



Star 2

Getting dirty and loving it

It was an experience of a lifetime for the volunteers who signed up with APE Malaysia. >2

Living
A life devoted to volunteerism >4

Technology
Gaming: Assassin's Creed goes to the high seas >8

Showbiz
Lisa S-upermodel behaviour >18

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By SANDRA LOW
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Encounters in the wild

WHEN Mandy Lee Yu-Ming told people around her that she was going to sign up for a volunteer project, she got mixed responses of admiration and apprehension.

"Most thought it sounded really cool but they didn't think they could do it because they didn't want to get their hands dirty. They thought I was really brave to do it," says Lee, a Taiwanese English teacher who signed up for a volunteer programme organised by APE Malaysia (see sidebar on page 4) in September.

"The funny thing is, I didn't feel that brave. This is the first time I've ever volunteered and even after studying the programme, it was difficult to picture the reality and I wasn't sure what I was getting into," she says.

Lee, 30, was looking for a volunteer programme that involved conservation and working with animals, and when she came across APE Malaysia online, she felt it was the perfect fit.

Together with a small group of volunteers, Lee spent two weeks in a Malaysian zoo and another two weeks in Sabah at the Lower Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary.

The programme, called Orangutan Encounters, gives volunteers a "unique chance to work behind the scenes in a Malaysian zoo, then fly to exotic Borneo, home to wild orang utans, misty rainforests and colourful indigenous communities."

They were involved in husbandry work such as cleaning cages and feeding, and enrichment work through providing enrichment activities for the orang utans and chimpanzees at Zoo Negara and Malacca Zoo.

While in Sabah, they carried out tree planting and maintenance, engaged with the village children through play and teaching English, and did community work for the benefit of the villagers who work as fishermen.

"While in Kuala Lumpur, we made a trip to the Malacca

Instead of treating themselves to a cushy vacation, some choose the challenging but rewarding task of volunteer work.

Zoo where I encountered the most challenging activity. Together with another volunteer, we had to lift a few massive tires in the orang utan exhibit to hang a hammock for them," Lee explains.

"We had to scoop out filthy and smelly water in the tires, and push them up a steep hill. I am very petite compared to the other volunteers, so it wasn't an easy task! But when we saw the orang utan using the hammock, it was so rewarding," shares Lee.

There were times when Lee had doubts about accomplishing the tasks but she kept thinking of the zookeepers and the facilitators who were doing the same work on a regular basis.

"I really cannot complain as I'm only here for a short while, and this is an amazing opportunity to help improve the animals' living environment. Before this experience, I didn't know what I was capable of, but now I know my level of endurance," she says.

Not only did Lee learn about herself through volunteering, she also had a better understanding of animal behaviours and oil palm farming.

"I learnt that orang utans in captivity tend to vomit after they are fed, but those in the wild don't seem to experience this problem. They also make a nest before they sleep.

There was one orang utan that would finish her coconut juice and peel out the coconut husk to make a nest," she says.

She also learnt of a web-

site listing all the companies that adapted to sustainable palm oil production and says "it is better to purchase the products of these companies since they also contribute some of their profits to assist with rainforest rehabilitation."

Volunteers who sign up know that it's not a walk in the park, so apart from unsuspectingly donating her blood to a tiger leech during a jungle exploration in Sabah's rainforest, Lee also injured her finger during a volunteering activity.

"I hurt my middle finger and covered it with a plaster. I didn't think about it until Punky, an orang utan friend I made, kept staring and pointing to my wounded finger and made the action of kissing her finger while pointing to mine," Lee recalls.

"It mirrored the same behaviour as what a caring person would do and it was the most touching moment for me. I wanted to cry," she says.

Lee is happy that her first trip to Malaysia was through volunteering instead of just for a holiday, otherwise her interaction with Malaysians would be limited to those at shops and restaurants.

She says, "I would never have experienced mingling with Malaysians in a volunteering environment, made a few lovely local friends and seen how genuine Malaysians are.

"If I came as a tourist, I would be having my meals at restaurants but because I was living in a village in Sabah, I was lucky to be treated to home-cooked meals by the villagers. Food was tastier when I experienced eating with my hands!" she explains.

On her most fulfilling experience, Lee says, "Our group planted 80 saplings and did maintenance work on about 300 trees in the Kinabatangan plantation sites. We hope that they all grow well so that they can produce more fruits to feed the wildlife and provide more habitats for the birds and insects in the rainforest.

"This is my first visit to Malaysia



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and I am amazed by the sense of harmony the different ethnic groups share. People are so friendly, helpful and humble. Also, the food is extremely delicious and authentic," she says.

"To those who have not experienced travel through volunteering, it would be great to experience it for yourself and see the beauty of the big picture of conservation work. Being a part of it is incredibly rewarding!" Lee says.

Adventure

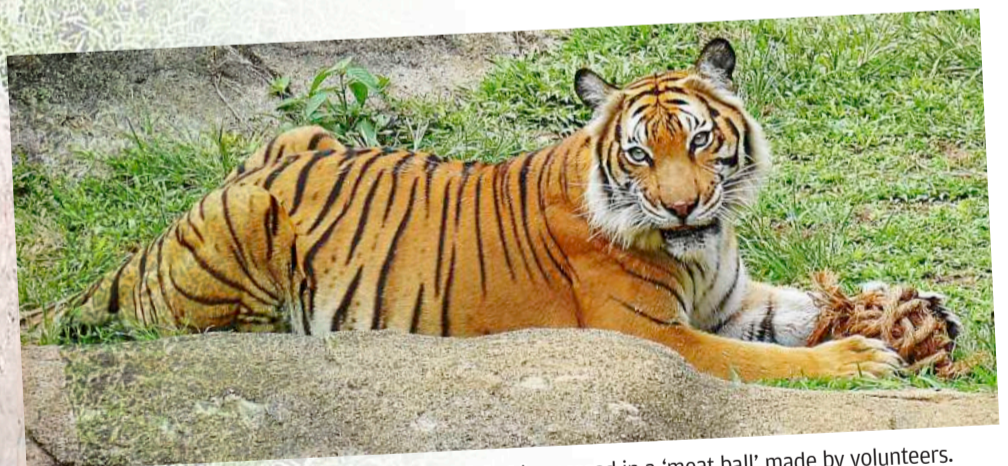
Brits Richard James Craddock and his partner, Dr Rachael Louise Nowak, spent a month in Malaysia when they decided to take time out and see more of the world.

Craddock, 48, is a trained carpenter and self-employed site manager for the museum and conference industry and Nowak, 41, is a biologist who has been working in the pharmaceutical industry for over a decade.

They gave up their jobs to go travelling for



Fast learner: Chimpanzees figuring out how to get to the termites inside an enrichment tool - a termite mound. — Photos by APE Malaysia



A tiger is challenged to get to his favourite food that is encased in a 'meat ball' made by volunteers.

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Top: Richard Craddock (right) using his carpentry skills to construct a puzzle as an enrichment tool for orang utans and chimpanzees to figure out how to retrieve food items. Left: Mandy Lee helping local fishermen to make sustainable bubu (shrimp pots).

18 months as part of their round the world adventure.

While in Malaysia, they were not sipping pina colodas on the beach, but getting all sweaty through physical work as volunteers in a four-week programme.

"We heard about the APE Malaysia volunteer programme through a UK company called The Great Projects. Our interest was focused on orang utan conservation and the programme appealed to us because we would be able to help captive orang utans, see them in the wild and get involved in rebuilding habitats," they explain.

"Harith of APE Malaysia was our guide, mentor, cultural ambassador, football critic and animal expert at Zoo Negara. He had the hardest job in terms of teaching us how to interact with the orang utans and looking after their welfare as well as ours!" says Nowak.

"What makes APE Malaysia organisers so special is their passion and commitment to improving orang utan welfare and making the experience as rewarding as possible for volunteers. It really opened our eyes and made us feel we were making a difference," she adds.

They both say APE Malaysia's briefing was so thorough that they knew what to expect but what they didn't expect, according to Nowak, was "how easily it was for us to fall in love with the captive orang utans."

"I remember seeing Richard feeding a Bornean orang utan at the very beginning and even though Richard was wearing a mask, I could see he had the biggest smile on his face and I knew from the start that we were doing the right thing," says Nowak.

It was news to her that orang utans do not have facial expressions but she also learnt quickly that "enrichment is absolutely critical for these crafty and very endearing captive orang utans."

Craddock had expected the orang utans to have different personalities but he was quite surprised that they were so individualistic.



One of the massive tyres that Lee had to lift - with another volunteer - to hang a hammock for the orang utans in Malacca Zoo.

Utilising his carpentry skills in an enrichment project, Craddock and fellow volunteers made a puzzle for the orang utans and chimpanzees. They were challenged to push fruit - with a stick - through a maze in the puzzle, and then retrieve the fruit at the bottom.

"They are a lot more intelligent than people are led to believe and they quickly solved the enrichment puzzles," he observes.

The volunteers also helped the zoo workers construct a new hammock for the orang utans to use in their enclosure and they were warned that it was unlikely the orang utans would use it immediately as it was something new.

"After letting the dominant female orang



Craddock and his partner, Dr Rachael Nowak, fell in love with Malaysia after signing up as volunteers with APE Malaysia.

utan out, she went straight up to the hammock and climbed onto it. Although these animals have no facial expression, we could see in her eyes that she was so pleased. It brought a lump to our throats!" Craddock recalls.

At Zoo Negara, Craddock found out how rewarding it can be to clean orang utan enclosures which were very dirty and smelly.

"I think the zoo workers are really fortunate to be able to care for the animals; it must be so satisfying. Working in a zoo is a well-respected job and these jobs are very hard to come by in the United Kingdom," he adds.

This is their first trip to Malaysia and Nowak points out that they were surprised by the heat and humidity, and how hot and sweaty they would get.

"While at Zoo Negara, we lived in very basic accommodation which we found enjoyable, especially when we tried to guess what animal was running on the roof!" says Nowak.

However, upon arrival in Sabah, they "were disappointed by the room which was quite posh. We became used to cold showers which

were so refreshing after a hard day's work."

"We were amazed by the diversity of the Kinabatangan river area, and we were very fortunate to see many different animals and birds during our river trips to the work sites," Nowak points out.

Craddock adds that this programme showed them the importance of tree planting and maintenance of the forest, which creates and sustains corridors and habitats for wildlife to live and pass through.

"We have not holidayed here before but through the volunteer programme, we fell in love with Malaysia and that will last a life-time. It is truly inspiring to see a country where different races can live well together," Nowak says.

Nowak pointed out that they got to enjoy fantastic Malay, Indian and Chinese food.

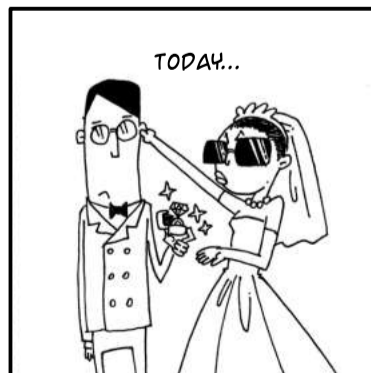
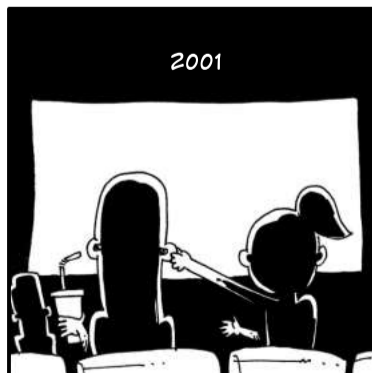
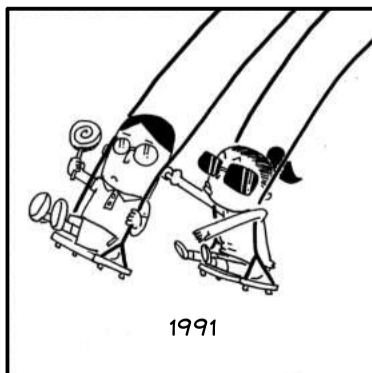
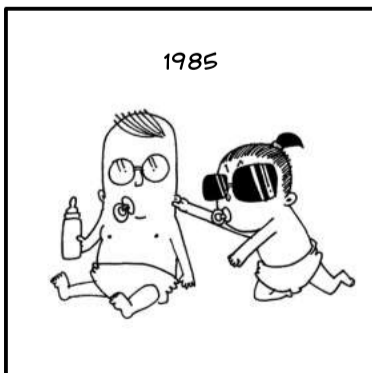
"Because it was so cheap, it's almost a crime not to eat out. We ate very well, from the Zoo Negara canteen lunches to the wonderful home-stay food in Sabah."

Through their experience, both Craddock and Nowak say "the time we spent here was life-changing. The buzz you get from this type of volunteering is addictive, just doing things for others is so rewarding and it gives you a very different perspective on life."

"This volunteer programme was not a vacation and it was about working as hard as possible to make a difference for others and the environment. Our views of vacations have changed now and we are much more eager to look at volunteering and supporting locals through home-stays when we plan our future travels," says Craddock, the only man in this group of mainly female volunteers.

"It might seem crazy to use your holiday to do volunteering work. Anyone can lie on a beach but everyone should try volunteering as it will be one of the best experiences you will have," he says.

■ Want to sign up as a paying volunteer with APE Malaysia? Go to <http://www.apemalaysia.com>.



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Fareea Ma lives out her dream to contribute to society and the environment.

By SANDRA LOW
star2@thestar.com.my

Devoted to volunteerism

FROM young, Fareea Ma Ch'ing was encouraged by her parents to be involved in volunteer work and to appreciate the environment.

"My parents never told me that I had to become a doctor or an architect, and I saw how a lot of my friends overseas worked as social workers or were involved in environmental work and they all lived a very decent life," says Ma, in an interview in Petaling Jaya recently.

KL-born Ma graduated in international relations and after working in various jobs, she opted out of the corporate world, saying that she learnt "working with animals is easier!"

Together with a colleague and friend, Anupama Arun Venkataraman (who has since moved on with her husband on a job posting to Africa), Ma dreamed of setting up a company where they could contribute to society and the environment, and run it on a sustainable modal.

They both drafted the aspiration for a social enterprise organisation based on a three-prong modal of animals, people and environment.

As a result, Animal Projects & Environment Education Sdn Bhd or APE Malaysia (APE) was born in 2007 – a business that takes volunteerism up a notch through responsible volunteering.

APE participates in on-going conservation projects, working with stakeholders to develop sustainable conservation solutions. And they achieve this with the help of people who pay to sign up as volunteers for a week to month-long volunteer programmes.

"Environment, animals and people are all interconnected. The environment is being destroyed while people are making money so there must be some balance. Realistically, we must have money to work on conservation, people to work on it, and animals to benefit from it," says Ma, 39, who is the managing director for APE.

"As a social enterprise, the sales from our programme is used to invest in conservation, improvement of animal welfare and community development," she explains.

"We create meaningful experiences for our volunteers and they are making an impact whether at a zoo or in Sabah. To be clear, we are not a tour company!" she stressed.

APE facilitates Responsible Volunteering Programmes for anyone interested in taking time off to do volunteering and education

programmes for students.

So, who are these people who sign up as volunteers?

"Our clients are mainly foreigners. I believe there is a sociological study that says once you achieve material satisfaction, you will look at other ways to spend your time and money, and our Asian society has not achieved that yet. So, they will not want to put their money on a programme where they are expected to work!" Ma says.

She has also contacted local schools, proposing that APE provides free talks to students on the importance of the environment but the response has been disappointing.

"Instead we get positive responses mostly from international schools from Hong Kong, Singapore, Australia and others. What's great is that environmental concerns are built into their syllabus," Ma explains.

For conservation work in Sabah, Ma says an area in the Lower Kinabatangan – known for its remarkable wildlife and habitats – has been mapped out for work such as reforestation whereby various NGOs run the conservation programme.

The NGOs may lack time or manpower, and this is where APE volunteers come in.

"We don't call ourselves a conservation organisation, but an organisation that is in support of conservation," she clarifies.

When APE brings volunteers to Sabah, they create alternative incomes for the villagers who live nearby conservation areas.

"We hire boats from different parts of the village for villagers to take turns to take volunteers to the tree planting areas. While we use a nearby B&B to accommodate our volunteers, we don't dine there. Instead we ask various villagers to cook meals for our volunteers so they can earn extra income," Ma points out.

Seven years ago, APE introduced an enrichment programme for captive animals in Zoo Negara, Kuala Lumpur, and according to Ma, the previous director of the zoo, Dr Mohamad Ngah, "was very supportive and even suggested a place that the public can easily access."

According to APE, "enrichment is to provide animals in captivity with an environment that gives attention to their mental, physical and emotional well-being, by giving the animals



Fareea Ma, founder of APE Malaysia, which takes volunteerism up a notch through its Responsible Volunteering Programmes.

'stimuli' to which they can react or interact with."

Among the enrichment ideas introduced by APE are bamboo feeders, frozen treats, piñatas, happy sacks, coconut surprise and hammocks, all created to challenge the animals mentally and physically.

According to Ma, the Education Department of Zoo Negara started taking the lead – after working with APE for several sessions – in involving the public in making enrichment items for the animals, and she is "very proud that Zoo Negara has taken enrichment so seriously and is making tremendous improvements to the animals' lives."

"The ingenuity of the zookeepers in creating interesting enrichment ideas and improving the enclosures is inspiring," says Ma.

Apparently, Zoo Negara's Enrichment Education Centre is unique in the world!

As reported in *The Star* on July 26, 2011, Ronda Schwetz had said, "I don't know of any other zoo that has a dedicated and centralised enrichment centre where anyone can come and create enrichment plans for all the

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animals." Schwetz was visiting Zoo Negara on a training workshop under the Orang Utan Species Survival Plan, and the American Association of Zoos and Aquarium.

"This centre raises awareness on the importance of enrichment for animal welfare. Hopefully people will start to empathise and understand why animals' homes should not be destroyed, and appreciate the need for conservation," she says.

"We managed to do what we set out to do. From seeing the growth of a few thousand trees, making thousands of enrichment items, improving the welfare of hundreds of animals at various zoos and rehabilitation centres, enhancing rainforest corridors for wildlife habitat, compiling a fantastic enrichment database, to building the world's first dedicated enrichment education centre," says Ma.

"Having a host of caring volunteers and students who have had a positive interaction with the environment and made a change wherever they are, is something we are extremely proud of."

So, what makes a good volunteer?
"You are put in a very different scenario. The weather is hot, accommodation is basic, and the food is different. Plus you get up at 6am to plant trees! So adaptability is crucial. You need to be able to give 100% of yourself to the task at hand," says Ma.

Volunteering is in Ma's blood. When Typhoon Haiyan hit the Philippines, she sent word out to her network and received more donations than she had hoped for. Then, over the weekend together with a group of people under the Ship for Southeast Asian Youth Programme, she travelled – with her own funds – to the Philippines to provide aid to residents affected by the typhoon.

Volunteer opportunities

For more volunteer opportunities, log on to www.dogoodvolunteer.com

Category	Event (NGO/Organiser)	Location	Date	Time	Contact person for registration	Event description	What volunteers will be doing
Children	Holiday Programme (Bright Minds)	Bandar Kinrara, Puchong, Selangor	Dec 2 - 4, 2013	10am-4pm	Ms Liyana Mobile: 018-968 4050	A holiday programme camp that includes fun activities such as learning memory skills, speed reading, leadership skills, art and craft, word games and many more.	Volunteers are needed as facilitators and photographers, and to handle registration.
Woman/Community/Education	Student Community Service (E-Homemakers)	28, Lorong Burhanuddin Helmi 3, Taman Tun Dr Ismail, 60000 KL	Ongoing event (Daily)	9am-6pm	Rhon Hagedorn Tel: (03) 7726 5271	Community service on weekends for university credits.	Volunteers are needed for: > Back-end administrative work for Eco Basket project > Training women in English/computer skills > Video-editing and photoshopping
Children/Community/Education	Event management for charity gala dinner 2014 (Living Hope)	Living Hope office, No. 65A, Jalan SS21/37, Damansara Utama, 47400 Petaling Jaya, Selangor	Weekly	2 hours a week. Anytime from 10am-5pm	Dr Peggy Wong Mobile: 012-652 7720	Managing the Living Hope charity dinner 2014	Volunteers needed for: > Event planning > Sales and marketing of tickets > Finding sponsors > Videographing > Arranging performances > Coordinating
Youth/Community	Global Youth Fest 2013 (Global Peace Festival Malaysia)	Shangri-La Hotel, Kuala Lumpur	Dec 6, 2013	7pm-11pm	Johnson Lee Tel: (03) 7805 4760	In conjunction with the Global Peace Convention 2013 Kuala Lumpur and International Volunteer Day of the United Nations, the Global Youth Fest will host volunteers from around the world to celebrate and recognise their commitment and dedication.	Volunteers are needed for: > Coordination of the event > Backstage > Registration counter > Hall crew All will be briefed on job scope after signing up.