

REVISITING THE PAST, AN ABRIDGED STORY.

My wife, daughter and son have lived for many years in various parts of South East Asia. One of those parts was a location called Kota Kinabalu (KK), the capital of Sabah, one of the federated states of Malaysia and part of the island of Borneo. Our three year stay in KK was between 1973 and 1976 during which time I was the maintenance superintendent for Malaysian Airline System (MAS) responsible for Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei.

This year an opportunity arose to revisit Borneo, with two like minded friends, Doug and Sue Heidke, with the attraction being the orangutan habitat near the second largest town in Sabah call Sandakan. Additionally we were very keen to visit the various memorials for those Australian and British servicemen who were murdered by the Japanese in the final stages of WWII by forced marches through the hostile terrain between Sandakan and Ranau. 2,400 men took part in the marches, 6 survived as a result of their escape. The remainder perished in a most horrible way.

However, the visit started at KK, where we joined a group of Australians intent on the same adventure. The small town of 40 years ago had grown into a large city with many holiday resorts and hotels to cater for the visiting throngs of people from all over the world. It was hardly possible to recognise the roads and area where we lived, the airport had become a large international destination and evidence of infrastructure that I was familiar with had disappeared. We did take advantage of an old steam train trip which took us in style for a days visit to villages and towns quite some way out of KK. The steam train was powered by wood rather than coal with the carriages reflective of the 1950's style of interior and decor. We also visited nearby islands which we used to go to during our time there with our very young children. The islands then were uncomplicated by such things as jetties or Cafes but were now. The water though was still clear and warm, that had not changed!

We then headed for the Sabah Tea Plantation nestled in the shadow of Mt Kinabalu. The tea plantation produces a delightful organic tea which is sold either on its own or is blended with other well known brands. The blend is usually 40% Sabah tea to the remaining 60% host tea. The milling, roasting and crushing process was shown to us and was most informative.

A travel in a four hour air conditioned coach then transported us to Sandakan via two memorials to the 'Death March', as the Japanese murder of our men is known. It was emotional for us all and I, as an ex serviceman who fought in Borneo during the '60's, to read the names of those brothers, fathers and sons and individuals who died either of disease, or injuries caused by beatings or shootings at the hands of the Japanese. The RSL and Australian government has produced funds and expertise to enable the monuments and gardens to be beautifully maintained and which are a lasting tribute to the lives of those lost.

The coach drive showed how forest and rubber plantations had been cleared and the resulting cleared land planted out with palm oil plantations, literally as far as the eye can see. We were told that approximately 40% of the land mass of North Borneo was now under palm oil plantations. The result, as far as the orangutan species is concerned is that they are now an endangered animal, set for extinction in the wild.

Finally, in Sandakan we visited the orangutan habitat at a place called Sepilok. Here orangatans which have been rescued from areas being converted to palm oil plantations were allowed to roam over a large restricted habitat. Nursery areas are provided for younger rescued animals, with limited feeding being the idea of weaning the animals from human reliance to self reliance eventually. The hope being that breeding and self reliance will allow the species to roam in what is left of the forest, in the wild. We saw evidence of this in the river cruises we were taken on which allowed us to view not only wild orangatans but other species of monkeys living in the forests that edged on to the rivers.

The trip was a great success, the accompanying folk were fun, and full of their own stories too.