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Travel

3 Days on a Luxe Indonesian Private Island (and a Quick Stop in Singapore)

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The moment you set foot on Bawah—an Indonesian private island just 150 nautical miles northeast of Singapore—you feel an immediate sense of adventure and childlike wonder. Perhaps it has something to do with the cheery barefoot pilot who skillfully lands the seaplane right on the crystalline-blue water. Or the handsomely rugged jetty you traverse as you make your way to your bungalow. Or the creeping monitor lizard you spy just moments after stepping onto the white-sand beach.

THE LOCATION

Bawah is one of six islands that make up [Bawah Reserve](#), a mini archipelago and luxury resort developed by Singapore-based shipping magnate Tim Hartnoll. While the location feels extremely remote, it's also relatively easy to get to.

Most guests take the private seaplane from the airport in Batam, Indonesia, which is a brisk 30-minute ferry ride from Singapore and an hour-and-a-half flight from Jakarta (though you could arrive by private yacht instead, should you be so fortunate). And to simplify things further, Bawah will send someone to escort you every step of the way, starting with the chauffeur who picks you up from your hotel in Singapore or Batam.

An important note: As you might expect, every seat on the seaplane is carefully accounted for. You'll probably want to stay in either Singapore or Batam for at least one night to give yourself some wiggle room and ensure that you make it in time for the 80-minute



flight.

When I visited last spring, I spent two nights at the newly renovated Mandarin Oriental in Singapore. While the quick city getaway offered just the right amount of time to recuperate from the long-haul flight from LA (and knead out the kinks in my neck at the hotel's glorious spa), it also felt like the perfect complement to the ultrarelaxed, beachy vibes of Bawah.



THE ACCOMMODATIONS

While discussion of a remote island might conjure thoughts of *The Swiss Family Robinson*, the accommodations on Bawah are inviting and comfortable, and they blend so seamlessly with their surroundings that it's almost hard to believe they weren't always there. That's because Hartnoll went to extreme lengths to preserve the island's natural beauty: The resort was built by hand, without the use of heavy machinery, using bamboo and other sustainable materials. Bawah even employed a team of skilled divers to move the coral manually and then return it to its rightful place once the main jetty was built.



Today Bawah boasts 36 suites, villas, and bungalows; dreamy canopy beds, hammered-copper tubs, and jellyfish-shaped light fixtures contribute to their luxuriously rustic charm. I had the privilege of staying in one of the overwater bungalows, and it did not disappoint, especially when it came to the views. I'm hardly a morning person, but more than once I pulled myself from bed in the early hours to curl up on a lounge and watch sea turtles from the private veranda.

Those seeking an even more exclusive experience can book [Elang Private Residence](#), on the nearby island of Elang. Originally conceived of as the owner's holiday home, it's accessible to only you and up to 19 of your closest friends and family, and it includes full access to a private spa, beach house, infinity pool, tennis court, and restaurant, where guests have been known to dance on the tables until the wee hours of the morning. If it ever starts to feel a little too secluded, you're just a three-minute boat ride from the (laid-back) action on Bawah.



THE FOOD

Sustainability is one of Bawah's guiding principles: It's powered by a renewable microgrid, maintains a plastic-free policy, and has a robust recycling program. For further proof, look to its culinary program. The resort grows about 40 percent of its own produce (some of it on rooftops, to avoid the unnecessary clearing of land), and other foods are sourced locally, like the tempeh crackers purchased from the wives of the fishermen who catch the property's fish.



The Tree Tops restaurant, which is just as charming as it sounds, serves up Asian fusion, like pillowy gnocchi made from taro root and purple sweet potato and slow-braised lamb shank with sweet chili glaze and coconut spaetzle. There's also the beachfront Boat House, which hosts BBQ night twice a week. At BBQ night I discovered my affinity for sambal, a spicy chili paste, which was served alongside skewers of prawn, Wagyu beef, and tempeh. (If you're lucky, you might get to see the staff harvesting salt over a roaring fire while you dine.) And for drinks: Swing by the poolside Grouper bar for an early-morning coffee or an afternoon spritz, or the sky-high Jules Verne bar for a sundowner made with garden-fresh ingredients like lemongrass and pandan.

THE ACTIVITIES

Come do as much or as little as you like: Try spotting bumphead parrotfish and blacktip sharks on a snorkeling tour; swim the two kilometers to nearby Sanggah island as part of the wild swim challenge (a hard no for me, but I took comfort in knowing a staff member would have accompanied me the whole way); or sweat your way to one of the highest points on the island during the jungle boot camp.

On my first morning, I opted for a yoga class where, in honor of Earth Day, the flow was inspired by the four elements; as if on cue, two turtles and a stingray swam by just as we settled into warrior two. If lazing about in the Indonesian sun is more your speed, have the kitchen pack you a picnic and spend a few hours at the private Coconut Beach. Then maybe follow it with a visit to the scent bar, where you can make your own perfume, or join a jamu-making workshop to learn how to make the traditional herbal drink (which I found tangy and intense, but in a pleasant way). Or have the staff design a bespoke experience for you—whatever your request, they'll bend over backward to make it happen.



Be sure to take advantage of the included daily spa treatment: The menu is extensive and draws from ancient traditions

Be sure to take advantage of the included daily spa treatment. The menu is extensive and draws from ancient traditions. One day you might want the full-body Balinese-style massage for muscle recovery; on another day you might choose the body scrub done with Southeast Asian spices and salt from the lagoon.

But possibly one of the most special parts of Bawah is how earth conservation is baked into its DNA. On a rustic sign near the jetty, the property keeps a running tally of how much marine debris has been collected, how many turtles have hatched there, how many coral fragments have been planted—and guests are invited to be part of the effort. That might involve joining a beach patrol to protect endangered turtle species from poachers and predators (which is more relaxed than it sounds) or participating in an underwater clean-up to remove ghost fishing nets and other debris. Such work furthers the mission of the [Anambas Foundation](#), the nonprofit funded by Bawah to protect the environment and support local communities.

On my last morning at Bawah, I lamented the end of what had been the most rejuvenating few days in recent memory—my mind felt clearer, my body nourished both physically and spiritually. As I begrudgingly walked from my bungalow to the waiting buggy, a teensy green lizard ran alongside me, the island's final parting gift.

A Mini Guide to Singapore

The city-state of Singapore is known for its incredibly rich culture (it's home to large Chinese, Malay, and Indian populations), diverse food scene, and natural biodiversity. Just slightly smaller than New York City, it has a world-class public transit system that makes for easy exploring.

STAY

The newly renovated [Mandarin Oriental](#) is an all-around excellent option thanks to its convenient location and beautiful interiors. It's within walking distance of [Gardens by the Bay](#) and the famous Merlion statue and, for Formula 1 fans, offers views of the Marina Bay Street Circuit. And the service is unparalleled: One morning, upon my return from a run, the doorman greeted me with a towel and chilled can of 100Plus, a Southeast Asian isotonic drink.

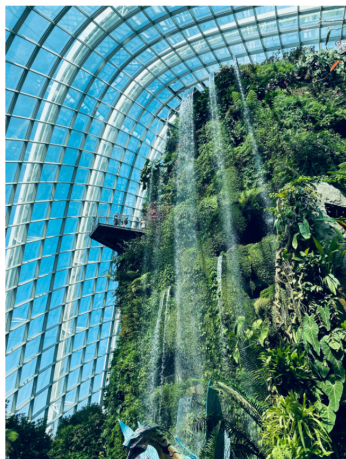
Other worthy contenders: If you seek seclusion, [Capella](#), on Sentosa Island, is a solid choice. For colonial-style architecture and old-world opulence, you can't do any better than [Raffles Singapore](#)—home of the Singapore Sling, a gin-based cocktail that looks like juice (which was reportedly created so women could drink alcohol publicly at a time when it was frowned upon). And if you consider yourself a creative type, you'll be in good company at the industrial-chic [Warehouse Hotel](#).



EAT

Singapore is known for its numerous Michelin-starred fine-dining establishments ([Odette](#), [Meta](#), [Zén](#), [Labyrinth](#)), but you can also get an excellent meal that won't set you back more than a few Singaporean dollars at one of the many hawker centers. Check out the satay vendors at [Lau Pa Sat](#)—they take over the street outside the market every evening—to enjoy skewers of meat with sweet-and-spicy peanut sauce in the open air. And Hainanese chicken rice, an unofficial national dish, is a must (just know that where to get it is a hotly debated topic). I tried it at [Tian Tian](#), which was famously praised by Anthony Bourdain, Gordon Ramsay, and Michelin, and loved it—though many locals highly recommend going to [Wee Nam Kee](#). For breakfast, try kaya toast, named for the sweet green jam it's topped with; any coffee shop will likely have a good version of it.

DO



My driver told me you can't leave Singapore without visiting at least one of its famous gardens, and he was right: If time is limited, make a beeline for the [Cloud Forest](#) at the 250-acre Gardens by the Bay, where you'll find one of the world's largest indoor waterfalls. See remnants of Singapore's past at the [National Gallery](#)—the building was constructed by merging the old supreme court and city hall—and get glimpses of its future at the [Red Dot Design Museum](#), a low-key but interesting way to spend an hour or two.

For locally crafted souvenirs and charming homewares, try [Suppermama](#), and—whether you need a new iPhone or not—take a stroll to the Apple store at [Marina Bay Sands](#), which looks like a giant glass bubble floating in the bay. When your feet get tired, book a tour with [Singapore Sidecars](#)—zipping around in a vintage Vespa sidecar is hands-down one of the most thrilling (and stylish) ways to get to know Singapore.

Lastly, even if you're someone who typically makes it a point to spend as little time in the airport as possible, budget a

few extra hours to explore Changi Airport. On one visit I filled up on dumpling soup from Din Tai Fung, and on another I marveled at the giant suspended waterfall in the central hub and stumbled upon a butterfly garden while heading to my gate.

THE GETAWAY SHOP

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