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True Borneo exploration by 4WD

Tina Melan

THE recent Cuti-Cuti Malaysia Transborneo 4x4 Safari provided an excellent way to see Sabah's Crocker Range off the beaten track.

The expedition was aptly called "Down the Spine of Sabah", as it took participants down the main highland range and the heartland of the Dusunic-Murutic people.

The sixth Transborneo 4x4 event was a four-day expedition which attracted 75 participants including foreigners and a television crew from Japan.

The event this year was organised by North Borneo Explorer (NBE) with Tourism Malaysia and Sabah Tourism Promotion Corporation.

Twenty-six four-wheel-drive vehicles of various makes left Kota Kinabalu for Mesilau in Kundasang at the official flag-off ceremony by State Culture, Youth and Sports Deputy Minister Datuk Sapawi Ahmad.

The first day took participants from Kota Kinabalu to Kokol, Kiulu and Kundasang before reaching Mesilau through 125 km of off-roading.

The first day's journey, which took about nine hours, saw a few vehicles having some engine difficulties in Kiulu - but in the spirit of one-for-all and all-for-one, all vehicles did not make a move until the problem was overcome and finally the convoy made it to the Mesilau Nature Resort.

The resort is built amidst montane jungle surroundings within the Kinabalu Park in Kundasang, with vegetable farms and interesting mud tracks for off-road driving.

If you happen to be here - be prepared for the cold weather, especially at night. I dare say that this place has the lowest temperature compared to any other highland in West Malaysia.

Day Two - we packed our bags and departed Mesilau, heading to Tambunan, a scenic rural village with padi fields, water buffaloes and rustic wooden houses.

On our way, we stopped by the Desa Tea Plantations in Ranau, the single largest plantation in Southeast Asia.

We reached Tambunan very much earlier than scheduled - due to weather conditions, the expedition had to forego a crossing through the Liwagu river.

NBE director Anuar Ghani, a seasoned off-roader and founder of the first 4x4 association in Sabah, said although the water was only less than a metre deep, the current was too strong to ensure safety for all vehicles.

"This is what off-roading expeditions are all about - expecting the unexpected, especially when you are dealing with nature," he asserted.

"Sure, the more seasoned off-roaders would just go through it (the river) without having any qualms but for the sake of amateurs, I had to make the important decision not to make it torturous but as fun and challenging as possible."

Day Three - off we headed for Tenom, the land of the Muruts (ex-headhunters). Besides superb off-roading, participants got to see and experience life in an authentic Murut village at Kampung Mamaitom.

In the true culture of the people of Sabah, everyone had to join in the party - with food, drinks, dances, songs and merry-making spirit in abundance.

Just when participants were getting to know each other better, Day Four (final day) came. But before making it back to Kota Kinabalu, the expedition made way for Tenom, the coffee town of Sabah. Participants took

home packets of coffee beans and powder in the dozens.

Besides being famous for coffee, Tenom is also home to the Sabah Agriculture Park and locals say it is a favourite town to visit for Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad when in the State.

All good things must come to an end and the expedition team arrived Shangri-La Tanjung Aru Resort in the afternoon for the closing ceremony.

The expedition managed to bring together first-time off-roaders as well as seasoned ones, and forged better understanding between people from various backgrounds.

Husband and wife team Andy and Patricia Wong from Tuaran said this was the first time they joined an expedition together, although Andy has been off-roading since he bought his Land Rover 10 years ago.

A lover of the outdoors, Andy said the expedition was pretty "mild" but enjoyed it nevertheless.

As for Patricia, the rugged and rough outdoors is not actually her cup of tea. As she puts it, "this will be my first and last."

As for Lawrence and Rachel Barber from Manchester, United Kingdom, off-roading has been their hobby for the past couple of years. The expedition was their first outside the United Kingdom.

"We looked through the Internet to find out where and how we could do it, and found North Borneo Explorer to be the only company to organise a convoy expedition. That's how we got here!"

The two are also scuba-diving enthusiasts and plan to visit Sipadan Island after the expedition.

For twelve-year-old participant Yannik Anuar, this is the first time he joined an entire off-roading expedition, although his real first was "when I was in my mother's womb".

"I like it a lot - meeting friends but it can get boring just sitting for hours on end in a vehicle. The best part about off-roading is the river. I love jumping into it!" he said.

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