

A Feast For The Eyes and Mind

Cameron Highlands is a great weekend getaway from the bustling city. And strawberries and tea plantations aren't the only attractions there. Beautiful vistas and intriguing historical attractions await the intrepid traveler!

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Named after William Cameron – a British government surveyor who 'discovered' the area in 1885 whilst on a mapping expedition – Cameron Highlands' fame grew during the colonial occupation era as the British were attracted to this cool hill station due to its climate. These days the Highlands are home to a plethora of agricultural farms and there's no place better in Malaysia to get fresher-than-fresh produce.



Cool weather, rolling hills of scenic tea plantations, and a whole range of leisure pursuits make Cameron Highlands a desirable destination for family bonding. Over the years, it continues to attract an increasing number of visitors from honeymooners to researchers, nature lovers, mountain bikers to students, and practically anyone who is seeking for a country retreat.

My last trip to Cameron Highlands was eight years ago; memory of it is hence somewhat vague. My only recollection of this place is the twisted road and the unpleasant experience of a friend who had motion sickness during our way up back then. The old road via Tapah to Tanah Rata is seriously narrow and winding with a lot of sharp bends. The presence of tour buses and numerous lorries ferrying fresh produce from the Highlands to the rest of the country makes driving on this road extra tricky. Hence, the less winding and wider new highway from the north via Simpang Pulai is a better option.

Nothing much in Cameron Highlands has changed over the years, it seems; except for the increasing number of choices of accommodation to cater to the growing demand. The opulent would most likely opt for the award-winning Cameron Highlands Resort whereas the rest of the visitors can choose from hotels, guesthouses, lodges, chalets, apartments, and bungalows, to established resorts like Strawberry Park and Equatorial.

While plucking strawberries and savouring scones with teas ought to be in every visitor's to-do list, I find learning about the background and history of Cameron Highlands equally interesting. Hence, the discovery of a local museum at Jalan Sungai Burung in Brinchang came as a pleasant surprise. Opened in January 2007, the aptly named, Time Tunnel, houses over 1,000 artifacts besides a gallery of monochrome pictures depicting the Highlands' development since the early days.

I was particularly drawn to the story of the mysterious disappearance of the legendary Thai Silk King, Jim Thompson, in the jungles of Cameron Highlands on 26 March 1967 during his holiday here. It was hotly discussed back then among people from around the world and many theories of his disappearance had been put forth. Undeniably, he had made the place very famous. After all, how an afternoon walk on Easter Sunday turned out to be his last remains a mystery till today.





ENVIRONMENT

The Cameron Highlands is unlike any other constituency in Malaysia; it is not only home to hundreds of floral species that are rare to the tropics; it is also an area with a substantially different ecosystem. There are more than 700 species of plants that grow here. The vegetation changes as one ascends the mountain.

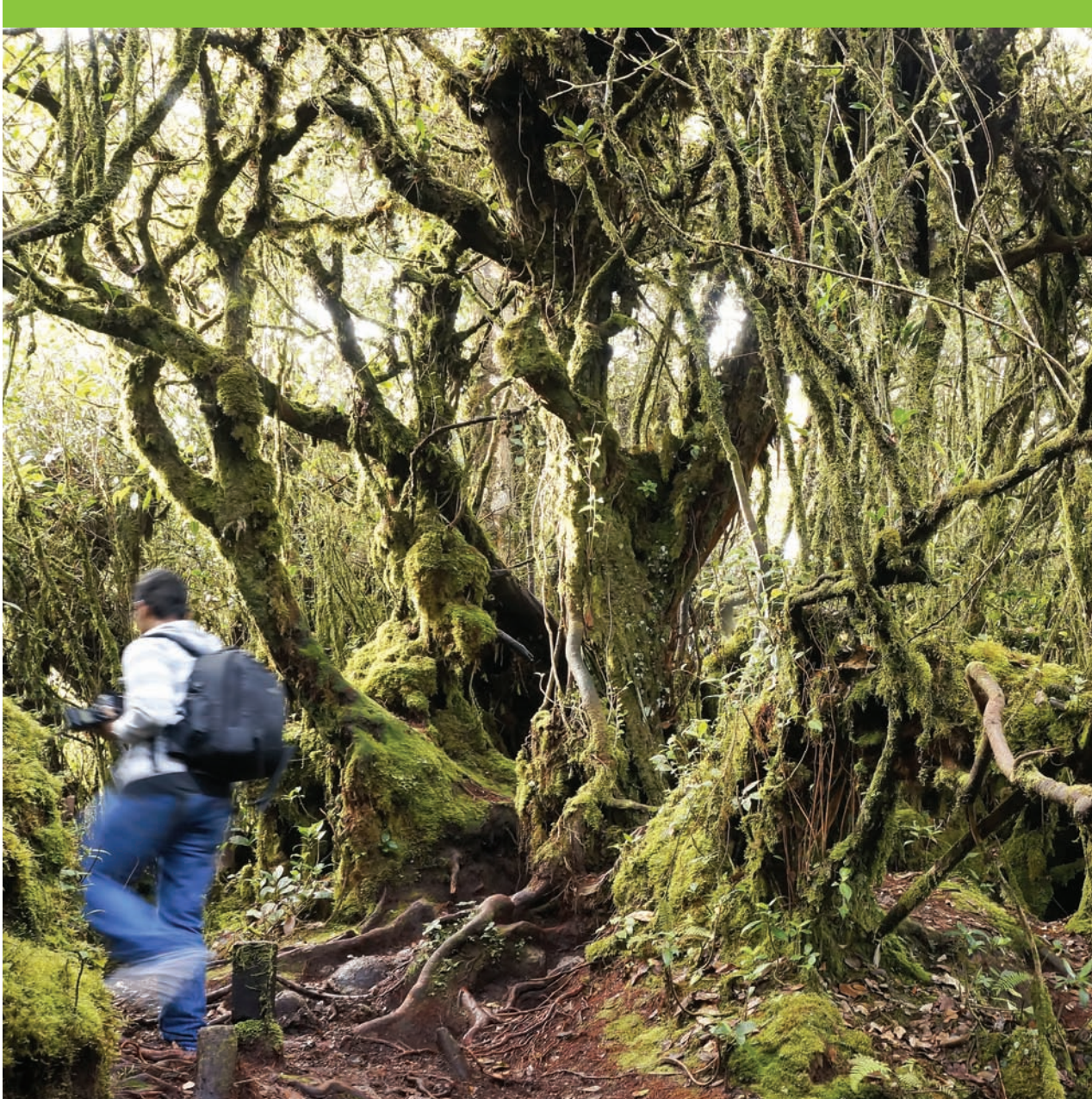
BACKGROUND:

Cameron Highlands is made up of three main townships at different elevations, namely Ringlet, Tanah Rata and Brinchang. Other smaller settlements located in the Highlands are Bertam Valley, Kea Farm, Tringkap, Kuala Terla and Kampung Raja. Cameron Highlands was named after William Cameron, a British government surveyor who stumbled across a plateau in 1885 during a mapping expedition on the Titiwangsa Range. Failing to mark his discovery on the map, the location of the plateau was

finally confirmed by subsequent expeditions after which Sir Hugh Low suggested that this would be an ideal location for a retreat and farmland. Nothing much happened after that until 1925 when Sir George Maxwell visited the highlands and decided to develop it as a hill station. Once the road was constructed, wealthy residents and British government officials started building retreats on the slopes of the highlands. Farming was the main activity here at that time. In 1929, John Archibald Russell, who was the son of a British administrative officer started a tea plantation which is now the famous BOH Tea Plantation.

GETTING THERE:

By car, the journey to Cameron Highlands takes about 3 hours from Kuala Lumpur (using either the old road from Tapah or the new access from Simpang Pulai). Daily bus services to the Highlands are available from Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, Penang and Singapore. The easiest way to move around Cameron Highlands is to drive. If you don't have a car, you can take a taxi or the local bus. You can also sign up for one of the local tours.





Though a major search was launched involving hundreds of people including the local aborigines with their expert tracking skills, he was never found.

While the information on Cameron Highlands was educational, the heartwarming artifacts that bring back memories of the 50s to the 80s truly capture the spirit of Malaysian life. The owner and curator, See Kok Shan, has been gathering these old items and antiques for the last decade. His decision to showcase them has given us a chance to walk down memory lane. Memories of yesteryear and childhood were brought back instantly. Most Malaysians would share the same sentiments, I'm sure. As the younger generation wouldn't have an inkling of most of the artifacts, parents were seen explaining about them to their kids excitedly.

If by now the image of big, juicy strawberries has already clouded your mind, you must be ecstatic to know that the Time Tunnel is located next to a strawberry farm. But before you proceed to the farm, I suggest you quench your thirst at the café above the museum. The refreshing ice-blended strawberry and yummy strawberry tart will provide the energy that you need to explore the rest of the attractions in Cameron Highlands.

With a refreshing climate between 15 and 25 degree Celsius all year-round, activities here are generally nature and agro-tourism-based. Markets, farms and nurseries make up the majority of the attractions. Nature lovers have a choice of 14 different trails of varying lengths and degrees of difficulty to explore the jungles of the Highlands. However, no nature tour is complete without a visit to Mossy Forest, which is over 220 million years old, at the peak of Mount Brinchang. At 6,666 ft above sea level, the mountain is the highest point in Malaysia accessible by road. On a clear day, a part of the Straits of Melaka can be seen from the observation tower of Mount Brinchang.

The forests of the mountains of Cameron Highlands are able to strip moisture from the clouds; hence they



MOSSY FOREST

The mossy forest grows around the peak of Gunung Brinchang, the second highest mountain in Cameron Highlands. Tourists and visitors on holiday to the Cameron Highlands are highly encouraged to visit this beautiful mountain, which is full of the treasures of nature.



are referred to as 'cloud forests' or 'mossy forests'. Its trees are generally about 10m tall, with a large number of mosses, liverworts, ferns and fern allies, pitcher plants, rhododendrons and wild orchids. These forests are often likened by the locals to the mystical Forest of Fangorn depicted in the Lord of the Rings, and are believed to be the final resting places for the souls of the dead.

Among all the attractions in Cameron Highlands, tea plantations are obviously one of the defining points that distinguishes it from the rest of the hill resorts in the country.

Whether you're a tea drinker or not, a visit to this green carpet is highly encouraged to learn more about local tea, its string of benefits and the tea making process. However, I suspect most visitors are actually enticed by the spectacular setting for picture-taking offered by the orderly green of the tea bushes. Whatever the reasons, there are a few tea plantations in Cameron Highlands for visitors to choose from. I headed to one of the most popular - BOH Tea Plantation Sungei Palas. Having over 75 years of experience in the tea industry, BOH is a famous local tea brand that most Malaysians are

familiar with. BOH Plantations is the largest tea-growing company in Malaysia with 1,200 hectares of tea gardens both in highland and lowland areas, producing a staggering 820,000 cups of tea per day!

To offer visitors a holistic experience of tea, the BOH Tea Centre was officially opened on 8 March 2007 on a hilltop of the Sungei Palas tea garden. The road leading to the Centre is narrow and winding. Do proceed with caution. Once there, you'll be rewarded with a magnificent view of the tea plantation from the



20 foot overhanging platform at the Tea Centre. I joined a guided tour of the exhibition area to learn more about the history of BOH Plantations, and the tea factory that has been in operation since the 1930s to get an insight into the natural and simple process of tea processing, manufacturing and packaging.

After the tour, those who wish to purchase BOH teas can proceed to the souvenir and tea shop. The tour ended perfectly at the Tea'ria with snacks consisting of scones and sandwiches, which I washed down with a few cups of BOH tea.

Before we bade Cameron Highlands farewell, we made a stop at Kea Farm Day Market. The fact is, for most people, a visit to the Highlands is not complete if they did not make a trip to the day market, or rather, if they did not bring home various fresh produce sold at bargain prices. Besides, they would probably be crucified by family members and friends if they returned home emptyhanded. Hence, despite the torrential rain, it didn't take too long for our tour bus to be filled with bags of fresh vegetables, strawberries, fruits, corns, and flowers. Judging from the big glow of satisfaction and pleasure on their faces, I can't help suspecting that this brief stop for shopping was actually the highlight of the whole tour. And all of a sudden, it dawned on me that this could be the reason the majority of visitors who joined this tour were ladies...

USEFUL WEBSITES/CONTACTS:

- www.cameronhighlands.com
- Time Tunnel**
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www.timetunnel.cameronhighlands.com
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