

EXTREME TREKKING IN THE CAMERON HIGHLANDS AND PULAU TIOMAN

SECRET REALM OF THE DRAGON SNAKE

Exploring West Malaysia's impenetrable montane rainforests
searching for beautiful, rare and occasionally dangerous fauna



■ A female Wagler's or Temple Pit Viper *Tropidolaemus wagleri*, a tropical arboreal venomous crotalid, rears up in a threat display on a trail of the Cameron Highlands, West Malaysia.

TEXT BY ANDREA FERRARI
PHOTOS BY ANDREA & ANTONELLA FERRARI

The four feet long, wrist-thick snake lies motionless, elegantly draped on a half-rotten, moss-covered tree stump, its heavy, muscular body wreathed in glorious gold, pale green and velvety black. A large adult Wagler's pit viper, probably a pregnant female: a strikingly beautiful species whose apparent, deceiving lethargy conceals the capability of inflicting highly venomous, lightning-fast bites. Drops of water glisten on its broadly banded back, every pearly bead a miniature rainbow in the sun's rays which scythe through the rainforest canopy, cutting through the all-pervading wisps of mist. Stunned, frozed in admiration, we silently watch its incredibly massive, broadly triangular head hesitantly uncoil and rise towards us, its small, grey-green beady eyes watching us intently, the long black forked tongue slowly darting forward, tasting the still, moisture-filled air. Mesmerized, I slowly draw my camera lens ever closer to its dragon-snake face, trying to find a precarious balance on the muddy, slippery, mossy slope. Squinting through the viewfinder of my Nikon I can clearly see its heat-sensing pits, located between its cold eyes and its backward-turned nostrils. I know it can sense my body warmth through these, its primeval mind scanning with utmost accuracy an infrared image of my body parts. The first third of its thick body compressed in a spring-powered figure-S, the diamond-shaped broad, deep head - covered in sharply ridged scales - is now focusing on my ever-so-slow approach, the forked tongue's flickering getting testier, faster, broader. I know the signs and I hug my camera closer, precariously hiding my face and exposed knuckles behind the heavy cardboard shield which rings the 105mm macro lens and which I have built for exactly this purpose - to protect my vulnerable fingers from its heat sensors. As I reach the invisible border separating me from the huge pit viper, imperceptibly inching closer and closer to get a sharper portrait, the snake suddenly lunges forward, heavily, its bright white mouth inner linings flashing briefly in the forest's damp perennial twilight, its long curved unsheathed fangs erected. Even knowing this was coming - a half-hearted, sluggish attempt at intimidating the intruder rather than a fully-fledged, violent, lightning-fast venomous defensive bite - my heart skips a beat as I almost lose my footing on the muddy, squishing ground, backing off with a half-gasp of enthusiastic awe. Contented with its genuinely impressive show of power and grace, the snake coils up slowly

continued on page 7 >



Left top, an adult Red Mountain racer or Bamboo Rat snake *Oreocryptophis porphyracea* sub. *laticincta*, a very colorful and active terrestrial colubrid restricted to the cool montane rainforests of Southeast Asia. Left bottom, a Twin Spotted or Himalayan Flying frog *Rhacophorus bipunctatus*, a small species found in the same habitat. Right, a bright red and very tiny mushroom photographed in the montane rainforest of the Cameron Highlands.



■ A Twin Spotted or Himalayan Flying frog *Rhacophorus bipunctatus*, a small and rather colorful species often encountered in the cool, water-soaked montane rainforests of Southeast Asia.

again, but its massive, threatening head is now fully alert, constantly turning to follow our clumsy movements as we surround it in a surreal, trance-like ballet. The dragon is awake. We know there will be no more bluffs from now on.

OF SNAKES, SLOPES AND SCONES

We have been trekking for hours on the slippery, muddy, heavily forested and very steep slopes of these peaks, the

perennially drenched and surprisingly cool untouched mountains on the Cameron Highlands, a popular holiday retreat of Peninsular Malaysia. Relatively close to crowded, highly developed Kuala Lumpur, this is a much-loved weekend destination for those city dwellers wishing to flee the oppressive heat of the surrounding lowlands, for Malaysians wishing to spend their holidays in an occasionally ridiculous pseudo-European and theme-park like hill station (replete with fake Tudor



A mysterious world of steep valleys and mist-cloaked forests

Steep, mist-cloaked and almost impenetrable: the pristine montane rainforest of the Cameron Highlands.

caulk-and-beams little straw-roofed hamlets everywhere) and an all-inclusive tour location where Western tourists are herded by bus to hurriedly swallow tea, scones and strawberry jam among carefully tended rose lawns. The absurd abundance of temperate-climate fruits and vegetables in the Cameron Highlands has given rise to an inordinate amount of farms and tourist attractions - we cannot forget the wonderfully inventive billboard inviting visitors to a greenhouse and its "Self-plucking Strawberries"...Now that would be interesting! The landscape is stunningly beautiful, with dramatic, ever-changing skies looming over tender green, rolling hills which are terraced with tea cultivations and intersped with deep stretches of thickly forested slopes and ravines. What most visitors do not know - and really do not care about - is that in fact the Cameron Highlands still feature exceptionally

large areas of connected, untouched, unspoilt wilderness, encompassing all habitats from dry lowland to montane rainforest to mossy elfin (or cloud) forest: a scenic environment which is all but inaccessible to most - except its native inhabitants - and which boasts an absolutely amazing biodiversity. Intrigued by the little information we could get from the Internet, we had an unexpected stroke of luck when we contacted our guide for the trip - young, literate and enthusiastic herpetologist Hans Kam, who - despite his surprisingly Germanic first name - is in fact an ethnic Chinese hailing from Kuala Lumpur and a veritable mine of tried-and-tested knowledge regarding the Camerons and their reptile populations. A frequent visitor and independent explorer of the largely untapped wilderness of the area, Hans has built over time an exceptionally

continued on page 10 >



A juvenile, yellow-phase specimen of the Oriental Whipsnake *Ahaetulla prasina*, a mildly-venomous, rear-fanged colubrid. Its large eyes with their keyhole-shaped pupil allow frontal, binocular view to better grasp fast-moving lizard prey in thickly forested habitats.



■ *Malaysian Dead Leaf mantis Deroplatys lobata, a praying mantis of Southeast Asia which is exquisitely camouflaged to look like a dead, dry leaf. Surely one of the natural world's most stunning examples of camouflage and mimicry, it is one of the many fascinating species found in the Cameron Highlands.*

local collectors and forest dwellers, which allow him to take his clients off the beaten track in search of the rare, spectacular species which are so abundant and yet so frustratingly elusive in this forbidding environment. Hans also authors and maintains the enthusiastically opinionated but nevertheless very informative website www.naturemalaysia.com which is an absolute must for those interested in exploring the area or simply wishing to know more about it and its fauna.

MISTY MOUNTAINS AND RUGGED RAINFORESTS

We had been repeatedly alerted in advance by Hans about the occasionally steep and very wet conditions prevailing when trekking off the beaten track in the Cameron Highlands, but we were nevertheless surprised and occasionally impeded by the extreme ruggedness of the terrain, which is to be visited at night and during the rainy season for the best chances of success – not an easy endeavour when carrying 15 kgs of camera equipment on one’s back. As we all know snakes, lizards and insects are more plentiful and easier to encounter during the monsoon season, but in the Cameron Highlands this means dealing on a daily basis with truly torrential downpours, low temperatures (we measured 12°C at

night with temperatures in their 30s during the day), faintly marked or non-existent forest trails transformed into sticky, glutinous traps of ankle-deep mud, the onslaught of leeches and a general state of physical misery which is compounded by the lack of heating in the local hotels. Add to this the fact that the average night trek may last from four to six hours, taking place on 80° slopes with only roots or twigs for handholds, through thick thorny shrubbery or by wading up stony streambeds, often having to deal with fallen tree trunks, slippery footholds and running, ice-cold water up to one’s mid-calf and you’ll soon realize - as we did - that this is neither easy nor comfortable. In fact, much to our dismay and humiliation, on a few memorable occasions we had to give up our planned itinerary when halfway through and opt for something more manageable. Footwear and clothes molding - if not downright rotting - overnight, the occasional messy leech bite and all-too-frequent falls head-over-heels in mud, over buttress roots and down steep slopes or forest floor ravines were - however embarrassing - a small price to be gladly paid for the amazing encounters we had: thanks to Hans’ unique proficiency in the field we were able to find and photograph a number of species we had only dreamed of until then, and which are all but invisible to anyone visiting the forest by himself.



Spectacular, prehistoric-looking three-meter tall Giant ferns are a visual, unmistakable landmark of the upper reaches of the Cameron Highlands.

■ The Mountain Horned lizard *Acanthosaurus armata* - a small, colorful and very spiky agamid - is restricted to the cool, water-soaked montane rainforest habitats of Southeast Asia.





■ The Cameron Highlands Pit Viper *Trimeresurus nebularis* is an arboreal, highly venomous crotalid. This recently described, endemic species is found in very cool mountain rainforest environments and its distribution is exclusively restricted to the Cameron Highlands of West Malaysia.



Antonella busies herself shooting a beautiful specimen of the Cameron Highlands Pit Viper *Trimeresurus nebularis*, a recently described, endemic, arboreal and highly venomous crotalid. These mostly nocturnal snakes can be quite active at surprisingly low ambient temperatures - as low as 12°C.





ANIMA MUNDI
ON **YouTube**

CLICK ON THE IMAGE AND WATCH A SHORT VIDEO ON SOME OF THE CAMERON HIGHLANDS' MOST SPECTACULAR NATURAL HIGHLIGHTS

Cameron Highlands



The scenic panoramas of the Cameron Highlands are often blessed with dramatic, swirling clouds - a great bonus for photographers and videographers.



■ A Malaysian Jungle Nymph or Green Nymph Walking Stick *Heteropteryx dilatata*, one of the world's largest and heaviest insects. Large specimens such as this may reach a length of 20 centimeters and a weight of over 65 grams.

Tender green tea plantations against a bright blue sky - a typical panorama of the Cameron Highlands of Peninsular Malaysia. Even if such man-made habitats are often rich in interesting reptile, amphibian and insect species, access to most tea plantations - which are privately owned - is normally severely restricted.





The finely structured leaves of Giant ferns - endlessly repeating an almost abstract pattern - offer interesting textures and details to the nature photographer.



Left, the softly rolling landscape of tea plantations. Right, a striking adult of the Oriental Whipsnake *Ahaetulla prasina*, a mildly-venomous, rear-fanged colubrid, with its chequered skin showing between the bright green scales in a typically colorful threat display.





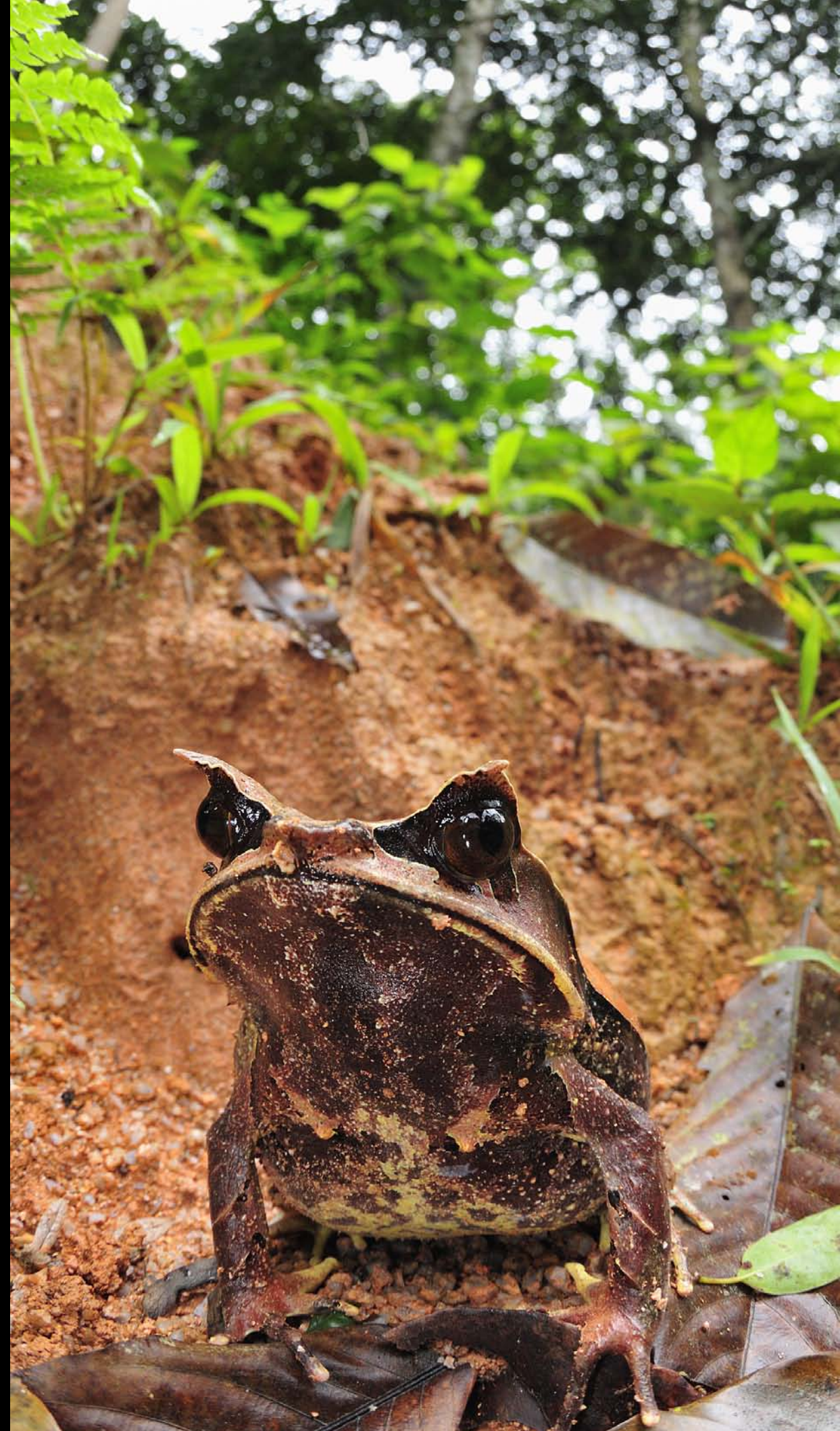
The Malaysian Orchid Mantis
Hymenopus coronatus
is a small praying mantis which mimics to perfection *Phalaenopsis orchid* flowers (pictured above and commonly found in its natural habitat) to trick its insect prey.



Dramatic landscapes of swirling clouds cloaking virgin rainforests

At their highest elevations the Cameron Highlands often offer unrivalled scenic views, with steep forest-covered mountainsides shrouded in swirling, dramatic clouds.

From left to right, a Malaysian Dead Leaf mantis *Deroplatys desiccata*, a praying mantis of Southeast Asia which looks exactly like a dead, dry leaf; a Malayan Water monitor *Varanus salvator*, a large, imposing and very agile semiaquatic monitor lizard extensively found throughout Southeast Asia; and finally a Malaysian Horned frog or Long-nosed frog *Megophrys nasuta*, perfectly camouflaged among dead leaves and forest litter.





Kuhl's Flying gecko █
Ptychozoon kuhlii, showing the extensive webbing which enables this species to glide for some distance if threatened. Its cryptic livery mimics to near-perfection the tree bark on which this gecko is found.

A large, beautifully patterned adult Wagler's Pit Viper *Tropidolaemus wagleri* lies in ambush, draped on a small branch by a forest waterfall.



■ A pair of displaying males of the Larut Rice Frogs *Microhyla annectans*, observed at night at a temperature of 12°C in the Cameron Highlands. Despite the cold, several couples of this exceptionally tiny amphibian were observed actively mating and breeding in a roadside rain puddle.



■ A Larut Rice Frog sitting on Antonella's thumb shows the exceedingly tiny size of this species. Microhylids enjoy a circumtropical distribution, being the most common group of frogs in Madagascar and Papua New Guinea.

■ Bell's Anglehead lizard
Gonocephalus belli, a large
and very colorful agamid inhabiting
the undisturbed rainforests
of Thailand, Malaysia and Borneo.



■ A juvenile specimen of the Red Mountain racer or Bamboo Rat snake *Oreocryptophis porphyracea* sub. *laticincta* clearly shows its distinctive red and orange banded livery, which will turn uniformly candy-red once it will reach adulthood. This colorful and active colubrid species is restricted to the cool montane habitats of Southeast Asia.





Clockwise from top left: Siamese Pit viper *Trimeresurus wiroti*, a colorful and highly venomous semi-arboreal or terrestrial crotalid found in lowland and submontane rainforests of Thailand and West Malaysia. Top right, Green Crested lizard *Bronchocela cristatella*, a common inhabitant of primary and secondary rainforests in Southeast Asia. Bottom right, Common or Dusky Mock viper *Psammodynastes pulverulentus*, a terrestrial, nocturnal, rear-fanged, mildly venomous snake found throughout Southeast Asia. Bottom left, Common Malayan racer *Elaphe flavolineatus*, a large, fast and aggressive terrestrial or semi-arboreal colubrid found in the lowland forests of West Malaysia, Borneo and Indonesia. All photos were taken in the Cameron Highlands.





■ *Pied Mossy Frog* *Theloderma asperum*, a small and rarely observed species found in montane rainforests throughout Southeast Asia. When seen from above (above) this slow-moving species mimics with surprising accuracy an unpalatable bird dropping to avoid predation.





Left, a Giant Leaf insect *Phyllium giganteum*, a large nocturnal Phasmid of Southeast Asia which mimics with stunning accuracy a set of leaves. This fascinating species is one of the natural world's most striking examples of mimicry and camouflage. Right, a Twin Spotted or Himalayan Flying frog *Rhacophorus bipunctatus*, a small species typically found in the cool montane rainforests of Southeast Asia.





*A Malaysian Orchid
Mantis Hymenopus coronatus, a small praying mantis which mimics the Phalaenopsis orchid flowers found in its forest habitat. The Cameron Highlands offer very good chances of finding these graceful, rarely-spotted insects in the wild, especially during the rainy season.*

■ A Malayan Crested lizard *Gonocephalus grandis*, an imposing and spectacularly colorful agamid found in undisturbed rainforest habitats throughout Southeast Asia. This beautiful male allowed a close approach when found in a very cold drizzle.





Giant Leaf insect Phyllium giganteum, a large nocturnal Phasmid of Southeast Asia which looks exactly like a set of leaves. Notice how perfectly even the leaves' veining is reproduced! A large female such as the one pictured can be over 10 cms long.



■ *Giant Forest or Green-Eyed gecko Gekko smithi, a large and pugnacious gecko restricted to pristine, undisturbed forest habitats of Southeast Asia. Bites from this beautiful but shy and uncommon species can be quite painful.*

Stunning mountain views of pristine, impenetrable cloud forests

The stunning cloud or elfin forest view from the top of Gunung Brinchang, one of the highest elevations of the Cameron Highlands. Sadly, habitat alteration and human encroachment can already be clearly seen in the distance.



■ Giant Rhino beetle *Chalcosoma caucasus*, one of the world's largest beetles and proportionally one of the world's strongest animals. Large males such as this one can make truly spectacular camera subjects.

A beautiful Wagler's or Temple Pit Viper *Tropidolaemus wagleri*, an arboreal crotalid which is still relatively common in the Camerons. This massive individual was found basking in the sun by a forest road with the dark, rain-laden clouds of a stormy sky in the background adding a dramatic, welcome touch to the scene.

Basking in the sun under the ominous clouds of an approaching storm



■ *Oriental Whipsnake Ahaetulla prasina, a mildly-venomous, rear-fanged colubrid. This juvenile specimen - still in its yellow phase - was found by an overgrown forest trail in Pulau Tioman.*



SHADES OF KONG!

Fully satisfied - and rather humbled - by two very energetic weeks spent exploring the verdant but almost impenetrable Cameron Highlands, we then drove all the way down to the east coast of mainland Malaysia to board a ferry to our next destination, the celebrated Pulau Tioman - an idyllic and steeply mountainous island in the South China Sea which boasts an impressive herpetofauna with a very high incidence of endemisms. Almost deserted during the monsoon by the budget tourists and backpackers which crowd it during the dry season (and which represent the main source of income for its meagre resident population besides fishing), Tioman welcomes visitors landing on its shores with its tall, craggy, heavily forested and rather forbidding profile, reminding one of the movie classic *King Kong's* fabled Skull Island. Sparsely populated along the coastline (an almost uninterrupted sequence of cheap tourist bungalows and seafood restaurants rings it along its sandy beaches, but luckily the

mountainous inside is still heavily forested, almost impenetrable and totally undeveloped), the island is crossed by a single, twisting and very steep tarmac road. It also offers several forest walking trails of varying difficulty - ideal hunting grounds for our nightly explorations in search of interesting herpetofauna. Besides featuring a high number of rare or endemic species (including an incredible and only recently described turquoise blue pit viper, which sadly we did not find despite all our efforts), the island is populated by an ungodly number of huge Water and Savannah monitors - these impressive, two-meter long lizards are literally everywhere (but usually not easily approached). The island climate of sea-mount Tioman is obviously very different from that encountered in the higher altitudes of the Cameron Highlands, and while the amount of rain we faced during our permanence there was equally staggering, the average temperatures were much higher, as was the number of mosquitoes: despite being

continued on page 41 ➤



CLICK ON THE IMAGE AND WATCH A SHORT VIDEO ON SOME OF PULAU TIOMAN' MOST SPECTACULAR NATURAL HIGHLIGHTS





Crab-eating or Long-tailed macaque *Macaca fascicularis* are very common on Pulau Tioman, where they are represented by an endemic insular subspecies. When encountered in large troops these monkeys can occasionally be bothersome and aggressive - especially if they are used to being fed by tourists.





A tropical idyll of forest streams and palm tree landscapes

An idyllic forest river forms a cascade of quiet pools fringed with palms in Pulau Tioman. Despite being rather small and mountainous, the island abounds with such enchanting views.



■ *The Many-lined Sun skink Mabuya multifasciata is another insular endemic subspecies exclusively found in Pulau Tioman. Skinks and geckoes are exceedingly common on the island's forest floor.*

occasionally rather steep, the forest trails are much more easily negotiated than the non-existent ones of the Camerons, and our daily and nightly treks on the island were both very pleasant and fruitful, even if the unique feeling of remoteness we had experienced in the cooler Highlands was somewhat missing. Make no mistake, however - seriously exploring the island can be similarly exhausting, as forests are very thick, slopes are occasionally steep and slippery, several half-forgotten trails are overgrown and in disuse and the high degree of humidity can prove truly stifling to the unaccustomed.

A TREASURE TROVE OF RARE SPECIES

It should be obvious by now this was a highly specialized trip, which focused almost entirely on reptiles and insects, with a very special emphasis on macrophotography and rainforest exploration - certainly not everybody's cup of tea, even if the results of such endeavours can be both stunning and unique. Trips like this require a degree



Top left, Keeled Rat snake *Ptyas carinatus*, a large and aggressive colubrid of SE Asia's lowland forests. Above, Reticulate python *Python reticulatus*, the world's longest constrictor and a powerful predator. Left, Banded Coral snake *Calliophis intestinalis* sub. *lineata*, a deadly venomous elapid showing bright aposematic coloration. Note the raised and upturned tip of the tail, showing bright orange ventrals in a typical threat display.

of physical fitness, the willingness to accept and tolerate the occasional difficulty or failure, a tolerance for bad weather, perennially damp conditions and physical discomfort, and last but not least a strong motivation. For us it has been a spectacular experience and we greatly enjoyed every minute of it - we got what we were looking for, and even more than we expected, thanks to our guide's field experience, enthusiasm and total dedication to make the trip a successful one. Despite the perennially damp conditions, our camera equipment - both our Nikon D300s and all our Nikon strobes - performed faultlessly, and our Apple laptop did not miss a beat. The final count of "firsts" or simply exceptional sightings - between the Cameron Highlands and Pulau Tioman - has been stunning for us, numbering - among others - spectacular specimens

of the endemic Camerons pit viper, Wirot's or Siamese pit viper, Oriental Whip snake, Mock viper, Wagler's or Temple viper, White-bellied Rat snake, Common Malayan racer, Red Mountain racer, Dog-faced Water snake, Banded Coral snake and Reticulate python among snakes, Malayan Crested lizard, Green Crested lizard, Mountain Horned lizard, Robinson's Anglehead lizard and Bell's Anglehead lizard among agamids, Twin-spotted Flying frog, Malayan Horned frog and Pied Mossy frog among amphibians plus Giant Rhino beetle, Giant Leaf insect, Giant Stick (or Forest Nymph) insect and the otherworldly Dead Leaf Mantis and Orchid Mantis to name only a few of the insects. We only missed finding a King Cobra, which is apparently plentiful in Tioman - it's going to be a good excuse to go back soon!



A small brook runs among scattered boulders in the lowland and sub-montane dipterocarp and palm rainforest: a typical snake habitat in Pulau Tioman.

Boulder-strewn brooks quietly murmuring in the forest's perennial twilight



A beautiful Reticulate python *Python reticulatus* lies elegantly draped on a treefork in the hot, stifling rainforest of Pulau Tioman. This powerful constrictor of Southeast Asia's forests is still relatively common and may occasionally prove dangerous to humans given the large size - up to a length of 8 meters - it can attain. Its spectacularly-marked livery provides surprisingly efficient camouflage in the sun-dappled forest environment.

■ A Dog-faced Water snake *Cerberus rynchops* hunts for frogs, tadpoles and fish, lying half-submerged in a fast-running, clear mountain stream in Pulau Tioman.



A graceful portrait of supreme reptilian elegance

■ A portrait in reptilian elegance, a Malayan Water monitor *Varanus salvator* basks on a granite boulder by a forest stream in Pulau Tioman. Notice its deeply-forked tongue tip testing the air in the presence of an intruder - despite their size these monitors are very wary and very fast, and are not easily approached.



USEFUL TIPS FOR YOUR EXPEDITION

SOME SIMPLE, COMMON SENSE, FIELD-TESTED ADVICE AND INFORMATION TO MAKE THE BEST OUT OF YOUR TRIP AND TO AVOID HASSLES, WORRIES AND PROBLEMS

At-a-glance travel guide



COUNTRY OF DESTINATION: **MALAYSIA**

ROUTE: Your flight will land at KLIA (Kuala Lumpur International Airport), one of the world's most beautiful and modern airports. From there it's a day-long tortuous car drive to the Cameron Highlands, where you'll probably stay in Brinchang or Tanah Rata. If you want to visit Tioman first, you'll have to drive instead all the way down to the peninsular eastern coast to the harbour town of Mersing, spend the night there and catch the ferry to the island the following morning. It's a long and very tiring drive - we recommend going to the Camerons first.

MEANS OF TRANSPORT: Visitors can rent a car in Kuala Lumpur and drive themselves around but we do not recommend this at all - save yourself the trouble and have the trip organized by a local guide who is thoroughly conversant with the routes and the best wildlife viewing spots. Once in the Highlands there will

be some daily driving to get from your hotel to the jungle trails starting points, and then lots of hard walking in steep, slippery, inhospitable terrain. In Tioman it is walking and nothing else - to the point of exhaustion if doing things seriously.

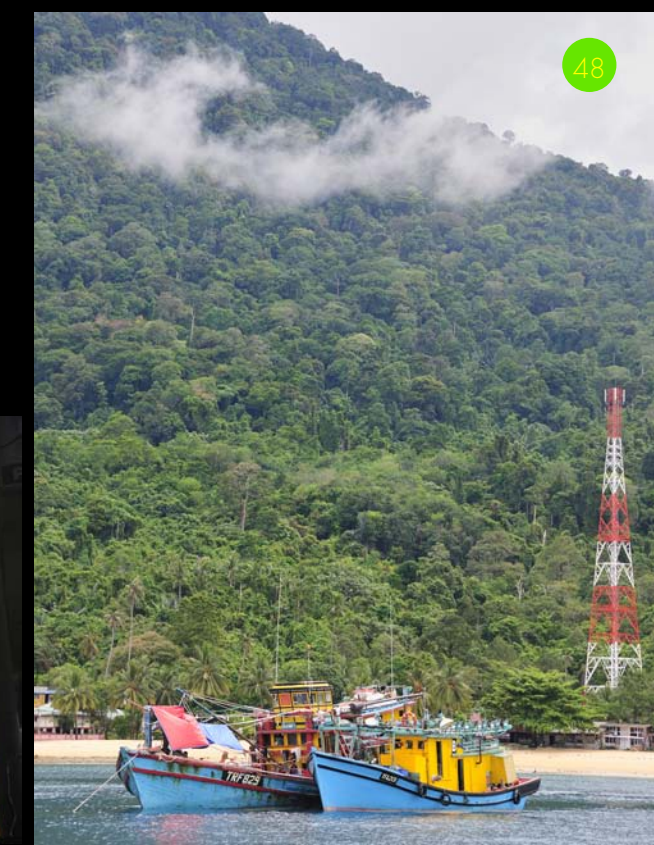
CURRENCY: It's advisable to change one's own currency in the local one (Ringgit Malaysia or RM) upon arrival in KL to save loss of valuable time looking for local bank branches later on.

ACCOMODATION: Pick your choice from beautiful, top-class hotels to very cheap little hostels for locals. We suggest to stay in upper or middle-level accomodation as coming back from a physically demanding jungle trek one is often exhausted, cold and soaking wet, so a reasonable degree of comfort is very appreciated. Keep in mind that hotels in the

Camerons - despite the prevailing cool and wet climate - do not offer room heating. In Tioman the same applies - one can choose from the luxurious **Tioman Berjaya Resort** to a zillion cheap and rather dingy beachfront huts. We choose the former - the dampness and the heat were enough without having to deal with the mosquitoes and the rats, plus we want our expensive camera equipment to be safe when we are not there.

FOOD: Absolutely wonderful - there's an enormous, mouth-watering variety to choose from as Malaysians love eating out. We recommend being adventurous and trying a few of the roadside ethnic Chinese eateries which abound in Brinchang - they certainly look intimidating and not too clean (don't look at the kitchen!), but we always had spectacular food and were never sick. Being helped by your tour guide is a must here - language problems and

Stunning landscapes, great wildlife and wonderful food



choosing exotic dishes in the small restaurants for locals can be pretty daunting. Plus you'll pay a lot more if you're on your own.

LANGUAGE: Malay and English everywhere, but outside of the big towns - when dealing with country folk or the aboriginal Orang Asli - problems might occur if you don't speak Chinese or a local dialect. Having an experienced bilingual local guide with you is strongly advised, especially when venturing beyond the normal tourist circuit - as you'll be doing.

WORRIES: Mosquitoes and other rainforest pests can carry diseases or provoke severe allergic reactions, so it's always better to use repellants. Leeches are omnipresent, messy and in the thousands, but luckily harmless. Forest hiking can be seriously dangerous, so watch your feet as it's all too easy to sprain an ankle or worse. Any small wounds or scratches suffered in the forest must immediately be disinfected and kept under strict observation to avoid serious consequences. With luck, one will be dealing with potentially lethal venomous

snakes, so a degree of caution is highly recommended at all times. These are pristine, untouched highland rainforests where very dangerous animals are still found - so never, repeat never, go hiking on your own.

HEALTH: There's always the possibility of catching malaria or dengue or something else but equally unpleasant, and one has to be fatalistic with such things when going to the forest in the tropics. Food is reasonably safe if just cooked and sizzling hot - particularly in Chinese restaurants - but avoid drinking tap water and fresh uncooked vegetables. The lack of heating in the hotels of the Camerons can be uncomfortable (the five-star ones have fireplaces), and people unused to damp conditions can certainly catch a bad cold there. Tioman is very hot and humid and mosquitoes are prevalent on the island during the wet season, especially inside the forest.

CLIMATE: Strictly tropical - both montane (as in the Camerons, very warm during the day but with cold nights) and lowland (as in Tioman, which is very warm

24 hours a day). During the wet season - which is the best time to find reptiles and insects - torrential downpours can be expected on a daily basis, often lasting several hours and causing dangerous floods.

BESIDES: Besides fascinating wildlife and stunning natural landscapes, the area - as most of Malaysia in general - has very little to offer regarding art or culture. Towns of the Cameron Highlands - such as Brinchang or Tanah Rata - are little more than artificial tourist traps replete with hundreds of restaurants, coffee-shops and various eateries surrounded by slightly grotesque, embarrassing recreations of Tudor England which are however much loved by the local tourists. If your interest lies in strawberry farms or vegetable street markets then you'll be having the time of your life, but do not expect to see much or anything at all in the way of art, culture or even traditional ways of life. Tioman is even worse, as it lives off seasonal tourists and it hibernates the wet season away when nobody comes. Nothing there, not even traditional village life or local folklore - in fact it's a rather closed, not too friendly community. ●