

Deep in the rugged heartland of Sabah lies a piece of paradise. It is one of the few remaining areas virtually untouched by man—not just in Sabah but in the whole world! The Maliau Basin is distinguished by its almost circular perimeter outlined by a razor-sharp rim with steep slopes on all sides. The highest point is thought to be Gunong Lotung which is over 1,600m in elevation although this has not yet been accurately surveyed. Despite its volcano like appearance the 25km Basin is in fact a sedimentary formation comprised mainly of gently inclined beds of sandstone and mudstone. It is a single significant water catchment area drained by a set of tributaries of the Maliau River, one of which descends a magnificent series of waterfalls known as the Maliau Falls. More than sixteen waterfalls have since been discovered making Maliau Basin one of the highest concentrations of waterfalls in one area in Malaysia. Here also you will find Lake Linumunsut, Sabah's only true lake, formed by a landslide blocking a small tributary of the Pinangah River. Maliau Basin has never been permanently inhabited and over 80% of the area remains unexplored.

Before you decide to dress up like Indiana Jones and embark on an epic journey of slashing your way through wild untamed jungle, access to Maliau Basin is strictly controlled. The 390km<sup>2</sup> Basin was originally part of a 10,000km<sup>2</sup> timber concession belonging to Yayasan Sabah (Sabah Foundation), a government subsidiary. Realising the immense biodiversity value of the area, Sabah Foundation voluntarily designated the Maliau Basin as a Conservation Area for the purposes of research, education and training in 1981. Sixteen years later, in 1997, the Maliau Basin Conservation Area was upgraded by the Sabah state government to a Protection (Class One) Forest Reserve which means no commercial interests will be allowed into the basin other than limited ecotourism, and the area was extended to its present size of 588.4km<sup>2</sup> (58,840 hectares). It is also gazetted under the state Cultural Heritage (Conservation) Enactment 1997, which provides for the preservation, conservation and enhancement of the cultural heritage of Sabah.

Early expeditions which came close to Maliau Basin date back to the early 1900s up to the 1970s but they never found their way onto the rim of the Basin itself. A pilot was reported to have almost crashed into Maliau's sheer cliffs in 1947. The first team to properly visit the interior of the Basin was in 1982 and this opened the doors for several organised scientific and adventure expeditions. The scientific expeditions in 1988 and 1996 revealed a spectacular array of plant species, including six species of pitcher plant and 37 species of orchid, several of which are new records to Sabah. *Rafflesia tengku-adlinii*, one of Sabah's rarest plants, was found during this expedition, and no new sites have been found elsewhere since. In addition, there are many more species of rhododendrons, orchids, ferns and other plants, which will require much more research and study.

These plants thrive in a diverse and unique landscape of lower montane forest dominated by majestic *Agathis* trees, rare montane heath forest and lowland and hill dipterocarp forests. There are over 40 species of dipterocarps as well as wild species related to well-known fruit trees, such as the rambutan, mangosteen, durian and jackfruit. These forests are also a refuge for rare and endangered animals such as Sumatran rhinoceros, banteng, proboscis monkey and Asian elephant, along with 182 species of birds. One of the most dramatic signs of wildlife is a clear path which cuts across low heath forest through a pass on the southern rim into more fertile alluvial forest sites near the centre of the basin. Known as "Jalan Babi", this natural game trail is likely the migration route of pig herds in search of food, especially during intense fruiting seasons.

The label "Lost World" which has been used to describe Maliau Basin was said "to be inspired by Arthur Conan Doyle's story of the adventures of Professor Challenger in unknown territory northwest of Manaus (Brazil), where a lofty plateau was Maliau is as pristine, as incredibly self-contained and magical a place as could be found on Borneo which is one of the world's everlasting icons of the splendour of nature." (KM Wong, *Malaysian Naturalist*, Vol. 54/3)

It is difficult to disagree with this observation. Spectacular scenery, wild unexplored jungle, undiscovered plant life, exotic animals—Maliau Basin is a treasure trove of possibilities and discovery. The real meaning of the name "Maliau" is lost beneath the dark tea-coloured waters that flow through the basin. One account says that it is a Murut word for "murky", which describes the silt-laden river waters during floods. Another tells of a Murut name which means Land of the Giant Staircase after the step-like hills and ridges there. Whatever meaning Maliau may carry, it is without doubt one of the most significant natural treasures of Sabah. It transcends the meaning of wilderness, remoteness and the all-encompassing joy of discovery. It is simply, one of God's green gifts to the world.

Source: Discover Sabah

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# MALIAU BASIN

## Sabah's Lost World