~ *Words* CHRIS WRIGHT ~

GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN

ULTIMATE ALTITUDE
Mount Kinabalu is a tough but rewarding trek to the roof of Sabah.

Mount Kinabalu, in Borneo, is not only South-East Asia's highest peak and a magnet for adventurers, but part of an amazingly diverse biological hotspot.

THERE IS A SIGNBOARD AT THE START of the track up Mount Kinabalu, the highest mountain in South-East Asia, bearing the names and times of the winners of the 2009 race up and down the Borneo peak. Two hours, 40 minutes and 41 seconds is the best performance.

To climbers returning from Mount Kinabalu, bruised, exhausted, perhaps drenched from a tropical downpour and with knees that no longer obey rational instruction, that signboard appears a cruel joke. Their own odyssey will have taken two or three days, never mind two or three hours. The board reflects not only the locals' fitness, but their connection with the mountain. Kinabalu guide Yamin, a 44-year-old father of five, has a personal best of three-and-a-half hours up and down, but reckons he can beat it next year. He has reached the summit 100 times.

There are few peaks so tightly embedded into their surrounding society as Kinabalu. The nearby state capital of Kota Kinabalu takes its name from the mountain. The distinctive profile of the peaks appears on the state flag of Sabah, the Malaysian territory within which the mountain sits. Sabahans take pride not only in the beauty of the mountain and the exhilaration of the climb, but also the extraordinary biological diversity of the mountain and its surrounding national park: between 5000 and 6000 plant species, more than 300 types of bird, and animals including the (rarely sighted here) orang-utan. More pragmatically, they value it as a source of work for guides and porters.

Foreigners feel the attraction, too, making Mount Kinabalu one of Malaysia's most heavily promoted tourist drawcards. Climbing the mountain involves almost nine kilometres of relentless uphill hiking, summiting at ›

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nearly 4100m – high enough to cause altitude sickness. It involves getting up in the middle of the night and climbing up an exposed granite face, hanging on to steel cables bolted into the mountain, in complete darkness. It doesn't require specialist skills, but is not, by any stretch of the imagination, a stroll. None of which is a reason not to do it – just be ready for the challenge.

Park authorities ensure walkers comprehend the difficulty, and insist that everyone who goes up must be accompanied by a registered guide. The numbers of people who can climb at any one time are limited by the accommodation available on the mountain. At Laban Rata, 6km into the climb, a guesthouse can accommodate 146 climbers, while another 48 can stay in accommodation nearby. On any given day, about 200 people plus guides and porters will be heading up the mountain; and the same number heading down. That feels like capacity, especially on the summit, and is a sensible limitation – although it means that one of the biggest challenges of Kinabalu is the logistical effort of finding a date with available accommodation.

Some are disappointed by the first day. It is relentlessly upward with few views – since the path cuts through deep forest – though tame squirrels and distinctive flora such as the pitcher plant provide diversion. Most of the track is built with wooden stairs and there's no need for technical ability, just plodding, dogged stamina. It is recommended to allow five to seven hours for this part of the ascent. Most greet the Laban Rata guesthouse – comfortable, heated at night, with hot water at some times of day, and a surprisingly good range of food – with relief.

But climbing Kinabalu is all about the second day. The routine is to rise early – very, very early – to reach the top by sunrise. Most are underway by 2am. For many, the first stretch out of Laban Rata is the hardest part of the trek: emerging at 11,000 feet, probably without having slept that well, to climb over slippery, uneven boulders. The 6.5km marker, just 500m out of Laban Rata, is greeted with disbelief from climbers certain they've done three times that distance since leaving the guesthouse.

WALKING ON THE MOON
A lunar-like landscape makes for a surreal climb. Clockwise from right: not-so-secret squirrel; the climb continues; dawn summit conference.

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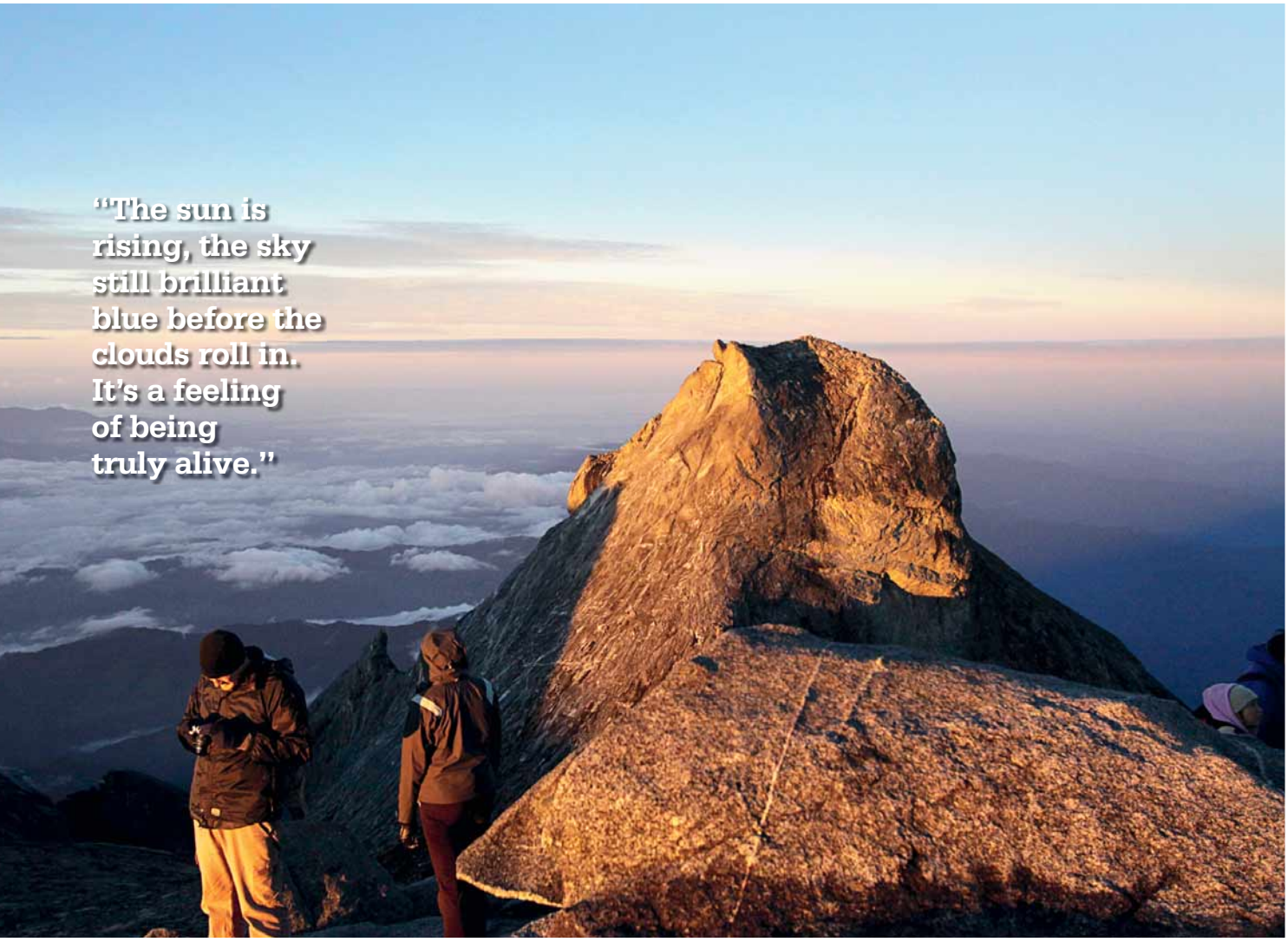
It's followed by the fixed-cable section, probably the most dangerous part of the ascent. In the dark, on slippery granite, it combines open rock with a lot of traffic, including many climbers unfamiliar with using rope. Eventually, climbers reach the Sayang Sayang checkpoint – where passes are checked – before attacking the face of the mountain, hand over hand, step by step, pushing on.

By now the sky is visible, Orion and a host of other constellations vivid against the darkness. Every step is painful, vertical gain as much as distance, hand over hand on the wire. The first hints of light appear as climbers reach the peaks. With every moment, the desolate glory of the surroundings, a granite plateau all the more beautiful for its lunar starkness, becomes clearer, and Low's Peak – the true summit – comes in to view, a gruelling final 200m to the top.

Hundreds share the summit every dawn, the first sight of the sun often greeted with applause. As it rises and the peaks are bathed in sunshine, the place takes on a different texture. In one direction is the ocean, the shadow of the mountain cast dozens of kilometres over the water in the shallow angle of the sunlight; in another, Low's Gully, an 1800m-deep monument to the scouring power of glaciation. Usually dawn is clear on the peak, although climbers may be looking down on cloud. The clarity doesn't last long, before the summit hides for the rest of the day.

Getting down is more interesting since the opening of a *via ferrata* (iron road), a system of fixed cables, ladders and bridges – the first in Asia, and the highest in the world at 3800m. The idea is to give the feeling of mountaineering without the danger: climbers are permanently connected to the cable by two caribiners, and also to a guide by rope, meaning that it's impossible to fall more than a few feet.

There is a mandatory briefing near the Laban Rata guesthouse the afternoon before the climb; equipment is good, the guides clear and calm. Two alternatives are offered – a short, beginner's version with limited exposure, and a much bigger version including a descent down a large part of the granite rock face (and an irksome stretch of slippery jungle). Both can be done only in descent, ›



GOD'S-EYE VIEW
Above the clouds on Low's Peak, trekkers are bathed in the first rays of the sun.

and both conclude near the Laban Rata guesthouse. Naturally, it's also possible to follow the trail back down.

For those who have the energy, the full version is strongly recommended. Starting a short distance from the summit, it's usually attempted at around 7am. Then, the sun is rising, the sky still brilliant blue before the clouds roll in, and the sensation of being on the edge of a rugged mountain face is vibrant; a feeling of being truly alive. It's hard work, though, and combining this with a full descent in the same day is asking a great deal of the body.

The toughest part of the whole endeavour is the descent from Laban Rata – slippery, often in rain or mist, and without the goal of the summit as inspiration. Many are surprised to find themselves in more discomfort on the way down, as the pounding on the knees is endless, and it's not uncommon for climbers to require assistance.

Back at the start there's a new appreciation for that signboard, the feats of those climbers now rendered not so much impressive, as Biblical. This doesn't dim the sense of personal achievement at having scaled the roof of Borneo. ✣

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