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Signed, sealed, delivered

By ALLAN KOAY

Looking for a gift that's truly special? RedRibbon may have something in store for you.

HERE'S the idea: a physical gift, a tangible present, is nice to have, but as we all know, nothing lasts forever. But an experience, a memory, is something a person can carry with them all their lives.

Timothy Tiah wanted to give his girlfriend something really special on her birthday. He knew a nicely-wrapped gift just wouldn't be enough. He came across a company named RedRibbon Days, called them and set up an arrangement. The surprised girlfriend found herself in a shoe store in Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur, except that the store had been closed especially for her, so that she could shop and enjoy champagne with Tiah, and made to feel like a princess for a day.



Time to fly: Captain Anselm Francis of the Subang Jaya Flying Club taking Khairil M. Bahar through the pre-flight check of the aircraft, a Cessna 150.

Then there was Charlene Wong, who wanted to do something special for her father Henry's birthday. Since she was in the United States and couldn't be home for the occasion, she called RedRibbon Days and arranged for her parents to have high tea at Carcosa Seri Negara. It all worked like a charm, and the senior Wong had a pleasant surprise when the RedRibbon staff turned up at his doorstep to deliver the special gift complete with red balloons.

Don't beat yourself up for not knowing that such a company exists in Malaysia. RedRibbon Days is still pretty new, having been created only in 2007 and launched in the middle of last year. But they've been giving a lot of people happy memories ever since.

It all started when RedRibbon Days founder and "chief experience officer" Sherin Wong was working in the corporate sector in Australia and found herself constantly sending cliched and obvious gifts to her mother on special occasions.

"It was always about hampers and flowers!" said Wong. "Imagine me having to send flowers to my mother for Mother's Day and flowers again for her birthday and flowers yet again for Christmas! The novelty wasn't there, and even my mum implored me to stop sending her flowers!"

Worst of all, she bought a hamper for her mother through a renowned online gifts company, and found that the bird's nest delicacy in the hamper was fake.

Upon her return to Malaysia, Wong began work on setting up an online gifts business. She consciously avoided providing tangible gifts after what her own experience had taught her. By sheer luck, she stumbled upon a concept in Britain where people could buy experiences as gifts.

"I believe the concept of experiential gifting is unique, different and most important of all, convenient and hassle-free for Malaysians dwelling overseas," said Wong. "We have so many Malaysians living and working around the world, with their family and friends back in Malaysia."

She called up her friend, Nik Hidayati Nik Ramli, with whom she was always talking business ideas. Nik Hidayati had been back and working in Malaysia a good few years before Wong decided to come home. They

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brainstormed over latte.

"When I mentioned the idea of RedRibbon Days to her, she was immediately sold to the idea and decided to quit her full-time job to do this with me," said Wong.

Thus RedRibbon Days was born, and when the business started growing, they brought in a third partner, Tan Ming Nu.

RedRibbon Days was officially inaugurated on June 19 last year. The name was chosen because Wong used to receive gifts that were wrapped and tied with a red ribbon, thus she always associates "red ribbon" with gifts and happy things.

There are literally hundreds of experiences from which to choose, so it's easy to get bleary-eyed from checking out the website (www.redribbondays.com.my) or the brochure booklet. Prices range from something like RM30 for a *Dry Sphering Ride For Two* (rolling around in an inflatable 3m-diameter ball) to RM16,100 for a *Private Luxury Yacht Charter*. There's literally something for everyone – individuals, couples, families, kids.

Some of the more interesting experiences include a helicopter ride across Kuala Lumpur (RM2,000), *Personal Chef Private Dining For Eight* (RM2,600), *Tandem Paramotor Adventure* (RM800), *Total Make-Over* (RM700), *Easy Peasy Cupcakes 101* (RM85), *Pregnancy Photography* (RM600), and *Kids' Cooking And Baking* (RM85).

"Customers can also personalise their chosen experience, based on their preference," said Nik Hidayati. "If they'd like to add champagne, flowers or chocolates, we can do that."

"To date, we have over 500 members in our database and over 1,000 people who have experienced a RedRibbon Day," said Wong. "So far, the response has been very positive. We have buyers from all around the world – China, Hong Kong, New Zealand, Australia, Britain, the United States and Singapore."

She said Malaysians are taking to this concept relatively well. They've had much return business. Her personal target is to have 10% of Malaysians experience a RedRibbon Day.

"We've had many customers who told us how convenient it was for them to choose an experience, buy it online and have the experience delivered to the recipient on the preferred date and time," said Wong.

Rock star for a day

Nik Hannani Nik Ramli's *Rock Star For A Day* experience turned out more surprises than anyone had expected. Not even the RedRibbon staff anticipated what would happen.

Nik Hannani, or Nikki, 16, promptly arrived at Purple Houz in Petaling Jaya, Selangor, in the late afternoon, with her very own entourage in tow – four of her schoolmates and friends.

The first thing on the itinerary was a make-up session with Becky Wong of Starlight Concepts. You see, the *Rock Star For A Day* experience comes with not just a professional recording session but also a photoshoot for the album cover that will be used on the CD.

After the album cover shoot with photographer Olivia Oon was over, it was off to the recording rooms upstairs. Prior to the actual recording, preparations turned into an impromptu jam session for Nikki, who had brought along her own acoustic guitar, and her entourage, with production engineer Collin Chin accompanying her on electric guitar.



The album cover for Nik Hannani's *Rock Star For A Day* experience.

There was a moment of slight pressure (which rock star doesn't face such moments?) when another production engineer Harvinder "Harvey" Singh came into the room and asked for Nikki's song list. She had a hard time choosing the songs to record. In the end, her entourage helped her to settle for a medley of songs by Lady Gaga and Rihanna.

Then it was off to the recording proper, and armed with her guitar, Nikki launched into her medley. Nice first take, but a guitar string was slightly out of tune. That was quickly fixed, and it was off into second take, as

out of tune. That was quickly fixed, and it was on into second take, as Nikki grew more confident and comfortable despite a slight cold. Then asked what she would like to try next, Nikki chose an unplugged version of The Jackson 5's *I Want You Back*.

It was at that moment that a surprise celebrity guest, *Malaysian Idol* runner-up Dina, came in to listen to Nikki. Here, it should be noted that a celebrity guest is not part of the RedRibbon Rock Star experience package. Dina's appearance was completely unexpected and a bonus for Nikki who got some pointers from Dina on breathing techniques and phrasing. Moral of the story? You never know who might turn up at a recording studio.

"It was everything I imagined it to be," Nikki said after it was all over. "It was fascinating. I didn't know anything about being in a recording studio, so everything surprised me."

Pilot for a day

Not since 1783, when the first human beings left the safety of the ground in a hot-air balloon in Paris, France, had human imagination about flying been so fired up.

In Khairil M. Bahar's case, it was the prospect of getting to handle the controls of a plane without ever attending flying school.

It was a nice day for flying. Khairil, musician and filmmaker, was ready and raring to head for the wild blue yonder, visibly excited. Never mind that the sun was scorchingly hot, or that Captain Anselm Francis of the Subang Flying Club in Selangor informed us that crosswinds were becoming a common occurrence. The clear blue skies dappled with cotton-white clouds were so inviting.

Khairil, well-known for his independent film *Ciplak* some years ago and who is now directing TV shows, had opted for the *Pilot For A Day* experience. All one had to do was turn up at Terminal 3 of the Subang Jaya Airport, and the professional pilot of the day, in this case Captain Francis, would take care of everything.

After a pre-flight check of the aircraft, a Cessna 150, the captain explained the functions of all the various exterior parts of the aircraft, and Khairil had the chance to ask questions about everything he'd ever wanted to know about a plane.

Then it was time to fly.

The first surprise for our pilot for a day? The cockpit turned out to be a squeeze-space, with both pilot and "co-pilot" barely having any space to move.

Some minutes later, the Cessna sped along the runway, and lifted off into the big sky.

The second surprise was the take-off. It was nothing like what Khairil had experienced on commercial flights. He said the feeling was like "getting into a car with a driver who's drunk." The plane literally swung left and right upon take-off, but settled into a smooth ride after that.

The plane flew a circuit for about 45 minutes, and during the short flight, Khairil got to fly the plane himself, all under the observation and guidance of Captain Francis, of course.

When the plane finally landed, Khairil stepped out of it with an even wider smile on his face.

"We flew past the Shah Alam stadium," he said. "Looking at everything from so high up, with everything so tiny below you, you just forget about all the stress in your life. Stress? What stress?" he laughed.

Model for a day

Anyone who's seen an episode of *America's Next Top Model* or *Janice Dickinson's Modelling Agency* knows modelling isn't all about easy glamour. It's really hard work, and tough mentally and physically for those who choose this career.

Christine Loo, 32, isn't a professional model and has no modelling experience whatsoever but she was interested enough to try being a *Model For A Day*.

The experience started at 10.30am, and Loo was there at Real Pixel Studio, in Petaling Jaya, promptly, getting cosy in no time, settling into the chair in front of the mirror for her make-up session.

But if you think modelling is a breezy affair – come in, sit down, get make-up done, and then pose – you're in for a rude shock. Loo spent a good 45 minutes to an hour just doing nothing but letting Becky



Wong of Starlight Concepts do her hair and make-up. But of course, one can always strike up an interesting conversation with the make-up artist, and that's what Loo did, while the rest of us ... erm, went to an early lunch.



Razzle dazzle: Personal assistant Christine Loo is transformed into a Model For A Day by the RedRibbon experience.

Wong's make-up and her years of experience transformed Loo's already good looks into something stunning.

"It was fun to have a different look," said Loo later. "I felt like a star after that."

Then it was time to get on the tiny "stage" in the studio and pose under the direction and instruction of photographer C.Y. Wong, who has photographed celebrities for entertainment and fashion magazines.

Loo discovered it was not easy to pose. What you see done effortlessly by models in magazines are sometimes awkward and difficult stances and positions, but look good in photos.

And then came the inevitable – facial muscle cramps. Even smiling too much can be punishing.

"Trying to smile for more than 10 shots wasn't a field trip as it almost gave me lock jaw," Loo laughed.

But the results were worth all the trouble. The photos were gorgeous, sleek and stylish. Loo admitted that after the experience, she now knows that modelling isn't as easy as it seems.

"Posing for the camera is nothing like learning your ABCs," she said. "You have to angle and position yourself to portray different types of looks. I had to move around a lot and strike different poses. And I completely ran out of poses after a few clicks."

She said she was glad to have taken up the challenge, and now looks at models with more respect.

RedRibbon Days can be contacted via 03-2093 5973, fax: 03-2093 5943, or e-mail: info@redribbondays.com.my.

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