

FROM PAGE II



shapes and sizes, with artfully decorated betel nut-crackers are still amongst the traditional and cherished heirloom of the people of Malaysia. If you are invited to a Malay wedding, look out for betel nuts. If it is a fully traditional Malay wedding an expensively decorated and fully stocked betel container will solicit your attention and curiosity!

And what about all those nasty side effects any drug carries along? Betel is supposed to cause teeth decay and cancer of the oral cavity. Maybe the most serious accusation comes from the US Food & Drug Administration: betel contains "a poisonous or deleterious substance [arecoline - a light central nervous stimulant]" and that habitual chewing may be linked to oral carcinoma. Despite its authoritative tone, the FDA does not provide any medical data to support the allegations, and an examination of the available literature indicates that no conclusive studies have been carried out. A quick web search on chewing betel nut and its cause for cancer reveals nothing compelling. In the contrary: in the respected medical journal "The Lancet" Dr. B.G. Burton-Bradley writes that "Betel chewing is practised daily by no less than 200 million people, the vast majority of whom do not have oral carcinoma;" German pharmacologist Hesse states that, "Chronic excesses [of betel] do not cause any permanent health disorders;" and Sushruta, the "father of Indian medicine," claims that in the first century AD betel "acted as a general safeguard against disease." So no reason for you to fear anything if you wish to try this so typical Austronesian habit! Back to my personal experience and from talks to village and educated 'town' people alike, in Sabah the general knowledge is that betel nut chewing makes 'strong teeth'. Observing those elderly people who have been addicted to the habit from an early life, I am often astonished that they still have powerful jaws and healthy teeth to masticate the hard betel nut. Admittedly, a generally healthy, even though with hardship filled life, and no artificial sugars of the village denizens has contributed much to their general health. It is sad to see younger generations indulging in sweets and loosing their teeth at an early age by a lack of oral hygiene.

In Sabah, the locals will also tell you that chewing betel nut prevents fevers and helps digestion; the chewing of the nut only keeps awake (bus-drivers like to have a couple of nuts with them, and without sirih and lime you won't see any red saliva drooling from their lips...); boiled areca nut is a potent laxative; the sirih leaf, with a drop of oil and slightly heated over a flame placed on the tummy of children calms an upset stomach; and the Malay midwife uses sirih leaves to soothe the pains of a child-giving mother. Of course, betel and sirih also play an important role in animistic rites and ceremonies, when betel offerings, together with tobacco, eggs and rice are presented to the spirits.

There is much more to betel chewing than red teeth. It is a habit that is probably older than drinking coffee, and it is an important social component. If you are in Sabah and invited to try to moggngat - makan sirih, go for it. You probably won't like the taste of it, but don't worry! Accepting the offer you have made your host proud and happy, and you have gained a new friend. And with the experience you have discovered another secret that makes the magic charm of the Land Below the Wind!

WHERE TO STAY

Winner Hotel
Phone: 60 088 243222
Fax: 60 088 217345

Hotel Deleton
Phone: 60 088 252222
Fax: 60 088 267999

Best Western Kinabalu Daya Hotel
Phone: 60 088 240000
Fax: 60 088 263909

The Palace Hotel
Phone: 60 088 211911
Fax: 60 088 211600

Hotel Shangri-La
Phone: 60 088 212800
Fax: 60 088 212078

Likas Square Business Suites
Phone: 60 088 252233
Fax: 60 088 251122

Tang Dynasty Hotel
Phone: 60 088 263389 /
251155
Fax: 60 088 263989 / 265566

Beverly Hotel
Phone: 60 088 258998
Fax: 60 088 258778

Promenade Hotel
Phone: 60 088 265555
Fax: 60 088 246666 / 253980

Hyatt Regency Kinabalu
Phone: 60 088 221234
Fax: 60 088 225972

Le Meridien Kota Kinabalu
Phone: 60 088 322222
Fax: 60 088 322223

Nexus Resort Karambunai
Phone: 6 088 411222 / 411030
Fax: 6 088 411020 / 412028

Shangri-La Tanjung Aru
Resort
Phone: 60 088 327888
Fax: 60 088 244871 / 327878

Sutera Harbour Resort -
Magellan Sutera
Phone: 6 088 318 888
Fax: 6 088 317 777

Sutera Harbour Resort
- Pacific Sutera
Phone: 6 088 318888
Fax: 6 088 317777

Gayana Eco Resort
Phone: 6 088 380390
Fax: 6 088 381390
www.gayana-eco-resort.com

Novotel Kota Kinabalu 1Borneo
TB-00-01, 1Borneo Hypermall,
Jalan UMS,
88450 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia
Phone: 6 088 529888
Fax: 6 088 529889
Email: info@novotel1borneo.com

Mercure Kota Kinabalu
TA-00-01, 1Borneo Hypermall,
Jalan UMS,
88450 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia
Phone: 6 088 526888
Fax: 6 088 526889
Email: info@mercurekotakinabalu.com