

# ECO ADVENTURES BORNEO TO BEWILD



It might be embroiled in a battle royale with the effects of deforestation, but the flora and fauna of Borneo – beautiful and diverse in equal measure – is fighting back...

➤ A small, motorised craft winds its way down the Kinabatangan River in northeast Malaysia. In it sits a group of people, motionless and silent but for the occasional click of a long-lens camera.

The subject of the photography? Well, take your pick. To the left of the boat, a family of proboscis monkeys make their way, one by one, along the branches of one of the millions of trees that make up the surrounding

rainforest. To the right, an adolescent orang-utan hangs athletically from another branch, his mother looking on contentedly as she chews on a tasty piece of bark. And then, but 10 feet from the boat itself, the water ripples almost violently as a pygmy elephant emerges energetically from its mid-morning soak in the river's refreshing waters.

If you hadn't already guessed, this particular part of 'northeast Malaysia' just happens to be on Borneo, the third largest island in the world (behind Greenland and New Guinea – Australia doesn't count because it's big enough to be considered a continent in itself) and an

ecological hotspot of the most impressive order. The aforementioned wildlife barely scratches the surface of an island on which, according to a World Wildlife Fund report of 2005, you will find 210 separate species of mammal – 44 of which can be found nowhere else on the planet. Throw in 15,000 species of flowering plants, 3,000 species of trees and 420 species of resident birds, and it is perfectly clear that Borneo is an island richer than most in biodiversity.

But, as we've come to expect from the earth's natural wonders, it's not all about pretty flowers and charismatic wildlife. Between 1994 and 2004, at least 361 brand new species of flora and fauna were discovered on Borneo – but, as the island's inhabitants diversify, so the pressure on their natural habitats grows. The WWF report, *Borneo: Treasure Island at Risk*, revealed that deforestation on the island is

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**BORNEO** THINGS TO DO

Beyond its vast array of wildlife and rainforest, Borneo has plenty else to offer. Hikers should be attracted by the chance to trek Mount Kinabalu, which at 4,095 metres is the highest peak between the Himalayas and New Guinea. From the mountains to the water, and the spectacular marine wildlife in the waters around Borneo (and the nearby Sipadan Island) will provide divers with a whole host of treats.

Not many people know this, but Borneo is also home to the largest cave system in the world. Clearwater Cave boasts one of the world's largest underwater rivers, while Deer Cave, two kilometres in length and never less than 90 metres high and wide, is thought to be the largest cave passage in the world. Those brave enough to give it a go are in for a real sight – the cave contains an estimated three million bats.

And, finally, singletons be warned – in terms of popularity, Borneo is one of the fastest-growing destinations for honeymooners.

**BORNEO** FAST FACTS


- Location**  
Part of the Malay Archipelago, southeast Asia
- Area**  
743,330 square kilometres
- Population**  
16 million
- Administration**  
The island is divided between Indonesia, Malaysia and the independent nation of Brunei
- Highest point**  
Mount Kinabalu, in Kinabalu National Park, Sabah, stands 4,095m



currently occurring at a rate of 1.3 million hectares per year (that's an area a third the size of Switzerland), while there is also concern about the widespread conversion of rainforest to palm oil plantation; this may help support the local populations in the short term, but the damage it is doing to the island's wildlife could have severely detrimental effects on Borneo's ability to attract tourists in the long term. Indeed, the WWF has estimated that, by as early as 2020, the island's orang-utan population may be too small to be genetically viable.

The good news is that work is well and truly under way to make sure this doesn't happen. The Sepilok Orang-utan Rehabilitation Centre, in the northeast state of Sabah, rescues orphaned orang-utans and trains them to again be able to survive in the wild – it has grown from modest beginnings back in the

1960s to be one of the island's leading tourist attractions in the present day.

And the industry itself is becoming increasingly aware of a need to behave in a way that encourages environmental sustainability. Ecotour firms operate across the island, with the Sukau Rainforest Lodge on the Kinabatangan River setting the standard. Built in a way that avoided the need for air conditioning, its water heating and power comes from solar panels, all cooking is done with harvested rainwater and its evening lighting is fuelled by recycled cooking oil. Food and provisions are sourced from the local Orang Sungai people, and the riverboats are run using pollution-free electric motors that can be recharged using solar panels. Which is why that group of people perched in awe of the monkeys and elephants can sit back, free from guilt, and enjoy Borneo in all its wild glory. 

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