## PHOTOGRAPHY by Ewen Bell

## IN SEARCH OF THE RAFFLESIA

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My earliest memories of wildlife television are of David Attenborough traipsing through the lush jungles of Borneo in search of the elusive Rafflesia Flower. This unique and bizarre of flora has many forms across Indonesia, Malaysia and Southern Thailand, but in the hills outside Kota Kinabalu, on the north western tip of Malaysian Borneo, a vibrant red variety is protected and loved by the local community. Here is one of the best chances for travellers to come face-to-face with the Rafflesia

In spite of my early-developmental exposure to BBC naturalists I was largely ignorant of the Rafflesia flower before visiting Borneo. I had not appreciated just how rare the blooms are; every two years worth of growth generating a flower that lasts no more than a week. The flowers are perhaps better described as the out-turned surface of a pot of nectar, while the Rafflesia plant itself is little more than a filamentous relative of fungi that infects the roots of a specific species of tree.

The slow eruption of a bulbous mass along a section of filament is what will eventually metamorphous into the blossom – a syrupy bowl of liquid, the size of a human head, that lures insects to a sticky death with a scent often compared to rotting flesh. The brightly coloured surface of the 'petals' provide further enticement to its unsuspecting victims, signposting the way to the sweet treasures within.

For those with a botanical bent the chance to examine the Rafflesia in the wild is truly remarkable, for no photograph can truly do it justice. But as is often the case, it is the journey itself that matters most – the search for a Rafflesia flower is what makes them such an adventure.

The first step takes place before you leave Kota Kinabalu. A few phone calls will quickly determine whether there are any known sightings in the national park at Tambunan. For any given day there is a one-infour chance that a flower is blooming.

If the word is positive then it's a simple matter of catching a mini-bus from the Kota Kinabalu Long Distance Bus Station to the Tambunan Visitors Centre, a little over 60kms away. These little vans are known in the local language as 'bas-mini' – not hard to translate.

There is no such thing as a bus timetable in Borneo; instead the vans simply wait until they're full of passengers and then it's time to depart. You may have to make room for produce and luggage around, beneath and on-top of your legs as the maximum seating capacity of a bas-mini does not take into account the shopping burden of its passengers.

My drive into the jungle was scenic to say the least as the road followed the ridge line around the mountains and dipping in and out of heavy mists. Borneo is known as the land beneath the clouds, and with good reason – the threat of rain is never far away. Upon Arrival at Tambunan the first measure of drizzle was evident.

The visitor centre is well organised to keep track of the forest and known locations for Rafflesia sightings. They divide the sites of frequent blooms into numbered plots, so the next objective was to head into the jungle and locate plot number 27. I had picked a quiet day and

there were no guides around to be of assistance, but the attendee of the centre was helpful enough to draw a map and assured us that the paths were easy to follow.

He was half right anyway. The paths were great, but the quick sketch scribbled on a piece of note-paper was sadly lacking in accuracy where left versus right were concerned. So I simply continued on into the jungle looking for plot numbers.

The gentle mist and occasional dapple of rain did nothing to ease the steamy heat of the afternoon, but to be honest I loved every minute of the walk. This is exactly how I had imagined Borneo to be; a land of dripping wet jungles, forest trails and exotic plants sheltered from the sun. I could hear the sound of birds calling each other far off into the forest and the background chorus of insects. This is the wild Borneo I had dreamed of.

Eventually I found the simple wooden signpost marking Plot 27, and sure enough not ten metres away an open bloom of the Rafflesia Pricei lay on the ground. It was five days old and would soon start a rapid decline as the fleshy parts begin to rot away and the orange and ochre tones turn to brown and black.

Photographic evidence of the success was secured and the time came to head back, beginning with an arduous climb back up the hill and the removal of several leeches from under my socks. The sound of rain drops pelting the canopy high above echoed down to the forest floor, and soon the rain really started to fall.

The harder it rained the more I smiled and the more I felt like I had earned my sighting of the Rafflesia. This is what Borneo is all about.

