

Cultural trip to Batu Pahat

by Caroline Davis

We were fortunate enough to be invited by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture (MOTAC) to visit Batu Pahat, a small village in Johor. The village, or small town, was the site of a spinning top competition, which is a popular pastime in Malaysia. There were people from all over the country competing for what I thought were quite substantial cash prizes. The spinners were tossing their large wooden tops in a central area that was screened off from the spectators to make a sort of "court". The participants were trying to knock each other's tops down, or out of play. Then they had a contest to see whose top would stay spinning the longest. It was quite noisy with all the onlookers cheering on their man.



There were also people demonstrating traditional Malaysian games. One of these games is known as congkak (pronounced chong-kak). This game is played with marbles on a long wooden board.

Leila and I both sat down and played a round of congkak with some local kids. There were many friendly and curious onlookers. The boatlike game board has two rows of seven round depressions along the length of the board, with an oblong depression at either end. At first it was tricky to know how many marbles to put where, but you can play quite successfully with a few hand signals, and a few words, such as "cannot" and "can can".

There was quite a bit of chuckling going on around us.

Adjacent to the congkak area, some people were playing an interesting game that looked similar to checkers. Curiously, it was played standing up, and the game "board", or mat, was on the ground. The mat measured about 5'x5'..... quite large! and was covered with squares in similar fashion to a chess or checker board. The playing pieces were different colored plastic bowls turned upside down and pushed around the mat from square to square with broom handles! So ingenious! Rita was a dab hand at this game,

and there were loads of people crowded around the match watching, shouting out advice and laughing.

We were then treated to a Malay lunch, seated on a special matted area on the ground in front of a stage. The champion top spinners were awarded their prizes here. Then the food was served on platters for us to share. We were starving! While eating, there was a beautiful traditional Malay dancing demonstration on the stage, along with some musical groups playing traditional instruments. It was all very colorful and entertaining.



We then boarded the bus for home, with a stop along the way to a cafe and sweet shop selling every variety of cookie and cake imaginable. We had a coffee, did some shopping, and hopped back aboard heading to a place selling the most interesting treat called "Putu Bambu".

This place had quite an assembly line set up. The coconut raw material was removed from its shell by way of a machine that ground the flesh out. The coconut was mixed with cooked rice, sugar and pandan and placed into bamboo molds that were about 3 to 4 inches long. The molds were placed on a special steamer until cooked. The putu bambu was popped out of the molds, rolled in shaved coconut and sugar and placed into boxes to be sold. We all bought some of these treats and then re-boarded the bus for our return to Johor Bahru.



We had a lovely comfortable coach, and a guide who told us some interesting facts about Malaysia in general, and the areas through which we were passing. A wonderful day!

