

Trekking and tracking

The challenge started with a trek to the summit of Mt Kinabalu, 4,095m above sea-level. The heat, humidity and steepness of the climb may have had us stopping frequently for breath, but the breaks allowed us to marvel at our surroundings.

Joel Hodges, Event Participant

I marvelled even more at the porters marching past us at a pace I was at odds to explain, especially given the size of the bags they carried. We climbed through what seemed different worlds, as the reduction in air was matched by the increasing sparseness of the vegetation. After some four hours we arrived at the Laban Rata Rest House, just 800m below our destination. After witnessing a sunset that left me even more breathless than the climb, we hit our beds by 7.30pm. At 2.30am the ascent started and we set off energetically after our guides. A lunar eclipse was all we needed to keep our thoughts from the increasing heaviness of our legs.

The first of our group reached the summit two hours later, where we sat huddled from the cold waiting for sunrise. The break of day brought photo opportunities galore, and a sense of huge achievement as we looked back down on our starting point far below. There was a nervous moment as I looked left of where I was sitting to see a sheer drop of some 1,000m into Low's Gully. I'd have been huddling a lot tighter had I known it was there.

The descent seemed just as draining as the climb, as the legs began to stiffen and the rain fell. A good night's sleep was welcomed by all, but the rest didn't last long. The next two days were spent on a mountain bike, faced with some testing hills, burning sun and the occasional buffalo to block our path. On route to the northern tip of Borneo, we passed through coconut plantations, small villages where the children rushed to greet us, and along a desolate beach where I took a moment by myself to enjoy its tranquillity.

Our journey moved swiftly on to the Tabin Wildlife Reserve. We followed our experienced guides who led us deep into the jungle, through rivers swollen from

the intense rain (where the waterproofing on my boots showed its quality as it held in everything that flowed over the top) and finally, sweating profusely, to our camp. We split into two groups and with our guides set off in search of evidence of wildlife, and hopefully signs of the elusive animal we were here for - the Sumatran Rhino. We were unsuccessful in the latter, but found elephant dung (just two days old by our guide's reckoning), wild boar tracks and numerous insects. One group was unlucky enough to find a hornets' nest and had the marks to prove it. We each experienced the resolve of numerous leeches, highlighted by one that attached itself to the chin of an American girl in our group - it was in mid-flight at the time, having been flicked from my arm. As awful as they are, you have to admire them.

We slept in hammocks roped together by our guides, and enjoyed eight hours under a mosquito net listening to the increasing sounds of wildlife going about their nocturnal business. It was loud, yet both strangely peaceful and relaxing.

Our final stop-off was at Sepilok where we visited the two captive Sumatran Rhinos. To witness the animal we were here to raise awareness of, and in such close quarters, was a fitting finale to a great adventure. The legs may have been aching but we'd seen nature in all its beauty and left with a sense of purpose at what we'd achieved.

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Borneo Rhino Challenge. SOS Rhino and Save the Rhino are organising another Borneo Rhino Challenge, from 15-29 May 2005. For more information, please email katy@savetherhino.org or visit our website www.savetherhino.org