

Making Tracks: Researching the Mountains of Malaysia and Indonesia

Abstract

The project was originally conceived as a nine-week exploration of numerous mountain ranges in Sarawak (Malaysia) and West Kalimantan (Indonesia), both large regions of the island of Borneo. Given that there was little information on many of the ranges within the public domain, the aim was to climb as many peaks as possible to photograph and document them. This up-to-date information (including GPS waypoints) would be then made available to all, permanently, including flora and fauna conservation groups, local and international hiking clubs, relevant eco-tourism authorities and outdoor fanatics searching for information online.

Unfortunately the project was cut short due to a combination of factors mainly relating to budget issues. An unexpected and significant increase in Indonesian National Park entrance fees effectively made it impossible to visit all the areas in the original itinerary and remain within the budget. Additionally, logistics within Sarawak proved more complicated and expensive than anticipated. In combination, these factors badly affected my morale and the increasingly unviable project was brought to an early close.

Despite the shortening of the project, lots of worthwhile information has been gathered which will be of considerable use for future projects in the mountain ranges of Sarawak and West Kalimantan. This information is to be found in the following report and it is hoped that it may encourage further responsible tourism and thereby help conserve what remains of the primary rainforest in some small way.

Project Description

As editor of the Gunung Bagging website, which since its creation in 2009 has given details of many mountains and volcanoes across the Malay archipelago, I was in a rather unique position, already being well-known to many keen local hikers as a result of my many trip reports from remote areas.

As the only website of its kind, Gunung Bagging has been featured in many national and international newspapers and magazines and is a trusted source of information. This expedition was planned to constitute a significant continuation and major development of the previous five years of exploration and reporting from within Indonesia.

In preparation, I had already made two shorted visits to the mountains in West Kalimantan to assess typical terrain and make a preliminary logistics assessment. During July and August of 2014 I conducted several training sessions, including wild-camps, on the hills of the Outer Hebrides, Scotland.

I left my home near Stornoway on Saturday August 30th for Inverness, where I caught the train the following day to Edinburgh. From Edinburgh I flew with Turkish Airlines to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Upon arrival in Kuala Lumpur, I took an onward flight from the domestic terminal to the city of Kuching, the provincial capital of Sarawak. As it was already late at night I found my backpacker dorm room (at Threehouse, 51 Upper China Street) and tried to get some sleep.

The following morning, Tuesday September 2nd, I returned to Kuching airport and flew to Mulu, the airport just over one kilometre from the Gunung Mulu National Park headquarters. The first mountain to hike and document was to be Gunung Mulu itself, a mountain that is only climbed a handful of times per year despite a clear trail. I met a local co-hiker who wished to join the trek and had a briefing with the official guide Harvey.

Another restless night followed in the intense heat of the hostel within the park itself and then we were off, along with one local porter, towards the summit on the first day of a four-day hike. The forest was particularly alive with the sounds of rainforest insects and birds. After just one hour of hiking we would not see any other hikers despite Mulu Park being one of the top tourism destinations in Borneo.

We reached Camp 3 at just after 5pm after a long and tiring day climbing from very close to sea level. The temperature at Camp 3 (1,350m up) was very much welcome after the heat of previous nights and the exertion of the trek itself. The sky turned various delightful shades at dusk and we settled for the night.

Despite being woken my rats scuttling across the large hut everyone slept well and felt strong the following morning. The highlights of Thursday September 4th included finding several pitcher plants, the views towards Gunung Api, the panorama from the helipad just beyond Camp 4 and the sighting of a rare butterfly (...) at Camp 4 which was our resting place for the night.

The following day we were up early for a hike to the summit of Mulu itself. The sounds of gibbons lower down in the forest at breakfast time were particularly beautiful. It only took just over 2 hours to reach the summit from Camp 4 but the trail was very steep in places, with many roped sections. By the time we reached the summit ridge the clouds had descended so our view, whilst pleasant, was only of the surrounding vegetation and not of distant peaks. The endemic pitcher species (*Nepenthes Muluensis*) was seen near the summit, and we also spotted four snakes, all of the same

species (*Rhabdophis Murudensis*) near and on the top of Mulu. A hornbill flew just metres above us as we descended, first to Camp 4 for lunch and then on to Camp 3 to spend our final night in the forest.

Our fourth day was the easiest so far, with just 6 hours of trekking back to Park HQ where I spoke with some bird researchers from the USA.

The following morning, I flew to Miri where I spent the night. The next target was to be Gunung Murud, the highest peak in Sarawak, for which I had allotted 4 days of hiking from one side to the other. On Monday September 8th I flew to Bario, the largest town in the Kelabit Highlands and the place where I expect to be able to find some local guides. The view of Batu Lawi pinnacles was especially impressive from the aeroplane.

Unfortunately, there were very few local people in Bario and shops were boarded up. I only managed to find one potential guide but he was unable to provide me with sufficient specific details about the hike, the costs and the logistics. After several hours of waiting to hear further information from him or any other local guides, I decided that the trek would not be completed in the time I had allotted and that the cost of trekking to Bakelalan for my onward flight would be significantly more expensive than simply returning to Miri and continuing with the itinerary.

Then followed a rest day in Miri which was required after the disappointment in Bario. Unfortunately things declined still further as I finally received an email replying to my request for information regarding the cost of a permit to hike to Bukit Raya in Kalimantan. The email informed me that the permit fees for foreigners across all Parks in Indonesia had increased by several hundred percent. This cast serious doubt over the viability of the budget for the entire of the second half of the project.

My next target was Bukit Batu, the highest peak of the mysterious Hose mountains in central Sarawak. I had long believed this range to be the most inaccessible and there was very little information to go on. I travelled to Bintulu from where I continued on the Bakun Dam road to Belaga. My contact in Belaga was unable to give any specific information or suggestions on how to get to the base of the range, but an enjoyable evening was had there. The following day I arranged transport to a remote viewpoint on the old Belaga-Bintulu road from which in good conditions I might see Bukit Batu and the Hose mountain range in the distance. Unfortunately it rained heavily so no such view was possible.

The following day I travelled by public boat via Pelagus Rapids to Kapit, hoping to find further details on Bukit Batu. My requests drew a blank and my GPS informed me that the peak was around 90km away from Kapit (in a straight line), far further away than from Belaga. I decided that to get sufficiently close would require a very expensive expedition, potential along logging roads from Kapit, and which would not be feasible with my funds.

I then returned to Kuching by boat via Sibu, determined to have some success on three mountains local to the city. Once again, I had serious problems, as a guide never met me at an arranged meeting point, local bus services turned out to be in serious decline and therefore no good for a dayhike of Santubong as planned and there were no public transport options whatsoever to the Penrissen range.

All of these issues negatively impacted upon my state of mind and too much of the budget had been spent on accommodation instead of on guides and camping free-of-charge in the forests and there seemed no possible way to complete the itinerary without going into serious debt. By September 17th, and because of these factors, I decided to return to the UK early and make as much as possible

out of the information I had been able to collect, despite the many problems that were encountered.

Gunung Mulu

Bagging It

This mountain is the highest peak in the Gunung Mulu National Park which was declared a Unesco World Heritage site in 2005. Several attempts were made to reach the summit in the 19th century, notably by Spenser St John and Charles Hose. The first person to reach the summit was a rhino hunter named Tama Nilong who 'discovered' the south-west ridge in the 1920s. In 1932 Tama Nilong led Lord Shackleton and an Oxford University Expedition to the summit and the very same route is still used today.

Mulu Park is perhaps the number one tourist attraction in the entire province of Sarawak, so it may come as some surprise that the summit is reached perhaps only five times per year – usually by avid hikers or scientific researchers.

The usual trek to the summit with park guides takes 4 days and at present (2014) they do not normally allow hikers to attempt to complete the trek in less time than that. This is pretty sensible because the trail is 28km each way, it starts close to sea level, and there are lengthy sections of trail on Day 2 during which you lose elevation gains you have previously made.

Official Park guides are trained in First Aid, carry radios to speak to Park HQ staff on a regular basis and generally speak good English. You may be able to find guides from tour agencies or other operators from outside the park itself but the quality is not guaranteed and your safety may be jeopardised.

Whereas the lower peaks of the Mulu range, including Gunung Api and Gunung Benarat, are limestone, Mulu itself is formed of sandstone. The curiously-named Gunung Api ('fire mountain') is presumably so named because of regular fires being seen on its slopes over many decades including, according to Hanbury-Tenison's "Mulu: The Rain Forest", in 1968.

Given the other, more popular activities within the Park, it is recommended that you stay at least an extra day or two. The itinerary below assumes that you simply fly in the day before starting the hike and fly out the morning after getting back to Park HQ, thereby being the shortest itinerary under normal circumstances.

Day 0 – Arrive at Mulu National Park (usually by plane from Miri or Kuching). See below for 'Getting There' details.

Day 1 – Park HQ to Camp 3.

Day 1 is generally agreed by park staff, guides and the few that have actually climbed to the summit to be the toughest of all the four days so a good night's sleep the night before is essential.

Assuming you are staying in the Park, you will be having breakfast at the restaurant, which overlooks the Melinau river, from 7.30am. When you checked in previously you should have been given a breakfast voucher for you to use when selecting which choice you would like from the menu. Remember at this stage to buy gas canisters from the shop next to the restaurant for your cooking over the next three nights and four days. It is recommended that you take 1 canister per person per day and although you may well not use all of them it is better to take more than not enough. Canisters cost 13 Ringgit from the shop (2014). You can also buy any last minute snacks, including a packed lunch, from the restaurant and shop but the prices are higher than you would pay

normally and the options limited. Your guide should bring plates, cutlery and the actual cooking stove with him but best double-check just to be sure. Any heavy items you have with you that you do not need on the hike can be left with security near the entrance to Park HQ.

The elevation of Park HQ is around just 25m, so you have a hot and humid day ahead of you as you climb to Camp 3 at 1,350m. The first 30 minutes is along the raised wooden walkway as it heads south-east and then south from Park HQ. Just 5 minutes into the trek the walkway crosses over the Sungai Lupar (Lupar River). After 30 minutes you take a signposted left turn down off the walkway. Another 30 minutes and you will have reach Paku Waterfall (on the right side of the trail) which is an important junction (for those doing the 'Paku circuit' trek') and is a good place to stop for a short break.

There are several crossings of the Sungai Melinau Paku and after another 30 minutes you will be wading through a wide section of the river that is usually only 1 foot deep but could easily cause problems after heavy rain. If possible, consider wearing a lighter, smaller set of shoes (ones that you don't mind getting wet) as far as Camp 1 before changing into your proper, dry hiking boots. By this stage you are already past halfway to Camp 1.

A deeper, narrow river crossing (at 115m elevation) is required about 45 minutes later. This is likely to be 2 or 3 feet deep even in dry times. Another 20 minutes and you will be at Camp 1 (approximately 200m) – that's less than 3 hours in total from Park HQ. Camp 1 is the obvious lunch stop (for eating your packed lunch from the restaurant) and it is possible you will be other trekkers or scientific researchers here. Like Camps 3 and 4, Camp 1 has space to sleep around 15 people and has a basic toilet and food preparation area.

From outside Camp 1, if you look up you will see the top of a peak several hundred metres above you on the other side of the river. Apparently this peak, which we do not presently have a name for, was on fire in mid-2014 and required helicopter assistance to prevent its spread.

This is the last river – further up the mountain at Camps 3 and 4 rainwater is collected in tanks which you then have to boil before using.

After this point, the trail starts to finally lead you upwards rather than remaining down near sea level. Camp 2 (490m) is reached after 90 minutes from Camp 1. Don't be fooled by the name, however, as there is little here except a flat area where you could pitch a small tent. There is a small stream down to the right of the trail that could be used in an emergency but don't count on it during the drier months.

By this time you will have noticed lots of red and white markers along the trail. Most of these are on small metal plates but one or two are spray-painted on trees. This is helpful but in actual fact the trail is pretty clear throughout. There is also a sign near Camp 2 which lets you know that you have so far hiked 7km of the total 24km to the summit. It's still a long way to go. Look out for sun bear markings on trees in this area (ask your guide to point any scratch markings out).

Depending on your speed it will take you another 3 or 4 hours from Camp 2 to Camp 3 (1,350m) and if it rains you are likely to encounter many leeches during this section. The temperature at Camp 3 is delightful for most Westerners but your local guide might find it a little chilly at night. Just above the impressive hut on the right side is a flat area that was presumably used as a helipad when the shelter was originally constructed. It's a nice place to watch the sky change colour at dusk but you won't get any panoramic views.

Tall hikers might be advised to take care in the cooking area as there is a beam that is at the perfect

height for bashing one's head on. Before going to bed, make sure you have hung your food up on the nails. Rats will probably visit at night and are likely to go through bags left on the floor, especially if there is any food in them.

Day 2 – Camp 3 to Camp 4. Sometimes to summit depending on weather and hiking speed.

This is another demanding day but significantly shorter than Day 1. Given what has been written about rats above, it is wise to boil your water this morning rather than the previous night just in case of contamination by rat urine. Not long after setting off you will start to be rewarded with some rather good views towards the shapely peak of Gunung Api (which has an elevation of 1,710m). There are several steep sections of trail here as you ascend through moss forest and up slippery rock. Some parts are steep enough to have had ropes attached to make things a little easier.

From an elevation of around 1650m you will start to spot a few small pitcher plant specimens – *Nepenthes Tentaculata*. These increase in number as you get higher up the mountain and are larger specimens of *Nepenthes Lowii* and *Nepenthes Muluensis*. The views back to steep cliffs near park HQ and the airport runway beyond are impressive.

The trail begins to flatten out to what feels like a flattish ridge. In actual fact you find yourself descending more than ascending over the next couple of hours, clambering over muddy logs and making slow progress. Tall hikers or those with large backpacks will struggle on this section. However, there are more good views on the left of Gunung Api and neighbouring Gunung Benarat (1,615m elevation) between which lies the Melinau gorge. A couple of mud wallows next to the trail look likely to have been ideal spots for rhinos ('badak') to have lived many decades ago. Sadly, it appears that there are now none left in Sarawak.

Finally you will be delighted to have made it to Camp 4 (1,795m). It should have taken you between 4 and 5 hours to get up here from Camp 3 so probably still early afternoon. You are now about 1.8km (in a straight line) from the summit of Mount Mulu.

Depending on how you and the rest of your team feel, and after making an assessment of the weather, you could possibly continue on to the summit today, before descending again by nightfall and making your Days 3 and 4 significantly shorter. Most hikers will be happy to have an afternoon rest and watch the butterflies around the hut. Indeed, the chances of clear views from the summit are usually greater during the morning than in the late afternoon so it may be wise for that reason not to summit on Day 2 (but it does all depend on various factors you will have to discuss).

There are quite a few harmless yet persistent bees around Camp 4 and these bees seem to especially like the sweat of Westerners. Don't be surprised if your socks are covered in bees just minutes after you take them off! Best wash yourself well here so that they aren't too attracted to you.

You will also notice a bit of graffiti inside the hut by previous hikers and possibly an old snake skin or two in the roof beams. Apparently during rainfall some of the snakes that live up in this part of the forest may enter the building. It makes sense to check first and block any holes in the floor boards with your bags. Alas you won't be able to block with wide doorway itself but the snakes are not likely to come looking for trouble during the night. There are also squirrels who might come looking for food so, once again, keep your food bags tied up to nails if possible.

Just two minutes further up the trail from Camp 4 is an excellent open area originally used as a helipad during the construction of the hut. This is by far the best viewpoint on the trail so far and therefore a great place for photographs, especially at sunset. You can also be happy in the knowledge that some of your gear will not need to be lugged right the way to the top of Mulu the

following morning and therefore you will be travelling lighter beyond Camp 4.

Day 3 – Camp 4 to summit and back down to Camp 3. Sometimes down to Camp 1 if summited on Day 2.

Listen out for gibbons lower down in the forest at breakfast time. The sound is wonderful. From Camp 4, the trail gets near-vertical in places with several roped sections and at one point a ladder to make aid your ascent. After an hour, at around 2065m there is an excellent view to the right of the trail and from here you will spot the pitcher plants *Nepenthes Muluensis* and *Nepenthes Lowii*. The former was originally thought to be endemic to Gunung Mulu but has since been found on other mountains in Sarawak. This is a likely spot to hear, or even better see, the magnificent hornbills.

Do be careful in this area as there are many frogs (you will of course hear them) and these frogs are what the *Rhabdophis murudensis* (Fire-Lipped Keelback) snakes feed on. We saw four keelbacks on the way back down from the summit and it is not known just how serious a bite is as little research has been done and few bites have been recorded. To be on the safe side, assume that a bite could be very serious indeed. Despite the daily radio contact with Park HQ this is a very, very remote area and the last place you want to have a medical emergency to deal with. Therefore walking sticks might be a good idea here. These snakes are encountered in mountaineous areas in both Sarawak and Sabah and it gets its name from Mount Murud where it was first discovered.

You should have reached the summit in about 2 and a half hours from Camp 4. If you are lucky, you will have a wonderful panorama to enjoy and photograph including Gunungs Api, Benarat and perhaps the more northerly Gunung Buda (963m). If you are like most hikers, you will probably catch a few glimpses of distant peaks through the swirling clouds. The summit has a couple of plaques including a memorial to the grandson of Tama Nilong and a Conquering G12 Expedition from April 2009. There is also an antennae for radio signal use across the entire mountain range. Once again, look out for the keelbacks as they slither around in search of mountain frogs.

It should take about 2 hours to descend back to Camp 4 for lunch before the tough work of getting back down to Camp 3. It may only be 3 hours or so back down from Camp 4 to Camp 3 but it could feel a lot longer as you ascend for a considerable proportion of your 'descent'. If you summited the previous day then presumably you will either have reached Camp 3 by noon and had a relaxing afternoon or else continued down to the hot and humid Camp 1.

Day 4 – Back to Park HQ.

From Camp3 back down to Camp 1 should take around 3 or 3 and a half hours depending on your speed. Camp 1 is the obvious place for a lunch break, but you and your guide may be keen to get back to 'civilization' to have a proper shower, change into dry clothes and enjoy a more interesting meal at the restaurant after 3 nights in the forest. It's up to you to decide on this. Fast hikers can reach Park HQ in about 2 and a half hours from Camp 1 – but remember than you have a couple of river crossings to negotiate.

Day 5 – If you have been staying within the Park, for example at the hostel, check out on the morning of departure is by 10am.

Bagging information by Dan Quinn (hiked September 2014, written October 2014).

For further information on the history of the park, read 'Mulu: The Rainforest' by Robin Hanbury-Tenison.

Getting There

The Park is best accessed by plane as there are daily flights from the coastal city of Miri and several flights per week from Kuching. It is possible to travel overland but this will take at least one full day from Miri. Flights are very affordable at present (2014).

Accommodation

At Park HQ (and just outside it in privately-owned homestays) there is a range of different accommodation types to suit different budgets but all of these need to be booked well in advance. Both budget and luxury accommodation is available outside the park boundary. On the mountain itself, there are large wooden huts with rainwater tanks and basic toilets at Camp 1, Camp 3 and Camp 4, meaning that taking a tent with you is not strictly necessary (although it may be of benefit as a precautionary measure). You do, however, need to take a sleeping bag, mat and your own First Aid kit.

Permits

You need to book in advance, especially during June-September when the Park is full with tourists. A booking deposit of 500 Ringgit needs to be made to confirm the reservation in advance. A maximum of 15 people (including guides and porters) are allowed to stay in each of the huts because of the size of the huts and also in order to minimise the impact on the surrounding vegetation. The cost of the hike (including one guide, hut accommodation and cooking equipment) is 475 Ringgit based on a minimum of 3 participants. If there is only one hiker it will cost 1425 Ringgit. Cost of a porter varies from 300 Ringgit (75 per day) to 400 Ringgit (100 per day) (2014). Confirm the price in advance on more than one occasion (i.e. with Park staff and with the porter). If taking a porter you will need to pay an additional 45 Ringgit to the park office for the porter staying in the mountain huts. Cashback limit is set at 300 Ringgit per day and there is a 2% charge. Best bring enough cash with you to what is a remote area.

Water Sources

The last reliable natural source of water is at Camp 1 although rainwater tanks are in operation at Camps 3 and 4 for which you will need to boil the water first before using it.

Trip Report

Mulu summit was the first target on my series of planned hikes in Sarawak. I flew in to Mulu from Kuching – a lovely flight but as expected you only need to look out of the window when flying over much of Sarawak to see the devastation that logging and palm oil industries are having on the environment. Thankfully, Mulu is a different story, with any such activities only going on at the very fringes of the Park area. Mulu airport is tiny, as you might expect, and with the other ten or so tourists I was offered a seat in a car to the Park entrance, crossed the bridge over the river and found Mardhiya, a Malaysian hiker who would be joining the trek and, later, Harvey the guide.

The cafe has an excellent and diverse menu – better than any other National Park cafe I have visited – however prices are a fair bit higher than back in Miri or Kuching due to the remoteness of the location.

I found it tough to get to sleep that night as I was still acclimatising and the fans in the 'Independent Hostel' don't do much to keep the temperature down. We set off at 9am along with Patrick, our porter. The sounds of the rainforest symphony become increasingly impressive as you get further

away from Park HQ and, once you get beyond Camp 1, you will probably not see any other people on the trail.

I was struggling with a large backpack in the incredible humidity and heat to which I was still acclimatising and it can be a huge relief when we reached our place for the night, Camp 3 at just after 5pm. My leech socks did a brilliant job keeping them off my skin – there were plenty about during a rain shower mid-afternoon. The temperature at Camp 3 was delightful and I expected a decent night's sleep. Unfortunately, the scuttling rats disturbed us a little!

The following morning – a nice, clear morning, we put on our day clothes back on (still soaking wet with sweat from the day before) and left just before 9.30am after preparing some new drinking water from the rainwater tank. For this kind of multi-day trek it is vital to keep your day and night clothes strictly separate so you always have something dry to change into in the evening. Your day clothes will stay moist whatever you do about it, but it doesn't matter once you get going on the trail again.

It is only now that you begin to get some views of neighbouring peaks in the Mulu range, and this is great reward for what is a steep start to the day. We reached Camp 4 by early afternoon and a rare butterfly landed on my socks. Storm clouds were gathering but the view from the helipad beyond Camp 4 was superb and dramatic. From there, you get an excellent, clear view of the rest of the trail and the summit beyond. It certainly is a steep finale the following morning.

Despite the concerns about snakes entering Camp 4, nothing untoward occurred that night and we were back on the trail by 7.30am hoping to get a reasonable view from the summit. It's a good job you don't need to take all your luggage with you for this section as the ascent is often awkward and, without the ropes in place, some sections would be treacherous.

Further up, beyond 2000m elevation or so, you start to see plenty of *Nepehtes Muluensis* – what was previously thought to be an endemic pitcher. We made it to the top in 2hr 15min but the clouds had already moved in thus limiting our views. The highest reading I got on my GPS was 2385m which is within the margin of error for the official 2376/77m published height for Mulu peak.

The summit ridge is covered in frogs – difficult to see but impossible not to hear croaking near-continuously. Harvey pointed out a snake to us – a snake which feeds on the frogs. It looked to me a bit like the Redneck Keelbacks I had seen in Hong Kong. Five minutes later and Harvey had spotted another one, though he couldn't tell us the name of it or if it was dangerous. “Consult the guidebook!”

There is some unusual graffiti at the top including 'Bintulu Ballbreaker' scrawled across the small radio hut! This is something to do with the Hash House Harriers apparently.

On the descent I spotted two more of the same species of snake sunning themselves on the trail at around 2,065m where you have a open view of lower down forests to the right (left on the way down). With the help of a Facebook snake identification group I later found out that these were indeed part of the Keelback genus – this one is *Murudensis* or Fire-Lipped Keelback. Take great care not to get bitten.

We spent about eight hours hiking that day and my feet were much in need of drying out when we finally got back down to Camp 3. My favourite meal of the trip was chicken noodles (minus the flavouring) mixed with a small tin of baked beans (both available to buy in the Park HQ shop in small quantities).

The following morning we didn't meet any leeches whatsoever on the way back down, presumably because it was so dry underfoot. At around an elevation of 380m, I spotted a very bright red tail end of a small snake disappear under leaves – the red colour exactly the same colour as a tree blossom also on the forest floor.

Not far beyond that we met a research assistant from Louisiana State University – David Bernasconi. He had been at Camp 1 for several nights and showed us a particularly impressive – though headless - cicada.

We were keen to get back to Park HQ for a more interesting meal and a decent wash so our stop at Camp 1 was a brief one. The dall and roti in the restaurant tasted particularly good that evening. One disappointment was that our porter requested 400 Ringgit, 100 Ringgit more than the figure given in email correspondence with park staff. I asked park staff about this but they wouldn't take responsibility for it, simply saying that they were as surprised at the increase as I was. So it seems porters are setting their own charges now, and this can differ from porter to porter, so be sure to check not only with office staff but with the actual porter himself.

This unexpected price increase became something of a theme throughout my project.

I chatted to another researcher, Ryan, about my plans and the mysterious Hose range (Bukit Batu). He showed me a photo of a Hose's Broadbill, a bird, like the mountain range, named after British zoologist Charles Hose.

With it being Saturday night, many in the park were getting absolutely plastered on local tuak and making quite a racket outside the hostel. Not me – I was exhausted and needed an early night in preparation for my trip to the Kelabit Highlands and Gunung Murud.

Gunung Murud

Bagging It

Mount Murud is the highest peak in the Kelabit Highlands and, indeed, the highest peak in Sarawak. It is part of the recently-created Pulong Tau National Park although at present there are no Park facilities or anywhere near as many travellers as you would encounter in Mulu National Park. The first known successful ascent was in 1922 by Dr. Eric Mjoberg, a Swedish naturalist and then curator of the Sarawak Museum. Another curator, J. C. Moulton, had tried and failed twice previously to reach the summit in 1914 and 1920. Since 1985, Murud has been the 'venue' of an annual prayer pilgrimage organised by the International Revival Meeting.

There are two routes up the mountain, and although getting to either trailhead is quite difficult, there are regular flights from Miri to the highland towns of Bario (also spelt Bareo) and Bakelalan (also spelt Bakalalan or Ba' Kelalan) . Despite its considerable height, the mountain is not climbed regularly and arranging guides can be difficult and time-consuming (especially for solo travellers) unless you want to pay a premium by booking an expensive tour online.

Both Bario and Bakelalan are very close to the Indonesian border and there are actually permitted trekking routes which cross over the border (but you are not able to get an official Indonesian visa here and must return to Malaysia afterwards). The eastern slopes of Murud itself are technically in Indonesian territory although the regular trekking routes do not pass by here.

Apparently September is a good time to see rare orchids in bloom on the mountain.

Based on the available information, Bario (1,085m) ought to be a better starting point as it is the largest town in the Kelabit Highlands (and even then more like a village) so you would expect there to be more potential guides available. During my visit, guides were very few and far between, and despite a couple of very encouraging maps of the area (at Bario airport and at Nancy HARRISS homestay) I would recommend several spare days to find reliable and knowledgeable local guides who are actually available for what is a multi-day expedition.

The alternative starting point is Bakelalan, a smaller town than Bario and, from what I could gather, more expensive guides (200 Ringgit per day in 2014 according to a contact). All guides are supposed to have an official ID card proving that they are reliable and know the area. During my stay in Bario, I met only one potential guide and he had neither an ID card nor was he able to answer adequately my queries about how long certain sections of the trail would take.

Whether you start in Bario or Bakelalan, unless you are returning to the same starting point, you will have to pay any guides and porters and extra two days of wages for the time it will take them to walk back from Bakelalan to Bario (or vice versa). For most single hikers – or even many small groups - this can put considerable strain on one's budget. Groups of 4 or more are likely to find an ascent of Gunung Murud more affordable and within one's means.

According to one internet source, Bario-Murud summit-Bakelalan (or vice versa) can be done in 4 full days but you will need a minimum of six free days to allow for flying in at one end and flying out at the other. This account will describe starting in Bario and finishing in Bakelalan, and given my comments regarding difficulty finding a guide, please note that it is based on local and online research rather than personal experience on the actual mountaintop. Please also bear in mind that a 4-day traverse is likely to entail 4WD at either end – preferably booked well in advance.

Day 1 – Bario (or Pa Lungan) to Long Rabpun.

This is a long day that some guides will try to make you split into two by way of an overnight stay at a longhouse in Pa Lungan. Assuming you fly in to Bario on a morning flight, I would recommend either ensuring with your guide that you can cover the distance from Bario to Long Rabpun the following day or else make your way to Pa Lungan the day that you arrive from Miri. Pa Lungan is apparently the best place for guides on the Bario side of the mountain but they may be busy when you arrive if you have not made arrangements in advance.

Allow 5-6 hours from Bario to Pa Lungan. This trek goes via Pa Ukat. 30 minutes beyond Pa Ukat take a right at the fork in the trail. It makes sense to aim for a lunch stop in Pa Lungan. 30 minutes beyond Pa Lungan you will reach an abandoned airstrip. The trail follows to the left of it. From this point watch out for leeches on your footwear and legs. The pitcher plant *Nepenthes Stenophylla* and rhododendrons grow in this area. The trail leads steeply up to a ridge and then down the other side to Long Rabpun. *Rafflesia* have been reported on this section of trail. In total it should take 5-6 hours from Pa Lungan to Long Rabpun, therefore 10-12 hours in total for Day 1 (unless you can arrange transport to Pa Lungan from Bario, or else stay in Pa Lungan the previous night). Long Rabpun is the site of a former longhouse attacked and used as an Indonesian army shelter. This shelter is often used by local hunters and lies on the banks of Pa' Dabur river. It has a bamboo roof so you should be able to manage without a tent however the roof may be in bad condition so best bring at least a tent sheet.

Day 2 – Long Rabpun to Camp Halfway Up.

There are no less than 6 river crossings after Long Rabpun (2 of which can be hazardous) so after heavy rainfall an extra day waiting for the level to lower may be required. Rapung river is first to be crossed – not too tough. Further on is another hunting shelter at Pat Liuk. The main river in this area is the Ulu Dapur which the trail crosses 3 times.

The 'Halfway Up' camp is at around 1,750m above sea level and you'll need a tent here. There is a small stream available 10 minutes from camp but in general the site is regarded as less pleasant than Long Rabpun. Day 2 is likely to entail 8 hours total hiking and please note that there are no reliable water sources beyond this point on this side of the mountain range.

Day 3 – Halfway to Summit to Church Camp (AKA Reked Meligan).

The steep trail offers good views but the dense, mossy vegetation requires scrambling and crawling occasionally. Apparently 7 species of pitcher plants grow on these higher slopes of the mountain, as do several orchids. There are lots of steep drops and holes so take extra care. It takes around 5-6 hrs to reach the summit.

In very clear weather Kinabalu can be seen but unlikely at lunchtime (you need an extra day to allow a night camping here for early morning views). At night the lights of the Brunei coastline can be seen. There's a blue sign 'Buduk Murud' at the very top, several rusting fuel drums and an ammunition box left by the British Army near the summit.

From the summit it's approximately 3 hours down to Church camp (roughly 2,000m above sea level) via the Rock Garden ('Kebun Batu') – a beautiful area of boulders and small, bonsai-like trees. Church camp is considered 'holy ground' so you are not supposed to drink alcohol or smoke here. There are 80 huts, a toilet and a church for pilgrims (1000 capacity). The pilgrimage happens in July so you might want to check online so you can avoid the dates otherwise it will be very busy indeed.

Day 4 – Church Camp to Bakelalan.

The first hour of the day is a hike up to a ridge. Then it's an hour and a half along the ridge before descending to a timber track and Pa' Rabata stream. Another hour of ascent follows before meeting another logging road where a right turn leads you into the forest. From here it's 2 and a half hours down to the Kelalan valley. It's preferable to arrange transport to collect you on the logging road so you get to Bakelalan before dark. The trailhead on this side of the mountain is Lepo Bunga (roughly 1,000m). This section of trail is a plank walkway in disrepair, but apparently being replaced with metal to allow for easier access to Church Camp each July.

The population of the Bakelalan area is 1200 across 13 villages, the largest of which is Buduk Mur with 300 people.

Getting There

The best method is to fly from Miri into either Bario or Bakelalan in one of the tiny 18-seater turbo prop planes on the 'Rural Air Service'. It takes about 50 minutes and the view of the huge, vertical rock fingers of Batu Lawi seen from the left side of the plane is fabulous. Have your camera ready. There are 3 flights a day to/from Bario and 3 flights a week to/from Bakelalan. There is at least one flight per week from Bario to Bakelalan. Because of strict weight limits on these small aircraft you are only allowed 10kg checked luggage and 5kg hand luggage. You will also be asked to stand on a set of scales in order to weigh yourself. If your luggage is just a kilogram or two over you may be asked to pay an extra ringgit per kilogram (although this does depend on how full the plane already is and you could technically be refused). The alternative to flying in is a slightly more expensive and much more time-consuming 4WD trip from Miri to Bario and vice versa which takes the best part of a day (approximately 150 ringgit per person for the 12 hour journey along logging roads). It takes roughly 30 minutes to walk from Bario airport to the centre of the village/town. For getting to the trailheads you either need a lot more spare time (at least a half-day on either side) or else enough money to hire a 4WD at either side. Unfortunately ojek (motorbike taxis) are not common here (unlike in nearby Indonesia).

Accommodation

Normally, you shouldn't have any problems finding accommodation in Bario or Bakelalan (though it is best to avoid or simply book ahead for special holiday dates). Given my problems in finding a guide in Bario, I would recommend NOT staying at the Nancy Harriss guesthouse simply because I didn't get very far Murud-wise when I stayed there so best try somewhere else for the time being unless you have booked a guide in advance. Some of the better places may well be further out of town. Bear in mind that electricity only comes on at around 6pm (until 6am).

Permits

You may be asked to sign a foreign visitors book at Bario airport. At present it appears you do not need an official hiking permit to climb Murud. However, you are supposed to take an official local guide with you (he should have ID for this) who will register your plans with local village representatives so that they know where you are going and when to expect you back.

Water Sources

Ask your guide for further details.

Trip Report

Unfortunately my planned hike of Murud fell apart before it began. Hopefully my trip report will

point others trying to do similar how they might increase their chances of success.

The previous night I stayed at a guesthouse opposite Miri airport so I would have a short walk over to board the plane the following morning. I was a little worried about the weight of my luggage and had been doing what I could to dry it out as much of my clothes as possible to reduce the weight. After standing on the scales at Miri airport I was told the weight was fine.

Having previously researched Murud and found a fair bit of information online I was confident I could complete the trek in 4 days, with one day either side to fly in and out of the Kelabit Highlands. The only treks that it seemed possible to book in advance were immensely expensive and for large groups. The Lonely Planet mentions one which is 1500 Ringgit per person with a minimum group of 4. So that's 6000 Ringgit, about 1140 Pounds Sterling, just to get started. Naturally I expected to be able to arrange a far more reasonable price in the local area after talking with local guides and explaining that I was not with a large group but on my own. Over the border in Indonesia (just a few kilometres from the Kelabit Highlands) you can almost always arrange a fairly priced hiking trip there and then, last minute, instead of paying over the odds in advance. My mistake was thinking it would be as easy to arrange such a trip in Malaysia.

The flight itself makes a trip to the Kelabit Highlands worthwhile. On a lovely 18-seater twin otter 'Pratt and Whitney Dependable Engines' written on the side you will get some amazing views over some of the most remote areas of Sarawak. You need to be sitting on the left side for the best views but, given that lots of goods are transported this way and their weight is in lieu of some passengers, you may well find that there are a few spare seats on either side of the little plane.

The first thing to look out for is the Mulu range – seen from a very different angle and of great interest, especially to those who have perhaps just been trekking in Mulu Park. It is an immense area, and the summit peak looks even more remote from above, surrounded by endless forest, than it feels standing on top of it.

After you have passed Mulu, next up is Batu Lawi (2,040m) – sometimes spelt Batu Lawih locally – a fantastic twin rock pinnacle on top of a mountain. The lower 'female' peak can be climbed as part of a 4 or 5-day trek from Bario but the taller 'male' peak requires expert rock climbing skills and ropes. Just to the rear of Batu Lawi is Gunung Murud itself.

There is no door between the passengers and the pilot so you will see the whole approach and landing. Bario airport is a nice, peaceful little spot, feeling very much in the middle of nowhere. The temperature up here at over 1000 metres is very pleasant. The local Bario rice and pineapples are much sought after.

There were a couple of other tourists leaving as I was arriving but other than them I didn't meet any others. There are several places to stay in and around Bario so I decided to walk into town and have a chat with whoever was around and find a place to stay based on what I could find out from local guides.

The town itself – village really – was exceedingly quiet – all the shops were shuttered and there were very few people around. Later I found out that they were all working in the fields at this important time of year, but it was quite a surprise as I have read reports of guides actively approaching tourists to propose treks in the area.

The first sign I saw for a homestay was the Nancy Harriss, so I strolled to the house and had a chat with the friendly Irene, a former Mulu guide. I told her my intention to climb Murud and she said she knew just the chap to be my guide, an experience local guy. Things were looking up so I

checked in for the night and waited for this guide to appear. The cost was 70 Ringgit for the room including all meals. Nobody else was staying there.

The homestay is owned by one of Tom Harrison's local relatives. Tom is famous in the local area – he and his men parachuted into this area during March 1945 as part of a military exercise by British and American troops to encourage locals to stand up and fight against the Japanese. There is a monument to Tom on the outskirts of Bario and he went on to become one of the best sources of knowledge of wild areas of Sarawak during the 20th century.

At the homestay itself was a very encouraging map of the local area, with trekking routes between villages and up Murud clearly marked. The guide didn't appear during the first couple of hours so I took a walk back into the village to see if I could buy supplies ready for the hike and have a chat with locals so I had a plan B guide ready. Unfortunately, the only shop I could buy anything from (I.e the only shop that appeared open) had little except bottled water and very basic snacks and it was being looked after by young children! I would have to wait until later.

I continued along the road to eBario where I hoped to check my email. This, too, was closed. As luck would have it, the guide Irene had mentioned actually found me in the street. Unfortunately he didn't seem confident about getting to the summit, especially not in four days, couldn't tell me how many times or if he had climbed it before, and couldn't propose a price for himself and a porter to form a team. Neither could he arrange transport to Pa Lungan the following morning, something which would be more or less essential to completing the traverse to Bakelalan in four days. His own price would be 120 Ringgit per day. Not cheap, but certainly cheaper than the 200 Ringgit per day that guides allegedly charge over in Bakelalan.

Unconvinced, I asked him to come to the homestay after he had found a porter and got a full price for the trek and found out about the possibility of transport to the trailhead. Back at the homestay we would be able to finalise our plans with the additional use of the map on the wall.

He never returned and Irene was also out all day, so I basically stood around or paced about waiting for news, unable to find anyone else in town with any information, and keen not to upset anyone by simply heading off for Pa Lungan myself the same day. In hindsight, I should have tried to get to Pa Lungan the same day I arrived instead of staying in Bario.

In the meantime I read about Bruno Manser, Swiss rainforest and human rights activist who lived with the indigenous Penan tribe for several years. He went missing in May 2000 on his way to climb Batu Lawi near Bario. Many people assume that he was abducted and murdered as 'revenge' for his encouragement of blockades to prevent further logging in the area and his publicisation of the environmental devastation that the Sarawak state government's support of widespread logging and palm oil plantations was having.

The Penan tribe were particularly badly affected, being evicted from their traditional areas with little or no compensation. The problems continue to this day as the logging areas grow and grow throughout Sarawak. Anyone flying over Sarawak need only look out of the window on a clear day to see the devastation, with logging roads criss-crossing huge areas of land and immense grid-like formations of palm oil plantation. Reading about Bruno Manser probably didn't help my feelings about where I was staying.

By nightfall, the electricity finally came on and Irene returned. I asked about the guide and said we had not fixed a plan or been able to buy any supplies for an early start in the morning. Things just weren't panning out and, having been standing around alone waiting for news or trying to get some information and getting nowhere, the day had been a very frustrating one. Even if the guide had

returned I felt unconfident about him leading a multi-day trek from a safety point of view as much as anything.

Additionally, I was due to fly out from Bakelalan 5 days later but given the lack of information and the cost of just one guide, let alone a guide and a porter, and the unlikelihood that it would be possible now that our preparation time was almost over, I decided to, instead of pay 480 Ringgit for the guide to just take me to Bakelalan forgetting Murud summit (and then for him to return to Bario) it would be better to simply return to Miri by plane the following morning for the standard 117 ringgit. My feelings had changed considerably and I wanted to get out of there.

The following morning I gulped down my coffee and walked back to the airport just after first light, keen to see if there was a seat on the first plane back to Miri. I was in luck, disappointed to have failed on the mission but quite honestly pleased I was leaving Bario. It's interesting how seemingly small decisions can alter the course of your project in significant ways. I daresay if I had found myself at a different homestay on the other side of Bario things may well have turned out very differently and the trek would have gone ahead. Who can tell?

To conclude, if you want to hike Murud, allow a week if you fancy trying to arrange things yourself in the local area. Even if you can find a decent guide, he might not be available until the following day, or even the day after that. If you are part of a large group and have plenty of money to spend then you might aswell book a tour in advance with an online agent.

Bukit Batu

Bagging It

Bukit Batu was first summited in December 2014 by a team including nepenthes (pitcher plant) expert Alastair Robinson. There are very occasional researcher trips to the Hose mountain range, presumably via remote logging roads from Kapit.

Getting There

The two main towns in the immense Batang Rejang region are Belaga and Kapit. Belaga is accessible by daily 4WD from Bintulu (4 hours, call Daniel Levoh to reserve a seat) or by boat from Kapit when the water level is high enough. Kapit is just 3 hours by boat from Sibu and there are several boats each day. In a straight line, Belaga is considerably closer to the highpoint of Bukit Batu than Kapit, but according to one source, logging roads from Kapit are the best bet of reaching the foothills of the Pegunungan Hose (Hose mountain range).

Accommodation

In laid-back Belaga, Daniel Levoh's guesthouse is the obvious place to stay. There are several adequate hotels in the unattractive and industrial town of Kapit and the New Rejang Inn gets the best reviews at present.

Permits

You may be required to obtain a permit from the Resident's Office 2km out of Kapit if you enter from the Sibu direction and especially if you continue up the Batang Baleh river which looks like a likely route towards the foothills of the range. In reality it is unlikely you will be asked to present your paperwork, but for those spending several days in this remote area it may be worth getting your permit.

Water Sources

Unknown, assume none.

Trip Report

I made countless enquiries about this mysterious mountain range several months before arriving in the area. Very few had ever been there, and the few who had actually had conducted wildlife expeditions to the range remained rather tight-lipped about all of the logistics but did find it implausible that anyone had reached the true summit before. It certainly isn't a mountain that many, or any, local hiking clubs visit.

One adventure company manager was very interested in joining me on this, with a view to offering a new itinerary to his clients. This was excellent news, as the lack of information and supreme remoteness meant that the costs of just getting to the base of the mountain would prove expensive and time-consuming. Even at this early stage, this range always seemed to be the one that I would have the lowest chance of actually getting to the top of.

A number of weeks prior to the planned expedition dates, the adventure company manager got back in touch to say he was quite busy and would be sending a colleague in his place. And then,

following on from that, it turned out his colleague might not be able to make it either. And then the correspondence stopped and that was the end of that and it was obvious I would be alone on this one.

Daniel Levoh of Belaga was very helpful with his emails, even if he couldn't help me with the actual task of finding anyone who had hiked in the range. He suggested maybe staying in a Kayan longhouse near Bakun Dam but I was needing something more concrete such as the number of endemic species that may have been lost is impossible to ascertain.

I arranged with Daniel to be picked up in Bintulu for the 4WD journey to Belaga. This journey was a real eye-opener, with large areas of land being burnt in order to make way for palm oil plantations. Once off the main Bintulu-Miri road and onto the 100km-plus Bakun Dam road, the scale of logging and palm oil industries became sadly apparent, despite the backdrop of attractive hills. The air was filled with smoke and large areas of forest graveyard lined the modern highway to the controversial dam itself. There is a lot of money being made here.

It was around this time that pitcher plant expert Alastair Robinson got in touch to say he had been to the Hose range on more than one occasion and the way to get there was via logging roads near Kapit. Just a few weeks later in December 2014, Alastair was part of a research team who were probably the first to have reached the true summit of Bukit Batu.

7 kilometres before Bakun Dam is the right turn to Belaga, a further 34 rollercoasterish kilometres. Much more scenic now, with many small mountain ridges in all directions. I wasn't feeling great – toothache and a bit of a cold.

First impressions of Belaga were very positive – it seemed clean and cared for and relaxed, although quite frankly most towns would seem nice after the totally unremarkable Bintulu. The population of Belaga is around 4000, according to Daniel Levoh, the very friendly owner of the homestay. His wifi signal is surprisingly good too for such a remote town. Three German girls were staying too so it was fun to have a good chat after a few days of conversational solitude.

I took a walk down to the riverside, as the sky turned a lovely shade of red. The only food you'll find in Belaga is fairly basic, but it does the job. I checked my GPS and found that Belaga was just 70m above sea level and that Bukit Batu peak was over 50km in a straight line from the town (south). As Daniel's wife smoked local tobacco roll-ups (no additives) we sipped on some rice wine which takes apparently 6 weeks from start to finish to produce. Downstairs a barbecue was starting, with local wild pig as the meat of the day. We then got started on a bottle of '35% ginseng whiskey' – another local treat that most people found hard to swallow!

Given that an approach to the mountain range via the Bakun Dam appeared the only obvious route to take from this side, and that such an approach would likely require various permits, I decided to head to the more probably starting point of Kapit, but not before I had at least gotten a glimpse of the range from here.

I asked Daniel about a viewpoint in the vicinity and he knew exactly what I was looking for. Indeed, a Czech guy had had a similar request some time ago and he had taken him to a spot on the old Belaga-Bintulu road now unused. That would be the trip for tomorrow, and given it was only 10km or so out of town, it could be done fairly easily.

Unfortunately, though, there was no possibility of an 'ojek' or motorbike taxi to this place, despite the short distance. This was apparently because the road is too rough. Indeed it was, as I soon found out, but it cost me 250 Ringgit for a short drive to the viewpoint and back – very expensive indeed.

Unfortunately the weather was poor when we arrived and although we could glimpse Belaga a few hundred metres below, there was no chance of seeing Bukit Batu in the distance. Whether or not it can be seen from there is uncertain, though it is roughly the right direction to be looking in.

At this time I was following the Scottish Independence debate with great interest – just a few days til the vote itself. The next day I had breakfast and boarded another boat at 7.30am to Kapit. This boat service is daily, but relies on the water level being high enough in the Batang Rejang. Cost of a ticket was 50 ringgit and it took 4 hours total to Kapit although it takes 5 coming the other way as it's upstream.

After several minor stops at hamlets in very remote areas we approached the infamous Pelagus Rapids, a stretch of fast-moving water with boulder at awkward places. It's not easy to navigate and accidents have occurred here, more recently in 2013 when one of the local boats was overloaded with passengers. We were lucky, but you can see why British colonial governors and more recently Malaysian authorities have used explosives to remove some of the more tricky rocks to create a safer passage along the river.

At one beautiful moment, two hornbills flew high above us crossing from one side of the river to the other. The forest appeared in reasonable condition until we neared Kapit when either side transformed into an empty wasteland after logging.

Kapit itself was a very industrial and uninspiring place and nobody I asked could help me on the question of getting to Bukit Batu.

The onward journey was from Kapit to Sibul in a similar boat, but this time not one you could stick your head out of to take photographs or admire the view. It was 3 hours to Sibul on one of several daily services (25 Ringgit per person).

Despite what the Lonely Planet guidebook suggests, it is not easy to purchase onward tickets for the boat service from Sibul to Kuching until the morning of departure. I stayed in the pleasant Li Hua hotel which had a decent restaurant but was totally unimpressed by the city itself. Heavy rains lasted several hours that evening.

The ferry to Kuching leaves daily at 11.30am and takes about 5 hours which is significantly faster and more interesting than taking the bus. Best purchase your ticket early the morning of travel, especially if you want a seat in the small air-conditioned section (55 Ringgit). Note that the ferry may leave a couple of minutes early and that the air-con is set very high to 'arctic' levels. The speed of the boat is impressive and after a couple of hours of cutting round mangrove islands and logging warehouses we were out on the open sea heading straight over to Kuching. I sat outside for almost the whole 5 hours although it was very hazy indeed.

Penrissen

Bagging It

Mount Penrissen is on the Indonesia-Malaysia border but the highest point appears to be in Indonesia. It is close to the Borneo Highlands golf club and is one of the most accessible peaks from Kuching on the Malaysian side.

Getting There

Unfortunately there is no public transport to the area so you will need to hire a car and driver for the day(s) for perhaps 300 Ringgit per day.

Accommodation

Plenty available to suit all budgets in Kuching.

Permits

As of 2014, Borneo Highlands Resort charge 220 Ringgit (per person) for a guide for the dayhike to Penrissen summit. Contact Janetta Hazel hazel@borneohighlands.com.my

Water Sources

Unknown

Trip Report

I arrived into Kuching from Sibu feeling fairly fed up with how the project had been progressing. Success with Mulu but only some preliminary information and photos for both Murud and Bukit Batu. I was hoping things would change in the Kuching area with Penrissen, Santubong and Pueh/Rumput.

I fancied trying Santubong first – a sharp 810-metre peak just 30km from Kuching on the Damai peninsula in what was declared a national park in 2007. There are two starting points – Checkpoint 2 is at Bukit Puteri and is slightly higher up so can shave an hour of your hiking time compared to if you start your hike further on at Green Paradise Seafood which is presumably Checkpoint 1. I thought it might be nice to start at one trailhead and come down to the other, thereby getting a good understanding of different parts of the mountain. There seems to be some confusion over entrance fees with some sources stating 8 ringgit per hiker and others suggesting that an owner of Green Paradise is overcharging hikers who try to access the mountain via 'her property'. By all accounts the trek is steep involving ladders and roped sections.

Some tour operators in Kuching offer this day-trip but it's 170 Ringgit per person and you almost certainly need a few people signed up or else it won't be worth their while. Given that the K15 bus from Saujana bus terminal only takes 45 minutes each way and appeared to be a regular service I figured I could do it myself on a budget. So I went shopping for water and snacks for my day out the next day and was looking forward to finally using my hiking boots for hiking again.

I got up the following morning at 6am and trekked over to Saujana bus terminal. Saujana is not especially pleasant or orderly, with buses turning up on various streets and no way of knowing where you should wait unless you ask at the information desk that doesn't open until 8am. The 7am

bus on the timetable back at the hostel never showed up. I consulted the boards at Saujana. 7.30 – another half an hour, that's ok. 7.30am came and went and still no bus. Finally at 8am the desk opened and I made enquiries. It turns out that these Santubong bus services have been halved meaning that the first bus of the day is not until mid-morning. There would not be an early bus again that week, or perhaps for the foreseeable future, therefore making the plan of a dayhike starting nice and early to beat the high temperatures and humidity down near sea level rather more difficult. A word of advice on this – don't trust the timetables even the ones on display at the info desk as they are wrong. Why they still have incorrect information displayed is a good question that staff were not able to answer! So, it meant either finding others interested in hiking with me to share the cost of a car and driver for a day or else starting late in the day and not being sure of when the last bus might be coming back. It was disappointing.

Disappointment followed disappointment as I discovered that there was absolutely no public transport for Penrissen and that the price for a guide from Borneo Highlands resort which is at the main trailhead would be 220 Ringgit per person for just a short dayhike. Combing the high guide cost with the need to hire a car and driver for a full day from Kuching meant that this again was going to negatively affect the budget. How could ordinary hikers enjoy these places except by having local friends to help them or by hitch-hiking?

Rumput/Pueh

For Rumput/Berumput – or Pueh as it is known over in Malaysia – I had little information to go on but one contact at an adventure travel company in Kuching asked to meet so we could discuss a 3-day trek to the peak with one of his guides from the local area called Manshur. I was ready to ask him all the usual questions and took some extra money to prepare for paying a deposit. Well, I waited and waited for this contact to meet at the arranged place and he never arrived, even late, and never sent a message until the following day to try to negotiate a second meeting. With lack of reliability like that, how can one trust such an individual to organize a 3-day trek?

As with all multi-day treks in Sarawak, the cost is likely to be prohibitively high for ordinary travellers who are on their own or even in a small group. Your best bet is perhaps to try asking in Lundu.

You could try Manshur +60 138448726.

Otto Steinmayer who lives in nearby Lundu notes that in the 1860s the naturalist Odoardo Beccari climbed Pueh and spotted Rafflesia (very famous at Gunung Gading nearby).

Bukit Raya

Bagging It

This mountain is the highest peak in the Schwaner range and indeed the highest peak in Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo). The summit is known locally as Puncak Kakam. It is located in the Bukit Baka Bukit Raya National Park. You need a permit from the Park Office in Sintang (Jl. Dr. Wahidin No. 75).

Getting There

From Pontianak to Sintang you can take a 9hr bus (Rp135,000) or shared car or Kalstar flight (Rp650,000). From Sintang to Serawai is an 8 hour journey by speed boat and costs Rp350,000 per person. Note that Serawai is the last place for supplies i.e. food. From Serawai to Tontang is a 45 minute speed boat ride which costs Rp70,000 per person. Tontang to Rantau Malam is a 2-hour ojek (motorbike taxi) ride costing roughly Rp300,000 per person. Rantau Malam to Pintu Gerbang Batu Lintang is a 3 hour walk. And finally Batu Lintang to Bukit Raya summit is 4 days up, and perhaps 3 days back down again. All in all, starting and ending in Pontianak, you will need 2 weeks to complete this expedition. Note that these are 2013 transport prices and are likely to rise substantially by the end of 2014.

Accommodation

Plenty of hotels in Pontianak. A small number of options in Sintang. Serawai – unknown but likely to be basic losmen.

Permits

In 2013, porters cost Rp75,000 per day and guides Rp150,000 per day – very reasonable. It is customary to have a traditional ritual prior to starting the hike called Ngukuih Hajat which costs Rp300-400,000 for chicken, rice and various salad leaves. This is for good luck on the hike. You need to arrange a hiking permit, preferably done in advance by emailing Ivonne at bukitbakabukitraya@gmail.com You will be then asked to complete and send a short form with info about yourself, including 'purpose' and 'method' (this area is more typically visited by scientific researchers rather than ordinary hikers) and a photocopy of your passport photo page. You then collect this permission letter ('surat ijin / SIMAKSI) from the Sintang park office. Unfortunately, the price of admission to all National Parks throughout Indonesia have just been increased by several hundred percent and as a daily rate. Foreigners currently have to pay Rp150,000 per day per person for being within the park (and Rp225,000 if your dates fall on a public holiday). There is also a trekking fee of Rp5,000.

Water Sources

Unknown

Trip report

I had been hoping to hike this in October 2014 until I heard the bad news about the huge increase in the cost of entrance permits for foreigners at all National Parks within Indonesia. Altogether, if you want to complete this hike as a foreigner (without a KITAS) you are looking at paying well over Rp1 million just for being there, before the cost of guides, porters, food and transport and so on.

Appendix I – Why the Expedition was Shortened

No expedition of this type can be expected to run entirely according to the proposed itinerary, but whilst this one began well it turned into a series of considerable disappointments. I would like to take this opportunity to look at some of the main reasons why it was not as successful as anticipated.

First and foremost, I found that there were few ways to climb several of the peaks on an economical budget. It became apparent during the second week that the budget was not going to cover the trip and I personally did not have sufficient back-up funds to be able to continue until the expected project completion date without going into serious debt.

This problem had two main identifiable causes. Firstly, my own assumptions that I would, as a solo traveller and as a speaker of local languages, be able to find local guides for a more 'reasonable' price than I had seen quoted for larger tour groups on the internet.

Secondly, the unexpected increases of several hundred percent for all Indonesian National Park permit prices which could not have been anticipated and have come as an unpleasant shock to many working within the tourism industry in Indonesia. When this information was discovered via email correspondence with an Indonesian National Park (Bukit Baka Bukit Raya in West Kalimantan) it was clear that the project would not be able to be completed as envisaged.

Knowing that the budget was insufficient presented a serious problem, namely that if I could not be camping on the mountains as many nights as planned due to money issues then I also would not be able to afford alternative accommodation for those very same nights meant that serious changes would need to be made.

After a string of additional problems with guides not appearing for scheduled meetings and lack of public transport in Sarawak (and hence extra funds being required for private car hire) my morale was very low and I decided to return early with the information I had found thus far and work towards a report of both the good and the bad aspects of the project.

My suggestions for future projects of a similar nature would be as follows. Firstly, if you can find others who are interested in joining you on hiking trips in these regions then form a team with them. Prices which seem astronomical to the solo traveller are much more manageable in small groups.

Secondly, expect the unexpected such as sudden price increases. For example, the Indonesian government recently increased the price of a tourist visa with little or no warning to tour operators. Naturally this led to considerable problems with clients when they were asked to pay an additional fee to cover this. Without sufficient additional funds, lengthy projects such as this one can collapse when fees are increased. It is a shame, but without extra spare money available the risk of having to return early are increased.

Thirdly, when an expedition appears to be jeopardised it is important to get in touch with your sponsor to discuss any possible avenues that may be open to continue as best as possible. I regret not doing so until I had returned.

Finally, have a rest day if you feel that problems are mounting. A few hours of rest and you may find a solution to your problem. Unfortunately this didn't help in my case but may have done had the problem been of a different sort.

Appendix II – Thoughts on Hiking Tourism in Sarawak and West Kalimantan

Having travelled quite extensively in Borneo I have experienced 'being a tourist' in many different hiking locations, both popular destinations and those almost unheard of. Here are my thoughts regarding hiking tourism in Sarawak and West Kalimantan.

Sarawak

For solo travellers, most of the mountain hikes in Sarawak are simply far too expensive due to the high cost of guides. One clear reason why more tourists do not climb to Mulu summit is that it is significantly more expensive to complete than shorter itineraries.

My experiences in the Kelabit Highlands indicate that, despite maps in Bario and detailed local knowledge held by local people, finding a reliable guide on the ground may require extra days. This causes all sorts of problems for tourists who have a limited time-frame in which to accomplish a goal such as climbing to the summit of Gunung Murud. At present there appears to be a 'gap in the market' for a local Kelabit Highlands website to offer a series of treks at more reasonable prices than those advertised online by agents working out of the large coastal cities of Miri and Kuching. The poor public transportation available in the Kuching area is quite shocking. Not only do bus services appear to be dwindling, but timetables appear to be unreliable sources of information (such as was the case for my attempt to reach Santubong). Without appropriate investment in a decent local transportation network around Kuching, solo travellers are once again left unable to visit places without incurring the very high costs of car and driver hire.

In contrast, the cost of flights within Sarawak are very attractive indeed, and it makes getting to remote highland regions very straightforward.

West Kalimantan

Whilst the cost of local services in Kalimantan are slightly higher than most other regions of Indonesia, the prices are still low for most tourists, whether it be the prices of local hotels, guides, food or transport. With more promotional literature, there is no reason why wonderful spots in West Kalimantan such as Bukit Kelam and Gunung Niut cannot become much more frequently visited. The huge increase in National Park permit fees brought in throughout Indonesia during 2014 is the most significant threat to increased hiking tourism. This issue is dealt with below.

Appendix III – The Implications of New Indonesian Forestry Department Regulations

I first heard a rumour in late August, just prior to commencing my expedition, that entrance permits for Gunung Leuser National Park in Aceh, Indonesia, were to increase to either Rp150,000 or Rp250,000 per day for non-Indonesians. There was no information as to when this would begin but likely soon, so my source informed me. Considering that it can take ten days to reach the summit of Leuser and return, such a sum would very likely double the costs for hikers in the local area.

During my expedition I finally received word from Bukit Baka Bukit Raya National Park that I would have to pay in excess of Rp1,000,000 in order to be permitted entry to the area as a foreign person and complete the multi-day trek. Prior to this, staff were unable to give me even a vague figure so it was with considerable shock and sadness that I received this information as it would have a serious impact upon my own itinerary.

Once back in the UK, I conducted further research on this new Department of Forestry regulation which is slowly being implemented by all the different Parks throughout Indonesia. I found considerable local objection to this regulation, including an online petition from guides and tour operators in Bukit Lawang, North Sumatra, and a complaint letter from 4 large travel organizations including Indonesia Guide Association (HPI) and Association of the Indonesian Tour and Travel Agencies (ASITA). It is clear that numerous tourists will change their plans when they hear about the substantially increased fees and this will have a very negative impact on the salaries of local guides and others in the tourism industry.

The price increases are certainly significant. For example, whereas previously a hiker wishing to complete the 3 or 4-day traverse of Rinjani in Lombok would have to pay an entrance fee of Rp150,000, the same entrance ticket now costs Rp750,000 (for a 3-day hike) or Rp1,000,000 (for a 4-day hike). I even heard a rumour that foreigners were asked for an additional Rp250,000 to use a camera or Rp1,000,000 for a video camera in Gunung Baluran National Park in East Java.

Whilst a small entrance permit increase might be justified by cleaner parks, increased basic facilities (such as toilets) it remains to be seen if this price increase will have any positive effect on problems such as the large amount of litter (left mainly by local hikers) in popular Indonesian National Parks. The amount of money collected in fees at Gunung Rinjani were certainly adequate for staff to either send out a small team of rubbish-collectors or else create an awareness video to encourage responsible camping. In actual fact, the majority of the money collected appears to have gone straight to the Forestry Department in Jakarta. It will be of great interest to see how things develop over the coming months and years in this regard, assuming that the new regulation is not overturned.

The issue of differential pricing is worthy of an entire thesis of its own. The practice of charging non-locals considerably more than locals is widespread across Southeast Asia. Whilst the average foreign tourist does have more disposable income than the average local person, it is my view that such a pricing strategy encourages division between local people and tourists and perhaps even furthers unhelpful stereotypes such as that of the 'rich Westerner' and the 'poor local'. It can be difficult to form genuine bonds and friendships when one 'type' of visitor pays ten times more than another 'type'.

A much more positive approach might be to suggest that those who are able to further donate towards the National Park make an additional financial contribution of their own choosing when leaving the Park, having had – hopefully – a wonderful experience.

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Daniel Quinn, January 2015.

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