

Escape to Borneo



It's a jungle out there, Hannah Cleaver discovers, as she delves into Malaysian Borneo and enters a world of wild monkeys, heavenly diving, and eco-tourism

PHOTOGRAPHY: CHRISTIAN JUNGEBLODT



Imagine waking up to this view



THIS PAGE: Malaysian Borneo is famous for its wild proboscis monkeys, such as this one, spotted during a river cruise near Sukau Rainforest Lodge



To get to the wilds of Malaysian Borneo you have to dive into the country’s most civilised part: Kuala Lumpur. The capital city is a great place to shrug off jetlag, start to appreciate the warm smiles, which are so easy to elicit from just about everybody – and dig into the enormous and delicious range of food the country has to offer.

Far from the hectic, crowded and dangerous Asian metropolis of some imaginings, KL, as it is universally called, is wonderfully manageable, even for first-time Asia visitors. The Golden Triangle in the centre is dominated by the gleaming glass high-rises of banks, hotels and the Petronas Twin Towers, owned by the state

oil company. Yet lunch comes from a man on the street corner, who hands over rice in a banana leaf cone and indicates a choice of curries to be spooned in from containers on a makeshift table.

KL is only the beginning though; the trip takes on a different flavour on the little plane which flies to Malaysian Borneo, landing in Kota Kinabalu, capital of the northernmost state of Sabah. Here it is not so much the people who fascinate, but the chance of catching a glimpse of our relatives in the increasingly hemmed-in pieces of wild. Borneo’s most famous natives are the orang-utans – but proboscis monkeys are actually more exciting for the wildlife cognoscenti.

Orang-utans can also be found in Sumatra, but proboscis monkeys only live in Borneo. They’re not too difficult to find either – a boat trip up the Kinabatangan River from Sandakan is

“The shaking of branches means a monkey has landed”

Gorgeous Hindu temples leak the mixed scents of jasmine flowers and milk offerings gently souring in the heat in Little India, while in Chinatown the shops invade the streets at night with stalls groaning with watches, bags and clothes. And Malay town? It’s called Kampung Baru, and must not be missed, with its market full of amazing and sometimes puzzling fruit, spices and dried fish – and an entire neighbourhood filled with delicious little places to eat. Feet tired from wandering the streets – including frequent detours to follow the nose for yet another stall meal – can be refreshed at one of the many foot massage parlours touting their services on the streets.

soon halted as the driver spots monkeys in the trees which rise up from muddy mangrove shores. After a couple of days, the eyes become alert to the shaking of branches, which means a monkey has leapt and landed. The proboscis monkeys ignore the boatload of spellbound travellers to squabble, munch leaves, groom insects off each other, doze in the heat or hoot an alarm when a rival group comes too close.

Motorised canoes departing from a number of jungle lodges near Sukau take visitors up tiny byways of brown water for a taste of the jungle. Even a short walk introduces a selection of creepy-crawlies. The mosquitoes are the first to register their irritating presence, and some of the larger centipedes are very interesting. But it is the leeches, surprisingly quick to crawl

Street food

Some might suggest the food in Malaysia is worth a trip on its own. We certainly enjoyed exploring the little outside eateries in KL, Kota Kinabalu and Sandakan. Indian cafes and restaurants offer 'pulled tea', black tea with sweet condensed milk poured from jug to cup with vigour and at such a distance that the tea froths with bubbles. It is best enjoyed with warm roti bread, served with little saucers of curry and daal. Malaysian curries tend to be spicy, often served on banana leaves and always delicious.

The fruit and vegetables in the street markets are fascinating, and a smile and curious question often leads to an explanation and tasting. The best meal we had was at the Kota Kinabalu Philippine market, a large section of which is given over to cooked fish stalls. Also try an ABC afterwards: condensed milk poured over shaved ice with a portion of beans, and all manner of odd sweets thrown on top – surprisingly tasty.



TOP: Kuala Lumpur's Petronas Twin Towers seen from Hotel Maya's sky lounge
ABOVE LEFT: The capital's central market
ABOVE RIGHT: Preparing tea in Kuala Lumpur's Golden Triangle district
LEFT: A Philippine night market in Kota Kinabalu
FAR LEFT: Kampung Baru market



LEFT: The perfect getaway for eco-aware divers

►► up rubber boots, and frighteningly able to push through clothing, which take the biscuit. Possibly the best thing to do is a night-time trip up the river. The eyes of a crocodile gleam at water level, fish owls perch on shadowy branches concentrating for prey, and a monitor lizard can be seen already asleep in a tree. Ask the guide to cut the motor and switch off the torches. The dark is scattered with fireflies, and the night is complete, its coolness and damp air making it deliciously smooth, stroking all the senses. Don't forget to breathe. Don't forget to close your mouth.

One explanation for the proliferation of wildlife along the Kinabatangan River could be that the jungle lining its banks are thin strips of wilderness surrounded by palm oil plantations and the animals are practically trapped there. Sadly, this seems to be true. The march of the plantations can be best appreciated from the air, their regular lines pushing back the bountiful chaos of untamed jungle. The palms sometimes interrupt the wall of jungle along the riverbank. Even right next door to an eco lodge,

"Hindu temples leak the mixed scents of jasmine flowers and milk offerings"

an area has been cleared – to the dismay of those who work there. "There is nothing we can do," says Hazwan bin Suban, a guide at the Sukau Rainforest Lodge. "We need to live from the palm oil. Tourism is increasing but we still need the oil. We are trying to protect the forest, and the government is doing a few things to protect it, but it cannot do anything if the land is privately owned. People are thinking about money in the short term. There is deforestation and that has led to flooding and changed ►►

Going green

Visitors to Malaysian Borneo may well want to play their part in trying to reduce the destruction of the jungle. The World Wide Fund for Nature, WWF, is supporting the governments of Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei in their efforts to create a 'Heart of Borneo Forests' protected area. But the demand for palm oil is not slowing – and consumers are urged to look carefully at what they use and where it comes from. Palm oil is used in products as varied as margarine, chocolate, cream cheese and cosmetics. It is also increasingly used in biodiesel.

The Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil was set up in 2001 to establish ethical and ecological standards for palm oil production. Members included companies such as Unilever, Cadbury's, Nestlé and Tesco as well as some of the bigger palm oil traders. Greenpeace has been highly critical of the results though, and has called for a moratorium on converting forest and peat land into plantations. For more information, see the Borneo section of the WWF website: WWW.PANDA.ORG. Greenpeace also has information on the uses of palm oil and things that can be done to help: WWW.GREENPEACE.ORG



►► the colour of the river.” Twenty-seven-year-old Wasil bin Misil worked at a palm oil mill before getting a job at the lodge, where he now works as a guide, expertly pointing out which plants can kill, and which can safely be used as a nail file. “It was really hard work at the mill,” he says. “It nearly broke my body. But it is very difficult to earn money in Borneo and I worked at the mill for more than two years before I heard about this job. This is much more interesting; I get to learn about the plants and animals.”

Proboscis monkeys can be seen at even closer quarters at the Labuk Bay Proboscis Monkey Sanctuary, a ragged patch of land just outside Sandakan, set aside for the wildlife by a plantation owner. His employees put out fruit and vegetables twice a day and an enchanting couple of hours can be spent

platform in the jungle, while the orang-utans are given food on another platform 50 metres or so away. The circumstances are hardly natural, but it is still an exciting experience. These are animals which have been rescued, pepped up and reintroduced to the wild, with the snacking sessions a good way for the workers to keep track of how they are doing, as well as attracting tourists. Sylvia Alsisto, manager at the centre, says they have more than 40 baby and juvenile orang-utans being cared for at any one time. “They are generally found by villagers in the jungle, and kept as pets, but people cannot look after them properly and they are often malnourished and sometimes sick by the time we get them,” she says. “We have carried out an extensive education programme to encourage people to bring us the babies as soon as they find them. The majority of what we do is not seen by the visitors – but the tourists are very important to maintain political

“Surprisingly quick to crawl up rubber boots, and able to push through clothing, the leeches take the biscuit”

watching the four troops chase off the squirrels, macaque monkeys and grey leaf monkeys which all want a piece of the food action. Extreme good fortune may bring you the privilege of seeing an orang-utan in the wild. Yet it can be an unsettling experience, the wary creature coughing and spitting her disapproval of the human observers standing agog at the edge of the plantation which has replaced her habitat. Less edgy orang-utans can be seen twice a day at snack time at the Sepilok Rehabilitation Centre, a must-do for visitors. Because it is on every northern Borneo agenda, an intimate encounter cannot be expected – the people are corralled onto a large

pressure to preserve areas of wilderness. We have a lot of interaction with local communities which now support us, and are becoming increasingly aware of the need to protect the jungle,” Alsisto adds. There is also a need to protect the oceans – and when carefully combined, tourism and conservation can work together there too. Another speedboat trip from Sandakan leads to Lankayan Island, which while tiny, encompasses many of the complicated issues swirling in the waters around Borneo. On first arrival, it appears to be simply the most gorgeous paradise dive resort. Luscious tropical trees perch on hot white sand, ►►



OPPOSITE PAGE: Even the birds are laid-back
THIS PAGE: Waiting for a boat



LEFT: **Marine biologist Achier Fung Chen Chung with tiny baby turtles in Lankayan Island's special marine reserve**
BELOW: **One of the few baby sea turtles to make it to this size**



►► surrounded by sparkling water – a fish-filled invitation to snorkel, and a handful of lovely chalets to create the most romantic setting.

But it is not just about swimming, diving, snoozing in hammocks and staring slack-jawed in wonder at majestic red sunsets. Behind the chalets, patches of sand are punctuated by small tubes of netting, and surrounded by mysterious little fences. It turns out the building behind the restaurant is not for food preparation – it is the office of Achier Fung Chen Chung, marine biologist for the Sugud Islands Marine Conservation Area, SIMCA. A dedicated young woman, Chung leads a team of

knowing the natural odds of any of them ever making it to maturity are tiny, one can understand the determination of people like Chung to try to reduce the human factors which reduce those odds further. “I have been doing this for years, it has become my life,” she says. “I used to pray for them. Now I just keep working.”

Diving off Sipadan Island, along the more southerly part of Sabah, the abundant marine life cruising the immense underwater cliffs pays tribute to the decision in 2004 for the dive resorts to leave. They moved to nearby islands such as Mabul to

“The little creatures emerge from their eggs powered by an enormous primal urge to swim”

nine in monitoring and patrolling more than 46 hectares of ocean, trying to limit illegal fishing and practices which endanger turtles. With determined fishermen using drift nets, dynamite and cyanide, and operating at night, this is no mean feat.

Although the dive resort is the most visible part of Lankayan, it is SIMCA which has the upper hand. It leases the island from the government and then sub-leases it to the resort operator – under strict environmental and conservation conditions, says Chung. The fenced-off patches of sand are hatcheries where thousands of turtle eggs taken from their vulnerable nests on the beach are reburied in safety. “We had 12,000 babies in 2007, and around 20,000 the year before,” says Chung. Visitors are welcome to volunteer to help, and some spend much of the time on their knees, carefully burying eggs. The little creatures emerge from their eggs powered by an enormous primal urge to get to the water and swim. Watching them set off into the endless ocean,

reduce pressure on the environment, explains Clement Lee, MD of Borneo Divers, and one of the original group which discovered Sipadan. “The environment is our silent business partner,” he says.

This applies to the tourism industry across Borneo, in the Malaysian north and the Indonesian centre and south. Some operators such as Chung and Lee, have already realised this, and are working to preserve the environment and encourage the wildlife. They have realised that visitors come to Borneo to experience the wonders of the stunning natural world and that where tourists lead, investment and employment follow.

It can only be hoped that their attitude spreads – and some of the little turtles which we saw swimming so determinedly into the ocean from Lankayan, survive to return, and find it suitable to lay the next generation. ◀◀

RIGHT: **Preparing for a wedding at Sandakan harbour**
BELOW: **A tropical terrace**



Malaysian Borneo

ECO TOURISM

Reef and Rainforest Tours can arrange tailor-made trips, with an emphasis on sustainability. www.reefandrainforest.co.uk.

There are masses of useful information, advice and links from the Sabah Tourism Board on www.sabahtourism.com. Borneo Eco Tours can arrange just about anything, and has a stock of well-informed and friendly guides. www.borneoecotours.com.

MONKEY-SPOTTING

The Sepilok Orang-utan Rehabilitation Centre is supported by a UK charity which runs an adoption scheme; info from www.orangutan-appeal.org.uk. Visit Labuk Bay Proboscis Monkey Sanctuary for close-up monkey encounters. www.proboscis.cc.

JUNGLE FEVER

For adventures in the jungle and breathtaking night-time river trips, check out Sukau Rainforest Lodge. www.sukau.com.

DREAMY DIVING

Lankayan is simply paradise. Find it from www.lankayan-island.com. Borneo Divers has a base on Mabul and expert local dive guides

to show visitors the wonders of Sipadan. www.borneodivers.info.

HOW TO GET THERE

KLM Royal Dutch Airlines operates two daily flights from Amsterdam Airport Schiphol to Kuala Lumpur International Airport. Once there, a cool place to acclimatise and explore KL is Hotel Maya www.hotelmaya-kualalumpur.com. From KL Malaysia Airlines operates ten daily flights to Kota Kinabalu in Malaysian Borneo.



TOP: **Tasty street food**
ABOVE: **Lankayan Island Dive Resort's inviting chalet**

