

Heads in the clouds

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"YOU ARE NOT A REAL
MALAYSIAN UNLESS YOU HAVE
CONQUERED KINABALU."



My Way

They say that you are not a Malaysian if you haven't conquered Mount Kinabalu. Well, no one in our group was Malaysian, but reaching the peak and rising above the clouds seemed like something that had to be done. Here's our little adventure.

Mount Kinabalu refuses to be ignored. At 4,095 metres, the tallest mountain in the Malay Archipelago insists that travellers journeying through eastern Borneo stare awestruck through their passenger windows – some through disbelief at this towering massif, others amazed that they will soon try to conquer it.

Four of us faced this challenge together. We met in Kota Kinabalu while booking accommodation for the first night of the climb. Even if you are willing to pay over 100 euros for the two-day ascent, without one of the fiercely contested beds at 3,270 metres, you won't be allowed near the summit – unless you are one of the few superhuman climbers who can make it up and down before sunset.

The beginning of the ascent

On the day of the ascent, we met our local guide, Madiris, at 8:30am in Kinabalu National Park and clambered into a truck for the 4km ride to Timpohon Gate, the official starting point. The climb began with a walk down



The peaks tease us through the overhead tree branches.

a long set of steps, but this stretch didn't last long. The path soon turned steeply upwards, and we entered an oak-chestnut and conifer forest. Madiris told us that a steady pace was vital, and you don't question someone who climbs the mountain twice a week.

After an hour, we were overtaken by a middle-aged woman carrying a heavy stack of boxes with the help of a strap fastened around her forehead. Amazed at such agility, we stopped a smiling porter on his way down. He explained that his load on the way up to the rest house was 37 kilograms and he finished the climb in three hours. This made our target of six hours seem relatively simple.

Two and a half hours later, we left the foliage and looked across the landscape far below us, with the dimpled green and red rug of fruit trees gradually being replaced with a puffy white carpet of clouds. We stopped for lunch with around fifteen other climbers. Almost everyone brandished the same park-provided



lunchboxes containing cheese and bologna sandwiches, a boiled egg, some fried chicken, banana cake, a carton of soya milk, an apple and some water. It looked plenty, and we surprised ourselves by eating it all.

More walk and an overnight stop

As wispy clouds streamed around a crest of trees further up, we talked to a Malaysian man who had already made the climb four times. "You are not a real Malaysian unless you have conquered Kinabalu," he said with a smile.



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At the top it was hard to stop marvelling at the bizarre rock formations around us.

Clearly, climbing Mount Kinabalu becomes addictive for some people.

The path took us into an exposed region, with tall trees making way for orchids and rhododendrons. Madiris explained that half of the 50 types of rhododendron found in Borneo grow on the mountain and five exist nowhere else. He then boosted our botanical awareness by taking us to a secluded cove filled with bulbous flame-coloured pitcher plants.

The peaks teased us through the overhead tree branches as we continued, until the vegetation opened out once more to reward us with a stunning panorama. Beyond the red rhododendrons on our left, frothy white clouds lapped at the base of the steep, forested mountain slopes, which led up to an awesome granite crown, high above us.

We trudged on and, after six hours, reached our overnight stop. In the warmth of the Laban Rata lodge, we drank coffee with Madiris and checked in with the smiling receptionists, who told us that they each live in Laban Rata for a month before taking a week off.

Tired people on rocky roads

While waiting for our buffet dinner, we watched the British Army climbers walking around in

their fatigues and applauded with the locals every time an elderly Malaysian stepped through the door. There was a universal sense of achievement, and we were all delighted to have made it that far.

The four of us made our way to our nearby lodge for an early night at 7pm and were up again at 2am, dressing in thermal t-shirts,

sweaters, windbreakers, woolen hats and gloves. The corridor was full of other climbers, who all left around the same time as us to have breakfast back at Laban Rata. Madiris arrived at 3am, and we began our climb in the cold and dark, some of us clutching torches and others adjusting headlamps.

The path was rocky, but we couldn't help

gazing at the dramatic salt-spill of stars above and the scattering of fluorescent light from villages along the horizon. Everyone was practically silent, perhaps through exhaustion, tiredness or pre-peak anxiety. The rocks alternated with steep steps and the exercise created enough warmth for us to remove our sweaters.

Soon after the final checkpoint, we began climbing with a length of rope between our hands and took frequent stops. Some climbers turned back when they saw the rope, while some only made it a little further before joining them. It was the shortness of oxygen that made it so difficult.

Reaching the peak

The rope was long, and I was thankful I wore gloves. We eventually emerged on what appeared to be a lunar surface, with only slightly more oxygen, and gazed upon Low's Peak, our goal. The sky was the colour of a bruised peach, but we fought the urge to take photos and hurried on to reach the summit before sunrise. Just before 5:30am, each of us began sprinting up the peak and arrived at the top in time to see the sun bursting through the clouds.

With huge smiles across our faces, we snapped a few photos beside the Low's Peak sign and tried to avoid the rats running between our feet. Peering into the treacherous Low's Gully and marvelling at the bizarre rock formations around us, we tried desperately to keep our fingers warm.

Mount Kinabalu facts

Elevation: 4,095 metres (13,435 feet) above sea level.

Highest point: Low's Peak.

Location: Sabah, Borneo.

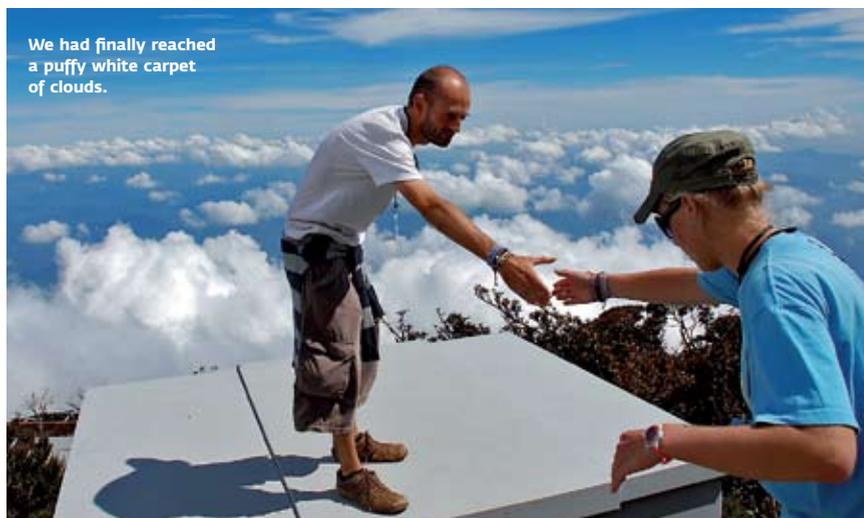
First ascent: 1858 by Hugh Low and Spenser Buckingham St. John.

Wildlife and nature: over 600 species of fern, 326 species of bird, and 100 species of mammal.



After 45 minutes, we began our descent and gave encouragement to friends who were struggling to the top. It was now light, so we could appreciate the landscape far below and wonder at how we made our way up such treacherous terrain in pitch darkness.

Seven hours later – with another Laban Rata meal in our stomachs and pain entering our lower legs – the four of us arrived back at Timponon Gate. Exhausted and relieved, we all knew that we had just achieved something extra-special. Perhaps next time we'll climb it in a day.



We had finally reached a puffy white carpet of clouds.