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You'll be hooked!

By **LEONG SIOK HUI**

It's hair-raising and mind-blowing! Check out the world's highest 'iron road' on Sabah's Mt Kinabalu.

I'm plastered to a near-vertical rock face at 3,800m high and looking down into a seemingly bottomless pit. My Jello-like feet teeter on footholds the size of digestive cookies.

Then, whoosh comes the lashing wind. I hug the rock so tight, I could almost kiss it. The butterflies are waging a Cold War in my stomach . . .



A natural high: A via ferrata allows trekkers to climb impressive cliffs without climbing skills.

Then somebody yells: "Check out the view!" I draw a deep breath, turn my head around and take in the awesome sight of a brilliant blue sky flecked with cotton-candy clouds and a rich, verdant valley dotted by matchbox-sized buildings.

It's hard not to feel like you're on top of the world!

I'm on Asia's first and the world's highest *via ferrata* or "iron road" on top of Mt Kinabalu, Sabah.

Launched in mid-December 2007, the Mountain Torq Via Ferrata is a mountain "trail" made up of iron rungs, palettes (footholds), cables and rails wrapped around the north face of Mt Kinabalu.

Basically, you put on a harness and are hooked onto a steel cable that lines the 3,200m to 3,800m route. Then, you clamber and crawl from point A to B.

So, why do it?

Because it gives non-rock climbers a chance to scale awe-inspiring peaks and dramatic cliffs. Plus, aspiring rock climbers get to experience "Big Wall" climbs minus the skills.

(A big wall has multi-pitch routes and takes two or more days to climb using specialised gear like pitons

(metal spikes hammered into rock cracks), hooks and aiders (nylon step ladders.)

An initiative of Sabah-based Adventure Factors Mountaineering Centre Sdn Bhd (AFMC), the Mountain Torq Via Ferrata starts at Mt Kinabalu's Panar Laban rock face (about 3,300m) and reaches its highest point at 3,800m.



A suspension bridge between mountains.

First, you need to footslog up to AFMC's base at Pendant Hut where you can choose three routes – Walk the Torq, The Low's Peak Circuit or The Preamble.

An easy two- to three-hour scramble, Walk the Torq is great for a taste of what via ferrata is all about. After that, you can pluck up the courage to try the more daunting Low's Peak Circuit and The Preamble.

I tried the Low's Peak Circuit where climbers hike up to Low's Peak (4,095m). While descending, you can take a via ferrata detour to explore the nooks and crannies of the mountain plateau. The 1,000m climb takes up to five hours but the views are awesome! The Preamble takes you upwards, in the opposite direction of Low's Peak Circuit.

A short history

The name via ferrata, or via ferrate (plural) comes from an Italian word *Via Attrezzata* (fully equipped road), meaning routes that are secured by hand rails, ladders, cables or lifelines. Though via ferrata has always been synonymous with the Dolomites in Italy, the first generation of via ferrata was born in Austria in 1843. (The Dolomites are part of the Alps in northeastern Italy.)

In 1914, the first via ferrata routes were created in the Dolomites by the Italian army to help move troops and equipment (including artillery) from one side of a mountain to the other. After the war, the via ferrate were abandoned by the army and the local people maintained them.

By 1936, the first via ferrata created for tourists was built by the Italian Alpine Club. Today, there are more than 300 via ferrata routes around the world – in Italy, Germany, France, Austria, Switzerland and Slovenia.

Mountain Torq boasts the highest via ferrata in the world (3,800m), while the second highest via ferrata is in the Dolomites at 3,343m.

Why do a via ferrata on Kinabalu?

The idea for a via ferrata on Kinabalu came from a group of passionate rock climbers and trekkers: Sabahans and AFMC directors Eric Wong and Tan Beng Lee, as well as Singaporeans Wilfred Tok and Lim Chin

Thiam.

“We started with the idea of introducing people to rock climbing. It’s hard to attract people because they think rock-climbing is tough and requires a lot of skills,” says Tok, an AFMC founder.

“We thought via ferrata would be an easy way to introduce people to the mountaineering sport.”



A scary rope crossing. — RABANI H. M. AYUB

An expert climber and senior instructor at the Singapore Mountaineering Federation, Tok, 39, has been honing his climbing skills on Kinabalu’s challenging rock faces for 10 years.

“We were coming here almost every year and realised the potential for climbing is great,” adds Tok who has been rock-climbing for 19 years.

Eventually, Tok also started conducting basic mountain rescue courses for Kinabalu Park rangers and formed a good rapport with Sabah Parks officials.

Apart from the via ferrata, AFMC also runs Sports Climbing Level 1 (top-rope climbing) and Level 2 (lead climbing), and Sport Climbing multi-pitch courses, based on the Singapore Mountaineering Federation’s syllabus which is endorsed by the UIAA (International Mountaineering and Climbing Federation).

“Our main idea is to educate locals to get them into this sport (rock-climbing) and the community to develop rock-climbing and mountaineering in Sabah,” says Tok who picked up his technical climbing skills in the Southern Alps of New Zealand and the French Alps.

Who can attempt the via ferrata?

Basically, anyone from ages nine to 70. For kids, you have to be a minimum of 1.3m tall. For the Low’s Peak Circuit and The Preamble attempts, you need to be as fit as a fiddle.

As Tok says, “If you can hike from Kinabalu HQ to Laban Rata (3,272m) in less than six hours, you’re ready to tackle Low’s Peak Circuit.”

“Ultimately, via ferrata is about discovering your spirit of adventure – not many people realise they have it within themselves to push their own boundaries,” adds AFMC’s sales and marketing director Quek I-Gek.

The petite and spunky Quek , who is also Tok’s wife, is an avid mountaineer. “It’s about conquering your fears and taking the plunge,” she says.

Bruises, scrapes and rattled nerves aside, my first via ferrata experience ranks top on my list of outdoor adventures.

And that combo of fear, highs and euphoria is totally addictive!

Additional information

For more details on Mountain Torq's via ferrata and to find authorised agents, visit www.mountaintorq.com, tel: +60 88 268 126, fax: +60 88 269 126 or e-mail: enquiry@mountaintorq.com.

PRICE RM260 per person for Walk the Torq and RM380 for Low's Peak Circuit and The Preamble (price quoted is only for activities and not the Kinabalu Park permits, Sabah Parks guides and lodging on Laban Rata or at Pendant Hut).

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