

The only way to get a full sense of a rainforest is to reach the canopy. The viewing platform visible here is an intermediate one, about 25m above ground

Top Trees

ONE OF ASIA'S OLDEST PRIMARY FORESTS STILL SURVIVES, BUT IT'S A PRECARIOUS EXISTENCE. TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY **ARATI RAO**

As the small airplane banked right over Sabah in Malaysian-Borneo, the valley and the river snaking through it came in to full view. It was resplendent: a thick shaggy green blanket swathed the hills. I was convinced there wouldn't be wiggle room for a finger in there. But as the plane flew lower and the coast came in to view, my heart sank. The green had been cleared in neat tracks all the way down to the sea, like someone had run a giant fork through the landscape.

We flew into the tiny Lahad Datu airport in Sabah, on the northeastern tip of Borneo. What lay ahead of us was about 430 square kilometres of almost completely primary forest, some of the oldest in the world—the Danum Valley Conservation Area.

The Danum Valley Field Centre, a research centre, lies on the eastern edge of the conservation area and hugs the banks of the Sungai Segama river. On the drive in, we'd already seen a couple of orang-utans and a host of other animals, reptiles and birds, a number of which I hadn't seen before. Orang-utans are the only great apes of Asia and are highly endangered. Their fast

dwindling numbers are attributed to massive swathes of their habitat being clear-felled for palm-oil plantations. To see one in the wild, and so soon after we stepped into the forest, was a huge privilege. We reached the field centre just as dusk was falling. Our rooms here were functional and comfortable and we settled in for the night after a quick simple meal.

The next morning, we set out early, for the drama in the forest begins with the first light of dawn. We crossed the Sungai Segama on a suspension bridge and walked up a trail that led to a canopy-viewing platform perched high on a dipterocarp. Dipterocarps are lofty trees (they soar forty to seventy metres high and our platform was a dizzying sixty metres up). A ladder on the side of the tree needed to be negotiated; let's just say it's not for the faint-hearted. It was like climbing the outside of an eighteen-storey building.

I was now in the emergent layer, way above everything else. Only a few dipts and some other fantastic, white-boled emergents were higher than me. Life in these rainforests is lived in



KALYAN VARMA

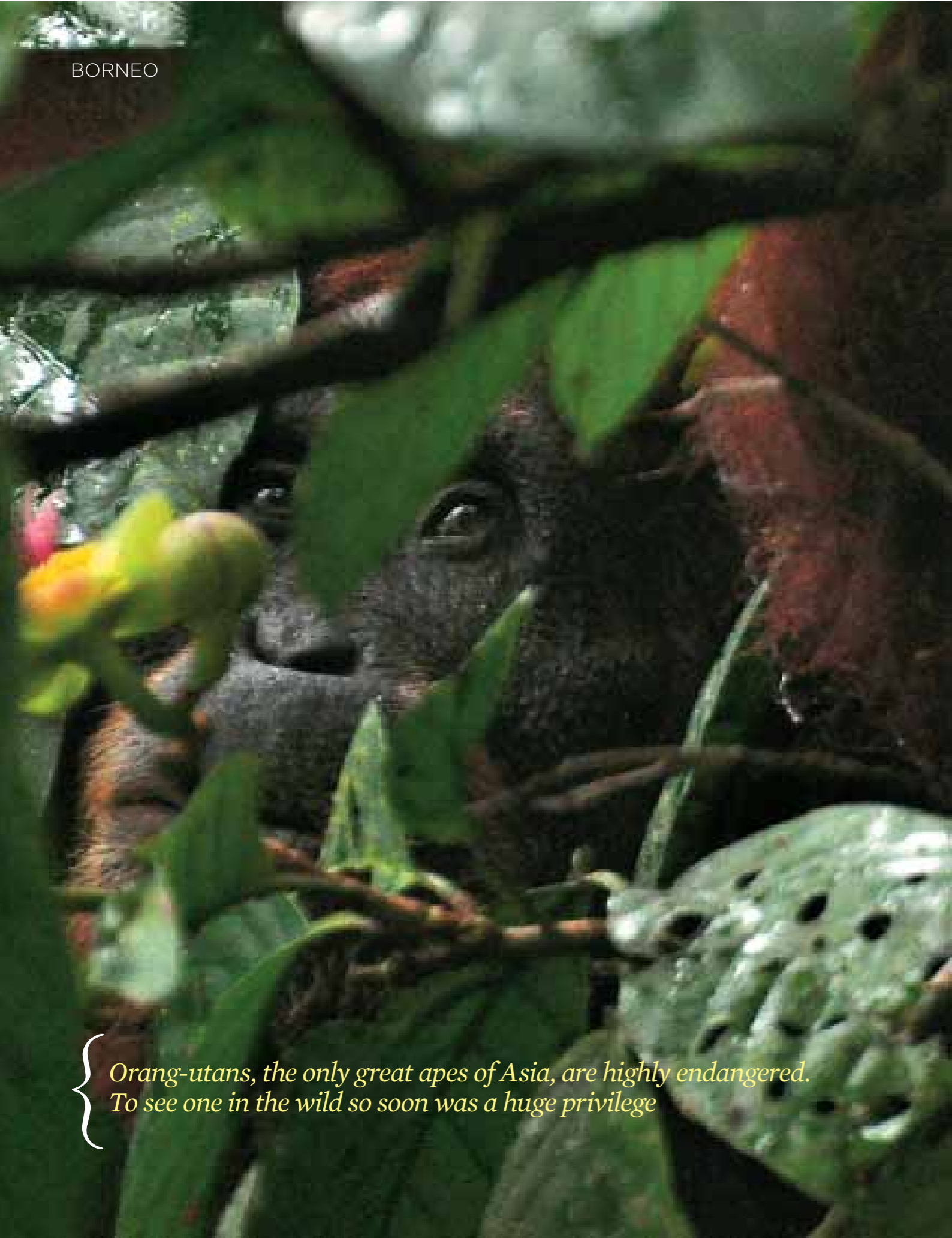


All around were mist pools, with the odd tree clumps peeking out as the haze ebbed and flowed around the forest

A smooth-barked tualang tree catches the first rays of the sun. Facing page (clockwise from top left): the leaf litter supports a whole lot of life, like the fungus here; this lizard changed its colour from green to brown as we watched; and the resplendent great argus pheasant in its lekking ground

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Parts of the Danum Valley are untouched by logging and still have their huge trees; these parts are probably the most complex ecosystems in the world



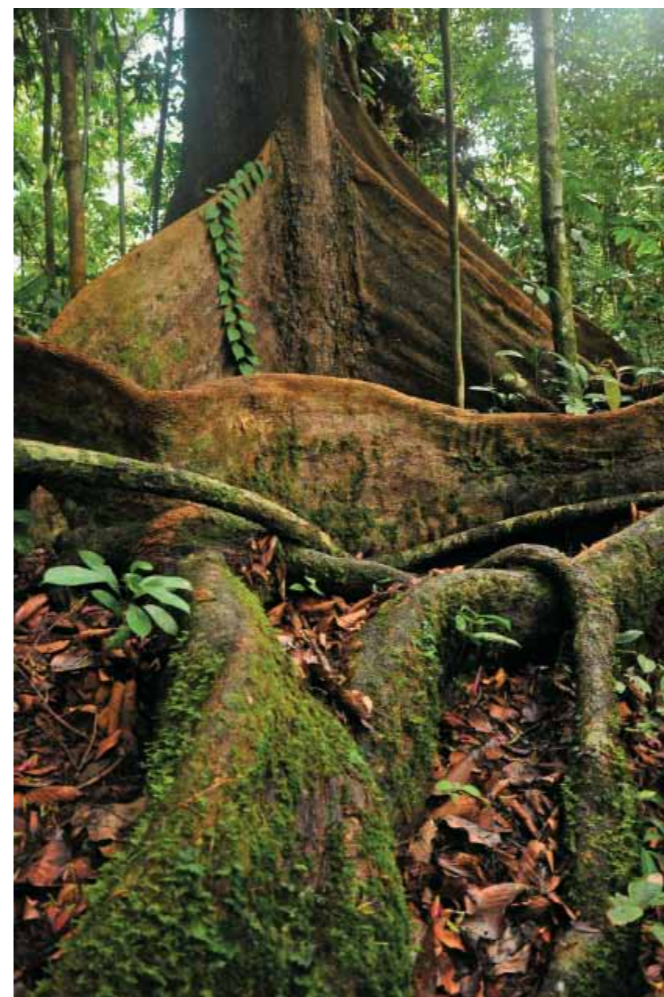
Orang-utans, the only great apes of Asia, are highly endangered. To see one in the wild so soon was a huge privilege

the canopies. I could see red leaf monkeys jumping around and chasing each other in the canopies twenty metres below. The sounds from all around were almost dizziness inducing, closing in around me. The lodge was a speck in the distance. The nature of the forest was all too apparent from up here and I developed a new appreciation for the scale of this rainforest and the many levels on which life subsists here.

On the way back, we heard a loud, throaty “wowwow”—a call you have to hear to believe. “What’s that?” I asked. I thought I’d be told they’re cicadas, pretty much the standard response to my queries about odd sounds. This time, it was an argus. Aah, I said, with a sage nod. Mental note: remember to check the Borneo Field Guide. I did and—wow, I had to see one somehow.

The night was full of forest sounds and a deep dark. The research centre had no electricity after midnight, so if you were to wake up at night, you couldn’t even see the palm in front of your face. Flashlights are your best friend

Clockwise from below: wood vines along the forest floor; red-leaf monkeys; and one of the 600,000 types of fungi found in Borneo. Facing: an orang-utan in his favourite dillenia tree

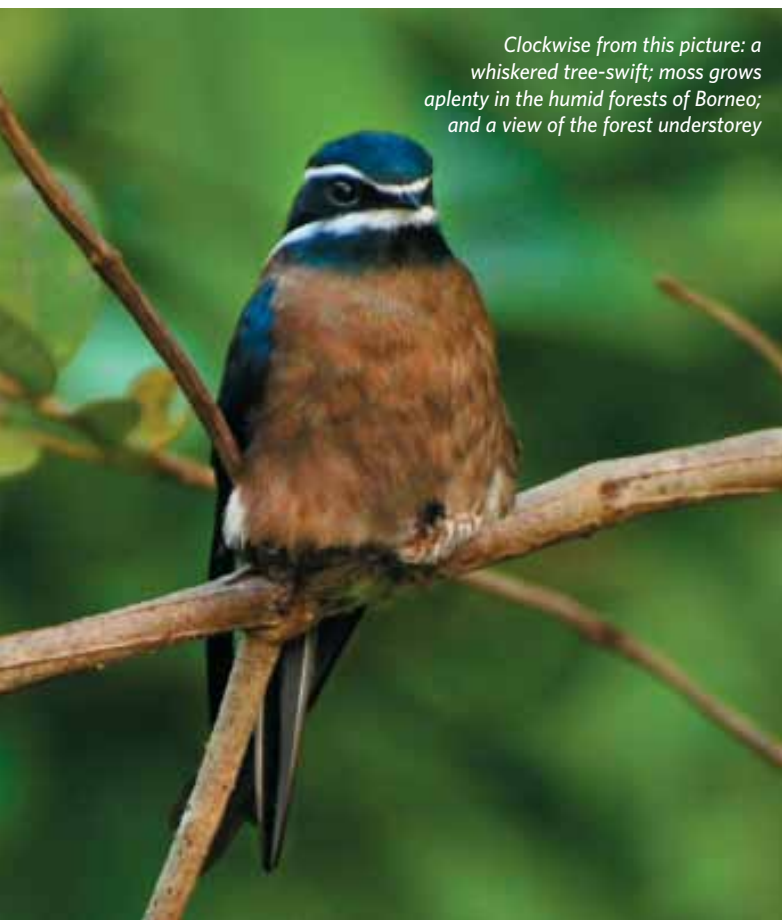


here. As dawn approached, the sounds changed slightly; the hooting territorial calls of gibbons. The occasional call of an elusive rhinoceros hornbill and the chattering of the red leaf monkeys added to the medley that morning.

We got out early and immediately encountered a huge old orang-utan quietly chewing on dillenia flowers. He watched us unperturbed. Not quite ten steps from the lodge, we froze. About three metres away from us was one of the most elusive sights in the world. A clouded leopard—head bent low to the ground, thick tail almost longer than its body—crossed the road and disappeared into the bush. Just like that. Researchers live for years here without seeing this very shy cat. There was something very special about how suddenly and quietly it happened, like an unexpected cameo by a reclusive, very famous star.

Back at breakfast, no one spoke for a while and then everyone burst out chattering with excitement at what we’d just seen. I could not wait to get out again, on the West Trail this time. Those trails were enchanting—like unexplored fairylands. Even at the leaf-litter level, they seemed charmed, with mushrooms, fungi and toadstools in colours I’d never seen before. Some looked like fairy tutus, some like the backs of spotted deer. Others were frilly black and still others pristine white.





Clockwise from this picture: a whiskered tree-swift; moss grows aplenty in the humid forests of Borneo; and a view of the forest understorey

Mike, a researcher, was leading us on this trail. “Shhhh...,” he kept saying and we plodded along behind him as silently as we could. Someone or the other always ended up flouting rules and either guffawed or yelled out to another and drew frowns from our guide. Soon, the rain of the previous night made the going slippery and concentration stole our tongues.

Mike hurried along on the ‘coffin trail’ (it takes you to an ancient burial site) and kept beckoning us to follow apace. Then there was that call again, the argus. It was somewhere in the forest ahead. We were tracking the argus! “We go 500 yards, then turn right. Then climb to see lekking [or mating] ground,” said Mike in his thick East Timori accent. The foot-chase was right out of an Indiana Jones movie, slick leaf litter over thick clay soil. Slippery terrain, if your shoes are not in great condition. The forest was wet and thick and the walking seemed to involve a great deal of climbing over fallen logs—not something you can do with dignity. Then came decision time: should we cross the stream on the creaky, mossy plank that lay across it? We ditched that plank and waded across the stream. And then there was more climbing through slush.

As we crested a hump in the trail, Mike hunched and beckoned urgently, with a finger to his lips. We inched forward and, in the clearing up ahead, was the argus. The resplendent great argus pheasant stood four feet tall, blue-headed and spiky



A bird's-eye-view of the Segama river; and (above) a selectively (and legally) logged forest

haired—him of the lovely ocelli tail feathers. Lekking ground prepped and feathers preened, he was calling out to his mate. I wish we could have seen the dance routine too—where apparently he flares his lovely feathers, full of eyespots, and hides his own eyes behind them, peeking out at her. He swished this way and that, unsure of us, and then strutted off pompously.

What a morning it had been. We'd seen the forest in all its glory and two of its star performers. Could things get better still? As it turned out, yes.

On our last day in Danum Valley, we woke up at 4.15am—easy, because I did not want to miss a thing. A quick shower and we were all out by the 4WDs. We were going to the observation tower. The forests around us were swathed in mist and we climbed our way up a mountain just as the sky was beginning to get an indigo-purple hue that announced pre-dawn. I ran up the stairs to the observation deck and gaped at the scene before me. Mist pools, with the odd tree clumps peeking out as the haze ebbed and flowed around the forest. A changing, shifting scene.

The emergent layer was just catching the first rays of the sun, revealing bare, long white barks and red leaves. The mist was catching the pink of the nascent rays and lifting, shifting. The gibbons and the orang-utans were all there, hidden in the mist pools, as was that magnificent argus and that clouded leopard.

My mind rushed back to those fork scrapes on the landscape we had seen from the sky. It's all going. Fast. But in the clarity of that morning, I saw that nothing was more important to hold on to and preserve.



THE INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

From India, your best bet is to fly to **Kuala Lumpur** (Air Asia and Malaysia Airlines have non-stop flights from Delhi for ₹12,500 upwards round-trip; from Mumbai and Chennai, Malaysia Airlines has non-stop flights from ₹16,000 and ₹14,000, respectively). From Kuala Lumpur, there are several flights a day to **Kota Kinabalu** on Air Asia (from ₹10,000 return) and Malaysia Airlines (from ₹19,000). The quickest way to get to Danum Valley from here is to take yet another flight to **Lahad Datu** (Malaysia Airlines has a daily 55-minute flight at 10.35am, from ₹9,000 return). The alternative is a 400km cab ride, which will also cost quite a bit.

Danum Valley is located 40km inland from Lahad Datu on Sabah's

east coast. If you're staying at the Borneo Rainforest Lodge, there are daily **transfers** from and to the airport from the lodge. The journey takes about two hours by road and the first 15km is along the main Lahad Datu to Tawau road; the remaining is on unsealed but well maintained private logging roads.

WHERE TO STAY

Tourists usually stay at the comfortable **Borneo Rainforest Lodge** (3D/2N package \$767 doubles, inclusive of meals; longer duration packages available; borneorainforestlodge.com). Besides accommodation, the package includes transfers, meals, a guide, night safaris, jungle canopy walk, birdwatching and rainforest treks.

The other (cheaper but DIY) option in Danum Valley is the

Danum Valley Field Centre. This is best done through a travel agent registered with the Sabah Tourism Board (sabahtourism.com). Danum Valley is a restricted area and you will need permits and guides, which the Field Centre will not organise for you. The accommodation here is basic but comfortable—note that there is no hot water and no electricity after midnight. You will have to arrange your transport and guides through a travel agency (we used Inno Travels; sabahholiday.com). Do ask for a guide who knows the forest.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

> The **best time to go** is between March and October, but this is near the equator and you are going into a rainforest, so expect it to be wet.

> Do not miss the **walks** into the forest on foot. There are quite a few trails into the forest around the Borneo Rainforest Lodge itself.

> One trail leads to a **natural waterfall** where there is a 'pool' you can jump into. Changing rooms are on the banks.

> The **canopy walk** is a must-do. This is a walkway that stretches out about 30m high across several emergent layer trees. Again, the walkway is close to the Lodge.

WHAT TO WEAR

> Borneo is tropical rainforest. It does not get any more humid than this. Carry plenty of **T-shirts** and **light towels** to dry off.

> **Leech-socks** are a must. There are plenty of leeches—and big ones too.

■ ARATI RAO