

Sabah's lost world

Threatened on every side by palm oil plantations and logging camps, Borneo's Maliau Basin is a vital rainforest refuge for 1,800 species of flora and a vast array of wildlife. Nick Ghosh treks into its heart.

Day One

Flying into Tawau anticipation was already building as I looked out of the window. The vastness of Borneo's wilderness was astounding, but as we approached the airstrip the encroachment of palm oil plantations highlighted the reserve's importance. Met at the airport by our guide Calixtus, it was a five hour drive, cruising past plantations until we reached Kalabakan and the edge of the reserve: from here we'd travel entirely off road.

Once inside the reserve our initial stop was at a superb canopy walkway and watchtower with views of the basin's endless expanse of emerald green foliage. It was almost dark when we arrived at Agathis Camp but after a leisurely supper we headed out on a night safari, spotting mouse deer, wild pig, and the rare banteng, a wild ox that is endemic to Borneo. Back at camp our bedding and mosquito nets had been set up in the basic yet comfortable bunkhouse.

Day Two

After an early breakfast we headed out for the first stage of our walk, the ascent to the ridge of the basin. This was to prove one of the toughest stretches, a gruelling 3.2 kilometre hike involving ladders, ropes and the unwelcome introduction of leeches into my life! Stopping to catch our breath Calixtus pointed out the strong musky smell in the air, a sure sign that gibbons were in the area. Twenty minutes later we heard the whooping of gibbons; our park ranger, Albert, pointed them out in the canopy, cavorting in a nearby tree before leaping like trapeze artists away into the thick foliage.

Along the ridge we walked through atmospheric heath forest, speckled with pink rhododendrons and colourful fungi. The snaking trail, flanked by pitcher plants and orchids was a lovely walk, gradually descending down to Nepenthes Camp. Set in a natural clearing, this was the perfect spot to rest over lunch. The afternoon was filled with trekking to the Ginseng and Giluk waterfalls, both gorgeous spots where we enjoyed a much needed break from the jungle, swimming in the natural pools and basking on the rocks.



Bearded Wild Pig



Nick with a Strangling Fig Tree

Day Three

Waking up to a glorious morning I climbed the 33 metre observation platform behind the camp. Built on a towering Agathis tree, the panoramic view of the early morning mist rising from the lush forest was spectacular, and the perfect way to wake up and enjoy the cool fresh air. The morning was spent trekking down into the heart of the basin, through mossy jungle dripping with carnivorous nepenthes plants into dipterocarp forest dominated by towering fig trees. An hour's gentle climb reached Lobah Camp, where we were rewarded with superb views of a self-contained Eden. Hemmed in by its sheer cliffs, this unique ecosystem where rare and endemic flora and fauna had thrived for millions of years was breathtaking to see.

The scramble down to the gorge was technically the most difficult part of the trek. A series of ladders, ropes and ledges meant that getting down to the falls was as tricky as climbing back up, but the steady roar of it was all the incentive I needed to keep going. As the noise of the waterfalls intensified we turned a corner, and were greeted with what must be one of the most spectacular waterfalls in Asia. Having rained during the night a huge torrent of dark water surged down the seven tiers, creating a fine mist that cooled us as we rested after the testing descent. We enjoyed our lunch, with a real sense of achievement at having reached our goal.

The rest of the day was spent making our way back up to the junction, keeping an eye out for any unwanted passengers that were hitching a lift and sucking our blood! Walking in the basin interior was never dull, with a constantly changing landscape across rugged terrain, creased with rivers and spectacular waterfalls. Trekking with Calixtus and Albert meant that every sight, sound and smell that assaulted our senses could be explained and made the trip even more rewarding. After a delicious meal cooked on an open fire by Calixtus I was exhausted and elated. Cocooned beneath my mosquito net, yet surrounded by the atmospheric sounds of the rainforest, I thought back to what was one of the most challenging and rewarding days I had spent in Borneo.

Day Four

Our final day was a relatively relaxed and easy nine kilometre trek back to Agathis Camp. The morning hoots of gibbons kept us company as we made our way on the final leg, and before we knew it the welcome sight of the camp greeted us. I jumped in the river, revelling in the cool waters and the prospect of being clean.

The forests within the steep walls we had climbed are some of the oldest and most unspoilt in the world, and as we drove back past the logging camps the importance of this area was driven home. A fragment of jungle that has survived the logger's chainsaws, the Maliau Basin is a worthy contender for the UNESCO World Heritage status it seeks. To be one of the very few that have explored the area was an immense privilege, and one that I will never forget.

Nick Ghosh
Borneo Specialist

FACT FILE

A ten night trip to Borneo, including return flights costs from £2,420 per person. This includes four nights in the Maliau Basin on a full board basis with private guiding, four nights in Kota Kinabalu and a two night stopover in Kuala Lumpur. For details please contact Nick, James, Vanessa, Jack or Sid on 01993 838 120.



www.audleytravel.com/borneo



Takob Akob Falls

