

FROM TAMBUN TO TSODILO - Tambun paintings - it's protection first before tourism

The "Ode to Tambun Rock Paintings", obviously a letter from the heart of a real heritage enthusiast, in Issue No 68 of the Ipoh Echo, set off a whole host of memories for me.

I remembered the many times I have taken visitors to see those ancient rock paintings, high on the abrupt limestone cliff above Tambun, struggling through the overgrown path and up the steep and



slippery steps; I remember the wonder my guests, particularly the children, expressed about the detail of the paintings of wild boar, a dugong, a tapir and some deer; one of the latter being especially fascinating and exciting, appearing pregnant, with a small infant drawn inside its swollen frame. Then there were the lost tourists on the Tambun Road who had read about the paintings, but could

not find them, despite the glowing article on the Tourism Malaysia website! Sadly, I also recalled just how often national and local media and our NGOs have also written articles and letters from the heart, without any attention being paid to them. So, as our letter writer advises us, the paintings continue to deteriorate.

Now many of you may not be aware that a whole series of the paintings, drawn with haematite and estimated to be between 5,000 to 12,000 years old, were not found until 1959. They were once part of a 'gallery' that, we are told, stretched for over 90 metres, discovered by an Englishman, Lieutenant R L Rawlings, but over the last 50 years most of it has disappeared. He was serving with the 2nd Battalion, 6th Queen Elizabeth's Own Gurkha Rifles as part of the Commonwealth Armed Forces' presence in Malaya for the Malayan Emergency. It was one of the most important historic discoveries in the country, in the opinion of experts, second only to the Perak Man.

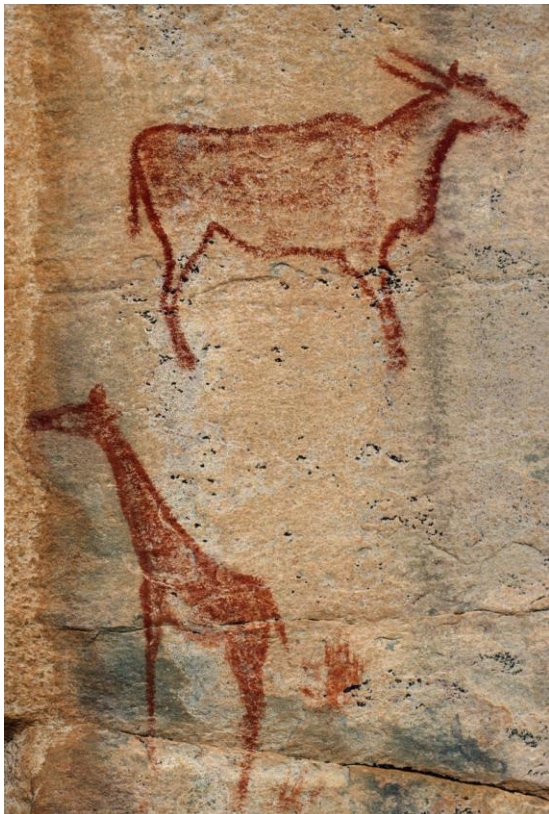
The paintings are situated on a wide ledge at the top of a steep slope, about 30 metres above the floor of Lembah Kinta on a smooth limestone cliff. Some 6 metres or more above the ledge, there are a number of illustrations of wildlife, people and abstract designs. Some are quite small while some of the animals are more than one metre long. It is believed they are the first and only ancient rock paintings known in Malaysia, but the sunlight is fading the artwork while water has completely eroded some parts of the sketches.

In November 1959, J.M. Matthews, an author in an issue of *Malaya in History – Magazine of the Malayan Historical Society*, wrote this description of the discovery: "The paintings are monochrome – indistinct. In some groups, the paint is dark purple, in others, dull red. Some of the figures are obviously men, rather crudely drawn. Some of the animals are easily identified, others are rather vague and imagination is needed for their representation".

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However, there are still enough paintings to prove that long before the history of the Malay Peninsula was written, there were primitive men living in Lembah Kinta, who illustrated the environment surrounding them. So why have they not been properly protected and controlled so that both Malaysians and tourists can enjoy our unique piece of history?

Clearly, only the appropriate government department could answer that, but if I may, I would draw their attention to another memory of mine, this time not in Perak, but a visit to the paintings of the ancient Bushmen in Botswana, Southern Africa, a third world country where its people still live in mud huts and wooden shacks.



The place is called Tsodilo hills and it is one of many different sites in Africa where paintings of the Bushmen can be found. Of course, with 3,000 paintings spread over several hills and a great deal of climbing needed to see the best ones, this is a much larger area than ours at Tambun, but the main points are still relevant. The most important one being that the local government actually value the paintings as part of their heritage. I do not believe we can say the same here.

Consequently, access to Tsodilo is restricted and compulsory guides are provided at a reasonable cost. For the 'less than fit' or disabled there is a small air-conditioned museum and seating under shady trees. Access is also excellent with signposts and a tarred road covering the last stretch from the normal dirt roads of Botswana; parking is plentiful. Finally, as the nearest airport is far away they have built a landing strip for light aircraft. Compare that with Tambun if you will!

It was there, in faraway Botswana, that I remembered again – Tambun – with despair. So, what can be done for Tambun? Well, first and foremost some method of protection of the paintings should be carefully put in hand using expertise from wherever it is available. Once that is underway and not before, we can look at the tourism aspects. We have an airport and an excellent article in the same issue as the above-mentioned letter provided a solution to getting that 'white elephant' back to work again. We also have tarred roads, dramatically improved over the past few months, which lead straight to the base of the cliffs. But here the similarity with Africa ends! No signs, no proper car park, no guides, footpaths, seats, museum or any semblance of trying to make the paintings an attraction to be proud of.

Is that how we want people to remember their visit here?