

Fund raising trip in Sabah Borneo

The Jungle of the Maliau Basin in Sabah, Borneo is not flat. It is a series of steep, often very steep, ridges. Our Trek started on one of 45 degrees.

For the next four days in 30 degrees heat and 97% humidity we scrambled up, slid down, clung to the occasional handy rope slung between saplings, climbed or descended small wooden ladders over otherwise impossible rocks and arrived at the end of each day with enormous relief and a great sense of achievement. We also arrived wet, muddy and stinking! And hungry. Simon and Henry who led this campaign were brilliant and produced hot tea (elixir of the gods) almost immediately which kept us going until an evening meal which over eight days varied between rice, pasta, rice, pasta etc. The packet sauces that came as disguise were more varied. Anyway it was always good and for goodness sake we were in the middle of nowhere. And there was always fruit, fresh at first then tinned.

The evenings passed in a haze (or daze!) of bonhomie and crazy card games. Bed came early, as did Simon's early morning imitation of a cockerel calling us to rise and shine and face another day of extreme activity.

The jungle is stunning; alive with sound day and night. Cicadas, very large insects, birds and monkeys and probably other stuff as well but you see very little. The trees are thick but in heath jungle there is more space between them and there we walked with amazing Pitcher plants of all sizes and wonderful colours. That was on the second, the easy day apparently though not obviously.

The third day highlight was the waterfall in the accompanying picture. This was our lunchtime stopping place, which we were quite reluctant to leave, but night comes swiftly and very darkly in the jungle so there is always a need to press on. The fourth day saw our return to the starting point.^L This Camp site, which had looked so basic when we arrived, now took on the appearance of the lap of luxury! Everything is comparative! Here we needed to ditch as much 'stuff' as possible before embarking on the river part of the Trek. So shared soap, toothpaste, "no you will not need socks or boots for this part" and shared rucksacks which did cause a degree of chaos but no loss of bonhomie.

With the river we made real history. As it flows out of the Maliau Basin and nobody lives in the jungle there, nobody has ever navigated the greater part of the river. Except of course Simon and two companions who rafted it two weeks before our arrival to make sure it was actually possible. And yes it was, so long as you abseiled everything rafts included, down a thirty-foot waterfall. Gulp! Too late to turn back now.

So we set off in four inflatables. Three women, one strong man and a 'steerer' in each. For some of us, this was our first experience of white water rafting. A bit of a misnomer as the river was a thick brown colour but what fun! And how wonderful to have buckets of the stuff cooling you down as you hit the rapids. Only two went overboard and were quickly retrieved. Mostly, the current was sluggish. I can highly

recommend constant paddling as a way to lose weight and trim the figure. We covered 155 Kms in 4 days and it was very effective. Did you know you can actually get callouses on your bum if you do that much in that time?

At night we camped as best we could by the side of the river. Simon always managed to find a narrow strip of flattish ground on which a fire for cooking supper (as above rice, pasta etc) and a tent or two could be placed. Otherwise it was hammocks between trees once you had climbed the very steep and muddy bank. Often there was a fresh water stream to hand, extremely useful, and on one occasion in the soil were the clear footprints of deer, elephant and some clawed creature. Leeches of course as in the jungle were our constant companions. By day we did manage to see some monkeys but no Orang-utan. The butterflies were amazing brilliant colours and as large as a wren. As we progressed down the river so the banks showed more elephant and even some crocodile tracks.

The last day on the river did not go entirely to plan. It took longer than anticipated, ten hours. Arriving at the village, the first to be seen along the entire journey we found that the boat which was to meet us there and transfer us another 5 hour journey to the main Kinabatang river had arrived the day before but left again. It was recalled and as darkness fell we climbed into an open long boat which sat some 8 to 10 inches above the water. It was not long before the storm clouds noticed a while before decided to treat us to a full-blown tropical storm. Thunder and lightning and drenching rain with only one polythene bowl to bail out the water rapidly filling the boat. The reality of crocodiles being in the river with us made sure the bailing never flagged. We were cold, soaked and ought to have been very hungry but I think we were probably too tired. We arrived at the 'port' around midnight to be met by some of Simon's team who bundled us into a minibus with cushioned seats (Oh bliss!) to drive another couple of hours to Sepilok where we were to spend what was left of the night. Our reward was to visit the Orang-utan in the Sepilok rehabilitation centre at feeding time early the next morning. Unfortunately Orang-utan do not like very rainy storms either so were sulking or catching up on lost sleep and not many turned up.

That was almost the end of the grand fund raising adventure. But not quite. We had a day to sort out all our kit and recuperate a little, finishing with a final dinner together before returning to Kota Kinabalu. As we left our outside dining table the foot of one of our number collided with a huge scorpion, really huge, which took revenge in the usual extremely painful way.

Whilst this is an opportunity to say thank you to all those who have given towards the cost of the youngsters trip next year, I hope it has also convinced you that every penny has been hard earned. You haven't heard it all either. The falls; the fears; the appalling jokes; the enormous centipede whose bite is more painful than a scorpion and the 'singing in the rain'. All terribly character building and in aid of a very good cause.

Patti Price