

Palm-Collecting Adventures in Asia

MELVIN W. SNEED

8107 S.W. 72nd Avenue, 113E, Miami, Florida 33143 (formerly of Montego Bay, Jamaica)

Palm Society members have an extraordinary bond; namely, as Dent Smith, the society's founder, might put it—a pervading fondness for the most princely of the monocotyledons. Fortunately, for the palm seeker, this membership is worldwide, embracing some 40 nations in and around the tropical belt, and other localities, like Alaska, far removed from it. Palm Society members are very helpful people, wherever they are. Phyllis Sneed and I know this so well, after having gone “on our own” on a palm trek into Asia. Our trip was a very rewarding experience, thanks to the members who made it so. We shall introduce them as we go along. We thank them all, here at the outset, for their kindness and many courtesies that made our travels possible and fruitful as well.

Before we depart we should say that we are not explorers. We really don't believe we ever will discover a new genus, or species, for that matter, but it's a thrilling experience to see palms growing in their habitat and to try to photograph and collect them. Actually there were many times on our trip, in jungles and elsewhere, when we felt like explorers. But one must not be deluded. Our Editor, Dr. H. E. Moore, Jr., in his many travels that have contributed so much to the knowledge of palms, had been there long before we arrived. There were others before him, but Dr. Moore's footsteps are implanted wherever palms are found. We are proud to have retraced some of his paths in Asia about 12 years later.

I. Montego Bay to Bangkok and Malaysia

We left Montego Bay 23 August 1975 and overnighted in San Mateo, near the San Francisco airport. Glancing out our hotel window the next morning we were astonished to see a towering *Phoenix canariensis*, all by itself with no other vegetation near it. And it was fruiting! So, Asia notwithstanding, we collected some good viable palm seeds in California. To make way for construction or other changes, the *Phoenix* recently had been transplanted at a cost estimated at \$10,000. One would have to conclude that the good people of San Mateo care about palms.

Our China Airline flight left on schedule and we went on to Bangkok via Honolulu and Tokyo, overnighting in Taipei, thence to Hong Kong, then over the South China Sea and Gulf of Siam, skirting Viet Nam and Cambodia, which the airline deemed to be inhospitable territory.

In Bangkok, we enjoyed the splendid old Oriental Hotel located on the busy river front where one can watch the endless river traffic. The hotel grounds are well landscaped with *Cyrtostachys*, *Areca catechu* and other palms.

No time was lost getting in touch with Cmdr. Watana Sumawong, one of The Palm Society's most ardent and helpful members, with whom we had corresponded and exchanged plants for several years. Our visit coincided with the eve of his departure on a trip to Florida, so we certainly appreciated his taking the time to introduce us first to



1. Cmdr. Watana Sumawong and Phyllis in a section of his nurseries in Bangkok.

Mrs. Sumawong, and then to his very extensive collection of palms, cycads, and many other plants in the nurseries at his attractive home (Fig. 1).

As noted earlier in *Principes* 17: 30-32, most of his plants are in containers—ceramic pots of all sizes on up to huge ornate jars. Watana even has *Lodoicea maldivica* growing in large, barrel-like wooden containers. We understand that later he hopes to establish a botanical garden at another location. Certainly he has assembled the ingredients for a very fine one. The Sumawongs hosted us for an evening of superb Thai cuisine, with entertainment by the traditional, rapturous Thai dancers, and in other ways made our visit to Bangkok memorable.

We had time to take the river and floating market trips, see the splendid temples and palaces, and spend an evening with Mr. Ura Snidvongs, also a

devoted member of The Palm Society. We not only talked about palms with Ura but proceeded after dinner to look at some in a nearby city park. It was too dark for pictures but we were delighted that he would take us to see the palms in the glow of Bangkok's lamp lights.

On 30 August we left for Malaysia, with Penang, an island state in the Malacca Straits, off the northwestern coast, our first destination. Penang has been called Palm Island, and today its state flag is centered with an *Areca catechu* (betel nut). Our main interest there was Waterfall Gardens, the island's principal botanic attraction. Although we had the name of someone to contact at the gardens, there was no prior warning that we had arrived on a holiday and all officialdom would be off duty! We couldn't get inside the nurseries, which looked as promising



2. *Phyllis* is dwarfed by towering cluster of *Oncosperma fasciculatum*, Waterfall Gardens, Penang.



3. A magnificent *Licuala* sp. may be seen in Waterfall Gardens.

as the gardens themselves, or obtain any available catalog of plants, or official permission to collect seeds. Not many seeds were available anyway, unless they were more plentiful behind the locked nursery gates.

The garden has impressive clusters of *Oncosperma fasciculatum* (Fig. 2) and *Cyrtostachys renda*. Several species of *Pinanga* and *Calamus* are along paths in a forested area adjoining the open spaces of the garden. Our favorite palm there was a beautiful, large-leaved *Licuala* sp. (Fig. 3). There was one female *Lodoicea maldivica* bearing abor-

tive fruits which attracted the garden's large population of monkeys. Having heard that Waterfall's palm collection contained a specimen of *Johannesteijsmannia*, we searched in vain for it. Later we learned that indeed one had been there years ago but disappeared during the Japanese occupation in World War II. We have yet to see this unusual palm in any botanical garden. But we saw it in the wild farther along in Malaysia. More about that later.

Leaving Waterfall Gardens, we proceeded to explore the island. We rode the funicular railway up Penang Hill for spectacular vistas dotted with palms and went on to the Snake Temple, where the author firmly refused to pose with a viper around his neck. Then, along the road we spotted a stand of dead coconut palms and wondered if the lethal yellowing disease had spread to this part of the world. Although loss of palms for any reason is deplorable, we were relieved to learn that these trees had

been killed deliberately to make way for an airport runway. After viewing the landscaping at several new resort hotels on the north coast, we raced the oncoming darkness back to the E & O Hotel in Georgetown.

The flight south to Malaysia's capital Kuala Lumpur, took only 35 minutes. Soon we were being greeted by Mr. Eric Taylor, a Britisher, who is a landscape architect with projects in Southeast Asia, formerly based in Singapore, now in Kuala Lumpur. Though he would eschew any accolades, Eric is a devoted Palm Society member who has gone much out of his way to assist traveling members. He helped make arrangements and guided us on most of our palm quest in Malaysia.

We had time that afternoon for Templer Park, 14 miles north of Kuala Lumpur, which we reached in a rented car with Eric at the wheel. This park gives the visitor a sample of the Malaysian jungles. Along the paths we saw *Eugeissona*, *Orania*, and what appeared to be *Metroxylon* species. Rain hurried us along, as well as darkness, postponing a visit to the Batu Caves, some seven miles from Kuala Lumpur, which is perhaps the only place having relatively easy access to *Maxburretia rupicola*. We returned later and saw this rare small palm but didn't get a good photograph or collect any seeds (for more on this see *Principes* 15:3-9).

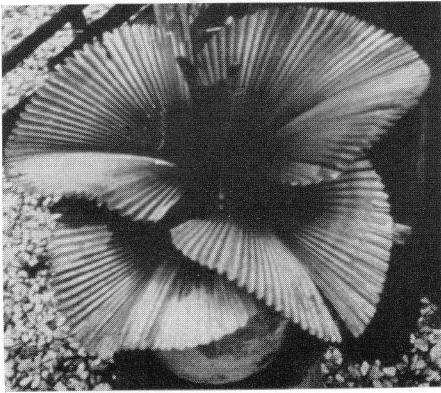
Early next morning, the three of us headed for Genting Highlands, about an hour's drive from Kuala Lumpur. These mist-shrouded highlands are covered with precipitous jungles loaded with palms. The highest elevation is 5,600 ft. We snaked our way upward constantly on the lookout for roadside openings where we could edge into the bush without the help of an entourage of machete swingers. These forests are heavily laced with *Pinanga*, *Licuala*,

Nenga, and the formidable rattans (*Calamus* and *Daemonorops*). We gleaned some seeds from these incursions but not in sufficient quantities for the Seed Bank. Some of the species from whence seed came were unfamiliar to us. Later in the day we found a dense stand of *Pinanga polymorpha* and collected seeds in quantity, although it was uncertain whether some of the fruits were ready for harvest. We also encountered species of wickedly clawed *Korthalsia*, a "fishtail-leaf" rattan, and collected a few of the round, scaly fruits.

The following day Eric drove us to the Fraser Hill area farther north of Kuala Lumpur, more rugged and somewhat less accessible than Genting Highlands. Ascent to the area is by one-way road, closed during certain hours to upgoers while open to downcomers. We repeated procedures of the day before, stopping at accessible places which Eric Taylor had visited previously, and probing for seeds with some success. *Livistona speciosa*, *Oncosperma*, *Arenga*, and the giant mountain rattan were conspicuous. But it takes more time than we had to explore the trails and see the palms that abound all over the area. It is beautiful country, prominently studded with the huge, solitary caryotas that tower in the misty vistas.

Back to Kuala Lumpur after dark, Phyllis cleaned the seed gleanings of the day, bagging and labeling them to go with earlier collections. We each reduced our traveling paraphernalia to what would go into a small carry-on bag, and we were ready for the next leg of our adventures.

Early in planning the trip we wanted to visit the Kuching area of Sarawak, but could not time it, or arrange it, before leaving Jamaica—so we decided to "play it by ear." The receptive "ear" that made it possible belonged to Mr. Paul Chai, Forest Botanist with the



4. *Licuala orbicularis*, Semengoh Arboretum, Sarawak.

Forest Department in Kuching, and a member of The Palm Society. We had phoned him from Kuala Lumpur upon arrival, and his response was heart-warming. Our itinerary was juggled thereupon to make room for Kuching.

Leaving Kuala Lumpur airport early 4 September, we were happy to be accompanied by Eric Taylor, who speaks Malay and Indonesian. The hour-and-a-half flight above cultivated forests of *Elaeis guineensis* and the tin mines of West Malaysia, then across the South China Sea was fascinating. Sarawak and Sabah are the Borneo states of East Malaysia, Kuching being the capital of Sarawak. Low cloud floats partially obscured our approach to Kuching beside the snaking Sarawak River.

Going directly to the Forest Department, we found Paul Chai expecting us. Although his duties prevented him from going along, he had programmed us to palm hunt within our time restrictions, and scheduled a land rover and guides, who also accompanied us for the next two days. That afternoon we went out of Kuching a few miles to the Forest Department's Semengoh Arboretum.

We spent much of the afternoon col-



5. Jugah Kuti and fruit of *Pholidocarpus* near Kuching.

lecting *Pinanga* species and admiring the plants. Trails made viewing quite accessible and except for a few leeches we enjoyed it thoroughly. In addition to the arboretum's forest reserve, there is an adjoining nursery where we found a most beguiling palm, the diminutive *Licuala orbicularis* (Fig. 4). This delightful little palm, we were told, is native elsewhere in the area and rare in cultivation. No seeds of it were available at the arboretum and we departed with a gnawing yen to get them eventually. On our return to Kuching we saw *Pholidocarpus* in fruit in a swampy area off the road, and Jugah Kuti climbed an adjacent tree to bring down



6. Down the Sarawak River to Bako National Park. Photograph by Eric Taylor.

a large stalk of seeds (Fig. 5). Unfortunately they were immature.

Paul Chai joined us that evening for conversation (palm-oriented) and introduced us to a splendid Chinese restaurant where we indulged in genuine bird's nest soup. From its Niah Caves, considerably east of Kuching, Sarawak is

a principal source of edible bird's nests, made from the saliva of their architects—millions of small swifts that live in the caves.

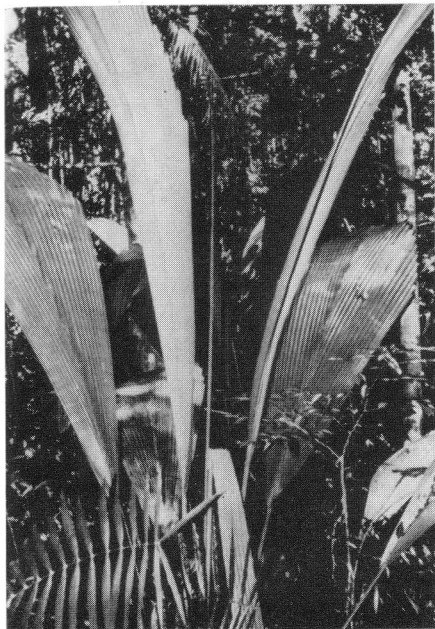
Before dinner we had shopped for provisions to take on our overnight trek next day to Bako National Park. Bako, consisting of some 10 square miles of primary forest, is on a peninsula at the mouth of the Sarawak River. It is reached by speed boat downstream from Kuching in one and one-half hours.

Dr. Moore, our editor, visited Malaysia and Bako late 1963 to early 1964, and his account of it in *Principes* 9: 103–117 was an inspiration to us. He detailed the palms there and we believe that our visit found the area little changed from what he described (refer also to *A Guide to Bako National Park*, reprint of the *Malaysian Nature Journal*, Vol. 24, Nos. 3 & 4, Aug. 1971).

We were picked up early and deliv-



7. Disembarking at Bako.



8. *Johannesteijsmannia altifrons* in Bako National Park.



9. *Eugeissona insignis* along trail in Bako.

ered at the river dock, where our party assembled. Joining Phyllis, Eric Taylor, and me were our Iban (Dyak) assistants of the day before—James Mamit and Jugah Kuti—a cook, Jagong Suka, together with Peter Martin, a student volunteer worker from Britain. After a bit of delay due to necessary switching of boats, our longboat pulled up and the boatman completed the party.

The river traffic and fishing villages were interesting with the scenery improving as we advanced, but mainly we relaxed and enjoyed the ride (Fig. 6). We saw *Nypa fruticans* along the tide-flushed river banks, and stopped once, not far from the Park, while James Mamit bargained for a fisherman's catch. The ray wound up in the stew pot that evening.

Rounding a rugged cliff, the boat pulled up in a shallow bay where we disembarked our gear and waded to

shore over the mud flats (Fig. 7). The overnight cottage was quite adequate, having three sleeping rooms with multiple cots, kitchen with gas fridge, dining area, and lavatory facility.

Quickly getting things in order, with Jagong Suka staying behind to thwart the kera and proboscis monkeys from raiding our provisions, the trails beckoned and we set out shortly after noon. The forest abuts the cottage clearing and we were in the jungle almost immediately. *Pinanga*, *Licuala*, and the omnifarious rattans are all along the trails, except for a plateau area of sandstone, which though palmless was studded with interesting *Nepenthes* (the pitcher plant). The licualas were especially handsome, but our most exciting moments on the trail came past midafternoon, about halfway around, when we advanced into a large stand of *Johannesteijsmannia altifrons*.

They ranged through the forest, up-



10. Livistonas enhance approach to the Sarawak Museum in Kuching.

hill and down, on both sides of the trail but weren't easy to photograph either individually or in depth (see Fig. 8). The entire party began searching for seeds, which meant probing the forest debris that collects around the base of this trunkless species of palm that fruits near the ground. Our efforts were in vain as we didn't find a single viable seed. Disappointing though it was, we thrilled at the sight of this beautiful and unusual palm and resolved to try again for seeds later on our itinerary.

Bako has *Eugeissona insignis* in several areas along the trails (Fig. 9).

Though the fruits are large and heavy for mailing we collected some for the Seed Bank, together with a quantity of *Pinanga crassipes*, the latter having beautifully mottled leaves that are characteristic even of the smallest seedlings.

A much welcome rest stop, atop the cliff area we had seen from the boat coming in, found the author wringing wet with perspiration, due more to exertion than the equatorial climate, and still some distance from that fridge back at camp. James and Jugah smilingly assured us that the climbing was over; that it was all "down hill" back to

camp. It was down all right, straight down a series of ladders and gouged out steps that kept the trail connected from the top of rock outcrops down through ravines, across streams, and so on. But it was a beautiful passage, weary legs notwithstanding.

The Bako trails were a highlight of our trip; the relaxation back at camp, dinner that evening, torrential rains that night, the shoreline exploration next morning, and return to Kuching by early afternoon were anticlimactic. We visited the Sarawak Museum where the grounds are beautifully landscaped with palms, such as the *livistonas* along the walk in Fig. 10. The museum is impressive with exotic items including an Iban longhouse with genuine skulls furnishing a cogent bit of realism. It is well worth a visit. We returned next morning to search the grounds and adjoining areas for seeds, collecting several species, including a quantity of *Cyrtostachys*, after which we canvassed Kuching's very clean and tidy market area and downtown shopping stalls. These were all within easy walking distance from our Hotel Borneo.

Back in Kuala Lumpur we packaged an accumulation of seeds for mailing and had them ready when Eric Taylor arrived next morning to guide us on another foray into a swamp forest to view a natural stand of *Cyrtostachys*, which seemed to thrive in a peatlike debris. We passed a few individual specimens of *Actinorhytis* along the way, and stopped frequently to explore promising byroads. Also, we mailed the packaged seeds, although for one of the larger containers a crisis arose. The postoffice substation had exhausted its supply of large denomination stamps and before the carton got into the mail-sack it looked like a Christmas package

as it was completely enwrapped with colorful, small-denomination stamps.

Another day we drove to historic Malacca, 100 miles from Kuala Lumpur, on the straits, with an unbroken history back into the fourteenth century. This is the place where one can acquire a malacca cane, the sire of which is a palm. But history is neither our forte nor purpose, and up to this writing we can walk without a cane. That evening we bid temporary adieu to Eric Taylor; temporary, because Eric was to rejoin us later on our itinerary. Our last day we explored downtown Kuala Lumpur, cabbng through lovely Lake Gardens with its beautiful ornamental palms, visiting the National Museum adjoining it, and walking through the interesting parts of the city back to our hotel.

We didn't get to Cameron Highlands in the north, with its rugged trails and alluring palm-collecting potential. Nor did we have time, or stamina, even to consider venturing into Taman Negara, which is West Malaysia's great (1,700 sq. mile) natural forest reserve. For what we missed there, see *Principes* 13: 83-98. We planned to double back later on out of Singapore into the southern state of Johore where, in certain traditional areas, *Johannesteijsmannia* is easily accessible and abundant.

Early 11th September we departed Kuala Lumpur with heartfelt gratitude to The Palm Society members and all our many new friends in Malaysia who had helped us so much. Also, it should be noted that T. C. Whitmore's *Palms of Malaysia* (Oxford University Press, London, 1973), which details the location of palms throughout Malaysia, was a most useful reference. Our next destination was Indonesia, starting in Medan, the capital of Sumatra, which will be another story.