Dated discovery

Stone Age tools may be avenue for archaeo-tourism

By DURIE RAINER FONG

The discovery that Sabah could be the first home for human settlers in East Malaysia has sparked off interest for archaeo-tourism in the state.

Perceived as a low-key industry before, with little significant finds to shout about, the archaeo-tourism is ready to delve into the recent findings of over 1,000 Stone Age tools in the Mansuli Valley in the east coast Lahad Datu district.

The tools, archaeologists claim, date back 235,000 years, and discoveries of the oldest cave drawings in the country in Sabah’s northern island of Balambangan, indicates the future is bright for the pre-historic tourism industry in Sabah.

The state recognised the potential of this untapped sector, thanks to the relatively recent extraordinary discoveries and also archaeologists’ confidence of fresh and more exciting finds.

State Tourism, Culture and Environment Minister Datuk Masidi Manjun said Sabah was looking into a proposal by Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) Global Archaeology Research Centre director Prof Dr Mokhtar Saidin on developing its archaeo-tourism sector.

“Archaeo-tourism is a very good idea and we will seriously look into it.

“I suppose with all these latest findings, there is a need for some urgency to turn it into another of our tourism products,” Masidi said after launching the Archaeology in Malaysia exhibition at the state museum here recently.

Acknowledging archaeo-tourism might not be every tourist’s idea of a perfect holiday, Masidi instead believed it could be turned into a niche product.

“I believe there will be enough tourists keen on going for this sort of package. What is needed is a smart package by the tour companies,” he said.

Echoing Masidi’s views, Dr Mokhtar said the pre-historic sites would be protected and preserved once they become income generators.

He said USM and the state museum have been working closely over the years, adding that USM has made key findings since starting their archaeological studies in Sabah 20 years ago.

Besides the discovery at Mansuli Valley, he said the USM and state museum research team had also uncovered artifacts and human teeth that date back 16,000 years in caves on Balambangan Island, which is off Kudat.

“There are also cave drawings there which are believed to be the oldest in Malaysia,” Dr Mokhtar said, adding the oldest log coffins dating back 3,000 years were also found in Mansuli Valley.

While most of the discoveries are made in Sabah’s east coast, he said archaeologists are unearthing more sites in the west coast.

“What is exciting is the data we collected will automatically contribute to world archaeology,” he said, adding the state museum would need an archaeological curator soon to handle all recent and future finds.
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Interest: Masidi (centre) being briefed by Saidin (left) about their research at Samang Buat Cave as Joanna Datuk Kitingan (right) looks on.

Jotting it down: The students taking notes at the Malaysia Archeology exhibition.