

How Far Will RM 5 Get Me?



I LIKE TO get out of the city. Don't get me wrong, the Man in the Moustache loves everything about our planet's urban centres: the food and festivals, sights and strangers, and of course...the opportunity for mischief.

However, there is something to be said about a little getaway. Malaysia's affordable transport options, smooth highways and access to beaches, mountains and jungles makes leaving the city all the more inviting. But sometimes, I just don't have the time to escape to Borneo or the desire to ride the RM9 bus to the LCCT. So I wondered: how far will RM5 get me?

My plan was: fill up the tank to my Honda 'Dream'. Drive over the hills of Ampang into the neighbouring valleys until my tank reads half empty. Turn around. Drive home. I even picked a destination .. sort of. Apparently there is a waterfall that can be found within thirty minutes of Metro KL. I have no idea where it is, but that doesn't necessarily mean I can't find it. After all, isn't it supposed to be about the journey?

Within five minutes of leaving my apartment, I was immediately surrounded by rural Malaysia's beautiful countryside and interesting Kampong landscapes. The 'Dream' and I cruised along the winding roads that took us over the mountains that surround the Klang Valley. Why was I living in the city? The air was instantly sweeter as the needle on

my gas tank barely moved in the first thirty minutes of my ride.

I passed rivers with clothed Malaysians splashing about in the mild rapids. Being the first sunny day in a while, I pictured myself doing a cannonball into the water as soon as I found a spot deeper than two feet.

Scattered along the riverside were numerous wooden sheds that housed beat-up, leatherette couches. How they got there was anybody's guess, but they were being put to good use by locals who enjoyed the company of their scenery.

When on a road trip, one tends to get hungry, and stopping for some *makan* is an important item on the itinerary. About ninety minutes into my journey, I stopped at a small stall just off the road, nestled close to a tree-lined, murky body of water. I strolled to the edge of the pond where I could see schools of fish playing just below the surface. If my knowledge of sea life was better than a ten-year old watching *Finding Nemo* I would be able to tell you what kind of fish they were. It isn't so I can't.

The stall was typically and delightfully Malay. A table, covered by a checkered, torn tablecloth, was weighed down by a purple plastic utensil holder housing six different forks and some folded tissues. Beside it were a mismatched set of bowls and a hot plate of steamed rice. A perfect place for lunch.

There was no one was around, so I assumed it was shut, but as I turned to leave, an older woman (no offence intended) emerged from the tiny kitchen and waltzed up to me gracefully.

I expected conversation to be a struggle as forgetful me had forgotten my trusty Malay phrase book (living in KL doesn't necessarily equip an Expat with a functional use of Bahasa Malaysia). However, ordering food is relatively easy for this linguistically challenged adventurer. Once again, I was amazed, as her English was as smooth as her stride.

Her name was Hafasa (there is a large chance that the spelling of her name is radically off. I mean no disrespect by this; I did not wish to interrupt the flow of conversation by asking her to spell it). She had a welcoming smile and asked if I was British.

"I'm from Canada".
No reaction.

"But I live over the hills in KL."
She kept her Poker face.

She then said I could call her Hajjah. When asked why, I was told that was the name she earned for visiting Islam's holiest of cities, Mecca. As she paused, I pictured her physical and spiritual journey for a moment.

"Cool".
I asked if the fully-clothed people swimming



in the lazy, roadside rivers were local villagers enjoying a bath or play.

"Not today". Her speech was never in a hurry and she still hadn't asked if I wanted anything to eat. "At weekends, most of the people visiting the rivers and the waterfalls are from nearby KL or Shah Alam. It gets quite crowded." I wonder if she has been to IKEA on a Saturday as the six people I noticed bathing in the rivers could hardly be classified as crowded.

I asked her age. She smiled but didn't answer.

I asked for directions to this unknown waterfall and she was only too happy to oblige. I guess that meant I was on the right track.

Although I have tasted better chicken rice, my thirst was quenched as the water was welcomingly cold. I thanked Hajjah and continued on my ride.

The best thing about budget-holiday adventures like this is that there are no wrong turns and one never really gets lost - a few left turns and unfamiliar signs were part of the package. As such, there is no real need to provide you, the reader, with satellite-precise locations as to where I was. To embark on this type of adventure is to lose your way.

Further down the road, I stopped to take a

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photo of a house that was strikingly similar to the Batak homes found on Pulau Samosir in Lake Toba, Sumatra. Trying to find a shot clear of telephone wires proved difficult as the two Jacks distracted me. To be honest, I am not 100% certain that their names were Jack, but that was what they responded with when asked, and having just met them, I had to take their word for it.

I guessed their ages to be between 12 and 15. The Jacks were brothers and were pretty excited to have their photo taken. They were chilling out in one of those riverside wooden sheds. This one however, was free of a 'charming' leatherette couch.

The Jacks weren't overly interested in conversation most likely due to their lack of conversational English and my embarrassing lack of a deep Bahasa Malaysia vocab. However, they were interested in my 'Dream', circling it the way small-town fellers circle a Camaro, commenting on how clean it was and then asking if they could take it for a spin (not in so many words). Jack 1 took off down the street as Jack 2 screamed in laughter. I wondered if I should have given my

motorcycle to a 15-year old. Then I wondered if I should have insisted he take my helmet. It's nice to wonder. Keeps me young.

Jack 1 didn't venture far out of my sight. He thanked me for the ride and together, the Jacks resumed their place watching the world go by next to the river. I asked if they knew where the waterfall was. Their puzzled looks led me to perform an interpretive dance as I tried to use non-verbal clues to explain 'Waterfall'. They laughed, pointed in the direction I was heading and waved goodbye.

An hour later, after an ice-cream cone, sunburned shoulders, and an ill-advised wicker basket purchase (he was a good salesman) my needle teetered on the ½ empty mark. It was time to head back to the concrete jungle.

I never did find the waterfall and I wonder if I was really looking for it? At least I have another excuse to come out for some chicken rice.

Peace, love and travel.
MM