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River angling Shangri-la

By AZNIR MALEK

The dark, tannin-stained water flowed over the regiment of smooth stones and entered the tranquil pool. By the leaf-strewn banks, the mammoth neram trees reached out towards the middle of the river, creating a gloomy cavern of sorts. Perfect water for the elusive kelah.

I was in one of the last bastions of pristine kelah fishing in the Peninsula; the remote upper stretches of Sungai Tahan in Taman Negara, Pahang. I had been invited by the Kelah Sanctuary to gauge the fishing at the newly-opened Eco-Angling project at Pos Melantai, a programme to ensure that stocks of wild fish like the kelah (Red Golden Mahseer) and sebarau (Hampala Barb) are retained and even propagated.

They started with a fish-feeding programme in Lubuk Tenor and Lubuk Lesong, close to the base camp of Taman Negara at Kuala Tahan. This programme, involving the participation of Orang Asli and Malay communities, has proven very successful. Now, visitors can feed the hundreds of wild fish like kelah, kerai (*Puntius daruphani*) and nyenyuar (Scissor Fish).

We took almost four hours to reach Melantai, the professional guides working hard to push the plastic canoes over the numerous riffles and rapids. The trip was a joy in itself for the pristine river laced with 130-million-year-old jungle was already a sight for sore eyes.

Aznir and his proud catch of an 8.5kg kelah.

Reaching Pos Melantai, I was surprised to find a well-appointed camp. There was running water tapped from a gin-clear stream, electricity, simple huts complete with floor-beds and mosquito nets, plus a well-equipped dining hall. Heck, they even have china dinner plates and silverware! This is truly five-star stuff.

I spent the next two days fishing for the kelah with angling guides Ahmad and Pak Uda Kamar. The latter is one of the living legends of kelah fishing, whose exploits are the regular subjects of camp-fire stories.

The kelah fishing at Lubuk Melantai 2 and Lubuk Panjang is nothing short of delectable. For a start, the pools are rife with mega fish in the five to 10kg class and beyond. With sightings of truly giant specimens, I will not be surprised if a world record kelah is landed here, one day (the current IGFA record stands at 12kg).

We caught several kelah topped by an 8.4kg female that took my oil palm bait on the drop. That was my biggest and fastest kelah hook-up ever! The giant made three torrid runs before reluctantly allowing itself to be brought to the landing net. Dr Eddy Tan, progenitor and driving force behind the Kelah Sanctuary programme, performed the tagging of the fish before we released it back to its watery home.

Pak Uda was not to be outdone by my lucky feat. He hooked and fought a smaller but much stronger kelah that almost snagged itself among the sunken timber. That gregarious fellow pulled the scales down to 6.4kg.

All in all, the remote camp of Pos Melantai is a Shangri-la for river anglers, with the kelah – the holy grail for Malaysian fishing – running to giant sizes. With the professional service given by the

staff there, it is now arguably the most exclusive freshwater fishing destination in Malaysia. W

o Compiled & coordinated by ANTHONY GEOFFREY

Getting to Pos Melantai

Travel by road via Jerantut to Kuala Tahan, the base camp of Taman Negara, Pahang.

A short boat ride (only RM1) will get you to Rakit Kelah, on the mouth of Sungai Tahan.

The camp staff will transport you up the beautiful Sungai Tahan to Pos Melantai by plastic canoe (three to four hours).

Alternatively, you can fly by helicopter to Pos Melantai. Facilities

Move around by Pelican canoe, aided by two boat guides per visitor.

Fishing with personal professional guide. Baits for kelah are provided. Rod and reel (spinning tackle) for kelah fishing are also available.

The camp comes complete with simple huts, running water (flushing toilets, sinks, showers), proper dining hall, electricity supply, TV and Astro.

Accommodation is full board. Hot drinks and biscuits are available throughout the day, even at some fishing locations.

Fishing platforms have been built at certain key locations for kelah fishing. Alternatively, you can travel by canoe to other locations, either for kelah fishing or lure fishing for sebarau/toman.

Safe jungle trails have been arranged for you to walk to your favourite kelah fishing spots.

Trip details

3D/2N, ex-Kuala Tahan.

Price: RM2,000 all-inclusive.

Schedule

Day 1: Early start at 9am. Travel from Rakit Kelah, Kuala Tahan to Lata Berkoh (40 min) by wooden longboat.

Travel from Lata Berkoh to Pos Melantai by plastic canoe (three hours).

Lunch at camp.

Late afternoon fishing.

Day 2: Fishing at Lubuk Melantai 2 or Lubuk Panjang, or other spots of your choice. Night fishing can also be arranged for experienced anglers.

Day 3: Early morning fishing.

Return to Lata Berkoh by plastic canoe.

Lata Berkoh to Rakit Kelah, Kuala Tahan by wooden longboat.

Season opening: May 2006

Location: Pos Melantai, Upper Sungai Tahan, Taman Negara Pahang

Angling season: Feb to Oct

Booking: call the National Park Kelah Sanctuary at (09) 266 4527 or Usains at (04) 658 8979).