SCALING GUNUNG TAHAN

By Dr Vikneswaran Nair

Want to try climbing up Peninsular Malaysia’s highest peak?

Taman Negara straddles the borders of Kelantan, Trengganu and Pahang in Peninsular Malaysia. A totally protected area of 4,343 sq km, Taman Negara is one of the world’s oldest tropical rain forests. The diversity of its flora and fauna is a result of disturbed evolution over 130 million years.

Peninsular Malaysia’s highest mountain, Gunung Tahan, is located in Taman Negara in Pahang, and climbing the mountain is an unforgettable experience. The climb to the summit is very tough due to the undulating nature of the 55 km trail. In all, the actual climb is 3,900 metres to reach the summit of the 2,187 metres mountain, which will normally take five days.

The adventure to conquer Tahan’s summit starts from the park headquarters (Park HQ) at Taman Negara Resort. Along the way there are numerous open clearings where a campsite can be set for the night. Five of the campsites - Melantai, Puteh, Teku, Wray’s Camp and Padang, have water points nearby. Therefore, they are ideal for overnight camping.

A nine-day return trek to the summit is indeed a challenging adventure. The climb is strenuous and demands sound physical and mental fitness.

DAY 1: KUALA TAHAN TO KUALA MELANTAI

This takes four to five hours. Follow the trail out of Kuala Tahan to Rentis Tahan-Trengganu for about two hours. After 1 1/2 hours you will pass a turn-off to Lubok Lesong, a popular picnic site (this turn-off is sign-posted).

After a further half an hour, there is the turn off for the main trail to Gunung Tahan. This turn-off is not clear and may not

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THE PARK AT A GLANCE

| Size:                      | 4,343 square kilometres |
| Highest Point:             | Gunung Tahan (2,187 metres) |
| Flora Fauna:              | Over 10,000 species of plants and 250 kind of birds. Local mammals include mousedeer, barking deer, wild ox, and numerous monkey species. Tapir, elephant, leopard and tigers are also present, though not easy to spot. |

(Please note that Taman Negara is a restricted area. All bookings and reservations must be made in advance at the reservations office in Kuala Tahan).

GETTING THERE

- **By Road:** From Kuala Lumpur, the road journey takes about three hours. Travel to Jerantut by way of Mentakab or Raub. From Jerantut, Kuala Tembeling is 16 kilometers north. Follow signs from Kuala Tembeling to the jetty.
- **By Rail:** Train services are available from Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. The train passes Kuala Tembeling. From Kuala Tembeling, there is a half-hour walk to the jetty.
- **By Air:** Pelangi Air flies to Taman Negara from Kuala Lumpur.

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The climb is strenuous and demands sound physical and mental fitness. The trail is fairly flat for some time. Towards the end there is a steep climb of about 100 metres before a descent to the campsite. The campsite at Kuala Melantai is a bare earth patch surrounded by tall trees. There is a small stream where you can wash, but not swim. The altitude is about 100 metres.

**DAY 2: KUALA MELANTAI TO KUALA PUTEH**

This takes about eight hours. For most people this is a hard day. There is usually no water en route. The trail starts with a steep 250 metres climb up a ridge at the back of the campsite. This hill was once known as 'Blood Hill', for a European surveyor who coughed up blood and died on the hillside.

After about an hour, the ridge top is reached. There is a scenic view here. The trail goes north along the ridge. You will cross a total of 27 little hills on the ridge. At the end of the ridge, there is a 150-metre climb to the top of Gunung Rajah (676 metres), the highest hill on the ridge.

Then the trail makes a long steep descent down to the campsite at Kuala Puteh. The descent takes 1 to 1 1/2 hours and rushing water can be heard long before you reach the campsite. Kuala Puteh is an attractive site on the bank of the Tahan River. There is plenty of space to camp. You can fish and swim. The altitude is about 150 metres.

A nine-day return trek to the summit is indeed a challenging adventure.

The view from the trail can be breathtaking indeed.

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**ESSENTIAL INFORMATION FOR CLIMBING GUNUNG TAHAN**

Entry and camping permits from The Department of Wildlife and National Parks at the resort. Also a permit for a camera is required.

Guide Requirement: The rate is one guide for every group of up to 12 people included in the package rate.

Average rate per person RM 480.00 net, (package includes: Transfers, permit fees, guide fees and camping fees and excludes: Equipment, camera fees and food).
DAY 3: KUALA PUTEH TO KUALA TEKU
This takes 2 1/2 to 4 1/2 hours. The route is along the Tahan and the river is usually crossed several times. However the distance is short and there is almost no change in altitude. If the water level is low and the weather is fine, Kuala Teku can be reached comfortably in three hours. Before setting out, cut a walking stick to help you in river crossings.

There is a good chance of seeing elephant droppings along the riverbanks. In fact this is your best chance of seeing animals though the odds are small. There is no fixed trail to Kuala Teku. The number of river crossings depends on the state of the river. Usually one continues upstream along the east bank for about 40 minutes to a point near the junction called the Palette (a small tributary).

The first crossing of the Tahan is made here. Stay close to the river and you will eventually arrive at Kuala Teku. If the river is flooded after heavy rain, you may have to wait for the water to subside. This might take as long as 12 hours provided the rain stops.

As you approach Kuala Teku, you will be on the east bank of the Tahan. You must then cross the Tahan to reach the campsite, which is at the junction of the Tahan and Teku rivers.

There is an alternative land route to Kuala Teku. This could be used if the Tahan is flooded. Instead of making the first river crossing near the Palette, continue along the east bank of the Tahan. Proceed until the vegetation becomes too dense for progress without cutting with a parang. At this point, climb straight up the hillside at right angle to the river. This can be exhausting (the vegetation is dense and there are loose rocks).

Eventually you will arrive on a ridge top. Here, there is an old trail running along the ridge, parallel with the river below. Go along the ridge for 1 to 2 hours. The ridge forks here. Take the west fork. The trail then disappears and the ground descends. At this point, you can see the old trail (marked by cuts made by parang) leading down to the river. In any case go due west down to the Tahan. You will then be almost at this junction with the Teku. The Tahan must still be crossed to reach the campsite.

Someone with experience of jungle trekking must lead the land route. A compass and a map are essential. Kuala Teku is a scenic campsite. You can fish and swim here. There is plenty of space for camping. The altitude is 168 metres.

Kuala Teku was the base camp for the first successful Gunung Tahan expedition in 1905. All the earlier expeditions made the mistake of continuing from here up the Teku River. The correct route is up the ridge behind the campsite.

DAY 4: KUALA TEKU TO GUNUNG TANGGA LIMA BELAS
This route takes about seven hours. It is a continual uphill climb. You will climb through 1,500 metres in a day. The trail runs uphill for about 4 hours, through oak forest and pine trees, to a little flat spot just off the trail, called Gunung Pondok Dua. This campsite is also known as Wray's Camp, after one of the leaders of the 1905 expedition.

A distinctive feature of Pondok Dua is the primitive ferns called Matonia pectinata, which are only found on a summit in Peninsular Malaysia. Pondok Dua is a convenient campsite. Water can be found at a small stream 10 minutes down from here. The altitude is now 896 metres. There are no further water bodies between Pondok Dua and Padang. If you are going on to camp at Tangga Lima Belas, water must be carried from Pondok Dua.

Immediately after leaving Pondok Dua there is an abrupt vegetation change. The trees become short and twisted. There is a lot of moss. The ground is soft and spongy in some places. Orchids and pitcher plants begin to proliferate.
The trail goes along the top of a narrow ridge with long steep drops on both sides. The ridge is very broken and a lot of scrambling is required up and down short vertical sections. There are three convenient campsites along this ridge, each on a little peak.

The first is Gunung Pankin, which is an hour of steep climbing from Pondok Dua. Another 1 1/2 hour is required to reach Gunung Tangga Lima Belas at 1,574 metres.

Gunung Tangga Lima Belas is a spectacular place to camp. The summit is very small, about five metres square, with a sheer drop on the west side, straight down into the Tuku Valley. But the view is superb and you can hear the water rushing through the Tuku gorge below. You can see along the whole rock face, across the Tuku Valley.

Tangga Lima Belas is very cold at night because of its exposed position. Wind and mist sweep the ridge and campsite. If time is available, one can proceed further along the ridge to Gunung Reskit. This takes a further 1 1/2 hours. None of these campsites on the ridge have any water.

**DAY 5: GUNUNG TANGGA LIMA BELAS TO GUNUNG TAHAN SUMMIT**

At 7 am on Gunung Tangga Lima Belas, the early morning sun sharply illuminates the route forward up onto Gunung Gedong. The trail goes over Gunung Reskit to the base of the rock face on the site of Gunung Gedong. You then scramble up a cleft in the side of the rock face. It is very damp and dark. There is an old steel cable remaining from an expedition in the past, which is useful for handholds in places.

At the top of the rock face on the shoulder of Gunung Gedong, there is an abrupt vegetation change - very thin and dwarfed vegetation, consequence of rocky ground and washed out soil.

There is an excellent view back down along the entire ridge. The height here is 1,900 metres. Gunung Gedong is on the edge of the Padang, an open plateau with gently rolling hills which stretches out below Gedong. The Padang campsite is 300 metres down from Gedong, on the other side of a small stream (at an altitude of about 1,600 metres).

A lot of attractive pink orchids grow around this site. There are the remains of two concrete platforms, which apparently dated from 1920-1930 when a weather station was operated on the Padang. An old abandoned wooden weather station can also be seen high up on Gunung Gedong.

Flocks of birds sometimes cross the Padang around noon. Elephants have been recorded on the Padang. The Padang campsite can be reached from Gunung Tangga Lima Belas in three to four hours. You can expect to arrive at the site around noon.

The normal practice is to leave camping gear and most of the rucksacks at the campsite and set off immediately for the summit of Gunung Tahan. Before you do this, set up your tents first.

There are several reasons for this. First, you might arrive late from the summit. It is not easy to set up camp in fading light. Second, your gear can be placed under shelter to protect it from heavy rain. Third, the tent will act as a visual marker in case you lose your way coming down from Gunung Tahan.

The whole Padang can quickly be covered in mist; visibility is then reduced to a few yards. Care must be taken to stay together and not wander, particularly on the route up to the summit. Do not move away from the campsite or off the trails unless you have a compass and know how to find your way back.

The Padang is very cold at night. Temperature as low as four degrees Celsius has been recorded through 15 to 30 degrees Celsius is normal. In clear conditions, the whole of Gunung Tahan is visible from the Padang. It takes 2 1/2 hours to reach the summit from the Padang campsite. Take a poncho or other raincoat with you. No one can stand the cold rain at over 2,000 metres above the summit. If you get caught on the Tahan summit without a rain-cape, you will literally have to run off the mountain just to keep warm.

The trail from the Padang campsite goes north over the plateau for a time and then climbs steeply onto a ridge linking Gunung Tahan with Gunung Gedong. Once on this ridge there is only one way to go and the trail is obvious. The ridge drops down into a saddle between the two mountains. This little valley contains dense mossy forest with lots of orchids and other high-altitude plants. It is quite wet and the trees are usually high.

On the other side, the trail...
rises towards the summit of Gunung Tahan. The vegetation is very low and heath-like. There are white patches of quartzite rock, particularly on the trail where many boots have worn away the thin soil. Many pitcher plants can be seen.

The summit of Gunung Tahan is not very impressive. There is an iron survey beacon, the original one put up in 1906. Unfortunately, the structure has been largely destroyed by people standing on it for photographs. You are unlikely to get a good view from the summit. More often than not, the summit is immersed in mist and there is light rain.

It is important to leave the summit by 4 pm to leave plenty of daylight to get to the Padang campsite. The return trek can take 1 ½ hours. If you delay your return until 5 pm, there is a real risk of being caught out on the mountain when night comes.

**GUIDE NOTES TO TREKKERS & CAMPERS**

Check the notes on the following topics before you embark on any trekking excursions... You may find them useful!

**Guide Notes for Trekkers & Campers**

**Rainy season is between mid December to mid January.**

Visitors are requested to help the Department of Wild Life preserve nature’s beauty by keeping litter and noise pollution to the minimum.

Heavy-duty gear is recommended. Keep your backpacks as light as possible and plan the items that you need to carry.

Lice are generally not a major problem but they can be a real nuisance if the weather is wet or the ground is soggy. Insect repellent is normally sprayed on the socks and shoes to keep them at bay.

Things to bring - as a general guide: - Long sleeve shirt / warm clothes, change of clothes, sturdy walking shoes, (Sport / tennis / gym shoes / hiking shoes), second pair of shoes / pair of sandals, gloves / hat / mask, extra socks, rain and wind gear, rain coat, thick wind breaker, rain cap, towel, toothbrush, tooth paste... etc. Tissue paper, toilet roll, sun block & lip gloss, insect repellent, mosquito coil, headache tablets, plasters (for cuts and blisters), deep heat lotion (for muscle cramp), talcum powder, a couple of plastic bags (for wet clothes, etc), binoculars, camera, waterproof bag for camera, torchlight & fresh batteries, high energy food (eg. chocolates, nuts, raisings, glucose) and water bottle (1.25 litres plastic bottles).

When choosing what clothes to bring, consider their weight (dry or wet!). Avoid jeans, jacket and other bulky apparel. Pack clothing in plastic bags to avoid getting wet.

**Jungle Survival**

- Don’t travel at night, as visibility is low.
- Don’t drink unboiled or stagnant water. If you have to, look for a moving stream with clear running water.
- Don’t eat any fruits or plants unless you know they are edible.
- Don’t leave camp without informing others.
- Don’t stray away from other trekkers. Safety in numbers.
- Stay healthy. Don’t take unnecessary risks like climbing rocks and trees.
- Important items that a trekker must possess - a large knife and waterproof matches or lighter.

Check with your guide or expedition leader whether it is safe to swim in the river. Rivers may look safe but if there is heavy rain upstream, the river water level may swell in a very short time and can sweep away even a very strong swimmer.

**DAY 6: PADANG TO KUALA TEKU**

Kuala Teku can be reached from Padang in one day. It may be a long day, but it is all downhill.

Day 7 to 9 is backtracking the route taken during the journey up the Tahan.

**DAY 7: KUALA TEKU TO KUALA PUTIH**

**DAY 8: KUALA PUTIH TO KUALA MELANTAI**

**DAY 9: KUALA MELANTAI TO KUALA TAHAN**
SMI:
TIME TO GEAR UP

Life Insurance:
Huge Untapped Market

Good Governance:
Govt Shows the Way

Qibla:
Another Islamic cola