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BORNEO MADE EASY

by
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Quick, picture Borneo in your head -- the emerging images are probably of dark jungles dripping with thick snakes, screaming monkeys, buzzing insects and all manner of crawly things. From deep in the trees, you sense natives looking out at you.

Truth to be told, these images can be somewhat realistic. The good part is that visiting Borneo can be relatively easy for those not inclined to venturing into dense jungles or up rock-strewn rivers. A series of national parks has been established by Malaysia in some of the island's most interesting areas. Several other parks are under construction.

Currently there are five parks in Sarawak, and four in Sabah, the two Malaysian states which lie across the northern part of Borneo, sandwiching the tiny country of Brunei in between. The parks have marked hiking trails, dorms and bungalows with cooking facilities and food shops, running water and electricity, ranger offices and maps. This takes out some of the hardship but leaves the adventure intact.

Bako National Park near Kuching is one of the smallest parks and one of the busiest, perhaps because it is located near a major city. Accessible only by chartered boat, the many hiking trails lead through thick forests, streams and swimming holes, across arid plateaus and on to beaches. If you are stealthy, you may get a look at the rare proboscis monkey. Silver leaf monkeys are notorious food thieves at camp, and the strange bearded pigs make for interesting garbage disposals.

A day's boat and bus ride up the coast is Niah Caves National Park, site of the huge Niah Cave and the smaller Painted Cave. In Niah Cave, archaeological digs have unearthed the oldest human bones found in southeast Asia, dating back 40,000 years.

Watch in awe as native climbers shimmy up 100-foot-high bamboo poles to scrape bird nests out of the cracks and crevices. The nests are cleaned of dirt and insects and the remaining saliva is what makes that expensive Asian delicacy, bird nest soup. Thankfully, almost all of it is exported and will rarely show up on your dinner table.

You will need a strong flashlight for the 30-minute walk through the cave. At the other end is the short walkway leading to the Painted Cave, where ancient cave paintings depict natives going to their final resting place in funeral canoes. Remains of a few canoes are still found near one entrance to the cave.

On the walkway back to headquarters, take a detour and have a look at the native Dyak village nearby. Two huge longhouses are under construction and the village is rather modernized. However it is still interesting to see the villagers go about their daily lives and to chat with them using Malay, English, sign language; whatever works.

A few more hours up the coast is the secluded and beautiful Lambir Hills National Park. Set in the most botanically diverse forest range on earth, the park features several pristine waterfalls connected by a single trail, which eventually ends on the summit of Mount Lambir. A refreshing dip after a steamy jungle walk in any of the cool, waterfall-fed pools is a little excursion into paradise.

The best part is that this park is virtually untouched once you hike past the main waterfalls near the headquarters area. No trash, no footprints, just you among the emerald plants as you dip into your own private, tranquil pool while the waterfall pours in a continual supply of fresh water.

For those with the time and money, a journey to Gunung Mulu National Park is a must. Arrangements must be made at the park office in Kuching or in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's capital and largest city. The park is renowned for its extensive cave system, plenty of which has never been explored. There are the razor-sharp, limestone pinnacles to climb to, a mountain to conquer, and more caving than you could manage in a lifetime. It is said that Sarawak Chamber, the world's largest natural chamber, can

accommodate 40 Boeing 747's.

This trip requires a guide, a three-day minimum stay and appropriate equipment. Make reservations as far in advance as possible.

Other Sarawak parks not yet open include the beachfront Similajau National Park near the town of Bintulu, Kubah National Park in the forest near Kuching and Gunung Gading National Park farther to the west. Check at one of the park offices for the status of these parks; they may be open for daytime use.

If you plan to go through Brunei to reach Sabah, you have to obtain a visa first in Kuala Lumpur. The tiny, oil-rich country is not particularly interested in tourists and thus makes it difficult to visit. Flights between various points in Sarawak and Sabah are generally inexpensive, and there are also a few boats going back and forth. The true adventurers simply walk around Brunei through the jungle.

Sabah's parks offer a bit more diversity. Most visitors come to Sabah just to climb Southeast Asia's highest peak, Gunung Kinabalu, and a park at the base helps get you on your way. The park is Borneo's largest and offers full facilities. Reservations are also a must for this popular destination.

You will have to hire a guide, so talk to a few other travelers and form a group to split the cost. Most climbers stay overnight at the group of bungalows at 11,000 feet, and then set out at 3 a.m. to see the sunrise from the summit of Lowe's Peak.

After surviving the climb (it is 13,455 feet to the summit), your sore legs will thank you for spending some time at the nearby Poring Hot Springs Park, where pools filled with the natural thermal waters were built by the Japanese during the occupation in World War Two. Sit back in your own tub and crank up the water as hot as you want it. You can also take a unique forest canopy walk along a boardwalk suspended 75 feet in the air. At night you may spot the reclusive, but very cute, slow loris as it ambles about looking for bugs.

If you prefer beaches, then Tunku Abdul Rahman Park near the main city of Kota Kinabalu has five small, jungled islands with accommodations ranging from fancy bungalows to primitive camping. You can also daytrip to the islands for snorkeling, hiking and picnicking. Check at the park office in town for details.

For a real island getaway, look into the Turtle Islands Park on the opposite side of the state. This chain of small islands is known for the green and hawksbill turtles which come ashore to lay their eggs at various times of the year. Getting here is expensive, though, and arrangements should be made at one of the main park offices before venturing out to the port town of Sandikan.

To the south of Sandikan is a small lowland park designed for daytrippers with their own transportation. The Tawau Hills Park, about 15 miles from Tawau, is mostly a weekend picnic spot and is surrounded by oil palm and rubber plantations. Call ahead to the ranger office to check on conditions before venturing out.

What would a visit to Borneo be without seeing orangutans? There are two sanctuaries to visit, the larger one being the Sepilok Forest Reserve near Sandikan in eastern Sabah. These shaggy, lovable creatures are best seen during the feeding times when they come in from the jungle for their meals. The orangutans are orphans, former illegal captives, etc., and are being rehabilitated for return to life in the wilds of Borneo.

Near Kuching in Sarawak is a small rehabilitation center accessible by a 30-minute bus ride and 20-minute hike. Check at the tourist information office in Kuching for feeding times and other details.

If you are in fact looking for adventure, you have also come to the right place. All across both states are rough logging roads and rivers leading to the interior. While a distressing amount of logging continues, there are plenty of wild jungle areas in Sarawak, but fewer in Sabah.

Native Dyak villages are widely scattered, although most visitors seem to focus on going up the Rajang River in Sarawak. The Dyaks (a generic name for the many different native tribes of Borneo) are usually friendly and will offer food and housing for the night in their unique longhouses. (If the area is frequented by tourists they may expect some form of payment.)

It is not hard to get off the beaten path; even though things are developing rapidly, this is still Borneo. Accommodation options range from expensive, four-star resorts and western chains to Chinese hotels to Dyak longhouses. For those looking for a manageable, adventurous and budget alternative, the national parks are the perfect solution.

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