

## BORNEO

*Mount Kinabalu, Lows Gully, First Ascent.* Pep Soldevila, Carles Albesa, Xavier Fernández, and Xavier Vilella made the first ascent of Lows Gully via the route *La Alquimista* (A3 6b, 800m). One A3 pitch was free climbed at 7b by the second. Further details are lacking. (*Desnivel* 164)

*Mount Kinabalu, Lows Gully, Second Ascent.* In 1998, Steve Long had joined a trip to descend Lows Gully beneath Mount Kinabalu. The gully has long been famous as a mystical place of the dead and more recently infamous as the gully in which a group of British soldiers nearly lost their lives. Steve's team, with film crew in tow, successfully descended the gully. After the descent, Steve was whisked away from the mountain for breakfast with the Government. Leaving Borneo a local hero, he returned home with fond memories and inspired by the huge walls that bound the gully. In 1999, he returned with a team to the walls of Lows Gully, but suffered horrendous weather.

Kinabalu is a sacred mountain. Its 4000 meters of gray mass rise from the romantic but appropriately named mist forest. Sacred the mountain might be, but quiet it is not. On the mountain herself there are well-maintained paths, watering stations, toilets, and huts. Steve, Jerry Gore, Twid Turner, and I joined the crowds of locals and travelers plodding up through heavy greenery. Our walk-in took two days: the first to follow the tourist trail to a hut, then, on the second day, to leave the trail, cross a col and descend to a place known as Lone Tree. The walk acclimatized us not only to the altitude but also to the weather. In retrospect, living in North Wales and wintering in Scotland was perfect training for Borneo. It rains not all the time but at some time every day. If it is not raining, it is because it has either just stopped or is about to start!

We divided about 500 kilos of kit between us and a band of porters. We struggled to establish a base camp before the afternoon deluge began. As we descended into the gully, it became apparent that the approach to the wall would involve several hundred meters of abseiling followed by a climb up the gully floor, which included negotiating waterfalls. Finally we caught a view of the base of our wall. To our dismay, it looked completely blank.

We were not alone in our efforts to climb the wall of Lows Gully. A month earlier, a team of Spaniards had arrived (see above). They had visited the area twice previously and climbed on the neighboring Victoria Peak. At present, they were based at a small hut just below the col we had crossed. We knew that they had taken nearly two weeks to find a descent into the gully. It was decided that we would return to the col and try to make use of their knowledge. The downside of this was that we would have to reascend the slabs of our descent and that we had just spent a huge amount of money transporting our kit to the wrong side of the mountain. Hope was not lost, but morale was definitely low.

We left early in the hope of glimpsing the walls before the clouds swamped and filled the gully. Our route through dense forest and bold slabs improved slightly. We had a viewpoint looking across the gully. The walls on the opposite side rose some 1000 meters, while the base of the gorge was only 50 meters wide. Hard at work on the opposite side were two members of the Spanish team. As a team of four, two would stay on the wall climbing and fixing rope. After a few days, they would swap. This allowed them to recover and more importantly to dry out. The wall was in fact incredibly overhanging, so when it rained most of the rock stayed dry (unfortunately, the wind would blow occasionally and then nothing could escape a good dousing).

Steve and Jerry descended to the hut where the Spanish were based to glean more information. Twid and I returned to Lone Tree to fetch more loads. The only line was where the Spanish had climbed through roofs to negotiate the blankest section of rock. We decided with complete

consensus that there was no point in bolting a ladder next to theirs. We would adopt a similar style of two climbing, while two rested, and climb their route for a few pitches, then follow a diagonal line to what looked like a large corner crack system.

We now shared the Sayat Sayat hut, on the main path to the summit of Kinabalu, with the Spanish. Twid and I started climbing. Day one was cut short by torrential rain and a narrow escape back across the gully. The sooner we got portaledges on the wall, the better. The next day we fared a bit better, following the Spanish line through the roofs. It was an impressive lead by the Spanish and must have given them sore necks and very strong arms! What had taken them days we were able to climb in one; someday, it will probably go free to someone with enough time and ability.

We fixed ropes to the first portaledge site and continued onto the imposing walls above. Without the camp established, climbing was a tense affair, since we knew that escape needed to be made before the day's downpour began, and the gully became uncrossable. The other down side of climbing in a gully is that in order to return to base you always have to go up. Getting home for tea involved abseiling down, then jumaring about 300 meters up our access ropes, then climbing over two cols before dropping down to our hut. This was usually executed in failing light, racing against the rain that turned the slabs into rivers.

Our aim was to now leave the Spanish line and to find the link into the system to the right. Our line diagonaled rightward. We had hoped to free climb, but the rock was compact and unfeathered. Accompanying us were two lads who were experimenting with filming and sending information back via the Internet. Along with them they also had mobile and satellite phones.

The line progressed, albeit slowly. The climbing was hard and serious, the rope work a complicated puzzle. However, we began to relax with the weather. Although it continued to rain, the wall was so steep we remained dry.

Steve and Jerry were progressing up the corner and would hopefully make a second ledge that we could move the portaledge camp to. We packed and prepared for an early start, when the door swung open, and two very tired and totally elated Spaniards walked in. They had finished. *The Alchemist* had been climbed. It was sad to see them go; they were good fun and good company, and their route was a fine and hard-earned line. They had been on the mountain for over 30 days and could not have been more pleased to be going home.

In the quiet that followed, we returned to the wall, moving the ledge to an airy platform high on the wall. We woke early and climbed until dark. The climbing was still hard but more absorbing than intimidating. Twid was weaving a line through the most incredibly steep ground. We were now overhanging the other side of the gully; anything that dropped fell rather alarmingly onto that side.

After three days, we could not see, but we felt we were close to the top. We decided to commit and go for the summit. Steve and Jerry cut off all means of retreat by stripping our lines and following us up. I headed off around an arête, glad to be climbing and not aiding, as I had landed upside-down on my previous attempt. It was a fine and thankfully easy pitch that stopped below a hideous chimney. Twid muttered on but then just kept climbing. We had emerged through the overhangs onto a final 100 meters of funneling slabs. To hesitate was folly, with the clouds creeping in and moisture spitting on our faces.

We were up; the others followed. We hugged and congratulated each other, utterly relieved to be at the top of the wall. As it became cooler we scrambled the final stones to the summit of Kinabalu. As a final gesture of goodwill the clouds cleared for our summit shots and final memories. As instantly as it had cleared, the summit disappeared, and the rain began.