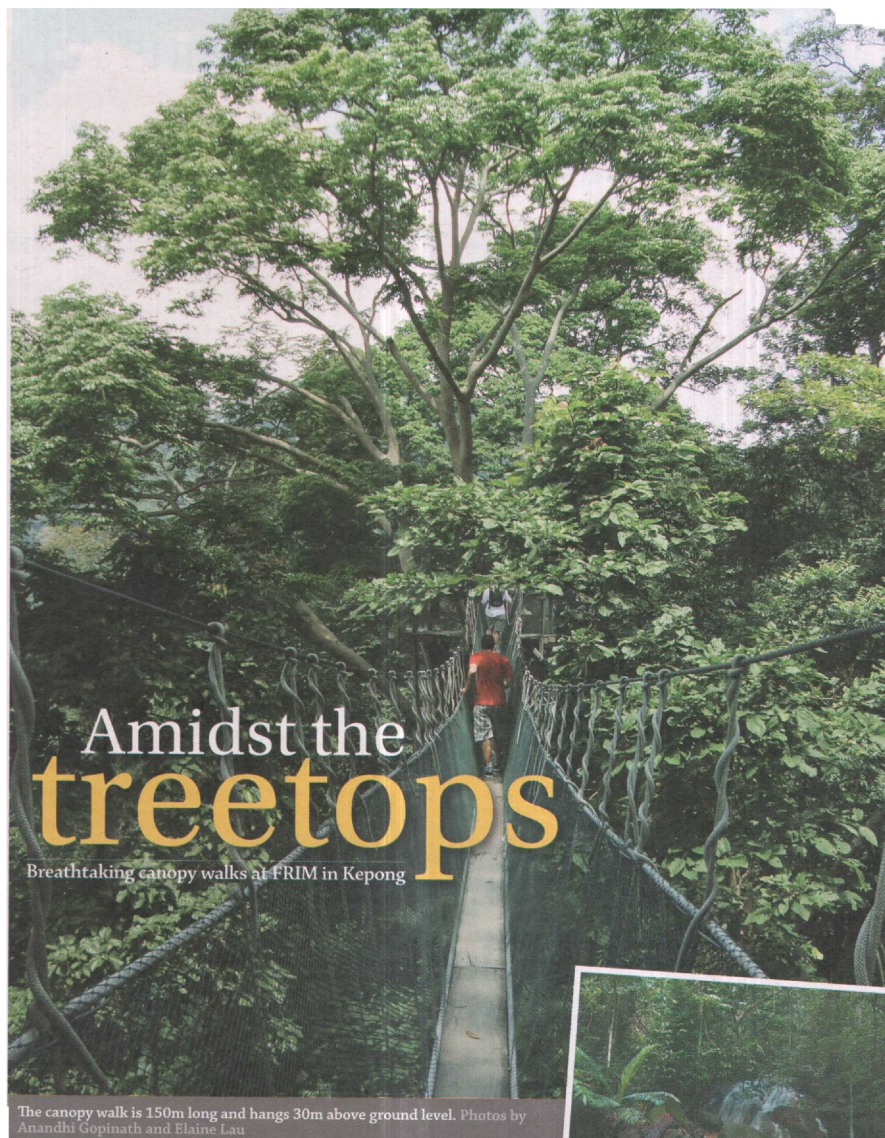


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It was the lure of a free massage that drew us to Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM) in Kepong early one Sunday morning. Home-grown spa brand Tanamera was having an open day there, and we decided that it would be a good time for us to check out FRIM as well.

When we arrived, we were dumbstruck at the view that greeted us — majestically tall trees lined the winding asphalt road, with tiny lanes that led off here and there to various research facilities. Against a background of pure green, a soft powdery breeze blew and an eagle glided lazily overhead. It was almost unbelievable that the bustle of the LDP was a mere 10 minutes away.

According to the literature we picked up, this sanctuary is 80 years in the making — it was in 1926 that researchers and foresters adopted the plot of land and developed it into the mighty woodlands it is today. A statutory government agency under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, FRIM promotes sustainable management and optimal use of forest resources in Malaysia by generating knowledge and technology through research, development and application in tropical forestry. It is also a widely popular recreational facility, and one of the most popular things to do there is the canopy walk. We decided to try it out.

With the massage out of the way, we made

our way to the souvenir shop to buy tickets — a mere RM5 — for the canopy walk. We were supplied a map and basic instructions on which direction to go. From what we gathered, the walk would take us about 40 minutes.

We set off towards the canopy walk, joined by a group of Australians with impressive-looking cameras that loudly proclaimed their tourist status. We observed other groups forming and noticed that the canopy walk does draw quite a fair number of tourists.

The pale, white gravel pathway leading to the canopy walk is broad and snakes for quite a distance ahead on a gentle incline. At first, as we walked, our only gripe was the crunch of the gravel which provided an ungainly accompaniment to the more soothing soundtrack of singing birds and the chirping of forest insects. Then, our lack of stamina gradually began to make itself felt. However, the sight of an older gentleman calmly making his way with a walking stick inspired us to muster up some energy to go on.

The others walking up the hill provided a rather colourful atmosphere — we saw young parents with eager children, older couples enjoying each other's company and a gaggle of chatty college students.

At the end of the gravel pathway was a small signboard pointing towards a steep incline — this was the final hike before we arrived at

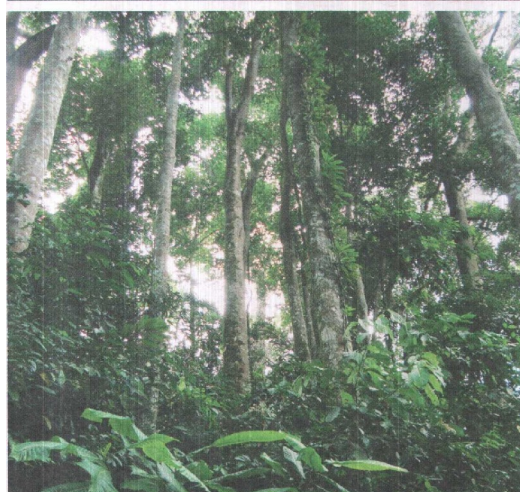
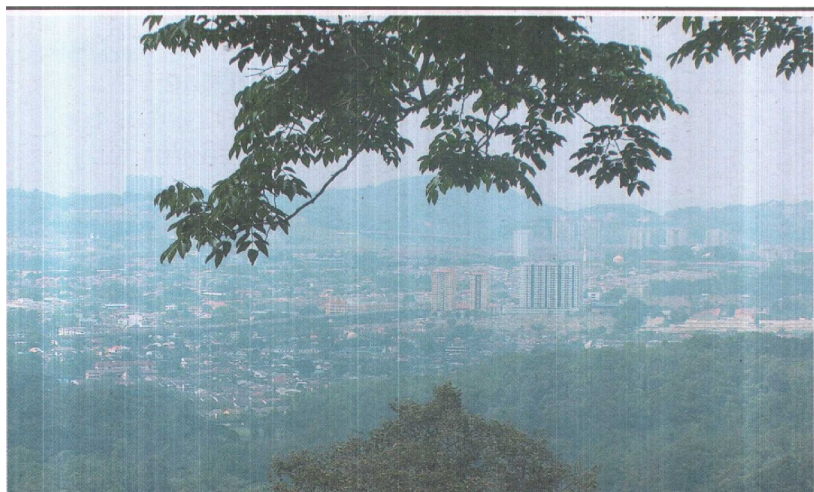


The Sungai Kroh waterfall and wading pool

the canopy. The roughly-hewn steps into the mountainous terrain took almost 20 minutes to ascend, and is the toughest part of the journey. (For those of you who are thinking of trying it out, don't say you haven't been warned — be ready for quite a trek.)

Up this hill, the foliage got thicker and the pathway slimmed down to a mere 12 inches. Branches and roots cut across our way while heavy leaves brushed across our sweaty shoulders. Then finally, across a tiny bridge over a small, clear stream was the entrance to the canopy walk.

There was quite a crowd at the beginning of the canopy walk, and we had quite a bit of a wait as only a few people are allowed on



Up on the canopy walk, you are greeted by breathtaking sights of the forest and the KL cityscape

at a time. When it was our turn, we were led to a tiny staircase built like a ladder, set at an angle of almost 90° up, which we climbed to get to the rickety beginning of the walkway.

And there we were, 30m above the forest bed, a height that would inspire a previously unknown fear of heights in anyone. From behind, an Englishman noticed one of us a little nervous and provided some tips: "Carefully place your feet one ahead of the other, don't splay them like you would when you walk normally."

There is a platform every few metres so you can stop and take pictures — or, for some, breathe in relief — of the absolutely amazing view. Glancing at the breathtaking sights of the forest and the KL cityscape almost twinkling in the mid-morning sun, we realised that this was worth every ounce of effort it took to arrive at the top.

The walk down the hill was a little tougher than the trek up as the spattering of rain earlier that morning had made the ground a little slippery. There is redemption at the bottom of the hill, however, as the toughest part of the terrain ends with a small waterfall and wading pool, the sounds of which hastened our

journey towards the end. We eagerly took our shoes and socks off and waded in. The icy cold water was a pleasant relief to our hot, sweaty feet. We sat on the rocks and basked in the serene surroundings.

We found out later that this is Sungai Kroh, which also has picnicking facilities further downstream. Next to the signboard proclaiming its name is another one, stating that there have been zero deaths since the canopy was first built. Might this have been better placed before we began the walk, perhaps?

The walk to the car was silent as we were, by that time, humbled by the majesty of the forest that surrounded us. Butterflies and moths fluttered by and a monkey, braver than its cousins, brashly swung on a tree next to us, screeching. The sound of a child's laughter somewhere closer to the base of the hill frightened him away, and the air became still once more. Our muscles were beginning to feel sore from the strenuous trek, but our eyes were enamoured with the beauty we had experienced.

FRIM's canopy walk is only open if weather permits, so if you are planning a trip there, do call (03) 6279 7000 beforehand.