

II. 5

COCONUT-PLUCKING MONKEYS

The Cruise Director was giving it the hard sell. If more people didn't sign up for the "Lake Chini Adventure" shore excursion they might have to cancel it. The problem was that there were a lot of, well, *superannuated* passengers on this cruise, and the excursion would be a little arduous—a journey into the Malaysian rain forest to check out the wildlife, human and not. It would take over two hours by bus just to get to the site, where the rest of the journey would be part hike and part small boat ride.

In fact the excursion wouldn't be all that arduous. This was a cruise, after all, on which most of the "dangers" consisted of injuries from pulling slot handles in the casino or choking on a jumbo shrimp at the Grand Buffet. Cruise companies do not relish shipping bodies home, or explaining to passengers that Mr. Worthington will not be at dinner tonight because he was gored by a wild boar.

The Cruise Director went on to say that there would be a lunch at a lodge somewhere in the jungle, and (this is where he hoped to close the deal) there would be some "entertainment"—"coconut-plucking monkeys." "That's right," he stressed like a carnival barker, "monkeys that will go up into a coconut palm and pluck you a coconut." He said this like we might be missing out on a private audience with the Pope or a chance to sleep in the Lincoln Bedroom.

Walking behind two ladies still debating whether they should sign up, I overheard one of them protest: "One hundred and fifty dollars to go off into the jungle to see some *plucking* monkeys!"

It didn't sound like the CD sold her, but that woman expressed sentiments '*participially*' close to my own: that's a lot of *plucking* money for some *plucking* monkeys.

Besides, I don't really like monkeys. They're animals, and being a city person, I have never really been able to trust animals. I don't think they trust me either. A few weeks earlier I had been in Madras on India's southeast coast. Emerging from a crafts store on one of the crowded main shopping streets, arms full of parcels from my Christmas shopping, I was accosted by a beggar woman carrying a small monkey in her arms as though it were a baby. She wanted me to take a photo of her and the monkey, for a fee of course. I politely declined and started to walk away when I felt something warm and furry land on my back and wrap its arms tightly around my neck, screeching in my ear.

I yanked the beast off me and it scurried back to the lady, who now had a rather deranged look on her face. I had my companion check me over for any breaks in my skin. The most terrifying thought was of getting some weird infection and ending in one of the hospitals in those

parts. I'd rather have a transfusion from the crankcase of an Indian truck than from the local blood supply.

I received epidermal clearance and set off again when the filthy little beast was on my back again. The lady was now cackling with delight at my discomfort! Again I removed the screeching monkey, this time with some difficulty. Monkeys are surprisingly strong for their size. This time it bared its teeth menacingly. I began to back away from what was becoming a game of king pong. I fended off her next toss of the monkey with my shopping parcels.

All this was happening on a crowded main commercial street with plenty of Madrasis either ignoring or enjoying the entertainment. No one did or said anything, which added anger to my anxiety. By now I was certain that one of the "attacks" would produce a wound and I would be in deep trouble. I remembered what happened to Gunter, an Austrian tour manager I had on a trip a few years earlier that went to Gibraltar. There the monkeys are often enlisted in cute photo opportunities for tourists by being encouraged with candy to sit on shoulders, or allowing themselves to be held. Gunter, who should have known better, demonstrated this by placing a candy on top of his head. The monkey complied by removing the candy with his mouth, taking with it a chunk of Gunter's scalp. The quick administration of hydrogen peroxide, and some heavy doses of antibiotics may have saved Gunter from losing his head, though not his "face".

That reverie sent my panic meter close to the top. Denied the options of "flight" or "fight," my fear and frustration prompted a stream of the most unprintable scatology I could summon from my not inconsiderable lexicon. This I did at an adrenaline-assisted volume I didn't know I had in me. I first directed my remarks at the lady and the monkey (who I referred to as her bastard son). After threatening them with grave bodily harm, I turned on the bystanders, calling the people of Madras some things I bet they hadn't heard in their long history. If I was going to die of "coconut-plucking-monkey fever" in some filthy hospital I was going to go out in a blaze of filthy language.

To my surprise everything stopped but the traffic. The lady backed off a few feet, and the monkey even went quiet. A proprietor of a shop came out and apologized for my mistreatment. It occurred to me that people thought I was about to become quite violent. The only thing that stopped me was that several parcels and my camera bag impeded me.

Still pumping adrenaline I chewed out the shopkeeper and told him some uncharitable thoughts he could translate to the lady and the monkey. Even with his dark Tamil coloring I sensed a blush. I didn't care about being the good tourist, culturally sensitive, or being a good ambassador for the USA. I cared about getting the hell out of India, and not with an exit visa from Mother Theresa.

This was all grist for my decision to go, or not go, on the Malaysian excursion. Since I detest monkeys, tend to avoid group activities, and I'm not one who "communes" well with Nature, which always seems to be trying to kill me or give me a rash, it should have been a simple decision.

Still, as a traveler and a writer, I have felt I might be missing something by not doing a little "adventure" travel. I might not be in these parts again, and though the circumstances were not ideal, perhaps I should seize this \$150 opportunity. Maybe this shore excursion would affect my 'rapprochement' with Nature (monkeys not included). Anyway, my favorite flavor is coconut.

Our port was Kuantan, the capital Pahang on the east coast of Malaysia. Sixty miles inland was the village of Kampung Bekimbing, where we boarded motorized "sampans" (they

turned out to be aluminum flat-bottom boats) for the trip up the Chini River. We were supposed to trek through part of the rain forest preserve to the Burma Ridge, but there had been a very heavy rain the preceding few days and the entire area was either muddy swamp or raging rivers and streams. We would travel almost entirely by boat.

I had the misfortune of being stuck in a boat behind the golf “pro” from the cruise ship and his wife. He was the guy who earned his passage by helping people hit golf balls into a net six feet away on the aft deck of the ship. He liked to stand around with his hands in a golf club grip, making Johnny Carson imaginary swings. Mrs. Golf Pro was over-made-up, and wearing enough perfume to attract every malaria-bearing mosquito within a ten mile radius. The couple behind me obsessed about what we were going to eat when we got to the open air restaurant a few hours from now, terrified by any food that wasn’t served to them by Aurelio, their waiter back on the ship. Along with Sue, my companion, and the boatman handling the outboard motor, that made seven in the boat, a maximum load. Everybody put on life preservers except Mr. Golf Pro; it probably restricted his imaginary swings.

There were about twenty other boats, and most of them looked to me to be overloaded, principally because many of our group were carrying the fleshy cargo of a good number of cruises. There was no attempt by the boatmen to balance the boats or to keep several overweight people from insisting on being in the same boat. On a couple of boats there was little more than a few inches of freeboard.

We set out in a file from the *kampong* across a wide expanse of river, but then turned abruptly into a rather narrow tributary against a hard on-rushing current of *cafe au lait* water that was obviously carrying the runoff of the previous days of heavy rain. The tributary was no wider than our or five meters in spots, canopied over by the forest, and bordered by high banks, merbau trees, and strangling figs. Huge contorted roots protruded from the banks, and the water swirled around and through them in roils and eddies. The boatmen raced their engines against the current and water occasionally splash over the gunnels.

It became evident that the boatmen, some of them mere boys, were more concerned with keeping a schedule than with passenger safety. The boats traveled in a line that snaked through the little river, their wakes bouncing off the banks and making things more treacherous.

Camera at the ready I scanned the banks for some of the fauna that we had been promised—monkeys, monitor lizards, kingfishers—but it must have been their day off. What I took at first to be some strange water creature turned out to be an overturned boat rushing toward our boat, its outboard motor propeller sticking up in the air like the head of the Loch Ness monster. Thirty meters up ahead I could see people in the water, and another overturned boat. Two other boats were trying to pick them up, but the fast-moving water made it difficult. I snapped a quick photo and yelled ahead asking if anyone was under the hull approaching us, but it swept past us before we would have been able to intercept it. Anyone trapped under it would have not survived.

People in the water were clinging to roots, and the sides of other boats. Anyone who lost a grip might have been swept away, or under, by the surging current. In a few very anxious minutes we had everyone aboard other boats, now very overloaded. Cameras, packs, glasses, purses, and other things were gone, but at least everyone was accounted for. Some people had swallowed water. Most of them were over age fifty, and some clearly shaken by what could have turned out to be their ‘final excursion’. The boatmen became more cautious for the remainder of the trip.

Fig. II.5/1: Title: Frantic rescue in the surging Chini River

Thirty minutes or so later the flotilla landed at a sort of lagoon, out of the furious currents of the river. The metal boats scraped over the half submerged roots of those giant trees that looked like the thick, sluggish bodies of huge sea serpents. My brain flashed a slide of that statue of Laocoön and his sons in the Vatican Museum, ensnared in huge tentacles.

Then our boatman yanked me back into the present tense. He urged us ashore: “We see Orang Asli people now. Live here, this place.” *Orang* means people, or man, as in *orangutan*, wild man of the forest. Asli must be the local people. We visitors are *orang putih*, foreigners the guide tells us. But I remember that most names for foreigners in this part of the world, or most anywhere for that matter, don’t sound complimentary. In these parts such expressions in the naïve tongues usually mean “ghosts,” “devils,” “big noses,” or worse.

Still, the Orang Asli seem pleased to see us, if a bit overwhelmed by our numbers. The forty or so of us must seem like a whole city has descended on this remote spot in the rain forest. Their ‘village’ consists of an extended family, headed by a little fellow wearing shorts, a shabby tank top, and smoking a cigarette. There are two crude huts, stilted about a meter off the ground, no doubt because the river reclaims this spot regularly, and to keep rats and vermin at bay. They are set about thirty meters back from the bank, in a clearing about the size of two tennis courts. The area is almost completely canopied by the surrounding trees and the ground is dark, damp, mud, packed down almost smooth by the little feet of the several wide-eyed children scattered about. One girl, maybe a teenager, might be the mother of a couple of the smaller ones. A more maternal-looking woman sits quietly on the stoop of the larger hut, holding a baby and looking like twenty-three going on sixty-seven with her betel nut-stained teeth. A still older woman could be glimpsed sleeping inside in the corner of the single, modestly sized room. By all appearances I reckoned the life-style to be about Late Neolithic.

But there were no monkeys in sight. No coconut husks either. Perhaps they were resting for the matinee plucking show.

Save for some scrawny chickens that scurried away from our Reeboks and topsiders to the security of the spaces beneath the structures, and two mangy dogs, there were no fauna in evidence.

Our local guide was giving bit of history about the area and its peoples, but most of us wandered and snooped about, snapping photos, giving the kids those heart-shaped chocolates they put on our pillows every night on the ship. I couldn’t help wondering what will happen if they all have a sugar-rush after we leave; is that how attention deficit syndrome will be exported from the first world to the third world?

Fig. II.5/2: Title: Village headman lights up before the blowgun exhibition

The size of our group exacerbated my feeling of being an intruder, amusing ourselves at the expense of these people’s privacy, and admittedly, their need or desire for the tips that would be forthcoming. How much would they in turn have to kick back to the boatmen, or whoever is behind this sort of tourism?

Still, it’s never so simple that we, the *orang putih*, are wholly at fault. One little boy with a cute smile and open sores all over his legs displayed the natural-born instincts of a hospitality

industry worker. I watched as he culled out different knots of tourists, then showed them the little vegetable patch, the secondary, 'cookhouse' building, and whatever else he thought was worthy of a gratuity. Since he jabbered in some dialect of Malay that nobody understood I imagined him actually saying: "OK you overstuffed, self-indulgent assholes, this is a taro plant, and you know what you can do with it. Now it's extra if you want me to show you where you can take a leak?"

Which was exactly what was on my mind at that moment. I needed to go 'mark some territory', but the question was "where?" I could wander into the rain forest a bit, but how far. I was daunted by the fact that I wouldn't have to go very far to be swallowed up by the rain forest. And I didn't want to add insult to intrusiveness by defiling some shrine, or some ancestor's resting place.

I backed away from the group to the edge of the clearing, taking a wide shot with my camera as a diversion, as though I was ashamed to let on what I was up to. Then I slipped out of sight, looking for just the right tree and hoping some predator wouldn't attack me with my fly unzipped. Usually when I am in the wilds of nature my blood pressure rises and my senses become more alert. So here I was only thirty or forty meters into the forest and I was nervously spinning around like a guy who had just been dropped into Jurassic Park.

I peed on my own foot when some guy a few trees away that I had not noticed made a monkey call as he was pulling up his pants. "G'dye," he 'strined' in Aussie dialect, smirking at my having been startled. He was one of the people who had gotten dumped in the river; his hair was still matted and damp. I also noticed that the area beyond him was littered over a wide expanse with bits of tissues and wipes and other sanitary items. In a few years it would be a rain forest landfill.

"Thought you were one of those 'plucking' monkeys, I called over to him, emphasizing the participle.

"Fahk the monkeys." he shouted back. "If it wasn't for the bloody bastards I wouldn't be lookin' for leeches in me knickers."

We walked back to the clearing together, the Aussie telling me that monkey's were "vermin-infested little buggers" and it was his wife that convinced him to come along on this stupid excursion when he could have been drinking at the bar on the ship rather than wondering whether he was going to die of schistosomiasis, or river blindness. I learned later that when we returned to the ship the ship's physician loaded the river swimmers up on antibiotics. Whatever parasites they might have swallowed were probably smothered to death by pastries at the midnight buffet.

Back at the clearing the group was gathered around a blowgun demonstration by the little cigarette-smoking headman. There was a target set up on a tree twenty-meters away and the headman was putting darts in its bulls-eye from a blowgun. Little puffs of cigarette smoke came out of business end of the blowgun that was longer than he was tall. People in the group "oohed" and "aaahed" and reached into their pockets for tips, like good tourists. One of the ladies volunteered to try her hand at the blowgun and the dart ended up somewhere in the rain forest. I could imagine some tourist in there found with his pants around his ankles, a poison dart in his neck, and a Stay-Free Maxipad for a headstone.

The local guide was explaining how the Orang Asli were proficient hunters with the blowgun, obtaining most of their meat with it.

"What do they hunt?" somebody asked. The local guide put the question in Malay to the headman, who replied quickly a single word in Malay.

The guide turned to the questioner: “Monkeys.”