

Maliau Basin: Lost World of Sabah



Ir. Chin Mee Poon

Ir. Chin Mee Poon is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.

Maliau Basin Conservation Area, often dubbed Sabah's Lost World, is a patch of nature in the south central part of Sabah, spread over 58,840 ha. A ring of formidable escarpment rising over 1,675m above sea level gives rise to a pristine forest with a unique ecosystem.

The entire basin constitutes the catchment area of Maliau River which leaves the basin through a gorge in the south-east to join Kuamut River, a tributary of the Kinabatangan, Sabah's longest river. Maliau Basin is well known for its high concentration of magnificent waterfalls, including the spectacular 7-tier Maliau Falls, the Giluk Falls and the Takob-Akob Falls. The rich biodiversity within and around the basin includes more than 290 species of birds, over 80 species of mammals, many amphibians and reptiles, countless insects, at least 8 species of nepenthes, several endemic orchid species, the rare *Rafflesia tengku-adlinii* and thousands of other plant species.

My first trip to Maliau Basin was in May 2001. It was organised by the Photography Group of the Malaysian Nature Society, Selangor Branch. Digital cameras were then still considered a novelty and I was using an analogue camera.

Our group of 14 photographers travelled in 4WD vehicles from Kota Kinabalu to Agathis Camp, the first camp in the conservation area. It was more than 20km from the security gate. A heavy downpour earlier had turned the laterite road very muddy

and slippery, so much so that even our 4WD vehicles swayed from side to side. The last few hundred metres before the camp was worse – a muddy slope that even 4WD vehicles could not tackle, so we had to struggle up the slope in the dark carrying only what was needed for the night! What a welcome!

Fortunately the following day was dry. We trekked 7km to Camel Trophy Camp on Day 2, climbing a



750m steep slope initially, followed by an undulating walk on a ridge. We went through a mossy montane forest with many epiphytes including various species of wild orchids and pitcher plants. We also heard the loud, characteristic cry of a helmeted hornbill, one of the 8 species of hornbills found in Maliau Basin.

The Camel Trophy Base Camp was constructed by the multinational participants of the Camel Trophy Adventure Sabah 1993 as a token of appreciation to the people of Sabah for hosting the off-road challenge.

On the third day, we visited Takob-Akob Waterfalls and Giluk Waterfalls

down in the basin, about 3km from the camp. Both waterfalls were quite magnificent but the descent to reach them was steep and slippery and two of my friends fell. Luckily they were not badly hurt.

On the fourth day, 7 of us and 5 porters trekked 9km over mainly steep and slippery terrain to Bambang Camp which comprised 3 open-sided sheds. One shed was used for cooking and the other two had bunks made of small tree trunks and branches. When we were having a simple dinner at 6.30 p.m., it was already dark in the forest even though patches of sky above the forest canopy were still bright. We went to bed at about 8 p.m. Against the subdued hum of the distant waterfalls, different insects came to provide us with nature's lullaby: First the cicadas, then grasshoppers and finally crickets.

We spent the best part of Day 5 at Tier 6 and Tier 7 of the seven-tier Maliau Waterfalls, the highlight of the trip. However, we could not find a vantage point to see all 7 tiers of the waterfall. Drones were not available then to give us an aerial view of the falls through the lens of an airborne camera.

We got back to Camel Trophy Camp on Day 6 and the whole group returned to Agathis Camp on Day 7 to conclude this often tough but memorable adventure in the Lost World of Sabah.

I visited Maliau Basin again in September 2015, but that's another story. ■