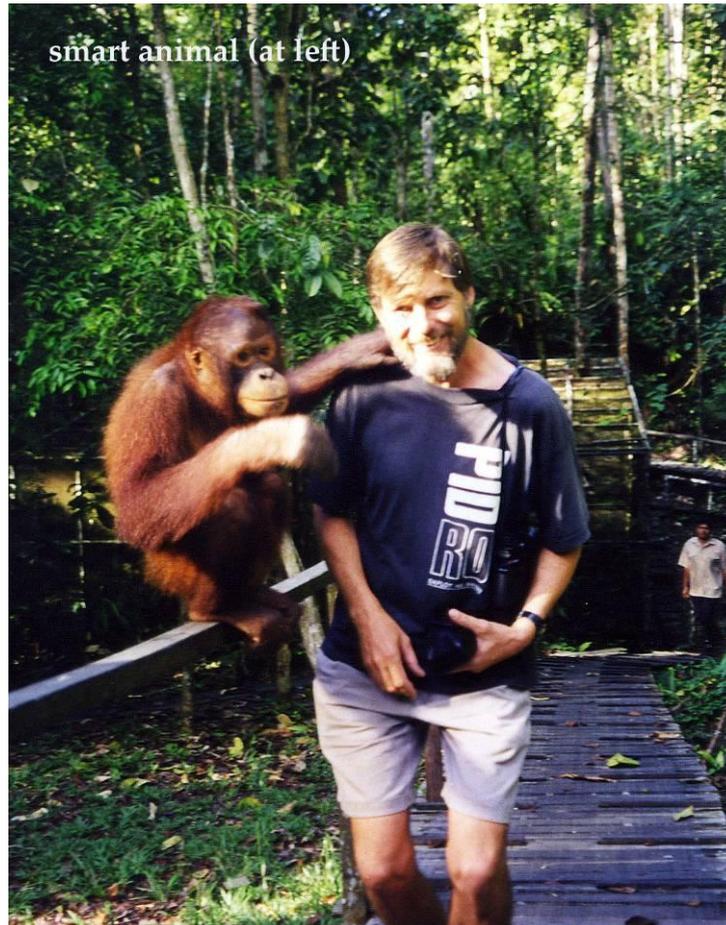


Wildlife, free beer and a little marital bonding in -

Malaysia (including Sarawak) and Singapore

30th May to 28th June 1998

Mayette and Steve Anyon-Smith



Outline of Trip

Marriage demands that every so often I take my charming wife on a holiday. The purpose of this trip was not so much to see lots of wildlife but to have a balanced and relaxing vacation experience by enjoying exotic food, peoples, cultural and historic places, shopping opportunities and, of course, luxury hotels.

Actually, I rather think that the idea right from the start was for me to contrive a shopping day or two on the back of a holiday seeking wildlife, but the mix was not pre-set and depended much on the flow of events.....

Aside from our return flights between Sydney and Kuala Lumpur, we had booked a return flight from Johor Bahru (Malaysia's "sister city" to Singapore) to take us to Kuching, Sarawak, on the Malaysian part of Borneo.

Malaysian People

My original hesitancy for visiting Malaysia was largely due to the animosity between the then Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating and a Dr Mahatir, head boss man of Malaysia. They did not like one another and the latter professed not to like any other Australians much either. I figured, in great error, that the largely Islamic Malaysia might not be much fun. But the Malaysian people were very happy and obliging and some of my best memories of ordinary people in action are from Malaysia.

Kuching is my favourite Asian city – by a margin as large as a male proboscis monkey's nose is long. Here, side by side you might see two young Malaysian girls, one with a headscarf and big smile and one in a miniskirt and an even bigger smile. I understand that the Malaysian version of islam is not common elsewhere. Pity about that.

Sites visited

Kuala Lumpur – 6 nights

Kuala Selangor – Taman Alam Nature Park – 1 night

Templer Park

Taman Negara National Park – 4 nights

Fraser's Hill – 3 nights

The Gap – 2 nights

Singapore – 2 nights

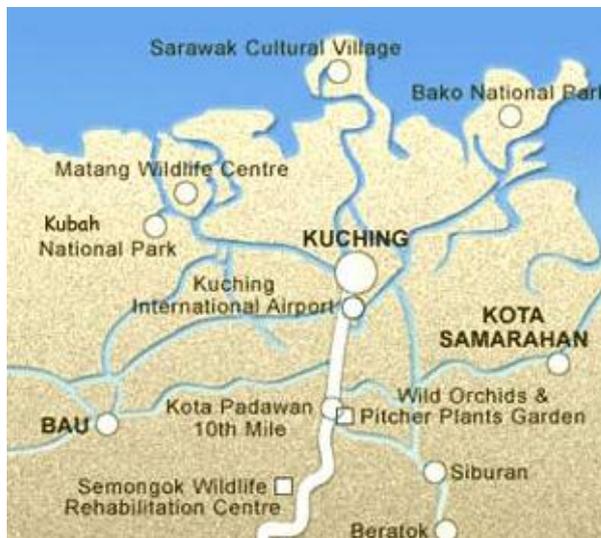
Johor Bahru – 1 night

Kuching – 5 nights

Bako National Park – 4 nights

Semenggoh orang-utan rehabilitation centre

Kubah National Park





Accommodation

We stayed mainly in hotels and lodges with private facilities. Hotels are quite cheap in Malaysia, quite unlike those in Singapore.

Roads / transport

We relied on public transport to get around. Like so many South East Asian countries, where private car ownership is not the norm, public transport is frequent, cheap and ever so entertaining. We managed to find buses of all sizes and pedigrees, taxis - long distance and otherwise, a train, motorised canoes, and lots of walking.

The roads were generally good and travel times could be predicted with fair accuracy, unlike so many places, developing world or not.

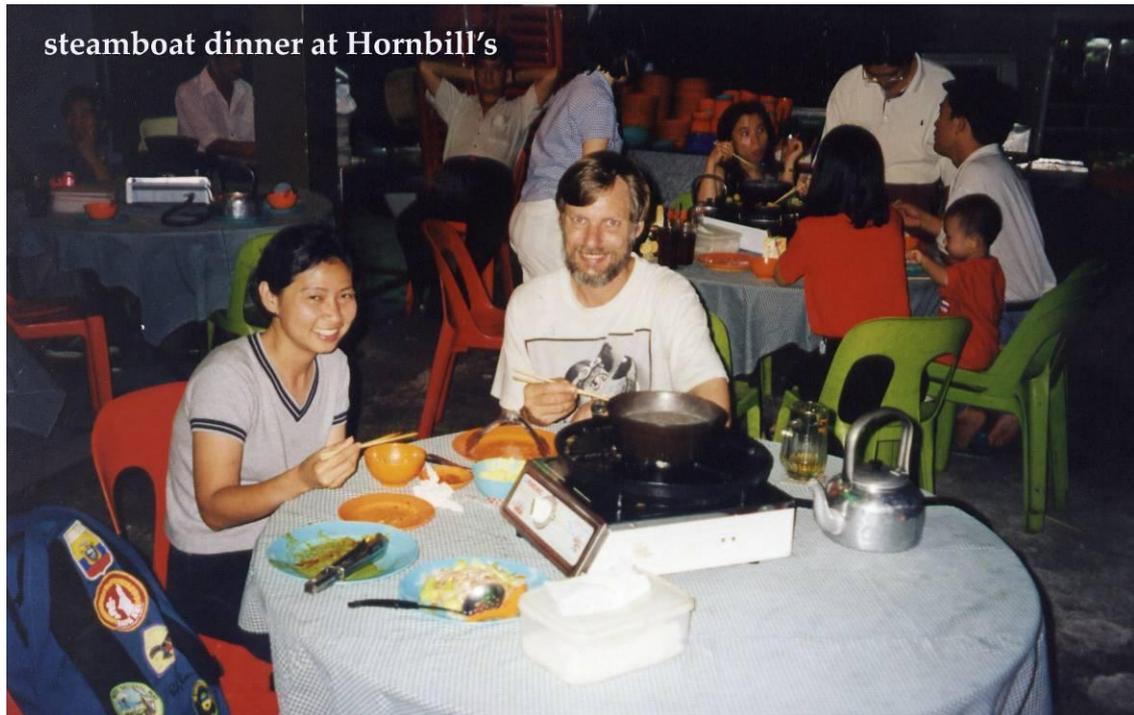
Weather

Hot, sometimes wet and hot.

Insects

Mozzies, lots of them.

Food



I am not alone in observing that Malay food is quite dull compared to that of neighbouring Thailand. I had my heart set on some laksas or spicy soups but alas, these were hard to find. There was nothing wrong with the food, in fact it was quite nutritious I guess, it just was not what I expected and mostly fairly boring. The food in Kuching, however, left that of peninsular Malaysia for dead. If you ask anyone in Sarawak they will tell you that their state and the mainland are for all practical purposes separate countries.

Beer

Sadly the beer in Malaysia is quite average and is relatively expensive – they don't drink much of it. A silly cultural or religious thing I suppose.

best buy at the Singapore markets



long-tailed macaques



Wildlife

Birds

It seems that I did not keep a list of birds seen that I can find. We did fairly well overall. Whilst Taman Negara NP was disappointing, we cleaned up at Fraser's Hill and at The Gap. The area around Kuching was never going to produce all that much. A good reason for going back!

Mammals – in order of sightings

Grey-bellied squirrel
Long-tailed macaque
Low's squirrel
Plantain squirrel
Silvered leaf monkey
Short-tailed mongoose
Banded leaf monkey
Lesser tree shrew
Dusky leaf monkey
Giant squirrel
Prevost's squirrel
Long-tailed mountain rat
Common palm civet
Common tree shrew
Lesser mouse deer
Three-striped ground squirrel
Bearded pig
Black-banded squirrel
Slender squirrel
Himalayan striped squirrel
Siamang
Small-toothed palm civet
Proboscis monkey
Colugo
Indo-Pacific humpback dolphin
Black-eared pygmy squirrel
Orang-utan
Plain pygmy squirrel
Black rat

Diary

Day 1 – Saturday 30th May 1998

Our Malaysian Airways 747 flight to Kuala Lumpur via Melbourne left in the evening and was unremarkable, save for the number of babies on board. It should have been mathematically impossible for so many screaming babies and so few adults to be so close to me. Perhaps I had mistaken some of the mothers as babies.

Day 2 – Sunday 31st May 1998

The airport at KL was a bit shambled. Methinks this was because they were about to abandon it in a favour of a glossy new one to open in a few weeks.

We had gained some “free” accommodation with our airfare at the *** Hotel Malaya in the centre of the city’s Chinatown. After catching a public bus from the airport, checking in and showering we went for a scrute of the local street scene.

Over-tired, we changed some money and walked to the Lake Gardens nearby. Certain things conspired against my full enjoyment of the experience. These included:

- Getting lost,
- Becoming very hot and sweaty (no surprises there),
- Mayette complaining constantly, and
- Falling asleep.

A taxi seemed like a good way of getting back to the hotel. The ride was taking a very long time, in fact a city tour would have taken in less territory, so we bailed short of our hotel and managed to find our way back without spending all of our money on the first day. Did some shopping and collapsed.



Day 3 – Monday 1st June 1998

After a very nice hotel breakfast we found the public bus for Templer Park. This rubbish-strewn patch of forest is quite near KL and is home to a surprising amount of wildlife. Although hunting is not unknown in Malaysia, of course, there seems to be a bit more respect for law than in some other Asian countries. One of the odd things about the country is the virtual absence of dogs. This made for a refreshing change and I guess the surviving critters are pretty happy about the deal as well.

We spotted some great birds and with better identification skills we would doubtless have named a few more.

Day 4 – Tuesday 2nd June 1998

We went to the Puda Raya bus terminal for our 90 minute bus ride to Kuala Selangor, adjacent to river of the same name on the coast just north of KL. Clearly the bus route didn't make much profit, as the buses were the oldest cruddiest things around. Arriving at Taman Alam Nature Park was a delight. This small coastal reserve comprises lowland forest, mangroves and waterways. We booked into a steamy lodge for the night and started to explore. Mammals easily seen were plantain squirrels, long-tailed macaques and silvered leaf-monkeys – with their amazing orange-coloured babies. The birding highlight was a superb view of a mangrove pitta, with myriad other stunning birds.

We made the short walk to the local village where we found the air-conditioned “Restaurant 99”. I had “Thailand Food”. It was good. The afternoon rose to no great heights as we tried to catch up on some rest which wasn't easy in the steamy heat.



Day 5 – Wednesday 3rd June 1998

Viewing a short-tailed mongoose was a good start to the day. By 0930 it was so hot and sticky we packed up and trundled off for lunch, keeping to the shade wherever possible. How do people live like this?

Our museum piece of a bus took us back to KL. The fun thing about buses in crowded KL is that they are not wedded to set routes if the traffic determines otherwise. Cries of anguish were heard from the locals when the thing suddenly veered off the main road for a rat-run up some side streets. The locals seemed more concerned about getting lost than we did.

Why we ate at an American restaurant I will never know. Suffice to say the food was garbage and that was precisely the view of my digestive system. Not pretty.

Day 6 – Thursday 4th June 1998

A much anticipated day – we were going to Taman Negara National Park, a large lowland rainforest reserve that shows what Malaysia has achieved by logging other countries' rainforest and leaving intact some of their own. We had booked on to the slowest air-con bus in creation to get us to Tembling Jetty from where we travelled by canoe. Paradoxically, the canoe was considerably faster than the bus, and we charged along the river at warp factor two. It would have been more relaxing and rewarding if we had travelled at bus speed.



The “resort” at Taman Negara is straight out of Catch-22. The facility charges whatever it likes because it knows a few things that you will quickly learn – it has a monopoly on accommodation on the national park side of the river; you can’t cross the river before 0700 if you stay on the other side; and there is no wildlife outside the park. Nobody in historic times has been afford to eat at the resort. They had not sold a meal since 1963. The accommodation was fully booked so all this was rather immaterial to us. We lobbied on the “food side” of the river at the very new Ekoton Chalets, paying RM80 (\$A35) for our own air-con room.

The food at Taman Negara is courtesy of a number of floating restaurants that are very cheap, competitive and so very relaxing. We met a Dutch / Suriname couple who cheered Mayette, helped us through drinks and dinner, and reminded us of why travel is so good.

I was chafing at the bit to get across the river and into the park the next morning.

Day 7 – Friday 5th June 1998

A day that turned into a complete shambles, but one which Mayette, seven years later, still talks about. The plan was to walk to the Kumbang Hide, a 12 kilometre slog through the forest to a small structure that overlooks a clay lick. The clay lick attracts a number of desirable animals including Malaysian tapir.



Bumbun Kumbang (hide)

The walk was very hot. Mayette does not exist to walk through rainforest with me. Every few metres or so I would fan her and try to cheer her as best I could. There was so little wildlife on display it was difficult to credit we were in the bush. Banded pitta and crested fireback pheasants were the pick of the birds and giant squirrels and lesser tree shrews the only mammals.

The hide, when we finally arrived there, was run down, smelly and barely habitable. Squirrels dropped from the ceiling to see what they could steal. Mayette was very unimpressed – the complete opposite to my reaction. We were the only inhabitants, but not for long. We decamped for the river where fortuitously there was a little used annex of Taman Negara Resorts. We stayed there having no choice in the matter. Happily for me there were Prevost's squirrel (one of the very best), the pale form of the giant squirrel and common palm civets.

More drama awaited us as we were fed some pricing misinformation by the barely intelligible staff of the "resort". Never mind, we survived.

Day 8 – Saturday 6th June 1998

Some early morning birding around the lodge did not produce much that I could identify. We went back down river and checked back into the Ekoton Chalet.

Much walking was done after a lovely lunch. We visited the canopy walkway, which seemed to be used more as a theme park ride for most of the people staying at the resort. The park was teeming with one particular type of animal – the Malay Chinese. Malay Chinese are readily identified in the field by having a uniform body size and shape, spectacles and a far carrying and distinctive call. The call varies but is invariably loud. These mammals are at the top of the local food chain and they don't give a toss about whether others might have come to the park for a bit of peace and quiet. Chinese Malays regard all parks as playgrounds and do not differentiate between parks with forest and wildlife, or parks with grass. Most days they can be obliging if you politely ask them to be quieter, particularly after you offer their first born to a reticulated python or a starving clouded leopard. This just wasn't one of those days.

There are some great birds at Taman Nagara, and I saw a small percentage of these. This afternoon's best were three different broadbills. Anyone who thinks that there are smarter looking birds than broadbills (oh, and pittas I suppose) is deluded.

A blissful sleep followed our dinner at the Lia Restaurant.

Day 9 – Sunday 7th June 1998

I mentioned that there are few dogs in Malaysia. Not so with roosters. I don't mind roosters as far as roosters go, but it would be nice if they could tell the time. I thought this was the first thing they learned at rooster school. The local patch of male chooks had no idea what time it was. From about 0330 they figured that it was close enough to sunrise and would let loose. For someone like myself who absolutely must get up by first light this can be disappointing. I lay awake dreaming of poisoned wheat. Or a few dogs might have helped.

We hit the trails very early and before the sweating hordes got moving. We were rewarded with stunning views of a male great argus that walked across the trail right in front of us. Lesser mouse deer, lesser tree shrews and dusky leaf monkeys kept us alert.

The mid afternoon downpour was ideally timed for us to have a short sleep. I prefer to travel with a small black umbrella rather than a raincoat in tropical countries. It is too hot to wear

the latter. So after my kip, I toddled off in the rain with my umbrella, the recipient of much laughter from the tossers in the campground. The rain didn't completely stop but it was quite light and it did stop the seething hordes from walking in my park. The bearded pigs, three-striped ground squirrels and a few new birds were icing on the cake.

Mayette had befriended a local girl and they entertained each other all afternoon. I visited their house for a cup of tea. It was all very civilised and pleasant.

Day 10 – Monday 8th June 1998

The boat trip back to the jetty was memorable if only for Mayette's toilet stop. There is never much point in asking "why didn't you go before we left?", but the temptation is always hard to resist. So we stopped on a shingle island in the middle of the river where I held a towel and everyone else looked the other way. The boatman took a similar advantage of the opportunity sans towel.

Our long distance taxi – an old Toyota Crown – to Fraser's Hill was great. The driver, a chatty chap of Indian extraction, had waited three days for a fare so he was nice and happy to see us. He drove sanely and explained the history of Malaysia according to his ethnic base. He wasn't all that thrilled with Dr Mahatir.



Fraser's Hill is a marvellous place, cool, surrounded by forest, and literally dripping with birds. We stayed at the decaying Temerloh Chalet, a facility that is perfectly sited at the top of an enchanting rainforest valley. It holds a record of sorts in that it has a definitive world class collection of moulds. These were liberally applied to all surfaces of our room and gave off an aroma that would only appeal to undiscerning termites I would think. We changed rooms but it made no difference and the staff started to think we were fussy. It was later revealed by others that most of the accommodation in Fraser's Hill is no different.

We adjourned down the hill to the Puncak Inn where cool drinks of the Anchor Beer variety were purchased and consumed in the company of Larry and Nancy, an American birding couple. These were my first beers for two weeks (I can't believe I'm writing this).

Day 11 – Tuesday 9th June 1998

The Bishop's Trail is famous for only one thing – it is one of the premier locations to see the rusty-naped pitta. I left the “hotel” room at first light and fought the rainforest gloom to get stunning views of this much sought after bird.

After a good breakfast we wandered along a long road to a waterfall. *This was in the era when I hadn't learnt that Asian waterfalls are not worth visiting. Some are so bad that they cannot be identified upon arrival. This one was one of those.* A fine Singaporean family gave us a lift back to town.

A highlight for the holiday followed our lunch. After teaming up with Larry and Nancy we had awesome views of a male siamang (black gibbon) as it fed a few metres from us on the leaves of a low fig tree on the side of the road. This was an animal I really wanted to see. More beer please, and another satay dinner.



Day 12 – Wednesday 10th June 1998

The walk from Fraser's Hill to The Gap is along an 8km long road that has traffic that alternates between one way up to one way down, so all the traffic passes at once and then nothing for 20 minutes and then all the traffic going the other way passes, making it a good road to walk along. We spied many beautiful birds but no sign of any more siamang.

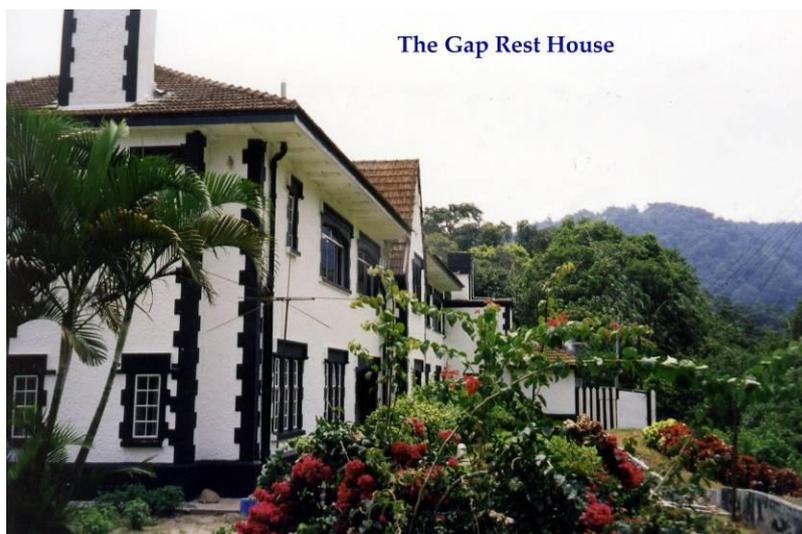
We lunched at The Gap Rest House before getting the bus back up to Fraser's Hill and more walking. We saw leaf monkeys, red-headed trogons, a green magpie and glimpses of a pair of pheasants I could not identify.

My legs were getting sore. I tried to cure them by drinking beer.

Spent much of the night hunting mosquitoes.

Day 13 – Thursday 11th June 1998

The public bus took us to our next stop, which had been much anticipated – The Gap Rest House. Here we were shown to our cavernous room with the biggest bathroom and the largest beds ever made. The rest house is an old British “hill station”, a lodge constructed so that some fat pommies could escape the heat, drink gin and point at the poor people. That it survived was a blessing for us. As the name suggests it exists in a gap between two thumping big hills. A Chinese family, on behalf of the Malaysian Government, manages it.



In view of the very comfortable guesthouse are the other couple of structures that exist at The Gap – there isn't much. Also in view was one very large very fruiting fig tree. I couldn't get over to it fast enough. There must have been at least one hundred birds in this one tree –

Asian fairy-bluebirds, various barbets and bulbuls, flowerpeckers, hanging parrots and pigeons. The forest along the road was also very birdy with many woodpeckers, flycatchers and hornbills.

By day the lodge played host to swiftlets flying through the dining room and out the other side. At night there were bats and nightjars performing the same trick.

There was a plan to go spotlighting but I had become rather unhinged from drinking something they call “Guinness”.

Day 14 – Friday 12th June 1998

There was a small-toothed palm civet in the fruiting fig tree, which provided a pre-breakfast bonus and the first “new” mammal for some days.

We strolled up the Fraser’s Hill Road to see feeding red-bearded bee-eaters in company with orange-breasted trogons, and on the ground, a bearded pig.

After lunch I met an Irish birder, Aidan Kelly, who showed me a pair of rhinoceros hornbills. These were shortly followed by a plethora of woodpeckers, pigeons, pin-tailed parrotfinches and wreathed and bushy-crested hornbills – all from sitting in the grounds of the guesthouse! Gentleman’s birding at its finest.

Mayette, meanwhile, had ingratiated herself with the management to the extent that we were ordering all our food without reference to the menu, with granny China heading up to Fraser’s Hill to buy the ingredients. I helped myself to drinks from the fridge and kept a tab.



Day 15 – Saturday 13th June 1998

Sadly, we moved on, with a bus to Kuala Khota Bahru, and then another to KL. We booked seats on the next day's train to Singapore and reconfirmed our flight to Kuching for four days hence. Otherwise a slothful day.

Day 16 – Sunday 14th June 1998

The Singapore Express left at 0740. It was a very comfortable air-conditioned train with TV and catering. Relaxing. Sadly, there was no scenery other than monotonous mile after mile of palm oil and rubber plantations. Eventually I gave up looking out the window altogether.

Singapore greeted us with long queues at immigration and longer queues for a taxi into town. The taxi driver laughed when I asked him about cheap accommodation. I thought 50 dollars would have bought something. We went to a fleabag place the driver suggested but we quickly bailed and looked elsewhere. Mayette was not a happy camper. She gained some comfort from the Hawaii Hostel, which was managed by a Filipina. The room we had was very interesting. It was the size of one double bed and four feet. Not four feet of extra space but room to place four feet, two each. Mayette would have rather stayed at Raffles, but they would not even let me in to have a look at the foyer.

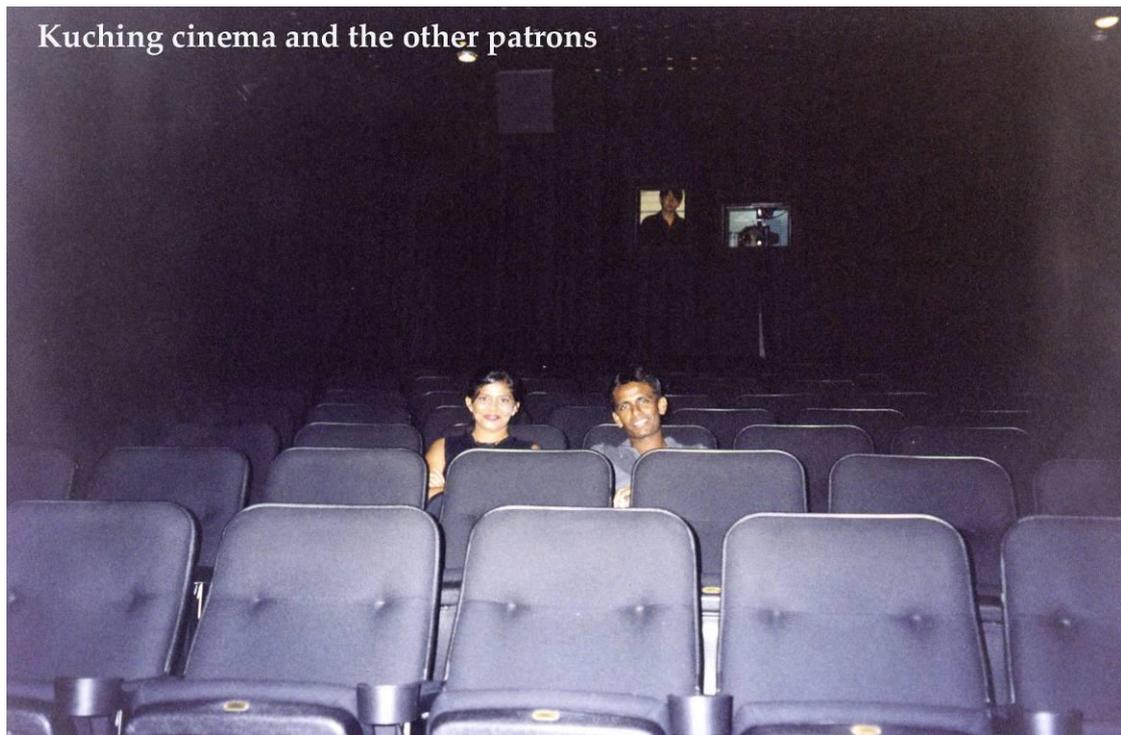
Prices in the Singapore goods markets were comparable to Sydney and the items on sale were just the same. I became quite unimpressed by the "country". It was not spotlessly clean, people jaywalked, most people were not all that happy with their lot, and the drivers were about as silly as those elsewhere in Asia.

I enjoyed a few beers near the food mall.

Day 17 – Monday 15th June 1998

We caught a taxi to a reservoir. There were lots of nice birds around it and turtles within it.

Mayette was not feeling all that flash so we went to see a movie, *The Wedding Singer*. It was quite intimate as there were about ten of us in the cinema and most of those were staff. I took a picture of the other patrons, both of them.



Day 18 – Tuesday 16th June 1998

It was almost a relief to travel across the causeway that separates Singapore with the rest of South East Asia. We checked into the Causeway Hotel in Johor Bahru. Mayette had the flu so she stayed in the room while I went for a pointless walk around the old palace grounds. A combination of mozzies, ants, heat and concern for the boss lady sent me back to the hotel where I purchased and pored over the Straights Times.

I enjoyed the aged, untidy and distinctively South East Asian bar near the hotel in preference to that across the water in Singapore. I felt as though my holiday had been on hold for the previous few days.

Day 19 – Wednesday 17th June 1998

Now something a bit more exciting. We flew to Kuching on an MAS 737-300. We caught a taxi to the Kuching visitor centre, a friendly place with lots of good info. Shortly thereafter we found ourselves on the bus to the Bako National Park wharf. We then hopped onto a boat and waved to some Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins on our way to the park. We checked into our lodge and went a-wandering.

Bako is a small park but rich in plants and landscapes. There are quite a few birds and lots of good mammals. About 20 stunning proboscis monkeys were easy to see in the mangroves, with long-tailed macaques everywhere, silvered leaf monkeys, bearded pigs, plantain squirrels, colugos (flying lemurs), and lots of microbats, geckos and assorted reptiles.



The higher parts of the park are sandstone with peculiar vegetation dominated by pitcher plants, orchids and stunted forest.

Day 20 – Thursday 18th June 1998

The only problem with Bako is that you see it rather quickly. It is one of those places that you should not hurry around because you find yourself retracing your steps.

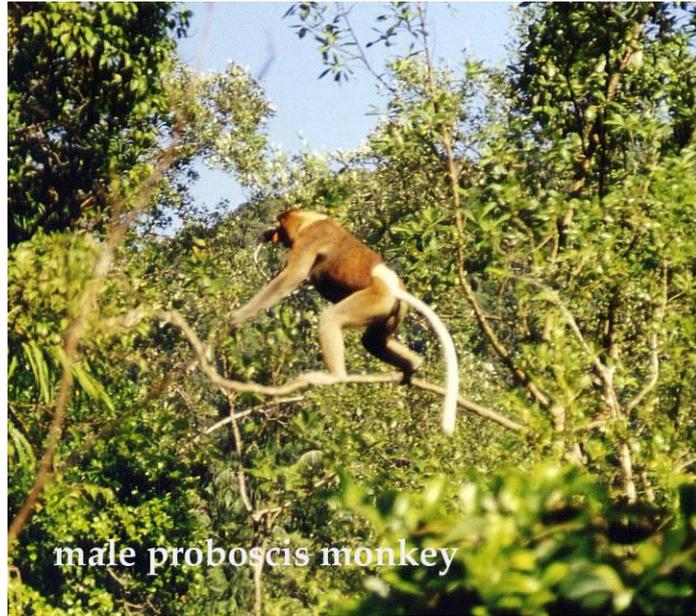
Mayette was still not very well so aside from delighting in the three monkey species that hung around the camp, we did little. The macaques, things you would soon grow to hate if they lived in your back garden, ran all their usual scams to dispossess newcomer tourists of their food and drink. These are very smart animals and have big enough teeth to know that white monkeys can do no real harm to them.

The evening spotlight revealed colugos and small-toothed palm civets.

Day 21 – Friday 19th June 1998

One of the days in a holiday that got stuck, for one reason or another, in first gear.

The highlight for the evening was the arrival of a platoon of college students. These people were so noisy and obnoxious that we pleaded successfully to the management to be moved to a different cottage for our last night so as to be away from them. I wrote a neatly worded letter to their college at the request of the park staff who were scared of them. I received no reply but that was hardly surprising.



male proboscis monkey



sandstone in Bako NP



silvered leaf-monkeys

Day 22 – Saturday 20th June 1998

We walked to a beautiful headland overlooking a sandy beach. It was most relaxing and I enjoyed taking pictures of pitcher plants and orchids and things.

Finished the last of my bottle of Jack.



Day 23 – Sunday 21st June 1998

Brahim, our boatman, arrived promptly at 1100 and took us via another pod of Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins on the way back to the wharf. We checked into the very worthwhile Fata Hotel in Kuching. We spent the afternoon wandering about the waterfront, enjoying a few beers and a steak, shrimp and mussel dinner.

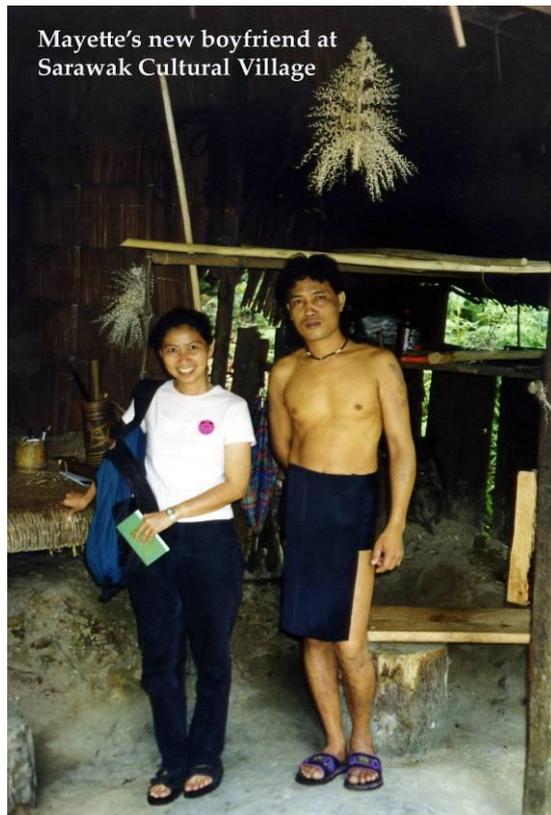
Day 24 – Monday 22nd June 1998

This day was to host one of my all-time favourite travel experiences. We ambled down to the town centre to look for a place to eat breakfast prior to visiting the Sarawak Cultural Village at Santabong. A Chinese man of inestimable age animatedly herded us into a restaurant of the roller-shutter door variety with much arm waving and fractured English. He conveyed his opinions of the food we might have by pointing to his mouthparts and smiling a lot. We decided to eat there anyway.

After cleaning up some rice, eggs, juice, coffee, toast and anything else they had – working on the principle that you never know when your next meal is likely – we went to pay the lady behind the money machine. She explained, “Oh no, no need to pay”. The first thing that sprang to mind is that we had consigned our lives to a long period of bonded slavery making

nasi lemak and cleaning floors. However a polite enquiry elicited the response that “the old Chinese man paid for your breakfast”. I was gob-smacked. “Doesn’t he work here?” Answer, no.

The Sarawak Cultural Village was really very good. It contained people from the different cultural groups in Sarawak, their architecture, artefacts and often some sort of dance routine or explanation of their way of life. We spent several hours here. It was bordered on one side by a forest-covered mountain with quite a few birds. I was happy to see chestnut-breasted malkoha and a few others.



We returned to Kuching to track down the mysterious beneficent Chinaman. He ran a small shop selling bulk eggs, rice and whatever. He gained a stuffed toy for his trouble. All he had to say on the subject of free breakfasts was - “Welcome to Kuching”.

The Sarawak Museum was our next stop. This fine museum contains much of the collection of Wallace so it was of special interest to me.

I had fallen in love with Kuching – and the best was yet to come!

Day 25 – Tuesday 23rd June 1998

This day was always going to be a day to remember long before it started. It was orang-utan day and I was prepared for it. My planning was set to achieve two things, getting to hold an orang-utan, and getting Mayette not to have the shits with me for doing so. The latter was resolved by promising a night out at the best restaurant in town if the former could be sorted. For this I had asked Zamri, the guy in the visitor centre who deals out the permits how not to

get attacked by an orang. He told me it was very simple – don't carry any food with you. Fine, gotcha.

And so laden with bananas, eucalyptus lollies and various other tid-bits we caught the 0715 Sarawak Transport Company bus (that left at 0705, probably to avoid having to take too many tourists) to Semenggoh Orang-utan Rehabilitation Centre. Upon arrival my plan started to fall over. The Dayak chappy who seemed to be running the show specifically asked if any of us had any fruit in their bags. Being basically honest I said I had brought some to donate to the food stocks for the orange folk. I didn't donate all of it because that question was not specifically asked, only implied.

As the rather disappointing gaggle of fat Europeans weighed down with cameras and the like stayed close behind the guide, Mayette and I loitered as far back as we thought we could reasonably manage. A mid-sized orang started down a tree next to a railing so I gave the camera to Mayette and stayed where I was. It grabbed me rather too tightly by the arm and showed no signs of letting go. Unfazed, I lifted it off the railing and it wrapped itself around me in a way that only orang-utans can do. Mayette was taking pictures and shaking. Fantastic!! No smelly animal this, but a cute, clean and expressive little guy.

Things started to go rather badly for me when the Dayak with the tattoos heard the screaming.



A rotund German lady was screaming that I was being attacked!! The guide ran at me kicking and yelling in some tribal tongue that may have had meaning to the orang but was certainly lost on me. The orange guy went elsewhere and the guide chewed me out for being some sort of loony or other. Problem was he couldn't get the smile off my face so he treated me rather coldly as I settled into some productive birdwatching.

Later, after the rabble and Mayette had departed, I stayed and had a bit of a chat with my newfound Dayak mate. He explained that my hairy friend made a habit of grabbing tourists and stripping them naked and stealing all their gear. He was at a loss to explain why I had been treated differently. I wasn't.

The forest in Sarawak is alive with squirrels. Even squirrel "waves" are possible. In one such procession there were giant, slender, plantain, Prevost's and black-eared pygmy squirrels and lesser tree shrews.

After some very heavy rain, I caught the same bus, seven minutes earlier than schedule, back to town. This bus was running at land speed record pace and bizarrely failed to stop for anything, including passengers. There have been movies made about this sort of thing.

bus ride of a lifetime



Hornbill's Corner Café was the venue for a few cleansing ales and a post mortem before a dinner to die for at the See Good Seafood Restaurant. The said facility was not showy, they spoke no English, but they served the best seafood I have ever tasted, by a tidy margin.

And we still haven't got to the reason that Kuching is my favourite city.



Day 26 – Wednesday 24th June 1998

I went to Kubah National Park and wandered all over it but the wildlife was a bit thin on the ground. Managed a new squirrel - plain pygmy squirrel, and a few new birds but nothing of any real consequence.

After catching an illegal taxi back to town we went to Hornbill's for more cool drinks and a fantastic steamboat dinner. They had a curious rule – you could eat as much as you like but if you leave anything on your plate at the end of your meal, they weigh it and charge you extra! Good thinking.

Day 27 – Thursday 25th June 1998

For much of the morning we poked about the shops. A Chinese man threw some apples at us. This was not in a fit of rage but in fits of laughter. He couldn't stop seeing the humour in giving Australians some Aussie apples he was selling. We tried to buy them but he wouldn't take our money. We had some delicious satay for lunch, before going to see a movie, Mercury Rising. There were six of us. Not six of us in our party, but six of us in the cinema.

Kuching has few traffic lights, little traffic, a lack of an identifiable city centre, lots of friendly people and the best pub in the whole world. I cannot reveal the location of this facility but it is called De Tavern Pub. We chatted with some other Aussies and a very large Dayak man and purchased some ale and vodka from the stunningly pretty barmaid. The said Dayak bought us drinks. Fine. Then he did it again, then some guy I'd never seen before buys drinks for everyone. Then he did it again. At about this time I started looking for angels and the choir invisible.

Beer and vodka produced itself endlessly and we paid for none of it. They even sent out for food when we tried to leave to get something to eat.



staff and owner of the best bar known

Day 28 – Friday 26th June 1998

0130 and Mayette was saying that she loved the bar and wouldn't it be great to go back there the next day? I'm thinking that this may not feel so good for two reasons. Firstly the hangover hadn't started as we staggered back to the hotel, and secondly we flew back to KL later in the day.

We arrived back at the Hotel Malaya on time, and now for the first of our shopping forays.

Day 29 – Saturday 27th June 1998

More shopping preceded lunch and a movie. This time the cinema was chock-a-block and if at all possible hotter than the street outside.

We left Malaysia to catch the 2030 flight from the very soon to be closed airport. This airport ceased to trade two days later and it was falling apart or being stolen by the staff. People were walking around with pot plants and building materials and other stuff that did not previously belong to them. The duty free shops had 50% off everything provided that you wanted to buy a whisky that was 1000 years old and cost three quarters of a million pounds.

The flight was fine and we arrived in Sydney to be greeted by a Vietnamese taxi driver. Welcome back.

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