





# Return to *Innocence*

The waterways of Sabah and Sarawak transport *Tamara Thiessen* into the island's natural and cultural wonderlands.

< *It's 4.30 in the morning and I am woken up by what sounds like a troop of Borneo pygmy elephants trampling the corridors outside my room. In actual fact, it's fellow masochists springing into life at this ungodly hour to see some Borneo beasts at their very best.*

And soon, as the longboat probes the mangroved estuaries and water hyacinth-dabbed oxbow lakes of the Lower Kinabatangan river, we get to spot several of Borneo's most awe-inspiring species, including those most under threat.

A dozen beer-bellied, big-nosed, proboscis monkeys (*Nasalis larvatus*) sit timidly, high in the trees. While a shaggy orange-haired, gregarious orang utan hangs from his perch: fists full of fruit, he has what could easily be taken as a grin on his face. We also hear, though don't see, an agile gibbon, whose whooping song is one of the most evocative of the forest, audible up to 2km away. The other sound that thrills is that of the hornbills swooshing overhead, the powerful birds earn their name from their large casque-topped colourful beaks.

The 200 plus bird species in the Kinabatangan floodplain include all eight of Borneo's hornbill species: from the white-crowned and bushy-crested to the wreathed, wrinkled and oriental pied varieties, and the two largest kinds: the helmeted (*Buceros vigil*) and rhinoceros hornbills (*Buceros rhinoceros*).



Orang utan

The rareness of such sightings heightens the intensely magical mood of these wildlife watching trips on the oxbow lakes: the tranquil, disconnected river bends distended in immense pools, teeming with insect and bird life. As the sun rises, we make our way through pleats of rising mist, swerving between swathes of mauve hyacinths.

The 560km-long Sungai Kinabatangan is Malaysia's second longest river. The journey to reach it starts in a speedboat, from Sabah's north coast city of Sandakan, whose creaky water villages throw rich hues and reflections over Sandakan Bay, dotted with old world fishing vessels and islands.

*"A dozen beer-bellied, big-nosed, proboscis monkeys sit high in the trees"*

Over the next 40 minutes, we teeter on our seats as we whizz along the coast before darting up the Lower Kinabatangan. There's a sense of leaving this planet and journeying to a uniquely special place, as we swerve around the huge serpentine bends of the Kinabatangan's widening floodplain. Occasionally the boat grinds to a halt, as our eagle-eyed guides spot crocodiles, orang utans and even a luminous green pit viper.

The mangrove and freshwater swamp environments of the Lower Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary are not just home to monkeys and apes, but also an important habitat for pygmy elephants, Sumatran rhinoceroses, Wallace's hawk-eagles, kingfishers and Storm's storks. WWF reports it one of only two places in the world where 10 primate species can be found; you have to stay at least a night to fully wallow in its wonders and maximise your chance of sightings.

Towards sunset we board longboats for further wildlife excursions through the fig-, orchid- and rattan-entwined riverine environment. On a late night sortie, the mangrove trees are lit up like Christmas trees, as male fireflies turn on a glittering love display: using their enzyme-altered, luminous green-yellow abdomens to attract mates.

I leave without having seen a top-of-the-wish-list critter – a pygmy elephant – but vowing to return for another go.

*"As the sunrises, we make our way through pleats of rising mist, swerving between swathes of mauve hyacinths"*

From Sukau in the Kinabatangan area, we travel south to another of Borneo's biodiversity hotspots, the Danum Valley Conservation Area. This 438 sq km zone is home to one of the largest remaining areas of old growth rainforest. Also to 4,000 orang utans: the world's largest population of the primate, which only live in Borneo and Sumatra.

A stay at the Borneo Rainforest Lodge offers an impressive inventory of possible wildlife sightings: gibbons, slow lorises, ET-eyed western tarsiers, bearded pigs, sambar deer, rhinoceros hornbills, clouded leopards and a wondrous diversity of birds.

One morning while eating breakfast, there is a cacophony as a huge mob of red leaf monkeys (also known as maroon



*Orang Ulu lady with long earlobes*

langurs) invade the surrounding walkways and trees. Their punk rocker, fiery orange hairstyle and nimbleness make them natural naughty little monkeys.

The following day I get the most unexpected buzz. Returning from a solo trek through the spectacular Canopy Walk – a 26-metre-high forest trapeze through the tips of the towering silvery grey mengaris, or honeybee, trees - I stumble upon an orang utan grazing in the lower branches of a tree. The whole rain forest is alive with natural wonders.

Leaving Danum, we narrowly miss seeing a pygmy elephant – the flash of a tail and cushion-sized paw print at the side of the road is the only evidence of its passage, but it is enough to feel some of the wonder of its endangered existence. Hunted for their tusks, there remain just a few hundred of these unique durian-loving creatures.

From Lahad Datu, we fly to Kuching, capital of Malaysian Borneo's southern state of Sarawak. With its airs of an old Chinese trading town, the city's charm emanates from the Sungai Sarawak river. Little peak-capped tambang boats ply the river, sporting Lipton Tea and other faded signs on their wooden



*Turtle, Selingan Island*

< roofs. We climb aboard to visit the downstream markets, dine in restaurants of the Malay kampung – the villages on the opposite river bank – and float downstream past the golden cupolas of the old mosque, Masjid Lama, a perfect piece of Arabia on the Kuching skyline.

A day trip to the Taman Bako National Park north of Kuching turns into yet another moving, mystical voyage, as we speed along the Sungai Tabo to arrive in this mangrove and peat swamp-filled haven for pendulous nosed proboscises. Even with only a few hours on our hands, we manage to complete the return trek to Telok Pandan Kecil, take a dip, and spot the famous cobra-headed rock formation, the Sea Stack off the coast.

*“Mangrove trees are lit up like Christmas trees, as male fireflies turn on a glittering love display”*

The next day we head south, towards the Indonesian border. The Sri Aman district is the heartland of Sarawak’s most populous tribe, the Iban, and some of the most remote spellbinding river journeys into former head-hunting territory. Along the way, we make a pit stop at Serian, a small market town distinguished by its Big Durian statue and undercover tamu (market). Here we buy fruit and delicious pisang goreng – fried banana.

Soon we come to the jetty on the Batang Ai dam. This is the launch pad for the longhouse style Hilton Batang Ai, and for many remote longhouse communities deep within the park.

The Iban are the most incredibly boat savvy people, manoeuvring their way up river, whatever the conditions, during the wet season’s rising waters and currents, or as now, the dry season’s low water. On outings with Iban trekkers and guides – Nam, Apau and Apong – we go foraging for fish and edible plants, barbecuing them in hollowed bamboo.

Though we get only to hear, not see, orang utans, there isn’t any room for disappointment: on deep forest walks and two-to four-hour longboat journeys, I feel I have come as close as modernly possible to reliving a slice of Redmond O’Hanlon’s 1983 classic *Into the Heart of Borneo* adventure.

*“I stumble upon an orang utan grazing in the lower branches of a tree. The whole rain forest is alive with natural wonders.”*

You cannot expect to experience all Borneo’s natural treasures in one trip, and so on a more recent visit in October, I venture back to the Kinabatangan. The optimism of a pygmy elephant sighting is high at this time of year. Sure enough, on one late afternoon cruise, we encounter a large herd of adults and babies, grazing, bathing and swilling ebulliently on the muddy riverbanks. The charismatic creatures seem unfazed by our presence and I get to take photos from within an arm’s reach.

As the fight continues to preserve what the WWF calls ‘the least-understood elephants in the world’ – and their habitat – this encounter, along with so many unique Borneo memories, continues to stay with me. ●



Mount Kinabalu



Iban Longhouse



Pygmy elephant



Iban fisherman

# < ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW: MALAYSIAN BORNEO

by Cox & Kings Far East expert – Neill Prothero

## THE BACKGROUND

**LOCATION** This fascinating region in south-east Asia is home to colourful tribal groups, a spectacular diversity of wildlife and rivers twisting through the jungles of the oldest rainforest on Earth.

**LANGUAGES** Malay, English and numerous tribal languages.

**POPULATION** 18.6 million.

**TIME ZONE** GMT +8 hours.

**CURRENCY** Malaysian ringgit (MYR / RM) £1 = RM4.8

**VISAS** A visa is not required for entry into Malaysia providing your stay does not exceed three months.

**POTTED HISTORY** Long known as a trading centre between China and India, Borneo became part of the Majapahit empire between the 14th and 15th centuries. The island later came under both British and Dutch colonial control, including the reign of the 'White Rajahs', before invading Japanese forces ravaged the island during the second world war. The states of Sabah and Sarawak have been part of Malaysia since 1963.

**TOP TIP** Be sure to include a visit to a longhouse, where you will be introduced to the traditional lifestyle and culture of the Iban community, and enjoy dance performances with a steady flow of tuak (home brew rice wine).

## BEFORE YOU TRAVEL

### WHEN TO GO

March to October is the best time to visit. Rain falls year round but mainly during the November-February rainy season. It is hot and humid all year, but cooler in the highlands.

### WHAT TO READ

*Into the Heart of Borneo*

by Redmond O'Hanlon

Accompanied by three trackers, the naturalist Redmond O'Hanlon sets out on a long river voyage into the interior of Borneo's tropical jungle, hoping to reach the Tiban massif.

*Wild Borneo* by Nick Garbutt, J, Cede Prudente and Sir David Attenborough  
Illustrated with more than 200 stunning photographs, *Wild Borneo* is a celebration of the splendour and diversity of the island's natural history.

### FIND OUT MORE

[www.sabahtourism.com](http://www.sabahtourism.com)

[www.sarawaktourism.com](http://www.sarawaktourism.com)

Both websites feature a wealth of information on accommodation, culture, nightlife and destinations.

## THROUGH A WRITER'S EYES

*"When right in the middle of Borneo, you thought you were in a different world."*

Sir David Attenborough



### WHAT TO WATCH

*Borneo*

A documentary from 1937 following an expedition by Martin and Osa Johnson showing the terrain, flora, fauna and lifestyle of Borneo.

## BEING THERE

### WHERE TO STAY

**Hilton Batang Ai Longhouse Resort**  
Accessible only by boat, the resort is built in the style of a traditional Sarawak longhouse. An eco-friendly property, the hotel uses recycled materials and sensitive lighting.

**Borneo Rainforest Lodge, Danum Valley**  
With a stunning backdrop of a thick virgin rainforest hanging over a meandering river, Borneo Rainforest Lodge offers comfortable accommodation in stilted bungalows.

**Kinabatangan Riverside Lodge**  
Reached by boat from Sandakan, the Kinabatangan Riverside Lodge is a

## SET YOUR COMPASS

**Batang Ai** is located in the heart of Sarawak, east of Kuching, and is notable for the surrounding indigenous tribal culture and longhouses.

**The Danum Valley Conservation Area** contains the highest concentration of wild orang utans anywhere, and other endangered species, including Sumatran rhinos, Borneo pygmy elephants and clouded leopards.

**Kuching** is the laid-back coastal capital of Sarawak, with an attractive waterfront and access to Sarawak's pristine jungle.

**Sepilok** is one of only four orang utan sanctuaries in the world, set up in 1964 to protect orphaned, injured and captive orang utans and introduce them back into the wild.

**Kota Kinabalu National Park's forests** are some of the richest in the world, with more than 2,000 flowering plants, including the largest of them all, the rafflesia, and more than 300 bird species.

collection of semi-detached bungalows linked by walkways, surrounded by dense jungle and walking trails.

### WHAT TO EAT

Malaysian cuisine is influenced by its ethnic groups, chiefly Malay, Chinese and Indian, and in Borneo further by various tribal groups. Look out for manok pansoh, a traditional dish from the Iban of Sarawak consisting of chicken cooked in a bamboo tube together with mushrooms, lemongrass and tapioca leaves.

## TRAVEL WITH COX & KINGS

### RECOMMENDED TOUR

*Splendours of Borneo* – 13 days / 10 nights from £3,695 per person. Journey explores the cultural and natural attractions of Sabah and Sarawak.



**SARAWAK TOURISM BOARD**