



The Interior of Sarawak

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Over the past 12 months or so, I have taken our readers to different parts of the world to look at some structures and buildings that I thought might be of interest to engineers generally. Actually, we need not go that far. Even in our own backyard there are some interesting things to look at.

A while ago, I visited a few villages in the interior of Sarawak with a group of friends. It was my first sojourn to such a remote part of our own country. All along I have known that this large East Malaysia state has a lot to offer in terms of ecotourism. What I did not realise was that so many of our colourful brethren lived so far away from the outside world.

We flew from Kuala Lumpur to Miri, and then to Lawas, a small town just south of Brunei. From there, two 4WD vehicles took 13 of us over rolling terrain and increasingly more difficult laterite road to arrive at the quaint Lun Bawang village of Buduk Nur in the District of Ba' Kelalan some 7.5 hours later.

The Lun Bawang is a village of exceptionally friendly people. When we were walking around exploring the village, many villagers greeted us warmly and invited us to visit them.

We climbed up a hill to enjoy a panoramic view of the village and the rest of the valley. We visited a tiny factory producing salt from brine which was collected from a well. We also trekked across the border to a village in Kalimantan, Indonesia.

A few days later, we flew from Buduk Nur to Bario in a 19-seat Twin Otter operated by FAX, a subsidiary of Air Asia. It was the shortest flight I have ever taken, taking only 10 minutes from take-off to landing. The alternative would be a two-day travel by foot over hills and crossing the international border and back.

Bario, as you may know, is home to the famous Bario rice. The people living in Bario and adjacent villages such as Pa Lungan are the Kelabit. They are the smallest group among Sarawak's 27 races



and tribes, numbering only about 5,000, yet they have produced professionals like engineers, doctors, accountants and lawyers, including prominent personalities like Idris Jala, the current Managing Director of MAS. Idris' father was the penghulu of Bario, thus we paid him a courtesy visit.

We spent two days trekking to Pa Lungan and back. On the way there, we met a Kelabit man with a buffalo pulling an empty cart. On the way back, we met the same man with a basketful of things on his back while his buffalo was pulling a fully loaded cart. He had gone to Bario to

buy provisions for his fellow villagers in preparation for Christmas. We also enjoyed the crisp air, beauty and serenity of the Kelabit Highlands before flying back to Miri via Marudi in another Twin Otter.

I consider the trip to be an eye-opener. While many Malaysians may take pride in the country's physical development, in having buildings that were once the tallest in the world and having some of the best roads in Asia and so on and so forth, some of our brothers live in places so remote and inaccessible that they seldom come into contact with the outside world. ■