

“Prepare to be scared!” screamed my guide as we set off down a 9km stretch of South East Asia’s top raftable river. I *was* scared. I was very scared, but the riding of the rapids was the least frightening part of the trip.

It is raining in Kota Kinabalu on the morning of my rafting experience. This is a good thing – it is an indication that the water running into the Padas River will be strong enough to turn grade III rapids into grade IV. The rain is also a bad thing because it makes the road to Beaufort more slippery and the already dangerous Malay driving that little bit more life-threatening. It’s white knuckles all the way as we drive at high speed up the backside of the vehicle in front, and then overtake it on whichever blind corner happens to come up next. As I fill in the obligatory liability waiver form I wonder whether Borneo Minibus Riding is classed as an adrenaline activity, and if so, whether my budget travel insurance policy will cover it.

As it turns out, there was no rush to get to the station and the Kamikaze cornering was just a stock Malay party trick. Our early arrival means I have an hour to calm my nerves in the quirky town of Beaufort which is known as the Venice of Sabah. But there are no gondoliers or overpriced restaurants here, just houses that are built on stilts. The river floods its banks during monsoon season every year and the people are forced to go shopping in dugout canoes. I spy an old hollowed out log hiding underneath a house and wonder whether my raft will be as flimsy.

The train arrives late which is hardly surprising considering the age and state of it. These particular carriages were built in the late thirties and the engine itself climbs hills as fast as someone in her late fifties. This is the only railway in the whole of Borneo and it was built over a hundred years ago by the British to transport tobacco from the mountains to the ports. Nowadays it carts the Murut (Malay for “hill people”) between their homes and the city, and the numerous Honkys (Malay English for “people from Hong Kong”) to the rapids. If you sit near the front of the train, you run the risk of choking on diesel smoke, and if you’re at the back near the toilet, there’s a chance you will fall through the hole in its floor. Wherever else you sit, your head will bang against the widow whenever the train jerks and jolts (which is often), and you’ll be surrounded by the undeniably toxic smell of durian and dried jellyfish. This is not The Orient Express. This is much more exciting.

As the train traces the bank of the river you can look out of the window and watch the bamboo trees and hibiscus plants fall gracefully behind you. Or you can watch the track ahead and worry whether the century old sleepers will fall suddenly from beneath you sending the already precarious train tumbling into the mighty Padas below. But whichever way you look you will see smiling Sabah children waving your way as you chug slowly past their homes.

The sun is shining as we alight at a kampong and pick up the rafts, and it is here that I notice the true colour of the river. This is not the place for white-water rafting because the water is a strangely inviting shade of brown. If Willy Wonka had specialised in coffee instead of chocolate, this river would have flowed straight through his factory. At this time of year when the level is high the water really does look like a milky latté .

My river guide is a Murut (as opposed to an Umpalumpa) and rather appropriately he has the Murut name for “fish” – Ikan. His tribe has been using this river for years – if there were roads in these parts, we would have driven here – and he seems to know each rock and eddy by name. He tells us when to paddle and how hard to paddle, but I appear to be the only one making an effort. The others in the boat must be confused by the colour of the water because they are moving their paddles as if they are stirring in the sugar.

The first major rapid is The Head-Hunter and when this kicks in we get tossed around like a cocktail. It’s a lot of fun. I’m shaken (but not stirred) and once we have successfully negotiated the rocks I ask Ikan how the rapid got its name. He tells me that it has nothing to do with HR management; it is named after the activities of the Murut who used to cut off the heads of neighbouring tribes. He explains how head-hunting was outlawed over a hundred years ago but how these laws can take a while to filter through in practice. “The last head chop that I know was in about 1970.” I pretend I’m not scared when he offers to show me some of his dead relatives who are stored in jars, but I tell him that I need to get back to the city later to call my mum.

A few kilometres further down the river I am given the chance to try body-rafting – the same thing but without a boat. Ikan assures me that the water is deep enough for me to avoid smashing my legs on the rocks so I give it a go. It isn’t quite as much fun as it sounds – it’s like having a bath on the back of a camel while someone repeatedly chucks buckets of water into your face. After a few minutes of this torture I feel I’ve done enough to regain my masculinity and I swim back to the boat. But then I’m panicking again because Ikan is telling me that crocodiles live further up the river. “Don’t worry,” he says, “you have a tattoo so you’ll be OK” and he starts to tell an old Murut legend about a lady who helped a crocodile to give birth, and how she got a tattoo to show the crocs that she was a friend, and how... but I’ve lost all interest in tribal fairy tales now – I want to get back in the boat.

After two hours of spectacular rafting and numerous rapids we reach our destination where a barbecue is waiting. It’s chicken and rice with lots of other bits and it’s all been prepared by Ikan’s rather attractive sister. He catches me looking at her and gives me a few words of advice: “Don’t marry a Murut girl – Berian sampai mati.” Translated this means “Dowry until death” and refers to the old Murut custom of a father-in-law repeatedly asking for gifts, like the son-in-law’s boat, until one of them dies. If the son-in-law is stupid enough to refuse the request, he is likely to go first – at the hands of a machete.

There is nothing more scary than a girl’s angry father and I don’t really want to hang around much longer. As I gulp down my chicken I am actually looking forward to train and minibus rides; compared to the dangers here the journey back to the city will be relatively safe.