

.... AND AT THE END OF THE WORLD.... LANGKAWI !

It is difficult to believe that the man standing before us in his combat uniform, machete by his side looking like a member of a SWAT unit was actually once a German college lecturer. Were we in the wrong movie? Did we make a mistake with our booking? Or had we landed in the ‘survival training for special units’? Two South Africans, one couple from Slovenia who had been recommended to take the tour by their tour operator, a travel agency manager from England and a very talkative Chinese lady made up the group on this tour offered by the Berjaya Beach & Spa Resort.

During the drive up the highest mountain we were informed in detail of the geography, geology, flora and fauna of the island. The ‘lecturer’ in our guide was shining through from time to time. Then we were ready for the two-hour jungle trek. Ropes were taken up, carabiner hooks and other mountaineering gear clicked with metallic sounds against Jürgen’s backpack and belt. Trousers were tucked into socks as protection against leeches and the like. Now it was obvious: we *were* in the wrong movie and we couldn’t get out!

We waded through a knee-deep river already resulting in wet trousers, shoes and socks after 5 minutes, but who was going to argue with this *Indiana Jones* prototype, especially as he seemed to know what he was doing and proved to be a ‘walking encyclopaedia’. This butterfly, that beetle, a bat on a leaf – this man saw it all and he knew what he was taking about. He showed us leaves that stop bleeding and ginger that is used to treat cancer. Here it became clear why the jungle is called ‘God’s Pharmacy’!

Further we went, higher and higher, sweating like mad until we reached our first target, the waterfall! It was impressive, crystal clear water falling 30m in the middle of ‘green hell’. After a rest of 10 minutes we had the choice to return or to add a little more adventure – whatever our ‘torturer’ meant by this! After the Chinese lady had calmed down - in her own words: a little bit exhausted - the whole thing started to become fun. Well let’s go on!

Lianas and roots helped us on our way up. We had to make our way under fallen trees crawling almost on all fours. There was always something new to discover and for our lecturer to explain. Trees with stilt roots, mushrooms on rotting trees, seeds with wings, flying dragons and a disturbed King Cobra which vanished into the thicket. The rainforest truly was a natural wonder.

Jürgen collected the leeches from our shoes and socks making philosophical remarks on their medical value and use. We were promised from now on things would be easier and more pleasant. We admired a rare *Costus speciosus* Ginger flower and a fascinating 'body plant' - a rare *amorphophallus* species, which only flowered for a few days every few years. We walked for another ½ hour along a rock path with sheer drops to reach another waterfall. Its fresh water and a bath convinced us that we were in the end, in the right movie! And there was a second part to come. *The river safari in the mangrove forests of Langkawi!*

The boat was waiting, as expected, at the 'end of the world'. We found ourselves at the beginning of one of the mangrove rivers in the eastern part of Langkawi. This area is known for its absolutely untouched limestone cliffs, jungle and impressive mangrove forests. We met Judy, Jürgen's companion on this tour, a monkey in diapers! She was a hit but taught us what it means to have a monkey on board!

Half an hour later we noticed smoke in the air, one more turn of the river and we found out why – a charcoal camp! Children of all ages greeted us, all of them dirty and some of them naked. Now we knew what the kilos of bananas were for, which we had mistaken for Judy-food. Their *wai* gesture indicated that the children were Thai. We learned that Malaysians nowadays are no longer prepared to work in smoke and dust, far from any civilisation. Several kilns blew big grey clouds of smoke into the air, which settled in noses and throats. These poor people lived only a few meters away without piped water and electricity for weeks and months, permanently exposed to the smoke. Some of us felt really relieved when we were back in the boat, slowly floating down the river.

All were deep in thought, dwelling on all we had seen and experienced. Jürgen indicated that Judy's mother had possibly ended up in one of the cooking pots at the camp and only sheer luck saved Judy from the same lot.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a hole opened in the rock with light at the far end. 'Cave swimming' was on the agenda and we all joined in. We followed our guide in a line

like ducks, drifting in dim light, further into the cave. The passage opened out resembling a gigantic canyon, rough rock walls left and right, eagles circling overhead and macaques yelling and screaming in the trees. This was pure nature!

“Psst, all quiet,” demanded our leader. He pointed deeper into the mangrove forest. A whole family of Hairy-nosed Otters were curious to see who had come to visit. They were curious but shy wanting to see but keeping their distance.

“We have to go back now, otherwise the high tide will keep us here for hours” advised Jürgen. We returned to the boat. Some of us were glad to be back from our cave swimming excursion.

The next few hours took us to other interesting caves. A group of dolphins came past, spotted by our reserved boatman, Mat. We were very surprised when ‘Indiana’ took a jellyfish out of the water. “No problem if you know where to hold it” he assured us. That’s how easy it is!

The day was coming to its end. Once again we felt the warmth of the sun as the boat took us back to the world of hotels, restaurants, noisy TV sets and brightly lit fast food outlets. Eventually Jürgen was asked if he would consider working as a lecturer or teacher again. “Not on my life – Judy has to visit the jungle every day”. We had almost forgotten this!!

(This article about Langkawi and Jürgen Zimmerer’s nature excursions was published in 1997 in an English weekly)