The Land Below the Wind

ERIC WARBURG

(*Plates* 65, 82, 83)

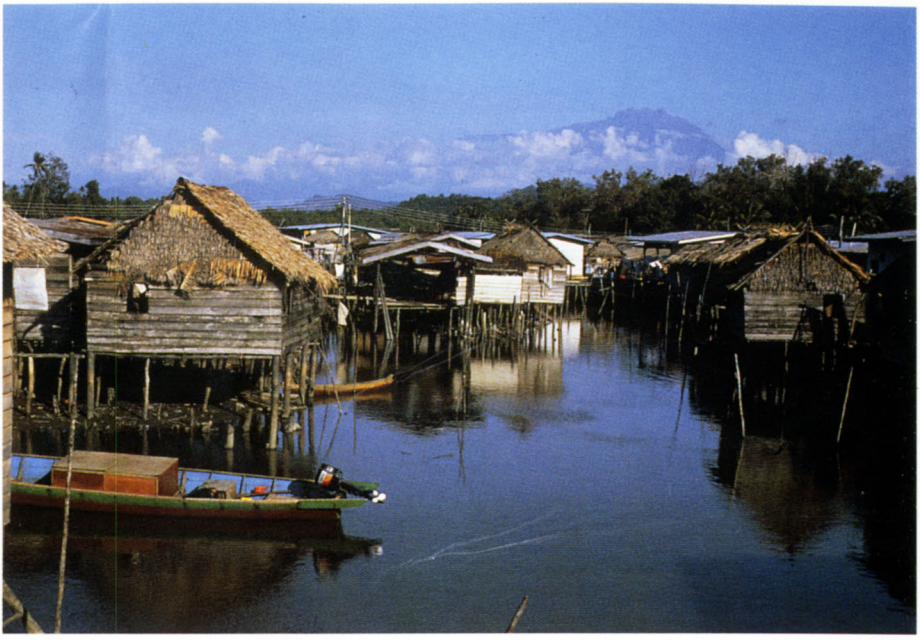
Sabah, at the northern tip of Borneo, means 'The Land below the Wind' in the local language. It is just celebrating 25 years of its independence, acquired at the same time as Sarawak when both joined the federated states of Malaysia.

Prior to that Sabah has appeared on occasional pages of history, recording a visit by Ferdinand Magellan's fleet as early as 1521 and the establishment of a post by the East India Company in 1763; this was subsequently attacked by Sulu pirates and abandoned. The British flag was again hoisted at Labuan, an island off the West Coast, when the Sultan of Brunei ceded it to Britain in 1845. Some years later he ceded the West Coast of Borneo to the 'American Trading Company' which established a colony at Kimanis called 'Ellena', but this did not prosper and was abandoned. Eventually, in 1881, the 'British North Borneo Chartered Company' was formed and one of the directors of this company, Sir Charles Jessel, gave his name to the capital, Jesselton, now renamed Kota Kinabalu. The town was occupied by the Japanese in January 1942 and, as a Japanese base, it was heavily bombed by the Allied Forces and almost totally destroyed. After its liberation in September 1945 it became the capital of the British Crown Colony of North Borneo, which included Labuan Island.

Today it is a thriving little town of some 220,000 people, with its own high-rise buildings, a modern airport with international flights to eight other centres and a seaport which is visited by international cruise-ships from all over the world. From London it is reached by a 22-hour flight, with a change either in Singapore or in Kuala Lumpur.

Borneo itself, covering 72,500 sq km, is the third largest island in the world. The territory of Sabah is 70% jungle, and timber is one of the main industries. Its economy is otherwise basically agrarian. The population of 1.3 million covers over 31 ethnic groups and over 80 different languages or dialects. The largest group are the Kadazans, who are also called Dusuns, and who used to be headhunters; their trophies are still to be seen hanging from the rafters of their longhouses. Today their main activity is farming, rice-planting being most important. This can be 'supplemented' by fermenting the rice into a fiery liquid called 'tafai', served on all occasions which call for a celebration. Another large group are the Bojaus, who used to be a sea-roving people, but who have also gravitated to farming and rearing buffaloes and ponies. They are largely responsible too for promoting Sabah's pony-racing which takes place at the weekends.

The Chinese are known to have had trade and diplomatic dealings with Brunei since 600AD, and archaeologists have found evidence of their settle-



65. *Typical village on stilts in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah.* (p 185)



66. *Above the Bigo Bog, amongst giant heather and lobelia.* (p 177)

ments on the island near Kota Belud. Arab traders from Sumatra and Malacca also came to Borneo in the 14th century. Today the Chinese form the largest non-native group in the state, having started to immigrate more or less since the British opened up the territory. They are the shopkeepers, the office workers and the professionals, recognized for their business acumen. Whilst Sabah was known by travellers from faraway lands in the 18th and 19th centuries as the 'island of plenty', modern day economics are starting to catch up, and in the search for new sources of income a big effort is being made to build up the tourist industry. It is ideally suited for this in many ways. The daily average temperature is 30°C, dropping to 25°C at night, and in the highland interior there is a variation between 28°C during the day and 18°C at night.

With two luxury hotels, the Hyatt Kinabalu International and the Tanjung Aru Beach, the bodily comfort of the traditionally pampered tourist is catered for. The miles of sandy beaches and coral reefs open up all the usual water-sports possibilities, with one outstanding diving 'secret' at Sipahan Island, where scuba divers can descend up to 600m within a few metres of the shore. Whitewater rafting down the Papar river has just been introduced and is a natural fun experience which will undoubtedly grow in popularity. Interests obviously vary from one individual to another, and I myself had always had the hope of climbing Mount Kinabalu which at 4101m is the highest mountain in South-East Asia. Set in the 724sqkm Kinabalu Park, 80km from Kota Kinabalu, which is rich in vegetation and a centre for the typical and varied flora and fauna of Sabah, this huge chunk of granite was pushed up through the earth's crust some one million years ago and then eroded by glaciers and heavy rains. It offers the trekker a superb climb.

The interpretation of the name 'Kinabalu' has been the subject of much ingenuity in the theories of various writers. One suggestion was that the summit had a mythical lake, guarded by a dragon. As numerous Chinese came to an untimely end up there, the Dusun words *Kina*, meaning 'Chinese', and *Balu*, meaning 'widow', gave it the name of 'The Chinese Widow'. The accepted meaning today, however, is 'The Revered Place of the Dead', denoting a resting place for the spirits of the Dusun dead. Indeed, until comparatively recently one was only allowed up if accompanied by a priest who had to offer propitiation to the spirits (on one's behalf and at one's own expense) in the form of the sacrifice of five chickens and five eggs. Today tourists usually climb the mountain in two days, with a two-to-three-hour ascent on the first evening for the overnight stay in the Panar Laban hut. They then rise at 2am, complete the three-hour climb to the summit in time to witness the sunrise and then return to the base.

This was the scene in September of the 'First International Climbathon '88', a promotion by Malaysian Airlines, the Sabah Tourism Promotion Corporation and the Sabah Parks Trustees, who sponsored an all-comers competition to climb the mountain – of course, it was to be a 'straight up-and-down'.

Numbering some 244 competitors, with 27 from abroad, we all gathered in Kota Kinabalu and were bussed out to Kinabalu Park the evening before. Rising at 4.30am, we breakfasted and set off for the starting point at 1830m, again by bus, and were flagged off by the Minister for the Environment at 6am sharp, the ladies starting 15 minutes later.

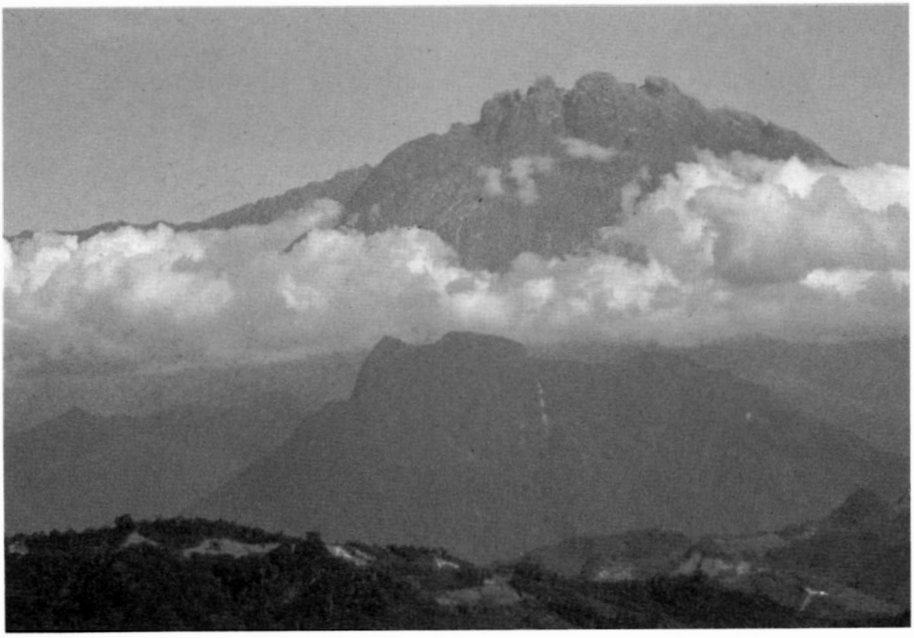


82. *Two up, one down: competitors passing each other along the fixed ropes near the top of Mount Kinabalu during the Climbathon '88.* (p 185)

As a senior citizen myself I just watched in awe as the confirmed joggers sped out of sight, and I was soon overhauled by the jogging ladies. The first objective was the Panar Laban hut at 3353m, which male competitors had to reach in three hours and ladies in four in order to justify their entry in the competition and thus to qualify for the prizes. My great worry was that the times of the various sectors which I had noted at the park entrance, which were of course designed for the normal tourist, gave a combined time of six hours to the point which I was supposed to cover in three! I therefore had to keep going at a rate considerably enhanced over that to which I am accustomed, and that took a lot out of me. My wife overhauled me after one hour, and to our relief we reached our reporting point in 2½ hours. The lower part of the course was through thick jungle, up an incredibly steep path. There were few flat stretches, but lower down the steps were reasonably shelved. As we went up, however, the steps got deeper and, as small people, we both found them very exhausting. Then, as the path zig-zagged higher up, we came to wooden ladders with wooden bars as steps. Fortunately many of these had wooden frames which one could use as handrails, some of them highly polished by use but at any rate giving assistance to the climber. Against the younger joggers I stood out in any case as an anomaly, wearing a rucksack and carrying a walking-stick, but both came in remarkably handy. After the Panar Laban hut one got on to solid granite rock slabs which cover the summit. On the steeper faces there were ropes to help pull oneself up. Away to our right we could see the impressive *gendarmes* of the Donkeys Ears Peak, with the South Peak to the left. It was a long tiring haul up the centre slab, where we hoped to find the turn-round point, but we were flabbergasted suddenly to be faced with Low's Peak (4101m) sticking up in front of us, on the top of which we could see the final reporting point. Climbers are always faced with unforeseen summits which they have to surmount one after the other before achieving their goal, and this was no exception. So, after a rest and another drink of vitamin juice from our flask in my rucksack, we staggered on. In actual fact we were surprised at the relatively short time we did take to the summit: at last we were there!

Then came the descent: this was none too easy as a heavy mist had come down, and it started to rain. Even in the tropics at this height it can snow, and I guessed that we were only a couple of degrees above 0°C. We followed the cairns down the summit slab, but these suddenly petered out and we were quite lost – making in fact for a precipice – but fortunately a Climbathon official saw us and redirected us to the right path. Coming down the wet rock and then the wooden ladders was a tricky operation, and with our tired and trembling knees it seemed an eternity until we reached the bottom.

The 'real' competitors however had had a field day. Led by three Gurkha soldiers, they had run up to the top and had passed us on their way down after we had been going for some 2½ hours, leaping surefootedly down the trail as though they were flying. The extraordinary winning time of 2 hours 42 minutes was hard to believe, when we returned having ourselves taken some eight hours – it was certainly the toughest climb we have ever done. Any chagrin we might have felt at this time was however dispelled by my wife winning the silver medal and I the bronze in the Veterans' category, there being no other contestants! The



83. Mount Kinabalu in the morning. (p 185)



84. Tom Patey and Jerry Smith on the first winter ascent of Parallel Buttress, Lochnagar, March 1956. (Note the nailed boots, the short axe, the home-made ironmongery – and the clothing!) (p 190)

organizers of this race can be well pleased with its success. They will undoubtedly wish to include it in their annual calendar, and as it becomes better known it is bound to attract more participants, especially from overseas.

The organization was of a high order. The Park authorities are to be commended for having prepared the trail to such a superb degree, the Tourist Promotion Board for the external organization and Malaysian Airlines for getting everyone there, and on time.

As time goes on, younger and tougher competitors will no doubt appear and break the record time and again. My good wishes go with them, but for myself I think this is a timely end to climbs like this, and my wife and I will keep to the flatter trails in future!