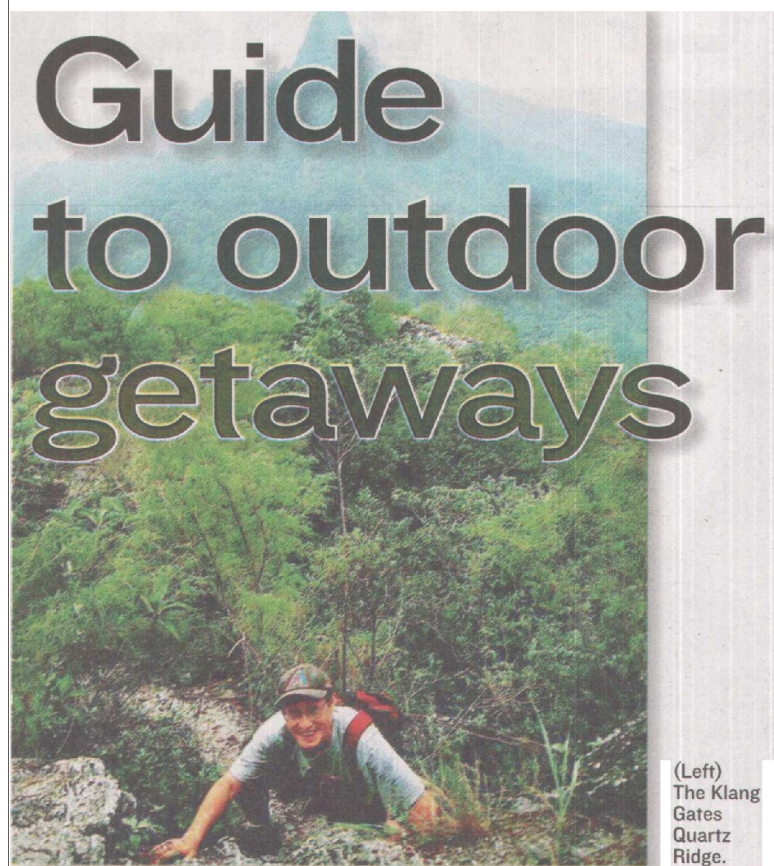


Headline	Guide to outdoor getaways	Language	ENGLISH
Date	06. Dec 2008	Page No	16,18
Media Title	The Star	Article Size	824 cm2
Section	StarWeekend	Frequency	Daily
Circulation	293375	Color	Full Color
Readership	1026812	AdValue	64507.79



(Left)
The Klang
Gates
Quartz
Ridge.

LEONG SIOK HUI

A decade ago, when I was a newcomer to northern California, my best companions were Tom Stienstra's *California Hiking* and *Mountain Biking* Northern California's Best 100 Trails guidebooks.

In those days, guidebooks were a salvation for stressed city folks with little time to plan a weekend getaway. Now, thanks to the omnipresent Internet with its tons of free information, outdoor excursions are mere clicks away.

Still, there's a dearth of information on outdoor attractions close to Kuala Lumpur. Newcomers, especially, have to muddle through a complex web of online information just to find a weekend nature outing. This is where *Nature Escapes*, the latest online outdoor guide, comes in.

Set up by Rick Gregory, a passionate outdoor lover cum environmental consultant, *Nature* lists more than 50 outdoor getaways within four hours of the city.

The site features a mishmash of nature outings catering to beginners, families and nature buffs, and holds a compilation of articles on all things nature, from animals and plants, to conservation issues and green travel.

With more than 50 outdoor escapades and counting, *Nature Escapes*, a new website, makes planning a weekend getaway a breeze for city folks.

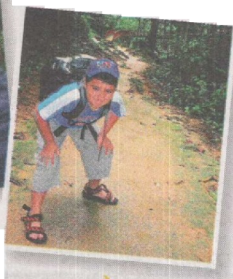
The site

One of the coolest things about *Nature* is how the getaways are categorised based on how long it takes to get to these places. The one-hour to four-hour escapes let you decide in a flash, whether you want to while away half a day on a short hike up Klang Gates Quartz Ridge or burn the whole weekend on an overnight trip to Taman Negara.

The one-hour escapes, from a stroll in the wild in the heart of the city at Bukit Nanas Forest Reserve, to a splash in the Kanching Waterfall, are great introductions to the outdoors for tourists or friends on a short visit to the city.



(Above) Environmental consultant, writer and outdoor lover Rick Gregory and son Jeren (right).



Promoting quality



> FROM PAGE 16

Aside from driving directions and safety tips, Gregory tells readers about the teeming weekend crowd in some of the more popular spots. But he also throws in some tips on how to get away from the madding crowd.

The website is also chock-full of travel ideas for kids.

If you click on the "Jungle Kids" section, you get ideas for a kid's day out — like easy and educational nature walks at Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM) in Kepong or fun family outings at Selangor State Park's waterfalls.

As the father of an eight-year-old kid, Gregory "walks the talk" when it comes to getting his own kid outdoors. He offers great tips on how to get kids excited about nature with stimulating questions, how parents can keep their cool and hold the kids' short attention.

For example, he suggests that whining be banned during hiking, that there be lots of communication, and that everybody tries to laugh off mistakes.

For the adventurous souls, *Nature* recommends, among other things, enjoyable mountain-biking trails like the Batu Dam trail, less than 30 minutes' drive from the city, and whitewater rafting outings, for example in Sg

Kampar, Perak, 1½ hours' drive on the highway from Kuala Lumpur. Practical info includes such things as the weather, jungle survival tips and what to pack in your First Aid kit.

Some of the entries come with nifty YouTube videos so that readers can gaze at actual views from the Klang Gates Ridge or hear and watch the gushing waters at Chamang Waterfalls near Bentong, Pahang.

For those who want to delve deeper into environmental issues or rainforest biodiversity, the "Jungle Essays" section is a gem.

Labour of love

Nature started as a book idea for Gregory about five years ago. As an environmental writer, he gets to explore Malaysia's wilderness with wildlife researchers while writing about conservation projects. The site reflects Gregory's passion for the rainforest.

"I am not a travel agent, I don't run tours or sell any tourism packages," says KL-based Gregory, who trained in forestry and plant science.

"I've been going into the jungle for almost 20 years to explore nature and its fascinating plants and animals. I try to let everyone

know that the jungle is real fun for kids and families too.

"Most people in KL don't realise how many forest parks and jungle trails exist within one to two hours from the city," adds Gregory, 50, who is also a senior advisor for conservation group Wild Asia.

"I wanted to share these nature sites with others and spark some interest in learning about the rainforest."

But Gregory wasn't comfortable with the fact that publishers don't usually pay attention to marketing a book after its initial launch. The onus is on the writer to push the sales of the book. Also, producing a book with lots of photographs is usually very expensive, so Gregory waited for the right idea to come along.

In December 2007, he found a website company that not only provided the Internet tools, but also ranks content as very important.

"I'm a writer, not a webmaster, so that company spoke to my senses. I studied the manual for one month and then began to write pages in January 2008. Now the site has about 115 pages with another 100 to 200 pages planned," says Gregory.

He has visited all the nature sites that are featured on *Nature*, taken most of the photos and checked out the safety aspects of the places. The rest of the information is culled from local nature books, other researchers or the web. Next year he plans to get users to give their feedback on their experiences.

"Readers can always give their comments via e-mail. I'd like to know about problems, good experiences and new places to try out," adds Gregory. "It's like a book review, sometimes you need three or four different opinions."

Gregory is keen to source for and promote quality tourism services through the site. He is also open to offering nature books and gear depending on readers' needs.

But as Gregory sums it up, "*Nature* tries to make it easy for anyone who wants an outdoor experience to make good choices based on solid information. It caters to parents searching for a weekend trip with kids, friends looking to hang out somewhere fun, or for tourists and business people wanting a day out of the city."

☐ Check out <http://www.nature-escapes-kuala-lumpur.com/>