

Chinese New Year 2004

A trekking trip through *Belum Forest*

by Robert F. Krause



## Belum Forest Malaysia

Wednesday, 21st January 2004

It is the day before the Chinese New Year of 2004, which will be the year of the Monkey. Michael our guide for the trekking tour to Belum forest picks us up at 14:38 hours. We start directly from our work place in Cheras, Kuala Lumpur. We are four of us, Katharina our engineer trainee, Andreas our young planning and design engineer, myself Robert and our guide Michael Manivannan. The day before we have already packed our 55 l back packs and Michael brought all camping gear like tents, hammock and outdoor cooking stuff for the trip.

We set out of KL in Michael's van, direction Ipoh and the first stop we make at Kellie's Castle. Scotsman William Kellie Smith was a late 19th century rubber tycoon. He shipped in Tamil workers from South India to build his fanciful Moorish-style mansion, and, following an outbreak of fever, allowed them to build the Sri Maha Mariamman Hindu temple in the grounds, about 500m from the castle. Therefore an image of Smith is among the sculptured Hindu pantheon on the temple roof. The castle was never completed as Smith left in the middle of its construction and died in Portugal on a business trip.



Our drive on the south north highway is more or less quite. Andreas and Katharina are talking all the time about their study times. Michael tells us about India, where he comes from, his family origins and what point of view he has today about India and Malaysia.

At 7:00pm we stop again for dinner at an Indian restaurant on our way to Gerik. We eat some Rawa Tosey, a sort of rice flour bread together with some mutton, stewed turkey and various vegetables. Actually we already love Indian food and eat it frequently in KL city, but to eat outside in a small country village is much better, since the meals are not accommodated for the citizens and the tourists. So you get the full Indian taste and all various spices with it. It is just delicious.

We drive in the night; the road is in relative good condition. It is quite -, here and there some fireworks, the Chinese New Year the year of the monkey is starting and the Chinese people are celebrating. I always enjoy driving in the night in Malaysia with all its colourful shop signs and advertisements along the little town roads. In the late evening after 10:00 we arrive in Gerik, the relative starting town of our tour. We move into the “great wall” hotel and before falling

into bed we have a beer in a small shop nearby. We talk about people of different nationalities, and how easy or difficult it is to deal with them. Michael has some first hand experience with it, in his job as a trekking tour guide.

Below: *Our relaxing boat cruise on Tasik Temenggor and the landing at camp site 1 .*  
Opposite Page: *Kellie's Castle*





### Thursday, 22nd January 2004

**5**:45 am. We start from the little hotel; it is still deep dark night. We just have a stop for our favourite Indian “roti chanai” breakfast and at around 7:00 we reach Banding island, just right for the sunrise above the large man made water reservoir of Temengor lake. We have to wait for the boat men who mixed up the appointment at the lake. Time or punctuality is never an issue in Malaysia - so be it. No pain for us, we look at the nice early morning scene above the lake and watch the light play with the shadows of the night and swallowing them bit by bit.

Finally around 9:30 we load the boat with our camping stuff, food rations and personal belongings and set out on the lake. The boat trip is quite enjoyable. The drive wind makes the otherwise hot and humid climate very pleasurable, almost mediterian like. We look at the fascinating green jungle walls around the lake shore and we see a native in his timber boat, who has run out of petrol for his out boarder. We help him out with some fuel and set off for our first camp ground. Just before lunch we arrive at the camp ground, which is just in far view of a small orang asli

village. We meet “Na”, the chief or elder of the village, who is sitting on a big stone and seems to enjoy the sight of the funny tourists arriving at his place. It is actually a very nice place at a river mouth, with a lot of butterfly and dragonflies flying around the flowers on the river shore.

We are setting up the base camp with our 3 person tent for Katharina, Andreas and myself, the hammock for Michael plus flyover. A kitchen table is made by the orang asli guides from spliced bamboo sticks. Before we prepare the lunch we still have to cock our chicken to make it durable for the next few days as a meat ration. For lunch we still have some roti and chicken curry bought earlier in Gerik. The sky suddenly becomes cloudy and we better prepare for rainfall. Just cleaning up the camp a bit and put our things underneath the flyover. Katharina is washing the dishes in the river and suddenly we hear a sharp but distinctive cry from her, immediately followed by the shattering rumpling of falling tin pottery. First fishing out our precious aluminium pots (slightly dented) swimming by in the river, we look out for Katharina. She is OK in principle, just hurt her toe badly but not so bad that



## Belum Forest Malaysia



Above, clockwise starting from left: "Na" the elder of the Orang Asli village. Andreas with the blow pipe and the construction engineers after building the bamboo landing bridge.

Previous Page: *The village children, not sure whether to be shy or not.*

we have to fly her out or make any kind of emergency toe amputation, - just a mishap.

I'm going for a swim. Thought of catching a fish with my self-made bamboo spear, but no success – the sight under water is not clear enough, not comparable to diving in open sea. Have to eat chicken la. But the water is refreshing, clean and cold and it washes away the sweet and the dirt of the day and the city – not only physically but also mentally.

We have some tee in the afternoon and a sort of invasion of fisherman at our campground. They setting up their camp near our place and bring a lot of stuff with them, even a small generator and an electrical extension cord. Seeing this, we have our doubts about Eco-tourism and whether the Belum Forest will stay for long a pristine rainforest as it is now.

The first day of our trip is quite easy; we enjoy the peace of the jungle site, the river scene with native women washing their clothes. We have a nap in the hammock and getting accustomed to the climate and rid ourselves from the hectic of Kuala Lumpur's working live.

In late afternoon we cross the river and go up the hill to the orang asli village of our hosts and guide people. We meet the native people in their village, which is still absolute original. Build only with materials the jungle is providing, which mostly is bamboo and some leaves or straw. We try our self's in blowpipe shooting, not very successful, but it is just for fun and we are more interested in making some nice photos from the village live. There are some curious children around, which become a bit shy, but not too much to be missed out by my camera.

The way back to our camp, we make on the lake by a bamboo raft. It is just a couple of 3inch bamboo sticks bound together, forming a longish rectangle. Paddles are just spliced bamboo sticks as well, seems everything can be build out of bamboo. We have a lot of fun on the raft. Katharina is trying to be the steering women, Andreas the rowing man and myself as commander. We sing some typical seamen songs, remembering just the first few lines of the text and scaring away some of the fishermen with it. Arriving with our raft at the riverbank of our camp, we can not



Clockwise from bottom left: *Camp 1 in the early morning hour. Katharina cooking a delicious dinner. Andreas slipping from the bamboo bridge and saving his camera and our guides taking a rest in a river crossing.*



hide that we are all construction engineers since we use the raft to build a bridge from the elevated shore to some stones in the river. This is quite comfortable for our morning and dish washing; we don't have to go through the mud now anymore. Just our orang asli guides are a bit confused about it – we are the first tourists they have seen, building a bridge instead of playing with the raft. Maybe we are the first construction engineers in this part of the jungle. (For the suspicious reader: we have not brought any concrete or heavy excavation machinery with us. The jungle is still intact, no dams or heavy roadwork done!)

At around 6pm we start preparing the dinner. We are peeling and slicing the vegetables and Michael is cooking in his Indian style with lots of ginger, garlic and curry. Meanwhile the campsite is infested with fisherman and another very large trekking group, not what we have expected, but during Chinese New Year everyone is looking for some out of town activity. Next morning we will go to our second campsite which will take us far away from the other groups.

#### Friday, 23rd January 2004

**T**he night was quite OK, just the usual background chatter from the other tents. With large groups you never get it totally quite at night. The Muslims of the other group were even up at 5am for their morning prayer. It is surprisingly cold in the morning, much colder than in KL city. At eight we get up and have a long extensive breakfast with beans, sweet corn and toast. It takes us a long time to clear the camp, which is naturally the backside of our luxury outdoor cooking approach. We have also a long discussion about how to do the morning toilet. Especially Katharina is a bit uncertain of how and where and if not at all. It is not so easy in the jungle with all this little creepy animals around – just imagine one of this tiger leaches attacking you during your most secret part of the morning toilet in the middle of some jungle bushes, but I do not want to elaborate further at this point of the story.

We set out for our first trekking part to camp 2. First we have to cross the river and we send Katharina first

## Belum Forest Malaysia



Left: *Blossoming Rafflesia flower.*  
Above: *The first river crossing at camp 1*  
Opposite page: *walking along a hill side in thick jungle flora*

rive at camp 2.

After the first river crossing we walk a bit through the jungle and coming soon to the next river crossing. Contemplating the possible number of river crossings ahead and the hassle of putting my shoes off and on all the time and also evaluating the imminent danger of bruised toe's during barefoot river crossings, I decide to give the heck on dry shoes and just walk through the river with my nice leather boots. Katharina is doing the same, only Andreas who has real heavy alpine boots is taking them off again. We walk pretty fast and having already some jungle experience from my mountain bike hash trips in Malaysia I do not much care about the wet shoes.

The trek goes fast and very interesting, through various always changing parts of different vegetation. We see bamboo forests, big fern and huge rainforest trees. We go through several river crossings and I'm happy to use my mono pot as walking stick, which gives me additional support on slippery ground. But one thing

with her damaged toe (still not amputated), giving her plenty of time to cross the river slowly and safely. Second is Andreas and he is the first to slip and crash from our bamboo bridge into the river. Desperately he is holding up his new digital SLR camera and sacrificing other parts of his trekking equipment. Now we have two fellows with damaged toes. Andreas one is even in red colour. Already happy that I had my camera on standby, when Andreas crashed into the river, I'm looking enthusiastically forward to some "in jungle toe emergency amputations" when we ar-



for sure – the leaches are a nuisance to me. Katharina is walking in front of me, stirring them up and then they launch there full attack upon me. In some areas I can stop every 5 minutes, pulling or burning a couple of leaches of my legs. They are not harmful just ugly. The leach bite keeps bleeding a while, due to the chemical the leach is injecting when biting and it looks meaner than it really is. At one of the river crossings, where we take a rest, I put off my shoes and have four leaches on my foot, having their meal of the day. They even find their way into the shoes, incredible but we have to live with it.

Before we reach camp 2 we see a Rafflesia, the biggest flower of the world, which is very lucky, since the flower needs about nine month to grow and then is only blossoming for a couple of days. After 3 to 4 hours trekking we reach our camp 2, again on the river shore and it is just time for lunch. So first we set up our usual bamboo table and Michael is preparing some fried noodles for lunch. After lunch Andreas and Katharina are falling flat dead into the tent, while I continue to write my travel diary. Michael gives me one of his Indonesian cigarettes; they look almost like a joint, no filter and very rough paper. The taste is good, with menthol, which makes the taste appearing

mild, but actually it gets deep into the lungs giving a strong kick. I enjoy the tobacco while writing. Our guides and porters are improving the camp, setting up their hammocks, clearing the ground a bit and preparing the night fire place. If I look around, I see only jungle. OK that was expected – but there is absolutely no human impact on it, it is just virgin jungle around 130mill years old – no fire, no logging, only rainfall and sunshine for millions of years. To realise that, gives a very special feeling and I think it is a privilege to be here in the middle of the pure nature and I can almost see tigers and elephants behind the thick green walls surrounding me.

Dinner is again an exquisite experience of Michael's Indian cuisine. Michael is teaching Andreas how to cook curry chicken that he can prepare it later for his friend's home in bitter cold Germany. We have lots of veggies and bamboo rice. The bamboo rice is prepared by our porters in their original way. They cut some bamboo stick to about 50cm length; they roll the rice in some special leaves and put then the riceroil into the bamboo stick. Some water on top of it and placed into the camp fire it becomes nice steamed and tasty rice, after half an hour or so. After lunch we sit with our usual cup of tee and discuss the toilet busi-

## Belum Forest Malaysia



Clockwise from bottom left: *Healthy jungle rations all day. Black spider just before breakfast and Andreas practicing Indian stile cooking.*

*Opposite Page: Our guide taking a rest at the waterfalls*



ness again. The problem has increased, since the area of our campsite is invested with leaches and every time I go out for a pee, I come back with one of the bloodsuckers on my leg. Andreas has even one on his foot sole.

Before going to bed, I make my last round for the small business. Careful for not catching any leach I choose my place around 20m off the tent place. One swing left and one swing right and our territory is marked. Is there something in the bushes nearby? Ah I don't think so, tired I go back to the tent and prepare

for a quite and cosy sleep, after all the day was physical quite demanding and we are all a bit exhausted.

After a couple of minutes I hear the others talking quite agitated outside around the tent. What is going on? Have Andreas and Katharina some problem with their toilet business or what? I'm tired and I don't care much, but when my colleagues come into the tent and telling the story I'm not so tired any more. Katharina was on her way to the toilet when something big was jumping from one place to another, somewhere in front of here. Andreas was nearby with his torch-



light pointing the light in the direction of the jumping noise. He was seeing some eyes, clear and white, fixed on him. First he wanted to investigate further, but Katharina changed his mind and they went back to Michael and the guides. They followed the description of Andreas and went to the place with some burning logs from the fire place. No animal found but from the description of the eyes and the traces in the bushes the guides become very quite and looking worried. Michael says it was most probably a tiger, no much doubt about it. Only a tiger has clear white eyes in the night and behaves like that. Aaahhh a tiger beside our camp and just at the place where I had my pee a couple of minutes before – seems we are getting the full and complete jungle program. The guides are making immediately a big camp fire on both sides of our site. They are very agitated.

Back in the tent we chatter a lot about it, making our jokes about it actually. We discuss how to deal with the tiger, whom he will attack first, Katharina is sleeping on the outside of the tent I'm in the middle and Andreas on the other side. Will he eat all of us? Maybe we should sacrifice on of us – sleeping outside as first bait? We come to all kind of strange ideas and laugh heavily about it. I recall the film "Predator"

with Arnold Schwarzeneger fighting an alien hunter in a similar jungle environment, losing all of his crew members before he is able to kill the alien with a small nuclear explosion. Shit we have no nukes with us, we don't even have a gun like Quaterman or a big knife like Crocodile Dundee, only a Swiss pocket knife – will it be enough for our tiger? Ahjaaa – we are lost. Actually we have no idea whether the situation is serious or banal and we open a small bottle of Snaps (hard liqueur) to relax and swallow our over-excitement. Sleep comes and goes this night, even our guides I hear talking all through the night.

#### Saturday, 24th January 2004

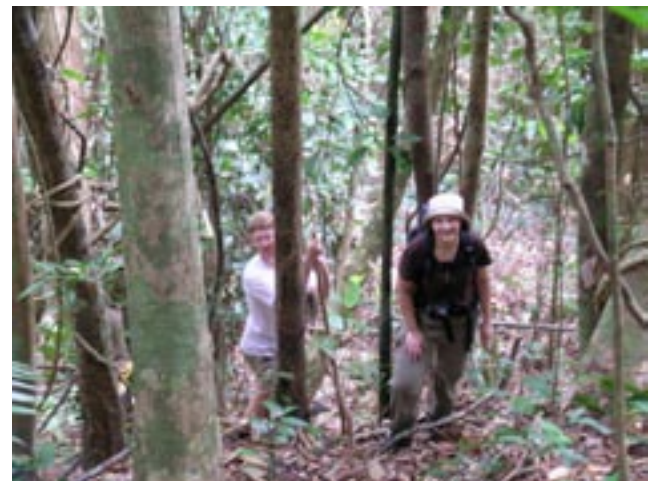
**A**t 8:00 I'm the first to get out of the sleeping bag after a rough night with no much continuous sleep. I make some strong coffee to get bit of speed into my bloodstream and watch a big black spider working on their web in the early morning hours.

After breakfast we set out on our trip to the water fall. We leave our big packs in the camp and carry only our cameras and one bag with water bottles and small rations for the day trip. A river crossing first and soon

## Belum Forest Malaysia



Clockwise from bottom left: *camp 2*; *Katherina writing her diary*; *Michael with his Tonkat Ali and Katherina climbing up a hill*.



we meet the large group of trekkers from two nights before, coming back from their trip. We marvel about the small Malay girls with their huge big packs and small jogging shoes in this group. Others are equipped like soldiers, all military gear. Ok everyone to his own gusto. We are walking uphill all the time and come to a small water fall first. The trail becomes steeper and steeper when we are gaining more and more on elevation. We come to one cascade of water falls to another, it is very nice. We have to be careful not to slip, since the trail is on a steep slope and it goes down on it almost endless. I would almost appreciate a rope, but soon we come to easier terrain. We have to go through water again and Andreas is fussing with his shoes again, one of the guides is building even some kind of bridge with a tree trunk for him. Michael is

telling me later, that the guides are joking about the strange foreign fellow who always takes his shoes off. Maybe they will throw him into the water tomorrow. Finally we come to the big waterfall. It is wonderful scenery, like in a film. There is a big pond surrounded by big boulders and the waterfall is plunging into it from high above. The falling water creates a lot of mist around it and the light penetrating from the thick rain forest around it is breaking in the mist. It is a beautiful play of water and light.

Andreas is going for a swim in the ice cold water, Katharina is writing her diary on a sun lit rock and I enjoy making some photos. Michael is preparing some coffee and cookies for us – excellent service. After an hour of relaxation and enjoyment in this beautiful place we make our way back. First we walk

uphill to a different kind of forest with huge trees and more space in the underground. We are looking for a Tonkat Ali tree. The root of this tree can be cooked for a healthy tee, especially for men's sexual health and back pain. We don't need long to find a tree, but it takes a lot of effort to pull the root out of the soil, it takes the energy of 5 men finally to pull the Tonkat Ali out and we are looking forward to nice tasty medicinal tee in the evening. After about 4 hour of easy going trekking today we come back to our camp site.

In the afternoon I enjoy a bath in the river, while Andreas and Katharina enjoying their afternoon nap. At daylight the tiger is not hunting so the sleep is more relaxed than at night maybe. In the late afternoon the porters are starting to make fire again with lots of smoke - good to keep the tiger away from the camp site.

In the evening we have again one of Michael's delicious jungle dinners. Roasted luncheon meat, tuna with lots of chilli, veggies, egg curry and bamboo rice again. After dinner it is time for the original Tonkat Ali preparation. The root is chopped up and a hand full of shaves is put together with water in the tee pot. Now the water has to boil until half of it has evaporated and the tee is ready. Each of us is getting a cup of tee, very hot no much smell and the taste – uarghhhh. It is bitter so bitter; you can not imagine it pulls you inside out and visa versa. It is really a challenge in self control to drink one cup of the tee. But OK we have to do it. And we need lots of orange juice to get rid of the bitter taste afterwards. Nevertheless we have a lot of fun with all our jokes around the Tonkat Ali tee and his supposed effect on men's sex life. Katharina is already looking out for a nice tree to jump up



and hide. It is not necessary actually, as the tee is not for immediate effect, but more for long term improvement as Michael explains. Michael tells us about other plants for various medicinal propositions, seams really you don't need any doctor or drugstore in the jungle, if you know a bit around the flora and its medicinal possibilities.

## Belum Forest Malaysia

Sunday, 25th January 2004

**H**ad some nice sweet dreams tonight, think the Tonkat Ali tee was not so bad after all. But again I wake up early this night, it is warm and damp in the tent with three persons sleeping in it and the ground seems to become harder and harder. Then, early morning at around 6:00 a big wumm is waking all of us up. Somewhere a tree has fallen down, maybe just a couple of 50m away from our camp. The guides and myself use the occasion to end the night and make fire and hot coffee. Today we have anyhow to speed up, since we have to make all our way back to KL today. We make a fast breakfast, pack the tent and camping gear, clean up the camp site and head on our way back. We go the same way than two days before and I carefully bind my shoe laces, that not too many leaches will find their way into my shoes. We trek fast and I count only 4 or 5 leaches on our way back. Andreas is again annoying us with his notorious avoidance of getting his shoes wet. At one river crossing he tries to get around it with finding a way over a fallen tree and the jungle aside the river shore. He ends up in a mess of thorns and mud and takes his shoes of again. Looking in the faces of our guides I feel they do not know whether to cry or to laugh. OK- on our next jungle trip we will throw Andreas in the water already at the first river crossing, that is for sure. However we reach camp 1 in 2½ hours and after a good bath in the river and a short lunch we are on the small boat again, speeding over the lake to the landing site. The boat trip is quite nice, we relax again looking at the huge green walls of the rain forest at the lake shores and the misty mountains in the background.

It takes us 6 hours car drive from Lake Temengor back to KL and we have enough time to reflect on our jungle trip. I have 25 leach bites, Katharina has 10 idiotic accidents and Andreas has 20 bruises and a couple of (broken) toes.

We are almost eaten up by a tiger, smashed by a fallen tree and lost liters of blood to monster leaches. We have seen the Rafflesia, drunk the most potential Tonkat Ali tee and we had just a good time together, lots of fun and we are looking forward to the next trip. Maybe we do Endau Rompin or a climb to Gunung Tahan in Taman Negara National Park.

*Kuala Lumpur, 1st February 2004*

*by Robert F. Krause*



