



River
transport,
the only
transport,
Limbang
River

**"a long walk through steaming, screaming,
coming-to-get-you jungle, complete with
primates, mud and leeches."**

Story and photos by Rob Greenaway

THE NINETIES HEAD H



BORNEO TO ME IS AS MUCH A CONCEPT AS IT IS AN ISLAND—A LAND LACED BY CANNIBALISTIC RIVERS DRAINING A DARK AND MYSTERIOUS CORE, LIKE THE VEINS OF A WARRIOR'S BLOODSHOT EYE.

Am I getting carried away? Not really—at least not if I wrote like many visitors to tropical rainforests did last century: trees as big as the Eiffel Tower, malevolent orang utans that would eat a traveller on sight, leeches that could lift their heads as high as a person's knee. All the adventurer had to do to see these wonders was to visit the hidden

interior of Borneo's jungle. They might even learn the truth—or something worse!

Although tropical rainforest and leeches were higher on my list than the truth *per se*, it didn't take much to get me on a plane to Sarawak, to the banks of the brown Baram River, and the bustling Malaysian town of Marudi. I met Kenneth, my jungle guide (a legal requirement for our destination) in this little riverside trading village. After a week in the two big cities of the state—Kuching and Miri—it was bliss to swap the assault of Asian road traffic for river travel. Kenneth had arranged a steel longboat to take us to the border of Gunung Mulu National Park where the company he works for, Tropical Adventure, runs a travellers' hostel. The park's attractions include the Pinnacles—fantastic limestone spires which tower above the trees, the world's longest cave system (they're still mapping Clearwater, for example, and already they've covered hundreds of kilometres) and its biggest under-

**Deer Cave,
in Gunung Mulu
National Park**



UNTER



Kenneth Awing wading river,
Gunung Mulu National Park

ground chamber which could hold 40 Boeing 747s without them touching, as well as a three-day trail through the rainforest, once used by Kenneth's ancestors to hunt for Murut heads.

Headhunting was one of the key elements of settling in Borneo. The Kayan, my guide's home team, were right up there with the best. Competition for land and a hunger for skulls encouraged the Kayan to hunt the Murut tribes, and the Murut reciprocated. They also decapitated the Bidayuh people, and the Bidayuh returned the favour.

In the longhouses, the women chanted their songs of truncation:

*Listen well, my little rice basket,
Grandfather's head hangs over the fire.
Go and avenge us:
Do not let us give you milk in vain.*

This exchange in heads continued comfortably in Sarawak until the Iban arrived in the 1600s from what was to become Indonesia. The Iban upset the natural balance because they were better at headhunting than most other tribes, and they forced many of the earlier settlers to escape inland. The first English settlers later used the Iban as a national army to eventually wipe out headhunting.

Kenneth went to school in a predominantly Iban area—a remote river settlement called Belaga. His school chums would send him running home by chanting, "Chop off your head, chop off your head". He later married an Iban, and an Iban longhouse in the depths of the rainforest was one of our main destinations.

I sat in our longboat nursing a frog

that I had discovered hitch-hiking in my pocket. The river had shrunk from a wide, slow stew of mud to a clear, tea-coloured series of shallow rapids. Each time the outboard struck gravel, making the sound of a teaspoon in a waste-disposer, we jumped overboard to push the canoe through the shoals, getting closer to one of the planet's largest perforations.

The entrance to Deer Cave—named to commemorate the good hunting once enjoyed near local salt-licks—was patrolled by the occasional insomniac bat. A veil of water droplets fell like slow-motion diamonds from the edge of a limestone massif towering some 200 metres above the

track. As we rounded a rocky corner the temperature fell a few notches from its humid 35 degrees Celsius and I was struck with the feeling of wanting to be the first person to have ever laid eyes on something this incredible. The cavity could have swallowed the Beehive and suffered no indigestion. One hundred and twenty metres above our heads hung an immense growth of bats, like a screaming, dung-dropping cover of lichen.

Further in, the cave twisted to the right and opened through a glowing lime-green veil of darkly lit rainforest. This second mystical entrance was named in a predictable manner by a team of British speleologists; The Garden of Eden, and two limestone extrusions gushing vast quantities of water from the cave ceiling; Eden's Shower and Adam's Shower. The cave mouth had been formed by a small river which drained the nearby jungle before disappearing underground, providing habitat for a cloud of silver semipalm and striped dangan fish. We dampened their appetites with the rice left over from lunch before I stripped off and swam through a narrow, dark gut to the cave's mouth, and stood without so much as a fig leaf in the Garden of Eden.

We left the rare coolness and headed off to prepare ourselves for the next day's trek. It was to be, I was promised, a long walk through steaming, screaming, coming-to-get-you jungle, complete with primates, mud and leeches.



Niah Caves



The express boat to Gunung Mulu on the Baram River

No one lied. I had decided weeks previously to allow my first blood sucking annelid to do its worst – to wriggle through my socks and drink its fill without hindrance, reasoning that this self-enforced blood-letting would leave me sufficiently relaxed to enjoy the rest of the rainforest. It worked too, and three months later I still had the scars to prove it. One leech is enough though, and I had no way of confining their interest to my ankles.

The glowing end of a cigarette had been in my mind's eye—a light touch to the leech's back and it would immediately curl up and drop to the ground, just like in the movies—but I discovered a few handicaps to this method. I don't smoke. Instead I used a borrowed cigarette lighter which left tracks of burnt hair as I chased the little suckers around my body. They wouldn't drop off until they resembled

overcooked French fries.

Within a few hours of mulching through the oozing forest I was casually pinching leeches from my legs, arms and underpants—as I had seen Kenneth do (and as every text had told me not to)—rolling them into little balls and flicking them into the jungle like pieces of dried snot.

Long-tailed macaques swung through the treetops and barking deer barked in the distance. Hornbills with rhinoceros heads creaked as they soared above the trees. Purple stick-insects flew lethargically from plant to plant, birds' nest ferns hung from the pit of almost every tree bough, and begonias sprouted along the edge of the muddy track. It seemed odd to see these plants out of their terracotta pots and in their native habitat, and I was keen to know their local names and natural histories. It was also an opportunity to ask more than,

"Does it bite?" and "Can I eat it?"
"Kenneth, what's this fern called?"
"That fern, at my longhouse we call it 'birds' nest fern'."
"What about this one?"
"We call that 'begonia'."

The trees weren't as big as the Eiffel Tower and the only plants I recognised had common names, but this was real rainforest: ancient, mossy, thick with life, and coming soon to a building site near you. Tropical rainforests cover 7% of the world's surface and contain 50% of its species. In just over six hectares of Borneo rainforest a botanist identified more than 700 different native woody plants. The whole of North America has about 170. New Zealand has 220.

We trekked further into the jungle and entered the territory of the Penan—one of the last nomadic tribes remaining on the planet. Although the Penan weren't hunting and gathering on the trail, we did locate an ipoh tree laced with drainage cuts. Penan hunters had bled its sap, which is mixed with snake venom to lace the business-end of blow darts. Strangely enough, the word ipoh means "Auntie" to the Iban, in whose longhouse we were staying for one night.

The longhouse is the original apartment block. At Bala Lasong the building is shared by 20 families. The flimsy structure stands on stilts, putting it above flood level but below the mosquito's maximum altitude. The design also allows little boys to pee out the front doors, between the bamboo slats which form the outside verandah floor, and onto the pigs which forage below.

We arrived in the late afternoon and were quietly welcomed by the community's mayor, the tuai rumah. His build was that of a man born to work in the sun without mechanical assistance—cracked, leathery hands and short, bowed and powerful legs.

He very politely invited us to be seated on the woven mats of the inner verandah of the longhouse. Evening sun filtered through a row of 20 doors spaced along the 80 metre length of the building. Men and women squatted in the fading light and went about their personal lives. The feeling of relaxation and welcome did not match the understanding that the community's survival depends largely on the work of that season—no insurance, no long-term investments (besides children)—and the unquestioning need for cooperation between families.

We chatted over a cup of black, sweetened tea. The tuai rumah smiled, revealing a row of gold teeth, and we smiled back. The tuai rumah's father-in-law also smiled. Tattooed on his arm was his name, date of birth, identification card number and the fact he had visited Brunei (where his son worked as an air conditioning engineer). I asked Kenneth for the tuai rumah's name, since it did not appear on his arm.

"It would not be polite to say," he replied. "Only very good friends use each other's names. I would call you 'friend' before I called you Rob, and you only call me Kenneth because you don't know any better. Call the tuai rumah uncle—'Aya'. Pretend you are related before you become a friend."

Aya spent some time debating with his colleagues, trying to decide which was the most appropriate chicken to feed us. A fat, clucking white hen trussed in blue twine was offered, but was quickly replaced by a wiry red animal that flopped on the mat between us. It was our job to dispatch the creature and its neck proved to be as wiry as its flesh. Spiced additions of bamboo shoot, fern, palm heart, beans and chilli added up to a fine meal, eaten cross-legged with glasses of sweet, young rice wine.

It proved difficult to respond to the hospitality of the longhouse. We had been welcomed as relatives. A small kerosene lamp was placed by our sleeping bodies in the night and mosquito coils were burnt specifically for us. We left awkwardly in the morning. I believed I had nothing to offer their community, and so sat in the canoe cruising downriver, coming to grips with the short interaction.

We were leaving a land which has given up head-hunting and instead collects signatures in visitors' books. Soon the longhouses will disappear as families settle in the growing towns



Bala Lasong Longhouse, basket weaving on the inner verandah

and cities throughout Sarawak, learning the skills of independence.

I was heading back to a land where head-hunting means getting a clandestine job offer. It's just not the same.

Bala Lasong Longhouse on Limbang River. L to R — Kenneth Awing, Tuai Rumah, Tuai Rumah's father in law



FACTFILE

I did a lot of preparation for the trip, much of it not well-directed. The anti-malarials seemed to work, and the water purification tablets meant I could fill my bike bottle (very necessary) from local streams and make it taste awful.

The insect mesh sewn into my sleeping sheet (no bag required) was hopeless as it was too hot to have any restriction of the airflow over my face and a laundry in Kuching turned the mesh into a clean dog's breakfast.

Leeches—you have to get used to them. You won't feel a thing. Do watch the first one do its job and let it go, otherwise you'll panic at every tickle.

Ticks always go for the warm bits

INDISPENSIBLES

- A tightly woven silk bag is best, since the biting insects can be extremely small. Take a good sleeping mat (and a repair kit if you've a Thermarest).
- Insect repellent is essential. It has to go everywhere.
- Take antibiotics. There is an antibiotic that is also anti-malarial and can be a good preventative for all sorts of infections—if you're there for a short time, worth checking out.
- Light, breathable, walking boots. Leeches get through the eyelets and socks and, like Winnie the Pooh, find it hard to get out again.
- **WHEN TO GO:** The rains come between October and February, but it's wet and warm the rest of the year too, so it makes little difference.
- **PLACES TO STAY:** Heaps of hotels and motels in major cities, all prices and many quite civilised.

For the longhouses contact Tropical Adventure, PO Box 2197, 98008 Miri, Sarawak, Malaysia. Ph: 0060 8241 3088 Fax: 0060 8241 3104

● **BOOKS:** *Into the Heart of Borneo*, by Redmond O'Hanlon (Penguin), *The White Rajahs of Sarawak*, by Robert Payne (Oxford University Press)

R.G

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