

For almost thirty years now my wife, Angela and I have been visiting the wonderful island of Borneo. When we were first married we decided to travel. We sat nervously in our lounge and literally tossed a coin. Heads and we would follow in the footsteps of Charles Darwin and travel west to South America and tails would see us travel east to Indonesia in the wake of that other giant of evolutionary science, Alfred Russel Wallace. Fate was with us that day as we both breathed a sigh of relief when the coin fell tails up. Although there is much to be found in the Americas we both secretly longed to see those most endearing and endangered of creatures, the Orang Utan. Plans were made, flights were booked and we set off on what was to be our maiden voyage to Borneo.

We were young, we were inexperienced and we were above all apprehensive. Travelling this far was a new thing to us and we had no idea what to expect. As a boy I had fantasized about the "Wild Men of Borneo" as I pawed through my "Boys Own Book of Adventure". I had fancied myself as pirate, a sea captain or even as the ruler of some distant land. My head was filled with images of Rajah Brooke and his army of head hunting Dyaks. I longed to drift along a river in an open canoe and marvel at the cathedrals of green that lined the banks.

The plane touched down at Sandakan airport and two very pale very nervous tourists walked across the tarmac. The heat was like nothing we had ever experienced and the humidity caused our shirts to instantly become soaked. As we made our way to the taxi rank, after clearing customs, it began to rain. Rain the like of which I had never experienced. Rain that was so torrential that it actually hurt as it hit your head and arms. Finding a taxi we clambered on board and the quietly spoken Malay driver turned and asked us where we would like to go...Sepilok I replied. "Good call man" he replied and we were off.

Now almost thirty years later we find ourselves once again in Sandakan. This time we are not here as the giddy newly-weds but as seasoned travellers to the East. From Cambodia to Thailand, from Vietnam to Komodo we have been everywhere. We have crisscrossed the globe in our search for endangered species and yet we still marvel at every new sight that we see, at every insect that crosses our path and at every soul that we meet on our journey. Our lives have changed so much in those thirty years. I have written articles for magazines, photographed some of the rarest animals on the planet and Angela has become a World authority on the spiders of the rainforests. From that single coin toss our destiny was sealed.

My visit this time is part of my work as lecturer on cruise ships and whilst one may argue that, in these time of climate change and global warning, one should reduce ones carbon footprint I balance it with the fact that I have been given an opportunity. An opportunity to tell my message to a captive audience. Since my first visit to Sepilok I have studied, written about, photographed and lectured on our Orange friends to every audience that was willing to listen both in the UK and in Malaysia. This time I find myself in front of an audience of cruisers on a trip from Hong Kong to Singapore via Borneo. The auditorium holds around 200 people and is filling fast. My lecture today is entitled "Last Chance To See". As the lights dim and I begin I observe a sea of face all keen to find out more about these wonderful creatures. By the end of my 50-minute slot I find myself swamped with questions. The next day we will visit Sepilok and I retire to my cabin a contented man. Hopefully some of what I have said will get through and who knows someone out there might be the person who makes the difference.

I offer this tale as an inspiration. All those years ago we had no idea what lay ahead for my wife and I. Just as today in these uncertain times we have no idea what lies ahead for us all but one thing I am certain of is that we can all make a difference, Whether it be running a marathon, lecturing or standing on the front line at Sepilok itself. We all have the power to change things. I hope to be still visiting Borneo into my old age and I shall continue to do so until I can travel no longer but I will always remember my first sight of those special creatures.

Ray and Angela Hale