



www.asiaticvacations.com

Bukit Timah

NATURE RESERVE

SINGAPORE

By Sunia Teo, Benjamin Lee and Karen Bartholomeusz
National Parks Board, Singapore

Introduction

Step into Singapore's nature reserves and you will be simply amazed by the biodiversity there. Despite being a tiny, highly urbanised island – the main land measures only about 600 km² – the variety of flora and fauna that greets the visitor upon his forest exploration is nothing short of impressive.

In spite of many competing demands for the island's limited land resources, the government has recognised the abundant and rich flora and fauna and made provisions for key biodiversity areas to be granted legal protection. Hence, Singapore now boasts four gazetted nature reserves occupying a total of 2,279 hectares of precious land.

Of the four nature reserves, two are found in the central part of the island – Bukit Timah Nature Reserve (BTNR) and the Central Catchment Nature Reserve (CCNR) – collectively

known as the Central Nature Reserves. With their rich diversity, both the BTNR and the core areas of CCNR are magnets for biodiversity research. Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve and Labrador Nature Reserve were gazetted on 01 January 2002. The 130-ha Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve, situated in the north, is a wetland reserve covering mainly mangroves, and to a lesser extent, freshwater ponds. It is a stopover site for migratory birds, making it an excellent place for birdwatching. Labrador's 300-metre rocky shoreline along Singapore's southern tip sustains rich marine life. This article will focus on the Bukit Timah Nature Reserve.

History of Bukit Timah Nature Reserve

Rising 164 m above sea level, the summit of Bukit Timah is the highest point on Singapore. Although its name means "tin hill" in English, the hill's chief geological feature

is granite and not tin. Some believe that its present name actually stemmed from a European mispronunciation of the word *Temak*, the Malay name for a genus of tall rainforest trees in the mighty dipterocarp family, *Shorea*. The Seraya tree (*Shorea curtisii*) belongs to the dipterocarp family and is a characteristic tree in the tropical rainforest, including Bukit Timah and the Central Catchment.

Although Bukit Timah was officially established as one of the first forest reserves in 1883, the hill was protected as far back as the 1840s for climatic reasons. Many visited the cool summit of Bukit Timah to escape from the sweltering heat down below. The main road leading up to the summit, which is the favoured route for exercise buffs today, was constructed especially for the early colonial visitors.

In a Class of its Own

Even after the creation of forest reserves, all except Bukit Timah were worked for timber. Bukit Timah was accorded “special”

status, possibly owing to the glowing tributes of its biodiversity given by the many naturalists who visited it in the 1800s, in particular Alfred Russel Wallace. Not only was he one of the first to work at Bukit Timah, he also happened to be one of the best, and certainly the most famous. Wallace was duly impressed by what he saw, and recorded his experiences during his visits.

When the reserves were later deleted in 1937, the protection of Bukit Timah’s flora and fauna was retained. In 1951, Bukit Timah received further protection under the Nature Reserves Ordinance. Now, the protection of Bukit Timah is enacted under the National Parks Act, administered by the National Parks Board (NParks) in 1990.

Flora and Fauna

The 164-ha BTNR retains the only substantial area of primary rainforest left in Singapore. A walk through the reserves takes the visitor along winding forest trails covered in dense tropical foliage. Along the way, visitors may



Profiles



see an astonishing variety of plant, animal and insect life, typical of a humid equatorial climate.

The forest has been a botanical collecting ground for more than a century, with the first known specimens of many species of Malayan plants obtained from it. Dr. David Bellamy, a renowned conservationist, once pointed out that the number of plant species growing in BTNR is more than that in the whole of North America!

One of the dominant tree families is the Dipterocarpaceae. This important family yields the bulk of commercial tropical hardwood timber and the signature tree of our coastal hill dipterocarp forest would be the Seraya (*Shorea curtisii*). Understorey plants growing on the forest floor, such as the beautiful Black or Bat Lily (*Tacca integrifolia*), are adapted to the low light intensity.

The edge of the forest is a good place to view rattans and other climbers. Some of the epiphytic ferns, for example, the Bird's Nest Fern, are found growing on the trunks

and larger branches of the large trees. The lianas or woody climbers grow from the ground to the canopy, twining itself around host trees for support.

The forest is also home to 160 species of animals. Insect life is abundant, and the actual number is estimated to be anywhere between 10,000 and 73,000! Geckos can be seen on tree trunks along with the Black-bearded Flying Lizard (*Draco melanopogon*). A large variety of snakes such as the Reticulated Python (*Python reticulatus*) and Paradise Tree Snake (*Chrysopelea paradisi*) can be found, but they are all shy of humans.

Birds are more often heard than seen. The most intrusive noise is the incessant 'chonk-chonk' of the Stripes Tit-babbler (*Macronous gularis*). The most common bulbul is the Olive-winged Bulbul (*Pycnonotus plumosus*) whose drab plumage contrasts with the black and blue of the Fairy Bluebird (*Irena puella*). Of all the birds, the most conspicuous is the Racket-tailed Drongo (*Dicrurus paradiseus*). A large black body with a long racket-tipped tail makes it unmistakable.

A myriad of insects provides a backdrop for the variety of invertebrates. During the day, the drone of cicadas seems perpetual. Grasshoppers, stick insects and beetles can all be found in the low bushes. Butterflies like the Common Posy (*Drupadia ravindra*) often provides a flash of colour. Spiders are found in abundance, some of which do not build webs but jump on to their prey from long distances. On the forest floor, the inch-long Giant Forest Ant (*Camponotus gigas*) is evident, along with millions of termites whose armylike columns can be seen everywhere. Many of the animals, especially the mammals and reptiles, are often difficult to spot as they are shy and blend in easily with the forest environment. Keen observers may spot the Common Treeshrew (*Tupaia glis ferruginea*), the Malayan Flying lemur (*Cynocephalus variegates*) and with just a bit of luck, the extremely rare Malayan Pangolin or Anteater (*Manis javanica*). BTNR's well-known residents, the Long-tailed Macaques (*Macaca fascicularis*), are bold creatures and a trip to the reserve would not be complete without spotting these playful primates!



Guidelines for Visitors

Singaporeans are learning to appreciate the thriving wildlife in their very own backyard. Thanks to the accessibility, especially BTNR, the reserves are popular with families, school groups and nature lovers. The Bukit Timah Nature Reserve, a mere 12 km from the city, is a favourite retreat for the many regulars who enjoy a good daily workout on its steep slopes. Begin your forest exploration with an orientation visit at the Visitors Centre.

A self-guiding exhibit features essential information about the native flora and fauna of the nature reserves. The Visitors Centre is open from 8:30 am to 6:00 pm daily. Here you will also find visitor amenities like washrooms, a telephone, first aid and a specialty shop.

If you have questions or need help, our rangers at the Ranger Counter will be pleased to offer useful information and recommend a suitable trail. Be sure to pick up a brochure there, which contains a map of the reserve.

Car parking is available at the Visitors Centre from 5:30 am to 7:30 pm daily. However, as lots are limited, and as the reserve is especially popular on weekends, public transport may be the better alternative.

The Nature Reserve is ideal for hiking and nature appreciation. Be sure to wear light clothing as the humidity is high. Wear comfortable walking shoes as the trails have many steps.

Bring along a water bottle and some insect repellents, as there are no refreshment kiosks at the summit.

It is wise to keep to the designated walking trails. There are four walking trails that are designed for hiking only. There is also a challenging mountain biking trail along the periphery of the reserve.

Observe all signs and information boards that are provided for your safety and enjoyment.

Take home nothing but photographs. The nature reserve, and all its plants and animals, are protected.

Fishing and the feeding of animals are also not allowed.

Do seek the advice of staff, rangers or nature wardens whom you may meet along the way. For enquiries, please call our Visitors Centre at (65) 64685736 or visit our website at www.nparks.gov.sg. ■