

Natural healing

MEDICINES & MYSTERIES ON SLOPES OF SALAK

On the "boundary between human habitation and the jungle", city dwellers can rest and rejuvenate at a unique property on Mount Salak.



Herbal remedy: A red flower from the ginger family, which can help to treat *maag* (stomach ulcers), is among the 200 plants in the garden.



Simple plant: A *kumis kucing* (cat's whiskers) plant, used for treating kidney stones, arthritis and diabetes, is seen in the *taman obat* (medicinal garden) at Vila Botani in Bogor, West Java.

Hannah Maddison-Harris
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Mount Salak is known for its nourishing qualities and superstitious stories. Home to leopards, gibbons and hawk-eagles, it's a densely covered mountain that can both hurt and heal.

On the northeastern slopes of the mountain nestles a *taman obat* (medicinal garden) containing more than 200 plants, part of the Vila Botani property.

Situated on the edge of Mount Halimun Salak National Park, only an hour's drive from Bogor city, the property is on the "boundary between human habitation and the jungle", says its investor Alex Kornis.

Formerly a coffee plantation, Vila Botani is now run by Kornis and manager Jaenudin, known as Pak Jai. Kornis, originally from the United States, was introduced to the area when he created hiking maps around the foot of the twin peaks of Mount Pangrango and Mount Gede.

Enamored with the terrain, he grew interested in a patch on nearby Salak, believing it would make an ideal base camp for hikers as it bordered the national park. Aside from the hiking possibilities and the medicine garden, the 5.5-hectare property now houses an arboretum, an organic vegetable farm and traditional accommodations.

Amid bird calls on a walk through the *taman obat*, which is in the process of being reorganized, Jai pointed out plants and their uses.

Passing a cluster of plants from the ginger family, he said some were used to make the well-known *jamu* (herbal beverages), while another featuring waxy red flowers was specifically for *maag* (stomach ulcers).

Next was a *kumis kucing* (cat's whiskers) plant with delicate white flowers, used to ease the symptoms of kidney stones, arthritis or diabetes. Following that was *handeuleum*, which is used to treat a bloody cough.

Even more interesting was a *daruuju pantai* plant, the leaves of which can purportedly be used to treat cancer, along with boiled *sirsak* (soursop) leaves. Jai cited a woman diagnosed with cancer who used the plants, in addition to a diet of organic vegetables.

All meals at Vila Botani use vegetables picked freshly from the farm. Among Indonesia's older generations, "people really swear by eating lots of *lalapan* [raw vegetables]", said Kornis, adding that some research indicated eating uncooked vegetables could help diabetes.

Separately, Jai said a fellow Vila Botani staff member had learned about the medicinal plants' properties from his grandmother, who was a local midwife, and was able to prepare remedies.

As many people believe Mt. Salak to be mystical, it's fitting to find a trove of medicinal plants there. Meanwhile, many also believe the mountain has sinister qualities.

Some say more accidents occur on Salak compared to Gede and Pangrango, including hikers being reported lost or missing. Alongside possible scientific explanations, local lore attributes it to something more mysterious, considering the top of Salak to be forbidden or sacred.



Home in the garden: The Gudang Kopi, formerly a warehouse for storing coffee, has been converted into accommodation.

Seven plane crashes have been recorded in the area since 2002. Perhaps the most infamous was an incident in 2012, during which all 45 people on board were killed. Following an investigation, human error was blamed as the cause.

Other myths talk of people dying in their sleep or of unknown causes. In 2007, however, eight high school students reportedly died from sulphur poisoning on the slopes of the active volcano.

Kornis also told the story of a researcher who enjoyed walking alone on the mountain "at any time of the day or night" until on one occasion when she "noticed a round ball on the ground", which turned out to be a human skull.

"[It's] probably true that people have gotten lost up there and died," Kornis admitted.

However, he believes incidents are now far less frequent than in the past, thanks to better preparations and technology.

"I think that was a common problem [on all three mountains, but] the times have changed and perhaps because people are a little more aware of the risks, they might bring the right equipment [and] they are also more likely to have a cell phone."

For those seeking a challenge, Salak has seven summits that can be reached from different departure points.

Venturing deep into the forest, however, is not necessary to en-



Health choice: Home-cooked meals served to guests feature a range of *lalapan* (raw vegetables) from the farm

joy the green haven of Vila Botani, which is only 15 kilometers south of Bogor city at the end of a small road passable by car or motorbike.

With all that's on offer on the fringes of the forest, getting close to nature is healing for both body and mind. Vila Botani is suitable for yoga groups, meditation, mountain biking, bird watching and for tree lovers who wish to explore the diverse arboretum.

For a short walk guests can head to a secluded waterfall on the property, while an hour in the other direction leads to a larger public waterfall.

As the sun goes down, city dwellers can enjoy the crisp air, the wide panorama of distant city lights and the sound of insects rising above the clamor far below.

— PHOTOS BY RANDY ASRA DAHNIAL



The greenhouse: Pak Jai explains the process of growing and harvesting organic basil.

BILL OF HEALTH

ODDS OF EARLY DEATH ARE HIGHER FOR SMOKERS

NEW YORK: Smokers who go through much less than a pack of cigarettes a day still have a higher risk of an early death than non-smokers, a new study suggests.

"There is no safe level of cigarette smoking," said lead study author Maki Inoue-Choi, a researcher at the National Cancer Institute in Rockville, Maryland.

"Even smokers who consistently smoked less than one cigarette per day were more likely to die in our study than never smokers," Inoue-Choi said by email.

Tobacco smoking poses a major public health challenge and claims about five million lives each year worldwide, researchers note in *JAMA Internal Medicine*.

A growing number of smokers tend to be "light" smokers, going through less than half a pack of cigarettes a day, the authors write. This used to be how people cut back gradually on the path to quitting, but it's increasingly a pattern that smokers follow for years at a time.

To get a better picture of the health effects of light smoking, researchers tracked more than 290,000 adults aged 59 to 82, including more than 22,000 current smokers and more than 156,000 former smokers, who completed surveys in 2004 and 2005.

By 2011, compared to people who never smoked, adults who consistently smoked at least part of one cigarette a



Reuters/Danish Siddiqui

day were 64 percent more likely to have died of any cause, researchers report in *JAMA Internal Medicine*.

Smoking one to 10 cigarettes a day was associated with 87 percent higher odds of dying from all causes during the study than not smoking at all.

Lung cancer deaths in particular were much more likely among light smokers than non-smokers. The odds of death from lung cancer were more than nine times higher with a habit of even one cigarette a day, while smoking up to 10 cigarettes a day was associated with almost 12 times the risk of death from lung cancer.

One limitation of the study is that researchers relied on participants to accurately recall and report on how often they smoked even many years in the past, the authors note. Even so, the findings should reinforce that even light smokers can face serious health risks from the habit, the authors note.

"The take home message is that all smokers should stop smoking, even if they smoke only occasionally, or if they smoke very few cigarettes a day," Jean-Francois Etter, a researcher at the University of Geneva in Switzerland who wasn't involved in the study, said in an email.

The study also showed very little benefit from cutting back from two packs a day to half a pack a day. — Reuters

DAIRY A POTENTIAL ALLY IN ASIA NUTRITION CHALLENGES: UN

BANGKOK: An apple a day kept the doctor away — but now in Asia, a cup of milk might do the trick.

Milk and other dairy products have become an unexpected ally in the fight against Asia's newest dietary challenges: obesity and vitamin and mineral deficiencies, according to a report by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization released Tuesday.

"This report is an eye-opener and a wake-up call ... we still have nearly half-a-billion hungry people in this region," said Kundhavi Kadiresan, FAO's assistant director general. But "increased consumption of milk and dairy holds out excellent promise to improve nutrition," she said.

With greater political stability and mechanized farming, Asia has made clear strides in taming famine and hunger. In the past 25 years, undernourishment rates halved in Asia from 24.3 percent to 12.3 percent, satisfying one of the UN's Millennium Development Goals.

As people move from the countryside to the big city by the millions, diets are changing from more traditional ones to a more varied, Westernized version incorporating more fruits, vegetables, and meats: Calories from starches declined by 50



AFP/Denis Charlet

calories per person a day while calories from fruits, vegetables, and meat increased by over 300 calories per person a day.

But like citizens of the West, people in Asia are exercising less and chowing down more on heavily processed foods filled with sugar and fat. This means many still aren't getting enough nutrients like zinc, iron, or vitamin A; and obesity levels are skyrocketing, rising more than 4 percent a year.

On top of still-persistent undernourishment in South Asian countries such as Afghanistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh, only seven out of 19 developing Asian countries are now on track to reach the UN FAO's bold goal of "zero hunger".

However, changing tastes for food means Asians are drinking more milk, traditionally absent from many Asian kitchens but which now flies off the shelves from Bangkok to Beijing.

Nutritious and cheap, the dairy boom has encouraged governments to bring cartons to classrooms. Studies have found Thailand's National Milk Program, which brings milk to schools, causes students to grow taller and take in more protein and calcium. Similar programs were rolled out from India to China to the Philippines. — AP