

The travel writer and photographer poses with a painting at Sekinchan 3D Art Gallery.

# 'So many untold stories'

By Emily Lowe

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**SETTING** up home as an expatriate in Singapore in 1986, Malaysia changed from a vacation destination to a weekend getaway haven for Michael Smith.

The 63-year-old Briton said: "My wife and I went on a Southeast Asian tour in 1981 and we had a wonderful four-day vacation in Penang.

"When an opportunity came up for me to work in Singapore in sales and business management for a multinational chemical company, I took up the offer without a second thought, bringing my wife along."

Smith's company supplied fuel and lubricant additives to oil companies such as Petronas and Shell, which meant Smith had to make regular trips across the Causeway.

But when vacation time came around, Smith and his family would head to Malaysia seeking adventure, unlike most in Singapore who would come for the food.

"We went for diving expeditions to spots like Tioman, Aur and Sipadan, and adventurous trips to the Mulu caves and up Mount Kinabalu.

"This went on for about 10 years. On our subsequent trips, we became more open to other sights and delights of Malaysia."

The Smiths are no foodies, therefore, most of their more recent Malaysian breaks were a mixture of shopping, cultural experiences and getting close to nature.

"Perhaps we have had enough scrapes on our knees, or maybe age caught up with us," he laughed.

Since their first ever trip to Malaysia in 1981, Smith reckoned that they have visited the country more than 100 times over three decades.

"Among the many trips, there were a few that stood out for me.

"My successful ascent to the peak of Mount Kinabalu to witness the sunrise on a cool crisp day, a visit to Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre, Satang Island turtle sanctuary, Taman Negara and the Borneo Rainforest World Music Festival.

"As you can see, I am partial to nature!"

Upon retirement in 2004, Smith turned his hobby of travel writing and photography into a retirement career, and established [asiaphotostock.com](http://asiaphotostock.com) which focuses on niche stock photographs of people, places and nature of Asia.

Hopping across the Causeway again, Malaysia became a treasure trove for Smith as he looked at sights with renewed appreciation.

"The tagline 'Malaysia, Truly Asia' is apt. Both East and West Malaysia offer contrasting attractions.

"Even though I have visited a good part of the country over the years, there are still many waiting to be discovered.

"Malaysia has so many untold stories, what I uncovered surpassed the school's history lessons on British colonies and World War II.

"Top on my list of attractions are obviously nature and wildlife but as a travel writer, I have taken a keen interest in the tribal cultures of Borneo, traditional music and picturesque *kampung*.

"I willingly go off the beaten track as I traverse the countryside in search of interesting stories and photography subjects."

Indeed, after 100 trips and counting, Smith's most recent visit to Kuala Selangor and its neighbouring areas to "Discover Selangor, the Heart of Malaysia", was still an eye opener.

"Although I missed out on the Sky Mirror at Sasaran — Malaysia's very own version of



Smith has a website selling stock photos of the colourful sights and sounds of Asia.



Salar de Uyuni, for going on the wrong day of the month — the boat trip was still interesting. I was not as disappointed as I thought I would be.

"Instead, I was able to see fishermen trawling for cockles. Now I know where cockles in my curry mee come from!"

"Also, there were plenty of photo opportunities with the wonderful bird life in the area," said Smith as he described how he photographed hundreds of egrets and herons in flight.

After decades of visiting in different capacities, Smith should know Malaysia like the back of his hand.

However, if there was one thing about the country that confuses him, it would be the ad hoc changes to policies on foreign cars.

"Because of this, I make it a point to find out the latest information each time I plan to drive in Malaysia. It will be a lot better if there are improvements in organisation skills and service. Don't settle for 'average,'" he said.