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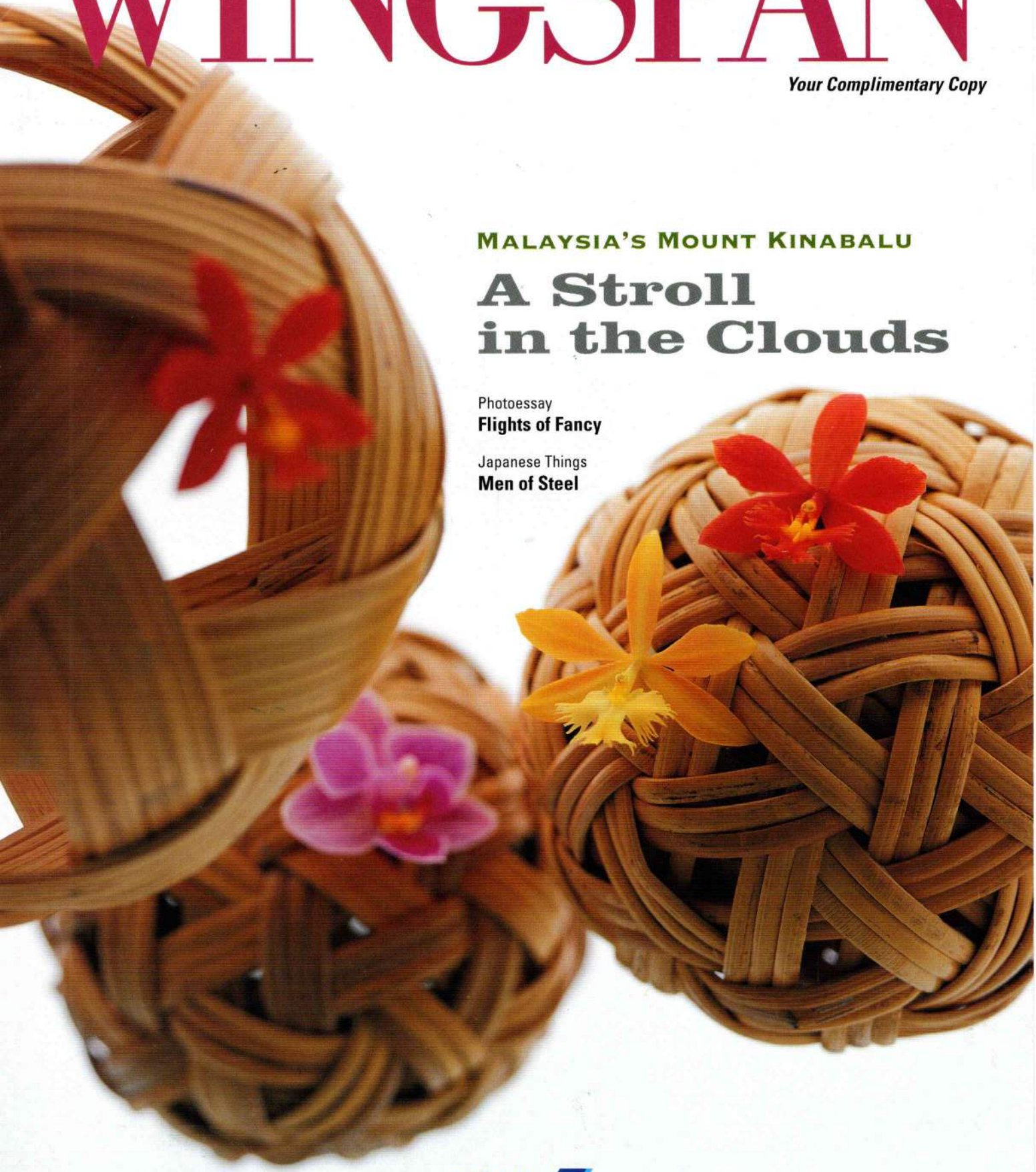

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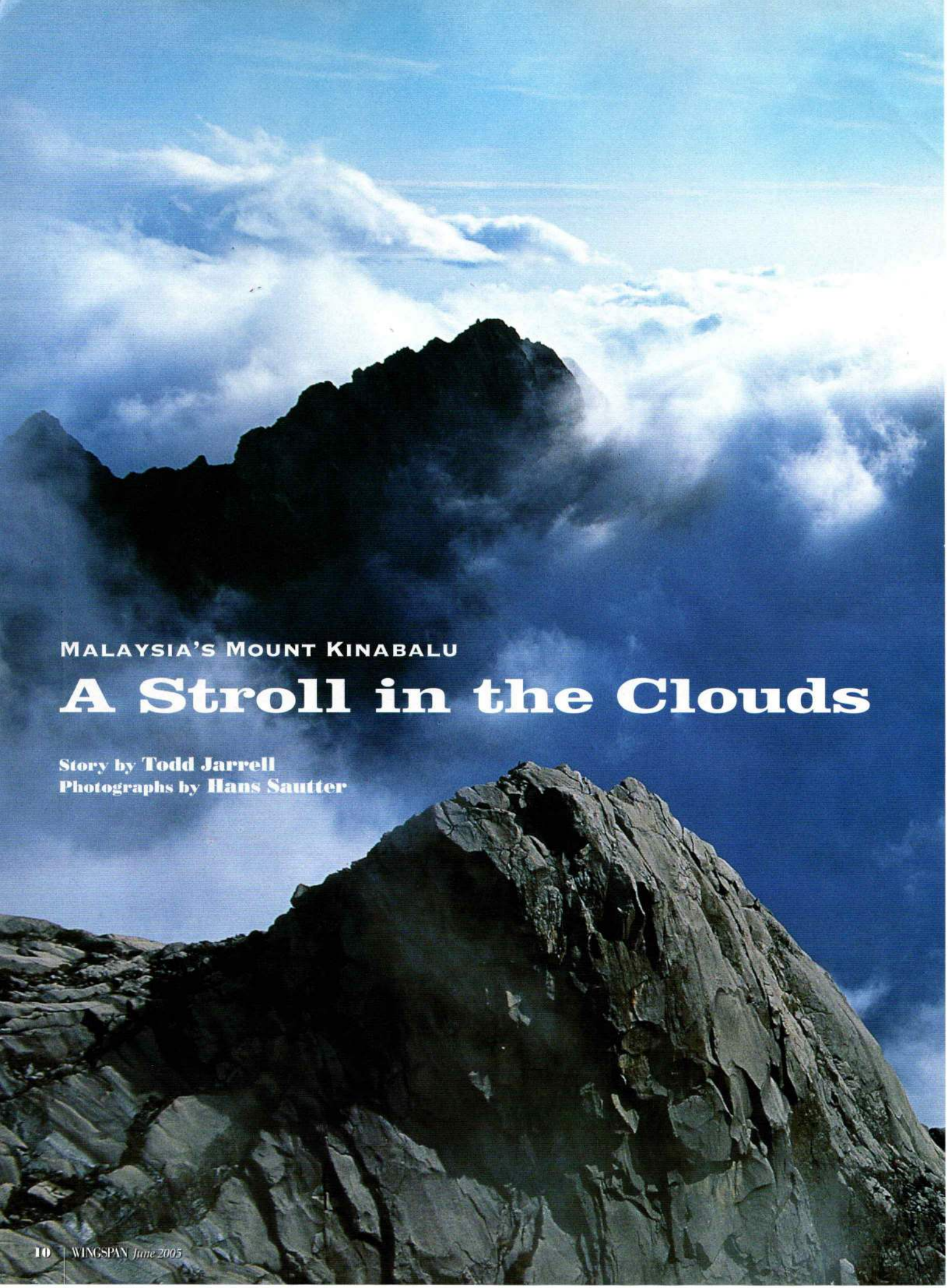

MALAYSIA'S MOUNT KINABALU

A Stroll in the Clouds

Story by **Todd Jarrell**
Photographs by **Hans Sautter**

"There is a mountain in Borneo," Hans began, "We should climb it." He had my attention. Though he was calling over his morning coffee from Tokyo, my phone in Nashville had rung late at night. "It's known as Kinabalu. It means 'the revered place of the spirits.'"

Encouraged by my silence, Hans listed Kinabalu's wonders: United Nations World Heritage Site; tallest mountain in Southeast Asia, home to carnivorous plants, meter-wide flower blossoms, sacrificial chickens, giant leeches and… flying snakes? My imagination soared. Vivid images assailed me. Determined to visit Borneo since childhood, my one question for Hans was, "When do we leave?"

Our first look at the mountain came the night we flew into Kota Kinabalu, the capital of Sabah state on the north end of Malaysian Borneo. Gary Mujini, our guide from Exotic Adventures, tossed our rucksacks into his minivan, and for two hours we wound our way up to Kinabalu Park. We peppered Gary with questions. About the relative safety of the climb…. "Fifty-fifty chance!" Gary laughed. "Half you okay. Half you fly to heaven!"

To illustrate this, he pointed out what looked to be small cluster of stars in the heavens. "Up there," he gestured, "you

will soon be up there!" But there, instead of our eternal abode, was the dim outline of the granite massif filling the night sky to the north; the "stars" were the tiny lights of Laban Rata rest house and Sayat Sayat checkpoint beyond, still well below the summit. From our view the mountain certainly had enough altitude to house the spirits, but our hope was to walk, not fly, to heaven.

Tarzan Vines

Waking early, we found clouds rolling an eerie gauze around the park, dampening the whoop and chatter of the jungle. Before breakfast, I strolled through the Mountain Garden with Effendi, who introduced me to the curious plants that have offered both health and hazard to the local Dusun people since their arrival millennia ago.

Everywhere lianas climbed into the canopy, some hundreds of feet long, thick as a man's arm. These "Tarzan

Vines" gush sweet, life-giving water when severed with a machete. The "wait-a-minute" plant is named for those held up in its spiky embrace. Pointing out a tiny red and yellow mushroom, Effendi says, "Make you laugh, laugh, laugh, laugh... Until you die." I made a note.

Kinabalu's diversity is incredible, with over 5,000 flowering plants. There are 40 species of ginger here, 78 of figs. And orchids—over 1,200 of these highly stylized species. A few steps beyond the laughing mushroom Effendi crooked a finger, beckoned me closer, and squinted at something midair. There, dangling from a slight green tendril was the tiny *podochilus* orchid, snow-white, perfectly formed, and enclosed entirely within a single drop of water.

After fueling up on bangers, eggs and beans, we stuffed our packs with chocolate and biscuits and rode to the trailhead at Timpohon Gate (1,900 meters). With the addition of James Bulangau, a park guide from nearby Bundutuhan village, we were now four.

It's Not All Downhill

I have learned from life to be dubious of things that go too well, and the Summit Trail soon piqued my suspicions with a broad graded track curving gracefully *down* the hillside. At the bottom, surrounded by lush greenery was beautiful Carson Falls, named for the first park warden. But crossing the creek puts one's feet on the main flank of Kinabalu; from there it is ceaselessly, remorselessly *up*.

The well-tended trail is a series of gravel grades and rock stairs of stone and twisted roots. Sabah authorities have gone to great lengths to make Kinabalu, if not easy, at least doable for reasonably fit climbers of all ages. This is evident in the trail's regularly spaced shelters, or *pondoks*. Each has fresh water; some have toilet facilities.

At nearly 2,000 meters, the first is Pondok Kandis, beyond which we entered the cloud forest with great pillows of white mist whispering up slope to coat a green, glistening world. In black relief, tall trees stood out against the monochrome light, gnarled and twisted as if posing for Dr. Seuss, seeming to bend beneath the weight of spongy moss and lichens, bejeweled with orchids, rhododendrons and feathery epiphytic ferns.

Past Pondok Uba and Pondok Lowii the mossy forest continued, tall oaks and bamboo laced with dripping vines, threaded by bright birds and butterflies. Though a

comfortable 21 °C, our breath was visible in the humidity; spoken words appeared as the ghosts of our thoughts. A sharp turn in the trail overlooked the void, a glare-bright world of white cloud; there could be anything out there—or nothing.

Past the turn, a long wall hugged the trail, 50 meters long and five high. Down the granite face tumbled broad ferns, loosely arranged over thick epaulettes of moss and silvered lichens. Cahaya blossoms rose up in tiny pink fists beneath slender sprays of grass. Crescent ferns waved like scimitars in the breeze, necklace orchids peeped from the foliage, the whole arranged in Mother Nature's finest style.

Facing page, left: Kinabalu's diverse flora include the *podochilus*, smaller than a raindrop; (right) *nepenthes villosa*, a pitcher plant endemic to the mountain; and (above) the world's largest flower, rafflesia.

Halfway to Heaven

Our goal for the first day was Layang Layang, halfway to the guesthouse at Laban Rata, which most climbers make in one day. But we wished to take time for photographs, to savor the trail, to "smell the roses along the way." Already we had met hikers who passed us, heads down, puffing from the strain, seldom seeing what wonders they were missing.

Emerging onto the open ridge at Layang Layang (2,700 meters), we found a storm grinding across the mountain toward us like a grain thresher. Just as the squall threw itself against us, James led us into a crude workmen's shack at the construction site of a new overnight rest house. Warm and dry, after a dinner of hot-spiced noodles we collapsed, slipping into sleep as the rain beat the thin tin roof above our heads like a troop of baboons with peening hammers. This was the area of the giant Kinabalu leech, seldom seen except when it is pouring rain. Little is known of it but that it can grow to 30 centimeters or more in length. I slept better knowing it is not a bloodsucker.

Layang Layang means "place of the swallows," and we awoke to birdsong and crisp sunshine. The trail steepened; the very few flat spots came in the form of mud-

sinks the color of wine-marbled cheese spread. While offering a full six or eight seconds of relief on the thighs, these inevitably lead on to more rock steps in countless succession. It was somewhere there that Hans turned to me. "Here," he said matter-of-factly, "is where you might use the word 'grueling' in your text." I made a note.

Deadly Nectar

The ochre-colored, ultrabasic soil offers little nutrients and is even toxic to some plants, but off the trail one finds the fully adapted pitcher plant. Its leaves form deep receptacles filled with a liquid to lure and drown unsuspecting insects, which dissolve, their nutrients absorbed by the plant.

They seem a bit otherworldly, these carnivorous plants, awaiting their prey. Of nearly 30 species of pitcher plants found in the park, ten grow on the mountain—three are found nowhere else on earth. Shapely and red-lipped, some are the size of thimbles, but the largest, *Nepenthes rajah*, holds as much as 3 liters of deadly nectar.

I was thinking that they seemed at once innocuous and sinister and, well... erotic, when Hans, hunkered over his tripod spoke to me through the sun-speckled foliage. "Believe me, I have seen sexy plants before, many times," he said, peering through his macro lens at a particularly florid specimen. "But *these*," he added, "these are pornographic!"

We broke out onto a clear ridge to see the great toothy jaw of the Mesilau Range away to the east. Trees at this altitude are stunted and more twisted than below, and many, over one hundred years old, wear long moss pennants like bedraggled prayer flags. Even in no wind this writhing forest seemed in motion. Cloudbanks in whirling horsetails swept up slope to lightly veil with mists the bald granite slopes festooned with snow-white waterfalls. Stunning in its beauty, anyone could believe this to be a sanctuary of spirits.

At Pondok Paka we took a brief rest while Gary explained that the next pitch—the last before Laban Rata—is the bit of trail that breaks people's will to summit. As if on cue, a small Chinese man appeared, coming toward us down the trail. Smiling brightly in a fit of empathy he assured us, "It's very close, now... Very close to hut. Very close." This he repeated until out of earshot. We shouldered our packs.

Above: Deep in the Cloud Forest Zone at 2,018m. Facing page: rainforest near the third shelter at Pondok Lowii; (above) the 4,054m Donkey Ears Peak appearing through the clouds.

Summit by Sunrise?

Though it stands at about 3,270 meters, Laban Rata is still dwarfed by the mountain behind. Three stories tall with narrow windows, made of plywood under faded paint, the look is vaguely Tibetan monastery. Unbelievably, here is a full-service hotel with warm food, cold drinks, hot showers and a heart-clutching view.

Laban Rata and its outbuildings can sleep 160 guests in Spartan, shared accommodations. The truly amazing part is that the entire operation is not only dependent on climbers as clientele, but for daily logistics: mountain porters carry up every cooking pot, can of pop, fried egg and bunk bed. Chairs, chickens, the office PC, the 40-kilo fuel tanks to feed hungry legions of hikers—all came up that steep track on someone's back in rattan baskets called *wakids*. The pay is fair, by local standards, and beyond the fact that they are as fit as Olympic athletes, these amazing men and women own real pride in the part they play in sharing Kinabalu with the world.

Laban Rata is grandeur amidst capricious weather. One minute, clouds seem to immerse the world in steamed milk. Next minute, the sun burns through with a sizzling intensity you can almost hear. Five minutes on, you are back inside looking out at a lashing rain squall. Beneath a gory sunset we chased *nasi goreng* with hot Sabah tea, then set an alarm for a very early wake-up… and crashed.

At 2:00 A.M., Laban Rata is a very busy place, with the restaurant opening briefly for a climbers' breakfast. Fueled and rested we stepped into the dark, buttoned against cold, determined to summit before sunrise. The way was very steep—more so for having just wakened. Ropes and ladders vaulted walls in the dark, and ahead, climbers' lights formed fluid constellations. Far below, against the pitch-black land, the lights of Kota

Kinabalu and Bundutuhan seem as shimmering galaxies spinning away from planet Kinabalu.

At timberline, Sayat Sayat is the last hut, a sign-in checkpoint for climbers where Park Rescue counts noses. James, with Hans and his camera, wait for morning light. Gary, feeling ill, also stayed behind. I listed my name with the ranger, switched on my headlamp, and stepped back onto the trail, which now traversed the bare face of the peak.

Passing one group, then another, I was soon alone, the world focused down to the sound of my breathing and the comforting cadence of my mountain boots, one after the other, stepping endlessly into my personal circle of light. I followed, like a highway stripe, the endless white rope that leads into the dark mountain mists.

Stopping to rest, I turned off my headlamp to save power, my eyes gradually adjusting to a strange and awesome moonscape. Peaks appeared all around: the rhinoceros horn of St. John's Peak; the spires of Donkey Ears and the towering twin lumps of the Ugly Sisters. Great granite plates scaled from the face in rain and freeze cycles were strewn about like tabletops, buffed and stained by a million years of rain. The rock is pocked with golf-ball-sized dents—glacial divots from the last ice age. Headlamp off, I continued up the curved dome of the summit plateau, the top seeming always to be just ahead … just ahead.

Ambient dawn featured Low's Peak summit as it finally pulled into view. The bright, multicolored anoraks of distant climbers ahead dotted the trail like so many scattered crayons. I passed a black elliptical pool cradled in rock where, to this day, annual rituals offer a sacrificial chicken to the spirits of a mountain that should never be underestimated.

Beam Me Up

The summit was crowded for the sunrise, which blossomed over the Pacific behind a cloudbank but brightened the gathering nonetheless. From a dozen countries climbers stared down into Low's Gully, yawning at our feet a kilometer deep, a veritable cauldron of steaming and shredded mists. Cameras caught the obligatory shot with the small metal placard:

Mt. Kinabalu Summit
4095m/13436 ft.

I was elated. I was exhausted. I wanted a rest—a nap, even—there at the threshold of blue heaven and Borneo. But, I thought, what an ignoble climax… 'I came. I saw. I conked out.'

As the day brightened under a crackling blue sky, our team reunited at the summit; the mountain's steepness took its reverse toll on the way down. At park head-

Facing page: Sunset at Laban Rata rest-house—a full-service hotel at 3,720m. Above: the bare granite slopes of the Western Summit Plateau at 3,900m, with Donkey Ears Peak just ahead.

quarters we said goodbye to James, an exemplary photo guide, and with Gary as wheelman set out for Poring Hot Springs, another natural plus of the park.

En route we turned in to a family farm upon seeing a hand-lettered roadside poster, "Rafflesia blooming." Up a leaf-littered path, across a bamboo bridge and into a jungle hollow we followed Mr. Gikau to witness a rarity, a 30-cm-wide Rafflesia flower. From a cabbage-sized bud, this largest flower in the world can grow to over a meter wide and is like something normally found only on Star Trek.

It is a parasite, with no stem or leaves, living at the expense of forest vine hosts. Surrounding a studded, slick white bowl are five white-spotted red petals, thick, and fleshy. When blooming, its insect-attractant odor is likened to putrid carrion, hence the nickname, "the corpse flower."

From the Rugged Roof

Satisfying one last Kinabalu curiosity before a long-awaited hot soak, we entered the forest just behind the hot springs to the jungle canopy walkway. Suspended as high as 40 meters and almost 160 meters long, this botanist's dream walk offers bird's eye views of the forest, though some trees go another 40 meters higher seeking their place in the sun.

Here live the flying snakes, as well as flying frogs, flying squirrels, flying lizards, flying lemurs and flying geckos. Though not true aviators—they actually leap from trees, gliding as opposed to flying—it's a moot point when one lands on your head.

Discovered by the Japanese during World War II, Poring Hot Springs was developed in 1966, the perfect remedy for trail-sore legs—the yang to the yin of the park's grueling trails. At last, immersed in steaming Japanese-style baths, soaking away the steep pitch of the climb and the jarring gravity of descent, I mulled over our time on the mountain.

Though few Dusun people now consider Kinabalu to be, as the legend goes, a revered place of the spirits... I believe it. I saw them myself in the will of tired climbers, in the smiles of guides and porters, and in the faces of those who had greeted the sun from the rugged roof of Borneo.