



# COFFEE BREAK WITH... ALBERT TEO

Strolling into the hotel lobby that afternoon with a wide smile and an unassuming air of confidence was a gentleman with many successful endeavors in the tourism industry. A graduate in Economics, his award-winning Borneo Eco Tours and Sukau Rainforest Lodge is an impressive challenge on a road less traveled.

No stranger to the tourism industry, Albert Teo's involvement in the tourism industry for the last thirty years has been extraordinary. A man of many hats over the last three decades he has been a hotelier, tour operator, lodge and backpacker owner and operator, ecotourism consultant, speaker and lecturer. "I had to be different" explains the latter about his decision to start the Sukau Rainforest Lodge. As you might have gathered Albert is all for innovation and creativity. Often sought by industry professionals to share his views and opinions on the subject, Albert is a visionary pioneer of the term 'Eco and 'Ecotourism'. It was his foresight that changed the face of the Malaysian tourism industry and since then he has never looked back. "You have to be passionate about it, otherwise don't do it" he relates. The man is certainly enjoying his work and is faultlessly passionate about the environment, sustainability and the welfare of his employees.

His face visibly lit up as we brought up the subject of Ecotourism. Being a descriptive individual, he then proceeded to draw us an interpretation of the term Ecotourism. "I want you to understand what Ecotourism means" say Albert as he started to explain and we were sure we never forgot.

**HARBOUR HERALD:** Back in the days when you first started Borneo Eco Tours, 'Eco' as we know it was something new and almost unheard of in Sabah. As a pioneer of the 'Eco' terminology, can you explain to us how you came about this idea?

**ALBERT TEO:** Before I started Borneo Eco Tours, I needed to find something that would provide me a niche in the market. I had a lot of time to think about using the term 'Eco' and felt that if I was going to start a company it had to meet specific objectives. 'Eco' was something different. It gave me direction and provided me with a new strategy to move forward in an industry that had little commercial difference between one tour operator and another. It was also the year of the 1st Earth Summit in Brazil (1991) when I formed my company.

**HARBOUR HERALD:** Are you able to tell us about your latest eco-program and its objectives?

**ALBERT TEO:** There are many eco-programs that we are currently working on. Eco-programs take time and people need to understand the challenges and level of commitment required before any project is undertaken. But most importantly all our eco-programs must benefit the lives of our local community and operate within a natural environment.

**HARBOUR HERALD:** In your Sukau Rainforest Lodge, can you please tell us some of the eco-considerations implemented in your lodges?

**ALBERT TEO:** With Sukau Rainforest Lodge, we are trying to create a unique travel experience with limited funds. We are trying to use the lodge as a tool for educating the locals and tourists alike on the idea of practicing a more sustainable living and sustainable development. So during the construction of the lodge we made sure that land utilization had a minimum negative impact with the natural environment whilst maximizing the natural advantage of the forest. The best river in view was reserved for the guests while a certain area of forested land was reserved for Borneo pigmy elephants. We even built two elephant passes for them to pass through our land. The boardwalks were built on stilts and covered to minimize impact on wildlife and vegetation. We made sure we used recycled materials and reduce noise where we could at the same time implementing recycling through rainwater harvesting throughout the lodge.

**HARBOUR HERALD:** What are some of the activities and common practices in our lodge to encourage your guests to be more eco-responsible?

**ALBERT TEO:** For a start I would encourage you to visit Sukau Rainforest Lodge to witness this for yourself. The Sukau Rainforest Lodge is set in an informal environment and we encourage our guests to wear our sarongs in and around the lodge. We use solar power for water heating and practise the use of recycled cooking oil as fuel for light. Noise level is minimized through the use of acoustic generators, four strokes outboard engines and electric motors. River boats are hand made by the local community to generate income and employment opportunity. When we take our guests on the night cruise we make sure we use a red filtered light so that it minimizes impact on the nocturnal behaviour of animals and birds. We also set aside RM12 for every tourist that visits our lodge for our community and tree planting project. These are just about a fraction of what we do at the lodge.

**HARBOUR HERALD:** Now that Ecotourism is better understood over the globe. How satisfied are you with Malaysia's approach on Ecotourism, do you think our country is doing enough to encourage this?

**ALBERT TEO:** We are very fortunate to have in place Malaysia Ecotourism Plan which was done in the mid 90s and used by the government to guide their developments. As a result ecotourism is better understood by the serious practitioners including academics, NGOs including WWF which assisted the government in drafting the ecotourism master plan, government departments directly responsible for developing ecotourism and a few special interest tour and lodge operators.

Many tourism players have also been exposed to ecotourism through several international ecotourism conferences that I have organised under Malaysian Association of Tours and Travel Agents (MATTA) including World Ecotourism Conference WEC1999, Asia Pacific Ecotourism Conference APeco 2002, Borneo Ecotourism Conference BEC2005 and the forthcoming Borneo Tourism Conference BTC2007 in September 2007. Over the last few years, MATTA have also been organising the annual APeco conference in different parts of the country.

The general level of understanding among Malaysians in the tourism industry is therefore increasing though at a slower pace than what the foreign tourists would have liked especially those who choose to come to Malaysian Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak where ecotourism products are more varied and better developed.

**HARBOUR HERALD:** As a driver of Ecotourism in the country, could you please provide us with some of your views on Ecotourism for the future and what are some of the directions to be taken?

**ALBERT TEO:** Given the rapid pace of globalization and the shift towards the knowledge economy I believe that Ecotourism will continue to thrive. And places such as the Sukau Rainforest Lodge will not just attract international visitors but prove an attraction among the locals as well. As Malaysians become more affluent, they will want to seek out places like Sukau and Kinabatangan for their "spiritual" encounters with wild orang utans, wild elephants and wild proboscis monkeys and generally with nature we need to protect these areas for our future generations to enjoy.

**HARBOUR HERALD:** I heard that you started a counseling program for the welfare of your employees at Borneo Eco Tours. Can you please explain your rationale and how significant is this to the business?

**ALBERT TEO:** Well, I wouldn't exactly call it counseling but more of an internal leadership program. It's my way of identifying potential leaders. I want all my team members to pursue learning as a life-long experience and they must want this for themselves just as much as I would like to see them succeed.

For the last 7 years I have been organizing fortnightly self-improvement sessions in my house with my key leaders. I instituted a book reading program and everyone had to read a certain number of books a year and also do a certain number of book summaries. To build a generation of thinkers and leaders we must always start with the most basic of skills. The ability to read and comprehend and later to take that one step further by doing a book summary. I read all their work and in our weekly equipping sessions I get them to present it to develop their public speaking skills. We also get to share the book summaries among the other staff. Most of my staff read up to four books a year and that includes my bus captains! Some of the leaders read over 20 books a year.

**HARBOUR HERALD:** Thank you very much.

A graduate in Economics (Honours) from the University of London in 1977, Albert Teo has been in the tourism industry for the last thirty years. Over the three decades, he has been a hotelier, tour operator, lodge and backpacker owner and operator, ecotourism consultant, speaker and lecturer. With a keen eye for photography, he has published over 150 postcard designs of Borneo and has published seven books on Borneo including the best selling Sabah - Land of the Sacred Mountain, Journey through Borneo and Saving Paradise - The Story of Sukau Rainforest Lodge among others.

His companies Borneo Eco Tours and Sukau Rainforest Lodge have won numerous international ecotourism awards. Albert has served in various positions in the tourism industry including Sabah Chapter Chairman of Malaysian Association of Tours and Travel Agents (MATTA), Chairman of Sabah Tourist Associations, Advisor of The International Ecotourism Society (TIES), USA, member of the marketing committee of Sabah Tourism Board, among others. In the last few years, Albert started to travel around the Asia Pacific countries as an ecotourism speaker on ecotour and ecolodge operations and marketing through his consulting company, Borneo Integrated Services Pte. Ltd.

