

Going WILD in Sarawak

Immerse yourself in the lush jungles of the eastern Malaysian state, where animal encounters are par for the course. BY ROD MACKENZIE

"Move back, everyone!" The forest ranger's voice sounded tense. Yet, spellbound, nobody wanted to budge.

Seconds earlier, he'd briefed my tour group on how to stay safe. "Put umbrellas or tripods out of sight, as they can appear like weapons; tuck water bottles away in your rucksacks; and don't let your children cry out – that can cause a real upset."

Now our group of 50 tourists all stood huddled together in our forest clearing, gazing across to a section of jungle where trees and bushes were being pushed apart with alarmingly loud snaps and cracks.

"Faster, please. Go! Go!" barked the ranger. "You're blocking his path to the food station – so don't stop!"

The reason for his urgency was simple: Ritchie the orangutan was coming out for his tea. And you certainly don't want to get between a 200-pound great ape and his afternoon fruit snack. With an arm span of up to two metres, this alpha male could have given our entire party a group hug to remember. Yet despite these daunting statistics, we were still reluctant to step away, thrilled at the prospect of coming face to face with a king of the Asian jungle.

Getting up close to nature was the whole point of my family's visit to Sarawak, yet



Getting up close to wildlife and nature is one of the top draws of the Semengoh Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre in Borneo.

DREAMSTIME



From top: A shaman performing a blessing ceremony; trek on the wild side to see amazing endangered animals at close quarters.



Left: Communal living and dining are all a part of the longhouse experience. **Below:** A welcome sighting at Bako National Park, the elusive proboscis monkey.

I'd never guessed it would all be quite so extreme. This part of Borneo is Malaysia at its wildest, with the world-famous Semengoh Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre one of the state's top draws. Located some 20km south of Kuching, this is where previously captive orangutans are reintroduced to the wild within a large protected forest reserve. With no fences separating the apes from visitors, feeding times (8.30am and 3pm daily) offer a rare opportunity to view this endangered animal at remarkably close quarters – just make sure you wear shoes you can sprint fast in.

THE LONGHOUSE EXPERIENCE

I'd also discovered a place to stay that offered a fascinatingly intimate glimpse of Sarawak's wild side. Part eco farmstay, part cultural discovery centre, the Kebun is a unique holiday concept set in lush riverside jungle some 45 minutes outside

of bustling Kuching. This is where Adrian Cornelius and his wife Olivia run a neat little organic farm that's home to fruit and vegetable plots, flocks of geese and turkeys as well as a few beehives and fishponds. When Adrian found he had a couple of disused goat sheds going to no use, he decided to embark on an ingenious recycling project that would see these transformed into replica Iban longhouses raised off the ground on stilts. The aim is to give guests a flavour of traditional Borneo life without having to embark on lengthy travels upcountry to remote villages.

Our stay kicked off with a *miring*, or blessing ceremony, to appease the spirits and ancestors while bringing harmony to the guests. Sitting on comfortable chairs in the dimly lit *ruai*, a wide veranda running the length of the longhouse, we watched

an elderly Iban shaman in a red loincloth and feathered headdress perform an ancient ritual through clouds of sweet-scented, smokey air coming from a campfire. While I'm usually a bit cynical about such displays, the atmosphere here felt suitably strange and otherworldly for all that not to matter. And the cup of *tuak* – a throat-burning, home-brewed rice wine – that was passed round to us all tasted authentic enough too.

Another striking aspect of the longhouse experience is the impressive way it brings people together. Actually, you don't have much choice. Walk out of your room and you emerge straight into a communal living zone. Within minutes of arrival we'd made friends with three young Australian couples who couldn't wait to start sharing their recent adventures in Sarawak's jungles and islands. Lively conversations flowed on over dinner at the

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communal dining area, where we sat down to hearty meals freshly prepared each evening using the farm's homegrown ingredients. Yes, open-plan living can take a bit of getting used to, but it quickly grew on us and

made a refreshing change from the sterile environment so often found in modern hotels. And more importantly, in this natural setting with the sounds of the jungle all around, it just felt like the right way to do things.



Above: From sandstone sea stacks to the green pit viper and the deadly *buta-butua* plant, Bako offers nature at its best.

BAKO NATIONAL PARK

It helps that the Kebun lies within easy reach of one of the region's most renowned national parks – Bako – home to another beast high on our wild wishlist, the proboscis monkey. Notoriously hard to photograph, these shy primates rarely venture far from the safety of the highest treetops, so we were delighted and somewhat surprised to spot a group hanging out close to the park's busy entrance building. "Maybe they're just being nosy," joked my eldest daughter.

Fortunately, the sightseeing was far superior to our family's puns. Set on a peninsula, visitors get to Bako via a short boat journey that also delivers one of Borneo's most striking geological sights – a magnificent sculpture park of eroded sandstone sea stacks that reach out from the inky depths like huge tobacco-stained fingers.

Walking trails crisscross Bako's 27 square kilometres, some taking up to seven hours or more to complete, but given the heat

we opted for one lasting just an hour. Yet even that turned out to be packed with wildlife sightings, from a green pit viper coiled in a tree to families of bearded pigs happily rooting in the grass and a hive of stingless bees in the trunk of a tree. Our guide also pointed out some marvels from the floral kingdom: a rare species of *bintangor* tree that scientists believe might be a source of treatment for HIV Aids or cancer; and the deadly *buta-butua* plant, whose milky sap can blind a person in seconds.

SATANG BESAR ISLAND

"Look over there! It's like a big shoe coming out of the sea!" shouted my eldest daughter. "No, it's a giant lying on his back – that's his forehead and nose sticking up," countered my youngest. We were zipping through the waves on a speedboat, bound for our final excursion, a picnic and snorkelling trip to the tiny Satang Besar island. "You're both wrong, it's a guitar," I said, as the island's twin-humped silhouette grew larger on the horizon.

Put it down to the fact that we hadn't gazed at a television or computer screen in days or maybe it was simply a spot of dehydration in the Sarawak heat, but we all found ourselves looking at the world a bit differently – in fact, our imaginations were running



riot. Hardly surprising, given the stimulating wild encounters that kept coming our way. This time around, we'd hardly left the jetty when the boatman cut the engine to let us gape open-mouthed at a pod of Irrawaddy dolphins diving just off the boat's bow.

As we arrived on the island, the children raced up the beach towards a low-fenced enclosure erected on the sand. "Look! Legs!" they

shouted. They'd spotted something small wriggling wildly – a baby green turtle hatched literally minutes before our arrival was writhing on its back, struggling to flip upright. Left for another minute or two in the blazing sun and it might have perished. A ranger quickly came to the rescue, picking up the baby reptile between his thumb and forefinger and placing it in a bucket of water.

He explained how conservation efforts here are giving turtles a fighting chance against the island's native predators. "Monitor lizards, for example, can get pretty big here," he explained, holding out his hands about 30 centimetres apart. "Oh, I thought they'd be longer than that," I suggested. "Not the length, that's the width of the body," he clarified. In between snorkelling in the clear waters and munching on our picnic, we spent the afternoon taking turns to guard the turtle enclosure, looking out for further hatchlings. Somehow, our Sarawak trip had made us all feel much closer to the natural world. ↘

SilkAir flies six times weekly from Singapore to Kuching.

SARAWAK TRAVEL TIPS



Eat

- **Sin Soon Lee Seafood** (9 Kampung Muara Tebas) is a popular waterfront restaurant 30 minutes' drive from Kuching that's renowned for its lobster, oyster omelette, steamed pomfret and drunken prawns.
- **Lau Ya Keng** (Jalan Carpenter) is an open-air foodcourt located on one of the oldest streets in town. Food stalls set up in this Chinese opera house serve up local favourites such as pork *satay*, fish ball soup and Sarawak *laksa*.

Shop

- **John Tan Gallery – Dayak Arts** (62 Main Bazaar; johntangallery.com) is an emporium packed with antique teakwood furniture and high-quality Sarawak textiles.
- **Maria Kek Lapis** (4 Jalan Bishopsgate; 22.com.my/mariakek) specialises in Sarawak's renowned layer cake. Choose from dozens of exotic colours and delicious flavours.

For more information, visit sarawaktourism.com

