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iron road

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Conquering Mount Kinabalu's Iron Road

If you want a truly Asian escape climbing the world's highest via ferrata will get you far far away from the hustle and bustle, stress and worry, of your daily routine. And the great thing, writes Floyd Cowan, is just about anyone can experience the thrill of being high on Mount Kinabalu.

When I first climbed Mount Kinabalu in the mid-1990s I was told that it was a relatively easy climb and no special training or equipment was required. Those local ladies carrying heavy loads up the mountain did make it look easy. Somewhat less acclimatised and with no recent mountain climbing experience I did find it a bit of a challenge, but far from being an insurmountable one. However, once I got to the top, I was thrilled at having made it and while watching the sun come up I fully understood why people climb mountains.

It is probably for very much the same reasons that people are taking up the new challenge on Mount Kinabalu, climbing the world's highest via ferrata. Built on Panar Laban rock face it starts at 3,400m and ends at 3,800m. The next highest via ferrata, Marmolada West Ridge, is found in the Italian Dolomites and its highest point is 3,343m.

Height Makes the Difference

Marion Pfister of Munich, Germany who has climbed both, explains the differences: "Mountain Torq's via ferrata is easy and can be done by everyone. What makes the big difference is the height. It is also a completely different landscape and climate."

There are about 500 via ferrate in the world, predominately in Italy, Germany, France, Austria, Slovenia, Switzerland, Spain the United States and Canada.

Wilfred Tok, Founder of Mountain Torq Sdn Bhd (MT) states, "Aside from its record-breaking height, the launch of Mountain Torq's via ferrata at Mount Kinabalu is also significant for the fact that it is Asia's newest mountaineering sport."

What is a Via Ferrata?

A via ferrata (Italian meaning 'iron road') is a protected mountain path consisting of a series of rungs, rails and cables that are built into the rock face allowing more people to access scenic sections of the mountains that otherwise would only be accessible to rock climbers and mountaineers.

"The exhilaration, breathtaking scenery and sense of personal conquest you experience on a via ferrata are guaranteed to give you something to smile about for a long time," says I-Gek Quek Marketing Director for Mountain Torq, the company that prepares and leads the climbers up the via ferrata. I-Gek says that navigating the via ferrata is not quite the same as rock climbing. "Although they both occur in the same area and in the same environment," she explains, "via ferrata climbing is easier than rock climbing and does not require that you have any previous experience."

Afraid of Heights?

Mountain Torq, in Sabah, Malaysia, enables climbers and non-climbers to experience the thrill of mountain climbing while taking in the spectacular surroundings. Anyone between 10 and 70, who are fit and healthy, not afraid of heights and want to experience the mountain in a whole new way can climb. “Oh and by the way,” adds Wilfred, “you also have to be at least 1.3m tall.”

Being afraid of heights doesn't deter everyone such as Chris M'connell of the UK points out, “The experience was exceptional. I have a fear for height. However, it was incredibly safe, the views, amazing and I could not think of a more professional outfit to conquer my fear.”

No Experience Required

Asked if people need any climbing experience Wilfred responds, “Absolutely not! If you can climb a ladder, you can climb Mountain Torq.”

That's not to say that you are going to be set free on the mountain. “You and your group will be assigned a Mountain Torq trainer. Our trainers are there to give you a full safety briefing and training on how to use the safety devices. They are also there to climb with you, provide tips on how to negotiate the more difficult obstacles, as well as highlighting some of the spectacular sights along the way.”

Though some people would like to climb the via ferrata without a Mountain Torq trainer I-Gek says, “Sorry, but due Sabah Park regulations, a Mountain Torq trainer is required to accompany you at all times. You will have to be prepared to join other via ferrata climbers with the maximum group size of 10 for ‘Walk the Torq’ and six for ‘Low's Peak Circuit / The Preamble’.

Being Prepared

Be prepared to start early, as the start time is between 5:30am to 7:30am. But don't worry about sleeping in as the invigorating mountain air and the sense of anticipation will energise you and defeat any fatigue you experienced climbing Kinabalu. You should plan a couple of easy days once you get down the mountain to savour the experience and rest your aching muscles.

Mountain Torq's huts and activities are located above 3,200m on Panar Laban rock face which meanings hiking for five to seven hours from Mt Kinabalu Park Headquarters. Once your reach the Laban Rata rock slab, which houses a group of mountain lodges including Mountain Torq's hut, a short 10-15 minute walk will lead you to one of Mountain Torq's starting points.

The routes were designed with beginner to intermediate climbers in mind. Mountain Torq has a via ferrata route to match everyone's ability and endurance. Walk the Torq, the beginner's route, will let the climber take their first experience along the granite walls of Mt Kinabalu. This is a journey of two to three hours.

Breathtaking Views

Low's Peak Circuit or The Preamble, the intermediate routes, will take the climber on a four to five-hour journey to experience the mountain's breathtaking heights and sights.

“The diversity of via ferrata routes means there is something for everyone,” says Wilfred, “whether he or she is 10 or 70, a keen mountaineer or a casual holidaymaker.”

You will be climbing a major mountain and the Mountain Torq team strongly advise you to be physically fit. The Alpine Guides Association suggests: “The best preparation for mountain sports always involves good amounts of cardiovascular exercise outdoors (running, cycling, mountain biking etc) and getting out for long days in the hills whenever possible.”

Mountain Torq recommends you participate in cardiovascular sports at least two sessions a week, with each session being a minimum of two hours and you should start training at least two months before you start your Mt Kinabalu adventure.

As Far Down as Up

I found that climbing the mountain wasn't so much of a problem I had done a lot of running prior to going, but unfortunately it was all on flat terrain. It was coming down that ultimately lead to the aches and pains I later experienced. Going down I put strain on muscles not much used to such activity. When you are preparing for the climb it is good thing to remember that you will walk just as far down the mountain as you do going up.

To check out how mountain fit you are, go to <http://www.alpine-guides.com/fitness.htm> for further details.

Simply Yes!

Mountain Torq provides all the technical safety equipment required for the activities and a trainer who will let you know what to expect.

Your trainer will meet you at Pendent Hut between 3:00pm and 4:00pm for your briefing. He will familiarise you with the via ferrata equipment, conduct an initial via ferrata practice round and tell you how to get to your meeting point for your chosen activity.

Does everyone have to attend the briefing? “Quite simply, yes,” says I-Gek, “You must attend the briefing.”

Attend the briefing and don't miss the climb, it is something you will always remember.

Quotes

BOX

WHAT MOUNTAIN TORQ OFFERS

Mountain Torq's offerings on Mt Kinabalu include the following:

? Via Ferrata climbing

- o Walk the Torq — 2-3 hrs
- o Low's Peak Circuit — 4 to 5 hrs
- ? Sports & Rock climbing
- ? Rappelling and Rope Ascending
- ? Dormitory style accommodations at Pendant Hut (3,270m) and Sayat Sayat hut (3,668m)

BOX

What do I need to pack?

For personal items, here's a checklist of the minimum essential items on that you will need to bring:

- ? Raincoat or waterproof jacket
- ? Warm clothing like fleece jacket, hiking pants
- ? Change of clothes (you may not want to sleep in what you sweat in!)
- ? Cap / beanie / head scarf (helps prevent heat loss, especially at night, so you can have a more cosy night's rest)
- ? Gloves
- ? A small / lightweight towel
- ? Personal toiletries
- ? Refillable water bottle
- ? Torchlight (preferably a head torch)
- ? Your camera!
- ? Comfortable covered trail/ hiking shoes
- ? Energy snacks e.g. chocolate, nuts, biscuits, sweets, energy bars
- ? Sun protection - Sunglass, sun screen lotion, SPF lip balm (beware of the strong UV rays)
- ? A small backpack to hold your things
- ? A rain cover for your backpack
- ? And of course, AN ADVENTUROUS SPIRIT!

Why Mountain Torq?

The via ferrata on Mt Kinabalu is like a necklace / torq adorning the mountain. In perfect conditions, when the rising sunlight hits it at the right angle, it can be seen sparkling amongst the blue azure sky and austere grey granite rocks. Thus the name Mountain Torq

Pendant hut's name

As a necklace is always paired up with a pendant, thus Mountain Torq's via ferrata is paired up with Pendant Hut. Serving as a haven which beacons to the climbers on Mt Kinabalu.

What is a TORQ / TORC?

Torcs are a type of Scythian and Celtic necklaces, produced in the European Iron Age, from circa the 8th century BC to the 3rd century AD.

The torc was a sign of nobility and high social status: a decoration awarded to warriors for their deeds in battle, as well as a divine attribute, as adorned by Celtic gods.