

Helicopters flying across our blue sky may not be an uncommon view, but watching 5 of them hovering over our bus, flying our multi-coloured Malaysian flag followed by our military and monarchy flags was a sight to behold. It seemed right that the enlightening **MENGO-Technip adventure to Ulu Geroh** would begin with such a splendid view. On the eve of our Yang di-Pertuan Agong's birthday, the **6th of June**, the MENGO Support Unit (MSU) with leading French engineering company, Technip held a **2-day, 1-night trip** to Ulu Geroh, Perak.

For the less informed, **Technip** is one of the **globally leading hydrocarbon-related companies** and with the growing concern of the depleting petroleum resource, it too has realized of the importance of environmental sustainability. To inspire and **encourage the value of environment conservation** within the company, Technip has collaborated with MENGO to visit the *Rafflesia cantleyi* and **Rajah Brooke's Birdwing Butterfly Conservation Area** in Ulu Geroh, Perak." Why are these species so special to merit a conservation area for them?" some might ask. Well, not only are they classified endangered (*Rafflesia*) and threatened (*Rajah Brooke's*) by IUCN but they are also our national prides. One of the smaller subspecies of the *Rafflesia*, *Rafflesia cantleyi* is **endemic to Malaysia** whilst the striking black-and-green *Rajah Brooke's* Birdwing butterfly is our **national butterfly**.

Back to our journey to Ulu Geroh. Upon arriving to our lodging site, we met our guides who drove us through the narrow, winding and very bumpy road to the Ulu Geroh Village. They were of Semai origin, an Indigenous People tribe located in the Peninsula Malaysia and they were responsible for the conservation area in Ulu Geroh. Though the road leading to the village may have seemed perilous at times (there were times when I would just lean out of the window to see, with relief that the tires were still on the ground), the Semai drivers proved their excellent maneuvering skills, ensuring the safety of their passengers (The fact that I can write this clearly indicates that I arrived safely back to KL).

Reaching the information centre after going through a jerky half-an-hour ride, we were welcomed warmly by our guides with introductions and a most awaited lunch. Due to the downpour during that day, we had to postpone our waterfall trip to the following day. Our groans of disappointment did not last for long, though. Soon, despite the still heavy shower, we trekked our way to experience our first action. *Rafflesia cantleyi*, here we go. After a brief hike, we managed to see the red, giant of a flower hanging on a tree in full bloom. *Rafflesias* are famously known to emit a pungent, rotten meat odour. This was not one of them; the *Rafflesia cantleyi* hardly smelt of anything at all. After a fast photography session, we all travelled back to the info centre.

After that and a round of bonding session led by cheery Dr. Sundari, we were introduced to **a traditional Semai game, the 'rotan penyemat'**. According to the Semai's belief, in the jungles, there lived supernatural beings called 'orang bunian' who often

impersonated young children. These bored paranormal beings would then tease poor innocent trespassers such as us, seeking pleasure in our fear and misery when we become lost in the dark and dangerous tropical forest due to their perverse game. Therefore, the Semais created this game, a game made out of rattan and carried by the Semai hunters which would then be hung on a tree. A rope is trapped within this rattan contraption and the ghouls would have a fun and merry time toying with the game instead of human beings.

As soon as we finished having our piping hot mini doughnuts and tea, we were given another demonstration of another Semai tradition, **the blow-pipe**. The blow-pipe was very long, reaching 6 feet in length. The darts, on the other hand, were very short but had very sharp tips. According to the Semai guide, for hunting purposes, they would dip the sharp ends with poison from the ipoh tree. Dinner was another pleasurable affair, and then we were again treated by an enriching cultural Semai dance, **the Sawang dance**. The musicians and dancers were composed of females who decorated themselves with skirts and crowns made out of weaved coconut leaves, chrysanthemums and daisies. It was an invigorating and energetic dance that soon moved some of us to join their cheery dance and music group.

The following day, we were glad that the weather was conducive enough to warrant a trip to the Sungai Damak waterfall. Along the way, we stopped by the salt lick to see the **Rajah Brooke's Birdwing Butterfly**. It was a splendid view. About 2 dozen male butterflies can be observed clearly with their bright fluorescent green pattern on the ground near a tiny stream of water. Once our curiosities were satisfied by taking photos and videos of the magnificent insect, we continued our way to the waterfall.

If we thought the path to the Rafflesia plant was tough, this had smashed that thought to pieces. It took us almost an hour to reach the waterfall, carefully trekking and occasionally wading our way on the non-existent narrow path. No wonder, all of us felt a sense of achievement, not unlike the feelings of those who have just climbed and reached the peak of a mountain when we finally reached the **Sg. Damak waterfall**. After enjoying a refreshing swim in the clear, frigidly cold mountain water, we said goodbye to the waterfall and trailed back to our village, and subsequently back to our noisy, dusty civilization.

All in all, it was an exciting trip, filled with the euphoria of seeing the Rafflesia and exquisite Rajah Brooke and of course, filled with the screams and squeals provoked by our ever-present blood-sucking opportunistic leeches. Don't we just 'love' them? We were also able to experience the great hospitality and warm, kind smiles bestowed upon us by the Semais who were willing to share with us their traditions and vast knowledge of the biodiversity. It was really, truly an once-in-a-lifetime experience, and from the bottom of my heart, a journey everyone should venture to. For where else can

you experience rare biodiversity, culture and hospitality in one place, especially one located relatively near us?



Group picture with Orang Asli, Technips and MSU



Rafflesia cantleyi



Rajah Brooke Birdwing, *Trogonoptera brookiana albescens*