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# BY THE RIVERS OF BORNEO

Remote and uncharted, Maliau Basin in Borneo is as mysterious as it is magical. It may have more waterfalls than any other area on Earth, and is a haven for wildlife – including lots of leeches, says photographer **Nick Garbutt**.

**ABOVE**  
Exposed layers of ancient sedimentary rock create the stepped appearance of many of the Basin's cascades, here Giluk Falls.

**LEFT**  
Reticulated pythons are often found near water in the Basin's lowland forest areas. Small individuals, such as this one, are adept climbers.

## THE EXPERT

**NICK GARBUTT** is a writer, tour leader and an award-winning photographer. He first ventured into the Bornean rainforest 20 years ago, and has been enthralled ever since.

If time travel were possible, would you go forwards or backwards? Hankering after the bygone era of great exploration, I'd go back, to follow in the footsteps of Wallace, Stanley, Speke and other pioneering travellers – as long as my cameras could come with me.

Today, there are few places on the planet that are truly out of reach, the only restrictions being time and the depth of your pocket. Yet there are still some that conjure mystery, intrigue and even foreboding in a way that inspired the adventurous spirits of those famous trailblazers. One such place is Maliau Basin, in the heart of Borneo – Sabah's 'Lost World'.

Resembling a giant, rainforest-cloaked amphitheatre over 25km across and covering more than 390km<sup>2</sup>, the Basin was not discovered until 1947, when a light aircraft nearly crashed into one of its mist-shrouded cliffs. The first scientific exploration took place in 1982, with a more thorough follow-up in 1988. Documenting the extraordinary biodiversity of the region is an ongoing project, but so special are the findings that Maliau Basin is soon to be designated a World Heritage Site.

Hundreds of streams tumble down the Basin's steep sides, plummeting over precipitous rock edges into breathtaking, multi-layered waterfalls. Particularly spectacular are Giluk Falls, akin to a giant, sculptured water feature; the towering Takob-Akob Falls, which plunge into an extensive rocky hollow; and the seven-tier Maliau ▶

**AFTER DARK, OUR CAMPS WERE PERIODICALLY INSPECTED BY CURIOUS BEARDED PIGS.**





**FAR LEFT**  
Three-horned rhinoceros beetles are among the world's largest, and found in many parts of the South-East Asian rainforest. Males are intolerant of each other and use their 'horns' to joust, aiming to flip their opponents off the branch.

**LEFT**  
Canopy-dwelling birds such as the green broadbill are a challenge to see in any of Borneo's forests, but especially in Maliau Basin. Canopy walkways and towers (such as the Sky Bridge near Belian Camp and the observation tower at Nepenthes Camp) are good places to start.

**ABOVE**  
Bearded pigs are normally shy and rarely seen, but these youngsters were frequent visitors to Nepenthes Camp, where they supplemented their omnivorous diet by scavenging for vegetable matter in the rubbish pit.



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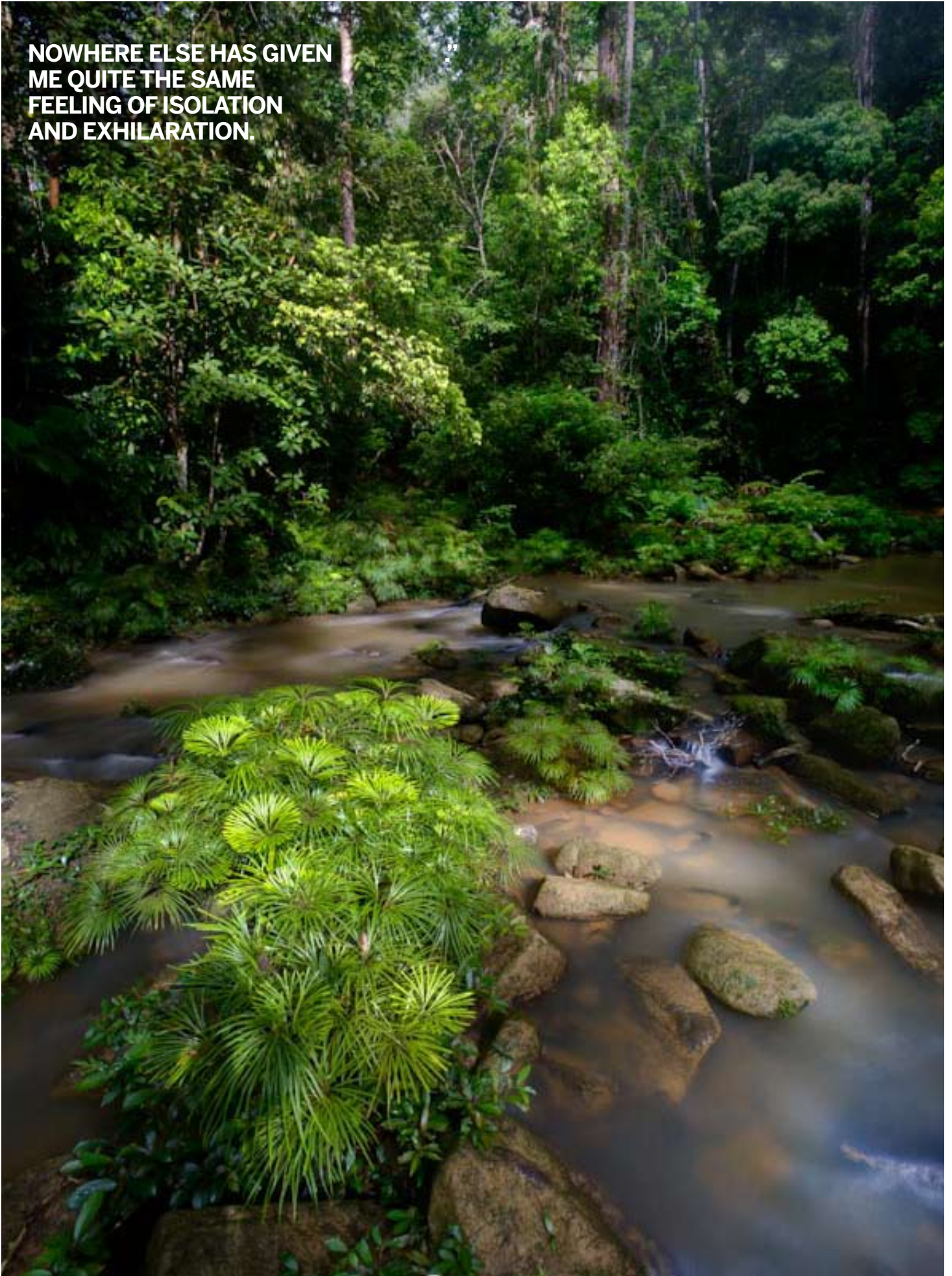
Falls, in the heart of the Basin, for their incredible raw power and energy.

After a number of thwarted attempts, I finally made it to Maliau Basin in May 2011. Carrying basic necessities for a week in the forest, I set off with a local guide and porter. The first three hours' hike, from Agathis Camp to Nepenthes Camp, set the tone – a steep climb through dense forest up the rim to the southern plateau. Here, the habitat changed dramatically to open heath forest, known locally as *kerangas*, dominated by stunted oak, chestnut and laurel.

Pitcher plants flourished on the impoverished soils – six species (genus *Nepenthes*) have been recorded here, often growing in such profusion that they resembled something from the Chelsea Flower Show. I wandered open-mouthed through one stand of trees, their trunks hijacked by lavish ▶

**ABOVE**  
The heath forest on the southern plateau supports some of the Basin's richest groves of pitcher plants. So profuse are they that some species hybridise. These magnificent individuals may be hybrids of *Nepenthes stenophylla* and *N. veitchii*.

**NOWHERE ELSE HAS GIVEN  
ME QUITE THE SAME  
FEELING OF ISOLATION  
AND EXHILARATION.**



**LEFT**

The giant dead leaf mantis is a cryptic marvel, superbly camouflaging itself among the detritus on the forest floor. It uses movement to enhance the impersonation, quivering when disturbed like a leaf on the breeze.

**ABOVE**

Another master of disguise, the Bornean horned frog inhabits lowland and mid-altitude rainforest. Males generally call from the vicinity of streams, and their loud, resonant honks can create a noisy chorus lasting up to 30 minutes.

**LEFT**

Riverine ferns often dominate the margins of lowland forest streams. The look delicate, but can withstand regular bashing by brutal floodwaters.

**ABOVE**

The crested wood partridge is hard to spot, but this one made a rare visit to Ginseng Camp. The species patrols the Rainforest Biome at the Eden Project, controlling unwanted invertebrates.

**NOW YOU DO IT****GETTING THERE**

► You can fly from the UK to Kota Kinabalu, the state capital of Sabah, with **Malaysia Airlines** ([www.malaysiaairlines.com](http://www.malaysiaairlines.com)), **Singapore Airlines** ([www.singaporeair.com](http://www.singaporeair.com)), **Royal Brunei** ([www.bruneiair.com/uk](http://www.bruneiair.com/uk)) and **Cathay Pacific** ([www.cathaypacific.com](http://www.cathaypacific.com)).  
► Local airlines, like **Air Asia** ([www.airasia.com](http://www.airasia.com)), fly from Kota Kinabalu to Tawau.  
► **Maliau Basin** is accessible by road (4WD required) from Kota Kinabalu and Tawau. However, it is very remote and the few camps are permit-only, so it is best to join a tour.

**WHEN TO GO**

► It rains year-round, but avoid August–September and November–December, which are particularly wet. It's best to visit during the 'dry' season (April–May).

**HEALTH AND SAFETY**

► You need to be **fit**. It is hot and humid, and the treks are strenuous.

**OTHER PLACES TO VISIT**

For a more accessible rainforest experience, try the **Kinabatangan River**, good for proboscis monkeys and Borneo pygmy elephants, or the **Danum Valley** (above), for orangutans and tarsiers.

**FURTHER READING**

► **A Field Guide to the Mammals of Borneo** by J Payne and CM Francis (The Sabah Society, 9679994716, RRP £27.50, W0712/XX).  
► Buy this book on p85.

spirals of *Nepenthes veitchii*. Each pitcher sported an extravagant shawl collar of red, gold or green.

Each morning, low cloud and mist swirled around the canopy, creating that ethereal atmosphere only rainforests possess. But even when the fog lifted, it was clear that animals – large ones, at least – would be tough to see. I heard Bornean gibbons several times, yet only caught a fleeting glimpse of an adult before it melted into the trees with effortless, arm-to-arm swings. I had brief views of a troop of maroon langurs, but the second they saw me they bounded off into the canopy with a volley of agitated alarm calls and a flash of orange fur. And while our camps were periodically inspected by curious bearded pigs and the occasional Malay civet, their visits were always after dark.

So I concentrated instead on smaller, often overlooked species – of which there is an abundance in the Basin. Stingless bees built delicate funnel nests from tree trunks, horned frogs hid in the leaf litter, a baby reticulated python knotted itself around a twig and – in the heath forest – a spectacular red and blue orb-web spider patrolled the pitcher plants in search of prey. For other invertebrates, I was supper: most evenings I had to pull at least 30 leeches off my trousers and leech socks.

I've been fortunate enough to visit many of the world's renowned wild places, but nowhere else has given me quite the same feeling of remoteness, isolation and exhilaration. This must have been a routine state of mind for those pioneering explorers – even though the leeches ensure you are never totally alone. 🦋