Ever seen a rafflesia in full bloom? Well, count yourself lucky if you have, writes Laviinia Dhanagunan

My hopes of seeing a rafflesia in bloom have always been hampered. A trip to Cameron Highlands was a week too late, said my guides. And I’ve been given the same excuse every time I planned to see one, until I bumped into members of the Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) in Belum-Temengor Forest in Grik, Perak.

Its leader, MNS head of communications, Andrew Sebastian, gushed enthusiastically about how they saw a rafflesia bud about to open during their walk the previous day. I had a choice of going bamboo rafting or trekking the forest to see rafflesia. The decision was not hard to make.

After all, how often does one get a chance to see this rare flower that only blooms for a week?

TRACKING RAFFLESIA

I buffed and puffed up the slippery trail in the dense jungle of Belum-Temengor Forest. Sebastian had said that this would be a “gritty” trail, so I had imagined it would be a fairly easy trek to conquer.

To my shock, the boat drew up to an opening in the forest and we had to jump to get to (not dry) land. Thankfully, the guide was very helpful and told us where to step and what to pull on or not to touch. But the end result made the trek worth the while.

I finally got the chance to see this massive flower and the experience was something I would do all over again - even though the flower hadn’t fully opened.

I also spotted a few other buds lying on the ground, along the lianas, the host vine.

However, the star of the moment was a nearly-opened flower which seemed to be quite shy as its centre faced away from the sloping trek. But it was beautiful and, depending on the angle, could appear orange and red at the same time.

I only wished I had the chance to see the flower when it was fully bloomed. But, for now, this experience will do.

BELUM-TEMENGOR FOREST

After the somewhat perilous-looking descent, I took in the extremely calm scenery as we made our way back to the resort.

The long stretches of green fringing the still blue waters of the Temengor Lake could calm the most troubled souls.

The Belum-Temengor Forest is 130 million years old (older than the Amazon and Congo forests) and is a habitat for the animals and plants that live in it, only one part of it is protected.

As a result, logging seems quite rampant, destroying trees and forcing wild animals into the open. This also destroys the population of rafflesia.

It is sad. It is already hard enough to find areas which fulfill the conditions the rafflesia needs to survive. Who knows, in future we may only be able to see this indigenous flower of Southeast Asia in museum pictures.

Holiday-makers preparing to head out for their stay on the houseboat.

Up close and personal with the rafflesia.

But I also caught sight of a number of trucks stacked with felled trees making their way out of the area.

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Treasures of the forest

I was first introduced to the rafflesia in school. I try to think about what else I know about it but can only draw a blank.

So I did a quick Internet search for interesting facts and also managed to get more information on the plant from the MNS.

Did you know the rafflesia weighs no less than 6.8kg and measures about 90cm in diameter, making it the largest, most magnificent flower in the world?

Malaysia is home to seven of the 20 rafflesia species found worldwide.

Out of these, three — the R. tengku adlanii, R. kerii and R. cantleyi — are endangered species and can be found in the Belum-Temengor rainforest.

BIOLGICAL DIVERSITY

The 130 million-year-old Belum-Temengor Forest supports important flora and fauna species:

• Over 3,000 species of flowering plants, many endemic to the northern peninsula, including 46 species of palms (15 endemic) and over 30 species of ginger (20 per cent of the total number of peninsula species) and a variety of rare orchids.

• At least 274 species of birds. It must be noted that the entire area has all 10 hornbills of Malaysia, with perhaps the largest remaining populations of breeding hornbills. It was recorded that at least 2,000 plain-pouched Hornbills were seen flying in just one evening.

• Over 100 species of mammals including Asian elephant, Malayan tiger, leopard, seladang (gaur), sun bear, Sumatran rhinoceros and Malayan tapir. The rainforest supports at least 13 globally threatened and 14 near-threatened mammals.

• 168 species of butterflies, including the rare Herona sumatrana and Tanaecla clathrata and 252 smaller moths.

• 95 identified species of leaf beetles, with the likelihood of many more.

• 64 species of ferns and fern allies.

• 62 species of mosses.

• 51 species of land snails.

• 49 terrestrial and seven freshwater molluscs species.

• 36 species of aquatic and semi-aquatic bugs and a new aquatic flies.

• 28 species of cicadas.

• 24 species of amphibians.

• 21 species of lizards.

• 23 snakes.

• 23 species of freshwater fishes.

• 19 species of odonates.

• Seven freshwater and land turtles — at least five globally-threatened and one near-threatened turtles and tortoises.

• Three species of freshwater decapod crustaceans.

Information provided by Malaysian Nature Society