

## Jones' Jolly — Part Two

Well, now that Tony had given the nod for this trans-Borneo fiftieth birthday outing, attention turned to the practicalities.

Part of the original pitch had been that we would travel as lightly as possible, much as the Dayaks themselves did. This appealed to Tony, not least because of an earlier Trans-Darién recce involving EO staff which, by all accounts, had departed carrying everything short of a sideboard and a set of garden furniture.

The Borneo approach was to be rather different.

As I saw it, the mission boiled down to a few essential considerations:

1. Visas
2. Fitness
3. Food and cooking
4. First aid - medicines
5. Hammocks and sleep
6. Footwear

...and, ideally, a reasonable amount of good fortune.

Tony and I began early-morning jogging circuits around Hyde Park, eventually introducing intermittent sprints. It felt faintly unnecessary discussing “danger” with Tony. Running EO meant he dealt with risk daily and, in truth, hazard was baked into the entire enterprise. Still, the sprinting served a purpose beyond fitness and acclimatisation for the tropics. One particular section of the proposed crossing carried risks that were difficult to mitigate diplomatically. In the unlikely event matters deteriorated completely, the ability to run rather quickly for one’s life seemed worth cultivating.

Preparation in London was helped enormously by the city itself. Most things required for the expedition were only a Tube ride away. An adventure travel shop called *Nomad* had recently opened and became a useful source of lighter jungle equipment and medical supplies. Meanwhile, a bead shop in Camden Town supplied trade beads of the type long used across Indonesia and Borneo. I left with a respectable stash.

To the uninitiated this may have appeared eccentric, but beads had served for centuries as both currency and status symbols throughout the region. Among Dayak communities in Borneo they functioned not merely

as ornamentation, but as stores of wealth, trade goods, bride price & heirlooms. Certain beads were considered so valuable they rivalled the worth of livestock or even slaves in earlier periods. We regarded them as a sensible emergency currency should conventional arrangements become unavailable somewhere inconveniently deep in the interior.

The final member of the recce team then entered the picture: Ian Stevenson...

Why Tony selected Ian—and, for that matter, myself—is probably something only Jones himself could properly answer. My own suspicion is that timing had a good deal to do with it: who happened to be available, and who did not. EO was rarely short of willing volunteers, but availability was often the decisive qualification.

Ian had been around the office during the final weeks of preparation, apparently between LD assignments, and stopped by my desk one afternoon to ask what exactly we were planning. I gave him a rough outline of the objective and how we intended to approach it. Not long afterwards, Jones confirmed that Ian was “in”. Flights were booked, passports checked and visas obtained.

In EO terms, adventure, danger and occasional catastrophe were more or less standard operating conditions. Risks could be reduced, though rarely eliminated, and if one stayed on the road with EO long enough, the odds of eventually encountering some variety of calamity became surprisingly high. When such things occurred, EO headquarters in London - Tony included - would invariably end up managing the fallout around the clock. From that vantage point they developed a fairly accurate sense of who remained useful under pressure.

Ian, it seemed, had recently demonstrated his credentials rather thoroughly.

He had completed a southbound Trans-Africa trip involving an ambitious attempt to load an entire Bedford truck onto a barge somewhere in Zaire. Unfortunately, the process could not be achieved by simply driving aboard. Instead, the ten-ton-plus truck needed to be hoisted by crane, swung over the Congo River, and lowered onto the waiting vessel.

It very nearly worked.

From what I later heard, the truck was lowered perfectly—apart from the minor detail of missing the barge entirely and spending the night sitting at the bottom of the Congo river. Quite how it was recovered the following day I never fully understood, though apparently it was eventually extracted, deposited aboard successfully, and the expedition continued.

At this point Ian's engineering background came conspicuously into its own. Against reasonable expectations, the truck kept going and the trip ultimately rolled into Dar es Salaam only one day late, which by EO standards probably counted as exemplary punctuality.

Reading between the lines, I suspect Tony considered there was at least a fair chance something in Borneo might unravel in a similarly imaginative fashion. His own neck, after all, was very much attached to the venture. My feeling was that he quietly selected those he thought most likely to remain functional if events drifted away from the plan. In that respect, Ian accidentally depositing one of EO's fleet into the Congo may actually have strengthened his application rather than weakened it.

Curiously, although Ian and I had apparently orbited similar routes for some time, I do not recall meeting him prior to Borneo. We had come close once before when EO sent me to Istanbul to run his group's "Iran overflight" contingency while he transited Iran itself. After dropping his passengers in eastern Turkey, I then doubled back to Istanbul before heading off on a Sundowners run to London. The same truck later became my home for the better part of nine months running Brief Encounters through Egypt, Israel and Jordan.

Tony and I, meanwhile, discovered we had both spent at least part of our school years in Eastbourne—albeit from rather different educational traditions: his private, mine resolutely otherwise.

Shortly before departure, Tony hosted a gathering at his recently acquired house. Staff from both Wren Park and the London office attended. It gave the three of us a final opportunity to become acquainted somewhere marginally more civilised before meeting again, fully laden with kit, at Heathrow Airport to board a Malaysia Airlines flight to Kuching (Sarawak) via Kuala Lumpur.

At that point, the whole thing still retained the reassuring feel of an interesting idea. Borneo itself would soon improve upon that considerably.