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Connecting in the forest

Being surrounded by nature brings out the friendly side of city folk

By SHALINI RAVINDRAN

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ALTHOUGH there have been many an article describing the sights and sounds of the Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM) in Kepong, there is still much left unsaid about the people you are bound to meet on a visit there.

There is something about being around such a large swathe of greenery that changes typically jaded urbanites into friendly and chatty people.

FRIM is the country's largest secondary forest and has remained largely untouched for the past 80 years. It is located in Kepong on the northern border of the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur and Selangor.

Since its establishment in 1929 by the British, its primary purpose has been to conduct research into forestry.

This 544.76ha of land is home to a large variety of plants and animals and is extremely popular among city folk.

FRIM charges a nominal fee for entry: Malaysians pay RM1 while non-Malaysians pay RM5. There is also a charge of RM5 for cars, vans and buses driving into the area.

During a recent trip there, it was a pleasant sight to witness strangers talking to each other on the trails.

It was surprisingly easy to strike up a conversation with anyone there. Regular park-goers will also be able to point out interesting sights or tell you the best spots to take pictures.

One such visitor, Mohd Imran Hanafiah, 73, said he made it a point to hike at FRIM's numerous trails at least twice a week.

"I like coming here because it is such a beautiful place and the trails are fairly

challenging. But the part I enjoy most is getting to talk to other people. It is especially interesting to talk to young people because they have fascinating stories to tell, of places they have been to or things they have done.

"They, in turn, are usually shocked to hear when I tell them I am an avid hiker and have hiked Mount Kinabalu at my age," he laughed.

A typical weekend scene at FRIM is seeing different groups of people visiting the place and enjoying their day there.

The majority of visitors are family groups either taking a leisurely stroll, having a picnic or attempting the many nature trails.

These trails encompass plantations, wetlands, and hills among others, and most of these paths and the nature that surround them date back to the 1930s.

To decide on the best trails to try out, grab a map at the One-Stop Service Centre (OSC) or alternatively, you can refer to the several layout maps of FRIM placed all over the park.

For more rugged activities, FRIM has a number of hiking and mountain biking trails that are clearly marked out.

Since September last year, FRIM has prohibited bikers on the popular Rover Track given the high number of regular trekkers, joggers and visitors using the trail to go up the Canopy Walkway.

Instead, other trails have been identified ranging from light, medium and hard mountain bike trails. For the more adventurous, try out the Bidara, Sentang and Pinus Peak trails.

Mountain biker Joey Ong, 28, said the bike trails were well maintained.

"Unlike other places, the trails here are kept clean and any uprooted trees

are usually removed once we report it," he said, adding he usually biked there on weekends.

Also, be sure to check out the Razak Walk, located in the Kepong Botanic Gardens.

Launched in 2008, the 400m trail is named after FRIM's former director-general Datuk Dr Abdul Razak Mohd Ali and is the first disabled-friendly trail in Malaysia.

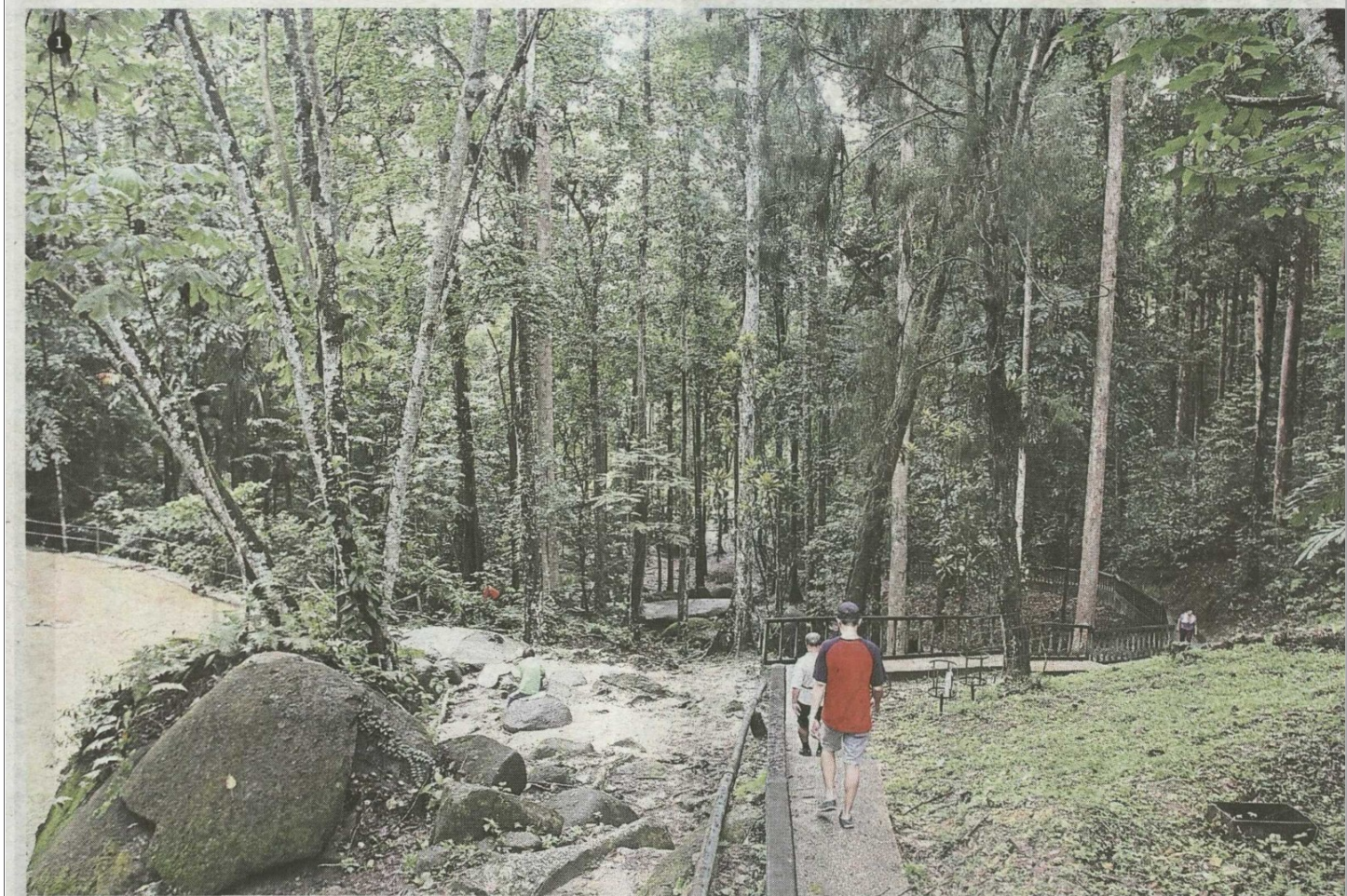
First-time visitors to FRIM should include the Canopy Walkway - a 150m-long walkway suspended from trees, 30m above ground level.

Originally built for researchers and scientists to study above-ground flora and fauna more effectively, this walkway is open to the public.

The Canopy Walk is open to the public from 9.30am to 2.30pm, with the last registration at 1.30pm. It is closed on Mondays and Fridays. Advance booking and purchase of tickets should be made at the OSC. Tickets are priced at RM5 for Malaysians and RM10 for non-Malaysians.

For those looking for a more relaxing activity, FRIM also has a number of picnic spots where you can while away the day. There is even a waterfall for children to splash around in.

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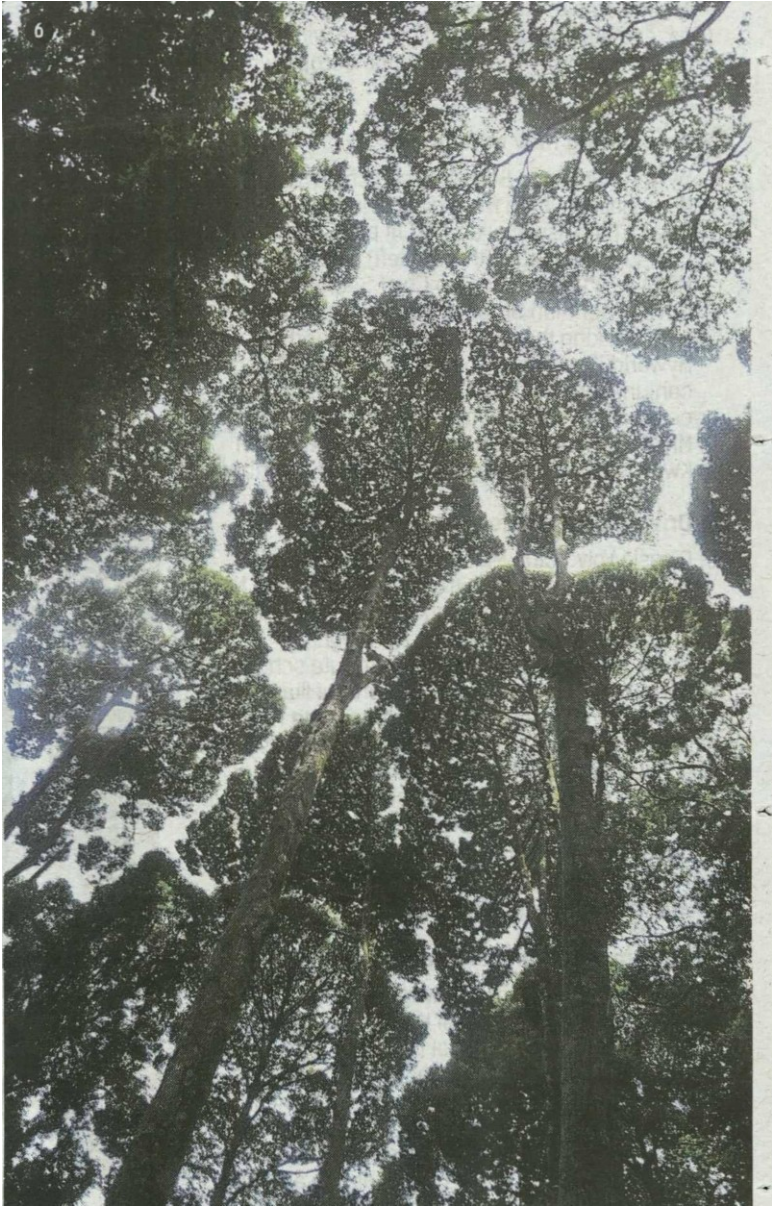
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- 1 The various nature trails in FRIM encompass plantations, wetlands, and hills, among others, and most of these paths and the nature that surrounds them date back to the 1930s.
- 2 A good way to explore FRIM is by bicycle. Visitors can either choose to bring their own bikes or rent them at FRIM during weekends.
- 3 For those looking for a more relaxing activity, FRIM has a waterfall for visitors to splash around in.
- 4 The trails in FRIM are kept clean and any uprooted trees are usually removed once it is reported.
- 5 The Rover Track is popular among visitors using the trail to go up the Canopy Walkway.
- 6 Another attraction of FRIM is 'crown shyness' where the tree crowns have a tendency to 'shy away' from each other, leaving gaps of a few inches to a few feet.
- 7 FRIM has a number of amazing spots to stop and snap a picture.
- 8 FRIM's canopy walkway is a popular attraction as it offers visitors a panoramic view of the forest and Kuala Lumpur from a distance.

– Photos by FAIHAN GHANI