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UiTM Sabah Tourism Management Students Explore Sandakan: A Journey of Learning, Nature, and Heritage

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KOTA KINABALU, 13 January 2025 – Sandakan, a coastal city in Sabah known for its rich history and stunning biodiversity, recently welcomed a group of aspiring tourism students from the Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Sabah Branch Kota Kinabalu Campus. From January 3 to 5, 2025, 28 eager second-semester students and their lecturer embarked on an academic journey as part of their Travel Agency Management and Operations coursework. This trip combined learning with real-world

experience, providing invaluable insights into the tourism industry.

The trip was carefully planned and executed as part of the student's academic curriculum, designed to offer hands-on experience in managing and operating a tour. Moving beyond textbooks, students engaged in the practical aspects of planning, organizing, marketing, and executing a tour itinerary. This unique opportunity enabled them to interact directly with travel agencies and tour operators, providing invaluable insights into the complexities of the tourism industry.

Sandakan's lush landscapes and unique wildlife provided an open classroom for students, allowing them to experience the beauty of nature while learning essential principles of sustainability. A memorable highlight of the trip was the rare sighting of the Bornean pygmy elephant, a shy and elusive species that made an appearance for the group. These elephants are known to appear only a few times a year, making this encounter a once-in-a-lifetime experience for the students. The group also encountered some fascinating wildlife, including the iconic proboscis monkey, recognized for its distinctly large nose, as well as various endemic species of monkeys and birds that are unique to Sabah. For many students, this was their first opportunity to observe such rare creatures in their natural habitat, underscoring the importance of conservation and sustainable tourism. The trip included a visit to the Rainforest Discovery Centre (RDC) in the Kabili-Sepilok Forest Reserve, where students explored Sabah's rich biodiversity. The impressive canopy walkways allowed them to view native flora and endemic bird species from above.

To enhance the experience, students attended an engaging talk from a professional tour guide with over 20 years of experience in the tourism and hospitality industry. The speaker captivated the audience with stories from his professional journey, highlighting the challenges of managing difficult tour members and offering practical strategies to handle such situations. His insights provided a valuable perspective on the skills and resilience needed to succeed in the tourism sector.

Beyond its natural beauty, Sandakan provided students with an insight into its rich history. The group visited the Agnes Keith House, which honors the renowned American author and her life in North Borneo. They also explored St. Michael's Church, one of the few structures that survived the bombings during World War II. These visits transported the students back in time, allowing them to appreciate the region's historical resilience and cultural heritage.

The trip concluded at the Puu Jih Syh Temple, an architectural gem situated on a hill overlooking the sea and the town. The temple's panoramic views and intricate design left a lasting impression on the group, highlighting the connection between spirituality and tourism in Sandakan.

For the tourism students, the academic trip to Sandakan was more than just an excursion—it was a transformative learning experience. By combining theoretical knowledge with real-world applications,

the program enriched their understanding of travel agency management and instilled a deeper appreciation for nature, heritage, and sustainability.

“This trip has been an eye-opening experience,” shared one student. “It taught us how to interact with industry professionals, appreciate the beauty of nature, and understand the importance of preserving our heritage.”

As the students returned to campus, they brought back not only cherished memories but also newfound knowledge and skills that will undoubtedly shape their future careers in the tourism industry. With its blend of nature, history, and culture, Sandakan was the perfect classroom for these aspiring professionals.

Authors:

Dezy Theresa Amanchai, Nurhidayah Binti Bakri, Mohd. Khalaf Dzakwan Bin Ramli & Cindy Johnny



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