

Not far from camp,
in the heart of this
isolated corner of
Borneo, the unbridled
power of Giluk Falls

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During an expedition into the rainforest in Borneo's Danum Valley, **Nick Garbutt** ventures even further into the wilderness to explore the remote and pristine Maliau Basin in the island's interior

LOST world

Dawn in a Borneo rainforest generates an ethereal atmosphere that is incomparable. Cool air brushes the face, subtle aromas of dampness percolate in the nostrils and intriguing noises pepper the ear drums. The sun's first rays take time to filter through the thick duvet of mist that sits on top of the canopy, but as this cover gradually breaks down, pools of soft light are thrown into once-dark corners. High above, the haunting, melancholy calls of gibbons intermingle with a chorus of birdsong. These first stirrings set the tone for a new day and suddenly there is movement and life everywhere.

Danum Valley in Sabah and in particular the areas around Borneo Rainforest Lodge have provided me with some of my most memorable wildlife experiences in the world. I've been fortunate to visit many times and the excitement is never any less intense than

the first time. After leaving the road near Lahad Datu, the excitement builds with each passing kilometre. On this visit to Sabah, however, I was only spending a few days at Borneo Rainforest Lodge before heading to the mysterious and remote Maliau Basin, even further into the interior.

Before dawn on the first morning in Danum, I met up with lodge guide and long-time friend Rafel, who had helped me during many previous trips. Local knowledge is key when wildlife watching and especially so in rainforests, where it can be quite literally impossible to see the wood for the trees.

Rafel proposed we go straight to the canopy walkway about a kilometre from the lodge. He was being coy but I could tell there was a specific reason for his suggestion. Still dark, we headed up the main trail from the lodge at a brisk pace. I was soon hot – even in the cool of early morning it does not take long to get sweaty in such high humidity. I couldn't see much yet, but the first sounds of →



Clockwise from here: the short-crested forest dragon changes colour during the breeding season; rehabilitated orangutans; the fierce-looking three-horned rhinoceros beetle is actually harmless to humans; large aerial pitcher plants

the dawn chorus were just beginning. From the darkest recesses of the undergrowth came the musical song of a male white-browed shama.

As we approached the turn-off for the walkway, the sound of rustling in the treetops caught my attention. Craning my neck upwards, I couldn't see the cause initially, then some foliage moved and a bough bounced one way, then the other. That was the giveaway; it had to be an orangutan. Sure enough, up in the canopy, silhouetted against the increasingly lightening sky, was a fuzzy shape moving rather ponderously, arms moving deliberately from branch to branch. I could tell from its size it was an adult male, but could make out little detail in the half-light.

"He's been in the area a couple of days now," said Rafel, almost dismissively. "Come on," he continued. "He'll probably still be around when we come back. I want to show you something more exciting." Tearing myself from a wild orangutan was not easy. Whatever Rafel had up his sleeve had to be good.

We climbed the steps to the canopy walkway and set out across the first two spans, stopping on the main platform, built around a giant Mengaris tree. By now it was light enough to see through the treetops. Rafel pointed back across the valley to a huge tree, perhaps 70 metres away. "Look in there closely," he said. "It's in fruit. Tell me what you see." With my binoculars, I began scanning the branches laden with golf ball-sized fruit. "On the left side," Rafel encouraged. I got it then: the shaggy, charcoal-grey shape of the binturong

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was unmistakable. "Wow," I exclaimed. It was an amazing view, the best I'd ever had. Belying its clumsy appearance the animal walked nimbly along a branch to a clump of fruit and started to eat. Binturongs are sometimes rather confusingly called 'bear cats', although they are closely related to neither. They are in fact the largest members of the civet and genet family (viverridae), but look very different to any of their kin.

NOCTURNAL ADVENTURE

Rafel explained that the tree had been in fruit for several days now and had attracted all manner of species. Three binturongs had been seen and several species of hornbill were also regular visitors. In the hour that we watched, both rhinoceros and helmeted hornbills came and went. Such intense bouts of activity are common whenever a large tree comes into fruit as it's not an everyday occurrence.

A further dimension comes as dusk falls. When all the familiar daytime creatures are bedding themselves down, a new cast of characters is stirring from its slumber,



including nocturnal primates, carnivores, geckos, frogs, a myriad of insects and more besides. Naturally, the fundamental problem to seeing nocturnal animals is the dark. However, the retina in most nocturnal animals is highly reflective. In torchlight, the eyes of an animal looking towards you appear to glow red, referred to as 'eye-shine'.

Next to the lodge is a boardwalk circuit called the Nature Trail and this is always a good place to begin a nocturnal foray. On a →



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ORANGUTAN REHABILITATION

The efforts to return orphaned and illegally captive orangutans to the wild



It is ironic that, on an island so rich in biodiversity, one of Borneo's major tourist attractions is a facility synonymous with captive and semi-captive animals. Virtually every visitor to Sabah finds time to take in Sepilok Orang Utan Rehabilitation Centre. It is easy to see why; sightings of orangutans are almost guaranteed and encounters often turn into memorable, intimate experiences.

Established in 1964, Sepilok is the oldest and most accessible of six major rehabilitation centres in Borneo (three more are in Kalimantan and two in Sarawak). These centres provide a safe haven for orphaned and illegally captive orangutans, with the intention of returning them to full health and then the wild. The majority are young animals and are often in very poor health. After an initial period in quarantine, the tiniest infants are cared for around the clock. Older infants (one to three years) are housed with other youngsters in nurseries, with climbing areas and an environment enriched with real

branches and foliage. As they get older, their interaction with humans is reduced and they are introduced to semi-wild areas, where they can further develop crucial climbing, foraging and nest building skills. Finally, when they are sufficiently strong and healthy they are 'soft-released' into forest areas, where food to supplement their diet (milk and fruit, plus minerals and vitamins) is offered daily. This is not meant to provide the orangutans with all their nutritional needs, encouraging them to forage for themselves.

To date, hundreds of orangutans have been returned to the wild across Borneo. Funding for these projects comes from the state government in Sabah, visitors and independent charities. Despite the apparent success of these rehabilitation projects, critics claim the money would be better spent on in situ conservation with wild orangutans. However, not only do the centres raise public awareness, but many rehabilitated individuals have integrated back into parts of the forest that can sustain them.

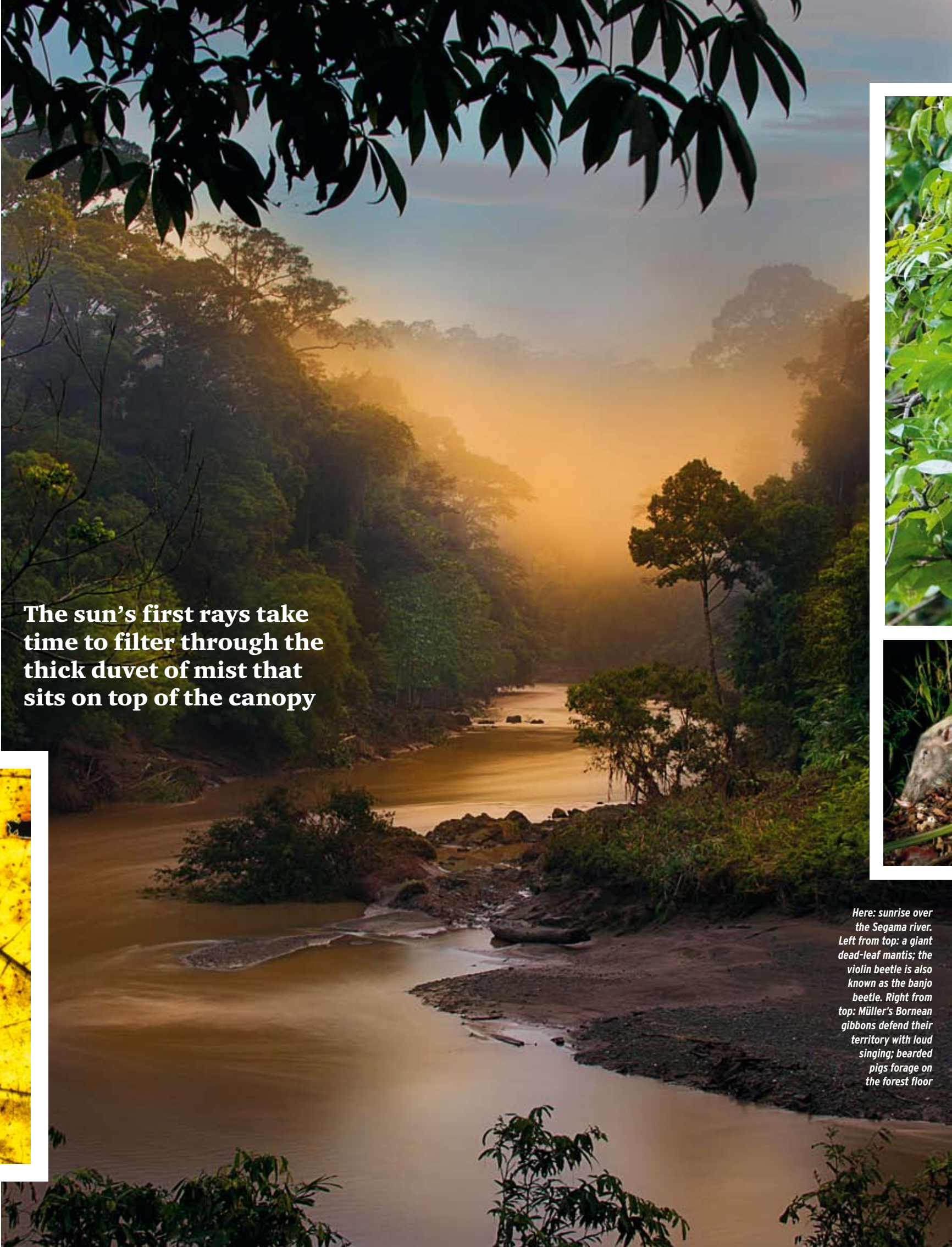
typical walk it is possible to see mouse deer tip-toeing silently across the forest floor in search of fallen fruits or fungi, or perhaps a palm civet investigating a fallen tree's crevices. You might spy a slow loris climbing a vine or a horned frog sitting stoically in the leaf litter. Whatever happens, the experience is a window into an otherwise unseen world. It never disappoints.

But Danum was just for starters; the main course on this trip was a venture to Maliau Basin. In today's world there is hardly a square metre that cannot be reached, the only limitations being time and money. Yet a few places are still able to conjure mystery, intrigue and even foreboding. Maliau Basin – Sabah's 'Lost World' – is such a place.

Resembling a giant rainforest-cloaked amphitheatre over 25km across and covering more than 390km², the basin was not 'discovered' until 1947, when a light aircraft nearly crashed into a mist-shrouded cliff. The first scientific exploration took place in 1982, with a more thorough follow-up in 1988. Documenting the extraordinary biodiversity is ongoing, but so special are findings that Maliau is soon to become a World Heritage Site.



The sun's first rays take time to filter through the thick duvet of mist that sits on top of the canopy



Here: sunrise over the Segama river. Left from top: a giant dead-leaf mantis; the violin beetle is also known as the banjo beetle. Right from top: Müller's Bornean gibbons defend their territory with loud singing; bearded pigs forage on the forest floor

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We spent two nights at Nepenthes Camp, which allowed time to explore the surrounding splendour. Hundreds of streams begin on the basin's steep sides and drain toward the centre. These regularly plummet over precipitous edges into breathtaking waterfalls. Over 40 major cascades are known, with others probably awaiting discovery. Within striking distance of camp were Giluk Falls and Takob-Akob Falls, both stunningly beautiful symphonies of sculptured rock and racing torrents.

SMALL WONDERS

After spending a day traveling by road from Danum, Rafel and I reached Agathis base camp for the night. The following morning we set off carrying basic necessities for a week in the forest. The first three hours on the trail heading towards Nepenthes Camp set the tone. It was a steep climb through dense forest up to the rim of the southern plateau. Here the habitat changed significantly to stunted, open heath forest, known locally as 'kerangas'. In the impoverished soil flourished pitcher plants, which grew in such profusion that they looked fit for a horticultural show exhibit. I wandered open-mouthed through areas where tree trunks had been taken over by lavish spirals of nepenthes veitchii.

Halfway into my exploration, one thing had become clear – animals, at least large ones, were tough to see. I'd heard gibbons several times, but only caught a fleeting glimpse. There had been brief views of a troop of maroon langurs and, after dark, our camps had been inspected by curious bearded pigs and scavenging Malay civets, but otherwise very little had appeared (presumably because wildlife is not yet habituated).

Instead I concentrated on finding the smaller, often overlooked things – I'm rarely happier than when grubbing around for reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates and in Maliau, these are plentiful. Stingless bees →



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. **WT**



Clockwise from here: Nick Garbutt shooting at, and in, Giluk Falls; luminous fungi glow in the moonlight; the male crested wood partridge is brighter than its female counterpart; a Wallace's frog perches on a palm leaf



TRIP ADVISER

WHEN TO GO: It can rain at any time in Sabah, but travellers should avoid August to September, and November to December, which are particularly wet. April to May is considered to be the island's 'dry' season.