

Where the wild things are

Dodging wild pigs, termites and carnivorous pitcher plants, *Justyn Olby* takes on the jungles of Sarawak, and lives to tell the tale.

WE WERE SITTING down to a late lunch when two wild bearded pigs wandered up to the steps of the canteen to inspect those gathered within. After sizing us up as potential food providers and finding us wanting, they wandered off towards the lodges and, presumably, better feeding prospects.

The English novelist Somerset Maugham once commented: “Things are just different in Sarawak.” When a couple of large wild pigs turn up to share your lunch, you see his point.

I had just finished my first real jungle trek through Sarawak’s Bako National Park, which is just over an hour by van and boat from the state’s capital city, Kuching. At lunch, it felt like we had started out a long time ago. My local guide, Rowenna Johannes, and I had arrived in Bako in the morning, when I was still feeling fresh and ready for a gentle stroll among the trees.

I really should have known better. The day before, I had gone for a warm-up trek in the Kubah National Park, about 20km from Kuching. My guide was Eric Yap, who had shown me round Kuching and places such as the Sarawak Cultural Village and Matang

From top: The buttress roots of this tree in Kubah National Park are taller than the average adult; Termites create a traffic system across the forest floor.

Wildlife Centre, where we saw two species for which Sarawak is famous – the orangutan and the hornbill. Sadly, they were in cages.

At Kubah, we left the air-conditioned comfort of our van to strike out for a waterfall somewhere in the forest. Descending into the primal rainforest was entering a totally alien world. Kubah is not noted for its wildlife and it was incredibly quiet and dim among the trees. The high canopy, supported by towering trees with buttress roots higher than my head, filters out most of the sunlight.

Occasionally there were small clearings where a tree had toppled over. Smaller plants, rushing to take advantage of the rare glimpse of sky, had immediately colonised these, filling them with a riot of twisting vines, slender trunks and emerald leaves. What mobile life we did see was exclusively confined to the insect kingdom. Azure butterflies flitted ahead of us while ants and termites created their own traffic systems across the path. On a slippery piece of boardwalk, I was horrified to find an insect thoroughfare along the handrail. It was definitely one of those moments that I could live without.

The waterfall itself was a delight. The small river (at this time of year, before the monsoon, anyway) streams down the rocks into pools before rushing off. It was a relief to relax with

my feet in the cool water while contemplating the trek back. Most of our journey to the waterfall had been downhill, so the return leg promised to be somewhat more tiring.

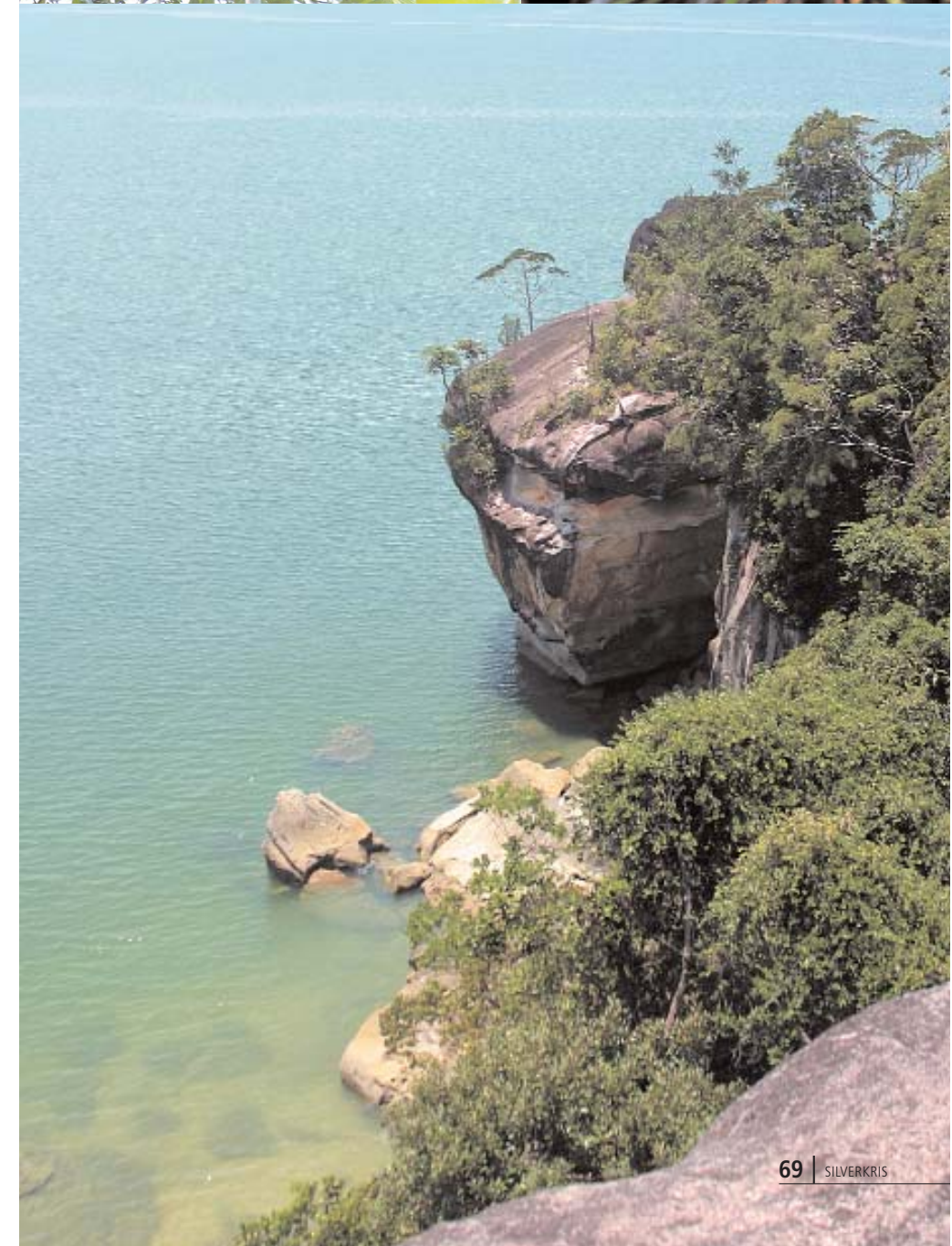
Looking at the impenetrable wall of vegetation along the paths as we walked back to the van, I was amazed that people could live in these jungles. The Sarawak Cultural Village showcases the seven types of houses used by the indigenous tribes, ranging from the simple huts of the nomadic Penan to the sophisticated painted structures of the Orang Ulu that house substantial communities. Tourists can go into the jungle to stay in a longhouse. As the name suggests, these are long subdivided houses with as many as 130 doors, behind each of which a family of six or seven lives.

To the various tribes of Sarawak, the jungle is a giant larder. Cultivated rice, fruits and meat supplement their diet. Tomi, a Penan tribesman at the Cultural Village, demonstrated just how effective a blowpipe could be – he could put a dart made from the stem of a palm leaf (like a satay stick) through a Coca Cola can hanging about 5m away.

The morning after my walk through the jungles of Kubah, I prepared for the real jungle trek at Bako National Park. My guide Rowenna picked me up from the hotel and then we were off to the village of Bako where we took a boat to the entrance of the national park. Our route for the morning’s trek would take us along the coast to a little bay populated by Proboscis monkeys and then on to a larger bay called Telok Pandan Kechil.

Before we started on our trek, someone discovered a Wagler’s Pit viper resting in the tree outside the Lodge’s main office. This little green snake is apparently quite docile, but highly venomous and should not be disturbed. After that bit of excitement, we were off to the jungle.

Almost as soon as we started, we had our first encounter with a troupe of Proboscis monkeys feeding in a mangrove swamp. These weird looking creatures



Clockwise from top left: Proboscis monkey takes in the view from up high; the carnivorous pitcher plant; Bako National Park meets the South China Sea – it’s only an hour from the city of Kuching.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JUSTYN OLBY

are native to Borneo. We went down the stairs from the boardwalk onto the mud for a better look – Rowenna crept barefoot, I squelched and snapped my way along in stout walking boots. Bako has been a national park since 1957 and most of the wildlife has become accustomed to human presence. The monkeys

leaf litter. My barefoot guide seemed to have no trouble negotiating the twisting route, but I soon found it hard going.

There was the usual abundance of insect life and Rowenna was quick to point out oddities like ant nests built inside living plants and a beehive in the root of a tree. Unlike Kubah, however,

sealed: it can't escape and gets digested by the plant.

The heat was incredible. It was a great relief to reach the end of the trail on the cliffs above Telok Pandan Kechil and see the clear waters of the South China Sea beckoning. After a steep climb down and a welcome chance to strip down to my shorts and wade into the sea, we went back for lunch (with the wild pigs in attendance) and then another climb up to a lookout point with a view of the park headquarters. Along the way, we ran into a large group of Silvered Leaf monkeys. Named for their silvery mane, these shy but fearless animals would raid your room if you didn't keep the doors and windows closed.

As our afternoon walk wound down, we sat on the beach and contemplated the calm seas. The sun was slowly going down. "See," said Rowenna pointing to the sky as the sun disappeared behind a bank of clouds, "it won't set properly. I told you the sun never sets in Borneo."

I was exhausted, in that happy way when you have worked hard and earned your rest. I knew I would want to come back, but the next time I would take more water and get a fitter first. ■

"My idea of a gentle stroll under a high leafy canopy was almost immediately undone. There was a great deal of climbing and clambering to do."

kept to a discreet distance, but they were not frightened off. They just hung around on the branches above us stuffing leaves into their mouths beneath flopping pink noses.

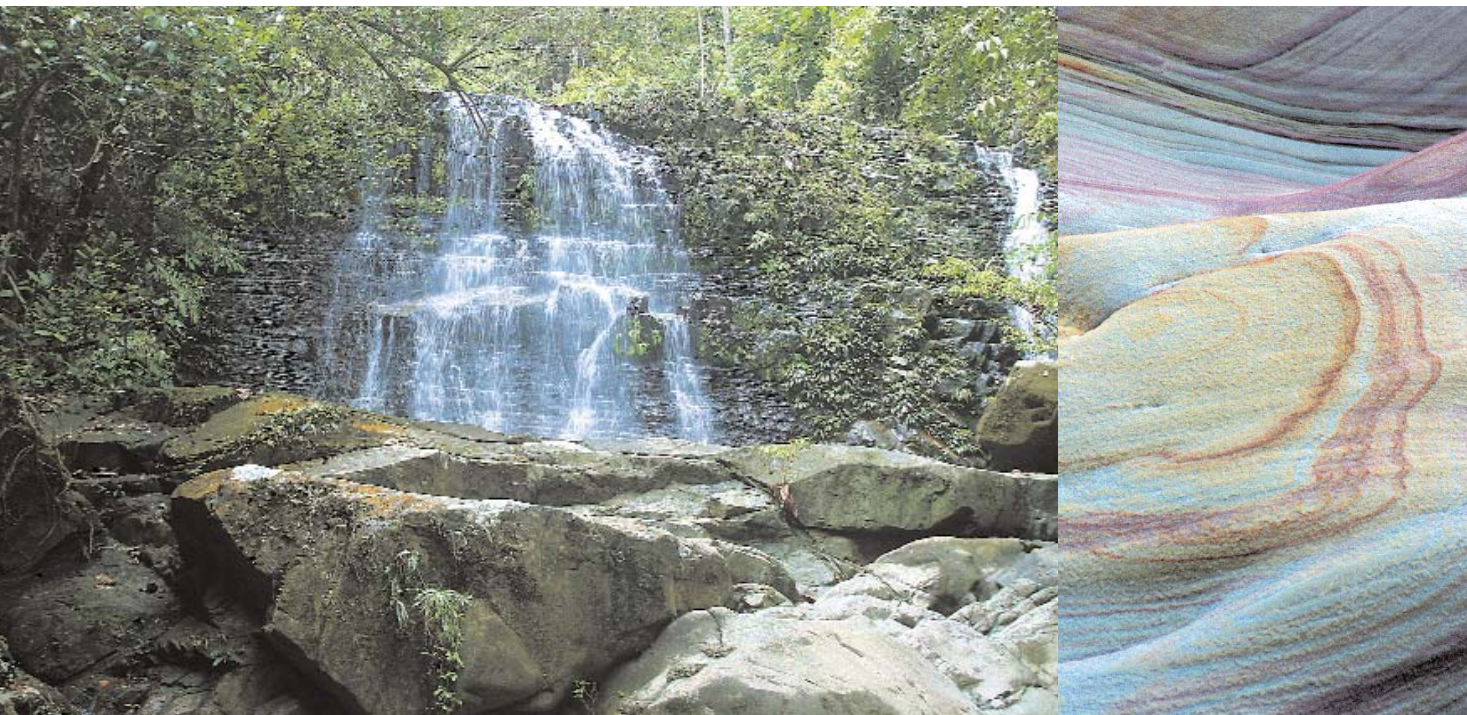
Soon it was time for the serious work and we plunged into the gloomy forest.

My idea of a gentle stroll under a high leafy canopy was almost immediately undone. There was a great deal of climbing and clambering to do. The jungle is more like a huge living organism than a collection of trees. The jungle pushed in on all sides and the path itself was covered in writhing tree roots and

there were mammals around and it wasn't long before we came across more Proboscis monkeys high in the trees.

After a brief rest, we climbed up wooden steps and tree roots to emerge from the lush tropical forest into the heath forest, its hard arid landscape dominated by bare rock and scrub trees.

Rowenna told me that nothing but insects lived in this area, which was probably why pitcher plants thrived here. These carnivorous plants are related to the famous Rafflesia and feed by attracting insects with their alluring smell. Once trapped inside, the insect's fate is



From left: A waterfall breaks the silence of the rainforest in Kubah National Park; Sandstone with beautiful patterns on the beach at Bako National Park.