



learning of the native people's cultures.

But after a rice wine toast and a brief chat we headed up-river to Kuala Terikan.

Thankfully, the trek to Camp 5 was pretty flat and the leeches scarce – only two got me. About half way along the walk, I was congratulating myself on how well things had gone. The morning had been sunny and I had not needed the poncho that Clive had insisted I have ready to wear. So far, it had not rained. Then I realised that it actually was raining. In the heat and humidity of the rainforest I hadn't noticed. I was so wet one way or another, from sweat or tramping in swamps and streams, that I hadn't felt the rain dropping through the canopy.

Then it really rained – true tropical, belting down rain. In some ways this made things easier. There was no longer any point in trying to avoid the swampy bits on the path. The whole path was a swamp, so I might as well charge straight ahead, regardless of what it was like.

The other surprise was the darkness. I had thought I'd been asked to bring a headlamp because we would be walking in caves. But by late afternoon the light was so poor a torch was essential.

As for seeing the wildlife? There might have been 262 species of birds and 75 of mammals standing within 10m of me, but I saw none. For a start, you are forced to walk with eyes glued to the ground to avoid slipping or falling.

And secondly, the forest is so thick that anything more than two metres into it is quite impossible to see.

Iban tribesman in a longhouse in Sarawak give travellers a sense of the local culture.

You hear plenty – bird and animal calls, and branches breaking. At one time I heard a great crash in the forest and was reliably informed that it was one of the huge old trees falling. You do see many beautiful butterflies, including the large iridescent green-striped Raja Brooke bird-wing.

Camp 5 was a joy – good clean showers and toilets, big airy rooms with vinyl sleeping mats and a sprinkling of tourists from around the world who'd walked down from the Mulu park. Clive provided the mosquito net, guaranteeing a peaceful night.

Day one gave me the confidence that I could walk in the rainforest. The more intrepid can take a diversion from the

headhunters trek up Gunung Api to see the Pinnacles, a natural formation of sharp limestone spikes.

Otherwise it's an easy walk and longboat rides from Camp 5 to the Mulu National Park headquarters. On the way you take in some of the caves which are a major tourist attraction.

In the late afternoon, providing it is not raining, hundreds of thousands of bats stream out of them, looking from a distance like a plume of smoke. There are said to be 28 species of bat in the park, with many dependent on the caves.

Each of the caves offers different attractions, from viewing the stalagmite and stalactite formations, to adventure caving.

The easy way out of Mulu is to fly back to the coastal town of Miri in Sarawak.

But there is another, more interesting way.

It is possible to get a longboat from Mulu to Long Terawan and then another boat down river to Marudi.

From there it is an easy express boat ride down the huge Baram River, just south-west of Brunei, to the coast.

By doing this you have skirted round Brunei, taking in stays at the longhouses of the various tribal groups as you go. Finally, it's a short road but a somewhat complicated multiple bus trip back to Bandar Seri Begawan airport.

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