



AAC Publications

Melinau Gorge, Jungle Fever

Asia, Borneo, Sarawak

Over two weeks in July a team of British climbers and film crew journeyed into Sarawak on Borneo to establish a new route in the Melinau Gorge and to document the wildlife we found there. Due to the number of people involved and the associated noise, the wildlife took note and quickly dispersed. However, Waldo Etherington, Leo Houlding, and I managed to climb a new 350m route, given a tentative grade of E5 6a, on a big limestone cliff on the southwest face of Mt. Benarat. Each pitch was climbed onsight with no aid, other than the last pitch, which was bolted due to the lack of gear placements. This went free at around 7b and was the icing on the cake: technical climbing on immaculate rock, 300m above the dense jungle below.

After arriving in Kuala Lumpur airport a long journey still lay ahead. We had two more flights, to Miri and then to Mulu, an area more famed for its network of caves than its climbing. Gunung Mulu National Park is a UNESCO world heritage site which hosts some of the largest caves in the world, with a migration of bats each day from Deer Cave which is something not to be missed.

Due to the sensitive nature of the area, permits and guides were required. A team of local guides and porters assisted us in making the three-hour boat ride up the river and into the national park. The river was low and often required us to push the boats upstream. With both big-wall gear and film equipment, this was no easy task. This brought us to the start of a trail into the jungle. The trek through the equatorial rainforest, listening to the many sounds echoing through the trees, was an adventure in itself, and only after three hours of walking did we get a first glimpse of the wall we were about to climb.

One of the main concerns from the outset was the lack of potable water in the area. The necessity of drinking five or more liters per day, due to the high temperatures and humidity, was to prove a major factor in where to set up base camp. Luckily we found a dripping stalactite in a small cave at the base of the cliff.

On the approach we couldn't see beyond the canopy, so reaching the top of the first pitch was amazing, with bird's eye views over some of the tallest tropical trees in the world. The sheer extent of the rainforest below us was awesome. Waldo, our resident tree lover, filled us with inspiration at the thought of climbing in and around them.

We picked the line of least resistance for our route, mainly due to time constraints and because, with the soft and loose nature of the limestone, we needed a line that would (hopefully) hold gear well. Finding a way up the steep, tufa-covered wall was tricky, to say the least.

After the fifth pitch, we reached what from the ground had looked like a small, grassy ledge. But in fact it had room for three of us to sleep comfortably, with a cave leading into the cliff. We found many small holes in the floor of the cave and closer inspection with the endoscope revealed each one had a scorpion lying in wait. The hammocks proved pretty useful that night.

After five days we reached the summit of the route we called Jungle Fever. Graded somewhere in the E5 region, there are many spots with poor protection, giving you a serious desire not to fall off. With a need to film the route, all belays were fully bolted and the odd bolt was placed in each pitch to show

the way. (Good luck finding them!) All pitches were freed, but unfortunately not in a single push. The rest of the two-week trip was spent filming the route and documenting other areas within the park.

To our knowledge there are no other routes on this wall, and the only other people known to have gone to the summit are the locals, who often descend into one of the small caves 50m from the cliff top to collect precious bird nests, a delicacy throughout the region.

Given the relatively untouched nature of this area, there is a large scope for new routes, with many other cliffs within the same valley. Cutting tracks through the jungle can take as long as two or three hours per kilometer, so even the cliffs slightly farther up the valley create a much bigger challenge.

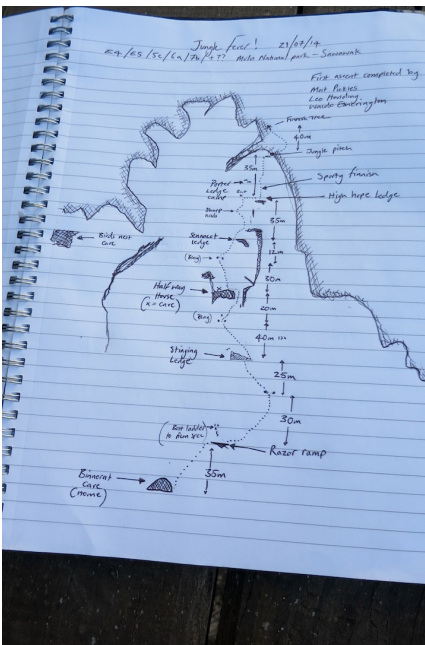
Many thanks to the locals who helped with the trip, especially our guides, Veno and Paris, Rudi our cook, and the many porters who helped us carry the gear through the jungle and supply the camp with fresh food and the occasional can of warm Tiger beer. Cheers guys.

Matt Pickles, U.K.

Images



Local climber and guide Paris, barely breaking sweat after jumaring 200m up the fixed lines.



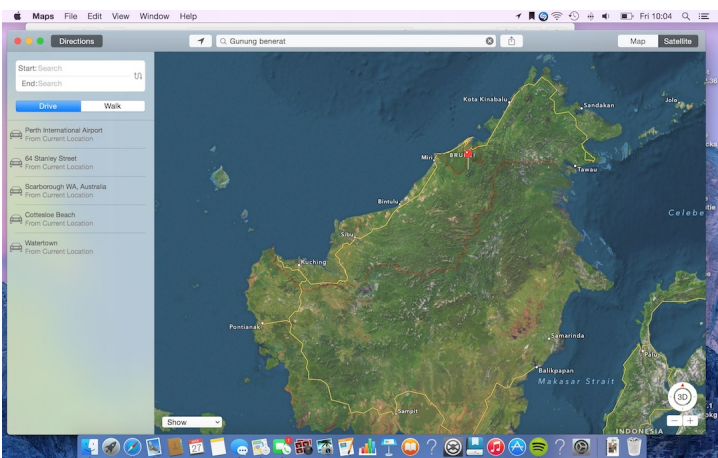
Topo for Jungle Fever



The line of Jungle Fever (350m, E5 6a) on the southwest face of Mt. Benarat in Gunung Mulu National Park.



Leo Houlding on the second pitch of Jungle Fever (350m, E5 6a) on the southwest face of Mt. Benarat in Gunung Mulu National Park.



Article Details

Author	Matt Pickles
Publication	AAJ
Volume	57
Issue	89
Page	360
Copyright Date	2015
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions