



The agony and the ecstasy

Craig Tansley endures aches and cold to earn a lasting memory on Mount Kinabalu.

Day five, 2pm: Kota Kinabalu. I grip the sides of my massage table so tightly I feel like my knuckles might snap. It's all I can do to stop from screaming out. "You need this hard, mister," she tells me. Overhead, a ceiling fan whirrs away in my five-star hotel room.

It's a far cry from the place that did this to me, but Pollen, whose iron fingers plunge and poke into my aching thigh muscles, knows exactly where I've been and what I need. "I am from Mount Kinabalu," she says. "I've climbed that mountain, too, many times. I know where you hurt. I know how it feels. Mister, I know how to fix you."

Day zero, 6:03pm: Rajah Lodge, Mount Kinabalu National Park. I'm at the base of the mountain, which, as the sun sets, looks beautiful and sinister. Locals say the souls of the dead are at the top of Mount Kinabalu, so to them it's more sacred than any church or mosque. What to us are clouds are to the locals spirits protecting the mountain.

Australian World War II POWs thought Mount Kinabalu was sinister and menacing: "Thousands of leeches, as big as pencils crawling all over you, and big baboons [orang-utans] screaming in the jungle of a night and the dense jungle was all misty and cloudy and ghostly," one survivor said.

A full moon rises; eerie white clouds swirl and cover then uncover the summit, while the noises of the jungle take turns to stop and start.

I can see the lights of the base camp at Laban Rata as they start to twinkle; the peak looks a long way up, deepetched against the evening sky. Yesterday, from my resort on Sabah's humid west coast, I saw the peak for the first time.



Base camp ... Laban Rata rest house on Mount Kinabalu. Photo: Photolibary

Shaped like a giant king's crown, it looked ridiculously tall. Mount Kinabalu is one of South-East Asia's tallest mountains, a hunk of granite that juts four kilometres straight up from a dank, green rainforest. I realise I am underprepared, a couple of laps of the resort pool hardly prepare you for a walk up a 4095-metre mountain.

Day one, 8:57am: Timpohon Gate, Mount Kinabalu National Park. I begin my foray into the jungles of Borneo. The World Heritage-listed national park that encircles Mount Kinabalu is one of the world's most significant biological sites. Between 5000 and 6000 plant species exist in this 754-square-kilometre park including the world's largest flower (the rafflesia, which grows to a diameter of 94 centimetres). There are also 326 species of birds and 100 mammals including the orang-utan.

Mount Kinabalu is still growing today and when I stop for breath I swear I can hear it moving beneath me.

What I discover immediately is that there is no time to discuss any of this; from the outset this is a cruel slog straight up a mountain. Sweat gathers in places I prefer it wouldn't. It seems to rain on the hour, just enough to turn my sweat cold.

Just as I think I'm on a roll, a local pygmy-like porter ambles past me carrying 40 kilograms of supplies for base camp in hessian sacks strapped across his forehead. "I've seen them carry washing machines," my guide tells me. "And that was a woman. They're very strong.

You get out of their way. They earn seven ringgit (\$2.50) a kilo and they need the money for their families."

I labour on, stopping to refill my water bottles while mountain squirrels eye off my Mars Bars.

Each rest stop is measured, although I'm sure they're inaccurate: 500 metres on Kinabalu feels like five kilometres. This walk to base camp is allegedly just six kilometres, but the fact it is straight uphill makes every step torturous after a while. I feel the first ache in my knees, but then the cloud clears and the sun comes out.

Day one, 3:15pm: base camp, Laban Rata. "Look at this," says one of my climbing buddies. We've arrived, finally, at a simple mountain hut with views that go on and on. A stunted alpine forest is flourishing outside: red tubular rhododendron flowers, white-flowered Borneo eye-

bright, pinkish mountain trachymene and the Kinabalu buttercup. The white mountain necklace orchid attracts a group of cute yellow birds.

Above us sheer granite cliffs reach up for hundreds of metres, with ropes attached, a stark reminder of the direction in which we are headed. One of the group shows me his watch, equipped with GPS: "Look, we've actually done 14.2 kilometres, not six kilometres." I knew it. The guide warns us we'll experience "chicken sleep" that night because of the altitude. He says we won't slip into deep sleep and we'll probably wake with headaches and dizziness. But with rise and shine set for 2am, we are all asleep in our bunks by 6.30pm.

Day two, 2:45am: base camp, Laban Rata. After a deliciously greasy breakfast (how great is it to justify extra baked beans and eggs when you're "fuelling" your body) we take off in the dark. It's cold, about five degrees, and it will get colder. I take a torch out of my kit but needn't bother, a perfect full moon lights our path. A large group of people is ahead of us and I'm shocked by their shapes and ages. There are people on this mountain who don't look as if they'll make anywhere near the top. Good for them, but it's worth heeding the warnings: this mountain can and has killed. A family of Brits was lost earlier this decade, the teenage daughter dying of exposure.

The slow group saps my resolve. There's a sense of freedom you feel out here on the mountains of Borneo and somehow a group of middle-aged Malaysians aren't helping it. So I scuttle past them all, ignoring ropes and scampering up moon-lit sheer granite faces (it's only when the sun comes up much later that I realise how sheer some of these drops actually are).



The mountain up close isn't soft and beautiful. It's an unforgiving, withered hunk of granite.

Day two, 6am: Low's Peak. The freezing wind gusts burn my face, I'm standing on the edge of Low's Peak, near the sign that tells me I've made it, and just metres from the sharpened edge of Low's Gully, an almost two-kilometre deep cleft that separates the east and west side of Mount Kinabalu. The sun finally pokes its head above the clouds, providing the instant warmth my body has craved. Looking into the gully, I get a sense of just how high I am.

One of my group is suffering the early affects of altitude sickness and has been taken down. But I just want to sit, silent, and breathe in this view. It's as if I am in an aeroplane, the clouds are far, far below and ahead I can see the lights of Kota Kinabalu and the coastline, even off-shore islands. The moon's still high in the dawn sky and local guides are chain smoking to warm their insides. They sit balancing on the edge of sheer precipices, staring into space.

The mountain up close isn't soft and beautiful. It's an unforgiving, withered hunk of granite. An approaching squall heightens the sense of foreboding. Then it clears, just like that. Again I'm basking in sunshine, staring out at Sabah.

Day two, 3:35pm: Mesilau Lodge, Mount Kinabalu National Park. The end's in sight, just another 500 metres. After 10 hours of walking I've almost made it to this point, which is the harder of two return options. Why did I take the hard road? I blame it on the tape measures of Sabah. On a huge high after the conquest of the summit, four of us decided the eight-kilometre trek to our lodging for the night wouldn't be much harder than walking back to where we'd started. We were wrong. We find out later, too late, that they do measure distances differently here; in a straight line. So our eight-kilometre jaunt was more like a 19-kilometre test of courage (this, of course, after the seven-kilometre or so return journey to

the summit). Twenty-six kilometres in a day might not sound super-human but at times this track took us down 45 degree-plus slopes that required a walking stick to descend.

My upper thighs have worked like front brakes for five hours but the track has been through the most spectacular scenery, descending mountain ridges, past waterfalls and across rivers. I've seen species of plants I won't see again anywhere in the world and only twice in five hours have we seen another walking group.

At the end, my walking buddies all take turns to embrace in celebration. We waddle to each other like penguins, our legs spasming and backs aching, knowing we have nothing left in our tanks.

I look out at the peaks above me, the ones we've conquered and decide that we do this because the joy of arriving beats the pain of the journey. Earlier we had questioned why on earth people walk so far – it seemed ridiculous at the time. But now we know why: we walk to arrive in triumph. Anyone can ride a jet ski on holiday but the memories of climbing a mountain may last longer, maybe even forever.

Craig Tansley was a guest of Air Asia and Tourism Malaysia.



Jungle boogie ... (clockwise from above left) climbers on the plateau; porters carry enormous packs; the summit, just visible; an orang-utan; the rafflesia, the world's largest flower. Photos: Photolibary, Jason Burgess, Getty Images, Lonely Planet Images



FAST FACTS

Getting there

The nearest airport is Kota Kinabalu in the Malaysian state of Sabah. Singapore Airlines has a fare for \$970 with a change of aircraft in Singapore. Malaysia Airlines has a fare for \$905 with a change in Kuala Lumpur. You can fly into Kota Kinabalu and back out of Kuching in the neighbouring state of Sarawak for the same fare. Australian passport holders do not require a visa for stays of up to 90 days.

Booking there

To arrange a mountain climb, transfers from Kota Kinabalu, mandatory guides, insurance, park fees and accommodation, see www.suterasanctuarylodges.com.

More information

See www.sabahtourism.com or contact Malaysia Tourism on 9654 3177 or (02) 9299 4441.