

Six years ago I spent two weeks in the rain forest of Borneo with several other volunteers observing and working with orangutans. We had no electricity, no running water, and ate simple meals of rice, vegetables and fruits. We slept in a rustic dormer with mosquito netting draped over our cots. We covered ourselves daily with long sleeves and insect repellent to keep both bugs and leeches at bay. We trekked in the rain forest for as long as 12 hours to follow or search for orangutans. It was the kind of trip most people would never have even fathomed—and it was one of the greatest experiences of my life.

Borneo and Other Adventures

by Ellen Piligian

These days everyone's into "adventure" vacations and eco-tours. Thankfully, with a mother who's always been into participatory trips, I got an early start.

Photo by Ellen Piligian

I was with my mother—who's never been one for luxury cruises or lounging on the beach. In fact, she worked with turtles in Costa Rica, dug for dinosaur bones in Montana and worked with dolphins in Hawaii (the latter two trips I did, too) long before most people even heard of "eco-tours." Thankfully, I've been smart enough to tag along.

Our trip to Borneo came about because of my mother's interest in orangutans, which are endangered. Orangutans now exist only in Borneo and Sumatra. Their main enemy is man—they're hunted by poachers and in danger of losing their rain forest habitat to the timber industry.

Sharing our interest in these animals were about a dozen other volunteers who'd also signed up for one of the most unusual trips offered through Earthwatch, an organization that sponsors scientists, artists, teachers and students to document changes in the world. Earthwatch volunteers pay their own expenses while helping to fund projects they take an active part in and care about. We worked with the head of the Orangutan Research Project, Dr. Biruté Galdikas, who's lived much of her past 20 years at Camp Leakey, the Borneo research station where we stayed.

Recognized as the world's leading authority on orangutans, Dr. Galdikas

named the camp after her mentor, the late renowned Dr. Louis Leakey, who's known for his work studying early human ancestors in Africa. He was also a mentor to two other women who became famous for their primate research: Jane Goodall, known for her extensive field work with chimpanzees, and the late Diane Fossey, known for her research of the endangered mountain gorillas in Rwanda, Africa. Dr. Galdikas, who's been featured in *National Geographic*

and on television documentaries, is perhaps less well-known because of the remoteness of her work.

So remote is her work that we traveled from Jakarta, Java, to a tiny village on Kalimantan (the Indonesian part of Borneo) via an airplane that seated about 20 people. We then rode a small river boat for nearly three hours up the Sekonyer River to Camp Leakey, our "home" for the next couple of weeks.

Here, orangutans—with names like Priscilla, Ranto, Mellie, Brook and April—roamed freely around camp. However, we volunteers, including two Australians—a physician and a restaurant manager; a graduate student from Oregon; a Japanese photojournalist; and a TV sitcom scriptwriter from Los Angeles; quickly learned that this was no petting zoo. The size of orangutans (males average about 165 pounds, females about 90 pounds) gave weight to Dr. Galdikas' cautionary words at the beginning of our trip: "Never engage an orangutan unless he engages you first." (In other words, they're wild, thus, unpredictable, animals.)

Orangutans, aka "person of the forest," live in small groups of two



Photo by Ellen Piligian

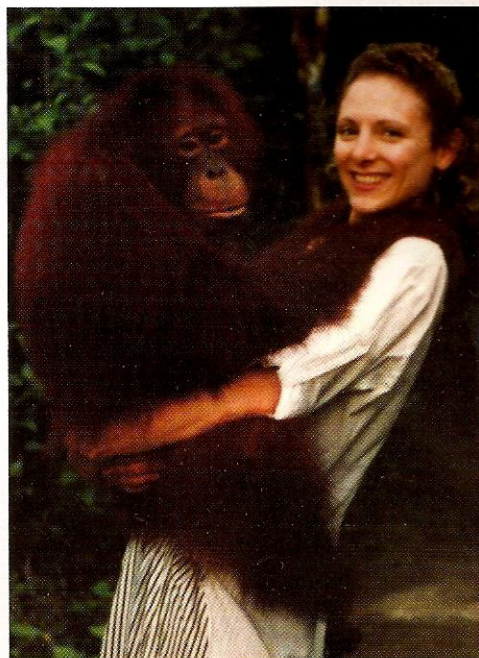
Two of our native Dayak guides, Mr. Ketu and Mr. Barak, take a break after a long day in the forest following an orangutan.

to four; some males are solitary. They're arboreal so they live in trees and sleep in nests. As one island legend goes, orangutans can speak but don't for fear that man will put him to work.

Dr. Galdikas' work, and hence, ours, was to observe and learn about these animals—both in the wild and at Camp Leakey, which is like a refuge for many orangutans who were rescued either from a zoo or private menagerie; others were young or baby orphans whose mothers were killed by poachers. Here, the goal was to rehabilitate them and return them to the wild.

Each day the volunteers had various duties. Some days that meant waking up as early as 3 a.m. to go trekking into the rain forest with one or more of Dr. Galdikas' Dayak assistants. (Dayaks are native, non-Muslim forest people who believe in a parallel universe. And—as we learned just days before commencing to the remote Camp Leakey—they formerly engaged in head hunting! This practice was discontinued, however, because the Indonesian government believed it was harmful for tourism.)

On these forest excursions—which



Once after a swim, I was engaged by a sweet female orangutan. She apparently decided I should carry her, so she hoisted herself up and held on to me like a child.

usually included two Dayak guides and two volunteers—we observed the typically reclusive orangutans in their habitat, looking for clues—such as half-eaten pieces of fruit dropped from the trees. This was no tour, though. In fact, we barely understood our Dayak guides. They spoke little English; even our Indonesian vocabulary books failed us since Dayaks use their own language. Still, we quickly learned key words to communicate with, such as “rawa,” which means swamp, “mandi,” for the bathroom or bathing, and “besar” for big—which came in handy if we spotted a large orangutan.

As for my days in the forest, despite my fear of falling into the “rawa” or encountering leeches, poisonous snakes or spiders, I recall the beauty and peacefulness under the canopy of trees. You don’t see as much animal life as you might think in the rain forest, though. Its inhabitants come out at certain times to search for food but are mostly reclusive. Still, it wasn’t a total disappointment if we didn’t see an orangutan, especially if we saw other animals—I spotted some beautiful birds, a huge squirrel, a small pig and a barking deer.

While “searching” days were spent on a main trail in the forest, the real thrill was when an orangutan was sighted. Then we followed at a respectful distance, taking notes and observing. When the orangutans stopped to rest or nap way up in the trees, we strung up our hammocks and rested, too, waiting for them to move on, following again until they set up their nests for the night—usually around 5 or 6 p.m. Then we’d head back to camp. The next morning, a group of two or three returned to the site by about 4 a.m. Again, we’d string up hammocks, wait for the orangutans to awaken, then follow them through the forest all day,

keeping notes. We got to know their unspoken language, too. For instance, when they started throwing branches down at us and making loud “kiss squeals,” it meant they weren’t happy!

Volunteers had less exciting duties, too, such as keeping records and typing up data at the team house (our dorm). We also worked in the “nursery” where young or sick orangutans were cared for—some we spoon-fed an oatmeal mixture, others we fed with a baby’s bottle. We’d comb them, nurture them. One adolescent orangutan in the nursery, Peggy, was having difficulty adjusting to the other orangutans. She was so shy and timid, she at times reminded me of a terribly depressed person. There was also a young male orangutan, Brook, who’d been sick for some unknown reason. He died during our stay and Dr. Galdikas asked the Australian physician to do an autopsy. Another, Ranto, was killed by a wild pig. The Dayaks, Dr. Galdikas and some of the volunteers held funerals for them.

There were many joyous moments, too. We’d get up early—6 to 7 a.m.—to watch the orangutans as they were fed whole pineapples and sugar cane along the 200-meter wooden boardwalk bridge off of which we bathed and swam. Once after a swim, as I was returning to the team house, I was engaged by a sweet female orangutan. She apparently decided I should carry her, so she hoisted herself up and held on to me like a child!

There were funny incidents, too. One day a Dayak assistant, Mr. Ma’Un, interrupted a volunteer meeting with Dr. Galdikas to tell us that one of the orangutans had broken into Mr. Radi’s room and drank some alco-

hol and formaldehyde! Luckily it wasn’t cause for alarm.

As for our rustic living arrangements, we quickly adjusted. The female volunteers, which made up the majority of our group, slept in the loft of the team house while the three men shared a room below. I remember the first night sleeping in the dormer, which we accessed by a ladder. I had mosquito netting draped around my cot. A bag hanging from a nail in a wood post beside my bed served as my “nightstand” where I kept my flashlight, book, journal and pen. As I tried to sleep it felt like I was in a narrow ditch with the sides of my mattress going up at 45 degree angles at either side. At the time I thought there was no way I’d survive two weeks of this!

Flashlights were invaluable. For instance, when our generator-powered light was shut off each night, we relied on our flashlights to get around camp. It also helped when you had to use the “mandi” or bathroom in the middle of the night. We all shared the mandi—a small room connected to but accessed from outside the main living area. There was no commode—you stood. There was no “flushing.”

(continued, see BORNEO)

Mellie, one of the friendlier orangutans, liked hanging out and visiting with volunteers at the team house.

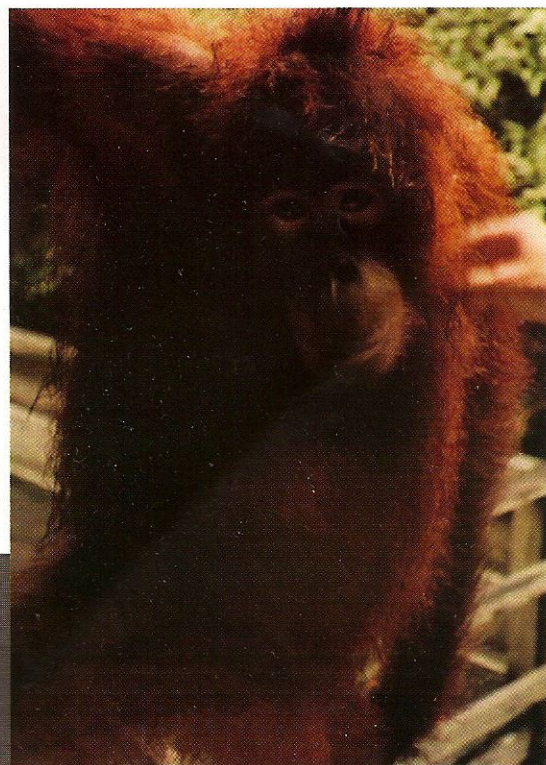


Photo by Ellen Pliigian

BORNEO (continued)

Rather, you drew water from a well inside the area to "flush" it yourself.

Icky, a playful pig-tailed Macaque monkey, was another animal we became acquainted with at camp. He was always around, too—he'd even climb up to the outside coves of our dormer and peek in at us as we slept. But for some reason, Icky mildly terrified me. Not because he was ferocious, but because he moved around so quickly it was unsettling—especially at 3 a.m. when you had to use the mandi and never knew if a 180-pound orangutan or worse, Icky, was hovering just outside the door ready to pounce.

We ate in a rustic, screened-in wooden building with Dr. Galdikas, the Dayak assistants and their families. The door—as with the door at the team house—always had to be "locked" with a simple wooden latch to keep the orangutans out. Sure enough, someone forgot to lock the door one time and in came Siswe, one of the large female orangutans. She climbed up onto the dining table and helped herself to our rice—never minding that we were in the middle of dinner. Dr. Galdikas quietly reminded us to remain calm and move out of Siswe's way until she'd had her fill. She then left as nonchalantly as she'd arrived.

Our food, though simple, was often quite delicious—

especially the fresh pineapple. We mostly drank hot tea. Water was always available but was boiled over an open flame to purify it, so it tasted charred. Even adding lemonade mix just made it taste like charred lemonade. Luckily we were encouraged to bring treats to camp. My mother and I packed only a few things. Little did we know we'd be craving some of the goodies other volunteers brought. One woman had a seemingly endless supply of granola bars and Pop-Tarts!

The real treat, however, was our last night of the trip. There was a party for the volunteers, which everyone dressed up for. The Dayaks entertained us with native songs and dances as we ate cookies and sipped Coca Cola—brought in especially for this night. We did our best to sing some of our native songs, too, and gave gifts to Dr. Galdikas and the assistants; they gave us hand-made reed bracelets and colorful rice farmer hats as souvenirs. It was truly amazing. Some of us were holding back tears. And it suddenly felt immensely sad to be leaving—just as we were getting the hang of everything.

It's a trip I'll never forget. I won't say I'll never take a vacation to just relax and eat good food. But after experiencing a trip like this, which takes you far beyond the usual tourist fare, it's pretty hard to go back.

There are many organizations offering adventure trips these days—from the eco-oriented to sports camps to wilderness vacations. Here's just a sampling of some groups and resources to get you started. Travel agents are also good sources. (Note: Trip costs vary greatly. A one-week trip could be \$500-\$3,000+ for one person, usually excluding airfare.)

- **Earthwatch** has trips to such places as Russia where volunteers record folklore of the people; and to Florida to work with manatees. Earthwatch, 680 Mt. Auburn St., Watertown, MA 02272.
- **Overseas Adventure Travel** has trips to India and Nepal, where you explore the Himalayas by foot, by raft and from the back of an elephant. 1-800-221-0814.
- **Above the Clouds Trekking** has hiking the Scottish highlands, snorkeling in Madagascar, and a Nepal Family Trek. 1-800-233-4499.
- **Sierra Club Outings** offer bicycle, burro, and backpack trips, activist outings, and more. Recent trips: mountain biking in New York's Adirondacks and a walking trip across England. Sierra Club Outing Dept., Dept. #05618, San Francisco, CA 94139.
- **Backroads** features hiking, biking, walking and cross country ski trips, including bicycling in Turkey and Greece, and five-day cycling trips through Kentucky and Louisiana. 1-800-GO-ACTIVE.
- **Women in the Wilderness** has trips for women of all ages: from canoeing in northern Minnesota and Utah to exploring the Amazon rain forest. (612) 227-2284.
- **Woodswomen** offers trips for women such as the

Galapagos Islands and at Boundary Waters, Minnesota for canoeing and camping. 1-800-279-0555.

- **Rainbow Adventures** has active travel for women over 30. Trips include a Kenya wildlife and camel safari and a Montana cowgirl sampler. 1-800-804-8686.

- **Tailwinds Touring** does week-long bike tours through Scotland twice each year. (206) 780-2634

- **Michigan Bicycle Touring** specializes in outdoor trips throughout the state via biking, hiking, kayaking, canoeing and sailing. Call (616) 263-5885.

- Two groups specialize in horseback riding trips: **Equitour** at 1-800-545-0019; and **FITS Equestrian** at (805) 688-9494.

OTHER RESOURCES:

- **National Geographic Traveler Magazine** recently listed top eco travel books, covered trips to Alaska and down the Rhine River. 1-800-NGS-LINE.

- **Dive Travel Magazine** for diving enthusiasts. PO Box 2885, Martinez, CA 94553-9842.

- **Backpacker Magazine** covers wilderness travel such as trips to American dunes and Waikiki—sans tourists. 1-800-666-3434.

—E.P.