

Peter Dickinson's Travel Journal -- May 2006 -- Malaysia ... truly Asia

Peter Dickinson*

29 April - 09 May 2006, Thailand

Saturday 29th April 2006

Here I am on Koh Pha-Ngan, Thailand. Koh Pha-Ngan is the home, the originator, of the 'full moon party', some miles along the beach from here but now copied on beaches worldwide.

I took advantage of a cheap lift and went to investigate Thongsala, a seaside resort more British than Thai. On my way back I saw some guys harvesting coconuts with monkeys (Pig tail macaques). I have read of this and seen photos but the real thing was even more fascinating to watch. The monkeys are held on huge lengths of line which stop them from running off. I was actually pleased of this as each time they descended a tree they threatened me. This made the scars on both my wrists and three on my head itch. All from a single previous disagreement with this species. They climb the tree effortlessly, find the ripe nuts and twist them till they drop. The monkeys seem to know which nuts to select and then move on to the next tree. All four animals were in excellent condition. I got to thinking about the recent stories in the press about the Spanish Socialist Party giving 'human rights' to the great apes. Whereas I'm sure something must be done I'm not sure if this is the right approach. I mean, where does it stop? What about a minimum wage and retirement benefits for Pig tails?

Sunday 7th May 2006

This morning I made my way out to Songkhla zoo. This is situated in a forested hilly 360 acre setting overlooking the city and sea in the distance. The views are spectacular as are the gardens and natural woodland. There are good paved roads throughout and the option exists to 'drive and park' in most locations. There are good neat paths all over though some odd locations these are broken and highly dangerous. There are food and soft drink outlets at convenient spots and many picnic areas. Sadly there was a lot of rubbish too. This I thought unusual for Thailand. It is not for the want of litter baskets for there were many about (usually there are none but still no litter). I did note on the drive to the zoo that there was more rubbish at the roadside too. Something about South Thailand perhaps.

The Ewoks appear to have had a major role to play in the design and building of this zoo. There is evidence of their input everywhere, they even left one of their castles behind. Sorry... I can live with this type of stuff, but I don't like it. The zoo was, on the whole, not bad. I think it let itself down in failure to maintain. There was building going on and dismantling as well but a distinct lack of repair. There were empty enclosures with no explanation. The very first enclosure I came to was mixed aquatic and land tortoises. There was no water provided. There was nowhere for water to go. They had recently been fed. There was fresh fruit on a aluminium tray. There was no food for the aquatic tortoises. Maybe the species were entirely frugivorous and fed out of water. I don't know and I suppose it is just possible, but water they need to fulfill their natural functions. Right next to

this freshly supplied fruit was a dead tortoise. Smelling, rotting, seeping. Definitely dead more than 24 hours. That first impression set the scene for me and I could see evidence of keeper neglect just about everywhere I went. Not the keepers fault. Someone needs a good kick in the pants further up the ladder because this zoo could be very good. The signs were nice. Engraved metal, so they should last a while. English and scientific names as well as detail in Thai. Missing maps though.

The bear enclosures were excellent. The Asiatic Blacks in particular I would give nine out ten. Ten out of ten if there is an enrichment programme. The lion and tiger enclosures were nice even though they were too small. An apparently happy marriage of gunnite, glass and stainless steel. Nicely planted too. Each pen had a pulley running over the top of the pen as part of some enrichment device. Good! So they know about it. It just needs to filter to all the little guys too. I really don't know why they provided the cats with so little space when they have so much land available to them. Here, like the hippos and rhinos they seemed to be spending more money on the public side of the enclosure with shade and paths than the enclosures themselves. No less important I know but they know about space as they demonstrate that at the bears and others. The Chimpanzee and Orangutans enclosures were a bit small too (much bigger than Dusit though) but with an abundance of ropes and climbing apparatus. It was only possible to view the chimps from a distance though, one path being closed to the public, and I could see why too. A male immediately spotted me as the only westerner in the distant crowd and let me know if I was within throwing distance that he would hit me.

The Giraffe enclosure I liked. Big enough and busy. Not just a flat bare plain. Why there wasn't a barrier right around I have no idea but the bull giraffe had parked himself in the moat right next to the wall. His belly level with our ground level. Everybody was stroking and patting him and he was loving every bit of attention he was getting. Not an ounce of evil in this beast. I like giraffes and I know that everyone who patted this animal today was going to go home liking them too. So, in a way I was glad the barrier was missing and he truly could be a memorable ambassador for his species. The elephant enclosure was a gem. Large, hilly, up hill and down dale. Mud wallow, walls to rub on, lots of vegetation. The haha base had concrete pyramids in it to prevent access. The haha was further protected by a strand of electric fence. All good then... but no.

There was no evidence to suggest that the single animal had wandered anywhere in this enclosure in a long time. It was chained on a concrete apron further up the hill. There was another chaining point next to the mud wallow. Not much of a life there!

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Why is it that I am always drawn to the condition of accommodation of palm and other civets? Well I think they are perhaps one of the best indicators of the well being of animals within the whole zoo. If the zoo can do good for the little guys then the collection as a whole will be good. So here they had the up, but not enough of it. The cages were too small and whereas there was wood to climb it was unidirectional and insufficient. Where these exhibits really let themselves down was water. There wasn't any. They had nothing to drink. The large Indian Civet's water dish was full of shit and had not been cleaned for days. The other animals on this block, the Prevosts, the Marten, the Malayan Porcupines were all just as badly off. Needs a re-think and in the meantime a husbandry overhaul.

There was a nice multi-level walk through aviary. Sadly some levels were closed off and besides there were very few birds. Having walked around the other aviaries it struck me that this place really needed a bird keeper and like, yesterday, so there could have been input on aviary design. Most were too small and dark and were dull and unattractive. A bit of imaginative perching and planting could transform appearance.

Education? They have apparently informative signage, though I could not read it. I was unaware of any other approaches in this field. There was a 'seal' show which I did not hang about to watch as I had a lot of ground to cover.

Conservation? I don't know. No one zoo can conserve alone. If I just take the 'Ewok' design as a clue then this zoo has definite connections to other Thai zoos. I only paid 100 Baht to get in. Locals were paying much less. So this was not a rip off, get as much cash as we can sort of place like Chiang Mai Night Safari or Safari World outside of Bangkok.

Research? Who knows? I saw no evidence of this.

Enrichment? Yes it is needed everywhere. The seed of the science is there, it just needs to hatch. Static none changing enrichment like ropes or pulley or pole feeding simply becomes part of the no less important cage furniture and daily routine. Enrichment needs a constant imaginative changeable application.

All in all I quite liked this place. Like I keep saying to myself, it is the easiest thing in the world to criticise. My visits are short 'one offs'. I wasn't there last week, nor will I be next. I am unaware of the facts, the politics or the financial situation.

Monday 8th May 2006

Quite close to my guesthouse are two shops devoted entirely to sale of Sharks fins and Birds nests. It is no coincidence that two blocks away there are three large restaurants which specialise in soup from these two items. I have a dim recollection of eating these soups in the distant past but would not do so today on principle. Okay, the birds nest trade is monitored, I think? But there are shark species on the road to extinction just to produce a soup. I had a look round both shops. All the sharks fins are dry and sealed in clear plastic packages and vary in size from huge individual fins down to smaller envelopes with a

dozen or so smaller ones. These are all displayed on shelves behind glass in huge ornate wooden cabinets. Each shop must have had hundreds of packages in stock.

The birds nests are in clear perspex boxes. There are small boxes and large boxes containing varying numbers of nests. All is scrupulously clean. I found the variety of nest colour interesting. Whether this was a result of the nests age or from whatever was in the 'spit' I don't know. There was also a difference in the way some of the nests were constructed. Different species perhaps. In the past I was told that birds nest soup was a waste of time as all the flavour came from the vegetables included in the dish. Having now seen the nests I would say that this is not true. The nests, though small, are substantial and look very much like they have a flavour of their own.

I have had breakfast, well tea and toast, the past couple of mornings in the same restaurant. Nice clean place, friendly staff and a regular clientele. This morning I noted a huge cockroach hiding behind the sugar on my table. I simply adjusted the container so that I would not have to look at it. I didn't think twice. Well till now really. It's funny how one simply starts to accept things for what they are. I have several times eaten meals with rats under the table. There are lots of big ones in the street here. I have accepted them before. I remember in Al Ain in the early days that when Roz and I went to the cinema we used to purchase three bars of chocolate. One for each of us and one to keep the rats around our feet busy.

This morning I walked out to the travel agent and validated my open minibus ticket to Penang, Malaysia leaving 9.30 tomorrow morning. Then I caught a taxi out to Hat Yai zoo. This is set in the Municipal Park about four miles out of the City. What a sad little place this is. The park itself is wonderful and seems to stretch for miles but they go and plonk the zoo right next to the main road. The aviaries back onto the road and in part are open to it. They are small and barrierless. No thoughts for flight distances. The larger free standing aviaries can be walked right around. Perching is poor to none existent. There is some planting which is a blessing for those few lucky species that have it. Feeding looks to be poor. Just about everything seemed to be getting banana and chunks of corn on the cob. The exception would be an outstandingly beautiful owl (housed with a Brahminy Kite) who had been given a couple of fish and the Hornbills (6 species) which, well some of them, appear to have been given some sort of grape too. Happily it was possible to buy fruit and other foods for the animals and I daresay that their survival largely depended on this. The best aviary here was a large walk through waterbird enclosure (which you couldn't walk through). This was nice, roomy and semi natural. Usually these type of aviary are very overstocked. This was, if anything, the opposite. Much better that way. There were Night Herons and Egrets breeding within. The only mammals here were rabbits. Their cage was horrible. The Green Iguanas held close by were no better off and were being teased by adults and

* There was a photo and small article in 'The Straits Times' of a 50 year old Estuarine crocodile being moved at the HB Crocodile Park in Pantan Cahaya Bulan in Kelantan. This animal was 4.9 metres long and weighed a ton. Off to a new home in Langkawi.

children. There was a huge Siamese Crocodile*. Biggest and bulkiest I have seen. Perhaps not the longest at around three and a bit metres but huge anyway. There didn't seem to be a whole lot wrong with its diet. Housed alone its quarters were just adequate. They did the job and no more.

Many of the birds were single (about fifty aviaries) and desperate for company which I thought very sad. There were two nice Cassowary, housed together and living amicably. Both males I think. There was some labelling. English and Thai but no more. This was not the worst zoo I have seen on this trip but it was a long way from what I would consider acceptable. It would not be impossible to, quite cheaply, improve the conditions for the stock here. In fact one knowledgeable keeper in one month with the funds could really make a difference.

After walking around the zoo four times looking for something I liked I was about to give up. It was then that I spotted the benches. Most all of them were sponsored. So the idea of sponsorship is alive and kicking. Good. It just now needs to be transferred to the aviaries themselves and so make life just that bit more comfortable for the inmates. Better still, knock the whole place down and start again. I left the zoo and wandered around the park. Here I met my first surprise. This was a substantially fenced, long and large enclosure. It had been divided in two but, as far as I could see held a single male Munjac. It had obviously been designed as a home to many more. Where they were was mystery number one. Mystery number two was the next enclosure. This was an absolutely huge and very strongly built walk through aviary. I have seen some really big ones in Thailand and this was on a par with these if not the biggest. It was an irregular shape and I walked right around. I took rough measurements of two sides and these were 184 and 156 metres and 14 metres high. A massive aviary. Lushly planted. Raised walkways and observation platforms, truly a construction to be proud of. The entrance itself was impressive and bore the legend 'Hat Yai Bird Park', but it was empty! There had not been any birds in there for a long time, if ever. It didn't look like any human had entered for an age either. Why? I have no idea. This mighty waste of space is now starting to show its age, however long that may be. Ten years, more perhaps. If I had any say in the matter I would take all the birds from the poxy little zoo and let them go in here. Let them establish a pecking order. It could only be an improvement on where they are now.

I can't draw to save my life. I wish I could. What the zoo world needs is a series of simple language free 'comics' which show 'what a bird needs to be happy**', 'what a palm civet needs to be happy' and so on. Okay it wouldn't change the people who don't give a damn but it would help those who do.

[Wednesday 10th May 2006 – Malaysia

In the morning I took a taxi out to the Penang Butterfly Farm <http://www.butterfly-insect.com>. It was further away than I thought and would probably have taken me all day on a bus. As it was I enjoyed the the drive and the informative tour from my driver. We passed a beach which had been badly hit by the Tsunami. I was surprised to see just how many people were living in temporary housing.

The Penang Butterfly Farm claims to be "The World's 1st Tropical Live Butterfly Sanctuary". Established in the 1980's I wonder if this is true? I was trying to recollect when I first visited a butterfly farm and think, it was probably in the 70's. Still, I suppose we would then get onto that old Sanctuary versus Zoo discussion, only this time it would be Farm instead. Actually I think it is irrelevant whether if it was first or twenty first because it is certainly the best Butterfly Farm I have ever visited. It helps of course if you have already got the temperature and humidity as all you need to do is put a secure net over the top and plant and tidy the inside. But they have done it so well. And, more to the point, in spite of being doing it so long are continuing to do it well. This place is neat, tidy, beautiful, professional and cared for.

I have never seen so many butterflies of so many species in one place before. The gardens were excellent and interesting in their own right. There was a collection of pitcher plants that at 25+ species must be one of the worlds biggest. There were other insects and some reptiles and a squirrel and a few ducks and fish in this same 'building'. As well as everything being so neat the education theme was with you from the word go. The signs were clear and informative and giving just enough in 'mind bite' sized chunks. There was a small education display centre attached but not in use on my visit. From the butterflies I moved into a 'stick insect' garden. 'Spot the stick insect' ... what fun! And it was too. These were huge great things of several different species but so difficult to spot until you tuned your mind to the task. Then there was a mini zoo. Mainly insects but a few reptiles too. I saw a Cat Gecko *Aeluroscalabotes felinus* here, which I don't recollect even having heard of before. Again all the signs, all the information, all interesting. I passed out from the mini zoo into the 'museum' of preserved butterflies and beetles. This too was the best I have seen. So often (well always) one finds with this type of display, slipped specimens, larvae damage or something askew. Not here though. This was good. The best, and consistently informative. I particularly liked the display of 'National Butterflies'. I then proceeded through a series of massive gift shops. Sorry, but butterfly coasters and wall hangings are not to my taste but I know they appeal to a lot of folk.

Thursday 11th May 2006

I caught the ferry over to the mainland to visit the Penang Bird Park <http://www.penangbirdpark.com.my>. This was well worth the trip. A lovely planted setting containing many impressive or mature trees as well as being an oasis for many wild birds. A very nice little collection. Again it shows just what can be achieved simply and cheaply to put an aviary together. The bigger zoos so often spend their mega bucks and do it badly. The point is that whoever designed most of these aviaries knew what they were doing and why and what for. I say 'most' because there were some things I did not like, but more of those later.

The signs were excellent. Some of the best I have seen anywhere. Done in house but with a professional appearance. They gave the name in English, Scientific,

** I know that there are those who would argue that 'happiness is not a scientific term'. To me though that is crap because if you don't know when your animals aren't happy you shouldn't be in this line of work.

Malay and Chinese plus distribution and habitat and include that all important map. What's more about 99.5% of the enclosures are labeled. The aviaries as situated don't need barriers or have them already. All are planted up where necessary, have sufficient imaginative perching and, where appropriate, nesting opportunity. Some of the aviaries, most notably those for the lorries, I thought a bit dark and dingy but it was a minor point. There was little deviation away from the bird theme but some of the aviaries contained tortoises or mouse deer. There was a pond containing Estuarine crocodiles and pens for Reticulated Pythons and Water Monitors. These last two were the worst exhibits in the park and I thought let the side down a bit. The Water Monitor cage told a story. There was fresh blood just inside and lots of it outside and spattered about. Someone must have stuck their finger through the wire to the large animal lying there with a 'butter wouldn't melt in my mouth' expression on its face. I liked the walk through aviary and liked the 'feed the bird' aviary. This sort of contact enclosure is so very important at getting the public to relate to the animals. Most all of the aviaries were good if some perhaps just a little tired looking. I thought all the Ratite enclosures were too small (two of the Ostrich were bald) and I hated Flamingo enclosure. No consideration for flight distances there. They must be under stress every time there are visitors in.

But the birds. What a beautiful collection. I would find it difficult to single out what impressed me most. Perhaps it was the Black-Thighed Falconet or the stunning Siamese, Crested and Crestless Fireback Pheasants. Maybe it was the Kingfisher aviary with its four species of Kingfisher. They had more than twenty species of doves and pigeon, ten species of hornbill and more species of bul-bul than you could shake a cape at. Towards the end of my visit I caught the bird show. This was a 'training' session as the girl doing the spiel was relying on notes and was not used to the microphone. As a show it was pretty hopeless and consisted mainly in bringing out birds and introducing them. It was, I felt, a lost educational opportunity. If they could only go down the lines of Paradise Park, Hale, Cornwall, I think they would be on to a winner.

Friday 12th May 2006

Langkawi Underwater World was a surprisingly long drive from the ferry port. The drive was pleasant enough though and my taxi driver very chatty. I learnt about history, politics, religion, the price of cows and buffaloes (buffaloes cost double that of a cow), the current market price of rubber compared to five and twenty years ago and the cost of rooms in each of the many hotels we passed by. I was due to meet a Mr. Ted K. at Underwater World. As luck would have it he was away on personal business in Penang. He was kind enough to arrange for his delightful assistant, Aria (was that not the little mermaid?) to show me round. I liked her. She was informative, up to date, observant and had a ready wit. It helped too that she had worked at Underwater World for ten years.

The collection has only just recently opened a new 'Amazon' wing for which they can be justly proud. It is very attractive especially the large freshwater tank in the entrance hall. Like all new buildings this has some teething

problems. They are solving these and I am sure it will be more impressive once fully established. The educational side of things has been given high priority here which is so important in an aquarium. The graphics are colourful and attractive, the text in informative bite sized chunks. All the aquariums were neat sparkling and beautiful. Some of the designs were quite different but I thought worked very well. I liked the living corals, I liked the Nautalis and I loved the Leafy Sea Dragons and so much more. The Rockhopper display was good, active, interesting and seemed to work well. The new penguin display was having some improvements made.

I didn't like the otter enclosure as I thought it too small and that they needed somewhere to hide from the public and the opportunity to collect nesting material and den up. That said they were two of the most laid back otters I have seen and looked content. I thought also that some of the terrapins needed somewhere to lay up on dry land and bask and that the swan enclosure was too small. There were several other things like this which prevented the animals from performing natural behaviours (five freedoms again). On the whole though I loved Underwater World and enjoyed my visit.

The 'Langkawi Bird Paradise' was a bit of a surprise. This was firstly because I had never heard of the place before today and secondly because it was so well constructed... taking the local environment in mind. By that I mean that both visitors and animals are in an inside/outside sort of environment meaning you get shade from the sun, protection from the rain without being stifled indoors. My first comment would be on the Palm Civets. They had a large, light, airy and clean enclosure and there was upper perching but sadly, not enough of it. One animal was up and one on the ground. I would have guessed that the two did not get on and so they had little choice to remain at different levels. There needed to be more upper branching. There needed to be more cage furniture, more enrichment. Using my 'palm civet rule' this needed to be applied to all the enclosures here. They were good, don't get me wrong, but they were just boxes. They just needed busying up. This is so much more important for the single animals of which there were a few. There needed the opportunity to hide and the freedom to express normal behaviour (five freedoms again). The otter had no water! The walk through aviary was robust and attractive. I liked the idea of brollies for when it was raining. The Brahminy kite aviary was amongst the best I have seen for this species. So often this very attractive little bird seems to get back perch. The signs were good and were mostly sponsored by Fuji film. There was a series of excellent educational posters on the anatomy of a bird and egg development.

I liked seeing the large planted aviary with Greater bird of Paradise and Lesser Mouse Deer. What I didn't like was that visitors got to three sides of this and the mouse deer had nowhere to hide. In just a couple of minutes watching I could see that both Bird and Mammal were stressed. It did not help that then a guy started throwing stones at the mouse deer to get it to move. I did not see any staff about. Later I saw two visitors up on a perch between two birds of prey whilst their friends took photos. Again no staff about.

This collection could be really good if the cages were given a long hard look at from the animals point of view.

Saturday 20th May 2006

I carried on and visited the 'Cameron Highlands Butterfly Farm'. This was quite nice little set up with numerous butterflies in an attractively planted netted garden. Sadly there was no clue to what species they were or where they came from or for that matter, came to be. Out of the butterfly area there were fifty or so vivariums of varying size holding a variety of reptiles and insects. A lot of these were quite nice. An effort had been made. Some tanks were labeled with an English name, others with a Scientific one. I don't think that any had both. Others had neat little information labels. I didn't think this place was anything special, it wouldn't score highly in any kind of test set but they had made an effort and I liked it.

Leaving the butterfly farm I turned right and walked twenty yards and saw a sign for 'Butterfly Garden'. I thought I was a bit confused and this was another entrance to where I had just been. It wasn't, it was a completely different place, and didn't it show. The actual butterfly side of things wasn't that different to next door, nice flowery planted netted garden, though there were less butterflies flitting about. It was the reptile/insect side of things where the difference showed. This was dirty, poorly decorated and showed no evidence of the care shown next door. Over the road was the 'Mountain Strawberry Farm'. This too had insects painted on the sign suggesting yet another collection but I thought I would give it a miss.

Tuesday 23rd May 2006

I had to change bus stations to catch a connection to Taiping where the Night Safari opened at eight. Kit had said the other evening that Taiping was the wettest place in Malaysia with rainfall measured in metres rather than inches. He may well have been joking but I thought I wouldn't take any chances.

Tonight was dry. I would go to the Taiping Night Safari. I am so glad I did. This was one of my most magical zoo visits ever. I loved every minute of it. This was a so much better experience than that I had at Chiang Mai. I reckon the major difference was that this was a zoo, which, with subtle and carefully thought out lighting had created a tasteful non intrusive visitor experience. On the other hand Chiang Mai was animal intrusive, exploitative and poorly done.

It cost me 10 RM to get in and I walked round. I was one of around eight visitors. The night sounds were mainly amphibian or insect. The route was easy to follow and, true enough, the dark hides a lot. At the same time it improves certain aspects and features. There was so much I liked. In fact I would say that there really wasn't anything I disliked about the Night Safari apart from the Reptile House. The naturally 'active by night' were active. The tigers, hippos, bats, elephants, porcupines, striped hyenas, binturongs and so much more. I liked the way the enclosures for sleeping species, like Chimpanzees, were utilised by another in their absence. In this case, Servals. With the Orangutans it was leopard cats. The massive Arapaima were a treat to see. I wouldn't like to fall in that pond.

Wednesday 24th May 2006

I walked across the park towards ZooTaiping (<http://www.zootaiping.gov.my>) wandering if my impressions of the place were going to be any different during the daylight. I saw two different species of squirrel along the way. The big surprise this morning was that the entrance fee was 5 RM, half the cost of the Night Safari. Odd when you think that by night you traverse an identical though restricted smaller area. Still perhaps the premium is for 'atmosphere' ...and well spent too. Taiping Zoo was first opened in 1961 and covers an area of just 15 hectares. It is intelligently covered though and gives the impression of being twice the size. It is a modern and attractive zoo. Very few of the old cages remain. Many of these are empty or are being temporarily utilized whilst replacements are being built. The zoo site, set as it is, within the park is enviable. Some of the large trees are so fantastic as to look artificial. There is many a zoo would give their eye teeth for natural décor such as this. Talking of trees. I saw a Tree Kangaroo sitting happily on a little spindly branch at least 50' from the ground. I never dreamed they went as high or climbed as well. The trees also play an important role on the Gibbon islands. So much better than the ropes and bare branches that are common elsewhere.

Probably my favourite exhibit was that for the Small-clawed Otters. I saw this by both day and night. It is of natural appearance. If it just had otters in it, it would be excellent. But it doesn't, there are also green peafowl, milky storks, gallinule, kingfisher, pheasants, egrets and several other bird species. And at night there are bats flitting about. It is truly memorable. I was saddened that the viewing through perspex was spoilt by scratching but pleased to learn that this is scheduled to be replaced later in the year. Some zoos could build themselves round this single feature exhibit but here there is so much more. They have the best Hippo enclosure I have seen anywhere and, as a consequence, the happiest hippos I have seen anywhere bar none. It is beautiful. The tiger enclosure too, brilliant... better at night but only marginally less attractive during the day. They were Malaysian Tigers too as were the Elephants, the Tapirs, the Gaur and others. The Bearded Pigs were a treat to watch and whereas the Bawean deer did not have the best of enclosures, it was active and interesting. I could have happily spent an hour watching there alone. The Smooth Otter enclosure was brilliant as was the Clouded Leopard. It is always difficult to assess in a single visit of a couple of hours the enrichment schedule but I could see evidence of it and at the same time saw very little stereotypic behaviour. The main labels were good and included chunks of information along with maps and pictures. Engraved onto metal they should last a long time. Empty cages were signed as such which is always helpful. For the vehicular tour there were larger signs in four languages. I thought it a pity that they didn't stretch it to include the Scientific name as well. Then I thought again that it probably didn't matter as the sort of person who sat through a visit would not be that bothered anyhow.

There were abundant signs asking people not to throw stones etc. There were a few single species animals which could have done with a mate but all were with companions so I didn't think it do bad. And what of the lowly Palm Civet? The cages were clean and there was plenty of branching.

They were however confined to some of the older, scheduled for demolition, cages. Still that's half way there. I still didn't like the Reptile cages in the day. They really let the collection down. The Reticulated Python exhibit was okay but the rest all too small, drab and poorly decorated. There were a few other things I didn't care for like the Macaw courtyard and the Cockatoo cages but that is probably just me and my preferences. It is a lovely place to visit. It is safe and attractive. There is shade and water. The wild birds are a pleasure to observe. The barriers are good. There are plenty of toilets and places to sit. There is adequate staff supervision. I really liked Zoo Taiping, in fact it goes into my top ten favourite zoos visited. In fact I think it will go into the top five somewhere.

After my tour of the zoo I made my way to the zoo offices to meet up with the director Dr. Kevin L. He was in a meeting so I waited and his very kind PA fed me a delicious meal in the interim. I must admit I was hungry and had been thinking of my stomach for a while. Eventually Kevin appeared and I gave him a brief rundown on who I was and what I was about as well as relaying regards from Dave W and Kit. I liked Kevin. Nice guy. He arranged a contact meeting for Kuala Lumpur.

I strolled back into Taiping and booked my bus ticket for Thursday 25th May 2006. So here I am in Kuala Lumpur. A huge great big city. Quite a shock after tiny Taiping. Here there are all the trappings of civilisation? McDonald's, Burger King, Starbucks, KFC, even a Nando's! and a 'Kenny Rogers world famous Roaster' which I had never heard of before. Yes, that is Kenny Rogers the singer!

Once I had pulled myself together I walked across town to the 'Kuala Lumpur Butterfly Park'. 15 RM (foreigner price) to get in so the same as visiting Zoo Taiping by day and night. Hardly the same value for money. It was probably the biggest butterfly park/garden/house I have ever visited. As everywhere else in Asia, no need for heat or a greenhouse, just net off a beautiful garden. I suppose the biggest difference here was the height. Fifteen or more feet. Probably wonderful for butterflies but it did mean you needed more to fill the space. It had less of a personal feel because

of the size. Lovely butterflies though, maybe fifteen or so species. There were several reptile exhibits within the garden. They really shouldn't have bothered, they were poorly done and let the place down. Leaving the garden there were a dozen small insect exhibits. These were fair to good. From these I moved into the educational displays. These along with the preserved specimens were excellent and informative. All in all very good I thought.

Leaving the Butterfly Park I carried on walking till I reached the 'Kuala Lumpur Bird Park', "World's Largest Walk-in Free-flight Aviary". I have no way of checking if this claim is true because I have seen some really big aviaries in Asia. I am not even sure if the 3.2 hectares referred to is the aviary or the park in general or the biggest aviary (there are two). It wasn't till today that I actually thought about aviary size in any great detail. One could make claims on both area or volume. Anyway I digress. This was expensive to get in at 28 RM. It was good, in fact it was very good to excellent but I'm not sure that it was worth that much. It was a big aviary, quite beautiful and well manicured. This is where my personal preferences take over because I much prefer that wilder, overgrown jungly type appearance whereas this was a big neat garden. The labels were good, the paths nice, the education centre attractive. There were enough toilets, plenty places to sit and get a drink. It was zoned and easy to get round with well thought-out views and vistas.

What I didn't like were the aviaries within the aviary. Some were very poor and menagerie like. Others were beautiful modern structures that were badly set up with insufficient perching or cover. I really couldn't understand how a team which so obviously had a 'gardener's eye' for the main aviary developed myopia when it came to the boxes. They had made an effort for the Brahminy Kite though and created a walk through aviary called 'Brahminy World'. Sadly this was closed during my visit so I can't comment.

The best thing for me on this visit was watching the Greater Bird of Paradise displaying. This was something I only recollect seeing once before, apart from on film that is. Sadly it was such a bare aviary, just a few branches.

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