

Exploration of Upper Sungai Rejang



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Ir. Chin Mee Poon is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.

Even before the break of dawn, the jetty in Sibul was as busy as a hive of bees. My wife and I joined the queue in front of the ticket counter but were sorely disappointed when told that tickets for the 5.45 ferry for Kapit was sold out; we would have to settle for the second departure at 6.15.

The previous afternoon, an officer of the ferry company had told me that, with the continued lowering of the water level upstream because of the dry spell, the 10.30 ferry this morning from Kapit to Belaga would be the last until the rains came again. As we had to get to Belaga to continue our journey from there, our original plan to stay a night in Kapit could not be followed, so a departure that's half an hour earlier would have given me a little more time to take in the sights of Kapit.

Sg. Rejang is the longest river in Malaysia. Originating from the mountains at the Kalimantan border, it flows 700km across Sarawak to the South China Sea at Sibul. There are many settlements on both sides of the river and the fuselage-like ferries are the only means of transport for most of the people living there.

Our ferry departed on time. The river was calm. Longhouses appeared

on the river banks every now and then. There were also individual houses and heaps of timber logs waiting to be shipped away, a clear indication of the once rampant logging activities in Sarawak. The ferry made a number of stops to unload passengers and pick up new ones, as well as to deliver goods. Exactly 3 hours later, the ferry finally docked at the jetty in Kapit, 126km upstream of Sibul.



After buying our tickets for Belaga and settling my wife and our luggage aboard the waiting ferry, I made a dash for the main attraction in Kapit – Fort Sylvia. Luckily this all-timber building is just a short walking distance from the jetty.

Built by Charles Brooke, the second White Rajah of Sarawak in 1880, the fort is rather small and unimpressive

by today's standards. Yet it witnessed an important chapter in the history of Sarawak. A memorial in front of the building records that on 16 November, 1924, a ceremony was held in front of the fort in which the headmen of the Kayan, Kenyah, Kajang and Sea Dayak tribes living along several rivers, swore that they would henceforth lay down their blowpipes and knives and stop the practice of head-hunting, or

they would die like the pig which was slaughtered as part of the ceremony. This was witnessed by the White Rajah, senior army officers of the Dutch East Indies and other high government officials.

The ferry departed at 10.30 as scheduled. With many stops to make and rapids along the way, it took almost 6 hours to cover the distance of 155km to Belaga. This small town is the furthest upriver along Sg. Rejang that one can reach by regular ferry service.

I first visited Belaga in September 2004 as a participant in IEM's technical visit to Bakun Hydroelectric Dam, then under construction some 60km further upstream on Sg. Balui, one of Sg. Rejang's tributaries.

From Belaga, we would be proceeding to Bintulu by road to continue our exploration of Sarawak. ■