

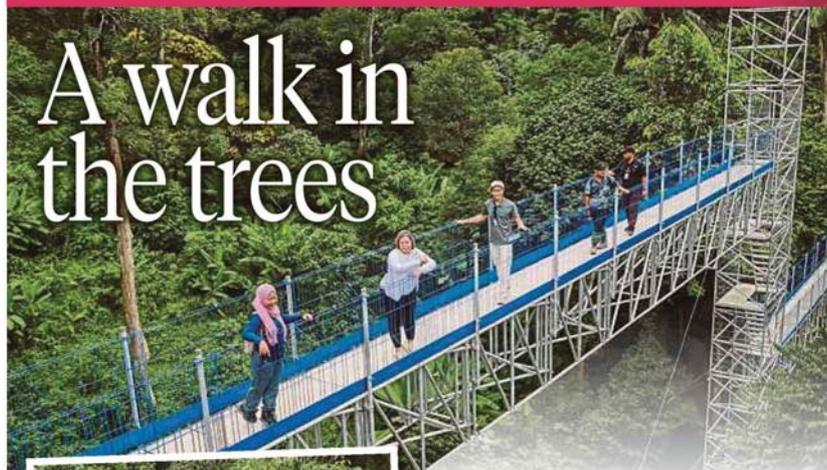
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JOM!

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Gardenias in your hands — the mature ones are deep orange and the younger ones have creamy yellow blooms. PICTURES BY ASYRAF HAMZAH



A walk in the trees



Lim explaining the story of the giant palm leaves.



The boardwalk that spans 400m in Razak Walk, which is the first wheelchair-accessible forest trail in Malaysia.



TOP: The Forest Skywalk is nothing like its older sister, the Canopy Walkway, which is now limited to research.

BELOW: On a clear day, one can see the Kuala Lumpur city skyline and even Genting Highlands from the Forest Skywalk.



Be mesmerised by the view at the Kepong Botanical Garden's Forest Skywalk, writes **Zalina Mohd Som**

"A H, gardenia!" exclaims someone walking in the middle of our small pack. We had just left the parking lot of the Kepong Botanical Garden (KBG), taking a stroll to the one thing that made us brave Friday morning traffic — the Forest Skywalk.

"Over here, it's gardenia," comes the voice again trying to get our attention.

"What? Breakfast now? Didn't he remind us to have a heavy breakfast before coming for this trip?" I say to myself as I stop and turn to look at Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM) media officer Lim Chung Lu.

"Look, there. It's gardenia," says an excited Lim as he points to the deep orange, single-layered petal flowers scattered on the tarred road.

"You mean Gardenia as in the bread brand? These flowers are called gardenia?" I ask.

Nodding, he picks one up and offers it

to my friend Zarina.

"Here, smell it," he says, signalling to Zarina to bring the flower closer to her nose. "It's gardenia carinata, or mentioning Kedah".

"Ah, it smells like vanilla with a hint of citrus. The smell is not overpowering, but enough to make you keep sniffing at it," comes a short review from Zarina.

"So, I guess today's visit will not be just about the Skywalk," says Lim, smiling.



Itsy-bitsy spider.

Our team has been trying to visit the Skywalk ever since FRIM officially opened it on National Day in 2020. It became an instant hit, most probably because it was opened at a time when most Malaysians were deprived of travelling or even outdoor pursuits.

With Covid-19 standard operating procedures (SOP) and a series of movement control phases in place, getting a ticket to the Skywalk is like getting a golden buzzer for that 15 minutes of bragging rights.

Due to the overwhelming response, this second canopy walkway by FRIM has seen a number of changes in its operations to comply with.

And today, the Skywalk allows only 320

visitors per day with tickets that can only be bought in advance on its website. No walk-ins are allowed.

In fact, it is limited to only 80 per hour throughout its four-hour operating time that starts from 8.30am daily, from Saturday to Thursday. Talk about crowd control!

So, you can imagine how elated we were when FRIM agreed to take us on a half-day guided walk at its "tourist wing" — the KBG and its main campus — which is now strictly for research and pre-booked activities.

WALKING ABOVE TREES

Besides Lim, our team is accompanied by Wan Saiful Rufi, a guide who speaks English flawlessly. While the team members are fussing over their new-found gardenia, Wan, as he prefers to be called, tells me that there are two routes to the Forest Skywalk office.

"Now we are taking a slightly longer route via Razak Walk so that you'll walk under the lush man-made rainforest, and going out, we'll take the outer route so you can see the garden's beautiful landscape," he explains in one breath.

As guests of a guided walk, Wan says, we get access to a "no-entry" trail off the main trail in the Razak Walk, which interestingly is the country's first, and maybe one and only, wheelchair-friendly forest trail.

The short walk takes us to the ticket counter, and after a short climb and a safety briefing, we are "released" one by one to take the stairs up to the famed Skywalk.

Only two visitors are allowed to climb the tower of stairs at one time, and only five people are allowed on each bridge.

Though the first bridge is only 20m high, climbing the tower is a bit nerve-wracking, and I'm not even scared of heights!

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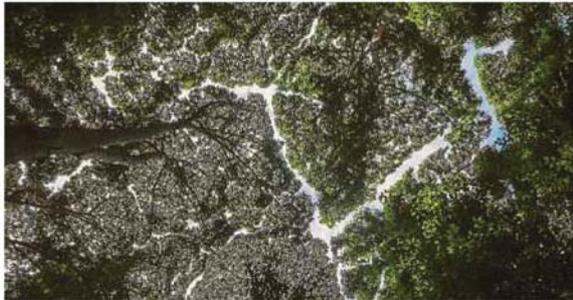
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Wan striking a pose below a towering Merbau tree, acknowledged as the national tree three years ago.



No, this is not Jerantut's famed Red Forest. This is the Kepong Botanical Forest's version of a Red Forest.



The star attraction of FRIM — the world-famous crown shyness phenomenon that makes the institute's forest the only place on earth with this beauty.

FAST FACTS

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OPENING HOURS: 8am to 5pm, Monday to Friday, Kepong Botanic Garden: 7.30am to 7pm, Monday to Thursday. Opens also at 7am on weekends and public holidays. Forest Skywalk: 8.30am to 12.30pm, Saturday to Thursday.

PAY: Forest Skywalk: RM15 (adult), RM8 (child); 3-hour guided walk — RM150 per guide; Sungai Kroh Guest House: RM200 (per room, per night).

FACILITIES: Event space; Villa Aromatica, Villa Fragrans and Pavilion and sports facilities — badminton, squash, volleyball and tennis courts.



Take nothing but photographs.

This Skywalk's the limit

FROM PAGE 21

Thanks to the mixed feelings the tower gives — "openness" from the close-up walls that are just made of steel mesh and the claustrophobia-inducing size of its built-up platforms.

But after reaching the bridge, that feeling disappeared. The view from this height is simply breathtaking — the thick forest of Bukit Lagong gently sloping down to meet the landscaped garden of KBG, with the concrete jungle of Kuala Lumpur to its east.

"Wait until you go on higher bridges or that tower," says Wan, pointing to one opposite site that is taller than the rest.

I can clearly see the shape of the Skywalk forming above those lush trees. I figured if seen from above, the Skywalk looks like a perfect steel-white rectangle framing the beautiful shades of green.

But at eye level, the bridges — all eight of them — don't stand at the same height. They, however, are connected to each other by the stair towers.

The bridges are suspended between 20m and 46m above the forest floor, and one tower offers the ultimate aerial view from its 50m-high platform that stands 141m above sea level. However, one needs to buy an additional ticket to go up this tower.

Not like its older sister — the Canopy Walkway — or other hanging bridges that sway and bounce with the visitors' movement, Forest Skywalk is surprisingly firm. And thanks to its totally

covered floor, not the usual see-through metal mesh, those with acrophobia get to enjoy the faraway views with ease, provided that they don't look down!

We reach the last tower after a 30-minute stroll on the 250m rectangular loop. The first guided tour ends with a short walk on the tree-lined road back to our parked cars.

WALKING UNDER TREES

A short seven-minute drive takes us to FRIM Main Campus. As we regroup at the parking lot of its main building, Wan asks us a rhetorical question: "Do you believe that this is a man-made forest?"

We turn to where he's looking — a thick rainforest with tall, mature trees, whose leaves are so lush that sunlight can hardly penetrate, creating a safe haven for undergrowth to thrive.

"If this is my first visit here, I would say that you're trying to kid me," I reply, "and yes, no one will believe you".

For the record, at 1,528 hectares, the FRIM has the distinction of hosting the world's largest man-made forest of various tree species, which were planted by pioneer foresters and scientists since 1926 (almost a century ago!)

FRIM, as an institute, was officially established three years later.

Prior to this, the site was an abandoned tin mining pit, with vegetable gardens and a small patch of natural forest.

When all are set to go, Wan leads us to the forest and within minutes, we are standing on the forest floor covered with dried leaves.

"Those dried leaves are keruing leaves," says Lim as he picks up one, adding: "You know it's a keruing leaf when you see these sharp, jagged edges."

"We've seen these leaves during our weekly hikes and now we know its name," Zarina says.

"Yes, it's a local tree species that can be found in Peninsular Malaysia, southern Thailand and Sumatra," replies Lim.

The dried keruing leaf-covered trail is wide and heavily shaded by the forest canopy. Not long after we entered, Wan pauses at the base of a tall tree. His eyes inspect the ground under the tree while he sweeps the dried leaves with his walking stick.

"Ok, got it," he comes running to us with something in his hand. "Smell this."

On his palm is a half-cracked wild fruit that looks almost like a betel nut, with

its similar size and hard shell. The only thing that is different is its cream-coloured flesh that covers every part of the brown-coloured shell.

"It smells like garlic but stronger," my colleague, Asyraf Hamzah, says.

"This is the fruit from pokok kutim, also known as the garlic nut tree. Some use the fruit as a substitute for garlic, but it is mostly used for its health benefits," says Wan.

The flat easy trail goes up another level with small challenges — streams, rocky sections and a bit of climbing. But our attention is focused on the unspoilt beauty of the forest.

Ten minutes into the little adventure, Wan stops in the middle of a trail. He waits for everyone to gather around him but the look on his face tells me that he's about to tell something big.

"What?" I ask eagerly, as I look around for anything dangerous lurking behind the trees. He sighs and smiles.

"This," he looks up and points his finger to the sky. Well, you know how it goes. Looking up, everyone goes "ooh" and "aah", with wide gaping mouths at the sight of the tree canopy.

"This is known as the crown shyness, a unique phenomenon that can only be seen here in FRIM," says Wan as he points up to the patterns made by the gaping crowns of towering kapur trees.

He says this phenomenon has put FRIM on the world map when it comes to scientific publications.

Now, I remember the reason why I put FRIM in my list of places to go for a quick feel of the jungle.

Oh, the stories behind the crown shyness phenomenon? Well, you just have to join this three-hour guided walk!

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Look out for beautiful wild flowers.

It's a real jungle in FRIM!



FRIM's Sungai Kroh Guest House has rates as low as RM200.



With wooden flooring and natural air, FRIM's badminton courts are probably one of its kind in the city.