THE MYSTIQUE OF PANGKOR ISLAND

By Dr Vikneswaran Nair

Pulau Pangkor (Pangkor Island), or more prominently called Pangkor, is situated just off the west coast of Perak in Peninsular Malaysia. A quaint mix of fishing villages and resorts, she is one of the most enchanting and fascinating islands you will ever come across.

In the old days, she was the refuge of seamen who sailed through the Straits of Malaka. Pangkor’s main idyllic bays made her the ideal destination for adventurers, merchants and soldiers of fortune who sought the peace and tranquility she had to offer.

Largely inhabited by fisher-folk who live in fishing settlements scattered along the coast, Pangkor is in stark contrast to Malaysia’s fast-paced progress and remains a haven for those seeking to get away from the hustle and bustle of city life. Here, visitors can bask in the sun on her golden beaches and catch sights of fishing boats rocking gently on calm blue waters.

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Situated seven kilometres from the historic Lumut town, Pangkor has for centuries enthralled visitors with her charming beauty, idyllic bays, pristine beaches, and vibrant tropical forests. Hence, it comes as no surprise that Pangkor has been a welcome stopover for the sea-wary pirates and adventurers in the old days. In fact, it was at one time ruled by European conquerors such as the Dutch and British. Despite that, her natural wonders have remained unscarred and her environment remains as tranquil and harmonious as ever.

Today, Pangkor is a thriving tourist destination that does not reflect her turbulent past. The centuries of islands of Pangkor is made up of one major mountainous island metres 800 feet) high. There is a mountain trail from Pasir Bogak beach to Sungai Pinang town.

Pangkor Island is about 20 sq km and has a population of about 23,000 comprising mostly fishermen. While the island is today one of the biggest fish suppliers in Peninsular Malaysia, it is known more as a world class holiday destination, thanks to its idyllic setting, tropical charm and various accommodation that suit every budget.

GETTING THERE

Pangkor is a 40-minute ferry ride from Lumut, a coastal town which is 84 km from Ipoh city or a three-hour drive from Kuala Lumpur. The ferry fare costs a mere few ringgit, depending on which part of Pangkor you are going to. There are also scheduled flights via Kuala Lumpur operated by Berjaya Air.

Once there, taxis (vars) are available for most part of the day to take you around. However, please be forewarned that the taxis have no fare meters, hence you should check the fare before embarking on a ride.
ACCOMMODATION
There is no lack of accommodation on the Island. Levels vary from the simplest camp site, A-frames, chalets and hotels to world-class exclusive beach resorts.

Pangkor Laut Resort is Malaysia's very own fantasy island. Separate ferries plies to and from the resort. This resort is located at the north of the island and away from the township. It has three main beaches, namely Emerald Bay which is ideal for swimming and sunbathing; Coral Beach, a haven for divers in search of colourful corals and underwater marine life and Royal Bay, ideal for those who prefer sailing and windsurfing. The resort has Malay-style cottages with modern amenities for your comfort. Pangkor Laut Resort has its own transport arrangements.

Then, there is another impressive resort at Pasir Bogak. The bulk of budget chalets are also all clustered around Pasir Bogak. It is a beach front. This place is about three kilometres from the town.

SIGHT SEEING ON THE ISLAND
Sight seeing in Pangkor is a matter of interest and opinion. Most visitors merely seek to satisfy their curiosity as to what would be available on the island. There is nothing outstanding as compared to other more celebrated sites available within the country. At the most, you would absorb the tranquility of the beaches. That is what this island can do best.

Among Pangkor's popular tourist destinations are the Dutch Fort (Kota Belanda), Scared Rock (Batu Bersurat), Miniature Great Wall, Pasir Bogak Beach, Segadas Beach, Foo Lin Kong Park, Sri Pathirakali Temple, Nipah Bay (Teluk Nipah), Tortoise Bay (Teluk Kura-kura), Giam Island, Pangkor Laut and Puteri Dewi Beach.

The fort was originally built in 1670 for a dual purpose - to keep the tin supplies from Perak and maintain a check on piracy in the straits. It was destroyed in 1690 when the locals became discontented with the Dutch.

The fort was rebuilt in 1743, only to be used for another five years. Unable to withstand the constant onslaught from the local Malays, the fort was finally left in ruins until today.

Beside this fort, somewhere down the road, look out for a boulder, almost immersed in modern-day graffiti, which is supposed to be engraved with some images of a historical scene. Look at it and form your own conclusion.

Another popular "must-see" destination rated by the locals is the Miniature Great Wall. As a practice of ensuring the presence of life, thousands of carp and "tiapia" fishes are kept in a pond.

Little known to most casual visitors, the sea around the island is not only clear but also scenic. In fact, the local advertising industry had selected a few scenes to project a remote destination with unspoilt environment.
A typical fishing village, at the jetty.

For shutter-bugs, there are many good places featuring local lifestyles and the whole fishing industry.

TOWNS AROUND THE ISLAND

Without defining the size of population to qualify a township, there are three distinct townships and four kampungs in Pangkor. With the exception of Kampung Teluk Nipah that is located on the west coast, the remaining six are on the island’s eastern side facing the calmer waters of the channel.

The town with the most activity is the first arrival point, Kampung Sungei Pinang Kechil. Here, the fishing industry sends its produce to meet the much-needed supply on the mainland.

The urban areas in Pangkor look exciting. Narrow streets with fewer cars but dominated by two wheelers. Shops dealing with industrial supply are concentrated around the vicinity of the pier.

Walk around town to savour some of the local cuisine while sightseeing. If your timing is right, you might even see the fishermen hauling in their catch.

Visit a seafood factory producing dried cuttlefish, anchovies, fish satay, and dried shrimps for a taste of Pangkor that can be brought home.

The mystique of this pretty fishing village has never failed to charm tourists from all over the world with a wide variety of fresh and dried seafood and souvenirs crafted from seashells and local materials.

If you watch carefully, you could see road signs indicating winding stretches. On the eastern stretch, the roads hug the steep hill slopes that almost end up in the sea. This rocky outcrop cuts Sungei Pinang Kechil town from the next town, Sungei Pinang Besar.

Do not forget to visit Sungei Pinang Besar village which is popular for boat building and repairs. Sungei Pinang Besar is a residential area as well as a maintenance depot for the fishing fleets. Though small, it is a self-sufficient township. You may spot an unusual-looking fuel dispensing station serving motor bike users with small purchases.

Pangkor town serves the commercial needs of the visitors and residents. Businesses here are sundries, general goods with commercial houses and banks. Unlike other towns, building here are of contemporary designs and the road less stilted. The souvenir shops can be seen here too.

Pangkor today is a thriving tourist destination that somehow does not reflect her turbulent past. Visitors will be charmed by the serenity of her fishing villages, its small but bustling towns and her splendid selection of international standard holiday resorts.

ROUND ISLAND BUS TOUR

It is a good idea for the mini bus (van) driver cum guide to show you through this small community in one briefing. This will acquaint you with your holiday destination and with this closely-knit society.

Round island trip is 25 km, point to point. It would cover most of the scenic sights and information spots. The trip would pass through the Dutch Fort, Sacred Rock, two major bays and three towns, Satay fish factory [disguised souvenir shop] and the “Great Wall”. The fort is off the regular route and may not be included, so it is good to confirm in advance.

Then, after having a feel of the places, take a walk or hike to the destinations at your leisure.

If you fancy mobility, get a bicycle or motorcycle!

Motorcycles [small] are available at about RM30 per day while bicycles at RM10. The round island road is ideal for mountain bikers. Beware of the condition of the rented bicycle and also some reckless mini bus drivers (vans) round the few sharp bends.