

An Introduction to Temenggor/Belum Forest and Lake

By IAN ANDERSON

After promising ourselves for more than 12 months that we would visit Temenggor/Belum, we finally got around to confirming a booking just after Christmas and took off for the trip on 31st January. The following describes our experience.

The first problem was where to stay as there are many tourism internet sites extolling the virtues of possible places – campsites, houseboats, floating chalets and more – but local advice was that there were only two places to be seriously considered if we wished to experience genuine attempts at ecotourism, the Belum Rainforest Resort on Banding Island or the Belum Eco Resort on Temenggor Discovery Island. A visit to each website made it abundantly clear that this would be an easy decision to make as they are as much alike as chalk and cheese.

Belum Rainforest Resort



Rainforest Resort

The Belum Rainforest Resort, owned by Tan Sri Mustapha Kamal's Emkay Group, is almost exactly what you would expect from any good quality resort in Malaysia with nicely fitted, air conditioned, en suite, hotel rooms providing telephone, mini bar and the like, just a few steps away from Reception and the Dining Room. But we discovered that Banding Island is, in fact, not an island but part of the Temenggor mainland projecting into the lake and the resort is close to the main road, easily accessible by vehicle and well above the lake, thus allowing only glimpses of the water from most areas.

Therefore you really do not get the feeling of being close to nature. To some extent this is combated by cladding the external concrete walls with bamboo, a landscaped garden of rare local herbs and fish ponds rearing rare and almost extinct fish for eventual release into the wild. However the resort's great advantage is their close relationship with both the Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), who provide eco-advice and the occasional lecture for visiting parties of young people. With trepidation we understand that additional chalets are planned as are development of homestead land parcels, a Rest and Recreation area and the establishment of two five-star boutique resorts north and south of Pulau Banding. Despite the resort's good record of caring about the ecosystems so far, we wonder if all these developments are necessary or whether they will bring any good to the area (other than profit for the developer). Such "development" usually translates into "destruction" and we fear for the future of Pulau Banding. Rates at the Rainforest Resort range from RM350 to RM500⁺⁺ for one twin/double room

and breakfast for two. All other meals and excursions are at additional cost. Promotional rates may be available, but there is a surcharge during weekends, school holidays, eve and public holidays.

Discovery Island



Arriving at Discovery Island

Totally different in every aspect is Belum Eco Resort on Discovery Island. First of all it is a real 6-acre island 7 km by boat from the Banding Island Jetty. Secondly, the accommodation has none of the luxuries of the Rainforest Resort – just small, twin-bedded, timber or bamboo chalets with *atap* roofs, each with a fan and an open-air balcony, the latter incorporating a shielded, but open to the elements, shower and wash hand basin. The toilets are in a spotlessly clean communal block just a few metres away, ensuring that all effluent is piped to an effective sewage treatment system rather than into the

lake. Here you really are close to nature without any sign of civilization or pollution – you are in a world of your own and believe it or not it is mosquito-free! Additional facilities include an open sundeck below the breezy open air dining area, above which is a beautiful general purpose lounge where multi-media presentations about the lake and its wildlife are given. A shortcoming for the not-so-fit is that these general facilities and the chalets are a short walk from each other and require some 80 steps to be negotiated, 40 up and 40 down, to match the contours of the terrain. Being adventurous and really wanting to get a feel for the area we chose Discovery Island and booked their 3-day, 2-night package. It costs RM550 per person all inclusive. Pick up and drop off was at Banding Island jetty. We did not regret our decision for one moment.

Discovery Island is owned and run by a father (Steve Khong) and son team who started several years by renting out houseboats on the lake and then moved on to the island on a longish lease. They have done everything they can to build the resort without spoiling the environment and have carefully constructed the buildings without cutting down trees or making them glaringly obvious to other users of the lake. All garbage is regularly removed from the island and many other eco-friendly practices are carried out. They have six young male staff, very capable in maintaining the resort, running the boats safely and providing tasty, quality local food whilst also fulfilling any special dietary arrangements necessary. Father and son eat with the guests thus maintaining the quality. Notwithstanding, it is fair to say that there are several improvements that could be made and Steve has some great plans for the future, finances allowing.



View from our balcony

Treks and Campsites

Their 3-day, 2-night package, is based on the principle of free play in the mornings with swimming, canoeing and fishing available and short treks in the afternoons. Generously an unprogrammed extra was also thrown in FOC – a very memorable, early morning, boat trip to view the hornbills. Each day is rounded off, after dinner, with multimedia presentations on the locality and wildlife. The treks were reasonably easy although in part very steep, and on the first day they included Pulau Tujuh and its seven waterfalls, Kampung Chuweh, an Orang Asli Village on a separate island and Pulau Besar with its Rafflesia site. Day 2 took us on a short, (50 minutes) steep climb up to the viewing tower on Pulau Talikali. The view was well worth the climb. Our guide was reasonably knowledgeable about the flora and fauna but could only speak Malay which could be a setback, although it was no problem to us.

Considering the treks in more detail, it seems that the Rainforest Resort also use Pulau Tujuh for their treks and camping and have built some permanent structures, toilets and *pondoks*. Our local guide was very careful to steer us around these and off the normal track and it was clear that he considers them as off-limits to us and not for use of anyone other than the Rainforest Resort. This seemed strange as the islands are government land that should be completely available to all. After all heritage and nature belong to everybody! How can one resort lay claim to public property at the expense of others? We do hope that this is not the old story of those rich in cash and contacts using their position to trample on others less well endowed as so often happens. That is certainly not the spirit of 1Malaysia!

Next issue: Orang Asli village, Rafflesia and more...