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An indigenous experience

Stephen Ng

At the Sarawak Cultural Village, you can see how the various tribes live in the past and today. Story and pictures by STEPHEN NG

EARLIER this month, the eighth Rainforest World Music Festival rocked the Sarawak Cultural Village. It's a must-visit destination for everyone visiting Sarawak and who wants to get to know first-hand the rich cultural and ethnic diversity of the indigenous people in the state.

People here are proud to be known as Anak Sarawak. Even the language, Bahasa Sarawak, is different from the standard national language. Kamek means saya (oneself) and kitak refers to kamu (you). For an unsuspecting West Malaysian, this could be confused with kami (we) and kita (we), respectively.

The cultural village, located at Pantai Damai, near Damai Beach Resort (about an hour's drive from Kuching), is the cultural showcase of the people of Sarawak.

This is where some of them live and work to preserve and protect their social values and traditions. There are few such cultural villages in the world and Sarawak is proud to be the home to one.

As more and more of the indigenous people move into urban areas to pursue education and employment, the cultural village "brings to life" again the beauty and richness of their traditional cultures.

The main Sarawakian tribes comprise of the Iban (29.4 per cent) who are also known as the Sea Dayaks, followed by the Bidayuh (8.3 per cent), Orang Ulu (six per cent) and the Melanau (six per cent).

The Orang Ulu, for example, are known by that name not because they are rural folks, but because they are the upriver people. They number 113,000 or six per cent of the total state population. The biggest tribes amongst the Orang Ulu are the Kayan and the Kenyah, while the rest are made up of Lahanan, Kejaman, Penan, Punan, Punan Bah, Ukit and Berawan.

Despite the afternoon heat, colourful costumes and lovely dancers help to spice up the visit to the living museum, the only one of its kind in Malaysia. When there are no performances, the performers will interact with visitors, providing information about their cultural and social values.

In just one day, one can learn so much about how the various tribes live in the rugged, thickly-forested interior of Sarawak. For example, it is interesting to note that although the Ibans and the Bidayuh were bitter enemies in the past, they now live in harmony with each other as one people in one state.

During the headhunting days, Iban warriors would keep the skull of any Bidayuh they had captured. Likewise, the Bidayuh warrior would take pride in counting the heads of fallen Ibans displayed in his home.

It may sound bizzare but it appeared that the more heads a warrior collected, the more desirable he would be to the opposite sex. Visit the Iban longhouse and you will learn that women were generally attracted to warriors with the biggest collection of human skulls. That was the way of the headhunters in the history of the indigenous people in Sarawak. Thankfully, that is now all in the past.

From longhouses to tall-houses, one common link was obvious – the tribes were known for communal living, something that, sadly, modern society has lost.

In each longhouse, there is a chief, a headman of all the families who lived there. An Iban longhouse is divided into rooms (known as bilek) where

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individual families lived, worked and learned to protect each other, especially in the tough environment of a tropical rainforest. They co-exist for their own protection.

As coastal-dwellers, the Melanau tribe build tall-houses on massive belian poles looming six metres above the ground. This was supposed to protect them from pirates as the staircases leading to the three-storey houses could be pulled up.

The most interesting part of the visit would be the cultural show, where dancers clad in bright and colourful traditional costumes perform ethnic dances to the rhythm of the traditional musical instruments. Each dance has a different meaning and can be traced to the various celebrations held throughout a year.

Both shows last 30 minutes. One can choose to begin the visit with the cultural show at 11am or end the tour with it at 4pm. Either way, it is truly a Sarawak experience that no visitor should miss.

One of the more fascinating costumes is the Orang Ulu costume in striking red, adorned with fascinating embroideries.

The Iban warrior, with his sumpit, is also another great attraction. Remember to bring along your camera to capture the scenes.

