



# Precious treasures

(Above) Squeezing through the caves of Gunung Senyum.

> FROM PAGE 11

the middle of one of these caves since it received direct sunlight. Yes, that would be Gua Taman, the "Garden Cave".

We continued our journey, heading up to the mountain peak, but a sign at the bottom said it would take 6½ hours to get to the top, and since it was already near noon, we thought it best to climb the next day. Next day, we found out that it actually took 6½ hours to climb up and down the mountain. The sign could have been much more clearer, we grumbled.

Accessing the rest of the caves further up the mountain required a fair bit of hiking along badly marked trails. Thankfully, Michael was experienced enough that we didn't have much trouble finding the caves. He taught us a lot about cave formations and how precious and fragile they were.

It takes hundreds of years to grow just an inch, for example, so it's best to be careful about what you touch in here. We did a bit of spelunking towards the end.

There was a small crack in the rocks which seemed to go down forever and sounds from a rock we threw in seemed to confirm that.

It's now or never. Stashing our day packs behind a rock, we proceeded to inch slowly down the steep slope on our bums into the gaping darkness. The small crack grew even smaller and we found ourselves lying flat on our backs in order to wiggle our way through. Thankfully, the gap opened up into a bigger hole and we were able to sit upright again.

We could feel the contrasting dampness by now and it was a bit stifling underground. The walls were coated in a layer of thin dirt that stuck to every inch of our clothing.

"Careful, big gap ahead!" called out Michael.

As my line of sight was blocked by the person in front of me, I wasn't really prepared when my foot stepped into empty nothing-

ness. I quickly gained my footing and stabilised myself thinking: "Phew! That was close!"

"Look up to your right, see the small hole at the top? You can see a tiny ridge a little further down in front. Place your right hand in the top hole and stretch your right leg onto the ridge. Swing your left leg and grab hold of that small protruding rock. You should be able to clear the gap with no problem at all," said Michael.

It sounded easy, but boy was it tough. For someone with short legs, clearing a gap while hanging on for dear life was no easy feat. Lucky for me, my balance was good and I managed to swing my left foot onto the next boulder and haul my body up. I clung to the boulder for a few seconds, thankful that I survived the death-defying drop below.

Ok, maybe I'm being a little dramatic here. The gap was scary but it was not that life threatening. Granted, you might twist an ankle if you fell down but that would be about it.

The rest of the passageway was easy going from then on. The space remained small with not one section allowing you to stand at all. We were mainly crawling on our knees or slithering along on our bellies. There were times when I thought some of the bigger-bodied ones would get stuck but everyone crawled through easily. Fat is compressible, you see.

A word of caution: do not descend into a cave by yourself unless you are accompanied by an experienced guide.

It is no fun being stuck underground in complete darkness. In fact, it's terrifying, but if you're with an experienced guide, crawling on your belly and squeezing through holes you never thought possible to get through can be quite exhilarating.

## Gunung Jebak Puyuh

We woke up bright and early to chirping birds the next day.

After a hearty breakfast which

### Getting there

Travel along the old trunk road from Kuala Lumpur to Kuantan, and head towards Temerloh town. Look out for signboards to Hutan Lipur Gunung Senyum. One turn off is by the east end of the bridge at Temerloh, the other one is at Kampung Awah. Gunung Senyum is 40km from Temerloh and 20km from Bandar Pusat Jengka.

**PERMIT** Not required.

**EQUIPMENT** Light clothing, preferably long-sleeved and pants, flexible shoes with a good grip, flashlights and head torches, helmets and a day pack for food supplies. Expect to get dirty and wet.

**FACILITIES** Hutan Lipur Forest Rangers office, car park, campsite, toilets, surau and rest area. For more information, call the Temerloh Forestry District Office at (09) 296 2755.

Michael and Ng cooked on their portable stove, we suited up for another day of cave exploration.

We hiked for about an hour before we reached the first caves of Gunung Jebak Puyuh. The caves here were relatively big, with soft, sandy soil. Michael and Ng wanted to explore an opening but had to retreat because the soil was too soft.

"We would love to explore every crevice but if it is not safe enough, we will not go through with it. For example, the soil here is very soft and there are lots of fine, loose particles. It might cave in on us if we were to go further down," said Michael.

Most of the caves had no signage, unlike the caves at Gunung Senyum which had a brief history on how the names were derived, so we didn't know exactly which caves we were exploring.

There was one particular cave I enjoyed, a huge cavern that linked several caves together. There were abandoned pathways which would have looked fantastic if they had been maintained but I'm glad in a way that they weren't as we got to enjoy the natural environment of the cave. I was curious to explore

Gunung Senyum, which first opened as a recreational forest on July 14, 1989, covers 794ha of the Jengka Forest Reserve in Pahang. Managed by the Temerloh Forestry Department, the area is an important biodiversity reservoir.

With its many caves and a forest rich in flora and fauna, Gunung Senyum offers visitors many educational and adventure activities.

There are two limestone hills here, namely the 550m Gunung Senyum, which has 18 caves, and Gunung Jebak Puyuh, which has seven caves. Gunung Senyum was highlighted a while back when a leading Malaysian conglomerate sought permission to quarry limestone from its hills.

"I am very concerned for Gunung Senyum," said a 45-year-old local who didn't want to be named.

"I was very disturbed when I heard that the beautiful caves of Gunung Senyum, which took millions of years

to grow might be destroyed to produce cement.

"I am a cave enthusiast and I have been bringing people here to enjoy the wonders of Gunung Senyum for 19 years, including foreign researchers from England and Sweden. They usually come here on extended day trips to conduct research on insects, bats and herbs.

"Gunung Jebak Puyuh, for one, is still active and growing. Many have said that it is much nicer than Gunung Senyum.

"I have encountered several animals here. There are many species of bats living here, some of which are endangered. Rare or endangered plants include the Merawan Jeruai tree and the Albino Ara tree, which you can see if you trek to Gunung Jebak Puyuh.

"Many NGOs are protesting the project, and I hope that the Government will at least listen to what they have to say before giving the go-ahead," he said.

The Malaysian Karst Society (MKS), a non-profit, non-government organisation formed to conserve the karst outcrops in Malaysia, has even sent a letter to the company in question expressing their misgivings and requesting a dialogue with them.

"It's been several months and we still haven't received a



(Above) A rare Albino Ara tree.

# Trouble for the caves?

response," its president Hymeir Kamarudin said.

"We hope they would agree to not quarry the place, and we would be more than happy to suggest and identify other less sensitive suitable sites for quarrying. There are technologies and quarrying methods such as basement quarrying, which neither deface nor destroy our above ground resources.

"We are currently embarking on a project to compile a database of all cave and karst features in Malaysia to determine the holistic value of a limestone hill where aesthetic, conservation and economic values are taken into consideration. This project is important because it will enable us to better manage the country's limited limestone resources.

"We hope the private sector is interested in funding this project to enable them to make sound decisions in relation to Malaysia's limestone resources," said Hymeir.

Even though it isn't as well-known among tourists as the other caves in Malaysia, Gunung Senyum Recreational Forest is an interesting destination for those interested in caving and trekking, as well as those who appreciate the diverse flora and fauna of the natural world.

but was too scared to go alone into the darkness until Michael said that all the passageways lead to the main cavern that we were standing in.

I told Michael to stay put as he was studying some cave formations while I ventured into a winding passageway with my friend. It wasn't that difficult as the caves were huge and we could walk straight in.

The floors were dry and there wasn't much debris hindering our movements.

True enough, each twisting passage led us back to the main cavern. After going down five passageways and discovering the same thing, I gave up and joined Michael at the huge column in the middle.

"Look at this column," said Michael. "The stalactite formed from water droplets from the ceiling has joined at the bottom, becoming one big column. It takes millions or years to achieve this and only a few seconds to destroy it. We should do all we can to preserve these natural wonders."

It was indeed beautiful. And so were the other intriguing cave formations found all around Gunung Jebak Puyuh and the small cave creatures scuttling about.

Trekking in the jungles outside again, we also had an opportunity to appreciate the magnificent rare Albino Ara tree.

Despite the horror that was the toilet, the trip as a whole was great, worthy of an educational experience.