

SABAH'S BIG SQUARE

CROSSING THE CROCKER **WORDS/PHOTOS** PETER 'THE BEAR' THOEMING



"THE ROAD SURFACE IS SUPERB, VERY GRIPPY AND CAMBERED CAREFULLY THAT'S VITAL HERE, WHERE RAIN IS COUNTED IN INCHES NOT MILLIMETRES."

I pulled over, put down the Aprilia's side stand and got off to walk up the road a little and take a photo. Before I'd even got my leg fully over the bike, it tilted eerily away from me. What the... had I not put the stand down properly?

Once, many years ago, something similar happened. It was on a bike launch, of all things. A colleague was having trouble keeping his bike upright in some soft mud, and I vaulted off mine to help him. Unfortunately, I didn't put the stand down properly. Even more unfortunately I kept hold of the handlebar grip when I realised that the

bike was falling away from me. I tried desperately to hold it and eventually, pulled completely off balance, I performed a summersault over the falling bike and into the mud. My struggling colleague just dropped his bike and collapsed laughing. Bastard.

I was luckier this time. As I grabbed for the handlebar grip to pull the bike back upright, I spotted my error – the grassy verge of the road was completely saturated with water, and as soft as a bowl of ripe lychees. The side stand resisted and made a sucking noise like something out of The Creature from

What's in the Bear's bucket?

Everybody should have a Bucket List, unless you're so young or so rich that you can simply do what comes to mind, whenever you like. My list consists of the roads I want to ride before I can't ride any more. I suspect that you would be at least marginally interested in that list. I'm fortunate in that I can ride almost wherever I want to, and I can come back with recommendations for you. The roads I write about in my Bucket

List stories are in Australia and overseas; they're short and they're long; they're easy and, just very occasionally, they're hard. But above all they're great bike roads. Stay tuned for more of them in future editions, and if you have any ideas of your own (I already have quite a few suggestions) then drop me a line and tell me why your road should be on my list. It doesn't matter where it is. The list can't be long enough for me!



Do you know a road like this? Don't keep it secret!



On the Keningau-Kimanis road.



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the Black Lagoon, but then I had it free and was able to put it on the tar instead. I have been wary of the square-section concrete drains at the edge of Sabah's roads ever since I first got on a bike here, but the beautifully green bottomless verge was a new hazard for me...

The tropics are like that, though, even back in Australia. You never know what to expect, except that it will be unexpected. I mean, who would have thought that a small Malaysian state on the island of Borneo in the South China Sea would have had a near-perfect road system? Peninsular Malaysia doesn't have roads to match Sabah's; neither does Indonesia's part of Borneo. I don't know about Brunei because they won't let me in. I'm a journalist. Sabah has lots of oil, and although the locals will tell you that the rest of Malaysia rips them off unmercifully, they do get a lot of public infrastructure built.

Now, those of you who don't want to have me go on about tour operators: I was about to, but then I got some bad news. Borneo Biking Adventures, run by five times British motocross champion Bryan Wade and Terry and Rose Mills, who helped me with this ride, are closing down. This is very sad news. Their tours were somewhat unconventional in that they were built entirely around what you wanted to do – Sabah can dish up any kind of road and any kind of environment you want, so Bryan would shape the tour exactly to your preferences.

Suffice it to say that I used to recommend them thoroughly, but now they're gone. I know that I'm not the only one who will miss them badly. This last time I visited I only had a couple of days but I knew exactly what I wanted: to ride the Big Square. Bryan rolled out some of the Aprilia Pegasos that BBA ran, and joined by Terry and a friend of his called Bob on a BMW GS we took off for the Crocker Range. Terry's house, Sinurambi, is on the slopes of the range, overlooking KK on one side and Mount Kinabalu on the other.

Named after a British ex-Governor of North Borneo, the range presents those amazingly steep slopes that mountains in young volcanic landscapes often have. You'll be able to see in one or more of the photos that the road builders have had to terrace the cuttings all the way up to the top of the slope, or they get landslips. Actually they get landslips anyway. Sometimes there's a cascade of mud and rocks down on the road, and sometimes the near-perfect tar is replaced by bottomless red mud where the road has slid away into the valley. But the main roads are fixed very quickly, and sometimes problem stretches of road are simply replaced by what amounts to bridges – think the Sea Cliff bridge near Wollongong in NSW, multiplied several times. Sabah really does have a lot of oil revenue. The road surface is superb, very grippy and cambered carefully. That's vital here, where rain is counted in inches not millimetres.

We filled up near Penampang and warmed the tyres before getting into it. It's corner after corner here, some hairpins and some wide sweepers though the rainforest. There is relatively little traffic, and the road is clear except where it passes through a kampong or village, where you can expect children, chickens, dogs and all sorts of human and internal combustion powered vehicles to share the road. The dogs are remarkably traffic smart; as Terry pointed out, they don't live long if they're not. Occasionally the corners in the kampong will tighten up, because the village was there before the road came and the latter has to fit in with the former. It pays to watch it; I tested the Aprilia's grip quite severely in one place...

On the way to the watershed, we passed one of the most intriguing tourist attractions in Sabah, the Rafflesia Forest Reserve. This is one place where the operators will smile happily and agree if you tell them their attraction stinks. The rafflesia is a gigantic flower –the biggest in the world, depending on your definition – which attracts insects

for pollination with its smell. The smell resembles that of carrion, which is why the flower's local name translates as "corpse flower". Its discoverer, a Dr Joseph Arnold, named it after Stamford Raffles, which could be seen as a kind of backhanded compliment...

I have never stopped at the reserve, since smelly flowers are relatively low on my Bucket List, but I encourage you to go have a sniff and contemplate the fact that these flowers were actually discovered some twenty years earlier by a Frenchman called Louis Deschamps, but his notes were seized by the British and locked away until after Arnold made his discovery. I wonder what old Louis called the flower. I will never know, because I don't wonder about it all that hard.

I am, however, now that I think of it, fairly sure that a reader will write to me and tell me. My readers are like that, aren't you?

We stopped at one of several refreshment kiosks along the road and observed the innovative way in which truck drivers keep their brakes from overheating. These get a solid workout on any laden vehicle heading down the range. The driver installs a water tank on the truck, and runs hoses from it to all the brakes. Water runs down and dribbles onto the brake drums, which accounts for the puffs of steam that you see accompanying moving trucks. Hey, it works!

The downhill run into the valley on the inland side of the Crocker Range is a little less challenging than the way up, although there are still some fun hairpins. Near the bottom we took the turnoff to Kampung Sunsuron on the right, which not only saved a little distance but also saw us on a wonderful narrow back road winding through rice fields. We reached the main road and turned right again into a loop road that took us to a ford across the river Pegalan where we had some fun riding across and back in great sprays of water and taking photos.

The locals, getting stoned on rice wine in a palm-leaf



BEAR'S BUCKET LIST

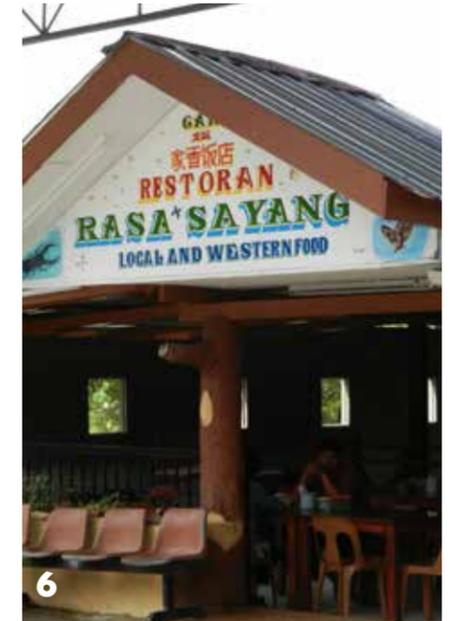
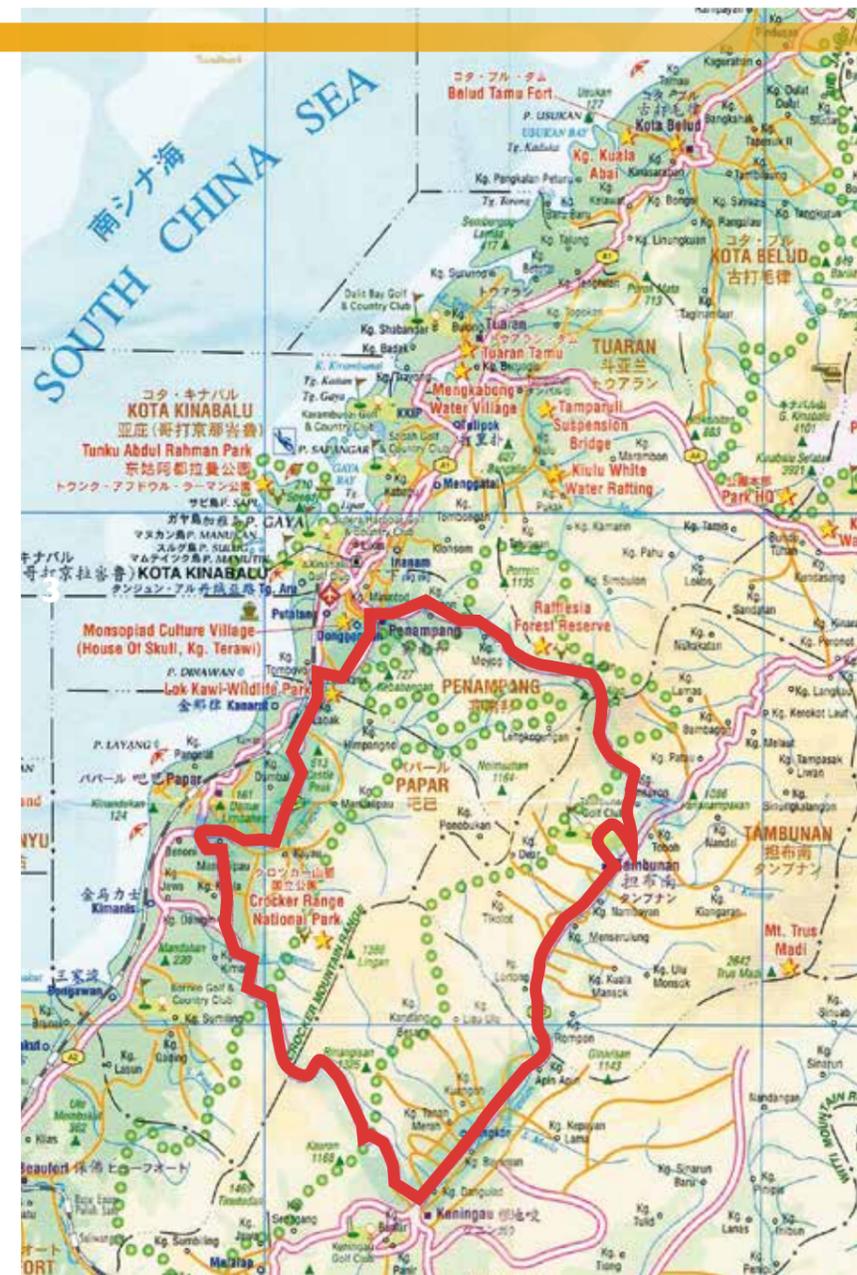
MIGHTY GOOD ROADS TO RIDE

thatched shed overlooking the ford, thought it was the funniest thing they'd ever seen and invited us to have a drink. Weird taste...

This actually raised an interesting question. Malaysia is an Islamic country. In some of the northern peninsular states it is actually damn near impossible to get a drink even as a tourist. So how come the locals were getting into the booze here, and why was there a shop selling delicious-smelling and dubious-looking smoked pork just down the road? It turns out that unlike the rest of Malaysia, Sabah is largely Catholic – cheers! – and that has to be accommodated by the laws of the state. What it boils down to is that you'll be able to get a beer and a bacon sandwich – well, a pork curry – when you want them.

The run down to Keningau is the closest thing to a transport stage you'll get on this run. There are several villages, there are various factories and compounds that do something or other and then there's Keningau itself, which is a typical South-East Asian town centred on a square that is also the bus station. A big restaurant up a few steps from the road served as our lunch stop, and I would be very happy to recommend it if I could remember its name. It's the big place on the south-western corner of the square. Great food – a huge menu up on the wall covers just about every potentially edible plant and (halal) animal, and everything I tried was tasty. Almost as good as Rose's meals back at Sinurambi. This is generally so in Sabah – not only is the food good, but even the street food is safe to eat.

The best part of this ride starts here. The road that runs for 50 kilometres or so back across the Crocker Range was a gravel logging road until 2006, when it was re-surveyed and sealed. Being near-new it is in exceptional condition even for Sabah, although there has been some subsidence due to the soft ground, so it's not perfect. That adds to the fun. The road runs through much more open country than the first road across the range; there is less forest and more



1. By no means the steepest hill
2. Bryan on the job.
3. High humidity makes the views misty.
4. Good food at good prices
5. Just after my near-drop.
6. Refreshments are not hard to find.
7. And a happy smile to go with the service.
8. Fog rolls in on the Crocker Range.





open country and agriculture – mainly oil palm but also rubber trees. Corners are generally well surveyed, but some of the slopes are very steep. Don't be surprised if you come around an uphill corner and find a truck panting up the hill at walking pace in front of you.

There are fewer kampongs and traffic is, however, once again light with buses as the main obstacles. They also tend to take corners with some enthusiasm and relatively little concern about lane markings. A teahouse about halfway along, up on the northern edge of the road, offers refreshment and some impressive views. On the subject of views - it's best to tackle this road early in the day, because foggy cloud often closes in later.

On the way down you pass a rubber processing... well, plant, I suppose... on your right. It's little more than a big shed, but if you've ever wondered how that milky sap that flows from rubber trees is turned into tyres, here's one of the early stages. The sap is boiled and then dried into large brownish flaps before being taken away. Don't ask me what they do to it after that...

Eventually you will roll into a major intersection with signs pointing to KK to the right. Turn here, and a back road similar to the Tambunan-Keningau road on the other side of the mountain will take you back home. We were stopped at a police roadblock for a licence check, but when I told them that mine was back at the "hotel", they were happy enough. They do radar speed checks in KK as well, but once again it's not all that serious.

Sabah's traffic in general is pretty anarchic, and in traffic Bryan spends less time on the correct side of the road than on the opposite, usually overtaking on double lines. When I asked him about this he pointed out that everyone else, including the police on their way to or from work, does the same thing...

Over Vietnamese 3 Amigos beers on the veranda back up at Sinurambi, it occurred to me that in Malaysia, the Navy is the air force. The Malay word for "water" is "air", you see. Must be good beer, eh... ●



WHAT'S THE DAMAGE?

Okay, now, listen up. I don't get many complaints, but I do read online forums and I've noticed a grumble there, with the roads I ride and write about: they're overseas, and the forum writer could never afford to go and ride them. Let me address that in two ways:

One, I don't just write to get you to do the same thing I do. If I did, I'd be putting in all sorts of stuff like "turn left at the pub, then immediately right, watch for the big pothole". You might have noticed that I don't do that? I write to entertain you and to encourage you to go out and have a go – not necessarily at exactly the same rides I do, but at similar rides that attract you. And when I write about an organised tour, keep in mind that the people who run those have a lot of other tours as well. Just go and have a go – I don't care how you do it, but I don't want you to one day regret that you didn't.

Two, there are certainly people who read this who can't afford to take overseas tours. Hell, there are people reading this who can't afford a weekend away! One of my jobs is to entertain those people and keep them interested until one day they can afford it. To cheer them up. As for the rest of you, do your sums and you might be very surprised how much the holidays you take at the moment cost you, and how little more an overseas trip could cost. Anyway, the whole point here is to find great roads for you – so even if you only get away once in your life, you'll enjoy the ride!

Sooo... we will continue to ride interesting roads, here there and everywhere. In Sabah's case, with Borneo Motorcycling Adventures almost certainly closing down, we understand that GG Adventures Tour Sdn Bhd are the best (and possibly only) alternative, although they only have small bikes. See www.gogosabah.com or email info@gogosabah.com.

