

Poorly Equipped for Nature – Human Beings from the City!

HIGHWAY AND TRANSPORTATION ENGINEERING TECHNICAL DIVISION



by Engr. Mohamad Ridzuan bin Abdahir

15 SEPTEMBER 2012 – Under the scorching sun stood 'the group', as we called ourselves, at the jetty in Ulu Muda, Kedah. As we looked out into the horizon from the jetty, the clean fresh air filled our lungs that had become polluted from city living. The majestic view of the never ending river and islands simply erased our memory of the long journey that had taken us from the Headquarters of IEM in Petaling Jaya to our destination.

When I first heard about the trip, which was organised by the Highway and Transportation Engineering Technical Division, the thing that drew my excitement was the fact that I had never heard of this paradise. Ulu Muda, situated in the state of Kedah is the largest forest reserve in Kedah. Here, visitors have the chance of viewing elephants at close range, taking part in the hiking trip through virgin jungle trails and exploring caves deep in the forest.



Catching an eagle in flight



Feeding fishes in the stream

After a quick lunch at the *warung* styled restaurant, we left the jetty cruising only in sampan-like boats equipped with motor engines. Our group comprised 10 people who bonded well through IEM. We were instructed to sit two to a boat. With life jackets on and minimal food supply, we started our 2-hour journey along the river heading towards our humble accommodation called 'Earth Lodge' where we would be staying for the rest of our trip. I felt that the best part of our trip was the sampan cruise as we were able to observe nature at its best. As the last trip to any sort of jungle for me was 3 years ago, I was rather excited but at the same time I felt unprepared of what lay ahead.

Along the way, we saw beautiful islands perfectly positioned to the left and right of us. Eagles, hornbills and kingfishers could be seen gliding through carelessly with no worries at all. This sight depicts what true freedom is. Even though we were at close range, the birds were still oblivious to our presence. During this river cruise my mind had yet to settle. Half of my mind was still filled with thoughts of office work left behind and the other half was filled with new tasks ahead waiting for my return. This is the reality of the pressures of working and living in a city where everyone is trying to survive the rat race. Well, all these thoughts immediately disappeared into the rain when the downpour came. What a wakeup call!

We got soaked and drenched wet. While some of the members of 'the group' had come prepared, sporting their waterproof clothing, I was not. The rain lasted for 20 minutes and it was only then that my mind started to realign itself by saying, *Ridz, you are in nature now, and it will test your survival skills and this is just the start. You will do just fine.* This is a part of the built-in survival reassuring skill that humans possess. So from then onwards, the thoughts of the concrete jungle, nice cars, and stylish clothing were all erased from my mind and I was fully immersed into the trip ahead and the surroundings.



Having a cool dip in a stream



Rowing out for a chance to see elephants bathing along the river bank



Slinkhorn



Threads of salt from salt lick and hot spring

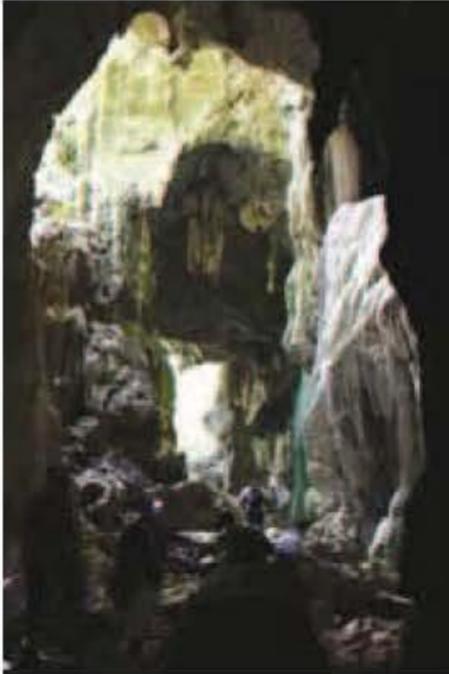
We reached 'Earth Lodge' at about 3.00 p.m. if memory serves me right. The task ahead was unloading our bags, getting a room for the stay and gathering again for a briefing session. Our main guide was a gentleman named, Gary, who is a regular for arranging trips for IEM members as often as once in every two months. Gary himself was a green badge holder which I had found out during our conversation on our way up here. A green badge holder is a guide certified to arrange and carry out nature trips.

The next stumbling block for me came when the local guides who were part of our trip informed us that there was no electricity because the wires had been stolen. This resulted in us sleeping without electricity and using only carbide-fueled lamps. What an experience! We quickly unloaded our stuff, picked a room and rushed to an open *hall* for the briefing. There, we were told by Gary that our next activities include jungle trekking, cave exploration, and tree house night stay. The night that we arrived, almost all of us took part in the tree house night stay. The people who stayed behind rested instead and preferred a 'chitchat' session rather than the experience of sleeping in the tree house and waiting for elephants to bang into our tree house and waking us up in the middle of the night. My mind just could not stop thinking about the elephants!

Upon reaching the tree house, our eager group set up the cameras, perfectly positioned so that when the elephants arrive the pictures taken would be pretty and precise. Thus, to ensure we did not miss any of the action, we had assigned different people to be on the watch out. Well, lady luck was not on our side or maybe she too slept and we were only greeted by the blood-thirsty mosquitoes instead. In the morning, after visiting the hot springs located near the tree house, we proceeded back to *Earth Lodge* via a short 5-minute trip by sampan.

The second day involved trekking through a virgin forest and cave exploration which all of us were eager to start. During the 2-hour trek, I encountered my first attack by leeches. As we walked through the forest, many of these leeches would stick onto our socks and were able to dig into our flesh with good precision and started the blood sucking process. Initially, all of us attempted to constantly flick off any successful leeches that climbed onto our fleshes, but over time, we raised the white flag and ignored the leeches.

About an hour into the hike, everyone's shoes were filled with at least eight leeches which were all bulging from the endless blood sucking. Honestly, the forest was simply mature and beautiful. The many different types of trees, plants, flowers and bushes were simply spectacular. Also the different types of insects that live amongst the creatures in harmony were a breathtaking sight. Every so often we took breaks just to indulge in the heavenly sight on earth.



Labua cave

After nearly two hours of trekking different terrains and rivers, we finally reached the cave site. There, we were able to view the formation of limestone caves through its stalactite and stalagmite formations. In the cave, various natural-formed sculptures protruding out of the cave floors and walls could be seen. These sculptures are pure art for those who love art appreciation. After spending about 45 minutes at the cave site,

we descended from the cave towards our hiking trail and headed back towards our humble abode.

Upon returning to *Earth Lodge*, we showered, removed the foreign beings attached to our feet and had some cooked meals. We were all so hungry that we could have eaten literally anything even if it was tasteless. But of course, the local guides were the cooks for the trip and they managed to prepare some simple yet delicious meals from whatever little ingredients they had brought along. The night was left to us without any planned activities, so naturally some engaged in small conversation whilst the younger ones went out frog-hunting and night-trekking through the rivers. And I was part of the latter.

The following day, with mostly sad faces, we packed and loaded our bags into the sampan and had a group picture taken before leaving *Earth Lodge* for good. The thought of the concrete jungle that awaited us was slightly depressing. We then got onto our sampans and headed back to the jetty. As we sat patiently in our sampans feasting our eyes on the majestic view, many thoughts ran through my mind about the journey. Back home, we feel so comfortable and we often think that we know it all by being able to make calls, surf the internet, check emails and post on facebook, but we seem to have lost our so called human identity the minute all these are taken away from us. And when we are placed into nature which is our natural habitat we become unequipped. We can't bear the pain of being bitten, we are not fit enough to go through lengthy journeys, our skin is vulnerable to different insects and creatures and so forth.

After reaching the jetty, we left immediately to a nearby *mamak* restaurant to fill up our hungry bellies. As I sat on my chair, I felt a lot of familiar sights and sounds making their way back into me. I started hearing the hustle and bustle of city life with cars honking, foul air filling my lungs and sights of the concrete jungle. I turned to my left and I saw the road heading back to Ulu Muda, and then turned to my right, I saw the road returning home. I was literally at the crossroads of my life. In the midst of this thought, my phone rang and I could see 'mum calling' appearing on my phone screen. My mother made that decision for me! ■

Upon completion of his Civil Engineering Degree in Illinois, USA, **Engr. Mohamad Ridzuan bin Abdahir** has been working in a local civil and structural consultancy firm in Shah Alam. He is obsessed with outdoor activities, reading and traveling and, when possible, will try to escape the concrete jungle by taking part in hiking trips.