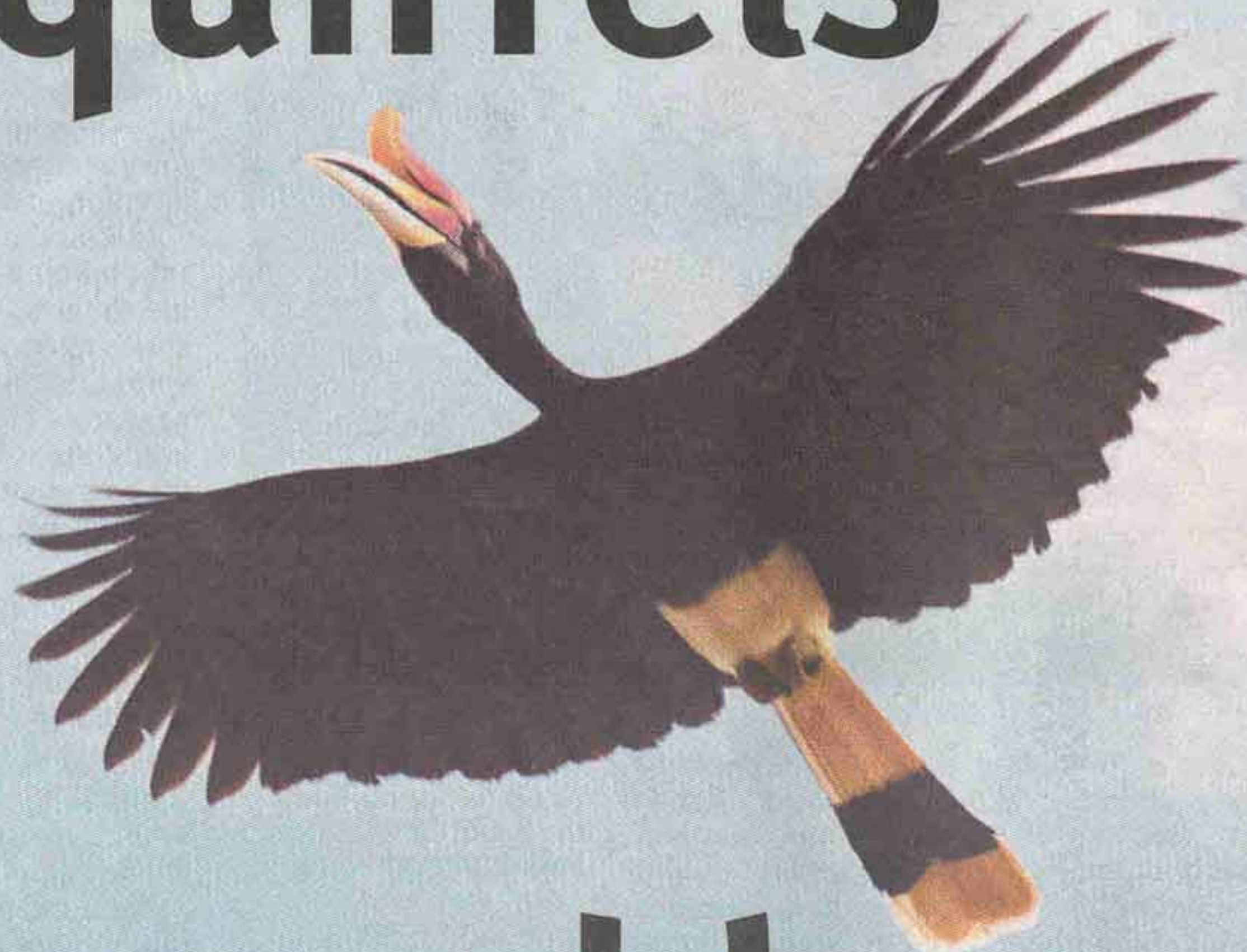


Of squirrels



and hornbills

Realistic expectations are essential for enjoying Malaysia's Taman Negara sanctuary, advises **Stella Martin**

WHERE are the elephants?" a petulant, chain-smoking Dutch girl demands of the hapless guide as he sweeps his torch beam across the clearing once again. He has escorted a group of tourists on a night walk to a hide behind the resort in Taman Negara, Malaysia's premier national park, but no animals have shown up tonight. Last evening, at the same time, we saw five deer quietly grazing; maybe they don't like smoke.

I feel sorry for the guide. Night after night he must face disappointed tourists who expect African safari sightings or have just seen too many David Attenborough documentaries. There are elephants in Taman Negara (and tigers, rhinos and tapirs) but these animals avoid humans and hide themselves well in the rainforest. For the observant and patient, however, the forest yields other rewards.

My husband and I have been visiting Taman Negara for 25 years and we love it. Our main interest is birds, but we have seen many other animals as well. Next to realistic expectations, I consider binoculars the most important thing to bring to Taman Negara: that movement in the trees can turn out to be, on close inspection, a rainforest gem that cannot be appreciated with the naked eye.

Although it is now possible to reach the park headquarters, the main access point, by road, we prefer what was once the only approach, a three-hour boat ride up the mighty, if muddy, Tembeling River; rivers are the traditional highways in this remote part of the country.

On arrival, visitors can stay in the upmarket Mutiara Resort, next to the park headquarters, or in backpacker-style accommodation in the small town on the opposite bank of the river. Small water-taxis buzz back and forth, carrying budget travellers to the park and resort guests to the floating restaurants beside the river bank.

Visitor numbers have increased considerably since we were last here and a 530m canopy walkway is the main focus; we find a steady stream of tourists, many with their own guides, heading along the path towards it. High above our heads we can hear excited backpackers and children (it is school holidays) bouncing, jostling and screaming on the rope bridges.

Shunning the busy walkway, we go elsewhere, but finding ourselves nearby just before it closes one day, we decide to ascend. The crowds have evaporated and we love it. Swaying slowly between the massive tree trunks, 30m above the rainforest floor, we have another perspective on the forest.

A thin green-and-black striped snake weaves rapidly around one of the walkway supports and then along an adjacent branch where it thoughtfully slows down long enough for me to have a closer look. It might be a harmless tree snake or it might be a pit viper; the sighting is a thrill.

Moving quietly we inadvertently sneak up on a giant black squirrel. Enormous, as squirrels go, and very handsome, it appears to be licking the balustrades, perhaps lapping up salt from tourist sweat. When it sees us, it ricochets off, rolling acrobatically around the supporting wires and then flowing off into the trees. We often see squirrels in the forest and more often spot similar, but unrelated, tree shrews. Frenetic and inquisitive, with pointed snouts and large, innocent eyes,



they must surely have been the model for Scrat in the film *Ice Age*. But it is the birds that fascinate (and frustrate) us the most. We can walk for hours through a rainforest without detecting a flutter or hearing a chirp and then, suddenly, a family of crested fireback pheasants strolls across our path, or the steam engine noise of their wingbeats alerts us to a pair of rhinoceros hornbills, or a scuffle on the ground turns out to be the heart-stoppingly gorgeous garnet pitta.

The easiest birdspotting is in the open area around the resort. The fig trees are full of colourful barbets of many species and the perfectly named, and thus exquisitely camouflaged, leaf birds. It is here we get our first-ever sighting of the black-and-yellow broadbill. A delightful little bird with a pink belly, sky-blue bill and plumage of black and yellow, it hangs around in the trees next to our chalet during our entire stay.

We think we are quite good at spotting birds, but then we meet James and Rob, two young Englishmen who escort bird tours around Asia. They were probably still

playing in their sandpits when we first came here, but they are true experts, and are friendly and generous with their information. "Indian cuckoo," says James. I would have called the black shape streaking across the evening sky a silhouetted bird. "Blue-rumped parrots," states Rob casually as a flock zooms past, behind him. You'd be forgiven for thinking these lads must have eyes in the backs of their heads, but they know every call, which is a distinct advantage in the forest.

Away from the busy walkway, we have the trails virtually to ourselves. One day we take a boat down the Tembeling River, which borders the park, and walk back. On our way, we visit a couple of hides, equipped with bunk beds for those who want to spend a night.

In the visitors' books, disappointed adventurers bemoan (at length) a lack of any wildlife action apart from uncomfortably close encounters with rats, mosquitoes and, of course, the ubiquitous leeches, but there are also raves from the more philosophically adaptable who enthuse about their atmospheric night in the jungle.

A network of tracks weaves around the park in the vicinity of the headquarters and resort. It is possible to join a 55km expedition to the top of Gunung Tahan (2187m), Malaysia's highest mountain, but we find the climb to nearby Bukit Teresek (344m) sweaty enough and the panoramic view over the forest ample reward.

There is no shortage of things to do. At the resort or the floating restaurants you can hire guides for short or long expeditions, to explore caves, visit the local aboriginal Orang Asli village, go fishing, shoot rapids or join a night walk. Boat trips can also be arranged, notably up the lovely Tahan River.

We prefer to wander on our own, usually ending the day at Bumbun Tahan, the elephant-free hide five minutes stroll from the resort. Invariably we see our favourite hornbills (pied and rhinoceros) flapping and bouncing in the distant trees, in the late afternoon sunlight. These large, and very charismatic birds have enormous bills topped with casques; that of the rhinoceros hornbill is bright red and yellow with a jaunty oriental curve.

Back at the resort, having detoured around some wild pigs, we stop to watch a family of macaque monkeys scampering among the trees. A young woman, another from The Netherlands, stops beside us. I ask if she has enjoyed her stay.

"Yes, it has been wonderful." She has been to Costa Rica and knows what to expect of a rainforest. Her expectations have been met.

Checklist

Jerantut is 200km northeast of Kuala Lumpur and can be reached by car, taxi, train and bus. From there, Kuala Tembeling jetty is a further 16km by local bus or taxi. Boats leave the jetty at 9am, 1pm and 2pm (9am and 2.30pm on Fridays); seats must be booked. Return trips are at similar times.

For a packaged trip, including accommodation at Mutiara resort, www.malaysiaforestresorts.com Birdtour Asia's next tour of Taman Negara is planned for July 2007. More: www.birdtourasia.com

Birds in the hand:

Clockwise from main picture, a rhinoceros hornbill caught in full flight; travelling in style on the Tembeling River; birdwatching amid the mighty buttresses of the rainforest; a rare moment without crowds on the canopy walkway, and a black-and-yellow broadbill sits in the canopy

Pictures: Stella Martin and Rob Hutchinson