

# Once In a Lifetime

by David W. Taylor

As the giant DC-10 thundered down the runway at London's Heathrow airport and up into the evening sky of a summer's day in late July, I sat strapped in my seat thinking of the adventures that lay ahead of me in the mysterious lands of Malaysia.

I had decided nine months before this day, to become one of a party of people to join an organized visit lasting three weeks, to study the flora and fauna in selected regions of Malaysia, including four days on the slopes of Mount Kinabalu. This very place was the prime reason for my decision to go to Malaysia, for it is well known by botanists and plant enthusiasts as a botanical paradise and a mecca for the carnivorous pitcher plant *Nepenthes*. It was my desire to see and record some of these strange yet fascinating plants and bring back a photographic account of my experiences.

The whole flight to Kuala Lumpur was to last for seventeen hours, and although I tried to sleep, the excitement of the journey prevented this. However, I eventually nodded off, if only for a half hour, and continued to snatch short moments of sleep for the rest of the long and arduous flight.

The first thing that struck me as the party walked out into the air at Kuala Lumpur airport was the tremendously high humidity. I was certainly relieved to climb aboard the small air conditioned fifteen seater bus that was to take us to our first hotel, situated on one of the main roads in the centre of the city. It was shortly after 12:30 a.m. as the bus began to drive along the roads of Kuala Lumpur from which I could see the many small shops and various industries of this bustling capital of Malaysia.

The Taman Negara National Park, situated in western Malaya, is a very large area of natural beauty with many square miles of jungle to explore. As it can only be reached by river transport, we had to

drive to the river's edge covering many miles of dusty roads, stopping once for a Chinese lunch, and once again in a very scenic area known as the Gombac Pass, to view a Malaysian roadside market.

Eventually our bus reached the river after having taken us through some beautiful and interesting countryside, a journey lasting over three hours, and on roads that were very bumpy and full of pot holes. It was a pleasure to get off the bus and stretch our legs before embarking on a one and a half hour river trip aboard power assisted long boats, that were to herald the true beginning of a Malaysian adventure.

Sailing down river in a longboat was my idea of peacefulness, and watching the exotic birdlife, and the large majestic butterflies fluttering across the water, added to the enjoyment.

It was towards late afternoon when the boats finally arrived at the landing station of the Taman Negara NP, and it was a great surprise to everybody to find just how modern the chalet accommodation was. The whole area was of great natural beauty, with many colourful trees and shrubs. I will always remember the splendour of the very large double flowered bouganvillea which one always had to pass either into or out of the camping site.

The following morning, I was awakened just before 6:00 a.m. by the sounds of birds, and particularly the distant hooting noises of gibbons. Their noises are more prominent in the early morning, as this is when they are engaged in establishing their territory. They were certainly making quite a din of this on my first morning in the Taman Negara.

After a good European breakfast, served up by two delightful young Malaysian girls, I joined some of my new found friends that I had made from the party, and went on my very first jungle

walk. Dressed in a cotton shirt and shorts, with a hat perched on my head, and my camera equipment on my shoulder, I could hardly wait for the exploration to begin. The jungle was dense in places, and there were quite a number of deep gulleys to cross. Most of the gulleys were bridged by felled tree trunks, or more usually by man-made bamboo foot bridges.

Although the canopy of tall trees sheltered us from the hot sun, below this canopy, the ground was very wet. Because of the continual evaporation of the wet ground and undergrowth, the conditions in the jungle were very humid, and my clothing soon became wet from my own perspiration. The jungle floor was covered with fallen leaves and twigs, and every now and then there were to be seen great armies of termites and ants all marching in convoy over the leaf-littered ground, and disappearing into the dense undergrowth. There were some ants that measured nearly one inch long.

Everywhere I looked in the Taman Negara there was greenery, but strangely a lack of flowers, although the few that were seen were very spectacular. There were some trees like the *Baccaurea* tree that were in fruit, and these hung down all around the trunk of the tree like great strings of large peas.

The walk lasted for about three hours, and I was very weary as I trundled out of the dimly lit jungle and out into the heat of the midday sun. A change of clothes was called for as I reached the protection of a comfortable chalet, and it was only then that I saw that my left ankle was covered in blood that had soaked through my once-white sock, and had started to congeal in places. I had had my first leech attack, and it was to be the first of four such attacks in my stay at the Taman Negara. These horrible little worm-like creatures live underneath the carpet of rotting leaves on the jungle floor, and they can smell blood at more than a foot away.

Another first for me on this day was to be caught in a tropical thunderstorm. I actually like thunderstorms, and I was hoping to experience one while in Malaysia. The rain really pelted down, and I took great delight in watching it from the shelter of my chalet veranda. Night-fall is early in Malaysia, but even so, there are still remarkable things to be seen if you are keen enough to walk the jungle with a torch light. The *Barringtonia* tree was well worth the walk that I took with several other members of the party, that led us about three hundred yards into the black interior of the night time jungle. The astonishing beauty of the pendulant individual flowers of the *Barringtonia* can only be seen at night when the flower opens and is pollinated by moths. After everybody had taken photographs of the flowers, we shone our torches back along the jungle trail, and headed back to our chalets. On the way back we spotted the rump of a small mouse deer as it nosed its way through the jungle thicket.

After the excitement and adventure of my first day at the Taman Negara, I could hardly wait for the following day to begin, and although I felt very weary, I managed to stay awake long enough to write my diary notes. I certainly slept very well that night, but I was still disturbed from my sleep by the hooting gibbons the following morning. After breakfast, it was down to the river's edge to board power assisted longboats for a trip down river to another part of the jungle. The short journey was to be full of excitement, as to get to our destination meant having to shoot the river rapids. I found it necessary to cover only my camera and binoculars, as the spray drenched everything and everyone.

The day was spent exploring the various trails in the jungle, and it was on this day that I felt that I could have made good use of a small tape recorder. The sounds of the jungle were all around me. The sounds of insects and birds seemed to bring the jungle to life, and at

one stage, I stood along and just listened to the noises around me. All of a sudden there was a crash in the trees, and as I looked up, I just caught a glimpse of a very large bird flying off to a safer position. I later discovered that what I had seen was a toucan.

The return journey back to the campsite took us through the rapids once again, and as the boat hit the swirl, a great blanket of water hit me full in the chest. The sun warmed the water that drenched me, and I was thankful to get back to the chalet for another change of dry clothing.

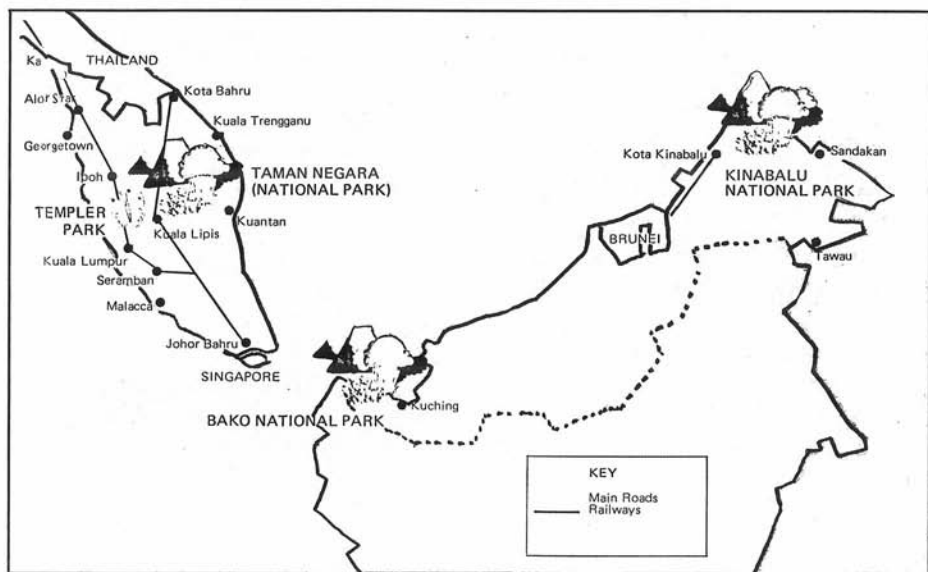
After four days in the Taman Negara, it was time to pack our belongings for the long and tiring journey back to Kuala Lumpur where we were to stay for just one night before flying to Kuching, the capital of Sarawak. The river trip from the campsite still contained adventure, as my boat suddenly became grounded in the soft silt of the river bed. We had strayed into shallow water, but the young Malaysian park rangers that always ferried us on the river trips soon had us out of trouble.

Another thunderstorm greeted our arrival back at Kuala Lumpur, but we were soon in the shelter and comfort of the

hotel, where it was nice just to be able to relax for a while before our evening meal and packing for our departure the following day. I felt very tired towards late evening. I had spent most of the day either propped up in a boat, or cramped in a mini bus, and I was happy to be able to stretch out in the real comfort of a firm bed.

It was only a short bus ride to the airport at Kuala Lumpur, and it was not too long before we boarded the Boeing 737 jet airliner for the flight to Kuching. On arrival there, it was just another short bus ride to the jetty of the Sarawak River, where we climbed aboard a fairly large pleasure boat. The leisurely trip up river was interesting, particularly as we passed by some tribal villages. Men were fishing with nets in the river's edge, while the women were washing clothes. Although they were all very busy, they certainly had time to wave to us as we sailed by. Eventually the boat sailed out into the expanse of the South China Sea, and it was not very long before we sighted our destination which was the Bako National Park of Sarawak.

It was a midafternoon as our pleasure boat drifted into the narrow channel of



water at the edge of the park, and finally came to rest in a mangrove swamp. There was a sandy beach to cross in order to get to our accommodation, and I found this very tiring as I had to try to carry a very heavy suitcase and my camera equipment. Every now and then, I stopped in order to change hands, and eventually I reached the chalet that we were to stay at during the next four days. The chalets were very basic, and nothing like the more up-to-date accommodations that we were afforded at the Taman Negara. However, we soon settled in and after a meal some of us began to look around the place. The air was very humid, more so than in Malaya, and I wondered just how hot and sticky it would be the following day. The area was full of life, and during the evening we watched the antics of geckos, moths, and praying mantis, all of whom adorned the walls and ceilings of the chalet.

The chalet that I shared with the other male members of the party was very uncomfortable, and because of the humidity and broken down bunkbed, I ended up with having a restless night. The sounds of crickets, moths, and mosquitoes kept stirring me from sleep, and the hardness of the bed made me ache. However, the thoughts of adventure the next day kept my spirits high.

The new day soon began, and after a pleasant breakfast prepared by our young female cook, it was decided to explore the immediate vicinity. We started out shortly after 8:00 a.m., and after a very tiring uphill climb through dense forest that literally blotted out the sky above, we eventually walked out onto a high plateau. The ground here was covered with large slate grey rocks that felt hot when touched. This was not surprising as the area was very open, and the sun blazed down, parching the tops of trees and drying out the ground beneath. A sudden call from one of my colleagues made me forget the sudden heat, and I walked to where he was standing at the foot of a tree which stood all alone in the fierce sunshine. The thin trunk was

gnarled and twisted—in fact the tree looked dead to me. My gaze was suddenly directed to the ground around the foot of the trunk, and there I saw my very first *Nepenthes* pitcher. It was a ground pitcher of *Nepenthes rafflesiana*, and it measured about nine inches long. The beautiful crimson colouration made it stand out from the dry grass it lay in, and as I knelt down to examine and photograph this remarkable sight, I felt a tingle of excitement come over me. I had travelled thousands of miles to see these strange plants, and this was to be the first specimen of how many more I wondered. I photographed the ground pitcher, and then looked up into the head of the tree. There sprawling in amongst the dry branches was the different shape of the aerial pitchers of the plant, and the very top pitcher had reached a height of around ten feet. Quite a lot of curiosity was caused by the discovery of the *Nepenthes* plant, as most of the other members of the party had not heard of the plant, let alone seen one. I found myself giving a short explanation of the species and their curious carnivorous habit, which made everybody concerned very interested—so much so, that they all started to look for the plants among the trees and shrubbery.

It was not long before I found another species of *Nepenthes* on the plateau. This time it was *Nepenthes gracilis*, and there were many plants situated on both sides of the narrow footpath that we were tracking. The light green pitchers measuring an average four inches long were hanging from the twiggy branches of what only could be described as bracken. It was a dramatic sight to see these great clusters of pitchers hanging there like decorations on a Christmas tree. The plants were growing in extremely dry conditions, although the air was very humid. Further along the track, I observed some of these plants growing in almost pure sand. I had taken a number of photographs, and had written records of the plants. Just ahead, the open land of the plateau gave way to a rain forest





*Nepenthes ampullaria*  
Bako National Park of Sarawak

Photos by D. Taylor



*Nepenthes rafflesiana*  
Bako National Park  
of Sarawak



*Nepenthes rafflesiana*  
Bako National Park  
of Sarawak

land of the plateau gave way to rain forest, and I began to wonder what was in store for me as I quickened my pace and set my sights on the mass of green forest. Some of the party were beginning to tire, and the journey back across the plateau in the merciless sunshine was a daunting prospect for us all.

The rain forest was a welcome retreat from the hot plateau, although as I entered into the canopy of trees, I was instantly aware of the much wetter atmosphere. There was a lot of healthy greenery, particularly ferns, and everywhere I looked, there was interest. I had not been in the forest very long when my eyes fell on a splash of pale green pitchers that looked more like little lobster pots. They were the pitchers of *Nepenthes ampullaria*, and further exploration brought forth more clusters, some of which were very large. The plants were very abundant in the forest, and obviously preferred the very wet and humid conditions that only a sheltered environment could afford. The temperature in the dense rain forest was measured at 80° F. (27° C.), and the relative humidity was also 80 percent.

When it was decided to return to base, I felt a little reluctant to leave the forest, but I too was beginning to tire, and so we started the long walk back through the trees and the creeping vines, and out onto the plateau once more. We walked at a steady pace, and very soon were in sight of our chalets. Our very thoughtful cook had arranged lunch for us, and as we trundled into the clearing where the chalets were situated, she greeted us with the news that she was making a very large kettle of tea for us, which certainly lifted my spirits. I drank five cups of tea during that late afternoon, and as I relaxed in the chalet, I thought back to my travels that day and to those amazing *Nepenthes* plants that I had seen and photographed.

It was suggested that the entire following day be spent exploring the terrain of the Bako National Park. Unfortunately, there was much reluctance from most of the party about

tance from most of the party about spending a whole day in an area that no one knew anything about, and eventually only four of us decided to go. As we set out the following morning, the four of us were confronted by a small tribe of monkeys that were always paying visits to the chalets for scraps of food. The leader of the tribe took great offense when we tried to photograph him, and showed his teeth when he became blinded by our flashguns.

As we rejoined our footprints from the previous day's walk, I was pleased that I had taken every precaution for this new walk. Our very friendly cook had supplied us with food and fruit, and I made sure that I had a full container of pure water. Another requirement on these long walks was an aerosol of insect repellent. A once-over spray of skin and clothing usually insured protection from insect attack during the day and, judging from the size of some of the flies and mosquitoes, spraying oneself was a habit worth adopting.

We very soon found ourselves back in the tropical rain forest, and I was once again in with the *Nepenthes* plants. The *Nepenthes ampullaria* were all over the place, sprawling this way and that, and inviting closer inspection. One of the most remarkable sights I saw was a very large and beautiful pitcher of *Nepenthes rafflesiana* sitting right in the middle of a clump of *N. ampullaria*. Another *N. rafflesiana* pitcher was seen sitting upright by the side of the track looking as though it was begging for food. It was at least nine inches long and was so perfectly formed that it looked like a piece of sculpture. There were many similar sights such as this in the rain forest, and as time slipped by, I began to wonder how many miles we had walked. I had fitted my belt with a pedometer, which is an instrument for measuring one's walking pace, and a glance at this showed me a walking distance of just over four miles. We were feeling quite tired, and we decided to give ourselves another half hour before turning back.

We must have taken a different path on our return journey through the forest, because we suddenly found ourselves in a beautiful tropical paradise, with tall palms, crystal clear water, and a serenity that beckoned the weary traveller to stop and rest for a while. This is just what we did, and we spent a very restful half hour at this beautiful place. The only sounds here were of the water cascading over smooth boulders into a small lake at a lower level. The whole area was surrounded by the forest, and the large palms and ferns were reflected in the water, which was only a few feet deep.

It was a pity to leave this wonderful place which really looked like something out of a Tarzan adventure film. However, we had to make the break as time was getting on, and we did not want to get trapped by nightfall. The walking became hard because we were so tired, but eventually we got back onto the plateau, and I knew that then we were only an hour from base. There was a cheer as the four of us staggered up to the chalets and dropped wearily onto provided chairs. My small pedometer registered nine and a half miles, and it certainly felt like it. I was thankful once again for the tea kettle, and as I drunk my fourth cup, I felt satisfied that I had achieved more than I had hoped for by making the long trek into the fascinating rain forest of Bako.

The long and tiring walk coupled with the uncomfortable bunk bed left me incapable for anything the following day, so I decided to do some photography, starting at the nearby mangrove swamp, and working backwards. I think that the day's biggest excitement was the sudden appearance of a large monitor lizard, that crawled out of the undergrowth and made straight for the food scraps that had been thrown out for the monkeys. It was at least four feet long, and its arrival made the monkeys scatter in all directions.

The time had come to pack our belongings in time for an early afternoon departure back to Kuching, so I hurriedly got all my things together, and took my

case and photographic gear up to where everybody else in the party had put their belongings ready for the walk to the boat. This gave me time for a last minute walk onto the sandy beach of Bako and a look at a small clump of *Nepenthes gracilis* which was actually growing on the edge of a cliff top, looking out to sea.

We boarded the boat at 2:00 p.m. and sailed out onto the South China Sea. It was not long before we were back on the Sarawak River, passing by shanty looking fishing villages, and waving to the native children as they stood waist deep at the river's edge. I was looking forward to our next day, as it was on this day that we were to fly to Koto Kinabalu, and on arrival at Kuching, were told that the flight was to be very early in the morning. A quick calculation made us realize that we would have to rise by 5:00 a.m. to get breakfast in, so it was decided to have an early night. After having spent three uncomfortable nights in the bunk beds back at Bako, the soft hotel bed at Kuching was sheer luxury, and I was sorry to have to get out of it in the darkness of the following morning. After breakfast, we boarded our bus for the drive to the airport, and as the Boeing aircraft soared into the sky, I began to dream of the days ahead of me, knowing that I had at least reached the climax of my Malaysian adventure. I would soon be on the slopes of the famous Mount Kinabalu, a mountain which is well known to botanists as a mecca for *Nepenthes*.

(To be continued.)

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## Special Notices

An extra plant source not mentioned in the March 1982, *CPN*: Marston Exotics, Spring Gardens, Frome, Somerset, England.

Catalog is 50 pence and they prefer to supply Britain and Europe.

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Correction for entry for Plant Shop's Botanical Garden in CP Source List:

Catalog: \$2.00 deductible with order (note price change).