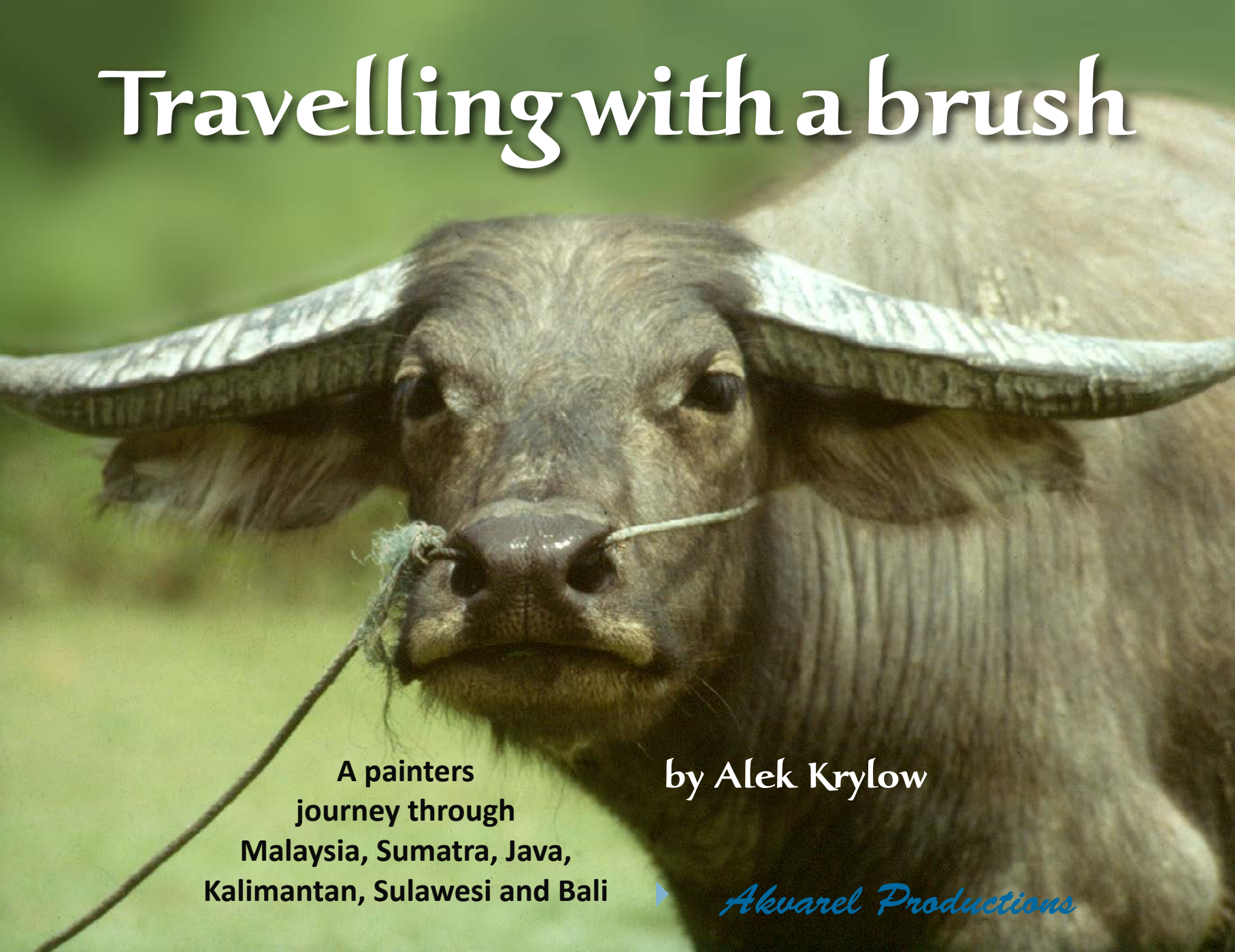


Travelling with a brush



A painters
journey through
Malaysia, Sumatra, Java,
Kalimantan, Sulawesi and Bali

by Alek Krylow



Akvarel Productions

Travelling with a brush

in the summer of 1996



I travelled for 84 days. I returned home with over 100 drawings in my sketch book, 9 portraits of people i met, 10 watercolours and 1300 photographs.

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Sumatra



15. JUNE

The five hour with the “flying boat” from Penang to Belawan, Medan entry port went without incident. As soon as the boat docked, the local baggage crew forced their way into the cabin and began offering their services to all non backpackers. They knew it was a waste of time with backpackers. Passage through immigration and customs was slow. The custom officers went thoroughly through all luggage, inspecting malaria pills and tooth paste tubes.

A free bus drove us to Medan. In the bus I sat next to Chris, a New Zealander, teaching English in Malaysia. When we stopped in Medan a new team of “helpers” forced their way onto the bus and started grabbing at peoples baggage. I held on to mine. Outside each helper seemed to know of a place to stay. I stuck close to Chris who was chatting to them in Indonesian.

We decided to take a room offered by one of them. They had a rickshaw ready and we were cycled there in style. The room was very basic. Two beds and a fan. Shower and toilet along the corridor. 6 dollars (12.000 rupees) each. We took it. After installing ourselves, we found a rickshaw back into town for one third of the original price. Feeling a bit peckish we went for a Chinese meal. Chris knew his Chinese food and we had a good meal. Back at the digs, we watched some television, played cards and went to bed.

16. JUNE

The next morning I decided to make my way to Bukit Lawang.

Bukit Lawang is a settlement on the edge of the jungle west of Medan. It is famous for an Orang Utan rehabilitation center started by a couple of Dutch women. There are several places in Indonesia where such places have been started. They are necessary in preserving this threatened species of apes.

When young and very small, Orang Utan apes are cuddly and often given as presents to children in rich households. But small apes grow into bigger apes. Apes which become stronger and more fearsome. In the past these larger apes were let loose in the forest, where they, not being able to fend for themselves either died of starvation or were killed by predators. They had been brought up in homes where there was no danger from other animals and where food was served at all times.

The idea with the rehabilitation centers was to have places where the unwanted apes could be delivered and gradually returned back to nature by people who understood the problems.

One of those at the hotel offered to drive me to the bus station. I caught the bus which drove me to another town. I had to change buses here. While waiting for the next bus I saw some sights which I will never forget. There were quite a few people with terrible afflictions. There were some who lacked noses or had other large holes in their faces. There were people who

had no legs and sat on a board with wheels. They could move around by pushing themselves round with their hands.

When the bus arrived, my rucksack was thrown, with some of the others onto the roof. I found a place on the back seat between five others. People were just piling in. I could see an open window but the back door soon disappeared. It got a bit cooler when the bus drove off. Before we left the station we made three stops to pick up more people. I began to feel claustrophobic but continued to look straight at the open window and think of some open field. As soon as someone along the road stuck their hand out, the bus stopped and they were picked up. Some young chaps climbed onto the roof, even though it though it was forbidden. Then someone started smoking. Someone asked me where I came from and the attention turned to me. As we talked, others pushed their way onto the bus and I lost sight of those I was talking to. This must be hell on earth. We arrived at some village and the bus slowed down to walking pace. All I could see were tops of palm trees and TV aerials moving slowly past. A queue of cars built up behind the bus. People were walking faster than we were driving. Then the bus turned off and I could see that we had been following a funeral procession.

When we arrived at Bukit Lawang, someone came up to me and asked me if I had a place to stay. He had a room for 7 dollars. Even though the currency in Indonesia is Rupee most of the transactions, especially with tourists are in US Dollar. He took me to a large clean room with a double bed, mosquito net, a shower and a toilet. Quite a change from the night before – so

I took it. Outside was a river flowing under a hanging bridge. Next door a restaurant with good food. I decided to stay for a couple of days. When I unpacked my rucksack I found that a watch, a penknife and a couple of drawing pens were missing from a surface pocket. When I arrived the river was quite calm, with people swimming and larking about in the water. By nine in the evening the river was a rushing muddy torrent. It must have been raining up in the mountains. (fig. 15)

15 Guest houses along the river at Bukit Lawang.



17. JUNE

The morning started overcast but soon cheered up. I decided to make a watercolour of the houses across the river. (fig. 16)

16 Houses at Bukit Lawang.



I finished in good time and as I had a couple of hours left before visiting the Orang Utan reservation I drew some other houses in ink. To get to the reservation one has to cross the river in a small “ferry boat”. (fig. 17) When we had all crossed to the other side, we were taken into the forest. The rain started. We climbed a wet slippery, muddy path to where the apes were fed. Two warders climbed onto a wooden platform amongst the trees and began banging plastic cups on the wooden floor. It wasn’t long before there was a rustling in the tree tops and the first red-brown Orang Utan appeared, followed closely by another. Cautiously they swung from the trees and sat down on the platform. They were given some milky substance to drink and bananas to eat. (fig. 18-23)

17 Ferry boat to the Orang Utan reservation.



18-23 Orang Utan at the reservation in Bukit lawang.



After a while a larger ape appeared. This one was 30 years old and had been free for about 2 years. It stayed in the tree tops. The warden tried to coax it down but it stayed put.

The Orang Utans at the center have come from zoos, circuses and rich families. At first they are kept in cages for about 2 years then they are set free in secure areas of the forest where they come to these platforms for free handouts of food. With time they learn to fend for themselves. We were told that there are about 3000 Orang Utans in this part of the jungle.

On the way back from the feeding area we were surprised by three Orang Utans close to the path. They were less than two meters away. I took so many photographs that I used up my