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Water, Water, Everywhere

I became so used to the droning of cicadas after three weeks in the rainforests of Borneo that it took me a few moments to realise that the sound had stopped completely and the surrounding trees and foliage were eerily silent. I had set off early accompanying scientists keen to locate new species of tree frogs higher up in the Batu Apoi Forest Reserve. The short silence was followed by a stiff breeze which increased rapidly in strength, swiftly followed by an almighty downpour of fat tropical raindrops drenching us in seconds.

Desperate to protect my camera equipment, I found an enormous tree root and managed to bury the camera bag underneath just before I lost my footing and slid 20 metres down the steep muddy slopes of the mountain. Recovering composure and equipment, we managed to scale the final 100 metres to the summit in time to witness a rainbow receding into Sarawak as water vapour lifted off the forest canopy.



I came away from a month of constant dampness in the rainforest with a new respect for how water, in all its guises can affect mind, body and landscape, It also reminded me of the endless photographic possibilities of this mercurial of elements. Water - how it flows, how we depend on it and how it affects life on the planet - has been a fascination of mine since childhood (Ratty and weasel messing about in boats from Tales of the river bank comes immediately to mind!).

One of my first major picture stories recorded water in its natural state and as a living and recreational environment. The project led me to photograph everything from dragonflies mating, river pollution and Welsh waterfalls to microlight aerials of sailboats on reservoirs, slalom kayakers and the formation of underground caves. Taking on such a huge subject as water taught me very quickly that there would be more skills needed than just knowing what f stop or film speed to use at any given time.



Travelling downstream by boat or along the seacoast is probably one of the finest ways to see the world. You have time to work at a slower pace and it creates an entirely different and challenging image of your surroundings. A few years ago, I was fortunate to join the writer and explorer, Tim Severin on a traditional Dhow to investigate the life and work of the 18th Century naturalist, Alfred Russell Wallace who sailed through the Malay Archipelago over a period of 4 years researching his own theories of evolution.

Hopping from Island to Island, I soon learned to be very liberal with baby wipes and silica gel to overcome the constant technical problems of saltwater corrosion & humidity. I was then able to concentrate on photographing life aboard the boat, making unexpected landfalls, and slowly weaving a story through the elements of land and sea. Water provided a link in the chain from one story to another.

We frequently take water for granted as it pours from our taps or cascades endlessly and sublimely down a Scottish Glen. Such are the qualities of water and despite the inherent clichés, we never tire at the beauty of flowing water. It's so easy to get wrapped up for hours on end experimenting with its moulding of contours and distortions of patterns and colours. Or simply put away the camera and watch the water flow; its still one of the best ways to clear the mind and contemplate life.

Before I go too far down the path to enlightenment and marvel at the 26 different words in Japanese to describe and define the flow of water, I also like to remind myself that water has some of the most influential and destructive powers worthy of our respect and attention. Where water has pounded and eroded then disappeared, it leaves behind some of the most impressive landscapes and transformations of life. Deserts which burst into flower, sinkholes which open up a world of dark underground caverns and the myriad colours of rock and earth deposited from spring runoff and receding glaciers. We are frequently reminded of how water directly and adversely affects our lives whether it's coastal settlement under threat of being washed away by ever-widening tidal zones or the disappearance and relocation of whole communities under such monumental engineering feats as the damming of the Three Gorges in China.

In recent years, water - its scarcity, quality and necessity - has become one of the most contentious issues among politicians, scientists and indeed all of us. 97% of the earth's water is salty; 2% is frozen in polar ice sheets and glaciers, and only a fraction of 1% is available for drinking, agriculture and industrial use. Armed with such statistics, I'm happy with the idea that my 15 year old project on water has never really finished and I will continue to conjuring up new ways in which to portray its nature, form and effects.

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Reference:

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