



A tale of Bukit Larut

His English was not too bad, but it had still taken a considerable number of hand signals to establish that the taxi man's son lived just a few streets away from me in Adelaide, my hometown. He was ferrying me to the government station at Lake Gardens, on the outskirts of Taiping, Malaysia, from where I planned to catch the Land Rover shuttle, up to the hill station of Bukit Larut. My guidebook told me the shuttle left on the hour, every hour.

"Yes, yes," he exclaimed. "*My son postcode 5038. Am sure. I give you phone number.*"

With heavy black moustache and thick rimmed glasses my taximan looked a little like a young Groucho Marx. He only asked for a reasonable amount as fare, which was a little unusual: perhaps because he was so pleased to find someone who lived near his son, in that faraway land, Australia. I paid up and we exchanged phone numbers, parting with an amicable handshake ... and from him, a two-teeth-missing-in-the-top-layer grin.

It was hot and sticky at the base of the hill, so I made myself even hotter with a cup of milk tea - or *Teh-O*, as known locally - from a small stall outside the government outpost. The vehicle assigned to take me to the top of the hill, pulled up exactly on the hour, outside the ticket office, just as a party of four Asians – two men and two women – disembarked from their late-model Mercedes. Any illusion of having the Land Rover to myself was shattered as they piled suitcases and large bags into its rear compartment.

The person who seemed to be the senior man in the group - tall and thin, with a greying, *Friar-Tuck-like*, ring of hair around a bald scalp - decided he would take the passenger seat in front, leaving the other three and myself to sort ourselves out, in the back.

I had a reasonably small backpack, but the Asian group was obviously planning on a much longer stay. This would have been fine, but then a somewhat overweight Indian guy emerged from a tuk-tuk, accompanied by an assortment of cardboard boxes, filled with what appeared to be household goods and groceries, which were then man-handled into the back of our vehicle. Our small government-badged, off-road truck, had ample space for four passengers to sit comfortably, two on either side in the back, but now there were four of us, plus all this luggage and the Indian guy, who like a couple of the Chinese party, was unquestionably rotund.

The problem was solved when the latecomer with groceries volunteered to ride *shot-gun*, as it were, standing on the back plate and hanging onto the cross bar, which supported the canvass canopy. We all thought this was a bit risky and shuffled together, as much as we could, to make some additional space inside the rear cabin.

“No worries my friends.” He said, doffing his wide brimmed hat, with an elaborate bow. *“I Gunas; I manager your hotel. I like ride this way for air condition.”* Gunas seemed was quite a showman (and comedian to boot), as we would come to realise later in the day.

The pronounced bow from our future host seemed to act as the signal the driver needed to get moving, as if it had been rehearsed many times before (which of course it most likely had been). Within seconds the diesel engine coughed a couple of times, then roared into life and we took off, with surprising acceleration, leaving a cloud of black smoke hovering around the remaining customers at the tea stall.

“Hi, I’m Andy. Where you from?” the man opposite me volunteered, holding out a plump hand. We were eyeball to eyeball, with only a short distance between us; there was no escaping his question.

Image: holidaysinmalaysia.org



“Australia,” I responded. “How about you?” He told me he was Chinese but lived in Kuala Lumpur, which, like everyone else in Malaysia, he referred to as *KL*.



Image: pintinterest.com

Andy Lam, the younger of the two Asian men, dressed in a half-buttoned, white shirt and Levi's, was irrepressible and from that moment on, kept up a steady flow of conversation, as we went careering around the first dozen or so bends. This went on for some time but became more and more one-sided as we ascended the hill. I have never been the best of back seat travellers and sitting sideways, not far from the diesel exhaust fumes, while we lurched around one hair-pin bend after the other, began to get the better of me ... and my stomach.

In addition to Andy, who sported an ample girth, there was a rather large lady sitting next to me, the wife of the front seat rider, Uncle Lim. She was reading a Chinese language magazine, murmuring to herself as she read. *“How on earth can you read in this situation?”* I thought. Then glancing towards Andy’s lady friend, a petite figure who sat next to him looking quite pretty in a floral dress which covered her knees, I slowly realised she was suffering in the same way as I was, if not worse. But Andy seemed not to notice that either of us were beginning to feel the strains of nausea. He just kept on and on, talking. I began to feel I would be better off as an out-rider with Gunas, rather than cooped up with this orator of the century, in the confines of the cabin.

We reached *Tea Garden*, the half-way check point after about 20 minutes, having negotiated what felt like one hundred and one hairpin bends. By that stage I wasn't counting! The lady in the floral dress spoke for the first time in a long while. "Oh my God, we're only halfway?" she muttered. Her questioning

statement was delivered almost like a silent prayer: pleading for someone to tell her it wasn't true. By that stage, I was myself seriously considering climbing down from the vehicle and walking – or resorting to prayer - but I had a vision of the floral lady falling on top of me and smothering me with kisses, saying "*Yes, yes, yes; please take me with you!*" So, in the interest of my own sanity and her obviously wonderful partnership with Andy, I stuck to my seat.

For the second half of the climb, even Andy seemed more subdued, perhaps also now beginning to be overcome by the exhaust fumes which filled the rear compartment. Gunas, hanging on to the back of the vehicle and swaying from side to side as we

*Image: says.com*

The Bukit Larut hostel

Image: says.com

rounded each corner - even bursting into song from time to time - appeared oblivious to all the goings on inside the canopied section. As we slewed around the last few bends - each time with a squeal of rubber on tarmac - our group was in total silence, no one either talking or reading, until we reached our home for the night, on top of the hill.



Image: globalone-assist.com

Mercifully, we pulled up in front of the hilltop villa, before the indignity of myself, or anyone else, having to throw up. I stumbled out of the vehicle and accompanied by the floral dress lady, staggered towards the nearest safe and steady seat, which happened to be a large rock at the side of the road. I could see there were a few ants crawling over the rock, but I didn't give a damn: it was perfectly still and not swaying from side to side, like a ship in a heavy sea: that's all that mattered!

A short while later, we had all been allocated rooms and were comfortably seated around the fireplace in the main living room of this spacious wooden bungalow, which looked as though it dated back to colonial days, when the British used *Maxwell Hill* - as it was called then - to escape from the heat on the plains, down below. Andy, who I came to understand was a retired doctor, then produced a portable, box-shaped machine, to test blood pressure, which he proceeded to strap to himself. It made a few hisses and beeps, then went silent.

“Oh no! Always same,” he announced, in an exasperated tone to his spell-bound audience, “Just when you need, damn thing run out from battery. But hey, no problems, I have spare set in room.”

It turned out that Doctor Andy Lam, at 56, had blood pressure problems which had caused his semi-retirement. His uncle, Mr Lim, the tall, slim and much quieter man, who

elected to sit in the front of the Land Rover and was now on the sofa next to his nephew, had faced similar but even worse challenges, having experienced two strokes during the previous three years. Mr Lim, now in his seventies, was by all accounts a much-respected physician who had specialized in cardiovascular surgery. Thus, there did indeed seem to be some justification for the BP machine being included in their bags for their holiday in rarefied air, at the summit of Bukit Larut.

My main concern came about when just a little while later our semi-retired (and junior) physician returned with the new batteries and then proceeded to test himself, Uncle Lim, and everyone else in the room. The results for everyone before me all seemed pretty normal and Andy was looking a bit deflated, almost as though his prized machine - his party-piece if you like - was not performing. But then my turn came, the last in the circle as it happened, and the BP machine began to make loud beeping noises, which, up until that time had not been heard. I stared at the black box thinking it was another malfunction: warning of more battery collapse, or something similar.

But no, much worse! My turn had thrown up trumps. “*Oh, Oh, Oh.... my goodness!*” the good doctor exclaimed, clapping his hands together above his head. “*This too high reading, my friend. You need lie down and take rest. Also drink cold water.*”

“*Cold water for high blood pressure.*” I thought. “*What is this, some new Chinese remedy?*” But I didn’t want to offend, so after being detached from the BP machine, I gave Andy a thumbs up and got out of my armchair to pour a glass of water from the jug sitting on the coffee table (and encircled by a now, engrossed audience). I felt quite OK and not about to keel over as the good doctor seemed to predict, so after a bit of a lull in conversation I announced I was going to walk up to the summit of the hill, which was a few hundred metres on from our cottage. “*Would anyone like to join me?*”

“*No, no, not for me,*” Andy responded rather pointedly, “*I need be careful. Too much exertion not good in mountain air. And hey, you too, my friend: take care!*” he added this in a sharp tone, stabbing a finger directly at me. “*High BP no joke you know.*”

I nodded, but otherwise ignored the pointed remark and looked around the group, smiling. “*Anyone else for a walk?*”

In the end I set off with Andy's wife Lin, the lady who had suffered so badly with me, in the jeep. "*I need fresh air,*" she declared to the others. "*It good idea.*"



Image: itulapasal.blogspot.com

In the early evening we all came together again for dinner, around a large, old, wooden dining table, set in front of an open window at the front of the cottage. We had a marvellous view right down to the hot steamy plains in the distance, as the sun was setting over the Western coast. The house manager, Gunas, who had ridden *shotgun* on the back bumper of the jeep earlier in the day, now served up a selection of mouth-watering dishes, some flavoured with subtle Indian spices, and others with a touch of Chinese. The piece de resistance was an enormous whole fish, which came on a large platter and was placed at the centre of the table. Kamala, the wife of Gunas - whom I suspected was the main cook behind the scenes - stood with a beaming smile as she cut and served the fish in portions, to each of us in turn, starting with Mr Lim at the head of the table, then proceeding in clockwise fashion to me at the end of the round.

Meanwhile the men, in typically Chinese style, were betting on whether the fish was from seawater or freshwater. I was seated between Andy's wife, Lin, and Uncle Lim, who seemed to have a special penchant for gambling and tried to impress on me what incredible fools most *Black-Jack* players are. His explanation was a mystery to me and

in the end he turned away, probably dismayed to have found yet another amateur, who couldn't understand the simple rudiments of betting.

Earlier in the day I had noticed the charismatic nature of our host Gunas, and indeed he became something of a focus as he whirled into the dining area with dishes above his head, announcing each with flamboyant flourish: what they were and where they came from. His wife, though more subdued had a gorgeous disposition, which in its quiet way almost outdid the magnetic personality of her moustache twirling husband. It was a memorable evening: great food and wonderful company.

The next morning, after scrambled eggs for breakfast, I said my goodbyes to the Lim-Lams and set off on foot to descend back down to Taiping, the town at the bottom of the hill.

Image: tripadvisor.com.my



Gunas had informed me, over coffee, it was one and a half hours quick walking and two hours slow walking.

Later that day I saw the charismatic manager for a final time, as the blue Land Rover came sliding around a bend into view ... accompanied by a screeching of tyres and shrouded in a haze of black smoke.

"Don't worry," Gunas yelled out, hanging on with one hand and waving madly with the other: *"You almost there!"*

I smiled wryly and plodded on ... into my fourth hour!

Image: malaysiatraveller.com

Image: en.wikipedia.org

On the way down, it was noticeable how the climate and the vegetation changed, from a cool breeze and conifers at the top, to sticky heat and tropical growth near the bottom. The walk took much longer than forecast, but this was in part due to stops on the way, to take stock of my surroundings and meet the locals. At one point I sat watching as a small boy set up his food and drinks stall. As I surveyed the scene, I began chatting to an old Malay man, wearing a thick rimmed pair of specs, nearby.

“Yes, I have three children.” I said. *“How many do you have?”*

“I have four sons,” he replied. *“Two girls and two boys.”*

“That’s interesting,” I thought to myself *“Bukit Larut in a nutshell,”* and turned back to watch a party of brightly clothed school children devouring the snack foods and other delights on offer from the boy’s stall. They smiled back at me in my floppy Aussie hat.

Image: travelmalaysia.me