Jones' Jolly — Part Three

Borneo — Why Borneo?

Somewhere over the Indian Ocean, after the Heathrow rendezvous had been successfully completed and the Malaysia Airlines flight settled into its long overnight rhythm, there was finally time to consider precisely what it was we were doing.

Within a dozen hours or so the rubber would, in every sense, meet the proverbial road.

Why Borneo?

And more specifically, why this particular version of Borneo? An unrepeatable, diplomatically questionable and occasionally dangerous crossing that occupied the narrow territory between impossible and inadvisable.

To understand that properly, it probably helps to understand something about EO and the peculiar occupational conditioning of an EO L.D.

Leading overland expeditions required a flexible relationship with rules, paperwork and occasionally geography itself. Over time one accumulated a small library of passport stamps, visa improvisations and inventive border solutions, all in the service of fulfilling the brochure's simple promise of getting from A to B. The work developed a particular mindset: if a road vanished, a fuel supply failed, a border closed, a gearbox exploded or a local official took a sudden dislike to one's documentation, the expectation remained that somehow the journey continued regardless.

Improvisation was not merely useful; it was practically a job requirement.

By the late eighties, EO's brochure had already become extensive. Asia, Africa, the Middle East, South America — much of the obvious map had been coloured in. Yet amongst drivers and long-term staff there was always the same underlying question quietly circulating:
"What's next?"
Or perhaps more accurately:
"What's left?"

I first heard the word *Borneo* whispered in Kathmandu at the end of a GOE.
Not announced.
Whispered.

EO always had rumours circulating about possible new routes, but Borneo carried a different tone. Remote, mysterious, slightly improbable.

As it happened, I was heading vaguely in that direction anyway: Kathmandu to Bangkok, then onward overland towards East Timor en route to Australia. It seemed sensible enough to take a look.

During that visit, largely while travelling through Kalimantan — the Indonesian side of Borneo — and speaking with locals and semi nomadic Dayaks, it slowly dawned on me that something genuinely extraordinary existed there.
Not merely a trip.
A crossing.

The Equator runs almost directly through the island, dividing not only hemispheres but political boundaries, climates and cultures. The central border region between Indonesia and Malaysia remained highly restricted following Konfrontasi in the 1960s, while large sections were controlled unofficially by logging interests and the sort of individuals who preferred not to appear on maps.

In short, it was considered out of bounds.
Which naturally made it rather interesting.

The more I looked into it, the more compelling the idea became: a south-to-north crossing of Borneo, traversing the Equator itself through primary rainforest, crossing from one hemisphere into another via trails that officially did not exist.

The Equator always carried a certain fascination anyway. Two counter-rotating hemispheres meeting in permanent atmospheric negotiation. Airline passengers crossing it generally encounter the familiar moment when the seatbelt signs illuminate and drinks become temporarily unavailable. Somewhere within those opposing yet complementary forces sat Borneo: steaming rainforest, endless mist, swollen rivers and enough biodiversity to occupy David Attenborough for several careers.

For many people of our generation, Attenborough had already turned Borneo into something almost mythical. Orangutans swinging through jungle canopy, hornbills gliding overhead, strange insects, dense rainforest dripping with life. Even saying the word *Borneo* seemed to summon humidity.

As for why Tony Jones himself became interested in Borneo, I can only speculate. EO possessed a natural tendency toward expansion, rather like capillary action. If an unexplored possibility existed somewhere on the map, eventually attention drifted toward it.

Around this time, a smaller adventure travel company with historical connections to EO had approached Tony regarding possible collaboration. Various routes were discussed, but from what I understood only one destination genuinely captured his attention: Borneo. Ultimately Tony declined the arrangement, apparently deciding that if EO were going there, EO would do it properly and create its own route.

So when I later arrived with a concept for an entirely original Borneo crossing, the ground had already been quietly prepared.

Commercially, the whole thing made very little sense at all, which ordinarily would have guaranteed its immediate death somewhere in the Brompton Road office. Under normal circumstances Tony would probably have put the kibosh on it within thirty seconds.
However, timing is everything.

Tony's fiftieth birthday was thereabouts and there was perhaps a quiet sense that such occasions required suitable marking. EO folklore maintained that in earlier years an upper age limit existed for participation on expeditions — initially thirty, then thirty-five, and thereafter adjusted upwards whenever Jones himself approached the threshold. Whether true or not hardly mattered; it sounded entirely plausible.

By fifty, perhaps there was a faint danger of becoming too old for one's own adventures. If so, Borneo arrived at precisely the right moment.

An unrepeatable Equatorial crossing through primary rainforest, via unofficial tribal trails and regions politely labelled inaccessible, possessed a certain undeniable pull.
Preparations therefore continued.

On paper, at least, everything appeared reasonably legitimate. Indonesian tourist visas were obtained in London and Malaysia would happily admit us through normal channels on arrival in Kuala Lumpur and later Kuching.

Beyond that, however, the plan entered a somewhat greyer administrative category.

Months earlier, standing in front of the large world map at 267 Old Brompton Road, I had outlined the basic concept to Tony.
The essence of it was deceptively simple.
We would enter Borneo legally.
Thereafter, matters would become progressively less official.

During my earlier travels through Kalimantan I had repeatedly heard mention of unofficial routes linking Dayak communities scattered across the interior. The details were vague, but a pattern slowly emerged. Deep in the borderlands, longhouses formed a loose human chain across the rainforest.

A Dayak longhouse is an extraordinary structure: raised above the ground and often home to twenty or more families beneath a single roof. Arrive at one longhouse and somebody would know the trail to the next. Reach that one and another route would appear. The theory was elegantly simple. We would borrow centuries of local knowledge and allow the longhouses to guide us across the island.

Whether the theory actually worked remained entirely untested.
To appreciate the scale of the undertaking, it helps to understand Borneo itself.

Borneo is the third-largest island on Earth, exceeded only by Greenland and New Guinea. It is more than twice the size of the United Kingdom and sufficiently vast that one could disappear into it quite effectively.

Many people imagine it as an island. In reality it feels more like a continent that accidentally found itself surrounded by water.

The Equator slices almost directly across its middle. Roughly three-quarters of the island forms Indonesian Kalimantan. Most of the remainder consists of the Malaysian states of Sarawak and Sabah, while the tiny Sultanate of Brunei occupies a small but prosperous corner of the northern coastline.

To complete the crossing as pitched to Jones, we needed to move through two countries whose relationship following Konfrontasi had historically been, let us say, occasionally complicated.

At the time there was only one official land crossing between Indonesian and Malaysian Borneo.
We had absolutely no intention of using it.
The logic behind this was surprisingly sound.
We intended to start and finish in Malaysia.

Entering Indonesia unofficially was one matter. Re-entering Malaysia unofficially at journey's end was quite another and carried the potential to attract the interest of people equipped with uniforms, forms and spare time. Neither prospect held much appeal.

Our intention instead was to cross through the western border and interior and sing Dayak trails and local knowledge.

There was, however, one small complication.
I had never actually done it.
I had never met anyone who had done it.
I had heard it might be possible.
That was the extent of my reconnaissance.

The working theory was straightforward enough. Somewhere in the borderlands we would locate Dayak communities, establish whether routes actually existed between the longhouses, and if they did, attempt to thread our way across the frontier.

The remainder of the plan consisted largely of optimism and forward movement. Looking back, this may not have been the most rigorous reconnaissance ever undertaken.

Three foreigners intended to arrive in Borneo, locate local guides they had never met, follow trails that were absent from maps, cross an international border that officially could not be crossed, and then continue several thousand kilometres across one of the largest islands on Earth whilst avoiding situations that might require close examination of a small blue booklet known as a passport.
At the time, however, it seemed perfectly workable.
Or workable enough.

Once inside Kalimantan, the majority of the journey still lay ahead. We would rely upon whatever transport, accommodation and opportunities presented themselves, provided none involved excessive official curiosity regarding our precise movements.

Quite apart from the jungle itself, there were diplomatic obstacles, logistical obstacles, cultural obstacles and the ever-present possibility of saying precisely the wrong thing to precisely the wrong person.

The entire expedition resembled a carefully assembled collection of things that could go wrong. And somewhere over the Indian Ocean, as the cabin lights dimmed and most passengers attempted sleep, the true scale of what lay ahead began to settle upon me.

It is difficult to say who was most responsible for the situation.
Perhaps me for suggesting it.
Perhaps Jones for listening to the suggestion and, against what might reasonably be described as sound commercial judgement, approving it.
Or perhaps Stevenson, whose willingness to join transformed the whole thing from an ambitious idea discussed around a map into an actual expedition.

Whatever the answer, the point had become largely academic.
The plan had moved beyond the stage where common sense could intervene.

Weeks earlier it had been little more than lines traced across a map of Borneo with a wooden pointer. Then it became discussions, visas, equipment, airline tickets and training runs around Hyde Park. Before long, enough pieces had fallen into place that the expedition acquired a momentum of its own.

And that is often how these things happen.
An idea that initially appears improbable slowly becomes inevitable.
Now we were committed.

Somewhere beneath us lay one of the largest islands on Earth. Ahead of us stood jungles, rivers, unofficial trails, uncertain borders and a great many opportunities for the whole thing to unravel spectacularly.

Yet there was also a curious simplicity to it.
The planning was over.
The talking was over.

In a few hours we would land in Kuching and discover whether Borneo was prepared to cooperate with our plans for it.
Either way, there seemed little point being concerned about it now.

MAP: Produced with the same commitment to accuracy that underpinned certain aspects of the expedition itself.