

ON THE WALLABY 2020 PART 2

KALIMANTAN (9 to 12 February)

We had to anchor well off shore because of the shallow waters at the mouth of the Sekenyer River that was our access to the orangutan rehabilitation station at Pondok Tanggui. The Sekonyer is quite a sizeable river and provides access to a number of industries upstream including palm oil and forestry. We headed off in *Xplorer* and turned off the main channel into a tributary lined solidly with *Nypa* palm. We reached a landing where there were a number of local *Klotok* river boats waiting to take us on to our destination. These *Klotoks* are designed for tourist comfort with toilets and plenty of room to move around. Their crews probably live onboard.



As we proceeded further upstream the *Nypa* gave way to a form of *Pandanus* that grows in the water and eventually that began to give way to forest trees. Our local guide spotted an Orangutan in the forest beside the river so we stopped to catch sight of our first wild ape. It was a mature female and, though somewhat hidden in the forest we managed to get a good sighting. She was having a feed on the leaves of the forest shrub beside her. Much excitement on board!



We arrived at the landing for Pondok Tanggui and walked several hundred metres to the feeding station in the forest in very hot and humid conditions. The rangers went into the forest and started calling the Orangutans that usually come to the feeding station when they have not been able to get sufficient wild food, or just wanted a free feed. It was not long before the first apes made an appearance – the first was a young male that stayed up in the trees and watched. A few minutes later with much violent shaking of trees, the first Orangutans approached the feeding platform, a mature male and a female with a youngster. We were told that the male, known by the rangers as Albert, was

the local Alpha male. The rangers had filled a metal bowl with a drink of powdered milk and sugar which is apparently a favourite of the Orangutans.



Albert is a fine mature male with the characteristic cheek flaps which are absent in the females and younger males. The infant was as cute as could be.



This group took their time feeding as more Orangutans began to appear in the trees surrounding the station. They did not approach until Albert and his family had well and truly left the scene. After that it was a procession of individuals, mostly immature males, and one pregnant female. While one ape was feeding the others kept their distance but entertained us with their incredible agility to move up, into and through the forest. Their feet are virtually a second pair of hands. It was a real buzz to be so close to these magnificent wild creatures.

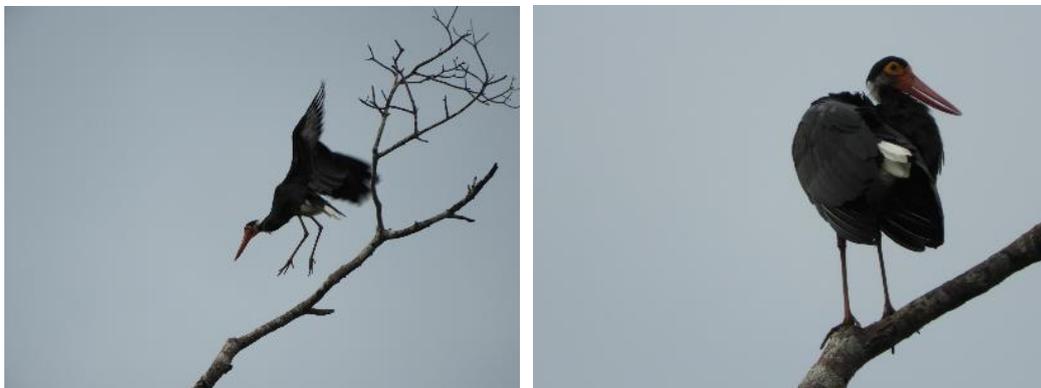


The walk back to the *Klotok* did not seem as long or as hot as the walk in. We headed back downstream and were served lunch by the Indonesian crew – soup, rice, sate, rendang and so on. Very nice. Not long after we had finished lunch our guide spotted a troupe of Proboscis Monkeys in the forest so it was cameras at the ready. The troupe consisted of several mature males and females and many younger monkeys that moved through the tree tops at incredible speed, mostly playing chasings. The

troupe probably numbered more than 20 individuals. The Proboscis Monkey's nose grows larger as it matures so a juvenile has a human size nose while the mature male has a real hooter. They also have very long tails.



Our progress down-stream was again interrupted when a pair of large birds flew into the top of a dead tree not far ahead of us. They were endangered Storm's Storks, of which there are now only 1000 in the wild. We also spotted a much smaller bird in the same tree. This turned out to be a Red-crowned Barbet – a very colourful bird though at the distance we were at it was difficult to capture the colours very well.



A little further on we again stopped, this time when another mature Orangutan was spotted in the *Nypa* palms just beside the river. This one was a male and he was fishing a *Nypa* seed pod out of the river. This was perhaps a risky behaviour as crocodiles inhabit the river.



The local people are very much at home on the water either on the *Klotoks* that they crew or in their narrow canoes. One young chap went so far as walking along the edge of his family's canoe – just to show off no doubt.



It was the chance of seeing wild Orangutans that had decided us to take this particular cruise and throwing in the Proboscis Monkeys as a bonus made this the most memorable day.

The following morning we sailed up the very narrow channel through the Sungai Barito Bar leading to Banjarmasin, a city of around 750,000 and the main city of East Kalimantan. We were given a red carpet welcome on the dock with dancers, drummers, a “king and queen”, as well as many officials in uniform. The “king and queen” were apparently winners of a local festival event but the “king” was a dead ringer for a young Yule Brynner. Apparently we were the first cruise ship small enough to negotiate the narrow channel so we were something of celebrities. We again had our temperatures taken before we could go ashore. As we landed we were presented with scarves of the local *sasaringan* fabric (the local sophisticated form of tie-dying).



From the wharf we were taken by bus with an escort of Tourist Police (to help us get through the traffic) to the village that specializes in the production of *sasaringan* fabric. The pattern is created by the women sewing the cloth into tight gatherings that will exclude the dye. The material is then handed to the men to do the dyeing and drying. This is repeated several times to achieve a multi-coloured pattern.



Motor bikes are the main form of transport across Indonesia and Banjarmasin is no exception. There were whole families riding on a single bike while others were piled high with bundles and packages. It was school out time and some of the kids were picked up by mum or dad on the family motorbike.



From the village we visited the oldest mosque in the city built in the 16th Century. It is built of local timbers and is fairly plain in its decorations. It stands next to the grave of the founding Islamic sultan and his wife. Banjarmasin is a very strong centre for Islam with a reported 90% of the population adhering to that faith. There are literally thousands of mosques throughout the city from tiny neighbourhood mosques to the Grand Mosque in the centre.



Our next visit was to a museum dedicated to the struggle by local people to get rid of the Dutch colonialists immediately following WW II up to 1948 when the UN recognised their independence. Banjarmasin was a centre of the resistance and there are photos of the local heroes as well as dioramas depicting various aspects of the struggle. Right next to the museum was a market in full swing selling mostly cooked food. Again selfies were the order of the day.



Banjarmasin is referred to as the city of rivers as it is located on a major delta with hundreds of channels. The final stop for the day was at the Mendara Pandang, or Viewing Tower, which is located in the centre of the city. It is a modern building beside the Martapura River, the main river that flows through the city. We were offered refreshments of local cakes, fruit and a sweet cordial drink. During this time we were “entertained” by a small Gamelan band which was amplified to a level beyond the

threshold of pain. That fortunately was followed by two groups performing traditional dances, the first from the Banjarese culture and the second from the Dayak culture. Each provided spectacular costumes and very graceful performances.



Again there was plenty of opportunity to interact with the dancers and the local people, especially the children who insisted in having their photos taken. We could rely on our local tour guides to interpret because very few of the locals speak English, though in recent years it has become a compulsory subject in senior high schools.



We had a very early start the next morning to travel upstream in local speedboats (twin 200 hp motors!) to the Lok Baintan floating markets. These markets are held every day of the year, except for two holy days, and start after the first call to prayer at 5:00 am. Before dawn the women of the villages come to the central place by canoe carrying their fruit, vegetables, dried fish, and craft for sale. There are several wholesale buyers in larger motorised canoes that come to get stock to on-sell in the city as well as boats carrying tourists like us. It is a very colourful and dynamic place as everyone floats downstream with the current. In spite of the traffic of canoes it all seemed to run peacefully and with a lot of good humour.



We had arrived at the height of the rambutan and mangosteen season so many canoes were well stocked with those fruit. The chef from the *Coral Adventurer* bought a selection of the fruits on offer and later he and Linda (our guest lecturer from Indonesia) gave a talk and tasting of each fruit. A few,

like custard apple, rambotan and the little “monkey” bananas were familiar but the majority were quite new to us.



Guava: sweetish flesh but lots of little seeds



Butter fruit: fairly bland and buttery relative of mangosteen



Rambotan: sweet and juicy, very like lychee in look and taste



Soursop: nice and sweet, a bit like a custard apple



Mangosteen: sweet and fleshy



Longsat: sweet and fleshy



Breadnut: relative of breadfruit; tastes very like pumpkin



Durian: rather bland but sweet; the fruit itself pongs!

All in all a rather interesting exposure to the fruits that were in season. There was also local citrus in great variety including several types of limes and oranges.

One of the more interesting locally produced and harvested luxury food items are the nests of swiftlets that are used to make bird's nest soup. The locals have constructed tower-like nesting houses with holes for the birds to fly in. They attract them by playing a continuous recording of their calls. The birds build their nests inside the tower using their saliva and the owners of the towers periodically harvest their extremely very valuable "crop" that is sold on to Chinese merchants. We saw many of these towers along the rivers around Banjarmasin.



The villagers that live along the rivers around Banjarmasin have well-built timber homes with power supply and rely on the river for just about everything, drinking, washing, transport and the "continuous flushing toilet" of the river. There does not appear to be any significant disease issues – perhaps they grow up developing a good immune system.



Bandjarmasin is also a major regional port for containers and bulk goods such as fuel and LPG, as well home to industries such as sawmilling and plywood manufacture. It is also the outlet for barges laden with coal mined in the interior and transferred to fleets of large bulk carriers off shore.



Banjarmasin is a fascinating city, a heartland for the gentle Indonesian adaptation of Islam; a city of traditional villages alongside modern infrastructure; and the most welcoming of people.



Ken and Judy
March 2020

