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Place: Sabah Tea Garden, Sabah, Malaysia



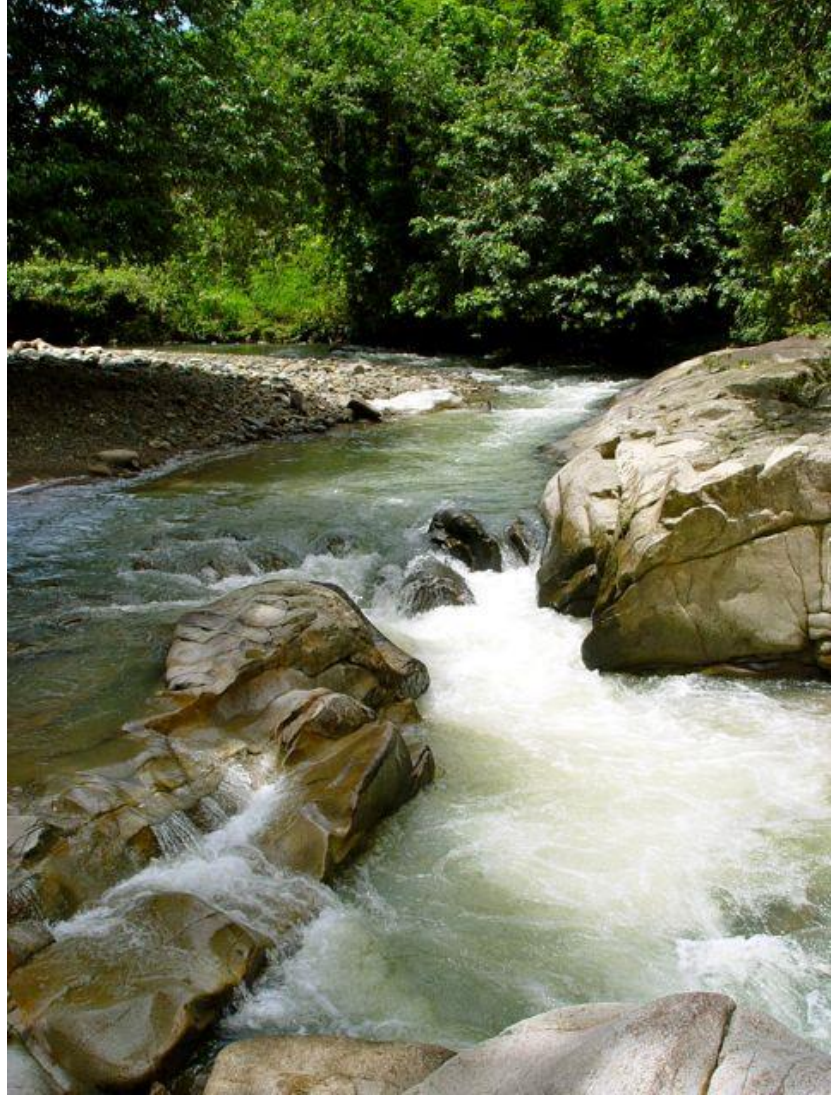
## Tea Garden with a Difference

**A RANGE OF TOUR PACKAGES AND CONSERVATION EFFORTS MAKE SABAH TEA GARDEN A POPULAR SPOT FOR BOTH EDUCATIONAL AND ECO-TOURISM. DARYL YEP FINDS OUT.**

Having returned from Cameron Highlands recently where I overdosed on a dizzying array of tea, I suppose going on another tea trip is out of the question. But strangely enough, in no time, I found myself traversing steep and winding roads yet again, to be surrounded by rolling hills of scenic tea plantations and served a variety of tea. Apparently, this writer just can't resist anything that the Land Below the Wind has to offer.

Nestled in a pristine rainforest reputed to be 130 million years old at 2,272 feet above sea level, Sabah Tea Garden offers visitors an unusual visit to the 'tea forest' where rainforest trees and organic tea plants grow side by side. Its popularity as a weekend getaway has been growing through the years, particularly among families and students. Besides, Kota Kinabalu is just a two-hour drive away while Mount Kinabalu Park is merely an hour's journey.





**‘Sabah Tea Garden has struck the right chord with a wide range of creatively packaged tours that combine an enlightening visit to the tea manufacturing factory, nature-based activities, cultural elements and conservation efforts’**

At the Tea Manufacturing Factory, my fellow tour members were totally engrossed in the lengthy explanation by the local guide Aubrey. Having no inkling of tea processing, their undivided attention didn’t surprise me at all.

I, on the other hand, was rather intrigued by a wide choice of creatively packaged tours available here. It’s pretty unexpected for a tea plantation, I must say.

Travellers today express growing concern for the environment and wish to play a part to preserve Mother Nature even during their holidays. Sabah Tea Garden has struck the right chord with a wide range of creatively packaged tours that combine an enlightening visit to the tea manufacturing factory, nature-based activities, cultural elements and conservation efforts.

**CREATIVE TOUR PACKAGES – TAKE YOUR PICK**

Its most sought-after tour package has to be the ‘Sabah Tea Adventure 2 Days 1 Night’, which garnered the first Tourism Malaysia award for Best Tour Programme for Educational Tourism. It is popular among students and outdoor enthusiasts as they get to enjoy a host of fun activities that takes them beyond learning about tea.

After checking in to a traditional Sabah Tea Longhouse, participants get to conquer obstacle crossings at the Sapaon Recreational Area and learn the importance of team work through team building games. They also learn how to make a fire and cook tapioca and sweet yams. Unless there’s a heavy morning mist, participants will normally be greeted by a beautiful sunrise view of the majestic Mount Kinabalu the next morning.





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Other highlights of the tour include jungle trekking at Kamunsu Hill, swimming in cool and pristine mountain water, night walk, and a tea factory tour. Needless to say, the educational programme offers participants a glimpse of sustainable agricultural practices and human development in harmony with nature.

Besides this award-winning package, various packages ranging from day trip to 3 day-2 night tour have also been created to cater to different group of visitors such as families, students, nature lovers, companies and government departments, cyclists and fitness enthusiasts.

The Qualey’s Hill Tour, for instance, is targeted at Australians and those who are interested to learn more about the World War II Sandakan-Ranau death marches and pay respect to a fallen Australian soldier. The 3 day-2 night Sabah Tea Rainforest Conservation & Global Warming Prevention Programme is created particularly for Japanese university students who wish to play a part in nature conservation efforts. The programme is also open to students from Malaysian schools and universities.

Cycling buffs would probably be fascinated by the challenging trails, meandering in and out of the rainforest and in-between undulating tea bushes. Sabah Tea Garden has hosted various mountain bike races such as the Sabah Tea Adventure Race, a 40km racecourse that combines off-road mountain biking, jungle-running, obstacle course and river crossings.

Sabah Tea Garden also provides facilities for companies and government departments that opt to hold their meetings, seminars or conferences there. A venue amidst tea plantations and rainforest should be more inspiring than a mundane hotel room that normally draws yawns rather than ideas.

#### **CONSERVATION EFFORTS**

After spending almost the entire afternoon touring the tea plantation, we were informed by Aubrey that only 1,200 acres of the plantation land is used for tea cultivation, commercial buildings, and staff housing; the rest, or approximately 5,000 acres, is still very much covered with rainforest. It provides home and food for insects that would otherwise attack the tea plants. Hence, no artificial colouring or flavouring is added into the tea and it is 100 per cent pesticide free.

“The practice of forest conservation maintains a balanced ecology; therefore, there is no need for the usage of pesticides,” said Aubrey. Indeed, the balance of ecology conservation and tea cultivation that is very much emphasised here has proven to be a winning combination.

We were also informed that the workers here feed the soil instead of the tea plants. Different parts of the tea plant are gathered to make compost and used as natural fertiliser. For instance, tea branches from the pruning are left in the field while discarded tea stalks from the tea manufacturing processes in the factory are recycled back into the field. Fruit trees are planted to attract birds. Fishing is also prohibited except for a few days in a year in the Morolli and Sapaon rivers that flow through the plantation.

Such conservation efforts are actually very much in line with the Government’s aspiration to create a clean and healthy environment. In fact, the Ministry of Tourism has launched the 1Malaysia Green, 1Malaysia Clean campaign to promote the country’s abundance of natural beauty as well as to boost awareness on the importance of preserving the environment.



## HIGH QUALITY TEA

Sabah Tea is one of the few organic tea plantations in the world and Borneo's only organic tea farm. Being a single-estate plantation, the tea is not blended with those of other plantations. Therefore, quality of the tea can be controlled to ensure consistency. Besides giving us a detailed explanation of tea cultivation, harvesting, processing, packaging, and brewing, Aubrey also showed us the ways to identify premium tea.

Speaking of premium tea, at Sabah Tea Garden, only choice tender leaves from the quality *Camellia sinensis* plants are selected and used. The entire process is expertly and meticulously controlled. The plantation is certified for organic production and processing by SKAL International B.V of the Netherlands, an internationally recognised organisation that performs inspections and grants certification for organic production methods.

Our tea trip ended on a perfect note with a glass of chilled tea at the Sabah Tea House. We also had some tea pancakes which were served with honey. Made of crushed tea leaf juice mixed with flour and egg, it is reputedly a must-have for all visitors to Sabah Tea Garden.

With a full stomach, we bade Aubrey and his colleagues at Sabah Tea Garden farewell. We vowed to be back again to join one of the tour packages. I've already set my heart on the 'Sabah Tea Escapade' package that comes with a fish massage.



### **SABAH – BACKGROUND INFO:**

Often called the 'Land Below the Wind' as it lies below the typhoon belt, Sabah occupies the eastern part of North Borneo and is East Malaysia's second largest state with an area of 74,500sq. km. Sabah has the South China Sea on the west and the Sulu and Celebes seas on the east and a coastline of some 1,440km. Sabah is mountainous with lush tropical rainforests and its population of nearly two million is made up of more than 30 ethnic communities, speaking over 80 local dialects.

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