

16/09/2002

A real Nice experience

Seelen Sakran

TRAVELLING by coach to Singapore can now be a smoother, more enjoyable and comfortable experience.

The five-hour journey from Kuala Lumpur currently comes at an introductory one-way fare of RM70, inclusive of light refreshments. The service, aptly named Nice 2, is created specially for business people and is operated by Plusliner Sdn Bhd (PSB), an ISO 9001 company owned by Park May Bhd.

On a trip specially arranged for the media, which the writer took recently, the coach attracted curious stares as it cruised along the North-South Highway. And no wonder: it's not often that one sees a gaily coloured semi double-decker executive coach cruising on our roads. In fact, it's the first of its kind in the country.

Save for the chassis, the RM534,000 coach was made entirely in Malaysia. The vehicle features a large glass area, giving passengers a wide view of the scenery. As it is taller than ordinary coach buses, passengers get to enjoy better cell phone reception.

The service was launched by the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, on May 2 and the company currently operates two services daily - at 8am and 5pm.

On board our journey, we were graciously entertained by PSB's general manager Chan Keong Meng and the friendly crew. The upper deck is designed for comfort with ample legroom and adjustable ergonomic seats and two TV monitor screens.

The lower deck provides a lounge area suitable for six or eight passengers. Here, businessmen can plug in their laptops for a few hours of uninterrupted work.

The lounge can also be used for on-board travel meetings or business discussions, and even recreational and entertainment activities. The lounge comes furnished with U-shaped sofa and a TV monitor screen. Passengers need to make reservations to book the lower deck.

Upon reaching Singapore via the congestion-free Second Link, we checked into Park May's partner hotel, Copthorne Orchid Hotel on Dunearn Road. The hotel is tucked away in the residential suburbs, away from the hustle and bustle of the city, yet is only a 15-minute drive to the shopping haven of Orchard Road.

Room rates are S\$118++ per day for a Malaysian passport-holder travelling on PSB buses. Late checkouts are possible.

The trip for the 30-member media team was made possible by Tourism Malaysia as well as Fascinating Holidays Pte Ltd and Mandarin Hotel of Singapore.

Dinner was at the Mandarin Hotel's Chatterbox Coffeehouse located right in the heart of Orchard Road. We enjoyed a good buffet spread of Western dishes, topped with a delightful array of dessert from heavenly chocolate mousse cakes to strawberry shortcakes and pecan pies.

The highlight of the evening was a trip to Singapore's famed Night Safari, part of the Singapore Zoological Gardens. All reservations we had as to what one could possibly see at night (hours are from 7.30pm to midnight), were soon dispelled.

The zoo authorities have obviously gone to great lengths to ensure a wonderful experience for visitors. Obviously, it is not an easy task creating an environment where one can view wildlife in a nocturnal

setting. In this case, it was made possible with the use of special lights that simulate moonlight.

Of course, no trip to the zoo would be complete without attending an 'animal play'. In this case, zookeepers issued commands to get civet cats, a panther and an owl to go through their paces. The show was remarkable.

Our other Singapore host was the Singapore Tourism Board (STB), whose officials took us on a little historical tour. We were brought to Bukit Candu, where the World War Two Interpretative Centre is located. This is a project by the National Archives of Singapore (NAS) and the National Heritage Board.

Here, we were told a wonderful story of how 1,400 Malay Regiment soldiers fought the last British battle for Malaya at Pasir Panjang in Singapore, before the country fell into Japanese hands. The soldiers included Lieutenant Adnan Saidi, regarded as a Malay war hero. All this was ably narrated by Colman Chua, the public education officer at NAS.

The whole experience was greatly enhanced by the Binaural Sound Presentation, which gave a cinematic effect to the proceedings. Also outstanding was the Pepper's Ghost Effect, a visual impression created by reflecting images.

Lunch, courtesy of STB, was at the House of Sundanese located in Suntec City in downtown Singapore. This restaurant is actually a chain, with outlets in Kuala Lumpur, serving Indonesian food. There was an interesting array of steamed rice, curry chicken and fish fried with belacan (prawn paste). Suntec City itself consists of a large mall offering a wide variety of consumer goods.

When we checked out of the hotel at 3.30pm the next day, we boarded another Nice coach - this time a single-decker - to take us home since the Nice 2 coach was preparing for its inaugural visit to Malaysia with members of the Singapore media.

As we bade farewell, Chan said, 'This is only the beginning. We already have the lion's share in the luxury coach sector. Once this new service proves to be successful, we will consider other destinations like Haadyai in Thailand.'