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Bernamea Feature

DANUM VALLEY: AN 'EDEN' ON BORNEO ISLAND

By: KANUL GINDOL

KOTA KINABALU: Located some 80 kilometres west from Lahad Datu in the east coast of Sabah, is the Danum Valley Conservation Area that is home to some 440 square kilometres of virgin forest believed to be at least 10 million years old.

Danum Valley's forest is not just another jungle -- it is reckoned to be the world's tallest rainforest, taller than the Amazon and the African rainforest.

Dr Zainal Adlin, corporate adviser of Sabah Foundation which manages the conservation area, said only the coniferous giant redwood forests of North America are taller, making the forest at the lowland Danum both exciting and mysterious.

Harbouring a biodiversity that ranks among the world's richest, Danum Valley astonishes both scientists and nature lovers.

It has more than 200 species of trees per 100 square metres, 124 species of mammals, 275 birds, 72 reptiles, 56 amphibians, 37 fish and a full house of Borneo rarities like the orang utan, Sumatran rhino, Asian elephant as well as proboscis monkey.

It is not surprising then that the federal government decided to declare the valley as one of the country's four new exclusive tourist destinations soon after Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad visited the valley on Aug 31.

The valley's richness, untouched since time immemorial, had already impressed King Carl Gustaf and Queen Silvia of Sweden earlier this year during their two-day visit to the area.

The Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Ja'afar and Raja Permaisuri Agong Tuanku Najihah also visited the place recently, spending an overnight stay at the serene Borneo Rainforest Lodge (BRL), deep in the jungle.

"Mainly lowland, the valley has only nine percent of area above 760 metres from sea level with 2,660mm annual rainfall and a mean annual temprature of 26.7 celsius," said Zainal Adlin.

There are at least three main settlements in Danum Valley: the Danum Valley Field Centre (DVFC), the BRL lying about 35km away, and a nursery somewhere in between the two places.

DVFC, incepted in 1986 and run by a consortium of government departments as well as institutions of higher learning, is an internationally renowned research centre for biodiversity and forestry. It hosts scholars from local universities as well as from all over the world.

As the steady flow of visitors became more unbearable for the limited accomodation at the centre, the management of the Danum Valley, led by Sabah Foundation, built the BRL, catering only for the exclusive market. BRL received the Aseanta Awards for Excellence 1996 as Asean's best new tourist attraction recently.

Group Manager of Sabah Foundation-owned Tourism and Leisure Divison which oversees the management of BRL, Rudy Kinajil, said the lodge was completed in July 1994 and now has 10 twin-bedded rooms in five well-spaced bungalows.

He said with the opening of the lodge, the DVFC would no longer be accepting tourists on an ad hoc basis, but would concentrate on its intended functions of providing facilities for international collaborative research as well as local education and training.

"We have the finest of facilities at the Lodge and plans are underway

to expand them as we grow," he said. The concept, he said, is to enable visitors to discover natural beauty and wildlife without sacrificing basic comfort.

Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Sabbaruddin Chik said although Sabah wanted to maintain the area as a tourism product targetted for the exclusive market, the Federal government felt the present number of rooms were insufficient.

In Danum Valley, visitors can expect to see elephants, deer including the sambar, barking deer and mousedeer, wild pigs, snakes, the unmistakable hornbills, orang utan and a host of others.

As visitors journeying the gravel road deeper into the forest, they should be able to see elephants' large droppings by the roadside, indicating that the giant mammals are not far away.

"Asian elephants normally cross or just mill around playing with sand on the road in early morning or at night," said a Sabah Foundation driver.

Visitors should also be able to see leopard cat, clouded leopard, civets and other nocturnal mammals during guided night tours around the lodge. Fresh water fishing is allowed at certain areas but only with hooks and lines.

Another attraction at the tranquil valley is a newly-found ancient Kadazandusun burial site at Coffin Cliff (Bukit Keranda), 122 metres above the lodge.

With its uniqueness and befitting its class for exclusive market, Danum Valley would soon lure big names, especially nature lovers. It would not be long before kings, princess and megastars from Hollywood drop in, either for scientific reason, filming or solely for communion with nature.

"Prince Phillip of England may drop in next year, and maybe in future we may be able to get Diana (former Princess of Wales) here," Kinajil said.

Actress Isabella Roselini was also there a few weeks ago doing some recce for a film titled "Reflections of Eden" and would be returning in March next year to shoot some scenes for the film about the survival of Orang Utan based on the same titled autobiography of American scientist Dr Birute Gildakas.

Danum Valley was classified by the state government as Forest Reserve Class I in May 1995, which means no commercial activities are allowed within the 43,800-hectare valley to protect nature's gift.

To make the trip to the valley an enjoyable one, the management committee has recommended visitors to bring along non-aerosol insect repellent, jacket for night drives, long and lightweight trousers, long-sleeved shirt to worn in the jungle, sun hat, trekking boot, raincoat, torch, sandals as well as extra socks.

Danum Valley which attracted 2,692 visitors last year, can be reached by land from any district in the state. -- Bernama

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