

TRAVEL

Up the highlands, windows down

Old world charm and healing spirit, snug in the Camerons

By ENOL DE CRUZ
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THE story is well-known. Cameron Highlands, discovered in 1885, by Sir William Cameron, was populated by British expatriates and Malaysians after a road was built in 1931. Settling on the slopes of the foothills, they were followed by tea planters and vegetable growers who found the climate suitable for the growing of their crops. By the mid-1930s, there was much improvement, with a six-hole golf course, several cottages, three tins, a police post, two boarding schools, a primary school, a hospital, a government rest house and agricultural experiment station.

The domain grew until the Second World War. During the Japanese Occupation (1942-1945), there was hardly any development in the area. When the Japanese withdrew in August 1945, it underwent a transformation which came to a halt during the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960) and when the conflict

ended. "Cameron's Land" experienced a marked change in its landscape. Today, the haven is not only the biggest and best known of Malaysia's hill stations, it is also the highest point in Peninsular Malaysia accessible by car.

When Cameron described it to Perak Resident Sir Hugh Low, he decided it would become "a sanatorium, health resort and farmstead".

A survey was later conducted by Captain C.C. Best and the authorities learnt that the area was good for growing tea. The rest is history.

Today, Sir Hugh's dream has become a reality, many times over. Originally, a place for expatriates who were homesick, it is now a favourite for locals who want to escape city heat.

Convincing from whatever ails you as soon as you begin climb, just after the quiet town of Tapah, and the log cabin, the hilltop agencies that come with more than 700 species of flora... changes as you ascend the drive is that you need not ask. The drive automatically winds the windows down as it fits the foothills. Has fame and wants to enjoy the greenery and clean

air, too. The drive up the ever-winding mountain roads past the early orang all villages clears your mind as children and whose's around stop to see who's coming round the bend.

Soon, you're higher, and the little town centre consists of sundry shops, generalists, landrover's, stationary stalls and lots, the last of which have mushroomed as the tourist population has multiplied.

After a pit-stop for toiletries and stuff that men always forget to pack, we headed uphill to the highlands' first Tudor-style country house — the Lakehouse, owned by HPI Hotels and Resorts, which also owns the Concord Hotel in KL, Casa del Mar in Langkawi, Kedah, Casa del Rio in Malacca and the Hard Rock outlets in KL, Penang and, most recently, Malacca.

If you're coming from bustling KL or Penang, you'll be stepping into a new world, complete with tranquil settings and crisp, cool mountain air.

The Lakehouse is nicely nestled against a forest

backdrop, 1,000 feet above sea level, on a hill which overlooks Sultan Abu Bakar Lake (which, incidentally, needs a good cleanup), in what is called the Valley of Eternal Spring.

Colonel Stanley Jack Forster, a retired British Army Officer, was the original builder and owner of The Lakehouse in 1966.

Forster ran The Lakehouse and The Smokehouse (in Tanah Rata), until 1977, when he sold the latter to a local businessman named Peter Lee and continued to manage The Lakehouse till his demise in December, 1984.

Forster's children were not interested in managing a hotel and preferred to divide their share from the sale of the property. His second wife, a local Chinese, did not have the experience to run a hotel and HPI bought the property in 1995.

Lakehouse has only been slightly refurbished to retain its old world atmosphere and so you cross its threshold, you're transported. The place is longed for with antiques, candleabra, a splendide fireplace, a cosy library where you can leave your books that you've read and even take away that feelings to the Lakehouse.

"There are always books here that guests happily leave for others to share," said Rooms Manager Mohd Noor, who, after several years in the hospitality industry, has been here for five months. "My friends said I wouldn't last here for very long because it's nothing like the big cities. Did I want to go trekking in the jungles? Haha, no thanks, I'm not really an outdoorsman." I said,

"Good. Then you can go for a massage at our Salkara Spa," he replied, and promptly made an appointment with the centre's sole therapist Lyliana who, he said, will take good care of me.

That, Lyliana did, and was soon napping while she worked on sinews I had long forgotten about.

There are 19 rooms at The Lakehouse, where other offers include The Restaurant, Lakewood Terrace, Cameron Room, a board games room and a landscaped garden for events.

Malaysians that we are, the ideal choice for a convalescing weekend in the Camerons would be one of the rooms warmed by an authentic fireplace, a fairy-tale world really with moss under our feet, on tree branches and trunks... everywhere.

The Lakehouse also organises tours that educate guests about the many entertaining and intriguing aspects of Cameron Highlands and it regularly uses an outfit called Eco, Cameron

consumed by the plant," he said. "Some clever ones know just how much to drink and they fly away to pollinate other plants."

There are old world ferns which look exactly like they did, 90 million years ago, and wood crotalaria that smells like eucalyptus and used as a vapouriser to treat colds and as a mosquito repellent?

Rajoo also told us about wild bilberry which smells like vacuum and is used in toothpaste and deep heat rubs, and wild ginger root which is used to heal minor injuries.

We talk about eco-systems and in presenting nature in all its glory, we get the environment to be the Time Turner effect, we headed back into the past of the highlands through photographs and memorabilia that speak to you about many decades.

This is "must visit" if you want to learn about highland history as owner See Koh Shan presents items depicting the past from personal collections of locals who have been here since the pre-war days.

See a Cameronian with a penchant for vintage items, "accumulated much junk over the years" and teamed up with the owner of the Kok Lim Strawberry farm to share his treasure trove and memories. He began this passionate project in 2007, buying more than 3,000 artefacts that tell you about the mysterious disappearance of the Sui King Jim Thompson, who never came back, the historic battle between world boxing champions Muhammad Ali and Joe Bugner in KL in 1975; the orang asli of the Camerons and old world Chinese traditions and pastimes.

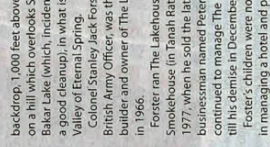
The highlands tour took a good eight hours also covering the Boh tea estate that sprawls over 34ha, the factory at Sungai Palas which produces 800,000 cups every day, the butterfly garden, strawberry farm, wet market and Chinese Buddhist temple.

For more, visit lakehouse-cameron.com, www.ecocameron.com and www.cameronhighland.net/time-tunnel.htm.

They fall into the cup and are dizzy.



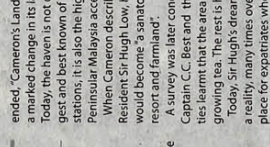
RAJOO, the 'Salkara' Palas estate produces 800,000 cups of tea daily



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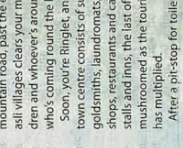
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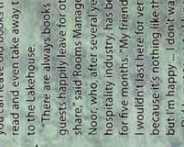
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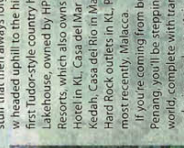
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