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World Of Their Own
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What's brewing in FRIM?

In the middle of the Forest Research Institute Malaysia in Kepong is, surprisingly, a Malay teahouse. But you won't find selections like Earl Grey, Oolong and Marsala tea. Instead, you get exotic brews like lemongrass, cat whiskers, mistletoe fig, pennyworth and knotweed.

T8-9



LONG walks along cool, shady and sometimes treacherous nature trails, climbing up a steep 50m hill to a canopy walkway and exploring the grounds of a top forestry research centre – all these can be experienced at the Forest Research Institute or FRIM as it is popularly known.

It cannot be said that it is Kepong's best kept secret as many Klang Valley folks know about it. After all, it has been around for 80 years.

But wait a minute. There's another lesser known secret or attraction at FRIM. It's the relatively unknown Malay Teahouse, which opened quietly about two years ago.

That's quite unique. I have never heard about special range of Malay teas, being more familiar with Chinese tea, Japanese tea and even Indian masala tea.

I found out more about this Malay specialty at FRIM. It all began when Mercedes Benz invited me to the launch of its new M-Class at The Malay Teahouse. I was intrigued by the place and after the event, I went back to find out more at leisure.



A nice ambience for quiet teatime

Herbal Tea Leaves

The Malay Teahouse is set in a beautifully restored colonial bungalow. Nestled in an incredible forest setting with birds chirping away merrily, it is easy to forget momentarily at least, the hustle and bustle of city life.

Located about 10 minutes walk away from the FRIM Visitor's Centre, it is well worth a visit for rest and

refreshments.

Opened by Safinah Yaakob in 2007, the restaurant has the ambience of a traditional Malay wooden home. Malay art and craft don the walls. Also displayed are congkak (a traditional Malay game set) and mengkuang items including tudung saji (food cover).

Guests are advised to take off their shoes to enter the main hall and make their way to the two dining rooms. This is also the usual practice before entering a Malay home.

The restaurant offers traditional Malay cuisine and the must-try – a wide selection of herbal teas, something you don't usually find in any restaurants in Malaysia.

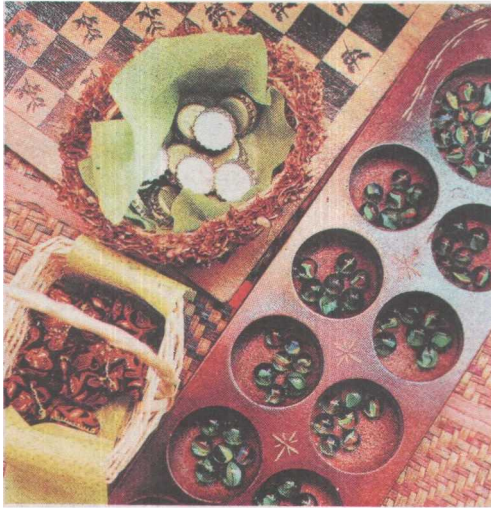
Another interesting fact is that about half of the items on the menu use FRIM's very own jungle products.

There are about 17 varieties of Malay teas, including lemongrass leaf, kaffir lime, Roselle leaf, pennywort leaf (pegaga), garcinia (asam gelugor), guava leaf (jambu) and bitter gourd (peria).

Then there are the more "exotic" varieties of wild cosmos (ulam raja), knotweed leaf (daun kesum), mistletoe fig



Interesting display of several types of containers



Play the traditional game of congkak while waiting for your meals

(emas cotek), king of bitters (hempedu bumi), water parsley leaf (daun selom), cat whiskers (misai kucing), sweet basil (selasih hitam), legundi (lemuni), water hyssop (berami) and shatter stone (dukung anak).

What makes these teas special is that they are not your normal cup of Earl's Grey or English Breakfast tea. These Malay tea leaves are simply dried herbs.

It has been documented that as early as the 15th Century, the Malay community used to harvest leaves of various native herbal plants, dry them and infuse them in hot water as a remedy for health and therapeutic purposes.

The tea selection lists the healing benefits of each type. You can also buy the various teas from the tea shop to take home. Prices range from RM40 to RM60 a tin.

The next time you'd like a hot cuppa, make your way to FRIM in Kepong for a healthy variety of Malay teas with health and therapeutic properties. Oh yes, you can even get Malay teh tarik, a special infusion of mistletoe fig with organic high protein soya and fructose, writes **JASWIR KAUR**

at RM5 a plate.

For lunch, the menu includes pulut kuning and sambal tumis (yellow glutinous rice served with ikan bilis sautéed with spicy sauce), the house favourite — mee rebus Perak and Penang laksa.

For a sweet ending, there's sago gula melaka, coconut pancake, ice cream and various types of Malay kuih-muih.

Green Sanctuary

Apart from the Malay Teahouse, FRIM is an excellent place to go if you want to learn more about the tropical forest, go bird-watching, and best of all, relax, jog or go mountain biking in an unpolluted, natural environment just a shout away from bustling Kuala Lumpur.

My friends and I order two pots each of the kaffir lime (which is high in antioxidants and helps to lower cholesterol) and lemongrass tea (antibacterial properties). You have to wait for a few minutes for the herbs to be well infused before you pour the tea into dainty little cups printed with the brand of The Malay Teahouse. The teas are thoroughly refreshing.

My personal favourite is the hot Malay teh tarik. But this is not the familiar version offered in mamak stalls. Instead, it is a special concoction of mistletoe fig with organic high protein soya and fructose and is priced at RM5 a mug. It's healthy and refreshing and highly recommended for first-timers. You can also order Herbal Malay Ice Tea with pure honey, made with many types of herbs — at RM6 a mug.

Sadly, service at the restaurant is a little wanting and you may find that some of the items on the menu may not be available for the day. But the ambience and novelty of sipping stimulating teas does more than make up for these little weaknesses.

More Than Tea

Other items available at the teashop are home-made herbal soaps under the Waris brand and made from tea tree, peppermint, lavender, rosemary and lemon, among others.

I buy a bottle of aromatherapy massage oil that's said to be able to help overcome physical fatigue and improve blood circulation. It costs RM35 a bottle.

Also available are dainty baju Kedah tops in pretty floral cotton print at RM35 each.

Tasty Malay Fare

We are eager to try the various dishes offered for both breakfast and lunch.

And to think that before 1929, this forest reserve was little more than abandoned tin mine pits, vegetable gardens and shrubby forest.

The 600 hectares of tropical forest today is home to about 15,000 species of trees, young and old, of all shapes, sizes and heights.

Although FRIM is located just 10km away, on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur along the Selayang-Kepong Highway, my planned trips there never seemed to materialise over the years, not until the Mercedes Benz launch.

When I first entered the forest reserve, I couldn't stop exclaiming how beautiful this woody paradise was.

For breakfast, the menu lists traditional Nasi Lemak (RM4.50-RM9.50). Nasi Lemak Istimewa and Roti Jala with chicken curry cost RM4.50 each.

We love the Malay-style fried rice which has many kinds of fresh herbs added in. It costs RM6 a plate for all the healthy goodness it contains. There's also fried rice noodles, Singapore-style,



Malay art and craft take centrestage in the hall

After the gate at the entrance is a meandering road shaded by tall, lush trees.

Ah.... so this is FRIM! How could I have missed this sanctuary of natural beauty with its many arboreturns and living museum of trees?

Forest Trails

On arrival at the park on a bright sunny morning, we are greeted by lush green trees and the sun's rays piercing through the tree canopy.

We park near the Malay Teahouse after going clockwise for about half a kilometre down to the main road leading to the canopy walkway. We pass by some old colonial houses with uniquely designed windows. These can certainly do with a new coat of paint.

FRIM is to be commended for having clear signboards to indicate the various places of interest in the zones marked out alphabetically. A signboard at the foothill of the steps leading up to the canopy walkway states that it's a 50m uphill hike. Alas, it also states that the canopy bridge is closed for repairs but we decide to hike up to the top anyway.

For a grey-haired brigade, our fitness level is tested to the max and it's such a triumphant feeling when we make it to the top in just 15 minutes! This is taking into account the number of brief stops we have to make to catch our breath.

The 200m canopy walkway is a suspension bridge, 30m above the ground and links six trees with three viewing platforms. On a clear day, you can see the Petronas twin towers in the distant.

Another route is anti-clockwise from the Malay Teahouse. It runs along the Rover Trail, which is actually a loop, halfway along which are the steps to the canopy walkway. This trail is quite popular with joggers. There is also a lovely waterfall along the way and small clear flowing streams.

Another route is a combination of Keruing Trail and

Salleh Trail which can be dubbed as the educational trail. The walk there unveils more than 25 timber species. Also highlighted by nature guides along this trail is the elephant tree, tarzan tree, giant bamboo trees and leaves with "ears".

Soon, we reach the Visitors Centre where we are greeted warmly and given some brochures. The centre also houses a souvenir shop. The two receptionists recommend that we visit the Monster Fish Pond located right in front of the Information Centre.

The pond is home to three huge arapaima, the biggest freshwater fish in the world, from the Amazon, and when we get there, we see a large crowd squealing with delight as they watch the giant fish being fed.

Other Facilities

While the terrain in FRIM is clearly a nature lover's haven, a jogger's delight and mountain biker's challenge, we notice that there are no mountain bikes for rent. A European tourist enquiring about renting a bike to cycle around the grounds looks disappointed when told there's none available. You have to bring your own for this activity.

There is a bookshop too but it's closed on weekends. What a shame that it does



Making their way into the forest

not take advantage of the large crowd on weekends unlike the many food stalls that open specifically for the purpose, selling local delights.

Other facilities include camping grounds, family and team building activities and picnic spots at Sungai Kroh. The wading pool is safe for children. It is recommended that visitors wear good walking shoes, carry a change of clothes, a face towel and insect repellent.

How To Get There

Located along the Selayang-Kepong Highway, FRIM in Kepong is accessible either via the LDP or NKVE if you are coming from Petaling Jaya. You can also take the KTM Komuter train from KL Sentral or any KTM Komuter station and head for Kepong station. From here, it's only a 10-minute taxi ride to FRIM.

Fast Facts

FRIM Park opens daily from 8am to 6pm. The entrance fee is RM5 per car and RM1 per person.

The Canopy Walkway is open to the public from Tuesday to Sunday from 9.30am to 2.30pm. It closes on Mondays and Fridays for maintenance work.

The walkway can only receive 250 visitors per day. You can buy tickets at the Information Centre at RM5 for adult and RM1 for child.

There are English-speaking guides who can be booked for group tours at RM80 per group of 30.

Details, call Visitor's Information Centre at 03-6279 7000 or 03-6279 7677.

The Malay Teahouse is located at Lot 514, Jalan Symington, off Jalan Jelutong, FRIM, Kepong. Tel: 017-300 7811 or 03 6280 3503/3607.

Besides catering for walk-ins, it is also open for private bookings, seminars and corporate meetings. For a lovely view of the outdoors, dining reservations can be made at the two outdoor courtyards or wakaf.

Opening hours are from 9am to 7pm daily. The Malay Teahouse has another outlet in KL's Central Market.

■ Pictures by ROHANIS SHUKRI and JASWIR KAUR



Herbal teas to go with traditional Malay food like otak-otak, ketupat, rendang, nasi lemak and mee rebus