

BLOOD, SWEAT, BUT NO TEARS!

Recollections of a visit to Kuala Lumpur

We, that's my wife Dorothy and myself, do quite a bit of bush-walking and have camped in some strange places. On this occasion we made camp in a very nice hotel in the centre of Kuala Lumpur, on the fringe of Chinatown. Now the guidebooks tell you that it is too hot and sticky to walk around town, use public transport or a taxi, and there is the odd shower of rain to contend with. Every day there appears to be a massive thunderstorm breaking over the town, any time from mid-day onwards.

From a map of the town we could see that the Orchid Gardens were only about a mile away. Not being one to take much notice of guidebooks, we set off to walk with our picnic lunch and water bottles in the rucksack. We crossed the main north/south traffic flow where no consideration is given to pedestrians and collapsed onto a seat outside the National Mosque. The next stage was uphill through what could best be described as a leafy suburb with various parks, listed as bird, butterfly, deer, and hibiscus. There were several monkeys in the roadside trees that had learned to wait to be fed by passing tourists, even the taxis stopped to allow their passengers to join in the ritual.

The entrance to the Orchid Gardens was marked by a beautiful roadside bed of vandas. Through the week, entrance to the Gardens is free, while at the weekends a charge of 17 pence is made. The gardens crown the hilltop with a collar of palm trees providing a windbreak, and a long curved shade-house arcing around the lower slopes from the plant sales area to the far side.



As we wandered around it was clear to see that the dominant plants were of the vanda alliance. Out in full sun there were large beds of vandas backed by 5-foot high wire-mesh fences to which more vandas were attached, free from ground contact. At eye-catching positions there were large *Oncidium splendidums* in full flower (↔ see left). It was to one of these that a group of gardeners descended with shears and started to cut off the flower spikes and throw them into a wheel-barrow. Vandals I thought, and said "That's a pity". I was greeted with smiling faces and the comment "Would you like some?" A great armful was thrust in my direction. I thought, "That's a bit tricky, how do I continue to wander around the garden with an armful of flowers?" If only they had been vandas, think of the stem cuttings; I wonder if you can take oncidium stem cuttings? Once out of sight of our new-found friends, I broke off several small pieces and put them in the rucksack, the remainder joined a near-by rubbish heap.



Despite the daily downpour, great jets of water were sprayed over the flower beds, while in the shade area automatic misting swung into action every 20 minutes or so. In addition to the vandas and oncidiums there were *Dendrobium acerosum*, *Dend. cruentum*, (↔ see flower head, left) various epidendrum, *Cymbidium finlaysonianum*, coelogyne (species and hybrids), *Phalaenopsis cornu-cervi*, *Phal. equestris*, and *Phal. violacea* and, of course, the 'jewel orchid' *Goodyera procera*, making mine look like a weed.

There were 4 or 5 stalls in the plant sales area with cut flowers, racks of pot plants in flower, large flasks of vandas, dendrobium, cattleyas, and oncidium, all for about £3.30. There would be about 50 plants in each of the flasks. There were hanging baskets with small plants in clay pots surrounding a plant in flower to show what the smaller plants should grow into. These included *Ascocenda* Princess Mikassa, both pink and blue, *Ascocenda* Sunfun Beauty, *Ascocenda* Sandy Gold, *Rhynchostylis coelestis*, *Vanda* Robert Delight, and others, all at 34 pence each. I was told that it would take about 3 days to sort out the paperwork for export.



There is probably a greater variety of plants in the Singapore Botanical Gardens, but these friendly gardens are well worth a visit.

(↔↔ *Ascocenda* Princess Mikassa, blue form)

(↔ *Ascocenda* Princess Mikassa, pink form)

Now it was all very well looking at these tame orchids in captivity, but how about the wild ones in the jungle? We would have to go and see if we could find some. We headed north out of K.L. on a local bus for about an hour to a point where the driver said "This is it". The jungle was hard pressed upon the road, so much so, that it appeared as a green canyon as the black tarmac disappeared around the bend along with our bus. We crossed the road and entered a forest park, which was used by the locals for picnics at the weekends. Various trails led off the main area and it was one of these we decided to explore.

At the outset the trees were labelled with their botanical names and it was interesting to see trees that I knew as timbers. It was not long before our trail became overgrown – this is better, orchids must grow here. There appeared to be plenty of plants attached to trees but these all looked like bromeliads, and, in fairness, I am the sort of orchid hunter who needs a label on the plant to tell me that it is in fact an orchid, never mind what species it might be. We had seen a few monkeys about earlier but in general the jungle was quiet, no birds and as yet no snakes, just hot and sticky.

Then, all of a sudden, we became entangled in our first chunk of wildlife – a massive 6-foot spider’s web. I am sure that the beast had used nylon rope for its construction. I had read how spider webs are stronger than steel – this was high tensile stuff. Then it appeared. Abseiling out of the canopy, it stopped about 3 inches from the end of my nose, a range difficult to keep in focus. It was all of 9 inches across and looked hungry. Normally I am quite happy with spiders but on this occasion, less so. We managed to free ourselves before it struck and now armed with a big stick we continued along the track, breaking through several more webs on route.

Eventually we came out onto the main road again, and still no orchids. Back in town, we were just in time to be caught in the daily thunderstorm. So it was straight into the hotel shower and it was at this point that we realised that we were not alone. Our feet and socks were covered in blood, not due to cuts and scratches, but to little black leeches that had been munching away all the way home.

Despite our lack of orchid sightings, with a bit of imagination we had had an insight into the world of the orchid hunter, and it was far better than watching it on television.

BOB BOYD



(above ↑) *Rhynchostylis coelestis*

(above, right ↗ from the top) *Phalaenopsis* species *cornu-cervi*, *equestris*, and *violaecea*.

Note. Some of the illustrations are from the “orchidspecies” website.

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