

BRUNEI

by the numbers

BY TAMARA THIESSEN

Small, sultry and bejewelled, the Sultanate of Brunei on the island of Borneo combines oil well-deep wealth, high living standards and lavish architecture with age-old cultures and startling flora and fauna.

In the 15th century, the powerful Islamic trading post of “Bruni,” today known as Brunei, on Borneo’s northwest coast, ruled over the island. The moderate and modern Muslim nation still has dazzling riches – from the fifth-highest GDP in the world to jungle biodiversity. Its 161-kilometre shoreline packs in the best of Borneo: tropical rainforest, coastal mangroves and proboscis monkeys; lavish mosques, spellbinding water villages and spicy Malay cuisine. True to its name, Brunei Darussalam – “abode of peace” – is a serene and friendly place, and day tripping from its capital, Bandar Seri Begawan (BSB) is a breeze.

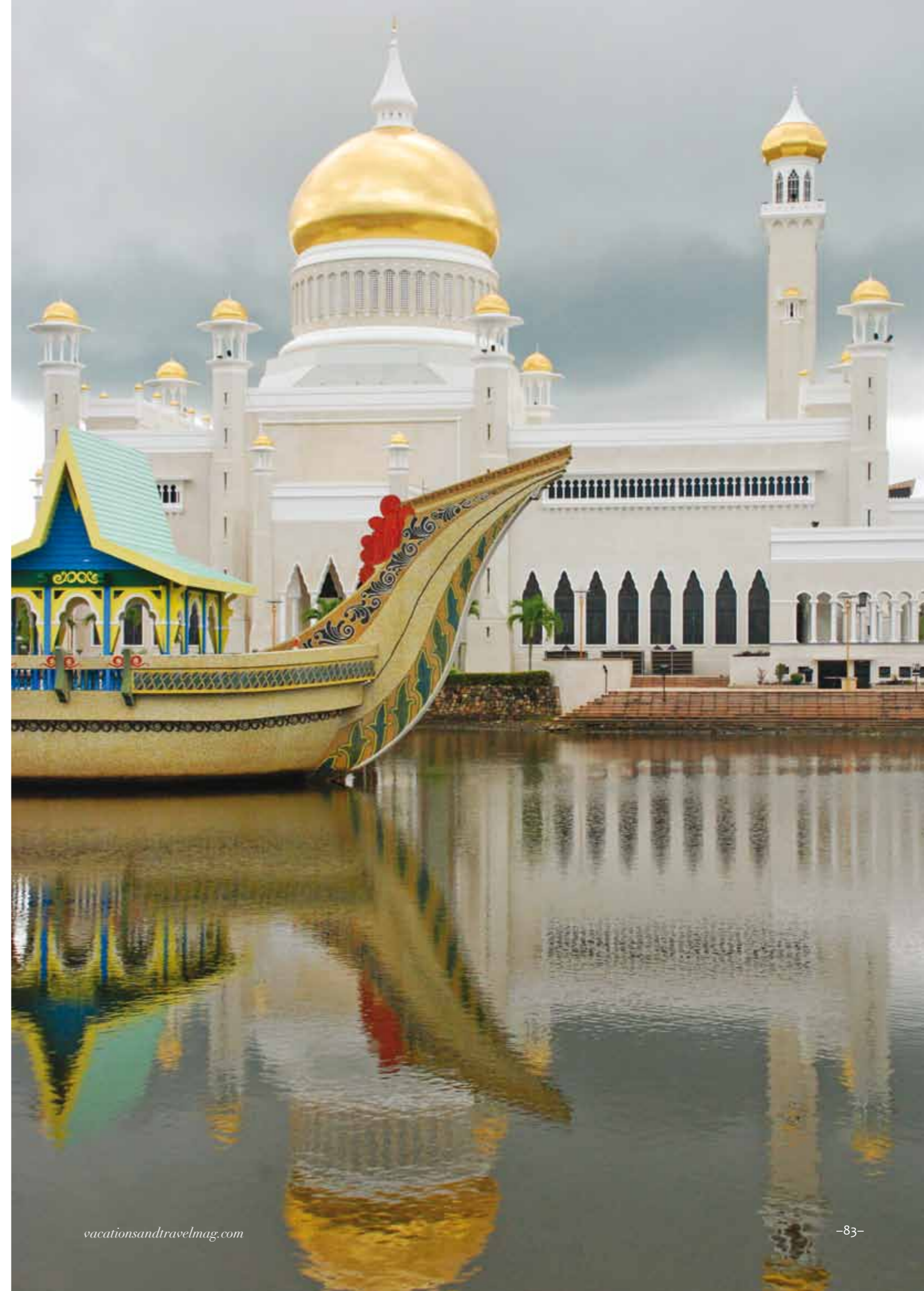
19.4 million

The wealth, in Australian dollars, of Brunei’s Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah. Once the world’s richest man, he has fallen a few rungs to

become simply one of its richest monarchs – *Forbes* places the oil-rich Sultan in second place to Thailand’s King Bhumibol Adulyadej. From Dorchester hotels in Europe to Australian cattle stations nearly as big as his kingdom, Bolkiah owns property worldwide in addition to the riches in his own country.

250

The height, in metres, of the Temburong canopy walk – a stainless-steel trapeze through the rainforests of Brunei’s only national park, it is reached along a two-kilometre boardwalk trek from the Ulu Temburong National Park headquarters. The structure has five ladders, interconnected by metal bridges, which take you to progressively greater heights. Best experienced in the early morning, the views extend over part of the “Heart of Borneo” conservation area – a 220,000-square-kilometre



reserve covering forests of Borneo's three nations: Brunei, Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak), and Kalimantan, Indonesia. Established in 2007, the cross-border conservation area harbours up to six percent of the world's biodiversity. Wildlife sightings in the Temburong Park include Bornean gibbons, macaques, civets, sun bears, pit vipers, hornbills and Rajah Brooke's Birdwing butterflies.

1 billion

The number of barrels of oil produced by Brunei's onshore Seria oilfields between 1929 and 1991, when the Billionth Barrel Monument was built. Five minutes from the south-coast town of Seria, its arched design and patterned tiles blend Islamic symbols with industrial architecture. Though oil still accounts for 88 percent of Brunei's exports, dwindling supplies are mounting the pressure to find alternatives. New economic hopes include the worldwide market for halal foods, tourism and knowledge-based industries. Nonetheless, the oil riches continue to offer travellers a boon – at 55 Brunei cents a litre, petrol costs nearly half that of neighbouring Malaysia and is even cheaper than water.

.75

The cost, in Australian dollars, for a serve of many of the Bruneian delicacies on offer at the Gadong market, one of the best *pasar malam* (night markets) in Borneo for both food and ambience. Held in a vast parking lot in the Gadong commercial district on the other side of the Sungai Brunei River, the outdoor eating theatre kicks off every evening at about 5 p.m. and continues through to midnight. Dozens of stalls sell Brunei's favourite snacks: banana leaf-wrapped portions of *nasi lemak* (rice filled with chicken, beef or anchovies and topped with spicy sambal sauce); grilled meats; and waxed brown paper cones filled with *nasi katok* (rice topped with fried chicken, beef or egg and spicy sauce). Finish off with some of the devastatingly delicious *kueh* (cakes and deserts), including *kueh wajid* – pounded Temburong hill rice is slow-cooked in palm sugar and coconut cream then wrapped in a banana leaf and steamed until the sugar caramelises.

FROM THE TREETOPS

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: The canopy walk in Temburong National Park gives you a bird's-eye view of the jungle; a monument commemorates Brunei's billionth barrel of oil; local weavers; the country's famed proboscis monkeys can be spotted in Temburong; mist rising over the National Park; street food at the Pasar Malam Gadong night market.

Opening spread: The lavish Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien Mosque.

6.427

The length, in kilometres, of the coast-hugging, Jack Nicklaus-designed championship golf course at the Empire Hotel & Country Club. Many people come to Brunei just for this award-winning 18-hole layout, which offers undulating fairways and jungle-fringed tropical landscapes overlooking the South China Sea. Located among the beaches of Jerudong, 13 kilometres north of BSB, it has won *Asian Golf Monthly's* "Best Golf Resort in the Asia Pacific" for two years running and features regularly in our stablemate, *Golf Vacations*.

300,000

The population of Brunei's water village, Kampong Ayer, one of the largest floating communities in the world. The watery suburbia, which is actually made up of 28 separate villages linked up by eight kilometres of stilted walkways, has mosques, schools, markets and a fire station. The latest addition, Kampong Bolkiah, is a high-tech community built from fireproof materials and equipped with an eco-sewage system and houses spaced nearly 10 metres apart – in other words, the exact opposite of its fire-prone predecessors. Kampong Ayer is most mesmerising at night, as boats whiz across the Brunei River leaving trails of coloured neon, evoking the 16th-century description of it as the "Venice of the East" by Italian historian, Antonio Pigafetta. Visit on a guided tour or take a water taxi from the city.

385

The average price, in Australian dollars, for a metre of Brunei's most precious hand-woven textile, the gold and silver threaded *kain tenunan beragi bertabur*. The intricately patterned brocades are an enduring feature of traditional dress in Brunei; a finished piece of cloth measures about 2.2 metres in length and a metre in width and can take up to a fortnight to complete. Shop for a large variety of *kain tenunan* at the Gadong mall, the markets and the riverside Arts and Handicrafts Centre on Jalan Residency. The latter is also the leading training institute, working to keep Brunei's centuries-old artisan skills alive.

1,788

The number of rooms at the Sultan's palace, Istana Nurul Iman. The largest residential palace in the world, it extends more than half a kilometre along the riverbank. Built in 1984 at a cost of AU\$388 million, it contains stables, a concert hall, helipads, several swimming pools, 200 bathrooms, a priceless art collection and many luxury toys including Boeing airplanes and helicopters. A keen equestrian and car buff, the Sultan also has 200 ponies and a 2,000-strong automobile collection of Rolls-Royces, Ferraris, McLaren F1s, Porsches and Bentleys. On a night cruise you will see the palace lit up like a fairytale thanks to some 55,000 light bulbs, powered



PAR FOR THE COURSE

Below, from left: On the green at the Empire Hotel & Country Club; sunset over the South China Sea.



by gas turbines. Failing that, you can view it from the public parking lot on Jalan Tutong, or adjacent parklands of Persiaran Damuan.

29

The number of sultans that have ruled Brunei since the 14th century. The 650-year-old unbroken dynasty is the longest lasting in the world. The magic number, 29, is matched in many architectural elements in Brunei, including the quantity of golden domes, steps and pillars at the opulent Masjid Jame'Asr Hassanil Bolkiah Mosque, built in 1992 to commemorate the 25th year of the current sultan's reign. It is also known as the Kiarong Mosque, after the suburb in which it is located, on the western side of the river.

3.3 million

The number of fragments of Venetian mosaic contained in the massive shimmering cupola of the older Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien Mosque. Built in 1958, the cream-and-gold edifice is like a magical apparition of stained glass, Shanghai granite and Italian marble, reflected in the surrounding lagoon alongside a replica of the royal barge.

Photography by Tamara Thiessen, David Kirkland and courtesy of Brunei Tourism.

travel facts

GETTING THERE

Singapore Airlines flies non-stop to its home base from Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Perth and Adelaide, with as little as a one-hour transit for a connecting flight to Brunei with its subsidiary SilkAir. 131-011; singaporeair.com

The low-cost alternative with AirAsia X from Sydney, Melbourne, Perth and the Gold Coast requires an overnight stay in Kuala Lumpur, before continuing to Brunei. 1300-760-330; airasia.com

Royal Brunei Airlines operates direct flights from Perth, Melbourne and Brisbane to Bandar Seri Begawan. 1300-721-271; bruneiair.com

WHEN TO GO

Though the average daily temperature lingers at an equatorial 28°C year-round, to avoid heavy rains visit during the dry season (southwest monsoon) from May to October.

WHERE TO STAY

Set within sprawling coastal grounds 13 kilometres north of BSB, the gold-plated, six-winged Empire Hotel & Country Club has 423 rooms – most with ocean-facing balconies – several swimming pools and restaurants, and crème de la crème sporting and spa facilities. 673/241-8888; theempirehotel.com

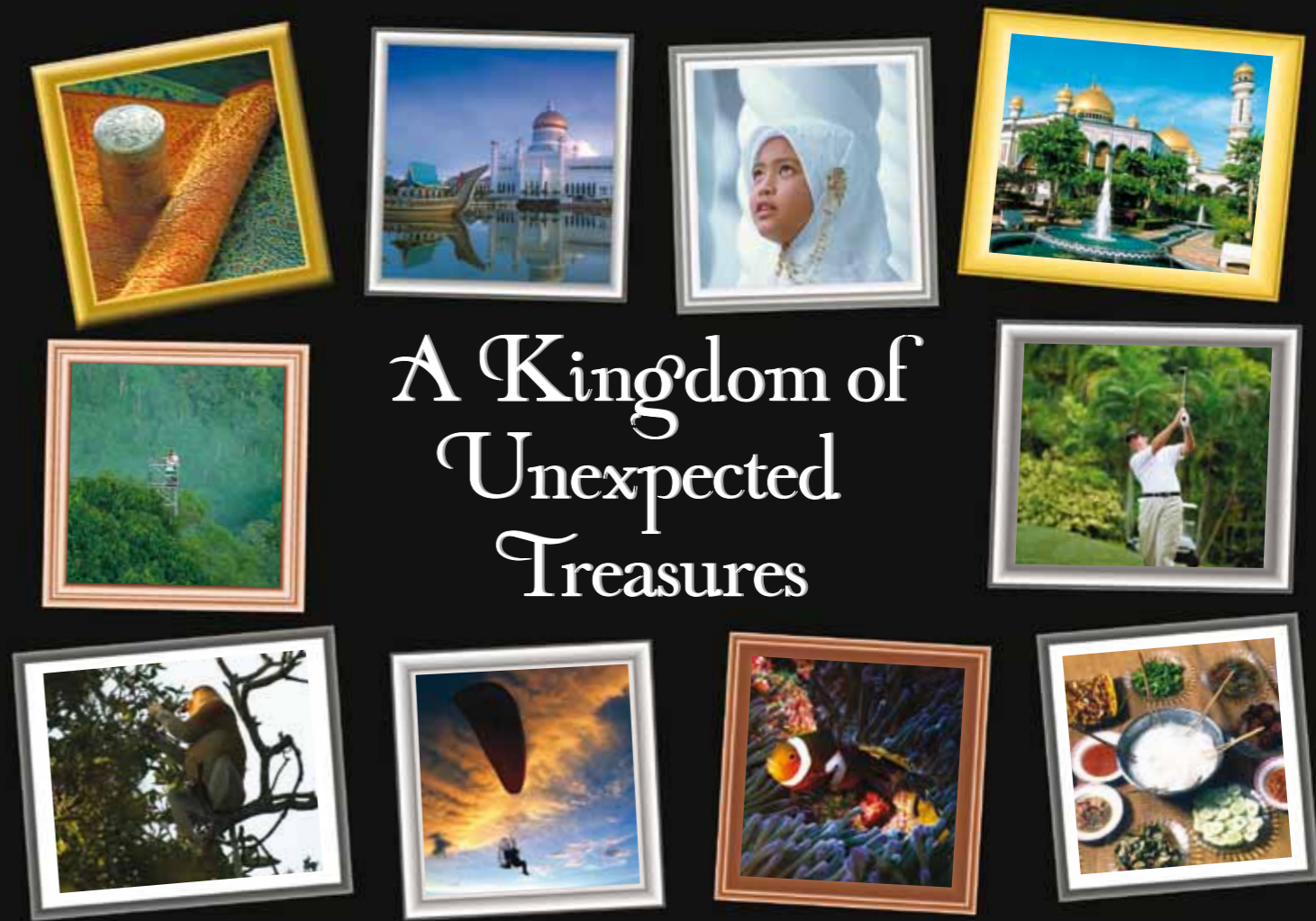
After a two-year overhaul, the 29-year-old Sheraton Utama morphed into a Radisson. A 10-minute walk from the CBD, it has good dining choices, a swimming pool and discreet places to down your duty free liquor (as Brunei rhymes with dry). 673/224-4272; radisson.com

FURTHER INFORMATION

For information about travel in Brunei, visit the website of the national tourist board website, bruneitourism.travel



www.bruneitourism.travel



A Kingdom of Unexpected Treasures

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