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Travelling responsibly

Going back to basics helps sustain the environment. In return, the ecotourist gets to enjoy a unique experience.

Society has grown accustomed to a certain lifestyle that revolves around money, electricity, running water and generally, what are now considered the creature comforts in life. However, sometimes, there is still a desire to go back to basics, when life was less complicated. Thankfully, the continuous evolution of the tourism industry has provided nature seekers with just the thing: ecotourism, which allows travellers to enjoy a rich and varied experience while leaving little or no adverse impact on the environment.

Malaysia is blessed with a lush rainforest and an abundance of biodiversity. In fact, it has one of the oldest rainforests in the world, popularly considered the grandmother to the Amazon. And since we enjoy good weather (there may be rain, but there's no snow) almost all year round, it has much to offer in terms of caving, hiking, jungle trekking, white water rafting, rock climbing, bird watching, diving and river cruising.

There are even specialised programmes to promote ecotourism such as the Tabin Wildlife Conservation Conquest in Sabah, Fraser's Hill International Bird Race and Taman Negara Eco Challenge competition.

Mona Manap, an agent with Planet Borneo Tours and Travel Services, says ecotourism can be defined as an activity which leaves minimal impact on the natural ecosystem while improving the livelihood of locals.

"Ecotourism is responsible and sustainable tourism, where the natural and social environment is conserved. Tourists can appreciate their surroundings when we teach them the beauty of untouched and preserved natural environments," Mona says, stressing that ecotourism is not just a tour, but also a process of education.

"For customers to appreciate the [full effect] of their eco-trip, they have to forgo certain necessities of the modern age, such as air conditioning, non-biodegradable toiletries, and 24-hour electricity," she adds.

This may be tough for those who are used to modern amenities, but "...it eventually teaches them that life without such amenities is possible after all".

The experience is beneficial to both tourists and locals. According to Mona, the social element of ecotourism gives visitors the opportunity to experience and contribute to the local community's social well-being.

"Tourists are educated on the social sustainability of tourism operations in these areas. This includes the maintenance of livelihood for residents, and gives visitors a chance to immerse

themselves in daily activities such as farming, craft-making or agriculture. The tours revolve around everyday activities that are unique for visitors, such as basket weaving at an Iban longhouse, cast net fishing in a remote Malay village, farming, and so on," Mona says.

There are three major types of ecotourism — eco-treks, eco-lodging and volunteerism. What Mona has highlighted is usually found in East Malaysia, but Peninsular Malaysia is also rich in ecotourism. Eco-treks involve excursions to exotic or endangered locations. In Sarawak, one such trek is the Orang Utan Trail organised by Planet Borneo.

"The tour brings tourists into the virgin rainforest of Batang Ai, where wild orang utan can be spotted. It involves a few nights' stay in the jungle and trekking along various trails. The aim is to educate tourists on the natural habitats and activities of this endangered species.

"They will be told how deforestation, illegal poaching and hunting are threatening the survival of the orang utan," Mona says, adding that 4% of the tour proceeds go towards orang utan conservation efforts in Sarawak.

Eco-lodging, she says, is a natural supplement for eco-excursions into remote areas of Sarawak and Sabah. "Due to the nature of some tours, eco-lodges are developed as an alternative to camping in the jungle." These serve as accommodation and have eco-friendly amenities.

Lodges range from basic to luxurious but eco-awareness is maintained across all of them. For example, the award-winning Sukau Rainforest Lodge run by Borneo Eco Tours is built to enable guests to have a comfortable immersion in the surrounding rainforests of the Kinabatangan river. The architecture and operations of the lodge also take into consideration their impact on the environment. The lodge is made of wood, to allow it to blend with the surroundings.

The third element, volunteerism, makes ecotourism different from merely visiting rainforests and natural tourist spots. The Sarawak Forestry Corp, for example, offers the Sea Turtle Adoption Programme at Talang Talang Island. It involves turtle conservation education sessions at which tourists are briefed by park wardens on the habits of turtles and their life cycles. At night, when turtles return to shore to lay their eggs, volunteers are shown how to assist in conservation activities, such as moving the eggs to hatching locations where they are kept in a conducive environment.

The programme runs from May to Septem-


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ber, during the egg-laying period, and proceeds are ploughed back into the conservation of the marine turtles.

No matter which element of ecotourism travellers opt for, they should keep two very important things in mind — preserving the environment and the native history and heritage, says Yap Sook Lin, managing director of Asian Overland Services Tour and Travel Sdn Bhd.

“We advise travellers on eco-treks to keep quiet and to never pick the flowers or leaves. During the trip, we [may] educate them on a particular fish that is almost extinct and rarely

found now — the kelah. They are kept in a sanctuary which people can visit,” he adds. And those who happen to catch the kelah are advised to put them back in the river.

Other locations in Malaysia that offer ecotourism services include Taman Negara, **Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM)**, Penang National Park, Royal Belum State Park, Endau-Rompin National Park, Danum Valley, Bako National Park, the Langkawi Mangroves, Pulau Tioman and Pulau Redang. Mulu National Park in Sarawak and Kinabalu Park in Sabah are recognised as Unesco World Heritage sites and also draw quite a lot of attention. — *By Sarah Voon* 

Top ecotourism destinations in Malaysia

Peninsular Malaysia	Sabah and Sarawak
National Park, Pahang	Sarawak
Kuala Gandah Elephant Sanctuary, Pahang	Bako National Park
Kenong Rimba Park, Pahang	Mulu National Park
Sungai Chilling Waterfall, Kuala Selangor, Selangor	Niah National Park
Royal Belum Forest Reserve, Perak	Batang Ai National Park
Gua Tempurung, Perak	Lampir Hill National Park
Kuala Gula Bird Sanctuary, Perak	Sabah
Penang National Heritage Park, Penang	Sepilok Orang Utan Sanctuary
Kilim Geopark, Langkawi Island	Kinabalu National Park
Rantau Abang Turtle Hatchery, Terengganu	Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park
Redang Island, Perhentian Island, Gemia Island, Terengganu	Danum Valley
	Maliau Basin
	Tabin Wildlife Reserve
	Kinabatangan Floodplain, Sukau
	Turtle Island
	Gua Gomantong, Kinabatangan, Sabah

Source: Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board

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