ANYONE who has lived four- and-a-half years in Australia would have seen the negative reporting of Malaysia by the media there. Many Australians get the wrong impression from these news reports, unlike those who know Malaysia.

To break the negative stereotypes being conveyed, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) introduced an edutourism programme in 2013 with the hope that participants of this programme would be able to tell their friends and families back home about the real Malaysia.

Generally, edutourism has become a popular form of recreational travel undertaken solely or partially for the purpose of study, self-improvement or intellectual stimulation.

UPM’s edutourism programme comes in the form of 13 tour packages around its Serdang campus, while staff and students were also encouraged to take part in edutourism activities available elsewhere.

Last year, the Australians who came for the programme enjoyed homestays with families in Kampung Temal, Pekan. They were tearful when it was time to leave for home and in their feedback on social media, they mentioned that the programme had helped to change their negative perspectives about Malaysia and Islam.

The nine-day programme with the edutourism concept was jointly pioneered by UPM’s Faculty of Forestry, together with two lecturers and 10 undergraduate students from QUT who jointly participated in edutourism activities in Sungai Lembing and Pekan, Pahang.

The programme was funded by the New Colombo Plan under the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Australia and UPM, with special collaboration from Pahang state government agencies including the Pahang State Museum Authority, Chief Minister Office and the State Assemblyman of Temerloh.

The programme began with a visit to the Kuala Gandah Elephant Sanctuary in Lanchang, Pahang. While it was not the first visit for most of the Malaysian participants, it was an eye-opening experience for the Australian participants who thoroughly enjoyed their time at Kuala Gandah.

The highlight was probably when the participants had the chance to take a bath with the baby elephants.

Temerloh state assemblyman Datuk Seri Mohd Shahrar Shamsuddin then hosted a Malay lunch which featured the famous Temerloh masak lemak ikan patin fish dish.

The following morning saw the group engaged in community service activity in the form of teaching English using IT and special gadgets for the Orang Asli children from SK Sungai Mas in Sungai Lembing.

The schoolchildren as well as their teachers enjoyed every moment with the Australians as well as their local visitors.

The visitors also found themselves learning from this experience of undergraduate and postgraduate students from UPM’s Faculty of Forestry, together with two lecturers and 10 undergraduate students from QUT who jointly participated in edutourism activities in Sungai Lembing and Pekan, Pahang.

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