

Trip Review



The “Best of Borneo”

By Will Weber, JOURNEYS Director

In early January I visited Sabah State in Malaysian Borneo. While formally a part of Malaysia, Sabah State, occupying the northeastern corner of the enormous island of Borneo is really a world unto itself. The destination combines peninsular Malaysia’s prosperity with Indonesian Borneo’s informality. Islamic observance is relaxed. My 16-year old son Noah and I joined other JOURNEYS travelers for various segments of a trip which included white water rafting, Sukau Rain Forest Lodge Sepilok Reserve and the northernmost tip of Borneo.

Arrival In Kota Kinabalu

I arrived in Kota Kinabalu expecting the atmosphere of a frontier outpost. I missed that era by about 50 years. In fact, this largest city of Sabah with 200,000 population is modern and connected to both the internet and the rest of Asia by boats, business and international flights. Kota Kinabalu has a good, though not busy, harbor. It is just a short motorboat ride to islands protected as a national park where there is great birding, hiking, snorkeling and wildlife viewing. Looking in the other direction the Crocker Range rises two miles into the sky and includes the highest peak between the Himalayas, New Guinea and Mt. Kinabalu. Based in Kota Kinabalu, we visited both the islands and Kinabalu National Park. Noah and I spent five nights here and felt it was a good base for seeing Borneo. There are lots of restaurants offering varied cuisine at good prices. The city is easy to explore on foot, though taxis are cheap.

Noah and I had arrived before our JOURNEYS group in order to attempt the climb of Mt. Kinabalu (13,500'). The main peak and a rather concentrated group of sub peaks are all contained within Mt. Kinabalu National Park. This is the last vestige of native primary forest left in this area of Borneo. The 754 square km park is well protected, but there are few trails and most areas are off limits to casual hikers. Many species of birds and animals are endemic to the Crocker Range and are now found only within the park. There is a good museum for understanding the natural history but little or no organized interpretation or education programs. We were pleased to be traveling with our own guide, JC, a native Malaysian who spent much of his childhood in London. He knew the birds and plants, especially orchids, very well. Orchids and pitcher plants as well as Rafflesia, the largest flower in the world, are characteristic families on Kinabalu.



The Mighty Mt. Kinabalu

Since an official guide must accompany every climb, JC did not climb with us and Noah and I started up the mountain with Somfain, our seasoned climbing guide. Somfain was experienced, but did not say much and did not seem to know the plants or birds. Mostly he saw his job as not losing track of us. Noah was a bit under the weather from a bout of flu and had still not recovered his appetite. My age, lack of conditioning and too much camera and video gear in my backpack slowed me down. It is possible to have your guide carry personal gear at a small cost, but pride rather than finances dictated I lug my own stuff. There is really just one path to the top and almost all climbers do the trip in two days. We marveled that the record time for climbing to the top and returning was under three hours. It took me almost that long just to climb to the first lunch stop. We were lucky with the weather. Normally, November through February is the wet season and many of the local rivers were in flood, some at a ten-year high level. From the day of our arrival in Sabah, however, the weather started to clear and we not only had no rain but the clouds which conceal the high peaks of Kinabalu most of the year, parted and dissipated for most of the time we were in visual contact with the peak.

The climb up Kinabalu is unrelentingly steep. The main route follows a limestone ridge through the dense rain forest to the base of the granite cap which forms the dome. Here, at about 10,000', where the forest dwindles into dwarf rhododendrons and laurels reminiscent of the Himalayas, the views gape open and the air chills. There are a couple of rather ugly hostels where it is possible to stay overnight. The food was not too bad and the bathrooms were clean with hot showers. We shared a tiny, four-berth room with a German couple. You go to bed by 8 PM and rise between 2 and 3 am to start the final, four-hour climb to the summit in the dark. There is an actual gate for the final leg of the climb which opens at 2:30 AM and there was a queue waiting. We arrived a half an hour later and still had to go slowly due to trail congestion. During our ascent we were gasping and groping for hand holds with about 125 other people, mostly Asians from Korea, Japan, Taiwan and Malaysia. Once on the granite dome, there is a white rope marking the route. In places it is so steep you really need to hold the rope to help pull yourself up. In other places there are very steep stairs carved in the rock or improved with wooden steps. The park rangers take climbing safety very seriously. We had to wear official climbing credentials and had to check in and check out at several points on the peak. In the darkness it would be quite possible to wander into trouble.



The combination of congested narrow paths, steep steps, and the unending white rope disappearing up into the night made for a less than joyous experience. Noah was weak from not eating. I was feeling the effects of thin air and a few of our fellow climbers were giving up and starting down. We could make out the flashlights of dozens of people much farther ahead and much higher up in the dark sky.



Our perception of respiratory and muscular struggle yet to come was balanced by looking down and behind us to see an equally long and stretched out line of lights inching up the painful path behind us.

At about 5:30 AM the sky lightened and we could see our destination, Lowe's Peak, the highest of a dozen granite projections on the summit ridge. Half an hour later and still just before dawn we scrambled up the final boulder pile. We were probably about the 66th and 67th "summiters" that morning. It was not cold or windy, and I carried more insulation than I needed. There was some amusement in the challenge of avoiding stepping on exhausted bodies as we tried to actually stand at the highest point. Noah had found a second wind somewhere around 12,000'. I felt a joy of achievement offset by aching muscles and the disappointment that my camera equipment carried up so many vertical meters was not working.

But we did it! Going down was easier, but not easy. We stopped for breakfast at the lodging from the previous night and then hiked the rest of the way back to the trailhead where we took a bus to the park headquarters and reconnected with JC for the next leg of our trip. On balance, I am glad to have made the climb. It was a beautiful hike. I enjoyed the exertion, though my legs ached for the next four days, mostly from coming down. A couple of tips if you do the climb: take a very lightweight camera, drink enough water, carry a reliable flashlight (my LED headlamp was just fine), condition your legs before climbing, bring a bandana, carry iodine tablets, don't hurry down, wear lightweight hiking shoes that grip well on steep rock, take your time to enjoy the upper part of the mountain on the return trip down.



The Calm, After The Climb

After climbing Kinabalu, the rest of the trip was truly a vacation. Borneo has lots of great fruit and vegetables and imaginative cooks. JC enjoyed taking us into markets or villages and introducing us to unique flavors, sensations and aromas. Shortly after we came down the mountain, we were joined by Jorgen Visback and Eva Sabat, both very experienced world travelers making their first visit to Borneo.

Our first group activity was a full day visit to Sapi and Gaya Islands, a short motorboat ride from the Kota Kinabalu docks. Part of Tunkul Abdul Rahman National Park, the islands are thoroughly protected. Although the primal forest is gone, the re-growth is now mature enough to offer habitat to several species of primates, hornbills and many other birds. It is a good place to walk through mangroves and begin to identify characteristic plants and animals. Crossing a small strait to Sapi Island we felt we had arrived a major beach resort. Lots of people come here to swim, especially on weekends. For us, the principal attraction was the coral reef, which was surprisingly rich in species of fish and coral. The rental masks were only fair quality and you may wish to bring your own. Scuba diving is available with advanced notice. The local wildlife, now tourist dependent, included long-tailed macaques and enormous monitor lizards approaching Komodo dragon size!

Back in Kota Kinabalu, our guide JC, took us on a wonderful tour of the night markets. In the cool of the evening at the waterfront scores of vendors set up portable charcoal grill and sell freshly prepared seafood. You can buy fish, squid, shellfish, shrimp, eel and a full variety of fresh vegetables, pastries, drink concoctions, sauces and spices. Open-air food courts and ambitious Chinese restaurants invite everyone to feast. Nearby side streets were converted to black markets selling counterfeit clothing, watches, sunglasses, athletic shoes, toys, cosmetics and music.



Leaving Kota Kinabalu early we drove north to Kota Belud and Kudat on the northern tip of Borneo. Perhaps the most significant thing about this trip is the lack of large native forests. In some ways the landscape looked like the rural, northern US in areas where the great forests were cut in the late 19th Century but the land proved unsuitable for agriculture. Here in Sabah there is extensive re-growth of scrub forest on lands that just a couple decades ago held primary dipterocarp forest. In lower areas there is rice cultivation and oil palm or coconut palm plantations and low population.





We visited several magnificent, undulating beaches where there were no tourists, no resorts, and no restaurants. JC speculated that development was just a few years away and the land languishing in coconut palms was speculatively priced for upscale development. There was something mournful about walking this near endless undisturbed beach with the knowledge that in a few years it may be unrecognizable.

We had lunch in a local restaurant that attracted a huge crowd by tuning their TV to satellite broadcast of American WWE wrestling spectacles. I found it almost embarrassing to be among the patrons. Through out

Borneo I found it depressing to see how young people in particular seem completely enamored with the seamiest and most violence-ridden and mindless forms of American-exported entertainment. Steven Segal, Bruce Willis, The Rock, Vin Diesel, Sylvester Stallone, and Ja Rule are among the best-known Americans. Malaysian parents must have fears about the bad influences of American popular culture.

Sukau Rain Forest

Our next stop was the Sukau Rain Forest Lodge. We flew to Sandakan, arriving on market day, a colorful, crowded, chaotic time. It was a relief to board our outboard boat and head out on the Kinabatangan River toward Sukau. Much of the route is through mangroves and riverine forest with little development, though we seemed to be flying along, couple of us noted the motionless forms of orangutans resting in treetops along the river. On the return trip we took time to investigate more thoroughly and enjoyed relatively close-up views of these wonderful primates, which are free-ranging and far from the rehabilitation sites. Arriving at Sukau, we found the water still high from recent rains. This flooded the hiking trails, but facilitate access by smaller motorized dugout canoes and skiffs. The Rain Forest Lodge was a very pleasant place not far from town, but still set in a wonderful forest area, which was full of birds. Hornbills are among the most notable and spectacular of the local avifauna, but by taking the exploration boats back into side streams and oxbow lakes, we were able to observe many other species, especially water birds. On several occasions we also observed troops of proboscis monkeys closely enough to see their distinctive elongated noses. The food at Sukau was excellent and we enjoyed the feeling of comfort in the forest.



Orangutan Reserve Visit

Sepilok Orangutan Reserve is not far from Sandakan. This is a reliable place for sighting orangutans, which are undergoing rehabilitation for return to the wild. Twice a day banana feedings provide a food resource for wild ranging animals, which have not yet become fully acclimatized to life in the wild.

Our itinerary did not include the Danum Valley, a Borneo mecca for hard-core birders. This is a somewhat isolated location preserving extensive virgin rain forest and offering modest accommodations for nature enthusiasts who wish to seek the many Borneo rain forest endemic species know to occur here. Including Danum Valley would have required an additional 2-3 days added to our itinerary.

Borneo offers an exotic and active experience of nature and environments. If just climbing Kinabalu is not enough adventure for you, there are several rivers for white water rafting. Adding a visit to Sarawak would offer caving and climbing and lots more hiking as well as a greater variety of indigenous culture experience. If you are not seeking such physical adventure, you will find a softer path through the forests, mountains and rivers.

