

**EXPLORE THE WORLD:
MALAYSIA**
STORY & PHOTOS
BY DAVID WEBB

RAINFOREST RARITIES

Unparalleled wildlife experiences await in the jungles of Malaysian Borneo

I'm looking into a jungle canopy thick enough to block out the equatorial sun and an adult orangutan is staring right back. It's said homo sapiens share 96 per cent of this ape's DNA. Focused on her personable features and occasionally catching a glimpse of the bug-eyed baby clinging to her breast, that seems a conservative estimate. For a half-hour, I gawk at this ginger-coloured primate, Asia's only great ape, as she munches greenery from the treetops.

But this is normal, I've come to understand, while exploring Malaysian Borneo.

BISECTED BY THE equator and located between mainland Southeast Asia and the Philippines, Borneo is the third-largest island on Earth. Three countries share this landmass—Indonesia, Brunei and Malaysia—with the latter home to some six million people along the northwest reaches. Kota Kinabalu (KK), the half-million-strong working class capital of Malaysia's Sabah province, is regularly reached via flight from Hong Kong and provides an accessible gateway for visitors to Borneo.

Arriving in KK on a sweaty autumn night, I've joined a G Adventures tour group



ABOVE: A momma orangutan munches greenery as she swings through the forest canopy outside of Gomantong Caves. BELOW: A pygmy, or Sumatran, elephant meanders along the riverbank—one of Borneo's most sought-after sightings.

for their Highlights of Sabah and Mount Kinabalu adventure. I'll soon summit the highest peak between the Himalayas and New Guinea and visit the sandy shores of Turtle Islands National Park. Today, though, I'm primed for jungle-bound wildlife excursions in this storied region of Asia—a setting that's still very much a frontier, yet on the cusp of tourism greatness.

WE'VE TRAVELLED overland for eight hours since leaving KK; through forest-lined highway that led to high mountain roads and then transitioned abruptly to massive and controversial palm groves before easing back to *au naturel* foliage. It's here that Myne Resort is set alongside the muddy Kinabatangan River; where guests are soothed by the cicadas' orchestra and refreshed by abrupt fits of rainfall.

Verdant lowland rainforest lines the Kinabatangan, a 560-kilometre-long watercourse that travels from the mountains of Sabah to the Sulu Sea. Noted for riverine forests and oxbow lakes, it is the second-longest river in Borneo. Perched at the apex of a hairpin river-curve, Myne Resort puts Borneo's biodiversity on full display. Walking

trails lead through the humid jungle and daily boat cruises along the Kinabatangan seek out birds, reptiles and mammals.

As we set out on our inaugural afternoon river cruise, our guide, Omar, lets slip a guarded hint: for the first time in three months rare pygmy elephants have been spotted up-river.

Loaded into a 10-passenger fibreglass boat, we cruise past egrets stilt-legging on the banks and beneath flying hornbills and the occasional crested serpent eagle. We spot a saltwater crocodile—a fearsome species that can grow to be six metres long. We see such a plenitude of silverback monkeys they become pedestrian.

Further, orange-and-white proboscis monkeys gather on the branches of a tualang tree. Endemic to Borneo, they are man-faced and pot-bellied; males sit arrogantly with legs splayed in an attempt to court mates. (Centuries ago, when the first Europeans arrived in Borneo, natives re-dubbed these creatures "Dutchman Monkeys" in response.) Our boat captain—who leisurely identifies fauna from absurd distances—pulls in close to shore. Above, a family of proboscis monkeys gingerly climbs along branches and jumps from one tree to another, at times dropping a half-dozen metres before grabbing safety. A luminescent kingfisher flutters past, followed by a gaggle of lesser adjutant birds.

Omar jumps up and points wildly toward the riverbank. A trio of pygmy elephants ▶



IF YOU GO

G Adventure's 11-day Highlights of Sabah and Mount Kinabalu trip is priced from \$2,399; international airfare extra. (gadventures.com)

leisurely lumbers from the jungle. A moment earlier or later and we would have missed them completely. A large bull, who flails his trunk in impudence at our intrusion, leads a gentle-tempered sow and a playful juvenile. Through a telephoto lens, I can see the blue of their gentle eyes. We stay in their presence for 20 minutes until they vanish into the dense grass.

The smallest of all elephant species—standing a maximum of two metres at the shoulder—a pygmy elephant is one of the rarest wildlife encounters in all of Borneo, second only to the all-but-extinct Sumatran rhinoceros.

GOMANTONG CAVES, located about 30 minutes' drive from Myne Resort, is the world's premier location for the collection of swiftlets' nests. Often selling for thousands of dollars per kilogram, these edible birds' nests are consumed in soup and are said to have medicinal properties. Twice yearly, workers build rattan and ironwood scaffolding to reach the 90-metre-high ceiling of Gomantong to collect the nests. It's dangerous work. And as one of our group members puts it as we hike along a boardwalk toward the cave mouth, "It's a ridiculous thing to eat anyway."

We're encased in fragrant fig trees and other broadleaf rainforest flora. But ahead, and in contrast to the sweet scent, I notice piles of fresh animal scat splattered across the boardwalk, as if dropped from high above. I don't put the puzzle together quickly enough before a nearby park ranger flails his hands upwards and bellows: "Orangutan!"

Above, a momma orangutan, baby clinging tightly to her torso, meanders arm-by-arm through the forest canopy. She stops above us to chew some leaves, indifferent to our awe. Orangutan literally means, "man of the forest," and it's easy to see why—their faces



LEFT: Cockroaches line the walls and ground in Gomantong Caves. **BELOW:** A crested serpent eagle makes good on its name with a slithery snack. **BOTTOM:** Proboscis monkeys hang around on hardwood trees.

reflect our own. Soon another orangutan shows up to double the excitement. We are virtually surrounded, gobsmacked by the second-largest ape on Earth showing up so casually it was as if to say hello. As the awe levels off, I scan the treetops for signs of nests—as the only completely arboreal ape, industrious orangutans construct new homes to sleep in every night.

Momma ape swings away and we continue on to Gomantong Caves, following the ammoniac scent of guano that emanates from the cavern mouth. Within, we spot dank-dwelling creatures that seem manifested from the mind of Tim Burton: long-legged millipedes, leathery fruit bats and about a billion cockroaches crunching beneath our footsteps.

It's all very interesting, but we're too entranced by our ape encounter. Combined with the throat-burning stench within, it makes for a hasty tour. And on the way back out, two more orangutans oblige for more photo ops—young apes who play and frolic like characters from Kipling—which leaves Gomantong Caves, impressive in its own right, to play second fiddle in the ape experience.

THE BORNEAN rainforest offers many memories. Later, we cruise into an oxbow lake half overrun by invasive water hyacinth to enjoy morning coffee among kingfishers diving for carp. We spot dozens more proboscis monkeys. Our guide spins terror-tales of growing up around king cobras and venomous vipers. And we even see another orangutan swinging distantly from atop a 20-metre-tall hardwood tree. But the pygmy elephants, those wise-eyed brutes of the jungle, and our close-encounter with apes near Gomantong Caves stand above the rest—a true connection to the wild creatures that epitomize Malaysian Borneo. ✕



BORNEO MUST-DO

- **Mount Kinabalu:** Mount Kinabalu offers a lung-busting overnight trek that covers more than 2,000 vertical metres, leading from dense jungle to barren granite atop a massif said to harbour the spirit-world. Fitness, hydration and comfortable boots are key elements for a successful summit of this 4,095-metre mountain.

- **Turtle Islands National Park:** Forty-two kilometres offshore of Sandakan, idyllic Turtle Islands National Park awaits. Spend the day lazing on the sands of Selingaan Island; stay up late to witness a hawksbill or green turtle lay eggs in the sand and assist in the release of newly-hatched babies.

- **Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre:** Located in North Borneo, Sepilok stewards 43-square-kilometres of virgin lowland equatorial rainforest dedicated to the rescue, rehab and, hopefully, release of orangutans. Visit during feeding times to closely observe these apes; you'll be inspired to symbolically adopt a baby orangutan to help fund the centre's good work.

- **Sandakan Memorial Park:** "You will work until your bones rot under the tropical sun of Borneo." These words hint at the brutality British and Australian soldiers faced at the hands of Japanese forces at the Sandakan POW Camps during the Second World War. Set within a garden park in Sandakan—once the start of the infamous Death March—Sandakan Memorial Park is a place of sombre reflection on the planet's most destructive conflict.

