

## INTO THE HEART OF SARAWAK

FZ Zainal *MMed (FamMed, UKM)*

Family Medicine Specialist, Klinik Kesihatan Putrajaya

Address for correspondence: Dr Zainal Fitri Zakaria, Klinik Kesihatan Putrajaya, No 1 Jalan P9E Presint 9, 62250 Putrajaya, Malaysia.  
Tel: 03-88883057, Fax: 03-88883054, Email: [drzainal2000@gmail.com](mailto:drzainal2000@gmail.com)

Zainal FZ. Into the heart of Sarawak. *Malaysian Family Physician*. 2007;2(2):90-92

Dateline: 21<sup>st</sup> Nov 2006

I was elated when my name was short-listed to accompany Dato Dr. Shafei Ooyub for his pre-retirement pan-Malaysian tour to Kapit and Belaga. It was always my dream to go deep into the heart of Borneo, a place where even most Sarawakians have never been.

The only way to reach Kapit and Belaga is by the express boat via the mighty Rejang River. The elongated twin-engine express boat measured approximately 15 meters long offered 3 different categories of seats: the first, second and third class. A fully air-conditioned cabin with a large screen TV at the front provides a comfortable and relaxing journey. It takes 3-4 hours from Sibul to Kapit and another 5-6 hours from Kapit to Belaga, the exact time depends on how frequent the express boat stop to disembark people at the longhouses along the river.

Along the way I saw traditional longhouses made of wood and bamboo. Some of the modern longhouses looked almost like the terrace houses we see in the town. Occasionally we encountered tugboats hauling massive log from the interior to the timber mill downstream. Then, I caught sight of a timber log loading station by the riverbank. I couldn't help but feeling upset to see the bulldozers and huge lumber trucks moved back and forth over the large clearing, arranging the huge logs. The barren ground was soaked with sump oil to keep the dust down, and raw, red earth logging tracks radiated further into the denuded hillsides. It is little wonder that the water of Rejang River is murky yellow in colour!

Three hours later we reached the Kapit town. [Fig. 1] As the deafening roar of the engine petered out, the express boat nestled adjacent to half a dozen boats. We had to walk gingerly along the edges of these boats to reach the concrete wharf. [Fig. 2]

Kapit is the largest division of nine Divisions in Sarawak. It consists of three districts: Kapit, Song and Belaga. Kapit town is the Division's administrative centre. Most of the lands are covered by dense primary forests. The mighty Rejang River and its tributaries (Batang Baleh, Batang

Katibas and Batang Balui) is the only means of transportation for the people travelling into the heart of Sarawak. Due to its mountainous terrain and small population, the Malaysian Airlines had decided to stop the air service to Kapit a long time ago.

There are two versions of story how Kapit got its name. The first was that the word *Kapit* evolved from *Kepit* (meaning the bamboo longhouse). When people go to the longhouse they would say: "*Kami ngagai rumah panjai kepil*" (which means "we are going to kepit longhouse"). The second version claimed that the word *Kapit* came from the English word "keep it" during the Brooke's era.

Kapit is the homeland of the Ibans, they being the largest ethnic group here, followed by the Orang Ulu, Chinese and Malay. The Orang Ulu ("the upriver people") refers to a number of smaller ethnic groups that settle upstream from Nanga Merit area up to Belaga. They are further divided into small groups such as Kayan, Kenyah, Penan, Punan, Sekapan, Kejaman, Lahanan and Tanjong. (Please note that Punan and Penan are two different ethnic groups.)

That evening I have a separate agenda at the Kapit Health Clinic [Fig. 3] while Dato Shafei and the rest of the team went straight to the Sri Balleh government rest house on top of the hill overlooking the Kapit town. At the Kapit Health Clinic, I had a meeting with all the staff regarding the on-going Teleprimary Care (TPC) project. TPC is a method of delivering health care service through the integration of ICT using the satellite communications system. Kapit Health Clinic as well as 57 pilot clinics in Sarawak, Johor and Perlis are interconnected through the TPC network. The system provides centralised, up-to-date and comprehensive patients Electronic Medical Record information throughout Malaysia.

After dinner we had an interesting chit-chat. We were talking about the famous yet the most dangerous Pelagus rapids that we were going to pass through on our way to Belaga the next morning. Travelling upstream depends very much on the rain and water level. If there is too much rain, the logs and branch debris make river trip unsafe. Too

little rain, the low water level will expose long stretches of dangerous rapids. Even when the river conditions were ideal, accidents could happen as a result of a moment's inattention. The former Kapit Divisional Health Officer, Dr Rais Abdullah (Krishnan) told us that he only trust one boat driver from Belaga if he were to make a trip there. That is because not everybody has enough skill to cruise through the rapids. The boat driver must have a precise knowledge of every single submerged rock of the rapid. A single mistake may result in catastrophe.

Almost every year the rapid claims human lives. Early this year a school teacher from the interior school died after he was accidentally thrown into the rapids by the wobbly boat while he was enjoying the view on the roof of the express boat.

That morning after the dawn prayer I took a walk around the rest house. The expansive misty green mountains and the slow moving river filled my heart with melancholy. [Fig. 4] I realised that I have a strong feeling towards the river, the mountains, the forest and the surrounding people.

While waiting for the express boat to Belaga I paid a visit to the Sylvia Port. It was an administrative centre during the Brooke's era which has been converted into a museum.

A few hours later the only express boat to Belaga arrived from Sibü. Unfortunately (or rather fortunately) the inner cabin was full – only a few passengers alighted to end their journey in Kapit. As a result most of us had to sit on the roof-top. [Fig. 5] Piled on the roof of the express boat were all sorts of things that people bring back to their longhouses – cooking gas cylinder, furniture, door, window (the last two are for their newly built longhouses) and electrical gadget such as TV and refrigerator.

I found a strategic place near the roaring engine; a secure handle was nearby in case the boat swayed too dangerously. The overwhelming excitement overcame my apprehension as the express boat sped upstream. I anticipated *The Lost World* of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and forgot the dangerous man-swallowing rapids. Sitting on the roof provided a terrific panoramic view of the beautiful rainforest. The blue sky above, the murky river below and the green mountains on both sides gave you an almost surreal landscape. I was hypnotised by the wonderful views and forgot the burning skin of my forehead inflicted by the scorching sun.

A few hours later we reached the most dangerous spot. As we were approaching the Pelagus rapids I could see a signboard on the riverside alerting the boat passengers to put on their life jacket. Amazingly I could not find a single life jacket for the passengers in the cabin let alone for those on the roof-top.

The slow moving water suddenly became a terrifying tumultuous turbulence. [Fig. 6] As the express boat lurched and rolled it way through the boiling rapids I tightened my grip on the handle while silently reciting the Noah's prayer. I could feel my adrenaline flowed freely as my entire body system became full prepared for any eventuality. Thanks God we managed to weather through the treacherous rapids safely. The initial terrifying experience gave way to an exhilarating feeling.

We reached Belaga six hours later. The Belaga folks welcomed us with the traditional Kenyah dance. Belaga is a dainty little place. It has only few rows of shop houses, budget inns, a health clinic and a post office. Belaga grew up in the early 1900s when a few Chinese traders settled there and started trading with the upriver people, supplying essentials such as kerosene, salt and cooking utensils.

We were brought to the Belaga Health Clinic (known locally as *Uma Perah* in Kayan; *uma* = house, *perah* = sickness) where a brief presentation regarding the health care system in Kapit was given by the Kapit Divisional Health Officer. Later on we went to see the site for the new health clinic where the construction is due to start early next year.

Dinner was a big welcome party. Dressed in their traditional costume a group of Kayan ladies performed their traditional dance followed by a solo *ngajat* dance that synchronise with the background traditional music. Later on, in his speech Dato Shafei thanked the Belaga people for their warm hospitality and reassured them that the new clinic will becomes a reality soon. The party continued with a karaoke session (a compulsory session for all Sarawakian parties) and it ended one hour before midnight with a traditional *Li-ling* dance where everybody walked rhythmically in a circle.

At dawn I was awakened by the *azan* from the nearby mosque. After a light breakfast we took an early express boat back to Sibü. A brief visit to this remote part of Sarawak was indeed an unforgettable experience. It was almost like travelling back through the time machine into the Lost World.

Photo gallery

Fig. 1. Kapit town



Fig. 2. At the wharf



Fig. 3. Kapit Health Centre



Fig. 4 The misty mountain



Fig. 5. On the roof-top (Author, right)



Fig. 6. Pelagus rapids



More photographs taken during this trip can be accessed at the author's website: <http://homepage.mac.com/drzainal/LostWorld/PhotoAlbum10.html>