ESCAPE
THE GLOBAL GUIDE FOR THE ADVENTUROUS TRAVELER

Borneo: Stumble in the Jungle

Backroading Portugal: Old Europe’s Last Stand

Castaway Kingdom: Downshifting in Tonga

God’s Indiana Jones: Digging Up Trouble
Another Fine Mess

there's a travel opportunity out there that's just waiting for somebody to cash in big. It's an idea that can go wrong. It's supposed to. Okay, here it is: There are plenty of companies selling the best trips money can buy; somebody should sell the worst, because they're really the best ones anyway. As we learn in The Inner Journey this time out, misadventures always make the best stories and give us the ultimate road souvenirs: the charge of adversity conquered, which translates into a steroidal sense of confidence and possibility, that pumped-up traveler's "glow" that makes people think you joined a cult.

When things fall apart on the road, we come together. When we're lost, stranded in the Chinese desert, when there's no place to stay, that's when we get what we paid for—real adventure, that state of improvisational problem solving or, in the immortal words of Oliver Hardy, "another fine mess." Coming out the other side of a road scrape, we've been transformed. The experts say we wind up increasing our flexibility, resilience and ability to deal with ever-changing circumstances. That's a pretty good return on the old vacation dollar.

A little adversity can go a long way. Our ESCAPE Artist this issue, Tom Freston, found that out traveling and working for years in the capital of tribulation, India. He tells us how his years on the receiving end of the best power outrages and haggling the subcontinent could muster made it possible for him to do what he does today; run MTV Networks as its president and CEO. Far-flung adversity has also shaped the career of photographer Steve McCurry (profiled in ESCAPE Routes), whose images from realms of conflict have made him one of the world's top shooters.

THE MUD BELOW. Karen Catchpole, who's been on the road in Asia for about a year now, got all the adventure she could handle on a 250-mile trek through the Borneo jungle—in monsoon season. Seeing a primary rainforest in its most rainy state makes a certain amount of sense: sloshing in it, uh, no. She gets a muddy primer in leech lore and jungle road signs en route to the Multi Caves.

SLOWING AHEAD. We dispatched our senior editor, Jordy Tanzer, to Tonga for a de-stress test—which got him so mellow we had to send him back on the L.A. freeways to revive him again. Winding down is a specialty of the world's smallest kingdom, where there's time to get a walkup photo appointment with the king and, always, to zone around the village kava bowl. The highlight, Jordy reports, was the turquoise world of the Vavau' Isles, where he kayaked with whales and sailed off into the sunset on a trimaran.

ELSEWHERE. John Krich, author of Won Ton Lust, takes us on a winding trip to the Old Europe of inner Portugal, a forgotten realm of castles and palaces. And for a distinct change of pace, contributing editor Chuck Thompson calls on the minister of exploration, Gene Savoy, whose exploits in discovering lost Andean worlds are only outdone by his controversial religious theories.

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See you there—and down the road.

Editor & Publisher

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The rainforests of Borneo contain a horde of plant and animal species found nowhere else on earth. And about 98 percent of the world’s mud supply, our correspondent concludes, after a 250-mile, mid-monsoon trek through the jungles of Sarawak and Kalimantan. Better pull up those leech socks.

WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE

By Karen Catchpole

I THOUGHT I KNEW HOW TO WALK, BUT THE slippery muck and twisted tree roots littering Borneo’s rainforest had reduced me to a flailing, stumbling, moving hazard. I was but a babe in the woods.

In any other context I would have taken it as a chauvinistic insult when, with little more than a knowing sideways glance, my Kelabit trekking guide, Larry, handed me a walking stick, then silently (and sticklessly) moved on ahead down the trail. But in any other context I wouldn’t have just slipped and skidded down a goopy incline, nearly taking out my trekking companions in the process. Larry was merely trying to avert the disaster of a sprained ankle or broken arm in the middle of the jungle and avoid the unsavory prospect of carrying one clumsy journalist to the nearest village, miles away. Who was I to argue?

To be fair, I’m not usually enrolled in remedial walking classes. I’ve been to Everest Base Camp. I’ve trekked over Pakistan’s snow-covered Dosai Plateau. I’ve walked to work through Manhattan rush-hour traffic. But the jungle trails of Borneo’s rainforests offer unique ambulatory hurdles—especially during the monsoon, the annual Mud Bowl the locals fondly refer to as landas. No one but a fool goes trekking through the rainforest from October to March, when more than eight feet of rainfall saturates the earth, creating treacherously slick, ankle-deep mud and a leech explosion of biblical proportions.

My fellow fools on this 250-mile jungle journey, an Iban adventure outfitter and two local guides, should have known better, but they were as curious as I was to penetrate some of the largest and oldest tracts of primary rainforest in the world. Gracie Geikie wanted to find out if there was a feasible route from the celebrated Kelabit Highlands, in the East Malaysian state of Sarawak in northern Borneo, through the jungle and across the border into Indonesia’s Kalimantan, and back to Sarawak again to the world-famous caves of Gunung Mulu National Park. I decided to tag along.
Despite widespread logging, there are more tree species in a couple of acres of Borneo rainforest than in all of Europe. One-third of the 204,000 flowering plants in the world are only found in Borneo, along with 180 species of indigenous animals and 475 species of birds, including the flamboyant rhinoceros hornbill, the official mascot of Sarawak.

Not that I saw any of that stuff right away. I was too busy staring at my feet. I spent the first few days of jungle life looking straight down in search of incoming leeches and those rare, somewhat dry and stable places to venture my next uncertain step. I soon learned not to trust any of my senses in the jungle. Distance and direction were impossible to measure because I couldn't see more than 12 feet in any direction through the dense foliage. Sound seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. Even the passage of time slid into oblivion in the sun-deprived world beneath the rainforest canopy.

But it's not an uninhabited world. The rainforest sanctuaries of Sarawak and Kalimantan are home to some of Southeast Asia's most endangered ethnic groups, including the Kelabit, the Lun Dayeh, the Lun Bawang, the Iban and the traditionally nomadic Penan.

Even in the age of satellite contouring, maps obliquely describe the jungle realms of Sarawak and Kalimantan as "generally forest covered" while warning that the "relief data is incomplete." But, as I was about to find out, the terrain is quite complete. Trails winding through the rainforest floor are narrow and overgrown with dastardly hazards like the "stop a minute plant," so named because its hooked barbs have a way of snaring your clothes (and any exposed skin) with such tenacity that you have to "stop a minute" to disengage yourself. Progress is also dogged by dozens and dozens of streams rushing across the trails. Generally unforgiving, they require focused and careful crossing on found-object bridges. Then there's the wall-to-wall mud and leeches.

The third biggest island in the world, Borneo is politically shared by two countries and one eccentric sultanate, a by-product of colonial days. Malaysia runs the northern part, with its provinces of Sabah and Sarawak—formerly British Borneo—while the lower two-thirds of the isle, called Kalimantan, reverted from Dutch to Indonesian control after World War II. The oil-rich sultanate of Brunei, on the coast between Sabah and Sarawak, is home of one of the world's richest men, the Sultan of Brunei—and the island's historic name. "Borneo," a word synonymous with primeval remoteness and a certain cartoon Wild Man, is a mangled version of "Brunei," once a maritime power, visited by Magellan in 1521.

The first of what would become daily afternoon downpours unleashed as Gracie, Matthew (a Berawan guide), fellow traveler Eric Mohl and I landed in Bario, the capital of the Kelabit Highlands in Sarawak. Nestled in a king-size valley at 3,700 feet, the town is home to 200 of the 3,000 or so remaining members of the Kelabit tribe, a few cranky dogs (of mixed ethnic background) and one grass airstrip.

The rice the Kelabit grow here is rightfully famous for its fragrant flavor and fluffiness, and the juicy local pineapples can cause cavities from ten feet.

We were met at the airport by Larry, our lanky Kelabit guide, who rounded out our party of five. He took us to the Ulung Palang longhouse, on a foothill above Bario, where we were immediately welcomed into the family. Many tribes in Borneo live in longhouse communities, with as many as 90 families under one incredibly long roof. The Kelabit version of the longhouse, however, is sort of a Rubik's-cube variation on the theme. From the outside it looks like there's nothing inside and no way to enter. Once you figure out how to get in, though, you could get lost in the labyrinth of dark verandas, gleaming wooden inner corridors, sunlit hallways and unexpected doors leading into each family's private room.

Author gets another lesson on the importance of balance in life.
convert thousands of people, including a large percentage of the Penan.

Once converted, the Penan were told to forget about their centuries-old animistic beliefs. In some cases, amulets and other icons of the traditional Bungan tribal religion were collected by the missionaries and destroyed in a ritual that was supposed to free the animists from their superstitions. Loincloths and roaming around the jungle had to go, too. The Penan were shown the wisdom of permanent addresses and trousers.

The combination of shrinking hunting grounds and burgeoning fear of God ultimately brought even the Penan out of the jungle. Of 9,000 to 10,000 Penan currently living in Sarawak, fewer than 400 are believed to still be nomadic.

With my pack suction-cupped to my dripping back and my legs resisting forward movement, I was feeling a bit too nomadic myself. The road to the Mulu Caves seemed ages of slogging away. I was more than relieved to finally see the modest settlement of Pa Barang swing into view. As prescribed by Borneo tribal etiquette, all visitors report to the headman first. Ayai Pep, the main man of Pa Barang, was unusually gregarious for a Penan. He told me he converted to Christianity almost four decades ago. Today all 40 or so Penan who live in the settlement’s eight wooden houses are devout Christians. They pray in their simple church every evening, twice on Sunday.

Fittingly, I spent Halloween—one of the more animistic of the Christian holidays—with the Penan. However, the treat was all mine. One of the men in the settlement had killed two habi utan (wild boar) that morning with his blowpipe and poison darts. Many Penan still hunt the traditional way, either out of preference or economy. Handmade bamboo darts will always be cheaper than bullets and, in the hands of a skilled Penan, they’re just as effective. Tipped with the poisonous sap of the tajen tree, the darts can kill a 300-pound wild boar in one minute.

Love Hurts. This heavily tattooed Penan man shows off his badges of courage. Traditionally, the more tattoos you had, the more pain you could brave, the tougher the hombre you were. Bottom line: the more the ladies would crave you.

While Matthew selected a few pounds of the best cuts of boar for us, I noticed a young monkey playing in the kitchen where the fresh kill was being butchered. The Penan had probably eaten its mother, but this baby was safe because the Penan will not eat anything they’ve reared. Their affection for pets is so great that Penan women have been known to breast-feed captured baby pigs and monkeys.

That night we feasted on greasy, tender smoked spareribs as big and meaty as the dinosaur ribs that used to flip the Flintstones’ car at the drive-in before every episode. After dinner we huddled around the kitchen fire to talk with Ayai and his family. Our multi-talented guide Matthew is a Berawan, but he also speaks Penan and was able to translate the halting conversation.

At first, Ayai figured he was 50 years old. No, 70, he reconsidered. No, more than 80, because he was already married when the Japanese invaded during World War II. “Where were you when the Japanese were here?” is the touchstone elders use to guessimate age, a thing that doesn’t matter much here except to a nosy reporter.

Niceties over, Ayai rumbled around trying to find some of his prized possessions to show us, and proudly pulled out a seven-inch boar tusk that must have come from an animal with ribs even bigger than the ones I’d just devoured. And for 50 Malaysian ringgit (US$13) it could be mine! The deal was sealed when Ayai told me that before the missionaries came, all Penan carried one to protect them from potentially fatal falling trees and limbs in the jungle. Even if the Penan weren’t allowed to believe that anymore, I could and would, with many days of walking underneath 150-foot, rain-soaked, termite-infested jungle giants ahead of me.

I was delighted to hear from Ayai

Left: The freestyle leg. Eric Mohl tries to stay in his lane. Inset: A Penan trail marker points the way ahead.
Each of the ten or so families living in the longhouse invited us to their private cooking fire on the floor for a warming cup of tea. Little girls and old women stared while the younger men practiced their English on us until the storm passed. Secretly I wished it never would, as I settled right into the laid-back pace of longhouse life.

When the rain finally let up, we explored another nearby longhouse called Bario Asal, which was practically deserted. Most of the younger generation had gone to the coastal towns of Miri or Kuching to find work, wives and big-city excitement. But the tua rumah, or headman, and his second wife still live in Bario Asal, doing their best to maintain Kelabit customs.

Once Matthew had translated the introductions, he spent a suspiciously long time trying to explain that I was from a magazine and that I intended to travel through the jungle all the way to Mulu National Park. The Kelabit are not known for their tact or social discretion, and they looked me up and down, doing little to hide their skepticism.

But the Kelabit are known for their elaborate and enormous earrings, which elongate their earlobes down toward, and sometimes to, their shoulders. While the earrings are usually made of solid brass, the tua rumah at Bario Asal had a pair intricately carved out of two tiny birds' skulls. To divert attention from my (apparently) inadequate physique, I asked Matthew to ask the headman about his beautiful earrings. "I have no one to give them to when I die," he told Matthew, who told me, "All my children are gone, and they do not want to wear the old earrings in their new life."

Some of the Kelabit men and women still living in Bario have had their dangling lobes—once considered the height of beauty—snipped off in favor of a more "normal" look. "When I went to Miri or Kuching everyone stared at my ears," explained a Bario woman, whose father is featured on a popular postcard in full tribal regalia. "So I had a doctor cut them off."

When I waved goodbye to my new Bario friends the next morning, it felt sadly final. Who knows what will be left of the old ways of the Kelabit a decade from now? I looked back one last time before the dripping jungle swallowed me whole.

Though almost perfectly flat, the rain-saturated mud path from Bario to the Penan settlement of Pa Barang had been churned into sticky pudding by the hooves of water buffaloes. Rainforests tend to be muddy in the middle of monsoons, of course, but this was ridiculous. The one saving grace was that it seemed to be too gooey here even for the leeches, who were oddly absent, perhaps rallying their forces for an ambush around the next bend.

I couldn't help but notice a pair of sticks intentionally planted in the mud along the trail, one of many complicated

Power Steering. Longboat drivers have standing room, and that's about it, to navigate their slim water taxis.

but completely logical Penan road signs. Prior to departure, I'd done some homework on the Penan, so I knew this configuration, one long stick and one shorter stick jutting out of the mud at the same angle, told us that the settlement of Pa Barang was only a short distance away. But a short jaunt to the Penan, recognized even by other tribes as the real masters of the jungle, can turn into an odyssey for those just learning how to walk. My stick and I flailed on, weaving through a slalom of giant roots, ducks under vines, my eyes peeled for anything that might be slithering down them. The profusion of tangled life was disorienting, claustrophobic—as foreign as foreign gets.

Yet it was home to the Penan, a security blanket that once provided all they needed. The shy nomads managed to cling to their wandering ways and blowpipes well into the 20th century, roaming their rainforest hideaway, eluding all with their encyclopedic knowledge of paths and plants. They used hand-bored wooden sumpis (blowpipes) and poison-tipped bamboo darts to hunt barking deer, wild boar, monkeys, sun bear and leopard. They rarely left the cover of the rainforest—almost never by choice—and never settled in one place for more than a few weeks. Moving on to a new home the minute the game got scarce or the yard got dirty. Then loggers came, and the game went.

God arrived next. The first Christian missionaries of the Borneo Evangelical Mission descended on the tribes of Borneo shortly after World War II—around the same time the first logging bulldozers arrived. This tidal wave of crusaders brought food, clothes, medicine and Bibles. They learned the local languages and customs and managed to

Sunday finery at Kelabit church service is a mix of old faithfuls: mission clothes and dangling earlobes.
that the missionaries hadn’t completely taken the road out of the Penan. “Every once in a while everyone in our settlement goes with their family into the jungle,” Ayai said. “They bring just a few things and spend many days, even weeks in the jungle. They go and follow their heart.” Time for me to do the same.

Stepping into a particularly low-riding longboat is like walking onto a surfboard. I wobbled slowly to my seat in the floating log that would take us up the Barang River. The driver poled us forward, and we were soon gliding through this sunlit passage in the canopy, guided by butterflies, emerald-green and ruby-red dragonflies and an enormous kingfisher that repeatedly swooped and landed in front of our approaching longboat as if concerned we might get lost.

Then we were back on the trail, squishing along an undulating, muddy jungle track. By this time the walking stick Larry had unceremoniously cut for me days earlier with one swift blow of his razor-sharp parang, a machete-like knife, had become my best friend. I used it as an emergency brake on slippery inclines, as a third point of balance when crossing the six-inch-wide, moss-covered, handrail-less logs that traversed the numerous tributaries in our way and as a pole to vault over muddy pits in the trail.

My beloved stick was no help, though, when it came to other realities of jungle life, such as mud, rain and wilting humidity. Though the daytime temperature was never more than 85 degrees, thanks to the thick, sun-blocking canopy of trees 150 feet over our heads, it was never less than 85 degrees either. And never below 98 percent humidity.

This happens to be ideal traveling weather for leeches, which like to get around even more than the Penan and happily lurk on the wet leaves of trailside plants, patiently waiting for a few red-blooded trekkers to pass by. British troops on jungle patrol here in the ’60s reportedly were so paranoid about leeches that they wore condoms 24 hours a day. That seemed to validate my own paranoia, which led me to a proactive strategy of leech socks. Looking like silly Christmas stockings with a drawstring at the top, the socks are definitely a fashion “don’t,” but they worked.

Nearly everyone in Borneo has his own theory of leech management. One Malaysian soldier reckoned that if you bite the head off the very first leech you find on your body, no other leeches will be brave enough to go near you for the rest of that day. “Just don’t swallow the head,” he warned, though he hardly had to. A Kelabit farmer recommended soaking our shoes and socks in wet tobacco. Evidently leeches don’t smoke. Salt water is also said to repel leeches, but while we had plenty of water, none of it was salty. “Don’t try to pull them off,” advised Matthew. “It’s better to roll them up in a ball — then you can flick them off easily.”

Despite Matthew’s diligent coaching (find, roll, flick, repeat), Gracie came out of the jungle several pints lighter every day. “I just got sick of looking for leeches all day long,” she explained. “I figured I might as well let them be and just deal with them once at night.”

Perhaps a bit of the confidence and ease of the Penan had rubbed off on me, because by the third day in the jungle I was feeling comfortable enough about my walking skills to look up occasionally. I found it thrilling to see movement in the branches above me, usually caused by swinging groups of long-tail macaques, gibbons or giant flying squirrels. I wasn’t always able to see the animals through the dense foliage, but if I hung around long enough they pinpointed their roosts by bombing us with a shower of seeds from their fruit snacks.

Of course, most of the stuff coming down was from that invisible ceiling beyond the canopy. Rain in the rainforest is a strange experience. First you hear it hitting the leaves of the canopy high overhead. But the drops don’t make their way through the dense foliage right away. For a couple of minutes you are aware that it’s raining, but you remain perfectly dry under your jungle umbrella. Then you get soaked.

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Towering blades of limestone sprout from the slopes of Mulu National Park.
Long Repon, near the Kalimantan border, was once a thriving village, but skirmishes in an undeclared war between Indonesia and the newly formed Malaysia between 1953 and 1956 forced the Malaysian army to relocate it to safer ground. Now it's nothing more than one jungle shelter with a wooden floor, a hearth for the cooking fire and a blessedly waterproof roof. Earlier in the day Larry had collected some damar—a sort of jungle lighter fluid that forms from the sap of the jati tree. The resulting hunks of crystallized sap got a good-size fire going in no time. While Matthew got to work on heating up some delicious canned beef curry, Gracie cracked open the bottle of Johnnie Walker Black she had wisely packed.

At dusk every evening the cicadas begin their jungle soundtrack, chiming in with an annoying, high-pitched drone. Larry told us it's taboo for the Kelabit to use the cooking fire for any purpose whatsoever for one hour from the start of the cicada symphony. It's an odd custom in a land not wedded to clocks, but the fire for that hour, he explained, should be given over to "the spirits." If you ignore the cicada hour and jump the gun, bad things will happen.

"Not too long ago, a couple of Kelabit men near Baro decided to go ahead and test the spirits," Larry quietly told us in his best campfire-ghost-story voice. "The cicadas started, but they didn't take their evening rice off the fire. Pretty soon the house started shaking and the wood from the hearth flew out at the men."

Larry told Matthew to stop cooking, and then he went outside to pick some jungle fruit for dessert. With Larry safely out of sight, Matthew, being a Berawan, immediately put the coffee back on the fire. Spirits or no, it had been a hard day, and the man needed caffeine. Still, I couldn't help but blame Matthew and his "spirit hour" coffee for the fact that none of us slept well that night.

Then again, it could have been the biting sand flies, visions of jungle rats ("as big as dogs," according to Matthew) or the fact that the open shelter we were sleeping in was being reclaimed by the jungle at an almost visible rate. As the utter blackness of night swiftly descended upon us, I felt the forest closing in like an army of Venus flytraps.

So far, I had managed to block from my mind visions of Borneo's six deadly snake species—including the cobra and an extensive selection of venomous pit vipers that can sensitize even the most non-phobic jungle visitor. As if to jolt me out of my false sense of security, I nearly stepped on a foot-long, coffee-colored snake near the top of a ridge late the next morning. Matthew assured me it wasn't poisonous, but I had long since learned to take the jungle's warnings seriously. It rarely gives two.

With eyes freshly peeled for snakes, we pressed on to the Indonesian border. The problem was, it was on the other side of a steep ridge. I looked for roots and rocks to anchor my feet, taking two steps up, one slide back, to the top of a slope in the Apo Duat Range. "Everything on the other side is Indonesia," Matthew announced casually. Crossing borders isn't a big deal in Borneo, where jungles and people ignore them. The lackadaisical border marking was a concrete survey post half consumed by jungle. Good-bye, Malaysia. Hello, Indonesia. Passports not required.

But we weren't stopping here. There were three more hours of bashing through the Indonesian rainforest (they still have some left after last summer's fires, which destroyed 20,000 square miles of jungle) before we arrived at the surprised eight-family village of Pa Rupai, home to the Lun Dayeh people. We weren't planning on staying in Pa Rupai for more than an hour or so before crossing back into Malaysia. However, I'd been hearing rumors that in these troubled times, Indonesian border officials had started extorting cash and goods from the few nonlocals who tried to cross this way.

The headman had a plan, though. He knew of a shortcut over a steep ridge and out of Indonesia that completely bypassed the border post. I like sneaking through borders; besides, in the space of 45 minutes I'd fallen in love with Pa Rupai's green foothills, waddling ducks and blissed-out water buffaloes wallowing in mud holes.

We gratefully agreed to stay the night with the headman and his family and made an early-morning run for the border. Headman at the helm, we blazed the shortcut, which by now I knew meant fewer actual steps but harder ones. True enough, the trail across the Malaysian border led straight up a very vertical, very long hill. For more than an hour we struggled along, trying to keep up with our 70-year-old pacesetter, who was fast disappearing from my view, hacking his way through the vines and saplings encroaching on the trail. I began to wonder if maybe the Kelabit had gotten it right about my inadequate frame.
After a slippery descent down the ridge, the headman informed us we were now safely back in Malaysia, then turned around and hurried home. We forged on to the tiny outpost of Ba Kelalan, a collection of houses, one shop, one school and one rest house in a gorgeous, wide valley.

In the dry season, you not only see the 7,949-foot peak of Mt. Murud, the highest mountain in Sarawak, from here, but you can climb it as well. In the wet season you can't do either. The monsoon also foiled plans for an overland journey to Lawas. The clay-based logging road was so saturated that even the locals wouldn't travel on it, preferring, like us, to take their chances on the 30-minute Twin Otter flight.

Our packs were taken to the plane in the official airstrip wheelbarrow, and we boarded. I soon wondered whether the road wouldn't have been safer. The plane struggled to lift off the bumpy, waterlogged airstrip, sputtered shakily aloft and headed straight for one of the ridges surrounding the Ba Kelalan Valley. It felt just like a flight simulator video game, only without the simulator part. Reaching for my trusty walking stick for moral support, I felt the plane make a sharp bank, and we were free and clear to enjoy the view—or what was left of it.

The flight to Lawas took us directly over vast areas currently being "harvested," the red scars of the now-treacheryous logging roads bisecting the hillsides. With the stall sounding, the captain dropped into a kamikaze descent and we were hurting for the airstrip at Lawas.

We were officially out of the Kelabit Highland, on our way to meet the Iban and at long last explore the Mulu Caves. A longboat snaked us up the monsoon-swollen Limbang River to an Iban longhouse called Rumah Bala. The Iban are the largest ethnic group in Bario and are known for enormous longhouses.

Once upon a time they were also known for their enormous collection of skulls, trophies proudly displayed from head-hunting expeditions that continued well into World War II, when Japanese heads were much hunted.

The Iban are also famous partiers and, despite heavy missionary pressure, they still celebrate Gawai (the traditional Dayak harvest festival), ignore Christmas, smoke like chimneys and drink homemade tuak (rice wine) every chance they get. Unfortunately they'd been having too many chances lately; and the Rumah Bala stock of tuak had run dry.

Gracie, an Iban herself, made the ultimate sacrifice and pulled out a carafe of Paul Masson. In the absence of tuak, she poured some into a plastic cup for the headman to try. "It looks like soy sauce," he said, seconds before he poured the whole snort down his throat. "It's sour," he declared, and passed the empty cup back for more.

Between swigs, the headman asked where we'd come from. This is no small talk to the Iban, who value the merit of taking a berjala— a journey for pleasure or adventure. They believe it builds character, and Iban women are said to be attracted only to young men who have made at least one berjala. Gracie explained our own berjala to the headman in Iban. "Your journey is very good," he replied. "And you have made good progress."

I'd been marveling at the headman's physique all evening—tree trunk legs, broad shoulders, not an ounce of fat. Not bad for 80 years of age. I asked him his secret, and he gave me a dark gray rock the shape and texture of an ice cream cone. Fifty years ago, he explained, he had a dream. In that dream he saw a tree struck by lightning, and was told there was a special rock beneath that tree that would protect him and bring him luck.

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THE FAMILY TREE

Indigenous peoples roamed through Borneo long before the Malay, Chinese or Dutch dropped anchor there. Austronesian aborigins settled on the island as early as 33,000 years ago. They stayed for a good number of millennia, branching off into hundreds of ethnic groups—each with its distinct social organization, customs and dialect. Mountains and thick rainforest allowed tribes to develop in virtual isolation, resulting in a family tree as complex and tangled as the jungle vines.

There are two main groups: the Dayak, a Malay term for "man" used to indicate sedentary peoples; and the Punan (or Penan), a catchall phrase for nomads. The Dayak—including the Iban, Kayan, Kenyah, Modang, Lun Dayeh, Kelabit, Bidayuh and countless others—live off the slash-and-burn cultivation of rice, cassava, taro, sweet potatoes, corn, sugarcane, leafy greens and wild fruit trees.

Southern tribes were influenced by Hinduism—which hit the island in the 6th century and is noticeable in their elaborate funeral rites. The central branch (Kayan-Kenyah-Modang) is the most class conscious, with equivalents of aristocrats, commoners and slaves, and the group has a reputation as hostile invaders. The Bidayuh construct intricate longhouses, while the Iban are headhunters turned pioneer farmers.

The Penan were traditionally nomadic hunter-gatherers, but these days they have partially settled in remote pockets of the island. Dozens of subgroups exist but are still largely unknown. Depending on the region, these elusive bands are called "upriver people" (olo ot), "mountain people" (tau'ukit), or "forest people" (tau toan).

Unfortunately, the complex network of indigenous tribes has gotten simpler over the last few decades: Many of the original groups have disappeared.
The next morning he went into the jungle and found the tree from his
dream. After some digging around its base, he found the *batu mimpi* (dream
stone). Rocks that have been transformed by a lightning strike hold special
power for the Iban. The headman believes his vitality and virility come from
the rock. Sort of like Iban Viagra. Every three months, the headman slaughters
a chicken and sprinkles the blood on the rock to honor and appease it.

We were after some well-endowed rocks ourselves, the limestone marvels
of Mulu National Park, the largest na-
tional park in Sarawak and home to
the world’s largest cave chamber. With
that journey in mind, it was an early
night at the Rumah Bala longhouse—
and an early morning. A longboat took
us to the mouth of the Terakan River
and the start of the Headhunters’ Trail.
Headhunting was practiced as recently
as the 1930s, and the 14-mile trail fol-

dows the ancient route used by Kayan
tribal headhunters on the warpath for
Iban skulls. After a few hours we arrived
at the base of 5,200-foot Gunung Benar-
rat and Camp 5—the halfway point of
the Headhunters’ Trail.

The highlight of a stay at Camp 5
is the deceptively challenging climb
to the top of the Pinnacles trail to view
the savage limestone formations on the
flanks of nearby Mt. Api. The walk is
less than a mile and a half each way,
but it’s incredibly steep and rocky. Near
the top, the trail gave up completely, and
vertical rock took over. And I did mean
vertical, enough so that park officials
installed a series of aluminum ladders
and fixed ropes to help hulking trekkers up
the last stages of the climb. I focused
no further than the rung ahead, bellowing
up over razor-sharp pitches, and finally
reached the 3,700-foot summit.

Suddenly I was glad to be there. From
the summit, I had a 360-degree pan-
orama of a sea of strangely beautiful 150-
foot limestone towers jutting out of
the jungle like the world’s biggest shark
teeth along the flanks of Mt. Api. After
being enclosed in the forest for almost
two weeks, I paused to take in the amaz-
ing feeling of a 360-degree view. The
only thing marring the occasion was
that I had to get back down.

I started down the ladder section,
feet feeling gingerly for the next rung,
gravity sucking me down. I spotted a
three-foot pit viper coiled in a tree above
me. This leaf-green snake is one of the
deadliest in Borneo. Fortunately, it’s also
one of the shiest. It ignored me. I
moved on, every step requiring total
concentration. After three kneecap-shat-
tering hours, we made it back to Camp 5.

The next morning and five miles later,
we finally reached the Mulu Caves.
No one knows how many giant holes

to mark the 5-million-year-old lime-
stone mountains here, but what has
been charted so far is mind-boggling.
The grandaddy of them all, Sarawak
Chamber, is the largest cave space in the
world. You could park 40 747s inside
it, or host 16 concurrent football games,
and still have room to spare.

The park’s five well-lit main caves
are just as impressive. I made my way
through the hallucigenic offerings of
Lang Cave. If I thought I had been
underground before, enveloped by

canopy, this was the real down under.
I made my way past boggling flowstones,
cave curtains, stalactites and stalagmites
that looked more like underwater coral
reefs than terrestrial features.

Deer Cave, which got its name from
the herds of deer that used to inhabit its
gaping mouth, is the largest cave passage
in the world. I stood and stared upward
at a ceiling height of cathedral propor-
tions. The deer might be gone these
days, but tens of thousands of swiftlets
and millions of bats are still around. I

gaped for fresh air through the pungent
smell of ammonia from three collective
tons of guano they drop every day.

The last cave we explored, Clear-
water Cave, is the seventh-longest cave
system in the world. It reaches back into
the innards of these hills some 65
miles. The feature we all focused on was
its amazingly clear swimming hole near
the entrance, and we indulged for a dip
in the glittering water.

This only reminded us of the need
for a real shower. After 250 miles of
some of the roughest, most beautiful
jungle in the world, we decided to cele-
brate at the Royal Mulu Resort. It was
like entering a five-star longhouse, the
traditionally designed lodge perched on
stilts along the Melinau River.

Minus grime, I stood on the verandah
and thought about how far I’d come,
and how far this forest had come, a won-
derland of evolution now threatened by
the chain saw and voracious appetites
for chopsticks and furniture. Time is
marching on for the trees and people of
this forest, whose fates are inextricably
linked. With ours, too.

Karen Catchpole, a freelancer from New
York, tracked a man-eating leopard in
Nepal in the July 98 issue of ESCAPE.

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**Doing It**

**OUTFITTERS**

Seridan Mulu Tour and Travels, Miri, Sarawak, Malaysia, tel 011-60-85-414-3000, fax
011-60-85-416-066, e-mail: seridan@pdl.jaring.my; Outer Edge Expeditions, Walled
Lake, MI (800) 322-5235, (248) 624-5140; Foris Adventures, Oakland, CA (888)
GO-FORIS; Latitudes Expeditions East, San Francisco, CA (800) 580-4883.

**TRANSPORTATION**

Malaysian Airlines (800) 552-9264.

**FURTHER READING**

Modern: *Stranger In The Forest*, Eric Hansen, Houghton Mifflin; *Into the Heart of
Borneo*, Redmond O’Hanlon, Random House; *Voices From the Rainforest*, Bruno
Manser; *The Inside Story*, James Ritchie. Classic: *Through Central Borneo*, Carl
Lummolz (1920); *Borneo People*, Malcolm MacDonald (1958).

**WEBSITES**

Borneo Online: www.borneo-online.com/my
Outer Edge Expeditions: www.outer-edge.com/borneo.html

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