

Head-hunting, old and new

STEVE BUNK deals with fame on the road to Borneo.

I'm the only English-speaker on board this rustbucket, bound for Borneo. Both the holdful of earth-moving equipment and the deckful of Javanese are headed for western logging and mining companies based on the Indonesian part of the island. To the Indonesians on board, I'm a celebrity — Mick Jagger, Muhammad Ali, Mel Gibson . . . the west in person. There's no escape into peace and quiet this trip; I'm trapped in show-time.

It's a 54-hour journey. The engines rattle and bang so loudly that we have to shout conversation across the oily wooden table where I share rice and bits of dried fish with the crew.

It seems that I'm forever either talking or listening, although often understanding very little. On the second day, I begin to search for hiding places — but a crewman or passenger always finds me, hunched behind a lifeboat or crammed between a rail and cabin wall. Nor is my shared cabin safe from "fans", who simply stand by the upper bunk where I lie and smile in my face. Even though Indonesians surely are among the kindest and friendliest of people, I become paranoid — half-crazed by fame.

In Bali or Sumatra or Java, all along the beaten tourist track, Indonesians long have been accustomed to western visitors. Off the beaten trail (say, in Flores or Sumbawa or Borneo), this is not the case. And these are the places where travelling alone — without the relief of someone else who speaks English — becomes a mental, emotional and physical test.

It's a type of travel that falls somewhere in between scaling a mountain and taking a packaged tour. For all its troubles, it can be addictive.

You spend large amounts of time learning to speak for without the language you have only superficial contact with the people and, without contact, you may as well stay home and read a brochure.

You must also learn the rules and ways of things, from the everyday to the sacred. You experience worry and discovery, happiness and loneliness, satisfaction and even tedium — because constant challenge, like any constant, can become tiresome.

Yet, such travel is the only way to go for some people simply because every moment is intense.



Banjarmansin, a big shanty town on Borneo's southern tip, is a major port for river traffic

In most villages along the brown rivers that flow into Borneo's murky interior, the guest-houses have balconies from which one can watch the town life pass by. When the day cools at twilight, there is guitar music and laughter, perhaps a ping-pong game where cars would be in a coastal town. Satay fires on open grills. The men squat under the eaves of their shops and houses, among the orange roosters, while the girls and women go with towels to the river to bathe. In these towns, I begin to have conversations instead of enduring friendly interrogations. I find myself talking without perspiring. I begin

to lose my dread of chats during which I can understand more than a little but not yet enough.

This frame of mind generally stays with me throughout the next month in Borneo. During that time, I speak with two Frenchmen for 10 minutes and with no other westerners. I meet only four Indonesians who speak any English.

In the village of Barong Tongkok, three days up the iron-smooth river, I have a stirring conversation which in itself makes the trip worthwhile. This is head-hunting country, inhabited by the "wild men of Borneo".



Children in a river town: overawed by the presence of a Westerner

After the sun sets, a flash-storm strikes and the generator behind our guest-house fails. I go onto the verandah and begin to re-read by candle something I have written. Two men in their 50s appear, greet me courteously and ask in Indonesian what it is.

"A story," I say, resigning myself to yet another batch of questions. After all, I'm from far away, a unique source of infor-

mation. And small talk is an important Indonesian custom, a way of being human together.

"You should write about us," one man says. "This is where we cut off people's heads, you know."

The two of them look angelic in the guttering candlelight. They have high cheekbones, broad upper lips and black liquid eyes.

"My father was beheaded when we were children," the man continues, "and so was the brother of my friend's wife. This is where we use blowguns with darts dipped in poison to kill enemies. But it isn't like in Africa, where they make the head small. Here, we keep the head big."

Illuminated by a lightning flash, the two faces glow at me with eager affection.

"Of course, you don't do that any more," I say.

"No more cutting off heads," they assure me. "No more poisoned darts. All that is over now."

"Why did your people take heads?"

"Magic," he answers over the storm's roar. "Protection."

When at last the rain stops, everyone leaps out of doors and chatters excitedly. The men stand for a long while afterward in the dark village square, smoking.

If travel is, as Graham Greene has written, a way of escape, it also can be a hunt — a way of capturing something strong that survives even in our comfortable 20th century souls.

This is the sort of game the lone traveller is after. But to take along even one English-speaking friend is to be fortified by numbers; then, the game is gone. ■



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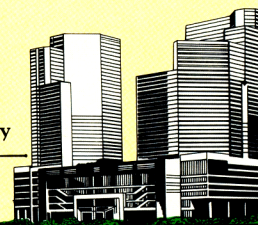
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