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View from the top in Langkawi

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LANGKAWI for years only told the story of Mahsuri to all who visited the island, selfishly keeping another very much to itself. But all that is about to change soon.

Thanks to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Langkawi Development Authority (Lada), we will not only get to hear the tale of Machinchang Mountain in Burau Bay but will also see the beauty of the 550-million-year-old structure when the RM45 million mono cable gondola system linking the base, Oriental Village shopping complex grounds, to the top of the 708m mountain starts soon.

The tale of the Machinchang Mountain is an interesting one but its veracity is difficult to vouch for.

The island has two mountain peaks - Gunung Raya (Main Mountain) and Gunung Machinchang (the Chopped Mountain).

According to a local legend, the two mountains were once two martial arts masters and warriors - Mat Raya and Mat Chinchang - sworn enemies who were cursed by a strange creature called Gedembai and turned to mountains after the two men started a massive fight at their children's wedding ceremony. Mat Chinchang is said to have gone on a chopping spree.

The broken pots and pans at the wedding ceremony became Belanga Pecah (a village in Langkawi), the spilt gravy became Kuah (the island's major town) and seeped gravy was called Kisap (a village).

A third person, Mat Sawar, who was Mat Raya's friend, too, was cursed by the creature and he became Bukit Sawar.

But with the mountain being accessible via cable car, a different but beautiful story awaits to be told - that of its surrounding flora, fauna, vegetation and the complete view of the island and geological features of the mountains.

With stunning and magnificent vistas, Mount Machinchang and the Austrian cable cars are going to be a big attraction when the service is put into operation soon.

From the very top of Mount Machinchang, visitors will get a 360-degree view of the the whole island group, the Datai peninsula, Andaman Sea and the southern Thai islands of Ko Terutai and the southern Thai province Satun coastline.

The 15-minute journey up the mountain is definitely not for the weak-hearted but the scenery below that shows off the 4,167 ha of virgin jungle of the Machinchang Mountain Forest Reserve and Telaga Tujuh is a feast for the eyes.

While the cable car project was under construction, a second waterfall was also discovered.

As the six-seater gondolas edges higher and higher up the steep mountain slope, the trees in the valleys and ravines below seem much taller than those on the walls of the mountain, on which short and sturdy trees grow.

This is because the mountain walls have less top soil and retain less moisture compared to the lush ravines and valleys. Seeing is believing, says project co-ordinator Allan Tan.

"We ourselves didn't know what was up there until we went up during the many exploratory trips in helicopters and small planes. Even when we started this project in April 2001, we made sure the greenery will not be touched," he says.

"The mono gondola cable system was chosen because it's very environment

friendly. We didn't touch any part of the forest reserve except for a few metres which had to be cleared to construct one of the two towers."

However, no other development has been planned for the Machinchang Mountain except for the viewing platforms, a restaurant and probably a suspension bridge over the valley.

"There's no access road or water supply at the very top that has an area of only about 21 ha. The water catchment area can only supply water for two or three days at the most. It won't be viable to build anything. The restaurant operator will have to take water up everyday," says Tan.

The most interesting and rare feature of this cable car project is the angle station - this means from the middle station, the gondolas make a 45-degree turn to reach the top where there are more viewing platforms and walkways.

Visitors will be given the option of getting down at both stations to walk about and enjoy the scenery.

All in, 35 gondolas will be used to ferry visitors to the mountain and in an hour some 700 people can be taken to the top.

Professor Dr Ahmad Jantan, an independent consultant looking into the geology and geo-tourism aspect of Machinchang Mountain, says judging from the ripple marks and rock surface of the mountain itself, it was once a seabed that was pushed up over time.

"It is definitely an interesting place to come to see the rock features that are only unique to this place. There is a wide variety of rocks in a small area and people should take advantage of that."

The other interesting geological facts about the mountain are the very rare sand stone, cone and round shaped hillock, the Machinchang ranges that look like the back of a dragon from the top, wild orchids, rock collapse structure and also the vertical collapse structure besides the flora, fauna and vegetation.

"Machinchang Mountain can and has the potential to be classified as a world heritage geological park. There is a track for trekking at the forest reserve and those who want to get a closer look of the mountain, can simply opt to go on foot," Ahmad says.

The soft launch of the cable car project will be held on Monday with the official opening by Dr Mahathir planned for a later date.

The launch will see those in the travel and tourism industry being invited to view the mountain's offerings via the gondola.