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CONTRARY to expectations, stepping onto a houseboat did not make me immediately want to return to solid grounds. In fact, it was surprisingly stable despite the "house" floating on a lake, a single rope tethering it to the pier.

Taking careful, steady steps on the wooden floor, I ventured further inside with my fellow travelers. The boat's woody scent greeted our group of 16 who would be staying aboard for two nights during our visit to the Royal Belum State Park in Gerik, Perak.

There were a few other houseboats aside from ours – some occupied, some vacant. Being a relatively "smaller" party, we were assigned a single-decker houseboat, which has five bedrooms, each fitted with bunk beds. It's a tight fit with up to four occupants per room, but we made it work. The double-decker ones are reserved for bigger groups.

Each houseboat has a minimum of two Orang Asli staff manning it. One person – called "Aunty" – does all the cooking, while the other guides the group through the forest.

The house has a kitchen, a living/dining space and a wrap-around deck (though we can only walk along the front and sides, as the back part is occupied by the kitchen).

There are only two bathrooms, which proved to be quite an "adventure" for us during our short stay.

As we settled down, listening to the soft pitter-patter of the rain, we could feel the boat starting to move on the calm waters of Temenggor Lake. Our guide had begun steering the boat deeper into the lake, to be nearer to the forest.

After about an hour or so, we arrived at the designated spot where we would spend the night. The vessel was moored steadily to a sturdy tree stump in the middle of the lake.

The engine's roaring noise was soon replaced by the steady hum of the generator. For light sleepers, it's advisable to bring earplugs, because the humming can be heard throughout the night.

I was pleasantly surprised, however, that sleeping on a boat was not as difficult as I thought it would be, as it wasn't rocky. In fact, we could barely feel the boat swaying. The occasional sounds of the rippling water even provided a soothing lullaby as I slept.

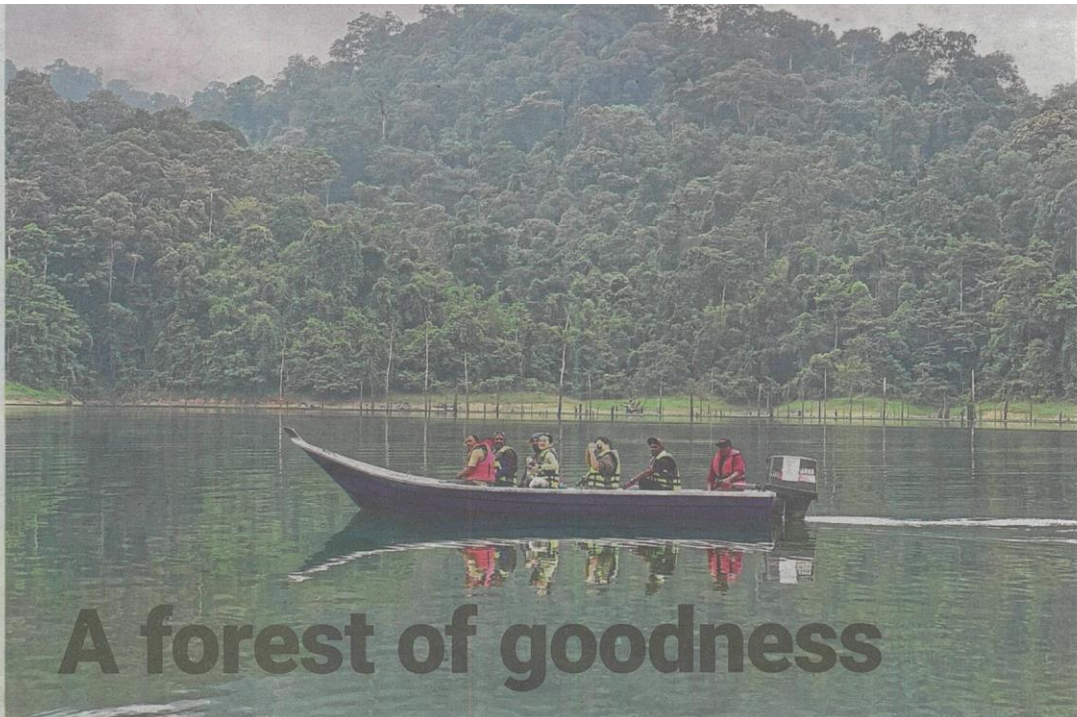
Natural beauty

We woke up to a misty morning and saw a picturesque view of the verdant mountains surrounding the shimmering lake.

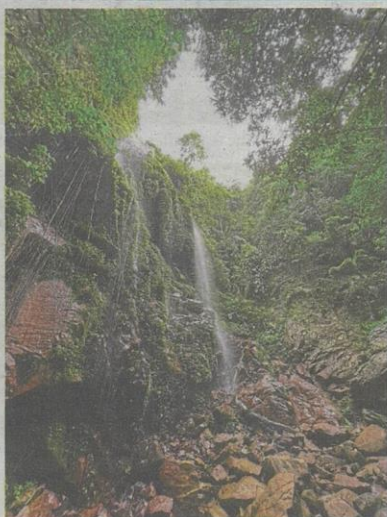
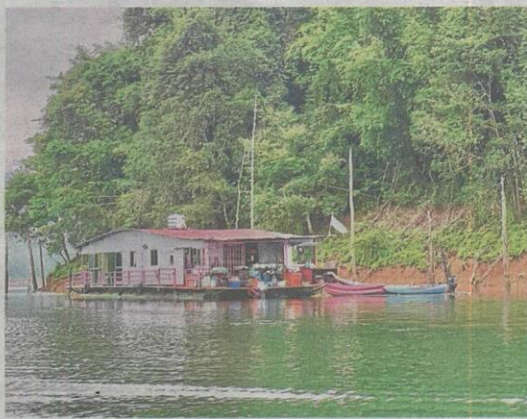
Now we could really see the beauty of the expansive park, which is part of the Belum-Temenggor Forest Complex and home to an old tropical rainforest believed to be in existence for over 130 million years.

Recognised as an "Important Bird And Biodiversity Area", there are more than 300 bird species inhabiting the park, making it an ideal place for birding activities.

According to the Belum Temenggor website (<https://belum.com.my/>), it is possible to



A forest of goodness



The unique floating dwelling on Temenggor Lake. — Photos: GISELE SOO/The Star

Sungai Kooi Waterfall is one of the popular attractions with visitors.

spot all 10 of Malaysia's hornbill species in this forest, during certain seasons.

Today, this pristine wilderness, comprising lakes and waterfalls, is an ecotourism destination popular with both local folks and foreign visitors looking to explore the forest and learn

more about the Malaysian biodiversity.

After breakfast, we embarked on our first adventure – a 7km hike at Sira Rambai. We were worried about leeches, which thrive in this wet and damp habitat, but we had been specifically informed beforehand to bring a

pair of "anti-leech" socks. Apart from that, I was pretty excited to venture into the forest.

A small boat ferried our group, now joined by a few Orang Asli rangers, to the starting point of the trail. During the 40-minute ride, we had several wildlife sightings, such as an elephant, an eagle and a family of otters.

Disembarking at the riverbank, we started making our way to a hill. It was an eventful start indeed, as we accidentally stepped on a colony of massive fire ants and had to quickly rid ourselves of these insects. A rather hilarious scene followed as we started shaking our bodies and stomping around, trying our best to get the ants off our clothes and hair!

Antsy ordeal over, we continued our journey deeper into the forest, where we were greeted by a series of different terrains, and had to cross small and large streams. We even had to wade through a waist-deep river at one point.

We took short breaks in between, where we replenished ourselves with some snacks and drinks. After about two hours of trekking uphill, it was time to go back.

Exhaustion started to set in about one hour into our descent. "We are almost there!" said one of the rangers. This helped keep our spirits up and motivated us to keep going.

After successfully completing our hike, we hopped onto our boat and headed somewhere for a quick lunch. Once we were done with our meal, we headed out again, this time to go to the Sungai Kooi Waterfall. Nestled in the virgin forest, the breathtaking cascade that measures 50m high was certainly a great place to unwind after a day's adventure.

It was a short but almost constant climb uphill to reach the waterfall. We trod carefully on the sharp and slippery rocks, using ropes to balance ourselves while navigating the steep path.

When we finally reached the waterfall, we only had time to sit in silence and briefly listened to its roaring sound before the rain interrupted our outing.

Endless adventure

There are several other hiking trails here such as Sungai Ruok Waterfall, Along Sg Kejar and Gunung Temin. Folks can also challenge themselves at Mount Titi Basah, a trek spanning 8km long.

You can also hunt for Rafflesia flowers here, but when it isn't blooming season then your guide will suggest other activities for you.

There is another unique activity that visitors get to opt for during their stay – a visit to an Orang Asli village, as there are two communities (Temiar and Jahai) residing within the Temenggor Forest Reserve.

As for the houseboat, it is more than just an accommodation. Once you've booked your stay in one of the houseboats, you will automatically have access to some of the activities in the lake, such as bamboo rafting and kayaking.

The latter was exactly what we did after our very long day of hiking.

As dusk fell and the lake grew colder, we decided it was time to wash up for dinner. We had to take turns showering in only one bathroom as the second bathroom had run out of water. As the queue got longer, some of us went back into the lake for a swim while waiting for our turn.

After dinner, we went spent the night chatting and playing cards. I was hoping to stargaze but unfortunately the stars were hiding behind the clouds that night.

I was already pretty tired by then and decided to call it an early night. Climbing up to my bunk bed was a very achy, painful ordeal after the day's activities, but it was definitely worth it.