



*Mount Kinabalu from the west.*  
Photo by Bruce Weber

## **Mt. Kinabalu—**

Borneo is a vast land of jungle and low hills, but near the northern tip of the island lies one great mountain — Mt. Kinabalu — whose rocky summit rises 13,455 feet just 25 miles from the South China Sea. Kinabalu is an isolated granitic massif, shaped like a “U”, with the two arms aimed toward the north. The southern part of the “U” is a wide, rolling plateau of barren rock which lies between 12,500 and 13,000 feet and covers some two square miles. Sharp, unusually shaped pinnacles rise from this plateau, while on all sides huge precipices drop from it to the jungle below.

Kinabalu is only 6° from the Equator and the summit does not reach a natural timberline, but there is little vegetation above 11,000 feet. This barrenness is caused by the steepness of the cliffs, plus the heavy rainfall which washes soil off the mountain before it can accumulate.

The only practical approach to the mountain is a gravel road suitable for four-wheel drive vehicles, which winds from the west coast through low hills cultivated by “slash and burn” methods to the headquarters of recently formed Kinabalu National Park. From here, on the southern slope of the mountain at an elevation of

5,500 feet, is a fine view of the massif, whose summit is 8,000 feet above and only 5½ miles away. The edge of the summit plateau forms an almost even skyline two miles across, except for the pinnacles which rise several hundred feet above. At the western (left) edge of the skyline is the startling face of Queen Alexandra Peak, 13,132 feet, the westernmost of the six major peaks of the mountain. In one vast cliff this west face drops over 3,000 feet, while below the precipice the rain forest-covered slope drops very steeply for another 5,000 feet.

The southern side of the mountain is the least steep, and it is here that a trail has been constructed. From a power station at 6,000 feet the trail climbs directly and very steeply through the rain forest to an aluminum hut at 11,000 feet, perched under the granite face which falls from the southern edge of the summit plateau. A shrub-filled gully up this face provides the gentlest break in the cliffs which surround the mountain. The trail ends at the hut and the route continues up the rock immediately above. In order to avoid the daily cloud cover which forms about 9:00 a.m., the climber should start from the hut at 4:00 a.m., which means he must locate

*Climbing the  
granite summit plateau.*  
Photo by Bruce Weber



# Borneo's Rocky Summit

By William M. Bueler

the gully in the dark — no simple matter, however well the route may have been fixed in mind the previous day. The route up the gully presents no serious obstacle, though it is wise to have a rope along; the slopes below the gully can be slippery when wet, and the rope is a good precaution against getting off route, in the fog, on the descent.

There is another aluminum hut at 12,500 feet, near the edge of the plateau. Above this hut, the plateau slopes gently upward all the way to the summit — Low's Peak — which is fortunately one of the easiest to reach of the peaks which rise from the plateau.

At about 13,000 feet, just below the final climb to Low's Peak, the granite plateau rises gently toward what looks from the approach like a gentle ridge. But, reaching the ridge, the unsuspecting hiker comes with complete suddenness to a stupendous chasm — which is most inadequately named "Low's Gully." Immediately below, there is a sheer drop of 3,000 feet, while farther north the chasm drops 4,000 vertical feet between the two arms of the "U" — which are but a mile and a half apart. The walls of the chasm are almost entirely rock, with vegetation only in the gullies. Where the Penataran River swings

westward out of Low's Gully, the western arm of the "U" terminates in a precipitous plunge of 7,000 feet in a distance of a mile-and-a-quarter.

Early in the morning, before the fog forms, there is a spectacular view from the summit. From Low's Peak the cliffs drop 4,000 feet into Low's Gully; across the Gully, over the cliffs of the eastern arm, can be seen the Borneo jungle, nearly 100 miles distant. Beyond the lower end of Low's Gully is Marudu Bay at the northern tip of Borneo. To the west, the undulating granite plateau is punctuated by spires and peaks and  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile away, Queen Alexandra Peak, beyond which lies the South China Sea. To the south, beyond the granite summit plateau, are the typical green hills of Borneo.

The great cliffs that surround Mt. Kinabalu would offer endless opportunities to rock climbing enthusiasts willing to hack through the jungle to reach them. For most climbers it might be more rewarding to spend a few days at the 12,500 foot hut, from where the major peaks and some unclimbed pinnacles can easily be reached. For the hiker or climber, Mt. Kinabalu is the most interesting and spectacular mountain between the Himalayas and New Guinea.