

The jungle beckons

[PUTRI ZANINA](#)

Stay at Pulau Banding on the man-made Tasik Temengor and enjoy the vastness of the lake and jungle on the main range. Or look for elephants along the picturesque journey through virgin jungle along the East-West Highway. PUTRI ZANINA did all that and can't wait to go back for more



Picture of this wild herd along the highway was taken by the resort front office manager Ridzuan Lopez while he was on the way to work about 8am



A group of mountain bikers from Singapore on a stop-over at the resort



Tasik Temengor is part of the huge Belum-Temengor Rainforest Complex

AFTER dinner, we've a full belly but nothing to do. It would have been so easy to succumb to the pleasure of lolling on our warm beds and soaking in the scenery visible through the large glass doors of our room.

Spread before us not too far away were the rolling hills, overlooking a still lake with waters that shimmered like glass against the blanket of darkness.

We felt a world away in such a tranquil setting at the brick and wooden Belum Rainforest Resort. But we wanted something more than just tranquillity that night. We wanted action. We wanted to see something wild, like herds of elephants crossing the highway. Yes, elephants! And yes, highway!

And this is no ordinary highway. It's the East-West Highway that cuts across the belly of peninsular Malaysia, from two god-forsaken places — Gerik in Perak and Jeli in Kelantan.

We were then somewhere in the middle, looking for action at Pulau Banding in Perak, the gateway to a green jewel, the Belum-Temengor Rainforest.

Earlier in the day, we had seen elephant-crossing signboards and one of them had been near the resort.

Within minutes, we found ourselves cruising on the highway towards Jeli, to check out the elephant crossings.

Our car's headlights pierced the darkness to reveal tricky curves flanked by wild bushes and big trees.

The headlights of the passing vehicles lent life to the otherwise dark, quiet and nearly empty highway.

While Zaaba, my husband, looked firmly in front as he drove the car along the winding road, I scoured the bushes by the roadside for any signs of movement.

But alas, there was no sight of the wild beasts throughout the half-hour drive. Oh, well, it wasn't our lucky night. The elephants had probably crossed earlier or at other spots.

We weren't about to lose sleep thinking about where they might be at that hour. The day's travelling from Kuala Lumpur to the wild "country" had taken its toll on us. That night, I slept like a log.

Tongkat Ali and Tumbling Bird

We woke up to the cheery sound of chirping birds and the sight of Tasik Temengor looking like a jewel in the sun. Though there was no breeze in the air, we could smell the freshness from the woods.

In the garden below our first floor room veranda were several Tongkat Ali plants that had grown almost to the level of our eyes. These plants were taken from the forest and replanted in the herbal garden that hasn't yet matured.

Tall trees stand guard over everything, including the concrete building that we stayed in, as if they sensed the intrusion.

During breakfast at the resort's Hornbill restaurant, our quiet makan was jolted by a loud thud. A bird had flown so fast that it had hit — beak first — the restaurant's external glass wall!

The bird looked dazed after tumbling to the ground. Zahari Harris, the resort director of sales and marketing, picked it up and we saw blood oozing from the side of its beak. But the poor little feathered one was all right. We asked Zahari to get his people to nurse the bird.

Keeping The Magic

Cruising around the island later with Zahari and the resort general manager, Rostam Mohamed, revealed the more picturesque face of Pulau Banding.

I watched in awe as the rays of the sun cut across the top of the hills towering above Tasik Temengor that surrounds the island. It is the kind of landscape, with miles of rugged terrain, that people would not mind travelling across the peninsula to witness.

It is reassuring to know that this rustic and wild open space will be protected from unscrupulous development.

Rostam said the Emkay Group of Companies, to whom the Perak state has alienated parts of the island for development, had developed the Pulau Banding Charter.

“The charter is a set of rules which are self imposed,” Rostam said, emphasising that any development taken must be in tandem with the ecological preservation of the area.

“We have also set up a research centre to allow researchers to study the area and the rich bio-diversity and also to act as watchdog over the area’s development.

“If the environment is gone, we’d all be screwed up!” he said, as our boat moved past the Gerik Forest Reserve towards the border of the Royal Belum State Park.

Within minutes, I felt the air turning cooler and saw the green getting greener in the vast expanse of the natural sanctuary before me.

But then we had to turn back as exploring Royal Belum was not in our plans during that short one-night stay at Pulau Banding.

Having had only glimpses of this largely unexplored green haven left us hungry to explore its depths. We made a promise to ourselves that we would be back.

Prized Heritage

Pulau Banding is a mountainous island surrounded by Tasik Temengor, with deep green waters fed by numerous rivers. Some of these rivers contribute to the second largest man-made water reservoir in Malaysia, the Temengor Dam (the largest is Tasik Kenyir in Terengganu), built about the same time as the East-West Highway.

The depth of the lake is astounding — its deepest part is about the height of a 75-storey building!

Linked to the mainland by the Tasik Temengor Bridge, Pulau Banding is the entry point to the huge Belum-Temengor Rainforest Complex, four times the size of Singapore, encompassing the Royal Belum State Park, Gerik Forest Reserve and Temengor Forest Reserve. The entire ensemble includes water bodies and virgin tropical rainforests dating back some 130 million years ago — making them even older than the forests in the Amazon and Congo!

Belum Rainforest Resort

The spanking new Belum Rainforest Resort now occupies the place previously known as Banding Island Resort. It was taken over by the Emkay Group last August. After massive rebuilding, costing RM35 million, the new resort spots features that include four- to five-star-like room facilities, water fountains, ponds and wooden poles that blend nicely with the surroundings.

It used the same designer who created the posh Four Seasons Resort Langkawi, no less.

When we were there, it wasn't fully ready yet. Nevertheless, the luxurious setting already in place pleasantly surprised us.

We stayed in the Deluxe Lake View room with twin beds and a day bed by a tall glass window that accords a lovely view of the lake. Sliding glass doors open up to a veranda with wooden poles as barricades.

The room décor is minimalist with clever use of dark brown wood against stark white walls. Floor-to-ceiling mirrors add to the already spacious feel. It's not the kind of luxury I'd expected at a resort in this deep interior.

One thing though, it doesn't have a TV in the rooms, and that's done on purpose. Who needs one when you're supposed to enjoy the symphony of Nature?

The resort is now gearing up for its official opening in May.

The resort offers 70 rooms of different types. Fifty more chalets will be built by the water's edge before the end of this year.

For those who want to experience the Belum Rainforest, the resort organises several tours, the most popular being the Nature Appreciation Walk in the forest and fishing trips to catch the bounty of fish in Tasik Temengor.

For trips to Upper Belum, permits are required from the state's park, police and army. You're advised to book at least a week ahead with the resort to get these permits.

For details, call the resort at 05-791 6800 or log on to www.belumresort.com

Highway Memorial

Pulau Banding, in the wilderness of the mighty Titiwangsa Range, opened up when the East-West Highway was built 38 years ago. It took 12 years of toil, from 1970 to 1982, to build this 214km road through the mountainous region crossing Perak and Kelantan.

What we today enjoy as one of the most scenic and hilly routes in the country was built at a heavy price. Many men died building it — from accidents during construction to attacks by communists.

The area was infiltrated with communists during the Emergency period from 1948 to 1960. The insurgency continued even some 20 years later.

The Public Works Department has erected a memorial at a spot where three of its men died and many more were hurt or maimed in communist attacks on Aug 27, 1974.

It was at this same spot, about 25km from Gerik, that 63 bulldozers were bombed by the communists in May the same year.

There were also numerous other attacks during the highway's construction, resulting not only in the deaths of workers but also security personnel.

Standing by the memorial against the backdrop of thick jungles flanking the highway gave us goose bumps. But making the short stop there was as fulfilling and meaningful as making the journey through the highway.

The Journey

The fun of making the journey starts the moment you exit the Kuala Kangsar (KK) toll plaza on the North-South Expressway.

If you have the time to spare, stop by KK and enjoy its serene setting by Sungai Perak. At a place called Lembah by the river in town, stop and shop for local craft, especially the famous Perak labu sayong (water pitcher), golok and other types of knives.

Savour the local laksa, a less tangy version of Penang assam laksa, at the Medan Selera in Lembah or try the famous hailam mee at a kopitiam near the Malay College Kuala Kangsar.

If you don't detour to town, the R&R near the KK toll plaza is a good alternative to sample local fare, including fresh water fish cooked in tempoyak (fermented durian) gravy.

From the toll plaza exit, follow signs to Gerik. You'll soon find yourself cruising along a fairly new highway linking KK to Lenggong.

Before reaching Lenggong, you would have crossed the Raja Muda Nazrin Bridge over Tasik Raban, a scenic lake. After the bridge, make a detour to the old road with a short, narrow stretch flanked by the lake on both sides. It feels absolutely surreal to pass through that stretch as the road seems to float precariously above the lake.

You can proceed to Lenggong via that old road or head back to the highway. Make a stop at a new R&R for an overview of the lake or have sumptuous grilled fish at the famous Restoran Ikan Bakar Tasik Raban along the highway.

Drive on to Lenggong, a place with many rivers and waterfalls. Just follow the signage leading to Lata Kekabu, Lata Air Ibol, Lata Papan, Lata Pusing and Lata Air Bahagi.

Cavers may want to explore caves like Dayak, Harimau and the historically significant Gunung Runtuh where the remains of the Perak Man (a Stone Age man aged 10,000 to 11,000 years old) were found.

A replica of the man, believed to be the most complete human skeleton ever found in Southeast Asia, is displayed at the Lenggong Archaeological Museum that sits on

Malaysia's earliest known site of human habitation, Kota Tampan. Find the time to explore this site that has preserved the finds of the Palaeolithic era.

From there, proceed to Gerik, about 55km away. After passing Gerik town, you'll reach a little roundabout. Take a three o'clock turn to enter route 4 that leads to Pulau Banding. If you miss that turn (the signboard there is small), you'll end up going to remote Baling in Kedah! Fret not though because you can turn back to the roundabout.

When you're on route 4, you'll start seeing the "Hutan Belum" signboards and your sojourn on the East-West Highway has begun.

It's uphill in the beginning, winding its way through hills and forests on both sides. Enjoy the sight of the vast expanse of greenery against the blue sky dotted with puffs of clouds over mountains that form the backbone of the peninsula — the Titiwangsa Range.

Watch out for elephant-crossing signs. Herds of elephants, some numbering 10 to 12, have often been seen crossing the highway at almost the same spots every time. Trampled grass and earth and, sometimes, blobs of elephant dung often mark these spots. The herds have used the same routes since ancient times.

Chances of sighting them are 80 per cent, almost always at night. They could also be seen in the early morning from 7am to 9am and in the evening from 6pm to 6.30pm.

If you do see them, stop and give way. It's not as if you come across such a spectacle every day. Don't honk, unless you want the wild four-legged beasts to come charging at you!

If you're lucky (or unlucky), you may also spot a tiger crossing the highway! But such sightings are extremely rare.

After travelling for 45 minutes, or about 38km from Gerik, you'll reach Pulau Banding.

Stop over there for a breathtaking view of Tasik Temengor (it's also widely spelt as Tasik Temenggor but Perak recognises Temengor as the correct spelling).

If you intend to explore the Belum-Temengor Rainforest and discover both the lower and upper Belum, you need to spend more than one night in Pulau Banding.

If not, after a short break there, proceed on with your drive to Jeli, 75km away. Along the way, you'll come across the Titiwangsa Rest Area with a lookout point that opens up to the hills and valleys of the mountain range.

If you don't make long stops, the journey spanning the entire length of the East-West Highway will take about three hours.

Lorries laden with logs may slow you down. The heavy lorries move at 20kph. They slow

down traffic on the Pulau Banding-Jeli route and you can see bald patches of forests, stripped bare of trees.

One important tip is to fill up your fuel tank, either at Gerik or Jeli. Though there are a number of rest areas, there are no petrol stations along the way.

The entire journey from Kuala Lumpur to Pulau Banding can take five hours (with short stops of a few minutes along the way). Add three more hours to reach Jeli.

- Pictures by Zaaba Johar