

SO YOU ARE GOING TO MULU?

- Brian Clark

Here is you're A to Z...

A..... is for all you need to know about the climate. It is hot (mean av = 26°C) and humid (90/95%) all year round. Annual rainfall is about 5,000mm. Mornings will be about 19 to 21degrees as the sun comes up and by mid morning it is usually about 27/28 through to mid 30s in the afternoon. You can usually bet if it is more than 28 in the morning we will have a thunderstorm in the afternoon. The wind rarely ever blows and when it does it is a short brisk puff of air moving at all of 10KMH for about a minute. You will usually hear very heavy rain falling right behind it. A word of caution. Because the wind so rarely blows there is always a whole lot of dead stuff hanging around in the rainforest canopy, and a lot of it is BIG dead stuff. When you hear the wind coming STOP! Look up and stay alert for anything coming down until the wind has passed. In the heavy rain which is about to follow keep your ears alert for the sound of branches cracking under the weight of suddenly wet foliage.

B..... is for Be Prepared. There is some malaria and some dengue fever in Sarawak but it is not common, particularly in the inland areas like Mulu. If you are concerned about other diseases check with your local medico – there isn't actually anything to be concerned about, but they will naturally tell you to take all sorts of precautions. Your choice depending how experienced you are in overseas travel. If you are worried then don't take the risk even though it be minor, and if you are going to take anti-malarials be careful in what your doc prescribes as some anti-malarials CAN cause exaggeration of any psychotic problems (depression/anxiety).



Going caving – Mulu style. Photo: Dr Grant Gartrell.

C..... is for Culinary delights. Sarawak has a wide range of food outlets in every town and city. Please remember that Mulu is neither of these! Local food can be either 'orang ulu' fare ('up-river people') of the inland, Malay (islamic) fare of the coastal people, Chinese (very common) or Indian (not so common in Sarawak as in peninsula Malaysia).

Hopefully you will have a chance to tackle all of these while you are here. Western food is also relatively common in the larger cities such as Miri and Kuching but is significantly more expensive than local food. The Resort dining room and park café have a balanced cross section of both local and western. C is also for catering – which is going to be difficult. I have decided not to try to get everyone together for every meal. It is just too hard. We will all get together for dinner in the resort on the first night and we will all be together for a BBQ after the AGM. From then on until the last Official Night (Thursday 29th) we will eat at respective places of accommodation. We will all get together again on the 29th. Some days will be packed lunch in the field.

D..... is for Drinky Poos. This is a Muslim country and while alcohol is commonly available it uncommonly expensive. If you adult beverage requirements can be met by what you can bring duty free (1 litre per person) this is very fortunate for you. For others you need to let me know if you require some assistance to procure supplies 'wholesale' for you. I do need specific information. Wine is findable – but what you might pay 8 or so dollars for if you were desperate enough to drink it in Australia will cost you 25 or more here, and because it is not a wine-wise culture no one really understands anything about proper storage. So be prepared to pay a minimum of 25 a bottle for some pretty ordinary stuff which has a 50/50 chance of being closer to vinegar than wine.

E..... is for Emergency medical support. Mulu is neither village nor town. We do have a clinic staffed by a medical assistant with some training, but beyond cuts and bruises you will need to be transferred to Miri on the next available flight, which might be tomorrow. If it is very serious and life threatening you may require heli-evacuation which will set you back about \$1750, so please take out proper travel insurance. Also note that if you get crook/hurt after 4pm you are stuck here until morning. Heli's cannot get in or out after dark.

F..... is for Flexibility. We will have a detailed program but please don't gripe when it changes. The days planned for Connection and Sarawak Chamber will be fairly fluid if it rains heavily while you are here. Both sites are subject to flash flooding and getting caught in either is not a good idea. Similarly you may be half way to the canopy walk and a thunderstorm will cancel all plans. Take a deep breath and go with the flow!

G..... is for Getting around. There is a sealed road from the airport to the park (about 2km) and from there to the resort (about 3km). For those staying in the resort there is a shuttle available to the park and back (\$2 a shot) and for those in the park a couple of local 'taxi's' provide the same service. To

attractions in the park it's a case of paying for a boat 'taxi' to Clearwater, Racer or Lagang cave, and no option except for 'bus number 11' to everywhere else. (Sorry - for you Mr. Bourne bus number 11 means your own two legs!!)

Expect to walk about 10km per day! And expect to get wet. Wear a raincoat if you must but understand that within a few minutes you'll be a walking sauna and be just as wet anyway. Always carry a plastic bag to protect camera/phone and most importantly your passport!

H..... is for Happy. You are going to be in a foreign country where English is a second language. Things will go wrong and there will be communication problems. When it does go wrong do NOT get angry, do NOT ever shout at ANYONE. Smile and smile again, take a deep breath and quietly explain what has gone wrong and what you think can be done to fix the problem. If you shout/get angry the recipient of your bad manners will most likely disappear and your problem won't be solved.

I..... is for Internet access. Internet access from the resort is possible but hideously expensive and there is no wi-fi so be prepared to be incommunicado for the week. Please don't ask if you can just pop into my office after hours to check on your emails because - except in an emergency - I will have to say no. For those who do have a genuine need for periodic contact with the outside world please let me know and I will try to sort something out, but there are just too many of you for me to offer open access.

J..... is for joking, as in 'you must be!'which will be my response to many of your requests if you fail to realize where you are. That is to say, you will be in Mulu, in the middle of the rainforest, in Borneo. There is no road to the outside world. This is the 'wilderness' you read about in a book!

K..... is for Keeping the fluids up. Don't ever go anywhere into the forest or caves without at least a half litre bottle of water, and remember to drink it! You will sweat, and you will sweat a lot. Dehydration is a serious threat, particularly after a night of partying...

L..... Loose and lightweight clothing. You will not be cold. You will be wet. Select clothing which is comfortable, light weight and quick drying. Don't bring leather boots. They will go rotten in a few days. For the caves a pair of light weight sports shoes is fine. Be prepared to walk in lots of water.

For the pinnacles you should - not must, but should - wear something which has a non-slip flexible sole and good ankle support. (I don't care how much you might have paid for your flash new hiking sandals you WONT be wearing them in any of the adventure caves nor on the trip up to the pinnacles.)

Archaeological Site - Niah Great Cave.
Photo: Dr Grant Gartrell.



M..... is for Money matters. The exchange rate between Australia and Malaysia is a little volatile. In the last twelve months it has been as low as 2.34 ringgit to the dollar to as high 3.20 which is where we are about now. I cannot begin to guess where it will be in April. You can use Malaysian ringgit or credit card in the park and resort but only cash in any of the local bars/cafes.

N..... is for No. You work it out!

O..... is for Orang puteh (*pooh tah*) - that's you, a white person. You are coming to a foreign country and you are different to the people here. In coastal areas you will encounter an interesting blend of 'Malays' or Muslims of middle eastern origin a few hundred years ago, Chinese (they arrived a few generations back) and 'Bumiputera's' or native people of some of 27 distinct (and countless sub-groups within many of them) ethnic groups, including the Iban's who arrived about a millennia back (and probably introduced the headhunting culture). Here in the inland areas the their very few (if any at all) Malays, Chinese or Iban and the local people are collectively called Orang Ulu or 'up river people'.

In the Mulu area we have Penan, Berewan, Kayan, Kenyah, Kelabit, Savan, Kiput, Lun Bawang, Murut, and some who consider themselves to be 'Tring' although the Tring community was subsumed by a sub group of the Kayan which became the Berewan about 300 years ago after a plague depopulated the lowlands. They are practically all practicing Christians after being converted by Australian missionaries in the early mid 1900's. In general they mostly like Australians (and Kiwis) and they are very tolerant of the mistakes and social gaffs we Orang putehs are prone to, but if you hear the term 'orang puteh' used several times in a conversation by local people, you can almost bet that they are talking about something you have just done. Think about it.

P..... is for Phone. We do now have mobile phone connection via Maxis 012 so most of you with international roaming will be covered.

Waiting to view the bat emergence at Deer Cave.
Photo: Dr Grant Gartrell.



Q..... is for Questions, and I know you'll have plenty that I haven't thought of. Send your questions and (if I haven't answered them already) I'll circulate the answers to everyone – without making you feel like a dill for asking it – because if you are curious or concerned about something then no doubt others will be in the same boat. Now, if I have answered the question already then you will have earned two penalty points. Do not, and I repeat, do NOT get to six penalty points. You won't like the consequence!

R..... is for Recharging batteries. The power supply here is 240 volt and supply outlets are based on the British system so grab a suitable international adapter to plug your battery chargers into.

S..... yeah, you guessed it, s is for safety. Some simple rules. Don't wander off into the forest alone. Alone on a plank walk is OK but onto the forest floor – no, don't do it. If you are going out to the waterfalls without a guide you must inform our security staff of your expected time of return. Don't dive into the river. Wade in to avoid having your head on a submerged log that just happens to be floating by, but a couple of feet below the surface as many of the local hardwoods are prone to do. There are no nasty critters in the rivers and very few in the forest. There are cobras and vipers but they are very rare. There are bees and wasps that occasionally become aggressive, if you have any allergy carry an antihistamine with you and let your companions know of your allergy, where your medication is and how to administer it. It is not a big problem but there have been a couple of nasty incidents.

Be very wary of caterpillars as many can cause skin irritations and some are actually very poisonous. Very painfully and permanently poisonous! Drink lots of water. Bottled water is available but a bit pricy. The water supply to your room – both in the park and in the resort has been treated and is suitable for drinking. To make double triple sure you may want to boil it too. It's up to you. My advice is to drink bottled water on day one and have a glass of water from the tap. On day two have a glass from the tap in the morning and another one in the afternoon. You MAY have a mild reaction and need to stay close to a loo for a couple of hours but by the end of day three you should have adapted to the local water. Or you can simply buy the bottled water. It's up to you, but drink lots of it!

T..... is for time out. We have a busy program planned for you and you have to monitor yourself and take a break whenever you feel that you are too tired. Just as staying warm consumes a lot of energy I have learned that staying cool does too. Be prepared to say enough is enough and spend the day being a poolside lounge lizard.

U..... is for 'you' and a few of U have expressed concern because U can't see some of the planned activities on our website – Eg. Kenyalang Cave. That's because they are not officially on our adventure caving program yet. U can sort out where U want to go when U get here! There will be a chance for most of U to go to Sarawak Chamber and to Clearwater Connection if U are very fit.

Regardless of what some of the old forestry department websites or Ur 1988 copy of Lonely Planet might have to say about adventure caving in Mulu, there will not be any overnight camping in the caves and there will not be any need to bring SRT gear. However, if U have a helmet of Ur own (or can borrow one from your worksite) please bring it with U. **PLEASE BRING UR OWN HEADLAMPS. IF U DON'T HAVE ONE THEN U HAD BETTER GET ONE!**



A view inside Sarawak Chamber.
Photo: courtesy of Mulu NP.

V..... is for voicing your concerns. I have lived here for eight years and no doubt I take a lot of things for granted. Some of those things might be worrying you and I seem to have completely ignored what you think is patently obvious. If it's worrying you then its worrying someone else, so speak up (but remember Rule Number One. If I have already told you the answer, there will be a penalty, and you won't like it!)

W..... why. Can some one please remind me why I agreed to let you lot come here?

X..... is for 'xtreme and you must be 'xtremely careful. I can't imagine that any of you would be stupid enough to do it, but the warning about carrying illegal drugs into Malaysia is not a joke!

Z..... is for time to catch a few. Good night!

See you in Mulu – soon!!