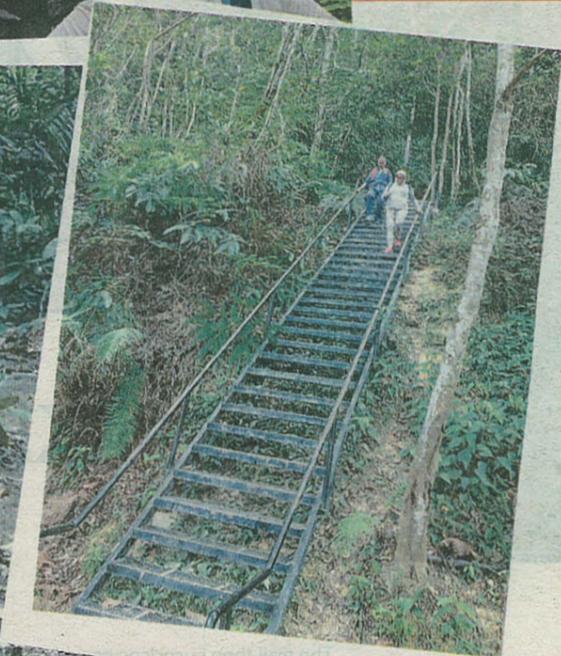


JOM!

BROUGHT TO YOU BY LIFE & TIMES



The Waterfall View tells you that you've done about three-quarter of the ascent. **BELOW:** One of the flights of stairs that welcome hikers right after leaving the park office.



LEFT: The Bukit Putus trail is either made of red-dirt trail that gets slippery during and after the rain, or this tricky roots-covered trail. PICTURES BY ZALINA MOHD SOM

Negri's two famous mountains

Angsi and Datuk, each has its own character, challenges and thrills. **Zalina Mohd Som** shares her experiences hiking to the peaks with her friends

OF its 300-plus named peaks, Negri Sembilan's most climbed mountains, or at least, most popular, are probably Angsi and Datuk. One reason are these mountains popular is the fact that the peaks can be reached in a day. Still, this does not mean that one can take them for granted. They have their own challenges and thrills. And the fact that they are not too far from Kuala Lumpur — Angsi is only an hour's drive while Datuk is another half an hour — is another attraction. These factors make the two mountains among the preferred training grounds for hikers planning to climb much greater summits like Kinabalu in Sabah or Tahan in Pahang, or even the world-famous Annapurna and Everest Base Camps in Nepal.

A short diversion, one trivia question: Do you know that Mount Fuji in Japan is the world's most climbed mountain, with a record of over 300,000 climbers a year? Hmm... I wonder what the records are like for both Angsi and Datuk. Back to the Adat Perpatih ground. Even though these mountains are located in different recreational forests, about 50km apart from each other, they are actually parts of the mighty Banjaran Titiwangsa before it ends at Gunung Tampin (764m) in Tampin Forest Reserve. Standing at 884m, Datuk, located at Gunung Datuk Recreational Forest in Rembau, is the state's fourth highest peak while Angsi (824m), which is located in the Angsi Forest Reserve in Kuala Pilah, is the sixth. The other peaks are Besar Hantu (1,462m), Telapak Buruk (1,193m), Bukit Payong (1,079) and Bukit Bintongan (842m).

Now, don't ask me why the last two are named "bukit" (Malay for hill) when Angsi, the lowest among the six, is called a mountain. Okay, back to Angsi and Datuk (ah, too many digressions!), how do they compare with each other? Somehow, for some reason, I always think that Angsi is harder and more challenging than Datuk. Is it?

GUNUNG ANGSI
Since in my mind Datuk is easier to tackle than Angsi, I thought my friends and I should try the hard one first. A day is set, with gear all ready, we make our way to the trailhead at Bukit Putus. Angsi has another trailhead at Ulu Bendul, some 4km down the Jalan Kuala Pilah meandering road. It's not difficult to find the trailhead. You won't miss the sight of an R&R-like long, single storey building with a distinctive Minangkabau roof, the state's identity, at the central section. Splashed across, on the hill behind the Minangkabau roof, is Gunung Angsi written in a Hollywood sign-like style. Unfortunately, parking is very limited and we have no choice but to park quite a distance from the building. But what we didn't know is that the walk from our car actually serves as a good, though brief, warm-up as the hike starts immediately from the building's pavement. The first thing that welcomes us when we get past the building is a long flight of steel stairs. Looking further up, we see another two stairs of similar fashion and height. "Okay. Brace yourselves, guys. Here we

go," I announce to the group, oh wait, more to myself actually. Still panting from the stairs, the trail continues immediately and steeply, too. The trail is wide and clear, which means it gives us a clear view of what's ahead — a long, steep hike on barren earth with snaky exposed roots. The steep ascent continues for almost two hours before we reach a reasonably flat section. Though less than a 10-minute walk, the stretch gives us a chance to regroup. We usually walk at an individual pace, but not too far away from each other. The view so far is nothing that we haven't seen during our weekly hikes, but with much higher trees and denser shrubs. Only at certain areas of the flat section could we feel the burning morning sun. I know the peak is nowhere near as my smartwatch shows only 652m but I don't know how much further the climb is.

TURN TO PAGE 24

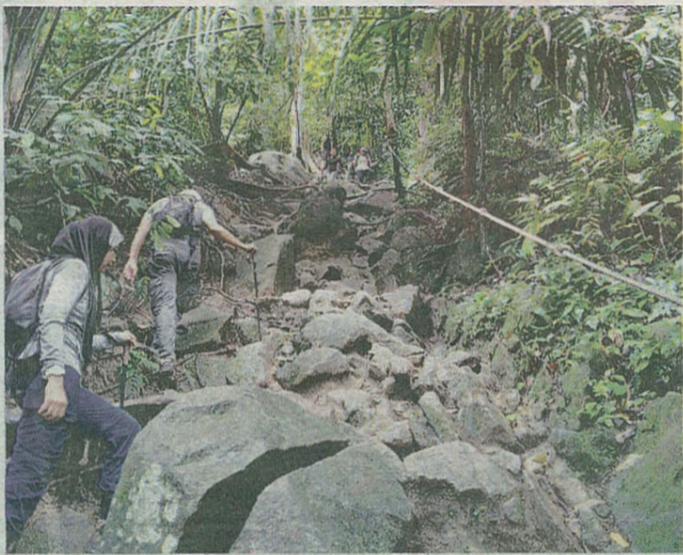
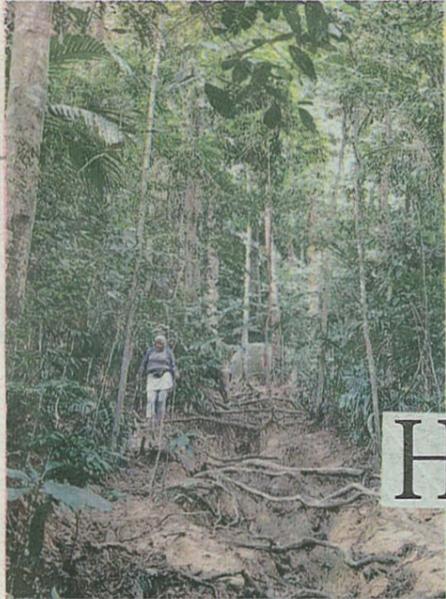


The typical Negri Sembilan-esque building has all the needed facilities — park office, toilets, surau, benches and (limited) parking.

LOKMAN MANSOR GROUP EDITOR, NST • SOFEA CHOK SUAT LING EXECUTIVE EDITOR, CONTENT EMAIL sling@nst.com.my

ZALINA MOHD SOM JOM! EDITOR TEL 03-2724 8707 EMAIL nstjomtravel@gmail.com FACEBOOK www.facebook.com/Friends of Travel Times INSTAGRAM @jom.nst • YK WONG ADVERTISING TEL 03-20569506 EMAIL ykwong@mediaprima.com.my
NEWSTRAITS TIMES TEL 1-300-22-6787 FAX 03-2056 7148 EMAIL news@nstp.com.my ONLINE www.nst.com.my DIGITAL EDITION http://subscription.nstp.com.my FACEBOOK www.facebook.com/NST online TWITTER twitter.com/NewStraitsTimes@NST_Online

Datuk gets the muscle and mind working with its arduous trail that is either barren red dirt, root-covered or boulder-covered.



Hiking adventures

FROM PAGE 23

The trail then surprises us with a short 20m elevation drop. This, to me, only means what comes down, will go up.

And yes, the track from the drop continues to climb, though not as steep and relentless as the first stretch.

As our lungs and legs have been trained by the early arduous climb, this climb is a bit boring and facile, especially with the absence of tricky roots. To a point that we actually ask the oncoming hikers how much further is the peak, a habit I've stopped practising as I "mature" in my hiking.

Not helping to ease our boredom and anxiety are the variety of answers we get from the hikers. The answers vary from 10 to 20 minutes.

Except for boredom, we are in no hurry to reach the summit. Walking as a group now, we continue the climb and in just 20 minutes, we can hear laughter and giggles ahead of us.

Soon, the source of the happy noise comes in view.

There's already a large number of hikers, from different groups, lingering on the barren, open summit. There's a shelter, a well-made signboard, a topple bay-route and a couple of benches. People are actually queueing to get their photos taken at the signboard.

After a half an hour break at the summit, we make our way down to the same point

from where we came. There are groups that choose to do a trans expedition, come from one point and out the other.

The return leg is faster but not much easier as we have to be careful with our footing to protect our knees and ankles, especially at the root-covered track. We complete the descent in two hours.

GUNUNG DATUK

The charming countryside on the drive from Pedas Linggi Toll Plaza to the trailhead at Gunung Datuk Recreational Forest Headquarters (HQ) in Kampung Mungkal gives me a good feeling.

"So, maybe it is easier than Angsi," I say to myself, in an attempt to calm my nerves.

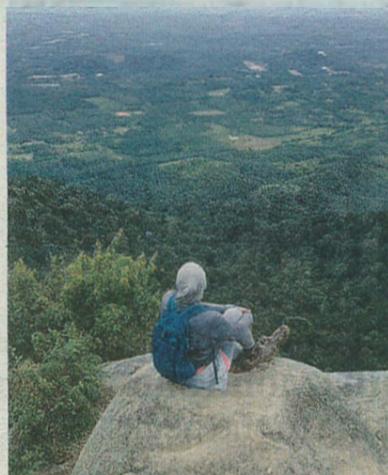
It gets better when a small warung, just a few hundred metres from the left turn to the recreational forest office, comes into our view.

Yes, we're going to get our wish answered — a hearty local breakfast. There's nothing much on the small counter. Only nasi lemak with its basic condiments and sambal, and a small container of donuts.

"Are you going to climb Datuk?" asks a patron in a thick Negri Sembilan dialect. We smile and nod.

"Be careful of pacat. It rained heavily early this morning and leeches will come out after the rain," he continues, while his companions giggle.

I immediately turn to look at my friends' stunned faces. No, they are not scared of that blood-sucking worm, but they just don't like the mess (read: blood and itchiness) each leech bite leaves.



On a good day, you can even see the ships on the Straits of Malacca!

With pacat occupying our thoughts and delicious nasi lemak in our tummies, we march on to the trailhead. Parking is not a problem as the vacant land which I assume belongs to a local, not the forestry, still has more space for more cars.

It's quite a walk from the car park to the park HQ and the small office across the river where all hikers have to register and pay the entry fee.

Then, the hike starts almost immediately with a long, rock-covered track that reminds us of the almost similar looking track at Gunung Irau, which leaves us with no time to woolgather.

Few minutes on the track, we know we have to give all our attention to every step we make and the higher we go, the more we realise that pacat is the least of our worries.

While the wet, slippery rocks frighten us with the thought of losing our footing and falling onto them, the following red-dirt trail tests our grip and balance.

Thanks to the heavy rain, the muddy

track looks utterly "koyak" (Malay for torn), a term used by my generation of hikers for worn, overused trails but the young generation uses the word "barai" (a Malay slang word for wrecked or broken).

It takes us one and a half hours to reach our first pit stop, with a total elevation gain of only 200m. Sitting down on a bench, we're actually drained and numb, with no excitement whatsoever.

"Kak, cold drinks? Pineapple juice, air mata kucing, Coke or 100-Plus," calls a young chap, who has two barrels of floating bottles and cans in front of him.

Startled, I nod and walk towards him: "Give me that dried longan juice lah." I don't know if it's fatigue or excitement (of gulping down cold, sweet drinks), I actually can't twist the cap open.

"Don't worry. It's less strenuous after this, but it's quite long ahead," he says while opening the bottle for me.

He was right. The second leg goes up on an elevation of 400m to take us to a flat, top area in 2:30hrs. But it's not the peak yet.

There is a pile of huge boulders that have sturdy, steel stairs that lead up to the top of the highest boulder.

We brave the steep stairs but as soon as we reach the top, we're dumbfounded by the breathtaking view.

We are not prepared for the whole experience — the sight, the cold breeze and the exhilaration — the peak holds.

We wish we could stay longer on the peak but we want to be out before it gets dark. Trekking without a guide in the dark is not a good idea. Especially not with the trail's wet and slippery conditions.

After 20 minutes, we make our way down slowly and cautiously, and reach the car park in three hours, recording just over seven hours on the arduous trail of Gunung Datuk.

Now, where did I get the idea that Datuk was easier than Angsi?

	GUNUNG ANGSI	GUNUNG DATUK
HEIGHT	824m	884m
ELEVATION GAIN	537m (from Bukit Putus)	868m
TOTAL DISTANCE	10.30km	13.53km
TIME (ASCEND ONLY)	2:50 hrs	4:10 hrs
PEAK	Flat, large top with a wakaf and enough space for three to four ground sheets for hikers to lie down and straighten their legs. But no view.	Superb, unobstructed view that goes as far as the Straits of Malacca and spacious flat areas for hikers to rest and relax.
DIFFICULTY	Easy with gradual climb and enough flats that allow your mind to wander	Tricky and tough with never-ending climb that without knowing it, you'll reach the peak!