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About 2000 words

KALIMANTAN PRIMER

by

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Kalimantan, the Indonesian portion of Borneo, should be seen slowly and thoroughly, but even a short trip can be enlightening. My travel partner and I had just 10 days left on our visas, and after a quick discussion in Sulawesi we crossed our fingers and decided to wing it.

We took a government-run Peln ship across the Makassar Strait to Balikpapan, a modern, booming, uninteresting metropolis which certainly doesn't "look like" Borneo. Expatriate workers live in posh compounds along a harbor packed with oil tankers. Modern buildings are going up everywhere. A huge oil refinery swallows much of the harbor shoreline.

Many of the "locals" are in fact participants of the "transmigration" scheme, the government resettlement program for natives of overcrowded Java who move out into the remote areas of Borneo, Sumatra and Irian Jaya. It plays hell with the indigenous cultures.

Most tourists immediately bus from Balikpapan up to Samarinda, and boat up the Mahakam River to visit the native Dyak tribes. Fellow travelers said it was quite far upriver to get away from mass tourism and jaded Dyaks, though, so we headed south to Banjarmasin instead.

Another big, transmigration city, Banjarmasin is based on logging; instead of oil tankers, endless rafts of huge logs float along the river banks. This is the irony of Borneo - tourists flock to see the natural wonder, and often become outraged when they see how the Indonesians and international corporations are trashing the natural resources.

Many such paradoxes lurk in South East Asia; in Kalimantan they hit you in the face. Banjarmasin has shiny, multi-storied shopping malls with American fast food restaurants and imported cheeses, beer and sweets in the supermarket, while 500 yards away, villagers in bamboo huts bathe and brush their teeth in a river which also serves as toilet, roadway, laundry tub and garbage can.

We stayed at the Borneo Homestay (aka Transito Hostel) at Jalan Pos 123 (doubles \$3). It is a bit cramped and very basic but the owner has an abundance of information and offers various tours and treks (they are relatively expensive, though).

There is also a helpful and informative tourist officer, who doubles as a local guide. His office is in a three-story public building near the new, spaceship-shaped city mosque. He has no set hours, but try to find him because useful tourist information is quite difficult to come by in Kalimantan. His name is Akhmad Arifin, and his office is at Jalan D.I.Panjaitan 23.

To see how the natives really live, rent a dugout canoe, called a klotok, and paddle around Banjarmasin's many canals. You can pull right up on their door steps as they wash their clothes and babies. Other sights include a floating market, a nearby monkey island and another island with a troop of shy proboscis monkeys, a species unique to Borneo. In the area is a diamond cutting factory at Martapura and an interesting museum at Banjarbaru with Dyak and Banjari (the dominant, regional ethnic group) artifacts and culture.

From Banjarmasin there are no roads heading west, but luckily there was a boat heading westward to the village of Kumai. This happens to be the entry point to Cape Puting National Park, site of Kalimantan's only orangutan rehabilitation center. We checked the airline office and we could catch a flight out of nearby Pangkalanbun on to Pontianak, near the Malaysian state of Sarawak. Our timing would be close, but with luck we would make it out of Indonesia before our visas expired.

We had four days to get a glimpse of Dyak life before the boat sailed. We took a rattling old bus and overnighted in the town of Kandangan (there are a couple nice losmans (Indonesian guesthouses), with doubles for \$2.50, fan included) and the next morning negotiated with a couple motorcycle drivers to take us to the village of Lumpangi. There is a stop to register with police along the way.

Along the bumpy, 45-minute drive we saw simple Banjar and Dyak villages. The latter are recognizable by their central big house, called a balai. These communal houses have a covered central square surrounded on all four sides with family quarters. More well-known are the longhouses of other Dyak communities, which have a long veranda for community activities.

Dry heat and dust are the main companions on the hike from Lumpangi, through mostly cleared mountain lowlands. A few huts along the way offered hot tea for sale, monstrously unrefreshing but safe to drink. Bring tablets or a filter for drinking river water. You can also ask for boiled water, but be suspicious if it is not still a bit warm and does not smell like smoke.

We passed through a few more Banjar and Dyak villages, but it was not until we reached the higher elevations that the village life became more traditional. Loksado, the Banjar village base for visiting nearby Dyak villages, was a most welcome sight after the five-hour hike. We took a refreshing dip in the clear river, to the amusement of all the village children.

A local schoolteacher named Gumbiri serves as the unofficial tour guide. He took us in the evening to the nearby balai at Malaris. As we approached with our small flashlights, the low hum of activity and laughter from the big house was very inviting. The few kerosene lamps inside gave off a dim glow and there was an unusual but wonderful warmth in the communal atmosphere.

A group was peeling the bark off cinnamon tree branches to obtain the inner portion used for the seasoning. We brought cigarettes to share and sat talking with the house medicine man and a few other men. He explained the rules and norms which keep such a close-quartered community harmonious, such as no fighting or arguing allowed. (It is good manners to bring a gift when visiting the Dyaks, and

cigarettes are appreciated since all the men smoke. Male visitors will have little chance to speak with female members in most balais.) Among other interesting things, he said Dyaks don't eat noodles (it's just tradition) and they do eat pork and drink alcohol (they were Christianized before the Moslems arrived), unlike the Moslem Banjaris.

The next day Gumbiri took us up to a waterfall and swimming hole, passing several villages on the way. On the way back in the afternoon the villagers had returned from the fields and we watched them at their daily chores, such as husking rice and tending to the pigs and chickens. The bamboo balais are constructed on stilts and the animals live underneath, sheltered from the elements. The natives were friendly and not used to tourists. We were welcomed to stay overnight but we had left our gear in Loksado, where we were staying at the village headman's house.

Returning from Loksado to Lumpangi the next day, the downhill walk was only three hours. My companion felt ill so she hired a villager to take her to Kandangan on his motorcycle (difficult on the narrow dirt paths!). Alternatively, you can travel by bamboo raft, either with the locals on market day or for a hefty price other days.

One note; Indonesian government officials have recognized the growing tourist potential of the mountain Dyaks, and even as we left Loksado, power poles were being erected and a road was being bulldozed through from Lumpangi. As with most tourist areas, though, you won't need to go much further afield to find unspoiled village life. Most tourists now hike in, visit the Malaris balai, overnight in Loksado, and leave the next morning.

We returned to Banjarmasin and caught our boat, the "Krakatoa", to Kumai (13 hours, \$10). A crew member offered us his spotless cabin for \$5 each, and with two portholes, a fan and clean sheets it was a bargain. The alternative with our fifth class tickets would have been to sleep on some lumber on the deck next to a large, tethered goose. As it was, two huge rats visited our cabin in the middle of the night and climbed around taunting us, but escaped before I could clobber them with a hiking boot.

Arriving in Kumai in the early morning, we went first to the police station at Pangkalanbun and got permission to visit Cape Puting. We returned to Kumai and went to the parks office and got an entry permit (by now we were used to Indonesian bureaucracy). Then we negotiated with a boatman to take us to the park the next day (\$25 for up to six people), and finally we found a losman, negotiated a price and had a rest.

At 6:30 a.m. the next morning we were on a small canopied canoe, chugging up a narrow river towards the Camp Leaky orangutan rehabilitation center (see the March 1992 National Geographic). The river grew smaller with each consecutive branch, until, five hours later, we saw a wooden watchtower and long walkway appear through the jungle. The American director was tending to some sick orangutans in Jakarta but her native assistant took us on a jungle walk where we spotted what locals call "orang hutan", or "man of the forest".

Words are inadequate to relate the wonder of seeing these delightful, sensitive animals in the wild. There is an odd familiarity when your eyes meet theirs. They certainly have distinct personalities. The first we met along the path was "Kusai", a tame and gentle male who simply wanted to hold hands. Later we came across "Pola", an aggressive male who angrily shook a dead tree when we gave him only one banana.

The late afternoon is feeding time, where dominance is established and maintained among the orangutans. The smaller orangutans are careful to keep out of reach of the larger and meaner ones. Visitors can bring bananas and nuts to offer.

The camp is maintained mostly with funding from the Earthwatch organization and is staffed with volunteers. The orangutans come from a variety of situations; from zoos, as orphans, those found sick or injured, illegal possessions, etc. About 100 live in the wilds around the camp but usually only 20 appear for each feeding.

While on the boat back to Kumai we saw tiny bamboo huts and entire families out fishing in wooden dug-out canoes. At dusk, troops of common gray and proboscis monkeys were gathering in the trees at the river's edge. After dark we had an unexpected, glorious surprise. Hundreds of thousands of fireflies were illuminating the huge palms along various stretches of the river, with a lighting display that quite honestly rivaled anything produced by Disney.

The next day we caught a little nine-seater airplane to Pontianak (one hour, \$53), the only major city in western Kalimantan. We still were not sure of our next stop, but upon arrival we learned a land border crossing between Kalimantan and Sarawak was finally open. (At this moment it is the only "open" land crossing between the two countries in all of Borneo.)

We were fortunate to find a very helpful travel agency willing to give out tourist information: P.T. Insan Worldwide, on Jalan Tanjungpura 149. They answered our many questions and provided many fare quotes. Ask for Joseph Masri. Accommodation and most other things are relatively expensive in Pontianak.

So, at 7 a.m. the next morning we were on the direct bus to Kuching in Sarawak (nine hours, \$15), just as our visas expired. The border station is huge and new and shiny, and we were given three-month visas to Malaysia. It is a shame the Indonesians only give two-month visas which are nearly impossible to extend.

Obviously it would have been better had we had more time. But for only 10 days, our diversity of experiences demonstrated how complex life is on this huge jungle island, as modern realities clash with traditional ways of life. It was a good primer for future explorations.

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