

Sungai Lembing: El Dorado of the East



Ir. Dr Oh Seong Por

Ir. Dr Oh Seong Por serves as a committee member at Standing Committee on Information and Publications at HQ and committee member of IEM Negeri Sembilan branch. He is a Deputy Managing Director at Samsung SDI Energy (Malaysia).

In Spanish, El Dorado means “The Golden One”, a title used originally to describe a chief of the Muisca natives who lived in the Andes Mountain in Columbia, South America. Over time, the name changed from a man’s description to that of a lost city of gold and today, it’s used to describe any place where wealth can be rapidly acquired.

In Malaysia, we too have our own El Dorado, an underground mine in Sungai Lembing, Pahang. The mining town, located approximately 40km from Kuantan, was rich in gold, tin and copper and small scale tin mining started as early as 15th century.

In 1888, a British company, Pahang Corporation, was awarded mining concession land of 2000 sq. miles to carry out underground mining. This marked the beginning of underground tin mining in the country. Mining activities intensified when Pahang Consolidated Company Limited (PCCL) took over from Pahang Corporation in 1906.

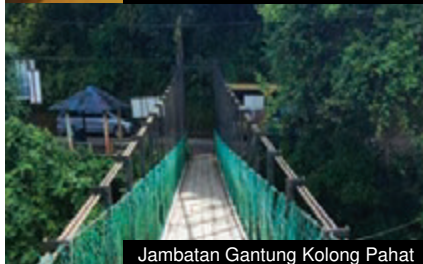
Sungai Lembing grew rapidly and became a prosperous town with a population of over 10,000 during its glory years. However, in 1985, the world price for tin collapsed, forcing PCCL to cease operations and transforming Sungai Lembing into a sleepy hollow.

Nevertheless, it has retained its unique charms. Wooden houses built for miners and rows of pre-war double storey shops still stand though uninhabited. The main road is lined with century-old trees and nearby Panorama Hill is a popular with hikers who come for fresh air, the sunrise and a spectacular view of the sea.

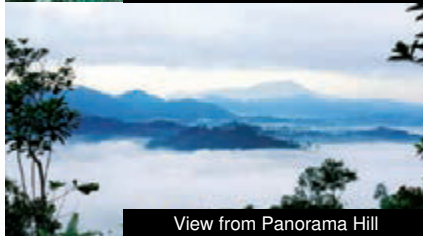
The biggest attraction though, is its subterranean network of underground



The world's longest and deepest underground mine



Jambatan Gantung Kolong Pahat



View from Panorama Hill



Entrance to the underground tunnel



Old mining equipment

mines which, at over 322km long and 700m deep, is the longest and deepest in the world. Even after mining went on for 100 years (1888-1985), Sungai Lembing still has an abundance reserve of tin. It really deserves the title, El Dorado of the East.

On 3 June, my family and I visited mine. We took a train to the stop point and then walked into the underground tunnel. Electric lights provided visibility and the air was chilly. The walls were fortified with concrete to replace the original wooden 20X20cm pillars. The ground was wet and water flowed in through a side drain. We were in the 1st storey mine shaft, about 100 feet

deep. The tunnels were dug in vertical storeys of approximately 30m apart. Only the 1st storey was accessible as the rest were flooded after the mine closed. Water pumps kept the 1st storey accessible to visitors and we were only allowed to explore 600m of the tunnel. We exited via another opening.

Enroute to the mine, we stopped at Jambatan Gantung Kolong Pahat, a hanging bridge across Sungai Kenau which connected to the miners living quarters. It was built around 1888, using cables from the mine shaft lifter and woods from the nearby forest. It was reconditioned in 2014. ■