

Shortly before my eighteenth birthday, I had joined my parents in Sarawak, Borneo (now part of East Malaysia). The town of Simanggang was the capital of the Second-Division (a county) of Sarawak and was situated inland on a major river of the same name. My step-father Terry had organised a fishing trip for his local leave and to coincide with my holiday. At the time I wrote the following account which my mother kept and returned to me some thirty years later.

'We left the town of Simanggang in the early afternoon in the District Officer's river-prahu, a long sleek boat with shallow sun-coverings. We were on the river Simanggang thirty miles from its mouth. The prahu was loaded with our tins of clothes and equipment, food and bedding for a fishing trip near to the Indonesian border. We were in Second-Division Sarawak and had to make the journey by sea into the First-Division and then around to the border. By five pm we had reached the sea port of Sebuyau where we were to spend three days settling business and preparing for the journey. On arrival I suffered a severe bout of sinusitis for which Terry immediately secured a course of penicillin injections for me at the local hospital – and over the next two days this relieved the pain in my forehead.

'For the final leg of our journey we hired a sea-prahu powered by an eighteen horse power outboard engine (we also carried a spare). Four of us (our cook Song, Terry, Mum & I) set out on Thursday at 12 noon as the sun beat down on the small river port. The sun reflecting off the sea was dazzling, but our holiday expectations were running high. Terry did most of the driving for the first four hours. We were aiming to round the rocky peninsular of Tanjong Sipang which juts out into the South China sea, but when I noticed from our map that instead of rounding the peninsular, we could dip inland and work our way through the river labyrinth to emerge on the south-west side of the peninsular we changed plans.

'At this point Terry allowed me to take over the driving and navigate up the river system. However due to the narrow river width (100 yards) and twisty bends, we weren't able to travel as fast as on the open sea. Banks of Mangrove and Nipah palms passed by, followed by jungle trees and some rubber groves with occasional Malay kampongs perched on their grassy banks. We approached the river Kuching and branched right and then later left into the Sunai Santubong which would lead us back out to the sea.

'The sun was sinking (it being about 6pm) with the sun's rays travelling the length of the river into my eyes (we were now travelling North-West), when a small ship approached us in the opposite direction without slowing down. I could see its wake was about three-foot-high sweeping back behind it to the river banks. The boat left us some room but with the running board of our prahu being only 18 inches above the water level, I considered the best angle to tackle the wake: If we took the wake sideways, we would lose some equipment. The best way would have been to take it diagonally (keeping straight on) so as to ride over the wave with the least damage, but being very inexperienced, I decided to turn the bow of the boat straight into the wake. The water came over the bow and drenched Terry, Song and mum. I stopped while they sorted themselves out, but I couldn't resist laughing out loud.

'Two hours later we reached Santubong, a small fishing village on the south-west coast of Tanjong Sipang comprising a Malay kampong with tall coconut palms on the flanks of mount Santubong a 1000 foot rock jutting skywards. This had apparently once been a pirate watering village. We quietly found the rest house and made good for the night.

'Friday morning, we were up early and headed due West with sea breakers hitting the Santubong coast as we set out. We saw a green turtle on the way basking in the warm surface water, but it dived as we approached and disappeared into the clear green depths. Bi-passing small islets, we headed for Batu Mandi a small rock which marked the entrance to the Lundu river mouth. We reached it and then travelled up the river to our next stop-over at Lundu where the Chinese District Officer was awaiting our arrival. We reached Lundu at 2pm where we washed and changed and then visited the Chinese shopping centre at dusk. Here we were entertained to a Chinese meal of several courses. There was much talk amongst the dozen guests eating slowly for an hour or so. One dish which I found delicious was a type of boiled seaweed. After coffee and beer, we left for the D.O.'s bungalow where he kindly put us up for the night.

'Saturday morning saw us up early for the last leg of our journey. We left Lundu at 7am and that afternoon we reached Milau Bay the last harbour this side of the Sarawak-Indonesian border. Here we hired a local fisherman a jolly Malay man and we left the Malay kampong and headed North West keeping close to the coast. Soon we found a pleasant looking bay and steered gingerly towards the sandy shore with one man standing at the bow keeping a sharp lookout for coral rocks which were all around us. With the prahu and provisions beached, we found a disused shack on high stilts. It was ten-foot square but was clean and would provide us shelter for our fishing trip.

'We weren't the only party in the bay fishing since we found a party of Malay fishermen camped 100 yards beyond a stream that was close to us. That evening we discovered they were going crayfish hunting at night amongst the rocks at low tide. They invited us to join them which we did equipped with torches and gym shoes. But we caught nothing perhaps due to our clumsiness. The fishermen left the next morning.

'We spent a week in this bay, deep sea fishing further out and at other times snorkelling over a shallow and very beautiful coral reef. In the deeper water we caught several large disc shaped fish (all about 18 to 24 inch in length and 2 to 3-inch-thick) including a parrot fish and an Ican Minac, using hand lines. We cooked these fish in a sand oven on the beach. After the first night I moved out of the shack as I found sleeping on the beach more comfortable than sleeping on the bamboo slats. One time I walked off into the jungle aimlessly following a dry stream bed for some distance. It was uplifting to be on my own with raw nature in a wilderness. One evening as we were fishing in the deeper water, we met up with a group of Indonesian fishermen who had crossed the border to fish in the same bay as us. We held a friendly exchange. I linked arms with one of them so as to keep our two boats together while Terry and our guide spoke with them in Malay.

'The next Saturday morning we left the bay at 6am on our return journey. First, we dropped our Malay guide of at Milau Bay and then we headed out to the turtle island called Satang. Here there was a manned turtle station and a rest house as well as a good coral reef. We arrived at 11am and having circled the island, we beached in front of the turtle station where the Malay turtle manager lived. We spotted a green turtle in the shallow water and that night we accompanied the manager to where a turtle had come out and was laying her eggs in a hole she had dug in the sand. We could light up the scene since once she had started laying, she would not be put off. From an extended uterus dozens of eggs came popping out. When finished she buried them and she flipped back to the sea. The manager marked the eggs with a flag and the next day he dug them up; some were

replanted for hatching. But the rest were to be sold as they are a prized dish. I tasted one – the egg had a coarse leathery texture and was not that pleasant.

‘That day I went coral fishing on my own with our guns and my snorkel. Terry didn’t come and wasn’t in a great mood. I lost a spear as the tide came in and washed it and my catch off the rock I had placed it on. I spotted a large crayfish but wasn’t able to get it. On Monday we were up at 6am and left Satang at 7am. The sea was rough and the wind was against us, but we braved the elements as we headed out to sea and went round the Tanjong Sipang peninsular which we had avoided coming. By midday we were round and well on our way home. Then we sighted a British war ship (a cruiser) which appeared to be sheltering from the weather. Rounding Palai Lakei and Tangong Po we headed east. I was driving the outboard when we struck some submerged fishing nets which broke our engine pin (on the outward journey the nets had not troubled us as the tide was higher. By 7:30 pm we had passed Sibuyau and had reached Lingu (a little way up the Simanggang River) where we spent the night with the local officer. The next day Tuesday we headed back to Simanggang town arriving at 2pm, sun brown and relaxed after our holiday. Little did we know that Terry and I had contracted Malaria from the Indonesian mosquitos and were to fall sick two weeks later.’

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