

A nature walk... In an oil palm plantation

By Anna Vivienne

THE wind sighs over the tree-tops as evening sun beams its last rays over it. The birds sing and warble, as if saying their goodbye to the setting sun, crickets prattle like incessant naggers and in the distance an owl calls. Dusk falls. Nature is in all its elements and peace reigns.

This is not fanciful imaginings; it is real. You can also experience this. The place is Balung River Estate where the Balung River Eco Resort is. Balung by the way is in Tawau.

The resort is very interesting, for want of a better word. Because even though the it is within an oil palm and cocoa plantation, some original trees have been left uncut while other local plants have been allowed to grow back, allowing it to have that appealing 'place in the wilderness' ambience.

This resort is perfect for those who want to relax away from the hustle and bustle of city life and the rat race. This is where you can take long walks and contemplate nature or just laze away with a good book.

Actually there are a lot of things to see and do in the resort. In fact you will not be able to see it all if you are there only for a couple of days. Take three or four days...and then you will see it all.

If you love walking and enjoying silent moments with your thoughts, a walk on the estate paths will do you good.

As you walk on, you will chance upon a field of *Orthosiphon stamineus*, which is locally known as Misai Kucing.

This plant have beautiful purple and white flowers on a bushy stalk. When they occupy a whole field and flower, the effect is so breathtakingly beautiful.

This pretty plants however are not just there for the show. They are actually being planted by the plantation for commerce.

Since they are traditionally used to treat diabetes, kidney and urinary disorders, high blood pressure and bone or muscular pain, they are now being processed and packed in Balung as tea.

Wander on and you may come to the *Morinda citrifolia* patch. Not that the patch is small. It must be a couple of acres if not more.

Morinda, commonly known noni or cheese fruit is native to Southeast Asia and grows nicely on any fertile soil. In Sabah you can see this plant on compound of houses as decorative plants.

In Balung they are planted and tended to diligently. They look very nice as they grow on almost-symmetrical rows, bearing tangy fruits.

They are not planted for their nice looks though, or even for shade. They have great commercial value, as it is believed to help in treating high blood pressure, constipation, period pains, stomach ulcer and flatulence.

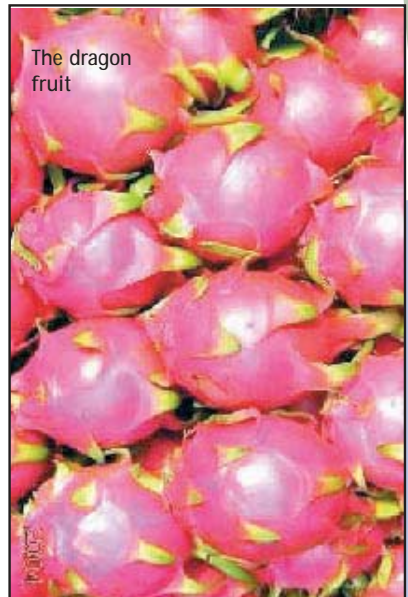
If you are at this patch of plantation, you will see some diligent workers harvesting the fruit. The fruits are gathered for the processing plant just near the resort. They are now being process into juice and pill form.

As you meander on, you will come to an area where tall trees with wide leaves grow. The tall trees make perfect shade and you may be tempted to rest a while and enjoy the breeze, the bird songs and various calls of the wild.

You will be interested to know however that you are resting under 'money'. This is because the tall trees in question are teak trees that will cost a lot when they are harvested a decade or two from now. By that time, timber from the wild will be quite scarce and these trees will be in great demand then.



Cocoa



The dragon fruit



Workers harvesting noni



The managing director Khatizah

If you look around you properly, you will see a small tree that has just been planted under the shade of the teak trees.

They are not lowly shrubs. They are saplings of the gaharu tree or agarwood. This tree produce aromatic resin when it becomes mouldy due to infections or attack by a certain parasite.

The modern way of acquiring the resins is by inoculating the tree with this parasite. However the trees in Balung plantation will only be harvested in 20 years time.

By the way, the aromatic resin is used in perfumes.

When you are ready for a rest, your room at the resort is the way to head towards to.

After your walk, a good meal is in order. The resort has a nice eatery to cater to you, with an extensive menu to choose from.

Later you may want to see more of the estate; walk down the hill in front of your resort and you will come to a swimming pool. A dip will always soothe tired muscles. There are some shades there where you can lay down and read a book.

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noni fruits