

Making it to the top

THERE'S always a good reason for returning to Langkawi. If you fly there, (and why wouldn't you with some very competitive airfares now being offered by Air Asia?), the island's beaches are the closest to Kuala Lumpur. They are also arguably the best.

Recently, the island's newest attraction opened. When the cable car project to the summit of Mount Mat Cincang was mooted some years ago, there was a lot of grumbling from the island's green movement. There were cries of 'what for?' and, 'what about the impact on the environment?'

While most of the comments were done in closed circles, they did have a point and I must admit I needed a lot of convincing that the cable car would add anything to the island's tourism industry.

The November opening of the cable car has silenced much of the greenie opposition and after two visits; there I've also got to admit, it is quite impressive.

The cable car starts from the Oriental Village within walking distance of the Mutiara Burau Bay Beach Resort. There is a lot of development going on in this part of the island - a marina and residential area is under development in nearby Pantai Kok and one gets the impression that when all is finished this will be a very smart piece of real estate for holiday, leisure and residential living.

Back to the cable car. The Austrian designed cable car (just like those in the ski fields of Europe) rises from behind the boutiques of the Oriental Village to a height of over 700 metres above sea level. Mount Mat Cincang is one of the highest mountains on the island and its serrated ridgeline forms a spectacular backdrop to Burau Bay.

The horizontal lift is a little over two kilometres and the most amazing piece of engineering information that I can muster is that it does this using just two pylons. This decision was made to protect the rainforests clinging precariously to the steep granite outcrop.

The expanse of cable from the second pylon to the first observation station looks very scary as it suspends for almost a kilometre. This is where you really have to



place faith in technology and Austrian engineering ability.

So, that's most of the technical information, but why should you make the effort? There are three things - view, view and view. Yes, the view is simply stunning and the ride to appreciate this view is exhilarating. The weather will have a lot to do with your appreciation so if it is overcast or raining, you may want to wait for a clearer day. The cable car operators carefully monitor the wind velocity and stop operations if it gets too strong.

There are two viewing stations and you should get off at both. While it is still early days, there is a walking track from Station One, uphill to Station Two for those who want to take in the montane vegetation, which is stunted and lower than the rainforest found in the lowlands. Hopefully, more interpretative signage will be installed so that visitors can appreciate and learn from the environment. A restaurant is planned as well.

The views from Station One look southeast and the Mutiara Burau Bay Beach Resort below can be seen nestled in the forest besides the beaches of Pantai Kok and Burau Bay. In the distance is the popular beach of Pantai Cenang and the airport can also be seen. It's a strange sight to be standing and looking down on landing planes.

Station Two is a short ride back up the cable car. The views from here include those from Station One but also the

undeveloped northern side of the island and off into the distance is Tarutao National Park in southern Thailand. Yes, this is how close Mount Mat Cincang is to Thailand - a matter of ten kilometres or so across the Andaman Sea. Someone tried to tell me that Phuket was visible on a clear day, but even I know that it is impossible to see 300 kilometres off into the distance. The rocks of this mountainous area also worth noting and some interpretation signs are planned to be erected. The granite rock here is over 350 million years old, which really doesn't mean that much to me except that they are old. Some of the oldest in Asia apparently but I'm not sure if this alone will have the tourists coming to check the ratio of orthoclase feldspar to plagioclase feldspar in the granite. The plants that grow in these difficult circumstances of climate and shallow soil maybe of greater significance and the services of a botanical guide would be worthwhile if this is what gets you going. There are some very good guides on the island.

The cable car ride is well worth the RM15 (adult) and RM10 (child) charge. The cable car operates from 1000 to 1900 daily and there are enough distractions like shops, restaurants and bars in the Oriental Village to make this a place to visit next time you are in Langkawi.

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