

Cuti-cuti Batu Gajah

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Tree of life: Lake Pucung, Perak, is the primary nesting ground for herons and other migratory birds. The hundreds of white dots are actually herons!



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By ALEXANDRA WONG

YOU'VE never been to Kinta Nature Park? Pak Yap gasps.

I shake my head.

"You do know that Batu Gajah is less than an hour's drive from Ipoh?"

My blush deepens.

"That's the trouble with Malaysians," he sighs.

"We never appreciate what we have.

When I was overseas, I had to travel four hours by boat to visit a bird sanctuary. After an uncomfortable ride on a small boat pushing through thick water plants and low-hanging branches and brambles, we got to the so-called bird sanctuary only to be told that we could not go any nearer as it would disturb the herons.

"After all the effort and the extra charges we only got to hear the herons. Mind you, the resort had billed the heronry as a significant eco site! Here, we have a treasure right at our doorstep, and nobody knows how to appreciate it!" Pak Yap laments.

After that tantalising teaser, I simply had to redeem Perak tour guide Mr Raja's long-standing invitation for a day trip to Batu Gajah before his patience expired. My folks

The sleepy hollow of Batu Gajah is about more than just Kellie's Castle. Think migratory birds, heritage hospital, *Anna And The King* and more.

and I set off towards Batu Gajah with Mr Raja as chauffeur; he practically insisted on driving.

On the way, I ask if our itinerary includes TT5, said to be the last remaining tin dredge in the country. Ever since learning as a kid that my grandpa worked as a mechanic on one of these metal monsters, I'd been raring to see a real-life one.

"Yes, I was going to suggest it since the dredge is about 9km away," Mr Raja replies.

My excitement turns into mild alarm after we turn from the main Batu Gajah-Tanjung Tualang artery into a bund road that leads to the park. Good thing Mr Raja insisted on driving - riddled with potholes, the bund road bleeds into a dirt road that goes on for five more bone-jarring kilometres.

With him at the steering wheel, I can focus fully on the striking scenery that surrounds us even before we enter the park proper. On our right, the Kinta River flows yellow and muddy next to a silted bank that's barren

except for some bushes.

In stark contrast, the left side is fertile and green, with lotus ponds and small groves of small trees

One final turn to the left, and we're there. The sight before me is positively Eden-like: giant trees and shrubbery dotting the grassy compound, while a shimmering pond lies beyond the covered footpath. I practically skip and dance along the short walk to the viewing pavilion, stopping from time to time to tilt my head backwards and gawp at towering rain-trees that soar heavenward, forming a green lacy canopy.

I reach Lake Pucung, where all the action takes place. Directly opposite the pavilion, a single islet floating on the pond, covered with raintrees, looking like a giant dark green mushroom speckled with hundreds, nay, thousands of white dots.

As my eyes grow accustomed to the scene, it dawns on me that these "dots" are really the over 2,000 fabled migratory birds that

have flown from as far away as Mongolia to build their homes on the branches.

Other details gradually register, as my eyes grow accustomed: A graceful eagle swooping down for a prey in a perfect line. A snowy white egret making a reflection on the water as it flies low. Male herons flaunting their plumes in attempts to woo the females. On the ground, in the air and among the branches, the heronry bustles with activity and echoes with the calls of numerous birds.

The four of us stand there in mesmerised silence, savouring our National Geographic moment.

Gradually, I realise we're not alone. A guy is standing in the watchtower, armed with a DSLR camera that looks as big (and probably is) and as powerful as a cannon. It occurs to me, I might get a better aerial view from the tower.

I sprint up to the highest level. Alas, my puny semi-pro with its puny zoom lens barely makes a difference, so I abort my mission and join the rest of my group at the pavilion.

They are fussing over a discovery my father made near a tree: a lumpy pouch encased in a wig-like net that resembles a

BATU Gajah has never ranked particularly high on my to-visit list. Though I've been to BG about half a dozen times, they were mostly superficial visits to my relatives and back to Ipoh.

Only last year, while doing an assignment for a travel magazine, did I realise that there is a lot more to this charming town, which started as a small Malay village in *mukim* Sungai Terap, than Kellie's Castle.

Its colourful history has left in its wake a trail of well-preserved architectural and historical markers, which until now have been spared the gadarene rush of Lonely Planet-toting tourists.

The upshot: Batu Gajah has plenty of nooks and crannies which can be particu-

Batu Gajah Heritage Trail

larly rewarding for the mature traveller who craves more than superficial eye candy: a sense of its past, a taste of the local lifestyle, and that increasingly rare animal - the off-beat discovery.

Any visit of BG should include a driving tour of its heritage trail at the Jalan Changkat colonial core, which can be easily covered in a day. A long strip of well-paved road winds through a leafy enclave that exudes the gentrified vibe of the colonial days. Must-sees are God's Little Acre, Kinta Gaol and the High Court House, recently

converted into a museum, and the Hospital District Batu Gajah.

Yes, I said hospital. Wait - before you go, "Are you crazy? A hospital as a tourist attraction?" This is no ordinary hospital: it's the last remaining heritage hospital in Perak, if not Malaysia.

This hospital has appeared on celluloid numerous times, including in *Apa Dosa Ku*, the local teleseries about Perak's wartime heroine, Sybil Karthigesu, and German movie *Love And Death On Java*.

A word of warning - you might be politely

but firmly ushered out by the nurses. But even a whirlwind glimpse would leave you with a deep impression of its Tudor-style wooden buildings, elegantly set within a leafy compound of undulating manicured hills and giant raintrees.

A note on food. Make sure you swing by Restoran Masuri (Jalan Pusing Opens 10.30am-6pm), which shares a brick building on the main road next to Sri Subramaniyar Temple, the town's oldest Hindu temple. Makkik's rendition of *mee rebus* - noodles bathed in a sweetish-savoury potato gravy, piled with loads of crunchy prawn crackers, hard-boiled egg, mung beans and potato slices - alone is worth the 40-minute drive to Batu Gajah.

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The TT5, the last remaining tin dredge in the country.

CLEARWATER SANCTUARY GOLF RESORT

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Tel: +605 366 7433
www.cwsgolf.com.my



The Sri Damai Chalet at Clearwater Sanctuary Golf Resort.



giant testicle. (Hey, I never said I wanted to be a naturalist ...)

Fortunately for everyone, before I'm solicited to volunteer my uneducated guess about its identity, my mother exclaims: "Amazing how the bird can make this with its beak!"

Sodesneh, it's a bird's nest.

"You can hang it on a tree," Mr Raja suggests, earning Dad's vigorous nod of approval.

I listen to the exchange with disbelief. Hang a fallen bird's nest on a tree so that it looks like a bird built it? My computer-ruined brain boggles at the warped logic. Whatever floats their boat.

While the folks continue bandying ideas about their newfound toy, I mull over my findings. The park has huge potential to be a prime attraction, but something would have to be done about the road coming in, for starters.

Then, there's the woefully inadequate facilities. No café to speak of; a peeling signboard that looks tragic; and a toilet ... what toilet? I had to borrow a bucket from the caretaker's wife to transport water from another tank to flush the toilet.

In spite of the odds, the park is quietly pulling a crowd of loyal admirers. It has drawn bird watchers from as far as Britain, Hong Kong and the United States. Mr Raja once saw a group of students from Singapore camping overnight at this site.

And they found out from...?

"Word of mouth?" he shrugs. "During dry weather, you can hike, cycle or drive around the park, using the many mining roads criss-crossing the site. We've only seen a fraction of the park," he points out.

Lake Pucung alone is already sensory overload. It's easy to get immersed and forget that there are at least a dozen other mining pools scattered over the 900ha territory that makes up Kinta Nature Park, the majority of them teeming with dense vegetation.

For this, we have to thank the collapse of the tin mine. After the mining lands were left idle, nature began to reclaim them, and thus began its new lease of life. The result is the rich secondary forest we see now.

To the birds, this means food – lots of it – which is why and how the area became a magnet for water birds and other wildlife.

Did I, a non-birder, just spend two hours gazing at birds? I look at my jeans. Clinging to the cloth is proof that I am not dreaming it up – lots of love-grass from running around the wild grass in an attempt to photograph the birds from every conceivable angle.

On the drive out, my eagle-eyed mother points to a distant mark and says the strangest thing: "Is that a real bird or a statue?"

Following the direction of her fingers, my eyes fall on a grey heron perched on a tree stump protruding out of the water's edge. With its dignified ramrod-straight position, it looks more sentry than bird, as if to see us off.

In that moment, I know that I'm in love.

TT5 – the Metal Monster

Next stop: TT5, the steam-powered tin dredge that operated for 44 years until 1982, when a drop in tin price made it economically unviable.

My grandma and aunts had always used the expression "metal ship", conjuring up images of all kinds of awesome to a child, and in fact, this isn't too far from the truth.

Sitting in a body of water, the dredge looks like a giant battleship with a system of chutes resembling a host of menacing jagged swords piercing the sky at one end, and a chain of giant buckets at the other which could dig to a depth of 15m and then carry 280 litres of tin-bearing soil upwards into an oscillating drum.

The tin is extracted through a system of jigs and screens, while the excess material is disposed of via the chute system.

Mr Raja intersperses his technical explanation with vernacular anecdotes, helping me imagine how life was 60 years ago. Slowly, a picture begins to form: grandpa arriving at 7am and hanging his tiffin by the railing; grandpa tinkering with a grinding, chugging mechanical mess; grandpa sitting on the bench and eating his lunch, grandpa...

As the workers could not leave the site during their entire shift, they had to do their business on the dredge, explains Mr Raja. The "big business" takes place in an enclosed cubicle. Another "open-air" toilet caters for "small business" – basically you just stand by the railing and make your "contribution" to



Jodie Foster enjoyed quite a view when she put up at Anna's Suite during the shooting of *Anna And The King*.

the pond ...

Though I was never close to my grandpa – men those days epitomised the "talk less, do more" philosophy – I could now understand why he would turn to drink for succour. "Hard" doesn't even begin to describe a life that involved mentally and physically punishing work in a pressure-cooker environment throughout the day.

Panoramic paradise

All that physical activity in the sun has naturally worked up an appetite. After debating the various options, we decide to save Tanjung Tualang river prawns (which I've eaten several times) for another day. With such pleasant weather, it would be a travesty not to have a relaxing al fresco lunch overlooking a panoramic lake, so we head for Clearwater Sanctuary Golf Resort, famed as one of the locations for *Anna & The King*.

After lunch, Mr Raja suggests checking out the chalets, a proposal I gladly welcome. In previous trips here, I've played at the driving range and checked out the remnants from the *Anna & The King* film set. I'm curious to see if the Sri Damai chalets live up to the promise

of "cosy cluster of 30 chalets, idyllically over-looking breathtaking lakes fringed with lush foliage."

We walk down a tree-lined path to the last chalet in the row dubbed Anna's Suite, which was custom-built in a record six months when it was learnt that Jodie Foster would be putting up at Clearwater. Mr Raja walks past the huge living room straight to the bedroom, and beckons me over to the balcony.

The expression "jaw-dropping" was invented for moments like this.

To this day, I still marvel that I had sufficient presence of mind to whip out my camera and click the button when a boatman rowed past on the lotus-fringed lake, rewarding me with the most beautiful landscape photo I've taken in my life.

Elated as I am about this unexpected bonus, I can't help feeling saddened by the truth of Pak Yap's earlier words: Here we have a treasure right at our doorstep, and nobody knows how to appreciate it!

Right after this Batu Gajah teaser, I'm planning my next Cuti-cuti Malaysia.

■ For customised tours to Batu Gajah, contact Mr Raja (k.raja8876@gmail.com / tel: +6012 524 2357).