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Lost world of Malaysia

Little-known Unesco site in Perak hopes its archaeological past will spark tourism boom

Ram Anand
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In Lenggong (Perak)

A little-known town in Malaysia's northern Perak state is ready for its share of tourists, a good decade after it was listed as the country's fourth Unesco World Heritage site. Lenggong, located some 80km north of Perak's capital Ipoh, is hardly a mainstream tourist attraction, unlike Penang or Melaka, the two other Unesco sites in Peninsular Malaysia.

Nestled in a valley between the Bintang and Titiwangsa mountain ranges, Lenggong is straddled by the Perak River and the man-made Chenderoh Lake.

A sleepy hamlet filled with greenery, bodies of water and only 15,000 mostly-agrarian inhabitants, Lenggong does not have any major hotels and experiences the occasional power outage.

However, its historical significance surpasses these drawbacks. The Lenggong Valley was gazetted as a Unesco site for archaeology in 2012 – the only such site in Malaysia under that category.

The town and its surrounding villages are home to sites that contain evidence of prehistoric settlements dating back nearly two million years.

It is famous among historians for being the discovery site of the Perak Man, South-east Asia's oldest most complete human skeleton to date.

Perak Man – found in 1991 in a cave in Lenggong's limestone hill complex – is estimated to be 11,000 years old. The museum housing the skeleton is currently closed for upgrading works, but a replica can be found at Universiti Sains Malaysia's field centre, while the cave is open to those who visit with knowledgeable local guides and trekking equipment.

Among the town's half-dozen caves and open-air archaeological sites are workshops from the early

Stone Age where stone tools like handaxes were made. A series of 20 caves is the site of prehistoric burials.

Parts of the town are mysteriously covered in hardened volcanic ash, which scientists believe to be from the Toba supervolcano eruption in Sumatra some 75,000 years ago. Suvite boulders also point towards a meteorite impact in the valley some 1.83 million years ago.

Lenggong's rural location and lack of development have helped it preserve its culture, with villagers retaining traditional practices and dishes from decades of agricultural activities.

For former hotelier Abdul Nasir Jalaludin, this represents a perfect opportunity to harness the culture and archaeology of Lenggong to draw in visitors and raise awareness of its archaeological heritage.

The 52-year-old left his job in China in 2017 to retire in his ancestral home in Lenggong. Upon returning to his house, Mr Nasir discovered that his home town was a Unesco site going largely unnoticed by even Malaysians.

This drove him to scrap his early retirement plans and tap his hospitality experience to turn part of his home into a guesthouse – with the condition that visitors sign up for his whole cultural experience of Lenggong – eating local fare, discovering local produce, and visiting the archaeological sites.

"What we have is our culture, and people cannot imitate our culture," said Mr Nasir, who calls Lenggong the "lost world of Malaysia".

From his home, Rumah Tiang 16 (House Post 16), he champions community-based tourism.

"Tourism is very green," he added. "You don't have to cut down anything to generate an income."

Among those who have benefited from Mr Nasir's model is Madam Fatimah Mohd Said, who makes a Malay traditional cooling powder using fermented rice.

The 63-year-old used to make

the powder, called bedak sejuk, as an odd job with a dozen customers per month. But since Mr Nasir started taking visitors to watch her at work, her sales have more than quadrupled.

Madam Fatimah, a grandmother and recently remarried, will move to Malaysia's capital Kuala Lumpur this month. But she already has a successor for her business in her daughter, who has become convinced of the economic value of the traditional craft.

At Rumah Tiang 16, guests tuck into meals prepared by Lenggong villager Noor Syilahizam Nordin, who serves several dishes that are not common Malay fare even in other parts of the country. Among them is ikan pindang daun seniar, where a fish is slow cooked for 48 hours in a banana leaf, till even its bones are edible.

Mr Nasir has so far drawn over 350 visitors from 25 nationalities. When he cannot house a big group in his home, he works with other local operators like Mr Aziz Abd Manap, who runs a rustic, village-style lake retreat in Lenggong.

The former Kuala Lumpur-based professional was one of the area's earliest tourism proponents, having set up his no-frills resort in 1995.

All the unassuming protagonists of Lenggong have now come under the umbrella of Think City, a city-making organisation established by Malaysia's sovereign wealth fund Khazanah Nasional.

Think City, which has worked on urban regeneration projects in Penang, Kuala Lumpur and Johor Bahru, has now set its sights on building an archaeo-tourism network in Malaysia's northern corridor, with Lenggong as one of the focus towns.

The RM10 million (S\$3.1 million) project is expected to take 10 years to reach full fruition.

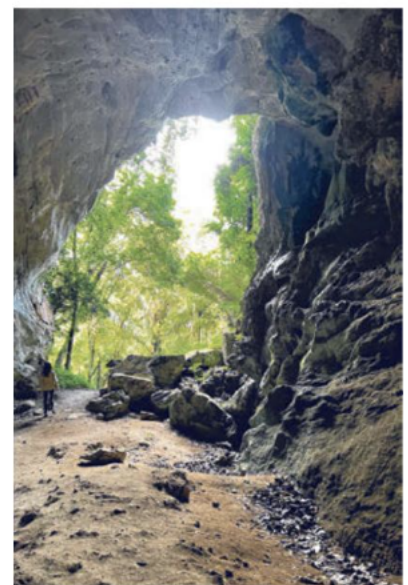
"Cultural tourism now makes up 40 per cent of all tourism. That trend is also emerging in Asia and South-east Asia," said Think City managing director Hamdan Abdul Majeed.

"People make it a point to turn up for food and culture."

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Lenggong native and community-based tourism operator Abdul Nasir Jalaludin dons traditional Malay costume when welcoming guests to his house for a home-cooked dinner consisting of local dishes.



Gua Kajang, one of the many caves in Lenggong where human remains dating back thousands of years have been found. ST PHOTO: RAM ANAND

Skeletons, fireflies and much more

Malaysia has begun efforts to promote archaeological tourism in its lesser-known towns, where visitors are introduced to conservation or historical sites while sampling local culture. I got a taste of this when I spent five days in three towns in the north of Perak – Lenggong, Taiping and Kuala Sepetang – in June.

Lenggong is home to the Lenggong Valley, a Unesco world heritage site for archaeology. Here, I traversed caves where human remains that are thousands of years old were found, and visited a gallery where a replica of the 11,000-year-old Perak Man skeleton – the most complete such skeleton in South-east Asia – is housed.

The area is scenic and serene, with a man-made lake and the tropical forests of the Bintang and Titiwangsa mountain ranges.

A guided visit to Bukit Bunuh will reveal the location of a prehistoric meteorite crash site some 1.83 million years ago. Stone tools found in the area indicate the existence of prehistoric humans in this valley.

Lenggong has also preserved its agricultural way of life and its food. Lunch at the Dangau Mak Aini eatery comprises traditional Malay dishes of fish and vegetables enjoyed while sitting cross-legged in a farmer's hut, which mystifyingly stays cool despite the hot weather.

I recommend taking a cruise on Chenderoh Lake, where you might enjoy a gorgeous sunset against the backdrop of either of the two mountain ranges, dotted with village hamlets enveloped in relative silence.

I enjoyed a no-frills, yet comfortable stay at Rumah Tiang 16, hosted by Lenggong native Abdul Nasir Jalaludin in his private home, which is filled with collectables.

Within an hour's drive of Lenggong is Taiping, which is home to historical attractions including the Perak Museum, Malaysia's first museum, the country's first railway track, and the oldest coffee mill, Antong Cafe.

Half an hour from Taiping, on Perak's west coast, lies the fishing village town of Kuala Sepetang, formerly known as Port Weld.

I enjoyed a post-dusk boat ride to watch fireflies along the river, where I had earlier seen fishermen using drag nets to scoop up shrimp along the river bed. I also spotted eagles picking up fish and shrimp from the river.

Mee udang, a signature dish of Kuala Sepetang, was one of the highlight dishes of my trip. Salleh Stall in the middle of the village serves up the prawn noodles with a really rich broth. The dish brims with sea-caught prawns and fresh seafood from the river. Absolutely *sedap* (delicious).

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