

Finding Wang Kelian

"If you want to observe the fish,
Enter the river without creating ripples."
— unknown

By SHIREEN ZAINUDIN

ONCE took an overnight train to Kuala Perlis, to catch the early ferry to Langkawi. I wanted to tick off the last Malaysian state I hadn't until then visited. Tiny and tucked right up under a crease on the Thai border, I had Perlis covered, I ignorantly thought, with a mad dash through the street-food vendors thronging the port.

Fast forward 10 years and the whispers about the extraordinary landscape of the Wang Kelian Valley in Perlis were insistent. Hypnotic, abundant, untouched. What had I overlooked all these years?

The Wang Kelian Valley and the adjoining Perlis State Park are largely shaped by the 370 million-year-old Nakawan Range that stretches 36km from Thailand to Kuala Perlis where I once caught that ferry to Langkawi, where the same limestone range continues.

The longest limestone range in Malaysia, the prehistoric reach of the Nakawan Range has birthed astounding geological formations: escarpments, underground pools and a complex network of caves which may include some of the deepest in the country. This vast expanse of limestone generates a less humid climate than the rest of our steamy country and a semi-deciduous jungle with seasonal leaf colours and shedding that occurs between December and March every year. These rich natural phenomena are only just garnering wider interest, though long observed by the over 200 species of birds and 40 species of mammals in residence, gentle keepers of many Wang Kelian secrets.

Though Padang Besar is the main border crossing into Thailand, Kampung Wang Kelian is the northernmost Malaysian settlement. As a deterrent to cross-border trafficking and smuggling, police checkpoints dot this frontier-land where the surrounding tangle of jungle remains a green gateway rooted in lore.

Malaysian citizens born or resident for more than a year in the states of Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and some districts of Hulu Perak may, however, apply for border passes which enable them to cross over, without passports, to the southern Thailand provinces of Satun, Songkhla, Yala and Pattani.

Getting to know you

Fahmi Radzi, our young guide, a Kangar native, is articulate and enthusiastic about showing us his home state.

"It takes 45 minutes to drive from the north to the south of Perlis. Forty five minutes east to west too."

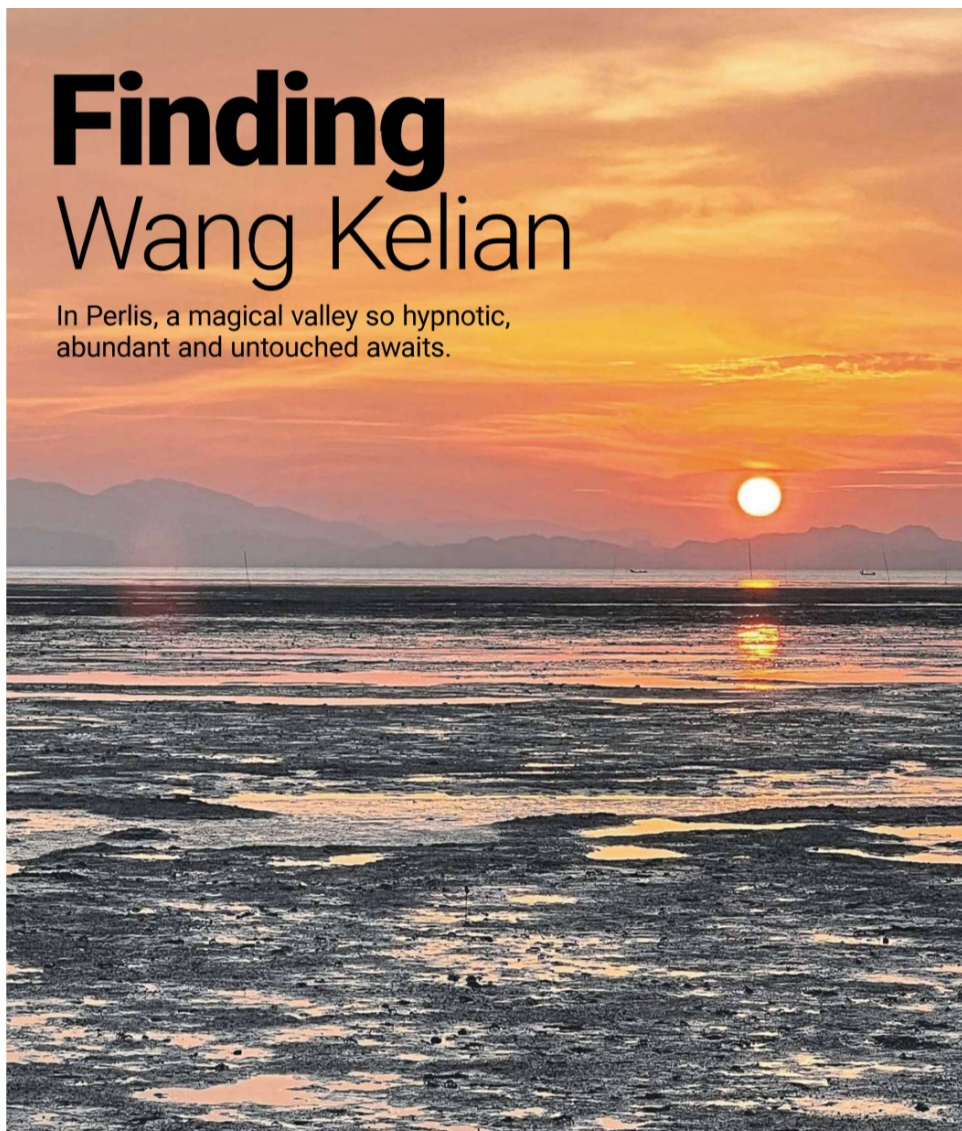
Fahmi is one of a merry band of volunteers from Perlis Nature and Wildlife (PNW) whose mission is to educate the wider public by sharing their passion and pride in the natural and historical heritage of Perlis and Wang Kelian in particular.

They are led by Syamil Abd Rahman who has been instrumental in documenting the stump-tailed macaques. He has been tracking primates in the region since 2016. The iconic red-faced stump-tail macaque is endemic to the Nakawan Range in Malaysia. Classified as "vulnerable" by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in 2015, families of "berok kento!" were easily sighted in the Wang Kelian Valley during the Covid lockdown.

Today the tribes have retreated farther into the jungle.

It is still dark at the very comfortable Gua Kelam Chalets in Kampung Kaki Bukit as we get ready for the day. The inscrutability of the surrounding jungle is heightened by a soundtrack of rising looping calls unlike any I've ever heard. Good morning to you too berok kento!

A thick drizzle dampens our enthusiasm



A beautiful view of the setting sun in Kuala Perlis. By the time that you leave, your heart will be full. — Photos: SHIREEN ZAINUDIN

as we traipse up to the famed Wang Kelian viewpoint just before sunrise. Viewpoints have often failed to live up to my expectations even on a clear day. This one exceeded them. By far.

We were greeted by a dreamscape of ethereal beauty. Sage-green padi fields, clusters of kampung houses and the Timah Tasoh waters lure you into a pastoral idyll dramatically ringed by jungle-clad hills.

The twin peaks of Bukit Chabang rising 390m to drape itself in low-lying cloud is pure theatre. You lose yourself in the mists and mystery as birdsong defiantly pierces through the mizzle.

Nocturnal wildlife spotting might be the best way to bookend an introductory day to the area. PNW organises a night walk through the herbal fragrance of Taman Rimba Herba where guides with built-in night vision will show you a bewildering variety of spiders, beetles and other bug-life indicative of a thriving biosystem.

But if you're really lucky you get to spend the evening in search of the Sunda Slow Loris with Peter Ong, who may well be responsible for those early whispers about the enchantment of Wang Kelian.

Ong, wildlife photographer, founder of #projectmonyet and producer of the beautifully realised documentary *Wang Kelian, Perlis – The Forgotten Valley* just happened

to be in town one evening in the hope of getting some good shots of this endangered primate.

So we hopped on the back of his pick-up equipped with head-torches, cameras and prayer.

And success struck twice! I now know that these beautiful shy primates are arboreal and partial to stink beans so keep looking up those petai trees.

Kampung life

There are only around 200 people living in Kampung Wang Kelian today. Nestling at the foot of the Nakawan Range, it looks like a 150ha agrarian amphitheatre encircled by spectating hills. Before the arrival of asphalt roads, villagers walked a 10km jungle path to get to Kampung Kaki Bukit for trade and supplies.

This Denai Warisan (Heritage Trail) runs along a pretty stream and is a popular route for hikers today. Cutting through Permatang Tangga, much of the trail is still intact even as the jungle has dutifully re-staked its claim.

The village is tranquil as we meander. A child plays quietly on a tricycle ahead. The crowing rooster almost obligatory. The air is thickly perfumed with the heavy sweetness of fruit trees in season:

duku, rambutan, harumanis mango, coconut. Ripened corn towers in the sunlight above tapioca at ground level. Coral and crimson ginger flowers peek through everywhere. A pair of green hanging parrots put on a fiery show chasing each other through old rubber trees. It's a breathing poster for the rural idyll.

The history of the village may not be ancient but the charming recollections of the orang kampung embedded in its fabric are invaluable living culture. These personal first-hand accounts are crammed with unwritten history that may go largely unheard and one day be forgotten.

Mak Milah hops lightly off her motor bike. She invites us to help ourselves to her mangosteens, glorious plump bursts of dark purple lying on low branches in her orchard. She tells us a snake was curled around one of the branches the day before as she lay resting beneath its shade. We retreat and opt for hot tea.

In the 1970s, Mak Milah was a young woman collecting bat guano for fertiliser near a rock shelter in Bukit Rongkit in Wang Belanga. It was here that she found the now famous buyung (clay receptacle).

Earlier this year members of PNW along with the Department of National Heritage and a documentary team headed by Ong went in search and located this

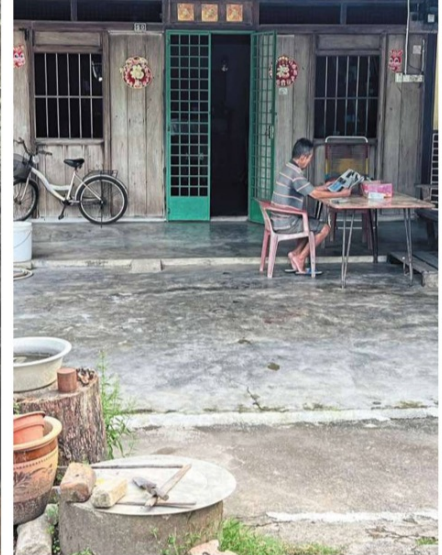
Finding Wang Kelian (cont)



This Denai Warisan (Heritage Trail) runs along a pretty stream and is a popular route for hikers today.



As you enter Gua Kelam, you find that exploring the caves today is an eerie but strangely heartwarming experience.



The quiet life in Kampung Kaki Bukit, which lives up to its small frontier town history.

same site. They found pottery shards, tools and hundreds of snail shells with their ends cut off. Who was here using pottery and dining on snails? Were these prehistoric settlements?

We excitedly await answers.

The tin miner's son

Wang – lembah/valley. Kelian – galian/mining.

Situated in the Wang Mu forest reserve near Kampung Kaki Bukit, the cave mines have long been a magnet. These are the only tin mining caves in Malaysia and the second largest tin mining cave complex in the world after Brazil's.

Small-time Malay tin miners had been working these caves for hundreds of years before the arrival of Chinese and Western miners in the early 1900s. The concentration of ore drew many here with dreams of becoming overnight millionaires with a rich strike.

Kampung Kaki Bukit is a small frontier town that almost exclusively served the needs of Chinese tin miners. The neat rows of nondescript shops are a textbook picture of utilitarian architecture and, seemingly like all Chinese towns, this one too came with a basketball court. Mining officially ceased in Gua Kelam after the Japanese occupation with all unofficial mining ending in the 1990s. The town is today perhaps in need of a new purpose.

Our Gua Kelam guide, Ah Long, was born and raised in Kaki Bukit. His main occupation today is guiding visitors around his childhood playgrounds – the caves, streams and trails found here. But as a child he followed his parents into these subterranean caverns, working alongside them for up to a week at a time before food supplies would run out. Work was dangerous and difficult but it was a life that he loved and now loves sharing with visitors.

Exploring the caves today is an eerie but strangely heartwarming experience.

You'll come across the accoutrements of a long-gone mining community. From discarded tins of Van Houten chocolate to gargantuan labour-intensive rock pyramids to love graffiti scratched on these rock walls, one is in awe at the resilience of man. That combined with the unwavering hope for a better future.

And if you keep going...

The "dry" and "wet" caves of Wang Burma are an endurance-challenging terrain teeming with wildlife. Be prepared to crawl, slither and get wet, and always

The word magic is used a lot but it really does happen here. I am marked by more than the three leeches that bit me. There is a desire to return, to experience more and learn more.

always keep that helmet on! Hedgehogs, bats, toads and fish populate these grottos a little more gracefully than us trespassers. Along with the stalactites, stalagmites and cave curtains formed millennia ago, these indicators of a healthy ecosystem remind us to flounder as gently as possible.

Bukit Keteri however may be the place for noisily flexing one's fitness. Known as K3 (love the reference) to local climbers this very cool pair of mogotes are where part of an ancient skull was found fused to the rock in 2018. Climbing enthusiasts, Perlis Climbers, have pegged numerous colour-coded climbing routes and are happy to guide both the novice and the more experienced climber.

The other climbing experience not to be had is up Bukit Jernih. Ancient wooden ladders were erected to collect birds' nests and guano in caves 245m high. Until 2017 local climbers had only ascended 140m. Finally early this year three climbers found a route to reach the legendary Gua Nenek Kebayan. The ancient ladders remain unclimbable.

And if shopping at ground level is more your cup of teh tarik, there is a morning market with a twist every Sunday in Kampung Kubang. Nat (market) Pokok Getah sprouts up around the trees of an old rubber estate, selling everything from antiques to vegetables to clothes.

And back to where it all began for me. Distance is nothing in Perlis. Do get yourself to Kuala Perlis. Those street stalls I remember have multiplied. There are now hipster cafes selling sophisticated Arabica blends but there's still Kak Su

Laksa eaten Perlis style with pulut udang (glutinous rice with prawn sambal). Don't miss Api Api Ikan Bakar for the best baked fish and find space for duck rendang and some Perlis-Thai food too.

Finally get there early and soak up some of the best sunsets to be found along this Peninsula.

Observing the fish...

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That Wang Kelian and its staggering biodiversity should be cared for is beyond question.

That sustainable tourism must be framed to support the local communities and their ecosystems is also clear. The ripples visitors create must enable the villagers to earn a living, take pride in what they have forged and drive their communities to thrive.

The pieces of any eco-jigsaw should slot together to include the needs of humans and nature.

There are undoubtedly complexities.

Maybe we could ask the berok kentoi. With their stump tails and red faces. With their wise eyes that have seen their home diminish and ask us only for respect.

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Nocturnal wildlife spotting might be the best way to bookend an introductory day to the area, including spotting a Sunda Slow Loris. – PETER ONG



Fresh fish for sale, you just need a huge chiller box to take them home.