

accl 27315

99/7

Low's Gully Big Wall '99



Expedition report



Low's Gully Big Wall 1999

MEF Reference: 99/7

Climbers: Steve Long, Dave Turnbull, Paul Platt, Chris Parkin (all British)

Support: Paul "Chip" Rafferty, Charles Stead (British). Also Jon Rees, logistical support (British)

Summary report:

Dates: 14th March 1999 - April 4th 1999
Mountain: Kinabulu (4,101 metres)
Aim: 1st Big Wall style climb in Malaysia. A major Big Wall in a remote setting, involving complex abseil approach to gully floor.
Route attempted: East facing wall of Low's Gully, 1000 metre wall.
Outcome: Objective failed due to poor weather and blank granite
Achievements: Pioneered relatively safe approach route for future parties. Recce of other climbing potential.

Expedition diary:

Sunday 14th March, 1999: Depart from Heathrow for Sabah.
Monday 15th March: Arrive Sabah.
Tuesday 16th March: Meetings with Sabah Park, Sabah Air, Sabah Tourism + Daily Express.
Wednesday 17th March: 2½ hour drive to Kinabulu Park. Met Head Warden, Eric Wong.
Thursday 18th March: 7.00 Porters arrive. Kit weighed, departed for Panar Laban hut.
Friday 19th March: Bushwhacked to Lone Tree. Pattern of afternoon rain. Transferred objective to a line free of waterfalls during daily rain.
Saturday 20th March: Lines fixed heading diagonally down into gully. Heavy rain. Rope appeared to reach gully bed.
Sunday 21st March: Paul and Chris descended rope with intention of starting on the Wall. Dangerous rockfall zone encountered, and further rope required, so modified descent line required. More rain!
Monday 22nd March: Line requiring less rope fixed further right fixed by Steve and Chip. Steve hung a bag at the base of the intended climb for scale estimation. Dave and Charles explored approach through jungle toward Cirque Peak ridge.
Tuesday 23rd March: Chris and Paul attempt the climb. 40 metres up cracks to a corner, about VS standard. Traversed across to 3 parallel cracks which proved blind and brittle. Spent all day making about 30 metres progress. Retreated.
Wednesday 24th March: Derigged. Chip and Charles evacuated. Various other options considered, but too difficult to approach through jungle.
Thursday 25th March: Evacuated Lone Tree to Panar Laban. Left 5 porter loads and arranged for them to be collected by porters. Heavy rain in afternoon.
Friday 26th March: Transferred to West Gurkha Hut. Attempted South Face of Victoria Peak (existing bolted line at about E2). Repulsed by heavy rain. Prospected other potential.
Saturday 27th March: Various lines attempted, but all repulsed by continued and worsening rain.
Sunday 28th March: Evacuated Kinabulu Park.

Logistical notes:

Due mainly to the adverse publicity caused by the epic rescue in 1994, Sabah Park are very wary of ambitious climbing expeditions, since backpacker's ascents of the straightforward tourist route up Kinabulu is an important tourist attraction. Considerable bureaucracy was encountered, and we are grateful for the assistance freely given to us by Mr Jon Rees, of South East Asia Locations. Jon was logistics co-ordinator for the 1998 canyoning expedition and had become a friend of the present expedition leader.

Some of the bureaucracy appears arbitrary to the visiting western expedition, and it would be very easy to offend local customs due to ignorance. For example, locals revere the mountain as the home of their ancestor's spirits. Full written emergency contingency plans were required, as well as proof of liaison with helicopter evacuation. Sabah Air required written documentation of level of financial cover from BMC insurance, which required various fax communications, and still necessitated the expedition leader providing a blank cheque as bond!

The expedition was also given the personal support of Mr. Tengku Adlin, President of the Sabah Society.

Useful phone numbers;

Sabah Park:

Assistant Director: Francis Liew 221228
Park Warden: Eric Wong 889396. Fax: 889068/9
Accommodation reservations Fax:211585

Sabah Tourism Promotion Company:

General Manager: Irene Bengon Charukuks 212121

Sabah weather forecasts 219186

Outward Bound, Sabah 750311

Sabah Air 251326 fax:221557

Jon Rees (SEAL) +(60) 88 429754

e-mail: Sabair@tm.my

e-mail: sealoc@pacific.net.sg

Useful guidance advice (mainly provided by Jon Rees)

- Leave passports and other personal documents for safekeeping in Kote Kinabulu.
- Change money prior to departure for Kinabulu Park.
- Copy of emergency plan to be provided to Park Warden (Eric Wong), Sabah parks main office, STPC.
- Make 2 photocopies of all insurance documents. 1 to Sabah Air, one for back up
- Keep spare copies of all documents.
- Arrange porters prior to departure. '99 rates: 50 RM/day for 10 kilo loads (2 days work to Lone Tree). Reckon on c. 60RM/day for 15-18 kilo loads by negotiation.
- Hire radios from Park for communications + weather forecasts. '99 rate: 40RM/day.
- Accommodation required at Kinabulu Park HQ + overnight hut. Book well in advance. '99 rates for Double Storey chalet + Panar Laban hut: 380RM for 6 people.
- Park fees + taxis to Kinabulu road head '99 fee: 324 for 6 people.
- On arrival at Park HQ, meet Eric Wong to confirm porter + radio arrangements. Take all paperwork along.
- Politely insist on completing all registration formalities on arrival, to allow early ascent departure.
- Arrange shuttle transport for climbers, gear and porters for ascent to roadhead.
- Official advice of end of expedition once off mountain essential to Eric Wong, Sabah Air, + Sabah Park HQ ASAP.
- Gas bottles; buy these in Kote Kinabulu. Only old style Camping Gaz available (i.e. non resealable) Do not buy "International" brand gas cylinders – these crumple and leak! Cost 90RM for 18 bottles.
- In '99 Orange roaming phone (dual band) worked at Lone Tree on 3 bars, allowing easy communications, contrary to expectations.
- Take tents! We survived with tarpaulins, but got very muddy.
- Yellow wall gets morning sun at 8.00, black wall at 9.20
- Water supply; always available 100 metres below Lone Tree on approach to gully.
- Leeches and mosquitoes are not a problem at this altitude

Conclusions:

The expedition was planned to coincide with the dry season. However, this year was unseasonably wet and we experienced an average of 12 hours rain per day. Within 3 minutes of the rain starting, enormous waterfalls would tumble down the fault-lines.

Given the prevailing weather pattern, the only relatively safe options were the golden walls higher up the gully, which are overhanging for over 2,000 feet, but apparently void of cracklines in the lower sections, plus an area at the right hand end of the wall, which appeared to have 3 parallel cracks and is relatively protected from the waterfalls. This is the line which we attempted.

Fixing an approach line into the base of Low's Gully took considerable effort, as we needed to conserve as much rope as possible. We took a total of 450 metres static line and 180 metres of dynamic rope. A further 200 metres of static line would be appropriate for any attempt on the golden walls. The descent to the base of Low's Gully required c. 300 metres of fixed line: essential for access and escape. Due to the rain we decided that portaledge were not a safe option, and planned to fix 300 metres of rope to a ledge system and then sprint for the top. Unfortunately, the cracks proved to be dangerous and "blind".

The approach route is as follows. Facing the wall at the House sized boulder at Lone Tree, head diagonally left and down toward the watercourse. Cross this (fixed rope essential), then traverse to a 10 metre easy chimney. Continue traversing through jungle towards shoulder. Easy abseil descent through jungle down a left slanting rake, leads to a steeper final drop of 80 metres to the gully bed.

Climbing potential in the area:

Low's Gully rock is recent granite and seems to lack cracks; the exception to this is the Commando Cauldron area which has potential for 4-500m routes. The walls opposite Lone Tree and stretching back towards Commando Cauldron are very impressive; vertical to overhanging for 800 to 1000 metres. There is a long corner system which may be possible to reach from directly below, some 200 metres back up the gully from our abseil line, where the gully makes an abrupt turn. However, binocular inspection did not reveal any cracks in the corner.

I believe that any climbs on the main walls opposite Lone Tree would require hundreds of bolts, and would not succumb to a "ground-up" exploratory style of ascent.

There is scope for a long buttress climb on Cirque Peak; this is clearly visible from Kinabulu summit, and was photographed by Paul Pritchard in 1998 as a potential objective. This would require two days bushwhacking through virgin jungle from Lone Tree, and the first 200 metres of steep slabs would probably require bolt protection. Above this would be excellent Alpine style climbing on good cracks. This would be a feasible objective for a future expedition.

The 250 metre Japanese route from 1969; "Tetsujin" is on very poor rock, and still sports almost continuous fixed ropes, with vast numbers of bolts.

There is considerable opportunity for climbs based at the 4-man West Gurkha hut near Kinabulu summit, ranging from 1 to 15+ pitches. Dewall Peak looks particularly promising for long ridge climbs. However, rain was continuous when we visited this area! Shorter climbs have already been made on most of the surrounding peaks, although documentation is hard to find. The hut book is the main source of information but even this is very incomplete. For example, there is no first ascent information about the bolted line on Victoria Peak which has seen several ascents, including one by P. Pritchard with C. Bull. The exfoliated granite does not lend itself well to natural protection, and sparing use of bolt protection seems to be the accepted norm.

Expenditure:		Income:	
Flights:	4 x £400	MEF:	£700
Park fees +accom:	£100	BMC:	£1350
Food:	£50	Support team:	£70
Gas:	£15	Climbers:	£637
Porters:	£200	Total:	£2757
Kinabulu expenses:	£400		
Bus travel	£100		
Fixed ropes:	£292		
Total:	£2757		

References:

Dave Nicholl	<u>Kinabulu – Northern Borneo.</u>	Alpine Journal 90, 1985 p.187
Robert New	<u>Kinabulu – Summit of Borneo</u>	Alpine Journal 1995 p.145
Wong/Phillips	<u>Kinabulu – Summit of Borneo</u>	The Sabah Society, 1996

Acknowledgements:

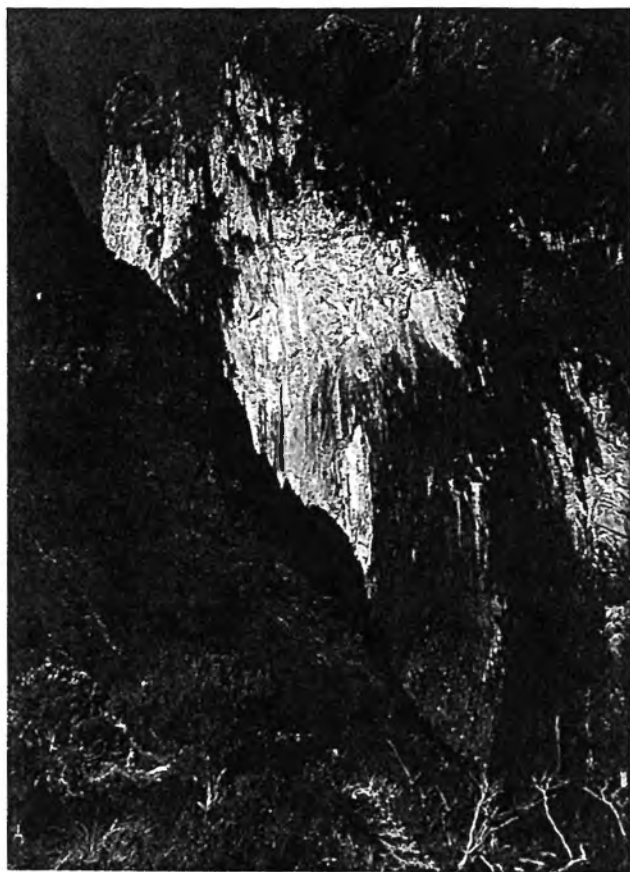
Assistance gratefully received from:

Coverplus (Ventflex clothing + dehydrated food.)
Nickwax (Waterproofing)
Cicada films (loan of video camera)
Andy Bowman (Discount on Mammut ropes + Boreal boots)

All expedition members agree that any part or all of this report may be copied for the purposes of private research.



8/7/99.



View of Wall from Lone Tree



Base of Low's Gully



Chris Parkin on the wall



Paul and Chris on the wall.

Wonderwall (with apologies to Oasis)

Today is gonna be the day
When the mist and rain will rise.
In camp the rain is in the air
That the rock on Howth Peak is dry.
But I can't believe that anybody's
Mad enough to climb upon that wall
'cos all the time we're out down it's raining.
And all our gear is soaking wet and streaming.
There are many places that I think I'd rather be
And I question why?
Because maybe...
The sun is gonna rise and save me
And after all
It's our wonderwall.

Steve Long, a cockney from North Wales,
Conned us on this merry jaunt.
With tales of big walls dry and steep.
We journeyed to this sacred place.
But I still can't believe that anybody's
Mad enough to climb upon that wall
'cos all the time the cracks are oozing water
And weather reports just warn of rain and thunder.
Yes, there are many places that I think I'd rather be
And I question why?
Because maybe...
Temperature will fall and save me
Because after all
It's still a waterfall.

Day three and it's clear for us to see
Waterfalls still tumbling down.
Last night, with lightning overhead,
We quivered in our lonely camp.
But now I can see why someone might
Just want to climb upon that wall...
Three thousand feet of granite rock arising
From a gully steeped in myth and legend.
Yes this is one of the places in the world
I'd like to climb - If the mist would clear.
So maybe...
If tomorrow dawns bright not rainy
Then after all
It could be Malaysia's wonderwall.

