

Muddy mission

City ladies team up with 4x4 drivers to reach Kg Sonsogon Magandai

● First of a two-part series

Mary Chin

OH My God! Ouch! Oh dear! Back-breaking! Never again. This will be my first and the last. Such utterances from the females were audible during the Nov 18 trip from Kota Marudu to Kg Sonsogon Magandai via the Paitan Road (which is part of Jalan Pitas-Telupid). From the Paitan Road, we branched into Jalan Sonsogon Magandai, a 30-odd km hilly, winding and muddy road for the most part.

The extreme challenge had yet to begun. But to the more adventurous traveller, the precarious situation was still not extreme enough.

The mission was the Sabah Women Entrepreneurs & Professionals Association (Swepa) Barefoot Solar Project launching of lights supposedly by Chief Minister Datuk Seri Musa Aman. (Inclement weather, however, prevented him from taking a heli ride to this remote village).

There were two teams: Team A comprising 4X4 volunteer drivers Tan Sai Hock and Lu Ai Lee (SA5255P), Ho Kok Yeong, Voon Chin Hwa and Daniel Sampe M.S.L. Bangul (LB2263) and Dave Das (SA5610R), Swepa President cum Barefoot Solar Project Adviser, Datin Albina Ogor Abdullah, Immediate Past President cum Project Adviser, Datin Jeanette Tambakau, Project Assistant Treasurer, Geraldine Ascunson, Head of Social Committee, Tricia Mojulat and Head of Public Relations, Rosie Moo. The Team left on Nov 16 as the participants were bound for Kg Sungai Magandai (farther than Kg Sonsogon Magandai) where they stayed overnight at the village community hall before proceeding to Kg Sonsogon Magandai on Nov 17 in anticipation of the launch of lights.

Team B left early on the morning of Nov 18, comprising 4X4 volunteer driver Wong Chee Wai (SAB5021J), volunteer driver Tan Aik Kiong and co-driver Liew Ket Kiong (LD5000), volunteer driver Tan Guan Kong (SAA6226Y), volunteer driver Koh Yik Hoe and co-driver Chin Yun Khiong (SA2883M), volunteer driver Tan Kok Guan and co-driver Chew Ka Tuan (LB8381), Swepa Vice-President Wynnie

Jong, Head of Training cum Barefoot Solar Project Secretary, Kate Chin, Swepa Assistant Treasurer Stella Wong and Swepa member Monica Chua. Other participants included Sabah Credit Corporation's (SCC) Head of Corporate Services, Eligius Samuel, Vicky Ng (Personal Assistant to SCC CEO Datuk Vincent Pung) and SCC staff Nicholas Chin, Pacos Trust Executive Director, Anne Lasimbang, Pacos Trust Community Learning Centre (CLC) Supervisor, Raini Mapura and photographer Kenneth Chung, and Asian Forestry Company (Sabah) representatives made up of Managing Director Glen MacNair, Project Manager Thondik Venantius, driver Parasul Basang, photographer Wilvia and staff member Judy Wa Juas. Also present were National Coordinator for GEF Small Grants Programme, Lee Shin Shin and Programme Assistant Lai Sook Mei from Kuala Lumpur, as well as RTM reporter Juliana Bangot and videographer Roslia Gondila. Amidst obstacles, Team B took some 12 hours to reach the chapel at Kg Sonsogon Magandai.

(Project Organising Chairperson, Datuk Adeline Leong and her Deputy, Hanaa Wong Abdullah could not make it to the village although their helicopter landed in the compound of the Kota Marudu District Police Headquarters. Owing to bad weather, they were advised to fly back to KK as soon as possible).

The Raleigh International Team, which built the Rural Electronic Workshop (REW) building (funded by the Sabah Credit Corporation) for the Barefoot Solar Electrification project was led by Tom Nelson.

In the 280km-overland journey from Kota Marudu township to our destination, the last 10km stretch of Jalan Sonsogon Magandai was the most treacherous. For unsuspecting first-timers like many of us, we had no inkling of what was in store for us – sharp curves, steep gradient uphill and downhill, rivers and streams to cross, and deeply-rutted muddy stretches of the road. Torrential rain over days had inevitably turned this particular section into a quagmire.

For this particular trip, even Tandek Assemblywoman Datuk Anita Baranting,



One for the album: Team members in a convoy pose for the camera.

Inset: A limping Wynnie Jong (Swepa Vice-President) being supported by personnel from Asian Forestry Company Sabah (AFCS).



who knows the topography of the area like the back of her palm, took 17 hours to reach the village together with her convoy on Nov 19. Gosh!

"On Nov 18, we started our journey from Kota Marudu at 11am and were supposed to reach Kg Sonsogon Magandai at 9pm, given the muddy road condition.

"However, we lost our way in an oil-palm plantation as some of the drivers were not familiar with the route. As a result, we only reached the village at 4am on the next day (Nov 19)," she lamented.

My body wracked with a succession of bumps, bounces, side-to-side swerves, and what have you! Some were forced to walk for a few kilometres when their vehicles could not take any further strain.

By the end of the day, our vehicles turned clayey beyond recognition, and some of us were partially covered with mud, too. A vehicle belonging to the Kota Marudu District Office had its front bumper almost ripped off.

Our homebound trip on Nov 19 was delayed for three hours because the vehicle

had landed in a ditch and had to be salvaged.

But give credit where it is due. We take our hats off to the Labuan 4X4 guys who negotiated the atrocious road perfectly well, save for minor hitches.

And last but not least, against this scenario, the question on whether the Swepa Barefoot Solar Project Committee finds it is worth risking their lives is a matter open to interpretation.

■ More next week

Makeshift stairway for Musa but...



AS early as 7am, anticipating the arrival of Chief Minister Datuk Seri Musa Aman for Swepa's launch of lights at Kg Sonsogon Magandai, a remote village in Kota Marudu, village men began to fill the ruts of a slippery slope that leads to the event venue (atop a hill). They then carved out steps for an 'earthy stairway' to facilitate mobility for the guest of honour who was scheduled to arrive by helicopter at 8.45am. New planks were also placed on the wet ground from the top of the steps until the entrance to the building so that the CM would not soil his shoes. However, inclement weather prevented Musa from making the trip. — Mary Chin



Four strong men to change a tyre to suit extreme road conditions.



Even the police vehicle from the Kota Marudu District Police Headquarters is not spared.



Women behind the wheels: Raleigh Borneo's lady driver at the helm and Swepa Barefoot Solar Project Secretary, Kate Chin (inset).



Above: 'Oh, I am exhausted,' sighs Swepa President Datin Albina Ogor Abdullah as she uses a rope provided by AFCS to get to the top of the hill.

Left: Crossing a river with a rocky bed.