

JOM!

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*Pak Aziz and family
in full traditional
Malay regalia, all
dressed up for dinner.*

PICTURES BY AIZUDDIN SAAD

Kampung life retreat

Keen on experiencing the
ambience and an olden-
day kampung lifestyle?
Book a staycation at Suka
Suka Lake Retreat, writes
Aizuddin Saad

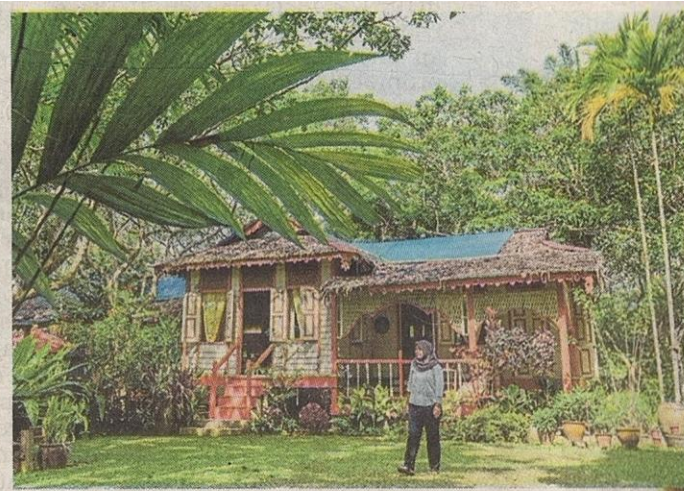


*Visitors enjoying a typical kampung
dinner, sitting cross-legged on the
floor in the living room.*





Pak Aziz and family in front of a charming house he bought from Sayong, Kuala Kangsar. The house serves as a common place for guests to eat and chill.



A house bought from Sayong, Kuala Kangsar is now a common place for guests at Suka Suka Lake Retreat to eat and chill.

MEMORIES of my childhood in my grandparents' kampung run through my mind as soon as I set foot on the compound of Suka Suka Lake Retreat, a homestay set in a beautiful village concept located on the shore of Tasik Chenderoh in Lenggong, Perak.

A young man, Azam Aziz welcomes my friend and I with an English-accented Malay greeting. The 19-year-old's thick English accent takes me by surprise, especially when we are introduced to his parents, a typical Malay couple, who live a very traditional Malay lifestyle, far away from the city. It is about an hour's drive to Ipoh and 15 minutes to Lenggong town.

I assume that Azam may have studied abroad his whole life.

But my musings are quickly drawn to the beauty of the "little village" and its surroundings — the lake, the quaint kampung houses, the flora and fauna.

Calm, serene and simply beautiful. And the sounds of birds chirping adds a beautiful sound effect to the whole picture.

THE BEGINNING

Owner 73-year-old Aziz Abdul Manaf, or fondly known as Pak Aziz, says initially the resort was not well known among locals

and was more popular among foreign visitors.

"Especially those from the North America and Europe," he says.

It all started when Pak Aziz and wife, Asiah Mohd Ridzuan, 58, were looking for a new place to live in a coastal village on the east coast. But both felt that they're not cut out for coastal life.

Pak Aziz, who hails from Kampung Baru, Kuala Lumpur, has been wanting to live in a rural area for the past 28 years, and was ready to quit his job at a world-leading IT company.

Finally, after exploring the whole of the peninsula, the couple found an island for sale at Tasik Chenderoh and decided to buy it to live their dream life in the countryside.

Azam was only 11 years old when the family relocated to the newly purchased land to make it easier for the boy to continue his schooling without travelling back and forth. They first lived in tents while slowly building a chalet.

Then, a friend from abroad visited Pak Aziz at his new lakeside home. Impressed, the friend began to sing praises of Pak Aziz's home, and the word spread.

From then on, it became the Suka Suka Lake Retreat, a place for visitors to stay and experience the life amidst nature.



Visitors playing congkak while enjoying the afternoon tea in the verandah of an old wooden house.

Now I understand why Azam speaks with a thick English accent.

He grew up surrounded by foreign visitors who became his chat buddies as he had no friends from the nearest village. Azam is a Form Six student at SMK Clifford in Kuala Kangsar, some 30km away.

THE COLLECTION

With a large plot of land at his expense, Pak Aziz bought the first old wooden house from Parit, Perak and made it as his home.

But he didn't stop there. Eventually, he bought several more old wooden houses,



Afternoon tea goes up an



The interior view of an almost 100-year-old house bought from Parit.



Move aside buffet spread, this simple breakfast of nasi lemak and traditional kuih gets you going.

built in the 1930s, sourced from around Perak like Selama, Padang Rengas, Lenggong, Kati, Sayong, Sauk and Parit.

He made them into some sort of a unique collection, in the effort to preserve the architectural heritage of the original Perak Malay houses.

Of all the houses, the Kutai house bought from Kati is the most valuable to him.

"Because the house was built in the late 1890s, but incredibly it is still standing strong. Thanks to the traditional Malay architecture," he says.

Overtime, Pak Aziz learnt to dismantle and re-assemble the houses from local carpenters.

"It takes about four months to rebuild a wooden house, depending on size and design," he says, adding that a house would cost him about RM60,000 which includes the process of dismantling, reinstalling and transportation.

But buying an old wooden house is not easy. Pak Aziz has his own practice to ensure the soon-to-be-bought house is free from any mystical disturbances.

"I make sure to enter the house through the front door and exit through the back door. If upon entering the house, I feels

comfortable and calm, then I will buy it," he says.

Once the buying process is completed, the house is dismantled one piece at a time, with each piece placed on the ground and left for a day to avoid any "mystical" problems.

"The challenge comes with the *tiang seri*," says Pak Aziz, referring to the main pillar of a traditional Malay house.

In the olden days, Malay builders, through the service of a *dukun* or *bomoh*, practised the *tiang seri* concept or the system of geomancy when siting or designing buildings to improve wellbeing.

"Most of the *tiang seri* are guarded by an entity to take care of the house," he explains.

He once found an old wooden house with beautiful architecture but could not buy it as he sensed obstacles and experienced uneasy vibes upon entering the house.

If the house was to be bought, it is very likely that the "entity" would remain in the pillar and follow wherever the house is taken to.

"This will affect the harmony of the house environment and the occupants who live in the house," says Pak Aziz.

enjoying the traditional Malay dishes and eating with one's hand.

"It's more intimate this way," says Pak Aziz as he passes a plate of a Rendang Ayam to my friend who is sitting next to him, "the warmth exudes a sense of togetherness instead of individualism".

Interestingly, there is a natural phenomenon that occurs once a year in the waters near the retreat.

For three weeks between May and June, the Putat Air flower (*Barringtonia Racemosa*), will bloom in the evening from 6pm and will fall in early morning.

When the flowers fall into the lake, the red flowers float and turn the placid surface of the lake red. The Putat Air tree is easily found around Tasik Chenderoh.

For me, staying at Suka Suka Lake Retreat gives a new meaning to the traditional Malay lifestyle, its values and traditions that are now increasingly forgotten.



FAST FACTS

SUKA SUKA LAKE RETREAT

PKK 19/27, Kampung Kelantan



Rumah Kutai, Pak Aziz's favourite house among the collection of 10 houses, is a traditional Perak Malay house that was built in the late 1890s.

THE STAY

Like our host, we take on a traditional Malay lifestyle throughout our stay at Suka Suka Lake Retreat.

At night, my friend and I are each given a *kain pelikat* (the chequered sarong usually worn by men) and a batik sarong for the ladies.

Pak Aziz and his family, who are also dressed in traditional Malay outfits, sit with us, cross-legged on the floor in the dining area of the house, for dinner.

We feast on sumptuous traditional Malay cuisine. The menu comprises *Pajeri Nanas, Rendang Ayam, Ikan Talapia Masak Serai, Sambal Udang Petai, Bayam Tumis, Pekasam Ikan Loma* and *Serawa Timun Betik*. Ingredients for these dishes are all sourced from the area around the homestay and grown organically.

I bet this dinner offers a new and experience for Pak Aziz's foreign visitors. Sitting down cross-legged, wearing sarongs,

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STAY The village has a collection of 10 old wooden Malay houses that are relocated and assembled to replicate a village. The oldest house is the Kutai house which was originally built by the previous owner in 1918. All rooms are with attached toilets and hot shower, fans and mosquito nets. The village can accommodate up to 32 guests at one time on a twin-sharing basis.

EAT Based on a "balik kampung" concept, the retreat offers an all-inclusive package of room and meals. Dinner is served in a traditional style — sitting cross-legged on the floor, wearing sarongs, and eating with hand.

DO Kayaking, boating, trekking, fishing, fish feeding or just enjoy a siesta on the hammock are among the things that you can do here. Local games like *congkak* and *batu seremban* are also available. If you are an avid angler, Lake Chenderoh is an angler's paradise.

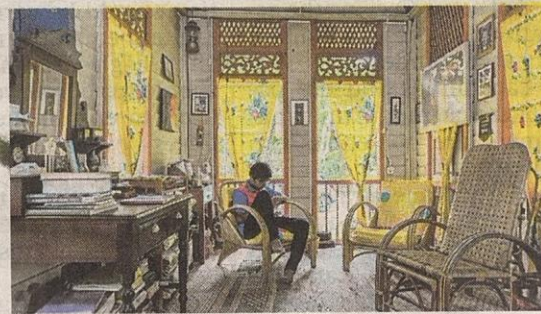
GO Visit Lata Kekabu, a beautiful waterfall located 8km south of Lenggong. Engage a local guide for a better experience.

HIGHS The kampung concept and the location — Tasik Chenderoh, the first dam to be built in Southeast Asia.

LOWS Generally, connectivity — Internet and phone — is not so good.



LEFT: A close up of Putat Air flower (*Barringtonia racemosa*), that is easily found around Lake Chenderoh. **BOTTOM:** Azam Aziz in his favourite corner.



A perfect place to take in the sight of serene Tasik Chenderoh.



Another level at Suka Suka Lake Retreat.



Kayaking in the placid Tasik Chenderoh is a fun activity for guests staying at Suka Suka Lake Retreat.



The red water of Tasik Chenderoh, thanks to fallen Putat Air blooms.



An aerial view of Chenderoh Lake.