Group awed by the sight of Rumah Kutai

Story and photos by CHRISTINA KOH

FROM a distance, the six-metre high Rumah Kutai along the main road, just 2km from Kuala Kangsar, inspired awe. Roasting walls of beautifully woven bamboo slats with a traditional attap roof, the house stands two metres above the ground. It is a majestic architectural feat built without any nails.

This Rumah Kutai was found in a state of neglect by a group of 30 participants of the Perak Heritage Society during a visit on Aug 13. Although it was restored by Badan Wartisan Malaysia in 1996, the house compound was overgrown with tall grass and its attap roof had gaps and the walls faded.

“It’s quite sad to see it like this,” said Assoc Prof Mohd Sabirizaa Abd Rashid, lecturer-researcher from the UiTM Seri Iskandar branch campus.

The professor, whose speciality is the history of art and architecture, said there were between 50 and 60 Rumah Kutai left in Perak today.

He said the remaining such houses could be found along the western and eastern banks of the Perak River around Kuala Kangsar, Botong Kiri, Bota Kanan, Pasir Salak and Layang Layang.

“The ‘newest’ Rumah Kutai is at least 80 years old, but most are over a century old. Some of the owners don’t even want the houses and preferred to build modern homes,” he said.

Prof Mohd Sabirizaa said that Rumah Kutai were usually built with the front door facing the river as it was the lifeline of the community.

“The people who lived in kampungs led a life that was very community-based.

“Everyone was close to their neighbours and they took care of one another. Today people are more individualistic and tend to keep to themselves.

“I think school children and the younger generation can learn a lot about the world views and the way of life of the Malays by looking at how they lived and built their houses.”

He felt that Muzium Negara, the state government and the Arts, Culture and Heritage Ministry can help to restore Perak’s ancient houses which he described as a ‘national heritage.’

Restoring a typical Rumah Kutai would cost between RM110,000 to RM200,000, said the professor. While similar houses once used by the royal family might need up to RM400,000 because of its more ornate features.

Earlier, the group went to Kampung Enggor where they admired a Rumah Limaj where 87-year-old Mat Saman Mat Marof still lived.

Note the beautifully woven bamboo decorating this opening wall.

The old house, where Mat Saman had stayed since he was a teenager, also had woven bamboo walls with an aluminium roof and still had an intact ‘sliding door’ leading into the kitchen.

From there the group visited Kampung Karai, about 40km from Ipoh, and they visited the beautiful Victoria railway bridge which was completed in 1900.

According to Perak Heritage Society vice-president Law Si