the most prolific fruit trees in the world (right).

he says. All of Borneo's wildlife, from orangutans to proboscis monkeys, bats, herons, fish eagles, macaques and elephants feast on the fruit of the ficus tree.

Phillipps believes planting fig trees could be the long-term solution that Sabah, and Borneo, need to fight deforestation and create wildlife corridors to reduce animal-human conflict. What's more, Phillipps says, such plantings could change local wildlife tourism by attracting animals to the doorstep of any resort during the year.

"Contrary to other trees [whose fruits are] eaten by primates, like durians or rambutans, which only fruit once a year in a big bang and are then barren for the rest of the time, [most species

off fig trees fruit asynchronously for two weeks once a year, but at random intervals," Phillipps says. "So if you plant, say, 100 fig trees, on average there will usually always be four figs fruiting at any one time."

But fig reforestation is no easy task. Phillipps says that the main issue in Sabah has been the limited number of big fig trees, which are randomly scattered in dense forest. Guides cannot predict the times when they will fruit because they are hard to find and monitor.

Also, few of the many NGOs already working on reforestation projects across the state understand the rhythms of fig ecology or have the patience to work with the trees. Fig saplings can be planted after just four months but only

start fruiting when they are about 10 years old.

Developments are starting to be seen, however: pioneer fig planting efforts started a decade ago at the Borneo Rhino Alliance, or Bora (also known as the Sabah Ficus Germplasm Centre), inside the Tabin Wildlife Reserve in southwest Sabah.

"I started thinking [about fig planting] in 2012 after visiting the restoration programme in Bukit Piton Forest Reserve," says Dr John Payne, Bora's executive director and WWF Malaysia's senior adviser.

Payne is referring to a former WWF-backed reforestation project in a degraded forest near the coastal town of Lahad Datu that was focused on saving the 40 or so orangutans that lived in an area enclosed by the Segama river, road developments and palm oil plantations.

"The emphasis was on dipterocarps and pioneer tree species," Payne says. "I did not see much point in planting either, for dipterocarps fruit very rarely and are part of the old-growth forest ecosystem, and do not provide food for orangutans. In fact, most dipterocarp trees in Sabah grow slowly and fruit on average every 12 years."

Back then, the idea of planting wild figs – which grow easily from cuttings at any time without having to wait for a major fruiting year – did not gain much

A young orangutan at Bukit Piton Forest Reserve. Photos: courtesy of Simon Werren, Shutterstock

traction, although Bora's veterinary surgeon and field manager, Dr Zainal Zainuddin, had started growing up to 90 species of figs in the Tabin Wildlife Reserve to feed Malaysian rhinos he was nursing. "When Iman, the last Sumatran rhino in Malaysia, died in 2019, the figs from the rhino food garden became a ready-made basis for the Sabah Ficus Germplasm Centre," Payne says.

The centre has been creating an orchard with a target of producing 1,000 saplings a month of

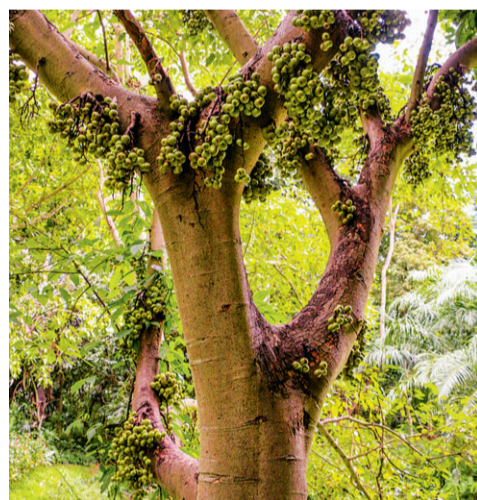
If you plant, say, 100 fig trees, on average there will usually always be four figs fruiting at any one time

QUENTIN PHILLIPPS, NATURALIST AND AUTHOR

*Ficus racemosa* (cluster fig), one of the most prolific fruit trees in the world.

It is commonly found on riverbanks throughout lowland Borneo. Unlike other fig species, it can provide between six to eight crops each year.

When these plants are mature, their branches can be marcotted (the process of rooting branches or stems that are still attached to the parent plant) or grafted onto younger plants, producing a new



## London hotel serves up the flavours of Singapore

Delle Chan  
life@scmp.com

It is not every day you find chilli crab being dished up in a restaurant outside Singapore – much less a hotel restaurant. Halfway around the world, however, the Pan Pacific London, which opened its doors on September 1, serves an array of classic Singaporean dishes.

Housed in a glass, bronze and steel skyscraper in the British capital's financial district, the 237-room hotel is the first European outpost of Singapore-based hospitality brand Pan Pacific Hotels Group. The hotel advertises its Asian roots in its decor, hospitality, bars and restaurants.

In the all-day restaurant Straits Kitchen, custom murals of Asian plants complement the menu's Eastern flavours. Guests tuck into dishes such as *mee siam* (Malay rice vermicelli), *tauhu telur* (Indonesian tofu and egg salad), Hainanese chicken rice and chilli crab.

Even some of the more inter-

national dishes are given a subtle Asian treatment: for instance, the lamb navarin is marinated with Chinese five-spice powder, while the butter-aged Buccleuch beef is infused with lemongrass and curry leaf.

"When it comes to Asian cuisine, authenticity is so important," says executive chef Lorraine Sinclair, who was born in Glas-

I really want to fly the Singapore flag high in England

CHERISH FINDEN, EXECUTIVE PASTRY CHEF

gow, Scotland, and cuthers teeth in hotel kitchens across Asia, including the Lotte Hotel in Seoul and the Langham Hotels group properties in Hong Kong.

She has assembled a team of chefs from Malaysia, Singapore,

the Philippines and China to cook "how their grandparents and parents taught them", Sinclair says. They use Asian ingredients such as Vietnamese coriander, kaffir lime and fish mint – grown on a farm in Norfolk, eastern England, to minimise the carbon footprint.

"Because we're keeping it so authentic, we've had guests say, 'Oh my god, that just reminded me of what I had back in Singapore,'" Sinclair says. "That, to me, means they have enjoyed it."

In the Orchard Lounge, the Kopitiam Afternoon Tea set – a Singaporean take on the quintessentially British afternoon tea – is the star of the show.

"When I was young, I would often buy snacks and enjoy them at the *kopitiam* [coffee shop], so that's how the name came about," Singapore-born executive pastry chef Cherish Finden says.

Paying homage to the memory, she has put together a spread featuring pineapple tarts and curry puffs alongside creations such as an intriguing chocolate and seaweed biscuit infused with soy sauce and sesame oil.

"I really want to fly the Singapore flag high in England, and open people's minds to what Asia is about," says Finden, who moved to London to pursue her patisserie career 20 years ago.

"Also, I worked at Pan Pacific Singapore when I was a junior chef, so joining Pan Pacific London feels like I'm coming back home."

Also at the Pan Pacific London are cocktail bar Ginger Lily, where Asian-inspired drinks feature, such as the Green Mountain – a combination of Belvedere vodka, matcha tea, wasabi, lime, ginger and mint – and two private dining rooms, Newton and Katong, named after neighbourhoods in Singapore.

The Asian theme shines through in other aspects of the hotel, such as customer service.

"When we talk about Asian hospitality, it needs to be delivered from the heart," guest relations manager Li Xinchun says.

"Also, it's our job to anticipate what our guests need 10 steps ahead, so they shouldn't even

need to ask," says Li, who was born in Shenyang, northeast China, and previously worked at The London Edition and Shangri-La The Shard, London.

Treatments at the spa are rooted in Eastern traditions, while many of the Asian-inspired art on the walls has been given by sister Pan Pacific properties in Singapore and the mainland.

While it remains to be seen how the British public will receive this taste of Singapore, members of the Singaporean community in London are positive.

"One might think that Singaporean food appeals only to Asians in London, but it actually has a very wide audience," says Sandra Leong, who brought another beloved Singaporean brand, snack chain Old Chang Kee, to London in 2018.

"Perhaps it's because it is a confluence of Chinese, Malay, Indian and even Western flavours. Or perhaps it's because many British people have a connection to Singapore, whether through its colonial heritage, their travels or through friends and family."



Hainanese chicken rice (above); Ginger Lily cocktail bar at the Pan Pacific London serves Asian-inspired drinks. Photos: Handouts

