

UP THE SPOOKY PYTHON RIVER

By Aznir Malek

There is this rocky, jungle-clad river that dispatches its cold water down to a lonely, man-made lake. It is shrouded in mist, even until the sun reaches its pinnacle. When the golden orb has dipped below the western horizon, the mist will be back with a vengeance, enveloping everything with a clammy wetness. In the sandy, leaf-strewn shallows of the waterway, numerous small fish like the seluang rimba, pelampung jaring and chemperas dart here and there in search of food. In the dark pools below the rapids, their nemesis lurk with subdued interest. Once in an unwary while, the menacing predators would rocket through the shallows, rampaging the schools of these minnows. A few seluang would disappear, and a few sebarau get fatter. Any minnow that flees the transgressors and enters the dark pool would invariably be victims of the equally aggressive kelah and tengas.

A promise to secrecy...

This is a special river; so much so that the guide who took me there made me promise not to divulge its whereabouts. And I can't help but agree; this is one of the most pristine mountain rivers I have ever visited. To find a water where the tengas and kelah readily take lures like spoons and plugs is rare, these days. Publishing its true location would lead to the onslaught of the "fish pirates". So, it has to remain anonymous, at least until it is gazetted a controlled water along the lines of our national parks.

I spent three days at this remote river, as guest to a mountain river nut named Joe. He has made this river his second home since '93. Needless to say, he knows it like the back of his hand, and has had his fair share of encounters with the locals. Like the pair of forty-foot pythons he found at one lubuk; one was hanging from a dead log, its head swinging underwater, waiting for passing fish. Its mate, meanwhile, was stretched across a nearby track, waiting for some witless deer – or angler – to trod on its log-like trunk, whereupon it would coil up on the hapless victim.

An arduous journey.

We started off from KL at midnight. There was Soo, outward bound trainer and regular saltie; Nan, a disillusioned remisier – who isn't these days – whose cure for high blood pressure is the sound of jungle crickets; his brother-in-law Azizi and Joe's friend Latiff. It was already seven in the morning before we reached the water supply lake, to be greeted by five kampung lads, all ready with the necessary camping stuff. Joe has made his arrangements well.

Three wooden boats were duly loaded, then we were off, crawling across the misty lake. The boats were lumbering, obviously too heavy for the 5 hp Siamese outboards; the ones with the long shafts which the locals lovingly call ekor biawak. We slowly slalomed past the dead trees until we reached the muddy torrent of the river entrance. I wondered what it would be like to power these slow boats up the rapids of the river.

It had been raining for several days. The water was too turbid for spinning. We could only hope that the dry spell would last for the remainder of our stay.

There were signs of fish. Loads of them. Minnows would skitter across the surface, alarmed by the boats. In the shallows, small fry would burst forth, chased by hungry sebarau. The otters we saw were as big as dogs, and the biawak we saw could be mistaken for crocs. It was obvious that this was an untamed water. I relished the prospect of fishing the river upstream.

The inscrutable badung.

The boat journey to the campsite took all of six hours. There were numerous stops; portaging at the rapids, short stints of spinning at likely lubuks, and replacing propellers damaged by the treacherous rocks. My introduction to the local sebarau – called badung in these parts – was sobering. I was casting at this little pool when it took the silver spoon. The Shimano reel screeched, then the spoon came back; the double-forged treble had straightened. Joe noted that these badung were famous for that. No hook is too strong for these powerful rascals. He has even had split rings dislodged and his Rapala plugs crushed by these critters. Sounds like great fun!

The local lads – Mael, Salleh, Din and Mat – set up the camp, situated on flat ground high above the river. True to the nature of most highland waters, this river is susceptible to flash floods after heavy rains, so setting home on high ground was a wise choice. It was too late to trek upriver to fish, so we took it easy, casting spoons and plugs in the pools and runs near the camp. The water was still too murky; we didn't catch any fish, and the only excitement came when one of us would inadvertently snag a lure to a tree or sunken log on the far bank, followed by the customary swims and dives by Mat or Salleh. Rapalas are expensive, and Abu Island spoons are downright priceless!

We were using spinning outfits: 7-foot tip-actioned rods coupled to small spinning reels like Shimano 4000 or Penn Spinfisher 4400, filled with 15 lb. mono – considered the minimum for this river. Joe used 30 lb. braided line, with the reel tightened to the hilt. His rod, however was a converted Orvis No. 8 fly wand! Wire traces for the lures are a must, for obvious reasons. Even then, you can't tell what would happen when that 3 kilo badung comes along!

The big trek.

The next day was our big one. We set off early, trekking upstream in pairs. Soo and I crossed the river at this seemingly shallow run; we sank to our armpits, the frigid water taking our breaths away. There were fish in evidence. We spotted red kelah in one lubuk, but they were not in biting mood. Maybe the dicey weather had turned them off. I had a good bite from a badung; this time the treble was up to task, but alas it pulled free. Badung two, Aznir zilch!

We returned to camp in the late afternoon, fishless but with muscles ready to tackle Everest. Latiff had caught two nice sebarau, but it was Joe who was champion for the day. Mael and he had gone far upstream, where the waters were fairly clear. He had landed a badung and tengas, each weighing about 2 kg., plus several smaller fish; all caught on a Yozuri-F plug. They found themselves too late to trek home, so they made a skimpy pontoon from a long piece of bamboo and floated down with it. Now that's daring, what with water-bound serpents about!

We had a sumptuous dinner, that night. Mael cooked tengas masak singgang. I was content with fried tengas to go with my rice. Nothing beats a tengas dinner, eaten to the gentle music of a droning mountain river...

The deluge.

Contrary to our hopes, it rained hard that night. An hour later, we started hearing the loud rumbles of timber crashing down the rapids. The lads rushed down to the bank, to salvage the boats out of harm's way. I knew that that's the end of the fishing. This river clears fast, but not fast enough for us, since tomorrow would be our last day.

The misty morn showed us a muddy river in flood; no more Rapala sessions. Amir dug up some worms and started fishing with them. He started catching fish on every cast, so we duly joined in. Soon, we had a mess of baung and lampam for brunch. This truly was an untouched river!

The trip home was just as treacherous, half of us trekked downstream, leaving the boatmen to maneuver the boats down the torrential rapids. It was a tired but happy lot that reached the landing point by the dam, five hours later. True to form, it started raining again just as we reached the Trooper, and it didn't stop until we reached the dreary lights of KL.

It had been a good trip. We didn't catch many fish, due to the bad weather, but we knew that they would still be there, on the next venture. But then again, so would those pythons...!