

Imbak Canyon: The Big Belian Trail

A beautiful forest scene looking across the Imbak Canyon. Photo: A. Phillipps

● Second of a series
WE had reached the Imbak Canyon Study Centre, where we were to stay, the day before. Although the drive took us over six hours, the views the next morning were well-worth it, for the Imbak Canyon has some of the most beautiful forests in Sabah.

The Study Centre sits at the mouth of the Imbak Canyon, a pristine valley, stretching away to the right, with untouched forest sweeping up both sides to the steep rim that boxes it in, and drained by the Imbak river. Because the valley is curved, we could not see all of it from the Study Centre, but were able to look across to the steep southern rim with its jagged tooth-like peaks that stood opposite, though these are often covered in cloud later in the day.

Imbak Waterfall

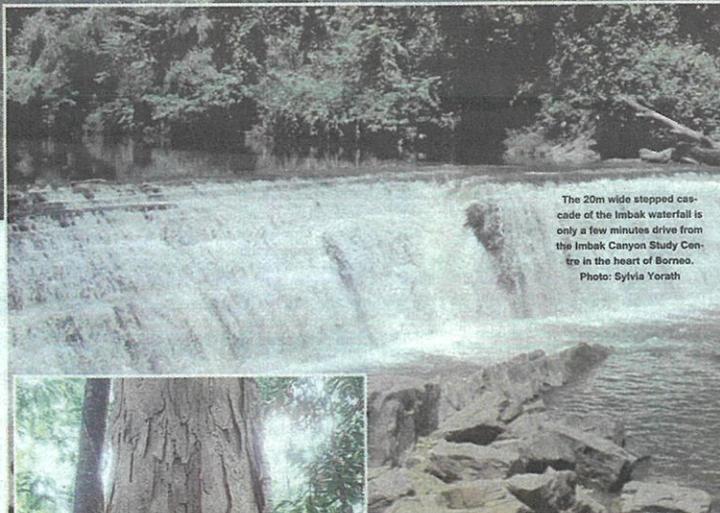
The next day we took a short drive to the stunning Imbak waterfall, 10 minutes away from the Study Centre by car, intending to return to the Study Centre along the Big Belian Trail through the forest. The drive to the waterfall is through old logged forest, still with a lot of interesting species, which is being developed as a natural Rainforest Park, and at the end of the short road, a set of concrete steps leads down to a viewing platform and the stepped cascade of the Imbak Waterfall, accessible to anyone with a vehicle.

The waterfall is not tall, but it is wide – 20m from bank to bank, stretching right across the river, and quite a sight, full of cascading, frothy water. On quiet days, one can swim in the pool at the base of the waterfall, and there are picnic places nearby, including the beautiful glade of the Big Belian Camp.

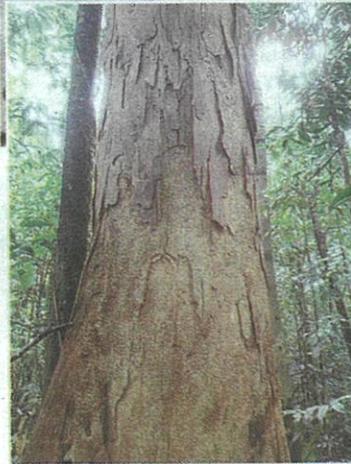
This lies on the other side of a small suspension bridge that crosses the pebbly Kangkawat river, just before it joins the Imbak river at the waterfall – a beautiful stream with delicate-leaved trees overhanging its banks and shallows.

Big Belian Camp

The Big Belian Camp on the other side of the suspension bridge is one of the most charming forest glades I have ever seen, right above the Imbak river, the ground



The 20m wide stepped cascade of the Imbak waterfall is only a few minutes drive from the Imbak Canyon Study Centre in the heart of Borneo. Photo: Sylvia Yorath



'Kapur merah' (*Dryobalanops beccarii*), easily recognised by its reddish trunk and flaking bark, is one of the commonest trees in this part of the Imbak Canyon. Photo: A. Lamb

carpeted with small, red-brown leaves from the few 'kapur merah' (*Dryobalanops beccarii*) trees growing there.

Scattered across the ground were exposed roots covered in pale, bright green moss – the openness of the

glade and the redness of the 'kapur merah' trunks contrasting with the green moss made a delightful scene – almost magical, especially when the sun came out, slanting its rays into the clearing.

There were also some benches cut from tree-trunks but we did not sit down because there were several termite trails in possession, marching from somewhere unknown to somewhere new, which we did not want to disturb!

The Big Belian Trail

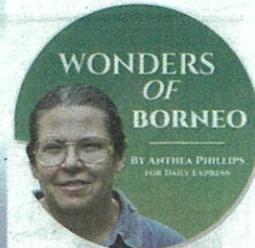
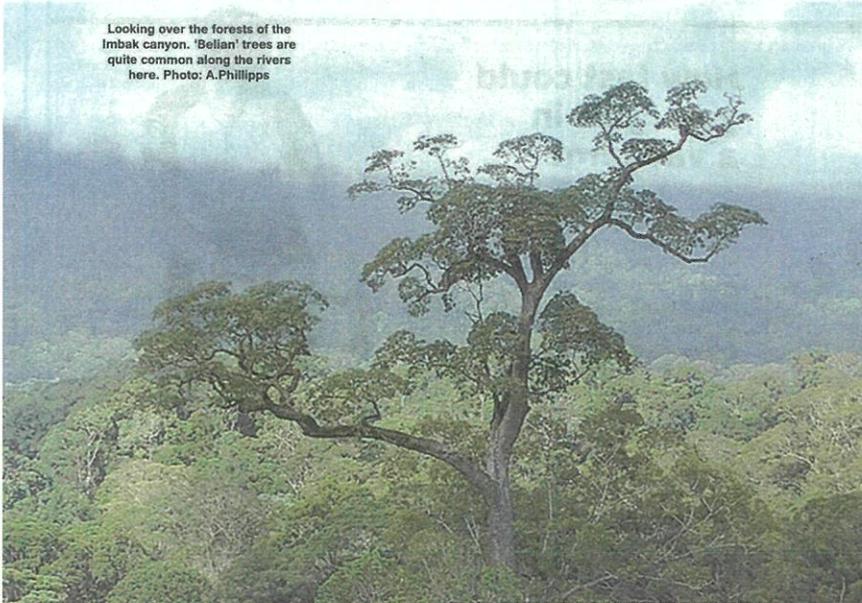
And so we started off. The Big Belian Trail must be one of the loveliest forest trails I have ever had the pleasure of walking, winding its way through the untouched lowland forest back to the Study Centre. Though only 1.7 kms in length, it took us three hours, there was so much to look at and photograph, admire and exclaim over.

Leaving the clearing, we started off along a beautiful trail, flat and level, but with exposed roots everywhere, often covered in moss, and many 'kapur merah' trees along the way, which are some of the commonest and most important trees in this part of the Canyon.

The Value of Tree Holes

One reason for this is that the branches are particularly susceptible to falling as the tree gets older, leaving small holes which are widened by fungus infection and

Looking over the forests of the Imbak canyon. 'Belian' trees are quite common along the rivers here. Photo: A. Phillipps

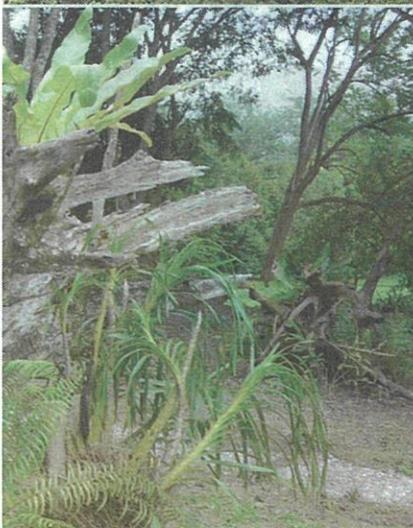


WONDERS OF BORNEO
BY ANTHEA PHILLIPS
FOR DAILY EXPRESS

Anthea Phillips studied botany at Durham University in England, before joining Sabah Parks as the Park Ecologist. She co-authored A Guide to Kinabalu Park as well as books on the Rhododendrons of Sabah and on the pitcher-plants of Borneo. She hopes that through these reports in the Daily Express, people will appreciate the unmatched uniqueness of Sabah and Borneo.

Anthea can be contacted at: anthea@kphillips@hotmail.com
She will gladly answer any question on this or related topics.

Below: The 'belian' tree at the Rainforest Discovery Centre at Sepilok near Sandakan is one of the easiest to see in Sabah. Photo: A. Phillipps



The moss-covered trunk of the Big Belian gives an overwhelming impression of great age. Photo: A. Lamb



hibited faster growth rates, especially under good conditions, of about 5mm a year, but appear to slow down fairly quickly.

Possibly the most well-known 'belian' tree in Sabah can be seen at the Rainforest Discovery centre in Sepilok, about 10 minutes walk down the path. This tree with a diameter of about 120 cms is thought to be about 1020 years old.

How old is the 'Big Belian'?

Based on photographs, it is possible to get a rough estimate of the diameter of the "Big Belian" of Imbak Canyon, of about 210cm, with a radius of 105cm. This gives us a rough age of between 1800 years and 3800 years, depending on which growth rate is used, so this tree is probably at least 2000 years old, and I think is a good contender for the title of the oldest

tree in Sabah and possibly the oldest tree in Borneo!

'The World 2,000 Years Ago'

So what was the world like when the 'Big Belian' was born? Two thousand years ago, the ancient Silk Road was the main trading route to and from China. Neither Christianity nor Islam had yet developed, though Buddhism had already reached China from India.

The first 1,000 years saw the rise and fall of the Roman Empire in Europe, the Mayan Empire in Central America and the Khmer Empire based around Angkor Wat in Cambodia. Genghis Khan built the largest known empire in the world across the grassy plains of Mongolia and Christopher Columbus supposedly discovered America. Paper, gunpowder and spectacles were all invented during the first 1,000 years of our tree's growth, and the forests of Borneo were yet to be discovered by the outside world.