Climbing An Active Volcano

by ***Ir. Chin Mee Poon***

OUR mother earth seems to be in a state of agitation and turbulence as demonstrated by the recent spade of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions in different parts of the world. This reminds us that the earth's crust, seemingly very solid and stable, is actually floating on a quagmire of extremely hot, molten mantle that is in a constant state of motion and is ever-ready to breach any weakness in the earth's crust to come to the surface.

We Malaysians are very lucky indeed that such natural calamities do not occur in our country, unlike our immediate neighbour Indonesia which lies smack on the Pacific Ring of Fire and has amongst the largest number of volcanoes in the world.

When it is not showing its explosive temper and has slipped into a slumber, a volcano is actually a mountain with attitude and character and can be extremely charming and attractive. Gunung Rinjani on Lombok Island in Indonesia is a good example.

At 3726m a.s.l., Mt. Rinjani is one of the highest mountains in Indonesia. It is an active volcano. Its last eruption just took place at the end of last year. Fortunately it was not an explosive one, just belching of smoke and oozing of lava, and the mountain's composure and beauty has remained intact. Within the crater there is a beautiful lake and a small volcanic cone formed during one of the earlier eruptions. The lake has become a very popular spot for family outing for the people living in the surrounding areas, and the mountain itself has become a magnet pulling many Malaysian trekkers to it.

My wife and I climbed Mt. Rinjani with a group of trekking friends in the middle of 2007. We took 4 days to conquer the mountain, camping on the rim, in the crater and on the outer slope. It was after a long trek on day one before all 16 of us reached the crater rim at 2725m a.s.l. The 1 km ascent to the peak on day two, starting at 3 a.m., was a tough one. Not only was the slope steep, it was covered with a layer of loose scree, making every step forward a big struggle and extremely taxing to the leg muscles. It was sheer determination and perseverance that saw me join 4 of my friends up at the peak. The reward was a most spectacular view of the crater lake and the vast undulating planes surrounding the mountain.

We had a fabulous time in the crater, enjoying the lake and a hot spring with the local picnickers and anglers. Some monkeys joined us too. Many people come to this mountain just to indulge in its beauty and serenity without making any attempt for the summit.

Conquering the mountain not only gave me great satisfaction, it also has added significantly to my pool of sweet memories to be cherished during my sunset years. ■