

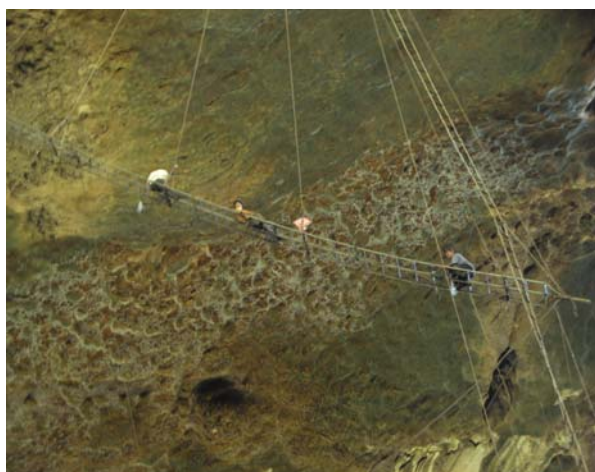
A FLYING VISIT TO THE GOMANTONG CAVES OF EASTERN SABAH

– Arthur Clarke and Siobhan Carter

Gomantong Hill with main (RHS) cave entrance & nest harvester houses. Photo: Arthur Clarke.



While the recent AGM venue and its surrounds, Gunung Mulu National Park guides and staff (especially the Clarks: Brian, Sue and Jeremy) are all receiving their well-deserved accolades, it should be noted that there are other hot and sweaty caves in Malaysian Borneo. In his promo flyer about Mulu (an ACKMA Journal insert), Brian Clark alluded to one such site: the Gomantong Caves located in Sabah, the Malaysian state north of Sarawak and Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo). It was suggested that this cave complex was a must-see detour for those interested in cave fauna. There was also mention of the Lok Kawi Wildlife Park (aka Borneo Zoo) south of Kota Kinabalu.



Three nest harvesters working at height in Gomantong. Photo: Siobhan Carter.

Unfortunately, Brian did not advise the exact location of these caves, let alone the wildlife park. So when travel agent Carole Parker was booking extra flights for us (Siobhan and I) prior to Mulu, we figured that two nights and a day-and-a-half in Kota Kinabalu would be plenty of time! We obviously had not checked our geography. With an area of 76,115 km², Sabah is in fact considerably larger than Tasmania and I had not adjusted my Asian political history to realise that

this Malaysian State was the former British Crown Colony of North Borneo. Formerly known as Jesselton, Kota Kinabalu (5° 58.6' N / 116° 6.9' E) has been the capital of Sabah since 1946 and is now the largest city. Having just paid for flights to and from Kota Kinabalu (KK), we discovered that KK was on the west coast of Sabah and Gomantong Caves were 420-430km away by road in the hinterland of eastern Borneo, en route to Sukau in the lower Kinabatangan area, 115km south of Sandakan airport. Knowing we would be sleep-deprived after the flights from Australia to KK and wanting to cat-nap before checking out the Borneo Zoo, we had only given ourselves a day to take in the delights of Sandakan (5° 50.7' N / 118° 3.4' E) and the Gomantong Caves (5° 31.9' N / 118° 4.2' E).



Getting ourselves to Gomantong initially proved to be quite difficult, though it was all eventually booked over the internet. Without a hire car to drive south to Gomantong from Sandakan airport, you have to join a tour group that provides a shuttle van, an English-speaking guide and lunch. Most of the cave tours departing from Sandakan airport were two-day packages involving an overnight stay at Bilit, a tiny village located on the Kinabatangan River, west of Sukau. Booking via *'Journey Malaysia'* we eventually landed a Full Day tour (Sepilok Orang-Utan Sanctuary and Gomantong Caves) operated by the locally based Megah Travel, out-sourced from the Kuala Lumpur office of Dolphin Diaries Travel. Costing 460RM each, this price included collection from Sandakan airport at 7.45am and dropping off again at 6.40pm for the return flight to KK. Our next problem was getting the actual connecting flights because it seemed that travel agents such as Carole Parker could not book flights from KK to Sandakan! This all seemed strange considering that as the second largest city in Sabah, Sandakan was about to have an influx of Australian visitors on April 25th and August 15th celebrating the 65th anniversary of the old Sandakan POW (prisoners of war) camp and the death marches. Near the end of World War II, Japanese prison guards forced 2,400 starving British and Australian POWs to walk 260km inland; the few survivors died from dysentery or

were killed by their captors. From the internet we booked flights from KK to Sandakan with MasWings, a subsidiary of Malaysia Airlines; our return flights including taxes and cancellation insurance cost 504RM (252RM each).

Flying into Borneo, from the air you see neatly arranged plantations of palm trees. On the ground you realise these are mostly oil producing palms replacing the coastal mangroves and rainforest jungle with its former teak and meranti forests that used to be home to numerous ethnic groups such as the Penan people as well as the endangered orang-utans. Looking like clusters of large lives, but with the colour of loquats, these oil rich fruits have unfortunately become the lifeblood of Sabah and Sarawak.



Close-up of harvester on bamboo pitau in Gomantong. Photo: Arthur Clarke.

After flying into Sabah on Monday afternoon April 19th, a taxi (RM30) took us into Kota Kinabalu and the Jesselton Hotel. Another one of Brian's recommendations, this was a quaint hotel with colonial traits including door-boys dressed in safari hats. However, we found it difficult to get a non-smoking room that did not already smell of stale cigar or pipe smoke. After our nap we took at taxi to the Lok Kawi Wildlife Park (5° 51.023' N / 116° 04.162' E). Costing just RM100 for the round trip, our taxi waits two hours or so then returns us to KK. Also known as the Borneo Zoo, it's located on the old Penampang-Papar road via Donggongan near the small town of Lok Kawi, approx. 20km south of Kota Kinabalu city. Covering an area of 280 acres, the zoo and surrounding botanical gardens is a relatively new site, opened to the public on February 17th 2007. The entry fee is RM20 each plus RM2 for the rubber tyred tram that stops at all the major attractions. There are reportedly over 100 species of mammals and birds in the park; many of them including the small Borneo elephant and pygmy hippopotamus are native to Borneo. Amongst the other animals were the Malayan Tiger, Clouded Leopard, Malayan Sun Bear, Sumatran Rhinoceros, Wild Cattle, Sambar Deer, Barking Deer, Gibbon monkeys, Hornbill and Macaw birds, and probably a number of animals such as the Sea Eagle that shouldn't be there at all. Highlights of the park include orang-utans, proboscis monkeys and playful otters, plus the magnificent tall walk-in aviary with its mix of ground-living and arboreal birds and mammals.

On Tuesday 20th we have a 5am rising to collect a takeaway breakfast from the Jesselton Hotel, then our early morning taxi (another RM30) with Peter Liew to KK airport. The 0700am flight is barely half an hour in the air, landing us at Sandakan around 7.40am, where we meet Bakar Burn (our English-speaking guide for Megah Travel). We are the only people on his tour today! Seeing our caving helmets and realising we are more interested in the caves and nest harvesting than orang-utans, Bakar takes us directly to the 3,300hectare Gomantong Forest Reserve.



Map of eastern Sabah showing location of Sepilok (Orang-utan Sanctuary), WNW of Sandakan and Gomantong Caves to the south, sourced from <www.malaysiasite.nl/sandakaneng.htm>

It is still harvesting season for *Collocalia* (swiftlet) nests, and of the 27 known sites in Sabah containing edible birds' nests, the Gomantong Caves are the most famous and largest sources, producing around 7,500kg of this delicacy annually. Made into birds nest soup, it is one of the most expensive soups in the world. The swiftlets' saliva is reportedly used to ward off breast cancer and as a cure for many ailments. There are two types of nests produced by two different species of the swiftlets that nest in different parts of the caves. The brown or black nests are produced by the *Collocalia maximus* birds. Comprising of moss and feathers, or occasionally grass and leaves all bound with black saliva, these nests are found in the lower parts of the cave. The *Collocalia fuciphagus* swiftlets make the white saliva nests, predominantly produced in the upper cave reaches. Approximately 4,000kg of the black nests and 3,000-3,500kg of white nests are harvested annually from the Gomantong Caves. The former sell for about US\$1,800-2,000 per kg, whereas the saliva-rich white nests are sold for four or five times more, at around US\$8,000 per kg and up to US\$12-13,000 per kg after preliminary processing and cleaning.

Although swiftlet nests have been traditionally harvested from caves in Sabah by the Chinese for over five centuries, the process is now strictly managed by the Sabah Wildlife Department, under the auspices of the *Wildlife Conservation Enactment 1997*. Licensed harvesting occurs twice a year; firstly during February to April generally before the *Collocalia* (swiftlet) eggs are laid, then later between July and September after the young swiftlets have supposedly left their nests. It is obviously a very lucrative business. Enabling them to have exclusive rights to the Gomantong

Caves' nests, a Kuching (Sarawak) based Chinese company reportedly pays a license fee of RM10million, plus 10% in royalties to the Wildlife Department.

En route to Gomantong Caves, we witness the harvesting of oil palms along the road to Sukau in the lower Kinabatangan area. The bulbous and spikey clumps of palm olives are hand loaded on to small trucks and large semi-trailers, and then dumped in concrete floored receiving yards to be gathered up by front end loaders. Various sorted into different grades, the palm olive clumps are taken elsewhere to processing plants for oil extraction.

The first pressing of the outer softer orange coloured flesh releases the edible oil component mainly used for cooking oil, margarine, cocoa butter, vitamin pills (e.g., carotene) etc. From a second pressing, the hard inside nut is ground to yield the non-edible oils used in lubrication, manufacture of candles, biodiesel, cosmetics (e.g., lipstick) and body soap.



Exhausted nest harvest worker in Gomantong Cave. Photo: Arthur Clarke.

After driving for almost two hours from Sandakan often in bumper to bumper traffic along narrow winding roads and then the new wider Sukau road, we take the very narrow one lane Gomantong Forest Reserve road. Passing through a wall gated entrance, another 4-5 minutes drive brings you to the visitor centre/ registration office near Gomantong Hill. Entry to the caves (Gua Gomantong) is controlled by the Wildlife Department and the fee charged depends on whether you are a Malaysian or a foreigner and the type of photographic record you want. The standard fee for an adult westerner is RM30, plus the same again for a camera.

However, if you want to record the nest harvesting with motion picture film you will pay RM10,000 for the privilege. Access to the caves involves a 5-10minute walk along a partly dilapidated wooden boardwalk in rainforest jungle where you may get lucky to see Proboscis Monkeys (*Nasalis larvatus*), the Maroon (or Red) Leaf Monkeys (*Presbytis rubicunda*) and occasionally the hornbill birds. The end of the boardwalk brings you to a small village with the bird nesters houses on stilts with coils of rope underneath beside rattan ladders and bamboo piatau platforms. Looking across to the main Simud Hitam (Black Cave) entrance you

see flimsy makeshift houses (or huts) higher up Gomantong Hill situated beside smaller cave entrances.

The Gomantong Caves are comprised of about 19 distinct chambers or passages containing swiftlet nests, all located within two main cave complexes: the lower Black Cave (Simud Hitam) with its 90m high chambers and the upper White Cave (Simud Putih). The lower cave is the only site normally accessible to tourists during the *Collocalia* nest harvesting season. Although largely covered in the guano from swiftlets or bats, a wooden walkway runs around the outer perimeter of the main Simud Hitam cave chamber. Much of the bird or bat guano surfaces (on the cave floor or walls) are home to thousands of cockroaches, spiders, centipedes and a myriad of smaller fast running guanophiles, plus crabs in the wet areas.

On the occasion that we visited the cave, there appeared to be six or seven teams of harvesters working; each team comprising about 10-12men or more. Each team involved a group of ground support workers operating the guy ropes, lowering or raising the wicker harvest baskets and food or drink. There were also men ferrying containers of rice and bottles of black coffee from the houses outside. Inside the cave there were rest houses at various sites; some had hammocks and mattresses. These shelters were sometimes also used to house the bags of harvested nests.

Harvesting is done in the age old traditional method where bamboo poles are used to raise rattan ladders up to the roof of the cave, connecting with more rigid bamboo (piatau) supports. The harvesters stand, kneel or lie on these bamboo structures to reach wall mounted bird nests. The ladders and platforms are moved up and down or sideways with the aid of various guy ropes. The main ropes are anchored to heavy tee-pee shaped vertical piles of logs; some of the guy ropes are simply anchored to the platform handrail supports.

Above, often near the cave roof, there were usually 2-3 men at the 'coal face', perched on the bamboo platforms harvesting nests that were often congealed together. Without binoculars or a camera with telephoto lens, from the walkway below it was very difficult to see the harvesters often working 80-90m above the cave floor.



An open bag of swiftlet bird nests in Gomantong Cave. Photo: Arthur Clarke.

Given that with our respective caving helmets and powerful lights we must have appeared to be professional cavers, our guide took us off the boardwalk, allowing us to climb upslope to where a larger team of men were working amidst knee deep guano. There was feverish activity here and sitting on the steps of his in-cave house, the Kuching-based Chinese overseer was personally unloading all the filled wicker baskets and closely guarding bagged up lots of harvested nests. After spending about three hours in Gomantong Caves, our guide suggested we get back on the road again and head back towards Sandakan and the Sepilok Orang-utan Sanctuary (5° 51.9' N / 117° 57.0' E). The admission cost was RM30 per adult, plus RM10 if you wanted to use a camera. There were about 60-70 visitors in our party, including a number of Dutch and German tourists. We were aiming to get there by 3pm to see the orang-utans emerging from the forest jungle to feed on various fruits that had been placed on a raised platform. However, the orang-utans did not appear. Fortunately for us as if by cue, on the way out to the feeding platforms, we were pleasantly surprised by a group of young and mature orang-utans swinging down out of the trees and onto the handrail and walkway beside us. A careless and absent minded tourist lost her unopened bottle of drinking water!

On the return journey from Sepilok, our guide Bakar gives us a brief tour of Sandakan, formerly the capital of British North Borneo. In the 1930s Sandakan was the largest timber-exporting port of tropical hardwood in the world and was still actively being used as a shipping base when invaded by the Japanese in 1942. Former Changi (Singapore) POWs from Australia were imprisoned here at Sandakan during the Second World War;

the main occupation involved construction and maintenance of an airstrip. At war's end, the remaining 1500-1600 Australian POWs were sent 260km inland on forced 'death marches'; aside from two escapees, there were no survivors from these long walks. In all, 2,462 allied soldier POWs perished at Sandakan or during the death marches. Today, a Memorial Park stands on the site of the Japanese Imperial Army's former POW camp. During the war, additional POWs were also housed on Berhala Island and Turtle Island off the east coast from Sandakan. Both islands have caves; some were later used as hideaways for escaping prisoners. On Berhala, some of the caves are still home to swiftlets, though harvesting of nests is no longer permitted.

A brief tour of the city and waterfront followed en route to the airport. There was quite a cultural contrast between the rich and the poor of Sandakan. To the inland we saw well-to-do houses with leafy garden surrounds occupying the higher ground contrasting with high density 'floating' settlements extending out from the shore into the bay. Meanwhile, adjacent coastal mangrove was being razed for development of more permanent low cost housing to accommodate the growing number of shoreline dwellers.

So ended our day after a flying trip to Gomantong Caves. PS: Our advice is to make sure you consult maps of Sabah, in order to plan your visit well in advance before you travel! Sandakan is a major centre for eco-tourism adventure so visitors should ideally allow about three full days to check out the area's highlights. To Bakar Burn: Terima Kasih (thank you very much)...



A wall of cockroaches ('Cockroach Heaven') in Gomantong Cave. Photo: Arthur Clarke.