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Crowning glory

Tree-top phenomenon at FRIM forest

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Forest magic

Whether you are a photographer, trekker or nature lover, the Forest Research Institute Malaysia has everything you desire, writes **ZALINA MOHD SOM**

A FEW years ago, the crew of National Geographic magazine visited Kuala Lumpur to check out a natural phenomenon in a little forest enclave in Kepong.

The phenomenon, called crown shyness (cover picture), was said to be unique to one location. Some claimed this spot was in Papua New Guinea, others said it was in Indonesia.

But as the crew stood under the canopy of the towering kapur trees, they came to the conclusion that the Forest Research Institute Malaysia, was home to this unique phenomenon.

The phenomenon — a series of patterns made by the gaping crowns of the trees against the sky — made it into the pages of the prestigious magazine.

The pictures catapulted FRIM into the limelight and proved to be a magnet, attracting streams of visitors.

Botanists and foresters came to learn about the phenomenon and photographers competed with each other for the best shot.

There are a couple of theories about the phenomenon. Some say the formation of the patterns is due to chemical reaction between the trees. Others say the abrasions caused by strong winds form the gaps.

Whatever the reason, it has made FRIM rather special. But then, FRIM is no ordinary forest.

Prized Natural Heritage

It may not bear the words "national park" but FRIM is marked as a National Natural Heritage Site. The title was awarded by the Department of National Heritage under the Ministry of Information, Communication and Culture in 2009.

The declaration protects and conserves FRIM's status under the National Heritage Act of 2005. But this was not the case 100 years ago. Then, the area was little more than abandoned tin mine pits, vegetable gardens

and a small forest.

In 1926, pioneer foresters and scientists began planting various tree species. Three years later, FRIM was officially established.

At 1,528 hectares, it is the world's largest man-made forest and has the potential to serve as a model for reforestation, forest management and forest protection to the rest of the world.

FRIM has now set its sights on achieving the Unesco World Heritage Site status. It is also more than just a centre for forest research.

Its proximity to KL means FRIM is the

preferred jungle for those who want a taste of a tropical forest without leaving the city. Its facilities, both man-made and natural, have placed it among the country's tourist spots.

Eco-tourism Destination

It is no doubt that the crown shyness has elevated FRIM into a tourist spot in the eyes of the world.

Almost every visitor will ask to go to the site of this phenomenon. And every time, it triggers one question after another.

Regardless of the distance — there are a couple of routes that lead to the crown shyness — walking along the 1.5km Salleh Trail is good enough to charm both first-time and regular trekkers.

The cluster of kapur trees whose crowns form the beautiful mosaic pattern against the sky can be found at the deep end of the trail.

Depending on the schedule and programme, trekkers have a choice of a direct route that starts from the administration building, or the longer route that will

leave them sweaty and completely bushed.

Other nature trails are the Engkabang, Keruing, Rover Track, Sebasah Trail and Razak Walk, each with its own character and specialty. The 400m Razak Walk is the country's first disabled-friendly trail while the Rover Track is known for its 150m canopied walkway.

Plaques and guides provide information to trekkers about the history of the forest.

But the trails are not the only reason that make FRIM a top choice for forest-based educational programmes and events.

A place for learning and recreation

FRIM has a diverse range of natural habitats, including forest ecosystems, gardens, arboreta and wetlands.

The institute has six arboreta to cater to those with specific floristic interests.

These are the dipterocarp, non-dipterocarp, coniferatum, fruit tree, monocot and bambusetum. The dipterocarp was established in 1939 while the bambusetum was set up in 1994. Among its most popular and beautiful gardens is the vast Kepong Botanical Garden which is the centre for its living plant collections, mainly local plants.

Besides research and development, it also provides horticulture and landscaping education.

An educational visit is not complete without a stop at the FRIM Museum which has exhibits on forest eco-systems and other products.

Visitors to the museum can learn about the cultural and commercial history of the country's timber industry. The exhibits include examples of various timber species, commercial timber products, and innovations from past and present research programmes.

The exhibits also include two traditional timber houses that reflect the cultural and architectural influences of Terengganu and

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Malacca. The Rumah Terengganu is about 100 years old while Rumah Melaka was built around 1917.

There is also a cascading waterfall that becomes a rocky river with mini pools.

Permits and charges

Visitors pay a small fee and there are rental charges for activities and facilities. There's also a price list for commercial photography such as weddings, advertisements or corporate videos. For details, call FRIM at 03-6279 7000 or visit www.frim.gov.my.

How to get there

FRIM is located in Kepong, about 16km northwest of Kuala Lumpur. It's easily accessible via the Selayang-Kepong Highway. For those who prefer public transport, the KTM Komuter train stops at Kepong KTM Station and taxis are available at the station. There are also buses plying the area.

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On good days, the Petronas Twin Towers can be seen from the Canopy Walkway

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Hobbyists and amateur photographers make FRIM their favourite playground



FRIM Museum is the oldest building in FRIM

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Rumah Terengganu is one of the rare wooden houses in FRIM

The cascading waterfall makes the regenerated forest natural

Students learn a lot about floristic and forestry at FRIM

The 4WD-accessible Rover Track