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The incredible mammal airshow

Anak Enggang

MOST people in Malaysia and in many parts of the world are familiar with the acronym Lima, which stands for the famous Langkawi International Maritime & Air exhibition.

Anak Enggang would like to introduce an alternative Lima event - Langkawi's Incredible Mammal Airshow. It is an amazing and inspiring event that takes place every night at The Andaman hotel on Datai Bay, and Anak Enggang believes it should become as well-known as the exhibition because of the vital lessons it holds for the developers of Langkawi island, Malaysian decision-makers and mankind in general.

The story began years ago when the legendary Datai Bay was slated for development. Situated at the remote north-west corner of Langkawi, Datai Bay is shrouded by the magnificent Machinchan limestone massif and its primeval rainforest. The 1.6km stretch with its pristine beach and crystalline waters has remained relatively inaccessible by land while the forest itself has been fairly tranquil, with the exception of occasional forays by illegal foreign loggers.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in envisioning an exotic tropical getaway at Datai, decreed strict quotas on the number of trees that could be cut, the height of the buildings and various other stringent environmental guidelines. This posed innumerable challenges to the engineers, architects and builders, but they rose to the occasion with imagination and skill.

The result is that Datai Resort is invisible from the sea, while The Andaman just peeks out with a modest four-storey profile. All the buildings are surrounded by mature trees and lush rainforest.

At The Andaman, the building and swimming pool have actually been built around towering trees. It is startling for humans to see lush rainforest all around the buildings, but Anak Enggang's animal friends love the natural environment.

Foreign visitors tend to agree, and the result is that up to 70 per cent of guests at this hotel are from Europe, Japan, the United States and other corners of the globe.

Hornbills swoop from trees just outside hotel rooms while Long-tailed Macaques sit placidly at the forest fringe, watching the human goings-on. Dollarbirds and Racquet-tailed Drongos perch atop the poolside trees, while Dusky Leaf Monkeys scamper from branch to branch.

Brilliant Orange-bellied Flowerpeckers and Crimson Sunbirds flit through the foliage, and unflappable Monitor Lizards stalk ponderously past fascinated sunbathers. The restful piped-in asli music is often interspersed with the chatter of mischievous tree-shrews and squirrels outside the windows, and majestic White-bellied Sea-eagles circle silently high in the sunny sky.

Visiting birdwatchers were thrilled to spot the rarely-seen Brown-winged Kingfisher at its only habitat in Malaysia, and to view many of the 70 bird-species recorded within the grounds of The Andaman. The hotel is a nature-love's haven for there is something to see at any time of the day; from intriguing forest plants to gaudy butterflies to the practically-invisible Ant Lion Larvae.

It is at night, however, that The Andaman comes alive, with Langkawi's Incredible Mammal Airshow!

At dusk, the cicadas begin their night-time symphony, and as the sun

sets, a preliminary flypast is mounted by various species of cute little bats, winging silently with their incredibly sophisticated radar-navigation systems. An owl begins to call, then suddenly flies by in an unexpected show of winged menace, sending shivers down the spines of the watching wild mice and skinks in their darkened niches. The human guests begin to drift in, gathering at the open-air restaurant or under the trees among the pools.

A civet cat suddenly causes a stir as it leaps from a tree and scurries away hurriedly, realising that it had inadvertently stumbled onstage before a live audience. A night jar begins its steady "tuk-tuk, tuk-tuk", heightening the tension of the waiting watchers who have craned their necks upwards expectantly. The suspense is taut, and you can almost feel the electric anticipation in the audience.

Suddenly, a child cries out, "I see one! Over there! LOOK!" Heads swivel, and torchlights come on. Long beams of the searching lights focus on the large trunk of a tall tree, where a furry little creature is busily clambering up with admirable dexterity. It reaches the foliage at the crown of the tree, turns to look at the audience below and after a measured pause, launches itself into the air in gravity-defying aerobatic spectacular.

This is the fabulous Colugo, a creature of almost mythical repute and fame. A member of the world-famous Flying Lemur family, the Colugo is a relatively rare mammal that glides from tree to tree by catapulting itself up into the air, then gliding down on its fur-covered membranes. At the Lima display that Anak Enggang watched, several Colugo soared above the heads of the watching crowd, often in almost simultaneous acrobatic precision.

The highlight of the evening was the surprise appearance of a Giant Red Flying Squirrel, which joined in the aerial display for a few breathtaking minutes before disappearing into the forest shadows. The entire Lima took about 20 minutes and during that time, tiny frogs bowed in from poolside lily-pads and nocturnal crabs side-kicked their way along the sandy path to the Gulai Cause restaurant that nestles underneath the trees.

It was a typical night in Langkawi's ancient rainforest, but the amazing thing was that it all took place within the hotel compound!

The lesson here is that it is well worth the money to invest in sustainable development, for that pays off in the long run.

The forest is actually Langkawi's greatest attraction, with its beaches only second in tourism value. The better preserved its natural heritage is, the richer will be its rewards in time to come. Remember Anak Enggang's golden rule of conservation:

"Take Care Of Nature, And It Will Take Care Of You!"

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