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Bagaimana

hendak ke sana?*

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Photos: Simon Hohnen

Good question, that; for the answer, just read on

'There is no wealth but life.'

John Ruskin, *Unto This Last* (1862)



Life is everywhere in Sabah, in the north of Borneo. Visibility, unfortunately, isn't. At the moment it is less than 10 metres and I'm doing 65km/h. It's just as well that the LED tail light on Bryan Wade's Aprilia is nice and bright because that's the only useful thing I can see. I'm relying entirely on him to get me through the ground-hugging cloud over this twisty pass in the Crocker Range.

Suddenly we ride into a stink so strong that I swear you can almost see it, even through the fog. Ah, yes, the Rafflesia reserve, where the world's largest and most malodorous flowers are protected and studied. Not by me.

Interestingly, we had noticed the very opposite the previous afternoon. No, not the world's smallest and most attractively perfumed flowers but the Kota Kinabalu fish market, which doesn't smell at all. If you've ever found yourself downwind of Sydney's equivalent you'll find that hard to believe, but it's true. Obviously the stallholders are meticulously clean, but it's still amazing – along with the almost total absence of flies.

It's not the only amazing thing about Sabah. Terry and Bryan from Borneo Biking Adventures (BBA) keep grinning as we discover more.

Take the driveway of Terry's house. It's five kilometres long, and British *Bike* magazine called it "ridiculously challenging were it used for competition it'd be the King of Hillclimbs". It's not

actually quite that bad, but Bryan does offer to trailer our bikes down to the road if we're not confident about handling the clay and gravel, as well as the deep potholes in the short tarred sections. Naturally we refuse, and learn quite a bit about off-roading as we tackle the five ks every day under different conditions. It's especially interesting when it's wet.

Decks and the City

When Terry and Brian collected us from the airport, we found ourselves in the middle of what obviously was a long-standing difference of opinion.

Bryan thought we would want to "ride", mainly because that's what he likes to do. Terry, on the other hand, thought we'd be interested in seeing some things, too, and stopping for photos. Both were quite surprised when we gently pointed out that we weren't actually there to have a good time – although that didn't mean we weren't prepared to have a good time as well. But our primary reason was to put together a story, words and pictures, for you.

It took them a little while to get their heads around that idea because they really are focused very strongly on making sure that their guests enjoy their stay and get as much fun out of it as possible. To be perfectly honest, I can't see how the business can make any significant amount of money, but what a great way to expand your social network. By the time Simon and I left, we certainly

felt that we'd made new friends.

And not just with Terry and Bryan. Terry's wife Rose is the third element in the package and she is the ideal hostess. At the end of every day's ride she has homemade doughnuts and either coffee or beer waiting for the returning riders in front of the garage.

That brings us to the house.

Sinurambi is an architect-designed marvel that manages, like a Klein bottle, to be inside and outside at the same time. It sits in the landscape as if it's part of it. Tour guests are accommodated here (although you can stay in a hotel if you wish – but you wouldn't) in self-contained and very comfortable rooms with en suites and everyone eats together either at the big communal table in the body of the house or out on the balcony. Rose makes sure the food is not only ample but also varied and interesting and Terry keeps the wine and beer flowing until you're ready to call it a night.

Friendly dogs litter the large, open decks of Sinurambi with very little idea of just how lucky they are in a country where all the other dogs seem to subsist just on the living side of starvation. The decks overlook the glittering new towers of the city. From up here you can't really see all the work that's going on down there. There's a lot of it. Kota Kinabalu has very little by way of historical buildings – it was razed once by the British and then again by the Americans – so it looks to the future. That includes a lot of blocks of flats, as the government encourages people to move to the city where they can be included in the modern life of Malaysia – and where they can pay taxes.

KK's modern downtown is just like any other modern Asian city's and a line of cafés and restaurants along the foreshore caters to the tastes of the wealthier members of society. There's even an Australian restaurant.

Welease Bwyan!

Unlike the eponymous protagonist of the Monty Python movie, BBA's Bryan Wade is not a loser. In fact he's out front most of the time and with good reason.

The five-time British motocross champion and founder of the British

Photographer in the mist. For once, Simon has everything backwards ...











Sinurambi from the forecourt. The decks at the rear of the house look out all the way down to KK.

Motocross Racing School is blindingly fast. "Welease" him and he sets a cracking pace over Sabah's (mostly) excellent roads, although I found that he somehow managed to not get too far ahead of my more conservative pace; he obviously keeps a keen eye on his rear-vision mirrors and takes his guiding duties seriously.

What do I mean by Sabah's roads being "mostly" excellent? Well, usually when you say something like that you mean that this road here is terrific and so is that one, but that one over there is not. In Sabah, most roads are terrific just about all the time, even though someone cornered the world market on decreasing radius curves and installed them all here! But the standard of road building is high, with particular attention paid to drainage. Almost all roads have the typical large square drains that can clearly shift a lot of water very fast (and look as though you definitely don't want to encounter them with your wheels). Mind you, they need to be big, too. When it rains here it rains hard.

The real problem is that the entire island is geologically young. That means

the ground is soft and unstable, landslips and rockfalls are everyday occurrences and the most beautiful bit of road can be there one minute and gone the next. As a result you will find interruptions at irregular but frequent intervals.

Road gangs make sure the carriageway remains passable, but often that just means blade-cutting a detour through the nearest soft earthen cliff. Proper repairs

can take a while, so you need to watch out for unpredictable, uneven and sometimes muddy dirt and gravel patches.

This is where it's very handy to have Bryan out front because he knows where they all are and will give you a "slow down" signal. Without him you can end up in deep doo-doo if you let your concentration slip.

Fortunately you don't need your



'Well, I'm not crossing that bridge when I come to it!'

concentration for much else. Once outside the major towns, traffic thins out to almost nothing and the roads are lovely and clear. And what traffic there is, is really polite – in the city and out. Trucks move over and blink you past, cars and “Bas Ekspres” minibuses make way when you overtake where there is simply no room and everyone is good-tempered. I only heard a horn blown in anger once.

But it isn't just the geology that tampers with the roads and other human structures. It's the bush as well. Long, straight lines of creepers race across roadside concrete aprons. Greenery pokes up over every abutment and every square inch of ground is quickly covered by plant life. The flat ground between the tar and the drain looks as though



Bryan checks out a river crossing.

Power to the people – infrastructure is not always the latest, but it works.

it's solid ground covered in lawn-like grass; then you see a set of two-foot deep wheel tracks where some unfortunate minibus was forced to leave the security of the tarmac. It's amazing that they get out again. Some don't and the occasional rusting corpse of a Bas Ekspres decomposes by the side of the road.

Skinny dogs are everywhere, standing by the side of the road or sunning themselves on the tar. Few of them chase or even look at the bikes; this is a strongly Darwinian place and silly dogs are soon dead ones. I still worry about them, but this turns out to be absolutely unnecessary. Apart from the inevitable chickens there is little other wildlife, although there are enough buffaloes and even occasional cows to keep me wary. Only once do we pass any horses. They stand in a thoughtful small herd by the road and watch us pass unemotionally.

One of the attractions of BBA's tours is the attitude that it's “your adventure”, as Bryan puts it. You set the pace, you determine how and where you go (although there are plenty of suggestions from Terry and Bryan) and you decide where you want to stop to take photos.





There are plenty of bike shops and what they don't know about fixing small Japanese bikes isn't worth knowing.

At the same time, however, you're guided. Somehow there's always an interesting restaurant or café at meal times wherever you go (nothing fancy, but with tasty local food – better than in Sydney) or a bright, busy market or some other attraction. Trust your guides and you won't miss out. You can also pick up fascinating snippets of information, such as: if a town or village lacks an Indian restaurant, someone will come along sooner or later and open one. Then, according to Terry, to guarantee good business they'll buy the biggest TV set they can afford and put on the wrestling from America. It's true, we saw it. The locals are fascinated.

Beetles fan

J.B.S. Haldane thought the main distinguishing characteristic of the Creator, should he exist, was "an inordinate fondness for beetles".

In Borneo, you can see where Haldane got that idea. Beetles are everywhere, from the outrageously armoured and spiked rhinoceros beetle to the odd, black and gigantic thing that flitted from flower to flower on the deck one afternoon sucking up nectar, with endless varieties in between.



I doubt that Sabah's beetles are endangered, but most of the rest of Sabah's (and Borneo's) wildlife is on borrowed time. Large-scale logging and clearing for oil palm plantations (ain't biofuels great) are chewing away at habitats and it's got to the point where hunting has been banned completely.

Not that it's actually stopped; we see a python for sale at a market on another day, on its way to someone's pot. You can't blame people for eating them I've had

snake steak in Sumatra and enjoyed it. But nature reserves have been set up and are being expanded I sincerely hope they've come in time.

One morning we go to see the orang utans at the huge 500 room Shangri-La Rasa Ria Resort. No, it hasn't got to the point where the big apes get their own air-conditioned suites; the resort, in collaboration with the Wildlife Department, runs a rehabilitation centre for them and for other native animals. The oranges, mainly orphans, range freely through a sizeable patch of forest while they learn how to exist without humans. They're then released into larger forest reserves. In the meantime they earn their living by letting the tourists watch



their feeding time, not an unreasonable arrangement at all.

Heck, I'd do it but there's no way I could swing the way an orang utan swings.

The environment, meanwhile, is beautiful. It's a lot like the area around Cairns, including the highland bits, and has that same wonderful rich light. But there is a lot more of it. Where there aren't sealed roads – and there are lots of sealed roads – there are many gravel and dirt tracks of varying difficulty and interest.



Breakfast at Sinurambi.

kidding!] The last few gravel stretches have been tarred and the last rickety bridges replaced. It climbs 6000 feet to the top of the range then plunges down to Keningau in Sabah's fertile Central Valley. We take lunch in the busy market town where our bikes still attract small crowds.

"There are plenty of flat-out sweeping bends on the ride up the valley and a great photo stop at a cascade. Of course, we have to re-cross the Crocker Range to get back home and another 6000-foot climb and descent awaits us. One of our riders counted the bends on the descent – there are 220!"

We rode that one and everything Terry says is right, maybe even understated. We missed out on this one, on another day:

"We head down the 'Old Papar Road', pick up a gravel trail through the oil palm plantations to take us to the Kuala Penyu Peninsula. An antiquated chain

On our first day, Terry and Bryan take us over one that consists of no more than dual wheel tracks through the jungle. At one of the lookouts, above a disturbingly steep pineapple plantation, Terry points out that all of the green scenery we can see in several valleys is just "rubbish" second growth, not real rainforest. There is no real rainforest left so close to Kota Kinabalu; we see some later, and understand the difference.

Space race

I see that I'm well over my allocated space already and I haven't even covered where we actually went and just how beautiful Sabah is, from Mount Kinabalu to the deepest gorge on the Kimanis Bypass. Maybe I can get away with quoting some of Terry's enthusiastic descriptions.

"The federal government has just spent millions on carving a new road across the Crocker Range. It's fantastic! [He's not

Freshly cooked roti, straight from the pan – simple but delicious.





Truck brakes are water cooled – check out the tubes that keep the wheels wet as the truck moves.

ferry carries us across to the little village and an unbelievable lobster lunch. We call on friends who have a boat yard where they build and repair traditional wooden fishing boats, take a few photos of the craftsmen at work before heading back through the old colonial town of Beaufort.”

Next time, Terry.

There are different packages on offer, but you aren't restricted to them. BBA will tailor tours to your exact requirements if you like. You can, for example, ride all tar or almost all gravel if you wish, and adjust the levels of difficulty as you go. The best thing to do is look at the website, www.borneobikingadventures.com. It's pretty comprehensive and gives you many options. Oh, one restriction is that bikes are not to be ridden after dark, but that's quite understandable.

Costs are more (that is to say, less) than reasonable. A four-day package will set you back RM3300, which is now a bit under \$1200. It includes airport pick-up and drop-off, three nights' accommodation at Sinurambi with all meals, soft drinks, beer and wine, laundry service, use of pool, billiard room and internet, an Aprilia Pegaso 650 Trail, fuel and bike insurance and use of motorcycle

clothing (I'd suggest you bring your helmet; they have some good gear apart from that, including Draggin Jeans) as required. It does not include flights or medical insurance, personal expenditure and fines. Longer stays are even more reasonably priced.

We flew Malaysia Airlines and don't really recommend it. Instead, you could fly almost any airline out of Australia to Singapore and pick up Air Asia or another budget carrier there. MAS stuffed us around before we left, offered a pretty ordinary service in the air (not even a basic pack with a toothbrush for an overnight flight, for example) and temporarily lost Simon's bag on our return. The crew were friendly, mind.

And that, finally, is the overwhelming impression we took away from Sabah as well: the friendliness of everyone we met. A lot of places claim to have friendly populations, but Sabah really delivers.

*The title? It means “How do I get there?” in Bahasa Malaysia.

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Disclaimer:

Knowing our eagle-eyed readers, I'm sure that you will have noticed that we have featured Aprilia's Pegaso 650 Trail several times recently.

Contrary to Ian Fleming's comment that “once is happenstance, twice is coincidence, three times is enemy action”, this is purely coincidental. We do like the bike, but we are not favouring it especially. BBA runs Pegaso Trails because they have a good Aprilia dealer and because the bikes have prove just right for the job.

You might also think that the description of our tour is a bit over the top. Not so. I'm quite happy to admit that it is very positive, but that's just the simple truth. It's an excellent product, provided by wonderful people. I'd even be tempted to fit in a short stay on my way to somewhere else such as the Philippines, Japan or Hong Kong. Air connections throughout SE Asia are very good from Kota Kinabalu.

And no, we don't get a kickback. But I'll tell you what, I'm pretty sure that I'll be going back to see Terry, Rose and Bryan again some time and to ride some of those other roads. **PT**

Terry, Rose and young David, their son. David 'helps' Bryan to maintain the bikes.

