

Sabah's *Lost World*

Cumbria's upland farmers face challenging times as biodiversity and carbon storage targets force changes to the way they farm. Can they protect a way of life that stretches back more than 1,000 years? **Harriet Fraser** reports

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NICK GARbutt



These days, there's hardly a square metre on the planet that can't be visited; the only limits are time and the depth of your pockets. And yet, thankfully, there are still remote places that conjure mystery, intrigue and even foreboding in a way that stoked the adventurous spirits of the famous explorers of yesteryear. In the heart of Borneo lies one such place – the remarkable Maliau Basin.

Long known to the local Murut people, who still live close to the base of the northern escarpment, the basin's existence was only revealed to the outside world in 1947, when the pilot of a light aircraft nearly crashed into the mist-shrouded cliffs of the rim. Even prior to this, the Murut only made occasional forays into the basin to hunt or collect forest produce. Maliau translates to 'bowl' or 'basin' in the Murut dialect, but can also mean 'murky' or 'milky', referring to the colour of the rivers that run out of the basin.

Today, the villages of Inarad and Pinangah, located about ten kilometres from the base of the northern escarpment, are home to the Tanggara Murut and Orang Sungei ('River People'), who've never hunted within the basin (which is inaccessible from the north). For them, the basin remains enveloped in an aura of mystery and superstition.

Resembling a giant rainforest-cloaked amphitheatre more than 25 kilometres across and covering in excess of 390 square kilometres, the

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basin lies in the heart of the Malaysian state of Sabah. Its waters drain to the east coast, more than 600 kilometres away.

Expeditions carried out during the early 20th century managed to reach areas surrounding the basin, but it wasn't until 1981 that its natural defences were successfully breached. A year later, the first scientific exploration took place, with a more thorough follow-up in 1988. Documentation of the extraordinary biodiversity is ongoing, but so special are the discoveries made already that Maliau Basin has been proposed as a future World Heritage site.

Neither caldera nor impact crater, the basin is actually a sedimentary formation of inclined beds of sandstone and mudstone, laid down in an ancient river delta some ten to 15 million years ago, then later thrust upwards by tectonic movements. Over the subsequent millennia, hundreds of streams have formed on the basin's steep sides, cutting ravines through the sedimentary layers and regularly plummeting over precipitous rock edges to form breathtaking waterfalls. Today, more than 40 major cascades

are known, but more almost certainly await discovery.

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After years of anticipation and several thwarted attempts, I visited the basin for the first time in 2011, before returning for a longer stint of exploration in 2013. The starting point for treks into the basin is Agathis Camp, which lies at the basin's outer southern edge amid a stately mixed-dipterocarp forest.

Within a few hundred metres of leaving camp, the trail the leading to the basin rises steeply. As the altitude increases, the forest changes complexion: the taller trees disappear and the height of the canopy drops.

Above 900 metres, a local variant of lower montane forest becomes increasingly established, eventually dominating the southern rim of the basin at 1,025 metres. Across the southern plateau, the habitat changes again to stunted open heath forest, known locally as 'kerangas', which literally translates to 'forested land that, if cleared, won't grow rice'.

On these impoverished soils flourish various species adapted to the nutrient deficiency. These include pitcher plants that often grow in such profusion that it's as if they were planted as a Royal Horticultural Society exhibit.

Six species from the genus *Nepenthes* have been recorded in the basin. I wandered open-mouthed through areas where tree trunks were

encrusted with lavish spirals of *N. veitchii*, each pitcher sporting an extravagant shawl collar of red, gold or green. In other areas, aerial pitchers hung in dense curtains just above the ground.

At *Nepenthes* Camp on the plateau of the southern escarpment, I eagerly climbed to a canopy platform built into an imposing *Agathis* tree. The aerial perspective across the forest canopy was certainly impressive, but it didn't provide the view across the basin that I had hoped for. Nonetheless, at first light, the low cloud and mists that swirled around the canopy created that magical, ethereal quality that only rainforests possess.

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Each day, our treks began with excited anticipation – what might be seen or discovered? Yet it quickly became clear that animals, at least large ones, were sparse and difficult to see. I heard Bornean gibbons several times, but only caught one fleeting glimpse; we didn't see any other primates.

A clue to the reason for this paucity is evident in the basin's streams and rivers, all of which resemble stewed tea. This staining is caused by tannins and saponins that have leached from the leaf litter. These chemicals are produced by plants that grow on nutrient-poor soils, specifically to deter leaf predation by herbivores.

I only saw mammals with any regularity after dark – around the camps. During the day, in the forests around *Nepenthes* Camp, I had seen the

PREVIOUS SPREAD:

Hannah Dickinson keeps a strong ram quiet with a gentle hold under the chin; OPPOSITE, TOP: like all his fellow Cumbrian upland shepherds, Gavin Bland has to bring his sheep in on foot;

OPPOSITE, BELOW: David Bland, Gavin's father, helps to drive the ewes and their lambs to the richer grass on Thirlmere reservoir





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ABOVE: many farmers prefer their fell sheep to wait until their third year before becoming pregnant. With insufficient enclosed land to separate the ewes from the rams, Anthony Hartley is one of a handful of farmers who still stitches 'clouds', like soft chastity belts, onto his young ewes. **OPPOSITE:** agricultural shows have attracted the same farming families for hundreds of years

tell-tale tracks and messy excavations of bearded pigs, but I was still surprised when they came into camp at night to scavenge. Rather more shy, but still adept at scavenging, were beautiful Malay civets, which could sometimes be seen creeping around the camp's periphery.

With larger species off the agenda, I concentrated my photographic efforts on the forest's smaller, often overlooked creatures. I'm never more content than when grubbing around for reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates, and Maliau offered them up in abundance. Stingless bees produced delicate funnel nests on the sides of tree trunks; a mantis resembling a shrivelled leaf sat in ambush in the leaf litter; a baby python lay knotted on a twig; mandolin beetles scurried across the forest floor; and in the heath forest, a spectacular red-and-blue orb-web spider was regularly found around the pitcher plants.

Other invertebrates were particularly easy to find - in fact, they found me. Leeches may be harmless, but they're definitely a nuisance. I routinely pulled 30 or more off my trousers and socks at the end of a day's hike.

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Near Lobah Camp, which lies northeast of Nepenthes camp on the edge of the southern rim, I finally found a vantage that gave me a view across the full extent of the basin. On the distant ridge, I could just make out Gunung Lotung (at around 1,600 metres, one of the highest points on the rim) and on either side, the rim of the basin curved smoothly around in a great arc. The giant depression of the bowl itself lay partially smothered in wispy cloud, but huge expanses of

the pristine forest beneath could be seen through the breaks and the forest readily erupted through the cloak on the rippling ridges that ran through the basin.

The steep descent into the basin followed a ridgeline. Again, the forest changed quickly, and we were soon enveloped by the majestic dipterocarp forest typical of lowland areas.

During my first visit, I had seen the tightly closed bud of a locally endemic, and very rare, species of *Rafflesia*. These peculiar parasitic plants are restricted to Southeast Asia and produce the largest single blooms of any plant (up to 95 centimetres in diameter). They parasitise a particular genus of liana, and are only visible when actually in bloom - an event that is infrequent, unpredictable and lasts only a few days.

But I was in luck. As I neared the bottom of the basin, with the roar of Maliau Falls increasing in volume, I came across a near-perfect bloom close to the trail, nestled among the roots of a huge *Shorea* tree. The flower was exquisite - perhaps in its third day, so fully open, but with no signs of deterioration (by day six or so, they have shrivelled and largely decayed).

The species in Maliau, *R. tengku-adlini*, was only discovered in 1987 and is probably now entirely restricted to the basin and known only from a handful of locations. By *Rafflesia* standards it's small - a diameter of up to 25 centimetres - but its uniform orange-red colouration is very distinctive.

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At the very bottom of the trail, I emerged from the forest at the river's edge, where the thunderous Maliau Falls cascade down in seven tiers. From ground level, it's impossible to gain a full appreciation of the falls as only two tiers are visible, yet the power and aura of the spectacle is still profound.

I've been fortunate to visit many of the world's renowned wild areas, but nowhere else has given me quite the same feeling of remoteness and isolated exhilaration as Maliau. After an



68 mm by 68 mm

