

Adventures in a Malay rainforest

J Srinivasan April 6, 2015

A walk on the wild side in one of the world's oldest tropical rainforests: Taman Negara in Malaysia



Up in the sky The canopy walkway strung 500 m up in the air gives a bird's-eye view of the forest J Srinivasan

When an inane joke gets an unnecessarily hearty response, it is one of the two — Boss Effect or Fear Factor. Standing late in the evening at the edge of one of the world's oldest rainforests - as old as 130 million years, it was surely the latter. Just metres from the bright lights of Mutiara Resort in Malaysia's Taman Negara lay one of the densest forests with its fascinating and dangerous secrets. Without a flashlight, it is you-can't-see-your-own-hand kind of darkness. Even with the flashlight on, the visibility is but a few feet. The darkness is petrifying yet mesmerising. You don't want to turn

away. Danger lurks all around you even though you are just on the fringes of the 4,343 sq km reserve that lies at the centre of the Malaysian peninsula in the shadow of the Titiwangsa Mountains. Established in 1938-39 as the King George V National Park, it was renamed Taman Negara after independence, which translates to 'National Park' in Malay. The park is about 250 km from Kuala Lumpur. The park has been kept free of any human intervention whatsoever beyond a two-km walkway on the ground and a 500-metre suspension bridge up about 50 metres in the air to get a view of the forest from its canopy. The walkway is as much to prevent people from getting lost in the forest as to protect the vast number of insects — 150,000 at last count — from the size-niners.

Sights and sounds

Just a few minutes into the walk and your guide spies a bird-eating spider on the hunt. A few yards away, he points to a bronze-back snake coiled onto a tree branch, getting its eight hours. Apparently, this is one of the few reptiles — of the over 200 types in the park — that are not nocturnal. After listening to stories of snakes falling from the canopy overhead and of a few adventurous souls gone missing, seeing ants the size of cockroaches, and crossing paths with a variety of insects with venom and hunting capabilities belying their size, you finally let out that breath you have been holding for over an hour now.

The forest guide, Wan Mohamad, assures us that the more intrepid go on survival trips deep inside the forest for up to three nights, many armed with nothing more than a couple of flashlights, machetes and

the expertise of the forest guides. Wan, who himself has taken a quite a number of few people into the forest, prefers a member of the nomadic Batek tribe by his side in the jungle. Even with a compass or GPS, one can get lost but not these people, who are hardwired on the forest and its many secrets. They can survive on various roots and shoots, tap certain climbers for crystal clear water, and use many a plant as a medicine. According to Wan, several plants have now been patented for providing a variety of cures, including for cancer.

Bounty of nature

Coming back to the park in daytime you get a real picture of the impenetrable jungle — ancient trees with gargantuan root systems, dwarf colourful fungi, orchids, two-tone ferns and even the giant rafflesia (the world's largest flower). The forest is host to some 10,000 plant species, 150,000 types of insects, 25,000 kinds of invertebrates, 675 bird families, 270 reptile varieties, 250 freshwater fish and 200 mammals. Wan says the lucky spot Asian elephants, tigers, leopards and rhinos, as also flying squirrels, but the sightings of any are extremely rare. Anyway, even if any of them lurked close to trails, it is unlikely you will spot them through the dense jungle thicket. What you might see are snakes, lizards, spiders, monkeys, small deer, and birds. Taman Negara's piece de resistance is the walk-in-the-clouds on a manmade bridge of rafters, netting and ropes hanging some 50 metres in the air. Strung to the trunks of among the tallest trees on earth — mainly

the Dipterocarpaceae family — the wobbly walkway gives a bird's eyeview of the forest's various layers and, again if lucky, snoozing reptiles. A good starting point of discovering Taman Negara is the Mutiara Resort, which straddles the worlds of modern comfort and earthy experiences. Located at the confluence of the Tembeling and Tahan rivers and at the very edge of the forest, the resort itself attracts a wide variety of birds and even the occasional animal. For instance, a Malaysian tapir walked into the resort and after foraging for food for a while, wandered back into the forest. The Tembeling flows quietly at the bottom of the resort, but can apparently turn into a raging river during the monsoon, rising 50-60 metres in a matter of days. Last December it had become particularly violent and its ravages can still be seen along the bank if you go on a ride on the boats run by locals, who navigate the boulder-strewn rapids with practised ease. Hearty laughter breaks the intense conversation at a table at one of the restaurants that line the Tembeling bank serving local Malay/Indian cuisine. This is no Boss Effect and even less a Fear Factor but more the joy of being with, and experiencing, nature.

The writer was in Taman Negara at the invitation of Tourism Malaysia

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