

# Sabah



Most visitors to Sabah come here for one thing: to trek up the mighty Mt Kinabalu. Or is it to dive around the Sipadan reef? Or to see the orang-utans at Sepilok? Or to explore the riverine forest around Sungai Kinabatangan? Or to get lost in the remote Maliau Basin? The trouble is, Borneo's northernmost state is so rich in treasures that it's hard to know where to start, and once you get stuck in there's always just that one more thing you want to see.

As well as its host of natural features, Sabah has an equally fascinating ethnic heritage, visibly distinct from the indigenous peoples further south. The largest group is made up of the Kadazan and Dusun tribes, known as the 'Latin lovers' of Borneo thanks to their healthy appetite for music and life in general, and visitors can also enjoy close encounters with friendly Rungus, Murut and Bajau communities around the state.

If you're coming from Sarawak, Sabah's rigid infrastructure may come as a bit of a culture shock – the tourist board has put a lot into promoting key destinations, and tour companies have a stranglehold on certain attractions, making life much trickier for independent travellers. The trade-off, however, is an unparalleled range of leisure and adventure activities, from home-stays, wetlands and night drives to seawalking, water sports and nightlife. Dubbed 'Asia's solar-powered theme park', this is one playground where it's well worth queuing for the rides.

SABAH

## HIGHLIGHTS

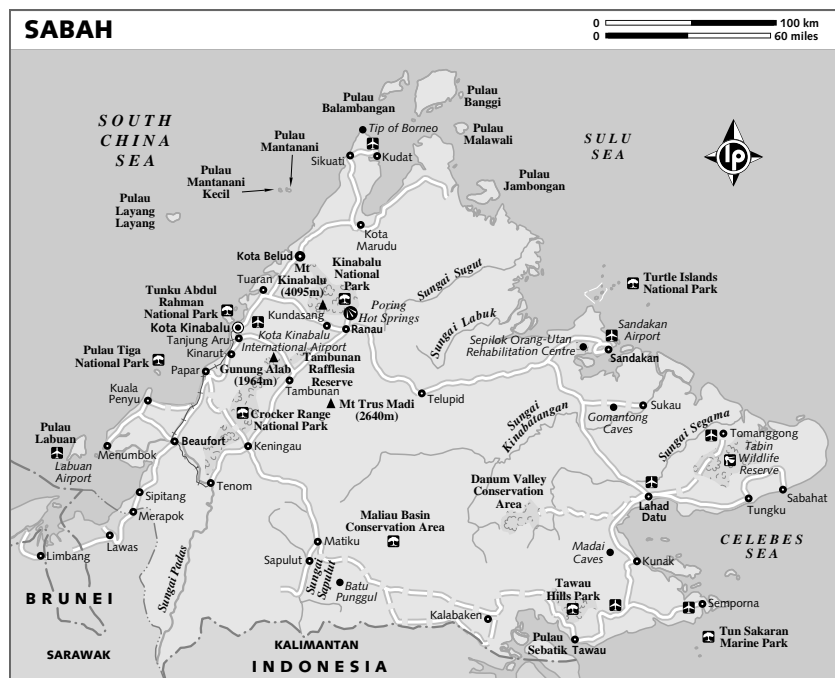
- Climbing high and breathing hard to catch the summit-view sunrises on granite **Mt Kinabalu** (p440)
- Watching wildlife, from the water or close up, in the jungle heartland of **Sungai Kinabatangan** (p470)
- Diving in the crystal waters surrounding the coral islands of **Tun Sakaran Marine Park** (p478)
- Trekking the real backwoods in the primary rainforest of the **Danum Valley** (p474)
- Getting ape close and personal with orang-utans at the **Sepilok Orang-Utan Rehabilitation Centre** (p467)
- Springing out of bed – or **Bed** (p431) – to catch the Sunday **street market** (p427) on Jln Gaya in Kota Kinabalu (KK)
- Trekking, away from the crowds, in the **Crocker Range National Park** (p448)



■ TELEPHONE CODES: 087, 088, 099

■ POPULATION: 3 MILLION

■ AREA: 73,619 SQ KM



## History

After centuries as a pawn in various Indonesian and Southeast Asian power games, Sabah was neatly carved up by enterprising British business in the late 19th century, when it was known as North Borneo and administered by the British North Borneo Company. After WWII Sabah and Sarawak were handed over to the British government, and both decided to merge with the peninsular states to form the new nation of Malaysia in 1963.

However, Sabah's natural wealth attracted other prospectors and its existence as a state was disputed by two powerful neighbours – Indonesia and the Philippines. There are still close cultural ties between the people of Sabah and the Filipinos of the nearby Sulu Archipelago and Mindanao, not always manifested positively: several small islands to the north of Sabah are disputed by the Philippines, there's a busy smuggling trade, Muslim rebels often retreat down towards Sabah when pursued by government forces, and pirates based in the Sulu Sea continue to raid parts of Sabah's coast.

After independence, Sabah was governed for a time by Tun Mustapha, who ran the state almost as a private fiefdom and was often at odds with the federal government in Kuala Lumpur (KL). Even when the Kadazan-controlled Sabah United Party (Parti Bersatu Sabah; PBS) came into power in 1985 and joined Barisan Nasional (National Front), Malaysia's ruling coalition party, tensions with the federal government were rife.

In 1990 the PBS pulled out of the alliance with the National Front just days before the general election. The PBS claimed that the federal government was not equitably returning the wealth that the state generated, and in 1993 it banned the export of logs from Sabah, largely to reinforce this point. The federal government used its powers to overturn the ban, and despite ongoing discussions, to this day nothing has changed – a mere 5% of revenue trickles back into state coffers.

As a result of this imbalance and its bad relations with the federal government, Sabah is the poorest of Malaysia's states,

with an unemployment rate of twice the national average. Although it's rich in natural resources, 16% of the population lives below the poverty line. Part of the problem is a bizarre rotation system that forces a change of political administration every two years.

Just to compound the economic difficulties, Sabah has experienced an extraordinary population boom over the last couple of decades – in 1970 the total number of inhabitants was under 650,000, whereas today it's a staggering three million. The government puts the blame squarely on illegal immigrants, claiming there are around 1.5 million foreigners in the state, but whatever the truth, a solution will need to be found in the next few years for Sabah's stretched resources.

## Climate

Like the rest of Malaysia, Sabah's climate is hot and humid. Expect temperatures in the high 20s and low 30s throughout the lowlands. The state's rainfall averages about 300cm annually and though it can rain any time during the year, the heaviest rainfall generally occurs between November and April. At higher elevations, the temperature is refreshingly cool and downright cold at night. Mt Kinabalu has its own climate and, above 3500m, temperatures can drop to freezing.

## Visas & Permits

Sabah is semi-autonomous, and like Sarawak it has its own immigration controls. On arrival most nationalities are likely to be given a visa for three months' stay and it is rare to be asked to show money or onward tickets.

Visas can be renewed at immigration offices at or near most points of arrival, even at small places like Merapok near Beaufort. If you miss the expiry date, it's not a problem – just report to another immigration office, even if it's several days later, and explain your situation to the officials. Apart from entry to national parks and other reserves, permits are required to visit Pulau Sipadan (Sipadan Island), the Danum Valley Conservation Area and the Maliau Basin. With the exception of the Maliau Basin, you can obtain these permits at each destination upon arrival.

## National Parks & Reserves

Sabah's national parks and their inhabitants are among the main reasons tourists visit the state: they feature beautiful scenery and an astonishing variety of plant and animal life. Budget accommodation is available in or near the major reserves and, depending on the area and weather, camping is also possible. The parks are generally well maintained and accessible.

Sabah's major parks:

**Crocker Range National Park** (139 sq km) Preserving a huge swathe of forested escarpment overlooking the coast, this park has no facilities; see p447.

**Kinabalu National Park** (754 sq km) Easily accessible from Kota Kinabalu (KK), this is the state's largest and most popular national park. It offers mountain trekking at Mt Kinabalu, forest walks at the headquarters and Mesilau, and the hot springs at Poring; see p437.

**Pulau Tiga National Park** (15 sq km) Three islands 50km southwest of KK: one formed by volcanic mud eruptions, one famous for sea snakes and the third virtually washed away by wave action; see p454.

**Tawau Hills Park** (29 sq km) Near Tawau in the state's southeast, this park has forested volcanic hills, waterfalls and hot springs; see p481.

**Tun Sakaran Marine Park** (325 sq km) Protects some of the best reef dive sites in the world, including the renowned Pulau Sipadan; see p477.

**Tunku Abdul Rahman (TAR) National Park** (49 sq km) A group of five islands, one quite large, a few kilometers west of the capital. Features include beaches, snorkelling and hiking; see p434.

**Turtle Islands National Park** (17 sq km) Three tiny islands 40km north of Sandakan, protecting the nesting ground of green and hawksbill sea turtles; see p469.

The Wildlife Department administers two cave systems, Gomantong and Madai. Reserves run by the Sabah Foundation include the Danum Valley Conservation Area and the Maliau Basin. The Tabin Wildlife Reserve is managed by both the Forestry and the Wildlife Department, though visitor facilities are run by a private company.

## PARK FEES & ACCOMMODATION

Accommodation in Kinabalu National Park (including the lodges at Laban Rata, Poring Hot Springs and Mesilau) and on Manukan Island in Tunku Abdul Rahman (TAR) National Park is privately run. Bookings are handled by **Sutera Sanctuary Lodges** (☎ 088-243629; www.suterasanctuarylodges.com; Lot G15, Wisma

Sabah, Jln Haji Saman, Kota Kinabalu; 7 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat, 8.30am-12.30pm Sun). You can book your guide and accommodation for Mt Kinabalu here, online or by phone; it's not necessary to make a special trip to KK just to make a booking.

**Sabah Parks** (90 088-211881; www.sabahparks.org.my; Lot 1-3, Block K, Kompleks Sinsuran, Jln Tun Fuad Stephens, Kota Kinabalu; 7 8am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Thu, 8am-11.30am & 2-5pm Fri) handles reservations for park accommodation at Pulau Tiga National Park and camping permits for Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park.

Bookings and permits for the Danum Valley Conservation Area and Maliau Basin can be arranged through **Innoprise** (90 088-243245; outthere@streamyx.com; Menara Tun Mustafa, Jln Sulaman, Kota Kinabalu).

## Accommodation

Depending on where you're coming from in the region, Sabah may seem an expensive place to travel around. It's still possible, however, to find a whole range of acceptable budget and midrange accommodation options, particularly in KK, Sepilok, Mt Kinabalu and the national parks. However, keep in mind that cheaper city hotels might also be brothels. B&Bs are popular and economical alternatives to hotels but are often located outside city centres (and don't necessarily include breakfast!). At the other end of the spectrum, on many of the islands (such as the Turtle Islands) accommodation choices are limited and usually only available as part of a tour package.

### SABAH HOMESTAYS

The **Sabah Tourism Board** (www.sabahtourism.com) publishes a booklet on available homestays, along with contact numbers, and it's also possible to book everything online. Prices vary depending on what is offered in terms of transport, entertainment and activities, but the bare minimum includes accommodation in a family's home and all meals.

The homestay concept is designed to encourage local tourism development at community level. Most such projects will have a variety of activities that travellers can take part in while living with a local family. Schemes are generally best suited to short visits (up to four days), and can be arranged by travel agencies in KK, Sepilok and Sandakan. Visitors must expect very basic facilities and above all must show a respectful attitude towards local customs and beliefs. This means dressing appropriately and following the rules, regardless of your own political and cultural assumptions and the fact that you'll be paying for the privilege.

We've listed a few stand-out homestay choices here, but many rural towns in Sabah have at least one option if you'd prefer to stay local regularly – check with local tourist offices and use the accommodation search engine on www.sabahtourism.com to see what's available.

A rewarding alternative is to investigate the growing number of homestays offered in Sabah's smaller towns and rural areas – see below.

Apart from dorms, prices indicated in all budget categories in this chapter are for rooms with private bathroom unless otherwise stated.

## Tours

Independent travel in Sabah is limited compared to neighbouring Sarawak, and most travellers will have to rely on tour outfits at some point.

Sabah has a huge number of tour operators, mostly based in Kota Kinabalu. A good operator can make life easier if you're short on time, and some places are simply too expensive or too much hassle to visit independently. If you run into problems with a tour agency, take your complaint to the **Sabah Tourism Board** (Map p424; 90 088-212121; www.sabahtourism.com; 51 Jln Gaya, Kota Kinabalu; 7 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-2pm Sat).

Popular itineraries include any combination of the Mt Kinabalu trek, the Sepilok orang-utan sanctuary, diving at Tun Sakaran National Park and jungle trekking in the Danum Valley.

Attractions promoted individually by tour companies include the Tip of Borneo, jungle camps along the Kinabatangan and the remote Maliau Basin, while you can only visit Turtle Islands National Park and Tabin Wildlife Sanctuary as part of a tour. Homestay and cultural options are possible on most standard itineraries.

## Getting There & Away

There are regular flights to Kota Kinabalu from KL, Singapore and Johor Bahru (see p365). You can also fly into Pulau Labuan, Sandakan and Tawau from KL.

Most visitors arrive at the state capital, Kota Kinabalu (KK), by air or boat, but it is possible to travel into Sabah overland from Sarawak via Brunei (see p455), and by boat, from Kalimantan (Indonesia) to Tawau (see p480), or from the Filipino city of Zamboanga to Sandakan (see p466).

## Getting Around

Malaysia Airlines' domestic network was completely revamped in 2006, and most domestic flights have been transferred to Air Asia or its rural-air subsidiary Fly Asian Xpress (FAX) – fares are expected to rise considerably, and it remains to be seen which legs will survive in the long term.

Sabah has a good road system and most major roads are sealed, including the highway from KK to Sandakan and Tawau. If you're planning to rent a car, it's a good idea to ask tourist information centres which roads are paved, depending on your destination. Probably the worst stretch is between Ranau and Keningau, where minivans sometimes have to turn back because the perilous cliffside gravel road is impassable after heavy rain.

Subsidence and washouts frequently put stretches of highway under repair and can slow down a trip considerably – the route between Ranau and Sandakan can be unreliable in wet weather. The route from Tawau to Keningau is unsealed for most of the way, though it's possible to get through on 4WD Land Cruisers, usually crammed with passengers.

Express buses, minibuses and minivans run between KK and most major centres, including Mt Kinabalu. The big state-of-the-art express buses are all air-conditioned; the smaller, often older, minibuses may or may not be. Minivans are small, eight-seater vans (usually white), often stuffed with as many passengers and as much of their gear as the laws of physics permit. Express buses are relatively punctual and usually cost only a few ringgit more than minivans. Minivans only leave when full, but once under way they are quick and efficient. They don't have air-conditioning and

can get crowded; on the other hand, they generally run more frequently than buses, and if you want to travel like the locals, this is the way to do it.

Minivans have rough schedules, but don't commit yourself to any vehicle until you see how many people are on board. If you get to the bus stand and there isn't a minivan with even one passenger going your way, hang back for a few minutes; chances are there's one that's nearly full doing a lap of the town trying to fill the last couple of seats.

There are frequent departures of buses and minivans from most centres until around noon; afternoon departures can be scarce. See individual destination entries for more information.

Sabah's only railway runs between KK and Tenom via Papar and Beaufort (see p451).

## KOTA KINABALU

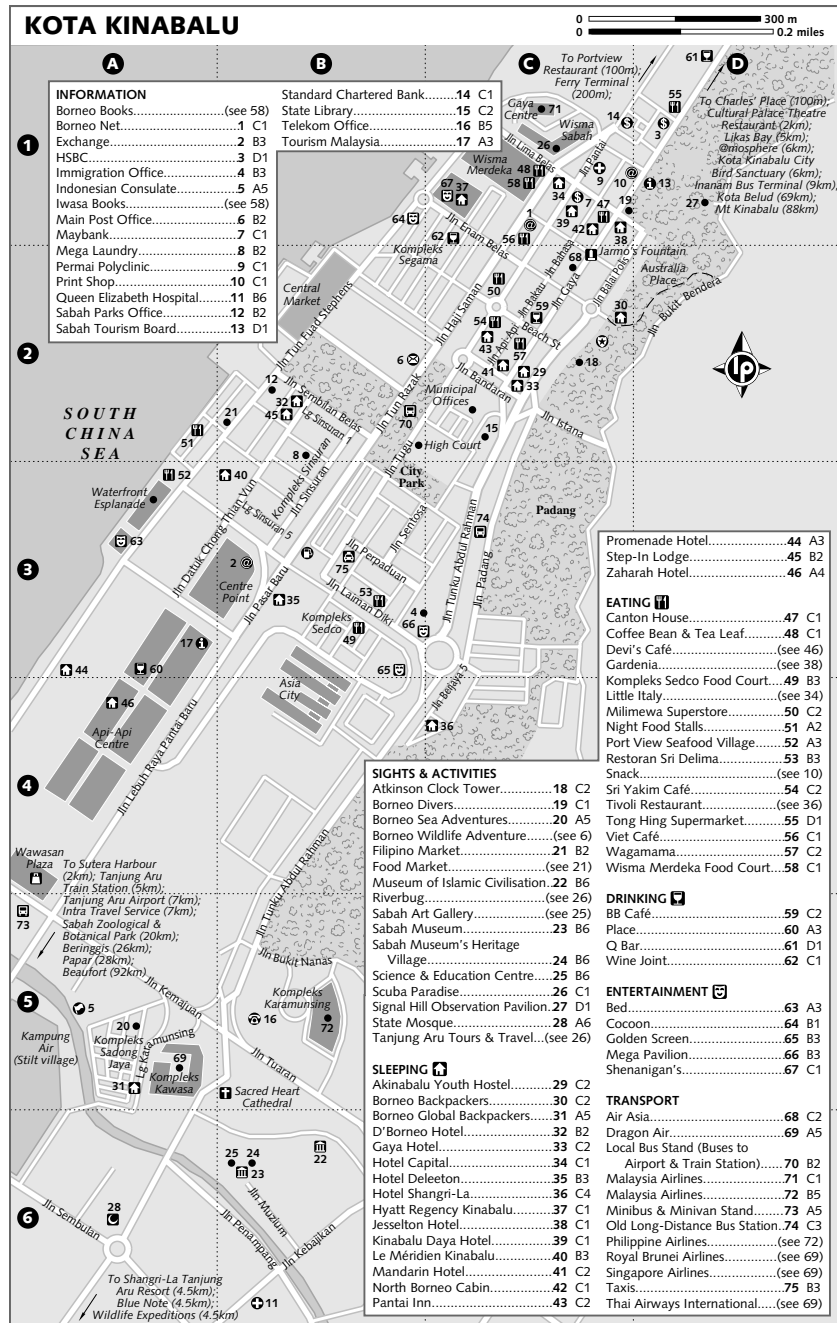
90 088 / pop 350,000

Kota Kinabalu, or KK as everyone calls it, is Sabah's capital and the largest city in the state, sprawling haphazardly, like a faded silver blanket, over reclaimed land down the coast. Originally founded as Jesselton, the city was razed by the Allies not once but twice during WWII, the first time to slow the Japanese advance and the second time to hasten their retreat. After the war the whole thing was rebuilt and rejuvenated, and renamed Kota Kinabalu in 1963.

Today KK is an engaging, if not exactly distinguished, city with a handful of prestige buildings, excellent budget accommodation, lots of shopping and the best leisure and nightlife facilities outside Kuching. The islands of the TAR National Park are also right on its doorstep, providing a perfect excuse to tune out and chill out for a day or so. You'll end up in KK at least a couple of times if you're aiming to cover a number of attractions in Sabah, so eat, drink, dance and make the most of it.

## Orientation

Downtown KK is a dense grid of concrete buildings nestled between the waterfront and a range of low, forested hills to the east. It's compact and walkable – most of the restaurants, accommodation, tourist offices, tour operators, the main post office and transport centres are located here.



KK's main shopping complexes line the main road, which changes name four times in a relatively short distance. On the western side of Jln Tun Razak there are two sprawling, grid-like blocks of dilapidated two- and three-storey shophouses, Kompleks Segama and Kompleks Sinsuran. Between Jln Haji Saman and the waterfront is Wisma Merdeka and at the opposite end, on the way to the airport, are the huge Centre Point and Api-Api centres.

The international airport and the train station are at Tanjung Aru, 7km south of the city centre, which is bounded on the north by the upmarket bayside suburb of Likas. Between town and the airport the massive reclamation project, Sutera Harbour, is a luxury resort development.

The new northbound bus station is at Inanam, 9km north from the centre; other public transport congregates around three main sites in town (see p432). Taxis are common in the city centre. Ferries leave for the islands of TAR National Park, as well as for Pulau Labuan, from the terminal at the northern end of town.

**Information**  
**BOOKSHOPS**

**Borneo Books** (% 538077; www.borneobooks.com; Wisma Merdeka, Jln Haji Saman) Now with two outlets, offering English-language and Borneo-related titles, café, free wi-fi internet and secondhand book scheme.  
**Iwasa Bookshop** (% 233757; Wisma Merdeka, Jln Haji Saman) Has a more general selection.

**IMMIGRATION OFFICES**

**Immigration office** (% 280700; 4th fl, Wisma Dang Bandang, Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman; 8am-1pm & 2-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 8am-11.30am & 2pm-4.30pm Fri, 8am-1pm Sat)

**INTERNET ACCESS**

**Borneo Net** (31 Jln Haji Saman; per hr RM3; 9pm-1am)  
**Exchange** (% 389860; Centre Point; per hr RM4; 8am-10.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-11pm Sat & Sun) Fast, efficient business centre.  
**Print Shop** (% 248399; 63 Jln Gaya; per hr RM4; 8am-7pm Mon-Sat) Digital photo shop with good internet access.

**LAUNDRY**

Hostels and hotels usually have laundry services available, but it's often cheaper to use an outside service.

**Mega Laundry** (% 238970; Lg Sinsuran 2)

**LIBRARIES**

**State Library** (% 254333; Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman; 9am-9pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat, 9am-1pm Sun; j ) The library has an English periodicals section for those wanting to catch up on the news from home, and it's a good place to cool down and get some peace and quiet. internet access is available for RM2 per hour.

**MEDICAL SERVICES**

**Dial** % 999 in an emergency.  
**Permai Polyclinic** (% 232100; www.permaipolyclinics.com; 4 Jln Pantai; 24hr) Private outpatients clinic.  
**Queen Elizabeth Hospital** (% 215030; 9 Jln Pantai-pang) Past the Sabah Museum.

**MONEY**

Most major banks, such as HSBC and Standard Chartered, have branches at the northern end of town. Moneychangers are plentiful in KK, particularly in the Wisma Merdeka and Centre Point malls; they are more convenient than banks, and sometimes have better rates.

**HSBC** (% 1300-880181; 56 Jln Gaya)  
**Maybank** (% 215030; 9 Jln Pantai)  
**Standard Chartered** (% 258746; Jln Pantai)

**POST**

**Main post office** (Jln Tun Razak; 8am-5pm Mon-Sat) Has an efficient poste restante counter. Parcels are weighed and sent from the offices to the left of the main entrance.

**TELEPHONE**

You can make international calls from public Telekom and Uniphone phones around town with the relevant phonocard or calling card.  
**Telekom office** (Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman) A 10-minute walk south of the city centre, this has international telephone booths.

**TOURIST INFORMATION**

**Sabah Parks** (% 088-211881; www.sabahparks.org.my; Lot 1-3, Block K, Kompleks Sinsuran, Jln Tun Fuad Stephens; 8am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Thu, 8-11.30am & 2-5pm Fri) See p422.  
**Sabah Tourism Board** (% 212121; www.sabahtourism.com; 51 Jln Gaya; 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-2pm Sat) Housed in the historic post office building, KK's main tourist office has helpful staff and a wide range of brochures, pamphlets and other information covering every aspect of independent and tour travel in Sabah.  
**Tourism Malaysia** (% 211732; www.tourism.gov.my; Api-Api Centre, Lg Api-Api 1; 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) Geared more for travel throughout Malaysia.

SABAH

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## Dangers & Annoyances

When the usual precautions are taken, KK is a reasonably safe city. Late at night, streets and alleys near the waterfront are probably best avoided if you are alone, and locals often advise caution around the Filipino market. Women travellers are wise to be cautious about walking around on their own after dark, though it's probably safer than most Western cities.

## Sights

### SABAH MUSEUM

A large complex, the **Sabah Museum** (☎ 253199; jmuzium@tm.net.my; Jln Muzium; admission RM15; 11 9am-5pm Sat-Thu) is centred on a modern four-storey structure inspired by the long-houses of the Rungus and Murut tribes. It's a little south of the city centre, on a hill on the corner of Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman and Jln Penampang, and could easily occupy a half day or so.

In the main building there are good permanent collections of tribal and historical artefacts, including ceramics, and some nicely presented exhibits of flora and fauna. The prehistory gallery even has a replica limestone cave, in case you don't make it to Gomantong, Madai or any of the other real ones!

In the gardens, the **Heritage Village** offers the chance to wander round examples of traditional tribal dwellings, including Kadazan bamboo houses and a Chinese farmhouse, all nicely set on a lily-pad lake.

The adjoining **Science & Education Centre** has an informative exhibition on the petroleum industry, from drilling to refining and processing. The **Sabah Art Gallery** features regular shows and exhibitions by local artists.

A short walk towards town is another annexe, the **Museum of Islamic Civilisation** (☎ 538234; admission included in the Sabah Museum ticket; 11 9am-5pm Sat-Thu), devoted to Muslim culture and history.

If you're heading east after KK, keep hold of your admission ticket – it will also allow you entry to Agnes Keith House (p463) in Sandakan.

To get to the museum complex, catch a bus (50 sen) along Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman and get off just before the mosque. Bus 13 also goes right round past the hospital and stops near Jln Muzium.

### STATE MOSQUE

A fine example of contemporary Islamic architecture, this **mosque** (Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman) is set some distance from the heat and noise of central KK. It's south of the city centre past the Kampung Air stilt village, not far from the Sabah Museum; you'll see the striped minaret and Octopussy-style dome on your way to or from the airport.

Built in 1977, the mosque has since been upstaged by the massive new City Mosque at Likas Bay; nonetheless, it's still an impressive building, accommodating 5000 male worshippers inside and 500 women on the balcony. Non-Muslim visitors are allowed inside, but must dress appropriately and remove their shoes before entering.

### KOTA KINABALU CITY BIRD SANCTUARY

Opened in 2000, this **sanctuary** (☎ 246955; kkcbs@tm.net.my; Jln Bukit Bendera Upper; adult/child RM10/5; 11 8am-6pm Tue-Sun) covers 24 hectares of mangrove swamp in the northeastern suburb of Likas. Being so near the city it's not exactly overrun with birdlife, but the 1.5km boardwalk offers plenty of sightings and there are some rare treats, like the majestic purple herons visible from a blind in the northwest section of the reserve. Run by the local Likas Wetlands Society in association with the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), the sanctuary reception has a small library and you can rent binoculars for RM5. It's best to visit early in the morning or late afternoon from September to April.

### NORTH BORNEO RAILWAY

Founded in 1896 and restored in 2000 to celebrate KK's new city status, the **North Borneo Railway** (☎ 263933; www.northborneorailway.com.my; adult/child RM180/130) offers visitors the chance to travel in fine colonial style with a refurbished wood-burning 1954 Vulcan steam locomotive, one of the last of its kind. The train runs from Tanjung Aru train station to Papar on Monday, Wednesday and Saturday, departing KK at 10am and returning around 2pm. The fare includes a boxed 'tiffin' lunch.

### OTHER ATTRACTIONS

You can wander up to the UFO-like observation pavilion on **Signal Hill**, at the eastern edge of the city centre, to escape the traffic and to get another take on the squatters' stilt village at Pulau Gaya. The view is best

as the sun sets over the islands. From the top, it's also possible to hike down to the bird sanctuary on the other side.

The modest timepiece at the foot of the hill is the **Atkinson Clock Tower**, one of the only structures to survive the Allied bombing of Jesselton in 1945. It's a square, 15.7m-high wooden structure that was completed in 1905 and named after the first district officer of the town, FG Atkinson, who died of malaria aged 28. The tower was once visible from the sea, though there's now quite a few buildings in the way!

There's a busy **food market** (Jln Tun Fuad Stephens) on the waterfront adjacent to the **Filipino market** (Jln Tun Fuad Stephens) handicrafts centre, with numerous vendors selling souvenirs, snacks and seafood. On Sunday a very lively Chinese **street market** takes over the entire length of Jln Gaya, with all kinds of food and goods (including some great pancakes). On Chinese New Year it goes completely crazy – you'll hear the gongs and dances starting around 7am!

## Tours

KK has a huge number of tour operators, enough to suit every taste and budget; if you're shopping around head for Wisma Sabah, where almost the entire ground floor is occupied by travel-agency offices.

More established companies include the following:

**Borneo Adventure** (☎ 238731; www.borneoadventure.com; 5th fl, 509-512 Gaya Centre, Jln Tun Fuad Stephens) Award-winning Sarawak-based company with very professional staff, imaginative sightseeing and activity itineraries and a genuine interest in local people and the environment.

**Borneo Biking Adventures** (☎ 013-552 7313; www.borneobikingadventures.com) This specialist company offers motorcycle tours in the Crocker Range and other parts of Sabah, starting at RM700 for half-day tours or RM1000 per day with accommodation. 'Wives, kids and girlfriends' seem to count as extra baggage!

**Borneo Divers** (☎ 222226; www.borneodivers.info; 9th fl, Menara Jubili, 53 Jln Gaya) Longest-established Borneo dive outfit; can arrange courses and dives just about anywhere and has its own dive shop. It's possible to get discounted rates as a walk-in.

**Borneo Eco Tours** (☎ 438300; www.borneoecotours.com; Pusat Perindustrian Kolombong Jaya, Mile 5.5 Jln Kolombong) This is a place with a good reputation, arranging tours throughout Malaysian Borneo, including travel to the Kinabatangan area. Multiday tours start around US\$140 per person.

**Borneo Sea Adventures** (☎ 230000; www.bornea.com; 1st fl, 8A Karamuning Karamuning Godown) Runs dive tours to Sipadan and has the only resort on the beautiful Mantanani Islands, off Kota Belud, where dugongs can be seen.

**Borneo Wildlife Adventure** (☎ 213668; www.borneo-wildlife.com; Lot F, 1st fl, GPO Bldg, Jln Tun Razak) Arranges a variety of tours and travel services throughout Sabah, including day trips; good for the midrange budget.

**Intra Travel Service** (☎ 261558; www.intra-travel.com.my; Level 1, No 5 Airport Terminal 2, Jln Old Airport) Sandakan-based company specialising in inland tours, including the only trips to Tabin Wildlife Reserve. Also runs Sabah Air sightseeing flights (from US\$44 per person).

**Tanjung Aru Tours & Travel** (TATT; ☎ 222210; www.tanjungarutourstravel.net; Wisma Sabah, Jln Haji Saman) Based at the luxury Shangri-La Tanjung Aru Resort, TATT incorporates Sabah Sightseeing, Beachbums Borneo and Absolute Scuba, offering everything from KK city tours (RM95) to full-day diving trips (RM285), plus some more unusual options like kitesurfing (three-day course RM800).

**Wildlife Expeditions** (☎ 246000; www.wildlife-expeditions.com; Shangri-La Tanjung Aru Resort) Specialises in wildlife and rainforest trips across Malaysian Borneo, with offices in KL and Sandakan.

## Sleeping

### BUDGET

KK has the best range of backpackers' hostels in Borneo, mostly clustered around Jln Gaya. Competition guarantees low rates and services aplenty, and a basic toast-and-tea breakfast is usually included. Even if you aren't staying at one, the hostels are often the best places to go for information and to seek out fellow travellers to share costs on tours, treks and the like, especially to Mt Kinabalu.

**Gaya Hotel** (137A Jln Gaya; s/d/tr RM15/20/25) The cheapest private rooms in town, but a million miles from hostel standards.

**Akinabalu Youth Hostel** (☎ 272188; www.akinabaluyh.com; 133 Jln Gaya; dm RM20-23, r RM50-56; a i ) Friendly staff, snazzy décor and copious freebies make this a premier option among KK's hostels, particularly if you find a quiet time to take advantage of the gratis internet and VCD movies. Accommodation is mostly in four-bed rooms.

**North Borneo Cabin** (☎ 272800; www.northborneocabin.com; 74 Jln Gaya; dm RM20-23, r RM50; a i ) The Akinabalu's sister hostel has a smaller lounge and larger dorms (eight to 10 beds) but offers all the same facilities, and often manages to feel more sociable.

**Borneo Backpackers** (☎ 234009; www.borneobackpackers.com; 24 Lg Dewan, Australia Pl; dm 20-25, r RM40-124; a i ) The larger dorms here can feel a bit crowded, but it's clean and popular with budget travellers. It's run by Borneo Eco Tours, and there's a café-museum downstairs commemorating the liberation of KK by Allied forces in 1945.

**Borneo Global Backpackers** (☎ 270976; www.bgbbackpackers.com; 29 Karamunsing Godown, Jln Karamunsing; dm RM22-25, r RM45-58; a i ) Fervently recommended by backpackers, Global is a bit out of the way at the southern end of town, but free airport transfers, sociable staff and good standards compensate nicely.

**Step-In Lodge** (☎ 233519; www.stepinlodge.com; Lot 1, Block L, Kompleks Sinsuran, Jln Tun Fuad Stephens; dm RM25-35, r RM60-80; a i ) The excellent Step-In Lodge is a new arrival, and is so far awaiting discovery by the backpacker hordes. It is a spotless paragon of good hostelry, with a big TV lounge, kitchenette, laundry service, cheap internet, proper mattresses and plenty of other plus points. Most rooms have four beds, with one large eight-bed 'family room'. Even the bedclothes look friendly!

#### MIDRANGE

Most of KK's hotels fall into this price range (RM70 to RM250), and it's possible to find some good bargains. TV, International Direct Dialling (IDD) phone and private bathroom generally come as standard, with some places offering extras such as minibars in deluxe or suite rooms. Most hotels listed here also have lifts, though not always with step-free access.

**Pantai Inn** (☎ 217095; 56-57 Jln Pantai; s/tw/tr RM67.20/72.45/88.20; a ) This great-value central hotel is so popular with bargain-minded Chinese businesspeople that it's a good idea to book in advance. You can't fault it for cleanliness, and the shiny lobby sets the tone nicely.

**Zaharah Hotel** (☎ 012-803 0387; www.zaharahhotelsb.com; Block 3, Api-Api Centre; apt from RM75; a ) Tucked away inside the shopping centre, keen self-caterers could have a butchers' at these small but neat kitchenette apartment rooms.

**Mandarin Hotel** (☎ 225222; jw3333@hotmail.com; 138 Jln Gaya; r RM78-140; a ) The flagship in a chain of four properties around town, the

Mandarin's reception hints at a Chinese theme that never manifests itself in the rooms. Comfort levels are OK, especially if you go 'deluxe'.

**Hotel Deleton** (☎ 252222; Lot 45-46, Block E, Asia City, Jln Pasar Baru; r RM79.90-159.90; a ) A grand entrance in a modest modern block heralds your arrival to the Deleton, a compact but respectable collection of various-sized rooms. Keen shoppers should relish the location, right opposite Centre Point and a short stroll from the waterfront.

**Kinabalu Daya Hotel** (☎ 240000; www.kkdayahotel.com; Lot 3-4, Block 9, Jln Pantai; r RM95-230, ste RM210-270, with breakfast; a ) The rooms here aren't huge but plenty of travellers swear by this central midrange stalwart, which offers wood floors, nonsmoking rooms and full Astro satellite TV (not controlled by reception!). There's a popular bar-restaurant, with karaoke of course. Ask here about trips to Sungai Labuk, a little-visited alternative to the Kinabatangan.

**Hotel Capital** (☎ 231999; 23 Jln Haji Saman; r RM144-173, ste 230-294; a ) The Capital's location is its second-best feature, with adequate accommodation let down by some borderline grotty showers. The hotel's best feature is of course the Little Italy restaurant (p430) on the ground floor.

**D'Borneo Hotel** (☎ 266999; www.dborneohotel.com; Lot 6, Block L, Kompleks Sinsuran, Jln Tun Fuad Stephens; r with breakfast RM145-175; a ) Newly opened and still immaculate, D'Borneo offers excellent quality accommodation near the waterfront, aiming for boutique-hotel style across 24 rooms. Discounts of RM25 are often available; breakfast is in the lobby café (complete with quirky designer chairs).

**Hotel Shangri-La** (☎ 212800; www.kkshang.com.my; 75 Bandar Berjaya Complex, Jln Berjaya 5; r RM258.75-293.25, ste from RM632.50; a i ) Ten storeys of business-class sheen, creeping into the midrange category as discounts consistently knock a full RM100 or so off the rack rates. Despite the name, this hotel is not connected to the luxury Shangri-La Tanjung Aru Resort.

#### TOP END

Central KK has several full-facility hotels vying for the lucrative top-end trade, though many tour companies prefer resorts such as the Shangri-La and Magellan

Sutera in Tanjung Aru. Substantial promotional discounts frequently apply outside high season, so you'll seldom have to pay full price if you're looking for a little luxury.

**Hyatt Regency Kinabalu** (☎ 221234; www.kinabalu.regency.hyatt.com; Jln Datuk Salleh Sulong; r RM296.05-333.05, ste from RM518.08; a i s ) Big, squat and square, the Hyatt dominates the waterfront adjoining Wisma Merdeka. Facilities include childcare, medical services and the infamous Shenanigan's pub (p431).

**Jesselton Hotel** (☎ 223333; www.jesseltonhotel.com; 69 Jln Gaya; r RM320-390, ste RM1090; a i ) Undergoing renovations at the time of research, KK's oldest hotel was originally built in the 1950s. Mock-colonial wood and marble give the place plenty of character, and the single suite even has its own fishpond! There's also a very good restaurant, coffee shop, business centre and a red London cab to shuttle you to the airport. Discounts of up to 40% are available.

**Promenade Hotel** (☎ 265555; www.promenade.com.my; Api-Api Centre, 4 Lg Api-Api 3; r RM345-517.50, ste from RM483; a i s ) This massive four-star block faces the sea just in front of the Api-Api Centre. Amenities are plentiful, and discounts of 30% or more make it a solid bargain.

**Le Méridien Kinabalu** (☎ 322222; www.lemeridien.com; Jln Tun Fuad Stephens; r RM862.50-1012, ste from RM1725; a i s ) 'If you can't undercut 'em, outclass 'em' seems to be the motto at KK's latest five-star venture, which just reeks of luxury, from the complimentary internet access to the flatscreen TVs and DVD players. The eye-watering prices come down a little in low season, and may even get as low as RM310 if you catch the right discounts.

#### Eating

KK is one of the few cities in Borneo with an eating scene diverse enough to refresh the noodle-jaded palate. Besides the ubiquitous Chinese *kedai kopi* (coffee shops) and Malay halal restaurants, you'll find plenty of seafood, Japanese and Western restaurants in the city centre, most with good varied menus and some vegetarian options. The abundance of small supermarkets and shops also makes self-catering a good option, especially if you have a room with a fridge.

#### CAFES

**Sri Yakim Café** (Jln Pantai; mains 80 sen-RM5; h breakfast & lunch) This typical little Malay place has all the usual fried rice and noodles and the full range of roti (unleavened flaky bread), but it's also home to the famous Pancake King, dishing up chunky peanut-filled pancakes so beloved as an afternoon snack that they come with a money-back guarantee.

**Snack** (☎ 016-806 8686; 63 Jln Gaya; dishes RM1.60-5.50; h breakfast & lunch) Snack is a tiny juice and sandwich bar next to the Print Shop outlet, serving up great juices, smoothies, coffees and shakes but rather haphazard snacks.

**Viet Café** (☎ 239208; 32 Jln Haji Saman; mains RM4-6.50; h lunch & dinner) When you just have to have a change from Chinese, try the fast-food style Vietnamese dishes in this bright canteen.

**Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf** (☎ 232333; Wisma Merdeka, Jln Haji Saman; dishes RM8-14; h breakfast, lunch & dinner) Pure coffeehouse indulgence, from the ice blends and free refills to the Western breakfasts, low-carb sandwiches and demon chocolate cheese-cake (RM7.50). You may need a moment just to digest the range of teas and coffees on offer.

#### CHINESE & JAPANESE

**Canton House** (☎ 267399; 70 Jln Gaya; dishes RM6-15; h breakfast, lunch & dinner) This air-conditioned restaurant is a little more upscale than your average *kedai kopi*, and serves up tasty dim sum, noodles and other Cantonese-style dishes.

**Wagamama** (☎ 230433; Beach St; dishes RM2-28; h lunch & dinner) Up above the leafy canopy of Beach Street's drinking dens, the pictorial menu here helps you navigate the range of sushi and Japanese cuisine. An all-you-can-eat buffet is available for RM44.62.

**Grand Port View Seafood Restaurant** (☎ 538 178; www.portview.com.my; 16-17 Jln Haji Saman; dishes RM20-30; h lunch & dinner) This is a large Chinese establishment specialising in seafood. This successful chain also has several branches dotted around Sabah, including the huge new Port View Seafood Village (☎ 221753) found on Jln Tun Fuad Stephens, on the waterfront. Some Western dishes also feature.

**INDIAN**

**Devi's Café** (☎ 012-803 0387; Lot 18, Block 3, Api-Api Centre; meals from RM9; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Devi's is very much a family affair, and return visitors often receive a full-on warm Indian welcome. You can order from the boards, pick and choose your dishes from the buffet trays, or simply state what you *don't* like and let them ply you with food. It's great value and ideal for vegetarians, and in good traditional style many meals are served on banana leaves.

**MALAY**

The best food court in town is the square at Kompleks Sedco, where a mass of restaurants with outdoor seating dish up seafood and other specialities. The proprietors can be a bit pushy in their pursuit of custom, and you should make sure you find out the price of each item before you order.

**Restoran Sri Delima** (☎ 213222; Block 36, 17 Jln Laiman Diki; dishes RM6.90-20; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) The Restoran Sri Delima, Ruby Inn's house restaurant, serves Malay and other pan-Asian dishes beyond the usual standards, plus American breakfasts. The air-con in the big dining room is a bit chilly but there are some interesting pictures of old Sabah on the walls.

**Tivoli Restaurant** (☎ 212800; Hotel Shangri-La; dishes RM10-20; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) A little more reasonably priced than the classy restaurants in the big hotels, the Tivoli has some good dim sum and Malay buffets (RM23 to RM34.50) and stays open until 1am or 2am.

**Cultural Palace Theatre Restaurant** (☎ 251844; Jln Tanjung Lipat; lunch/dinner RM18/42; 🍴 lunch & dinner) If you don't have time to seek out Sabah's traditional dances *in situ*, the hour-long evening shows at this tourist-targeted buffet restaurant provide a lively insight into the region's cultural diversity. And you get to eat, which is always a bonus! It's out of town towards Likas Bay, and closes on Monday evening.

**WESTERN**

**Charles' Place** (☎ 272677; 5 Jln Gaya; mains RM7.50-49.50; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Also known as the Ancient Mariner, the nautical theme here explains the toothpick treasure chests, but not the beer-bottle 'Christmas tree'. The food, too, is an interesting fusion of the

obvious (nasi goreng), the sophisticated (seafood) and the inexplicable (African pepper stew).

**Little Italy** (☎ 232231; 23 Jln Haji Saman; dishes RM16.50-43.70; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) The Capital Hotel's scored a winner with its red-tiled ground-floor restaurant, a permanent favourite with expats, volunteers, splurging backpackers and just about anyone else who likes it *Italiano*. Set lunches are RM16 to RM20.70, pasta and pizza come with the full range of toppings, and there are plenty of treats like tiramisu and some very reasonable house wines (RM18.40 a glass)

**Gardenia** (☎ 223333; Jesselton Hotel, 69 Jln Gaya; dishes RM30-50; 🍴 lunch & dinner) As you'd hope, the Jesselton's refined dining salon has some of the best Western food in town, holding its own against stiff but expensive new competition from Le Méridien. A recent renovation should only improve matters.

**@mosphere** (☎ 425100; www.atmosphererestaurant.com; Menara Tun Mustafa, Jln Sulaman, Likas Bay; mains from RM35; 🍴 lunch & dinner) If you can ever find an occasion special enough, the revolving restaurant atop the cigarette-shaped former Sabah Foundation Building north of town is the latest eatery of choice for Sabah's VIPs and celebrities, who were bussed, boated and helicoptered out en masse for the grand opening in 2006.

**QUICK EATS**

For great snacks and inexpensive seafood, try out the food stalls on the waterfront side of the Filipino Market, which set up around 5pm and stay open until midnight. KK's shopping malls are also good for quick sit-down meals.

**Wisma Merdeka food court** (☎ 213686; 6th fl, Wisma Merdeka, Jln Haji Saman) During the day, this has nice views over to the islands.

**SELF-CATERING**

For basic self-catering you can nip into any of the small shops or 24-hour stores around town.

**Milimewa Superstore** (☎ 231520; 1 Jln Pantail) The huge Milimewa in the centre of town has the biggest range of everyday supplies.

**Tong Hing Supermarket** (☎ 230293; 55 Jln Gaya) At Tong Hing Supermarket there's a more expensive selection of imported goods such as Marmite and Haagen-Dazs.

**Drinking**

Averaging 12 cans of beer a month per capita (not including smuggled goods), Sabahans are big drinkers in Malaysian terms, and KK's nightlife allows plenty of scope for visitors to join the party. The scene has two main centres: the **Waterfront Esplanade complex** (Jln Tun Fuad Stephens) houses a good number of upscale bar-restaurants and the lively Bed club (right), while Beach St, nearer the centre of town, is a busy open-air stretch shrouded in greenery and surrounded by bars and eateries. Live music or karaoke takes place almost every night in the latter's central round.

Wherever you choose, most venues keep going until around 4am. Prices are relatively high, though you can often save drinking happy hour or by ordering a jug or 'bucket' of your chosen beverage.

**BB Café** (☎ 233882; 1 Jln Jati) Opening directly onto Beach St's central stage area, this pool bar has two eight-ball tables and the cheapest beer in town, with buckets of four cans for RM18. There's a big icebox in case you happen to sprain your foot dancing like an idiot.

**Q Bar** (☎ 230722; 1st fl, 50 Jln Gaya; beer RM11.50, cocktails from RM17.25) Overtly gay bars are a real rarity outside KL, which is a real shame if Q is anything to go by. Stylish cocktail-lounge décor provides comfortable drinking space, and the small dance floor plays an unusually switched-on selection of Western dance music. The clientele's mixed, from the hilariously camp to the transparently straight (plus the occasional Mr Magoo).

**Place** (☎ 236702; Block 2, Api-Api Centre, Lebuhraya Pantai Baru; 🍴 24hr) A perfect after-hours retreat or all-day hangout, attracting plenty of expats. As well as drinks and pool, there's a full Western menu (RM5 to RM15.90), in case you feel like chocolate ice-cream and chips after Bed.

**Wine Joint** (Jln Datuk Saleh Sulong; 🍴 noon-11pm) Serious drinking, serious class and serious prices: this damn-near-authentic wine bar has bottles for up to RM365, hailing mostly from the New World. Even if you are not splashing out on the big tipples, you can sip a decent glass at RM13.80 and tuck into some small but perfectly formed tapas (RM10.25 to RM28.75) served up here at the Wine Joint.

**Entertainment****NIGHTCLUBS & LIVE MUSIC**

While karaoke is a mainstay in the bars, KK's larger venues rely heavily on live music to pull in the punters, providing regular employment for a whole flotilla of local and Filipino cover bands. The quality of the performances is often encouragingly high, but drinks are pricey and opening hours are more limited than for bars – everywhere listed here closes by 2am on weekends.

**Bed** (☎ 251901; Waterfront Esplanade) Get those bedpuns ready: the space that launched a thousand quips is arguably the fulcrum of KK nightlife, and it's a rare night out that won't see you ending up in Bed at some point. Bands play from 9pm, followed by DJs til closing; it's best with a crowd, so as in life, the more people you can get into Bed the more fun you'll have...

**Blue Note** (☎ 225800; Shangri-La Tanjung Aru Resort) If you're staying out of town or just fancy a change, the spacious Blue Note doles out plenty of DJ tunes, though followers of the great jazz label may feel cheated.

**Cocoon** (☎ 211252; Jln Tun Razak Segama) In the busy corner of town opposite the Hyatt, Cocoon is a smart bar-restaurant that goes all bar in the evening when the live bands emerge. The post-gig DJs have a tendency to talk over the records, but at least their R&B-leaning tunes are danceable.

**Shenanigan's** (☎ 221234; Hyatt Regency Hotel) Following the international 'Irish-pub' model, from dodgy draught Guinness to drunk and incapable patrons, this has long been a popular establishment in KK. Live bands perform most nights from 9pm and the place is totally rammed on weekends. Prices are horrendous (up to RM24 for a small beer) but get better during happy hour.

**CINEMAS**

KK has two major central cinemas. Both have three screens and show a mixture of new Western, Malay, Chinese and Indian releases, usually with English subtitles where appropriate.

**Golden Screen** (www.gsc.com.my; 63 Jln Laiman Diki; tickets RM4-8) An older cinema.

**Mega Pavilion** (☎ 313777; www.megapavilion.net; Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman; tickets RM5-9) New and modern.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

KK is the hub of the Malaysia Airlines network in Sabah, which currently includes frequent services to KL, Sandakan, Labuan and Tawau, plus regular flights to Kuching in Sarawak.

Air Asia has seven daily flights to KL and two to Johor Bahru, with promotions starting from as little as RM130, plus two daily services to Miri and one each to Kuching and Tawau.

KK is also the hub for Sabah's rural air services: FAX flies Fokkers to Lahad Datu (five daily), Sandakan (twice daily), Bintulu (twice daily), Sibiu (twice daily) and Mulu (three weekly), plus two weekly Twin Otters to Sandakan via Kudat.

If you're flying to Singapore, it's often cheaper to take the flights to/from Johor Bahru and cross the Causeway on the Malaysia Airlines bus (see p501).

Malaysia Airlines currently has two weekly flights to Bandar Seri Begawan (BSB) in Brunei and one or two daily to Hong Kong and Kaoshiung in Taiwan. The airline also flies to Taipei daily and Manila, Cebu City, Shanghai and Seoul twice weekly. Air Asia flies three times weekly to Bangkok and daily to Clark, in the Philippines.

### Airline Offices

**Air Asia** (☎ 284669; 94 Jln Gaya)

**Dragon Air** (☎ 254733; Kompleks Kawasa, Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman)

**Malaysia Airlines** (☎ 213555) Branch (Kompleks Karamunsing, Jln Tuaran) Central branch (11th fl, Gaya Centre)

**Philippine Airlines** (☎ 239600; 3rd fl, Kompleks Karamunsing, Jln Tuaran)

**Royal Brunei Airlines** (☎ 242193; Kompleks Kawasa, Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman)

**Singapore Airlines** (☎ 255444; Kompleks Kawasa, Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman)

**Thai Airways International** (☎ 242193; Kompleks Kawasa, Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman)

### BOAT

**Fast ferries** (☎ 236834) leave daily for Pulau Labuan (economy/1st class RM31/36, two hours) from the ferry terminal just north of the city centre. From Labuan, you can connect with services to Brunei (RM53). The ride is generally smooth as long as the sea is not too rough. As well as the ticket price,

a terminal fee of adult/child RM3/1.50 is charged for departures from KK.

There are usually two departures daily, one at 8am and one in the early afternoon, returning at similar times. Boarding is 15 minutes before departure, and because Labuan is a federal territory you will need to take your passport with you.

For boats to KK's offshore islands, see p434.

### BUS

The new bus terminal at Inanam, north of the centre, has simplified things considerably for travellers: all express buses, minivans and shared taxis heading north now convene here, and a handy counter system makes it easy to find the service you want. The only downside is the distance from the centre – a shuttle bus (RM1.50) runs here supposedly every 15 minutes from the old bus station, but allow plenty of time if you're aiming for an early start.

Transport for southern destinations (and some closer northern towns) still congregates either around the old long-distance bus park on Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman or behind Wawasan Plaza, south of the Api-Api Centre. Note that some companies serve both depots, and the asking price may not be quite the same.

Touts hang around all the bus stands, but most are helpful and will guide you to the right place. Schedules for express buses on the longer routes should be checked in advance. It's advisable to book ahead on weekends for Mt Kinabalu and Sandakan, but generally you can just turn up before the scheduled departure time and hop on. In any case, the bus may wait for an hour or so for more passengers.

Departures on all forms of transport are frequent in the early morning for most destinations; there are often far fewer later in the day. The general rule is to travel early, and the further you travel the earlier you should leave.

### TAXI

There are share-taxis to many minivan destinations. They also leave when full, but the fares are much higher than the minivans (see opposite). Their big advantage is that they are much quicker and more comfortable.

## MAIN DESTINATIONS AND FARES FROM KOTA KINABALU

Fares here are given as a guideline – exact prices vary from company to company, and cheaper fares may be available.

Destination	Time (hr)	Bus	Minivan/minibus	Taxi	Terminal
Beaufort	2	RM15	-	RM18	Town
Keningau	2½	RM25	RM20	-	Town
Kota Belud	1½	RM7	RM7	RM10	Inanam
Kudat	3	RM18	RM18	RM18-28	Inanam
Lahad Datu	8	RM40	-	RM50	Inanam
Lawas (Sarawak)	4	RM25	RM20	RM40	Town
Mt Kinabalu NP	3	RM15	RM15	RM20	Inanam & Town
Ranau	3½	RM15	RM15	RM19	Inanam & Town
Sandakan	6	RM33.50	RM30	RM40	Inanam
Semporna	10	RM56	-	RM60	Inanam
Tawau	10	RM55	-	RM60	Inanam
Tenom	3½	RM25	RM20	-	Town

### TRAIN

**Tanjung Aru train station** (☎ 254611) is 5km south of the city centre, close to the airport. Sabah's only railway runs from here to Tenom via Papar and Beaufort. The four-hour journey to Tenom is very cheap (economy/1st class RM7.50/11.50) but delays and cancellations are common; the most scenic section begins after Beaufort (see p451).

## Getting Around

### TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

KK's international airport is at Tanjung Aru, 7km southwest of the city centre. The building is new and modern, with a post office, hotel and car-rental kiosks, a Telekom office, internet, moneychanger and ATMs, a good bookshop and fast-food outlets. MAS services depart from Terminal 1, while Air Asia currently uses Terminal 2.

Minivans run to the airport till 10pm from behind Wawasan Plaza; the fare is RM2. Buses 17 and 19A from the local bus station also pass the airport turn-off (RM1). Departures are irregular, but there is usually around one an hour during the day.

The 15-minute taxi ride to the airport normally costs RM12 to RM15, but you may be charged more late at night. Leaving the terminal, there's a taxi desk on the ground floor where you can buy a fixed-price coupon (RM20) into town.

### BUS

Local buses leave from the stand by the city park, between the municipal offices and Jln Tun Razak. The only time you'll probably need one is to get to the airport or Tanjung Aru train station (RM1). Minivans that pass the airport also pass the train station. If you don't feel like walking to the museum or Kompleks Karamunsing south of the city centre, jump on a bus going along Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman (50 sen).

### CAR

Travel agencies, bigger hotels and the Tourism Malaysia office can help arrange car hire. There are also a couple of car-rental booths at the airport, though they are often unstaffed. While more expensive than buses, there are many advantages to renting a car; above all, it's a lot easier to get around because public transport to remote areas is often limited.

Rates for a Proton Iswara start around RM140 per day, while a Toyota Hilux or Land Cruiser costs from RM450 per day.

### TAXI

Kota Kinabalu's taxis are plentiful and mostly have meters installed, though you can still negotiate a price in advance if you prefer. There are several points in the city centre where taxis congregate – try near the Millmewa Superstore or any major hotel. Trips around town should cost about RM5, and renting a cab by the hour is about RM35.



## AROUND KOTA KINABALU Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park

Just west of KK, the five islands of Manukan, Gaya, Sapi, Mamutik and Sulug and the reefs in between make up TAR National Park, which covers a total area of just over 49 sq km. Only a short boat ride from the city centre, they have some nice beaches and the water in the outer areas is usually clear, offering ideal day-trip material for anyone wanting to escape the city and unwind.

Unfortunately, much of the coral around the islands has been destroyed by dynamite fishing, and experienced divers and snorkellers are likely to be disappointed. There are still plenty of colourful fish, however, and if you've had few opportunities for tropical snorkelling, the park offers easy and affordable access. It's possible to hire snorkelling gear from the boatmen and on the islands themselves, or try asking at your hotel.

Gaya, Manukan and Mamutik have visitor accommodation; it's possible to camp on Mamutik, Sapi and Sulug for RM5 per person, or RM30/40 for four- and six-person tents if you don't have your own (the tent-hire rate includes the per person charge). You need to get a permit (free) from **Sabah Parks** ([www.sabahparks.org.my](http://www.sabahparks.org.my); Lot 1-3, Block K, Kompleks Sinsuran, Jln Tun Fuad Stephens, Kota Kinabalu; 8am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Thu, 8-11.30am & 2-5pm Fri).

Meals and/or snacks are available on each island apart from Sulug, but you should bring your own water if you plan on camping. There is a park conservation fee of RM10 per person, which is valid for all the park's islands.

### PULAU MANUKAN

Manukan is the most popular destination for KK residents and has plenty of facilities. It is the second-largest island in the group and its 20 hectares are largely covered in dense vegetation. There's a good beach with coral reefs off the southern and eastern shores, a walking trail around the perimeter and a network of nature trails. There's quite a good range of tropical fish, many of which can be seen simply by looking down from the jetty.

Other wildlife includes the Tabon scrub-fowl, a primitive bird that lays its eggs in

piles of rotting vegetation. The birds are shy, but can be seen along the island's jogging path early or late in the day.

Equipment for hire on the island includes mask and snorkel (RM10), beach mats (RM4) and body boards (RM5 to RM10); a security deposit is payable. There's also a shop selling postcards, T-shirts, sun hats, ice creams and souvenirs.

**Manukan Island Resort** (☎ 088-302399; [www.suterasanctuarylodges.com](http://www.suterasanctuarylodges.com); chalets RM320-380; a s), managed by Sutera Sanctuary Lodges, has the only accommodation on the island, comprising 20 chalets, a restaurant, swimming pool and tennis courts. The chalets sleep up to four and are fully furnished, with a desalinated shower and kitchen/dining facilities. You may see sunbirds and fruit pigeons in the gardens.

Serving a wide range of Western and Malay dishes, the **Coral Garden Seafood Restaurant** (☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) also serves good seafood, though price depends on availability.

### PULAU GAYA

With an area of about 15 sq km, Pulau Gaya is by far the largest island in the park, rising to an elevation of 300m in places. It's also the closest to KK and is covered in virtually undisturbed tropical forest.

There are about 20km of marked hiking trails, including a mangrove plankwalk, and a good stretch of white sand – Police Beach – at Bulijong Bay. If you're lucky, you may see monkeys, pangolins or even a bearded pig. However, the trails can be rather overgrown, and the shallow water at Police Beach washes a fair bit of garbage ashore.

Anyone with an interest in the reef environment and its conservation should visit the **Marine Ecology Research Centre** (MERC; ☎ 088-301131; [www.gayana-resort.com](http://www.gayana-resort.com); Gayana Island Resort; adult/child RM9/7; 9am-9pm), which aims to raise public awareness about coral-reef destruction as well as conducting research into this fragile ecosystem.

The centre has 19 large aquariums displaying typical marine organisms, and there are regular seminars, educational programmes and other activities, including a volunteer scheme. On Monday and Thursday the centre does not open until 6pm.

The large stilt village in front of Pulau Gaya, mainly inhabited by Filipino refugees, is clearly visible from the KK waterfront. The village is generally considered a no-go area, and it wouldn't be wise to hop in a boat and go exploring through the maze of rickety plankwalks – there's every chance someone may be poor and desperate enough to relieve you of your valuables.

Accommodation here is provided by the **Gayana Island Resort** (☎ 088-301131; [www.gayana-resort.com](http://www.gayana-resort.com); s RM598-667, d RM713-782; a), a luxury development where thatched bungalows sit on stilts over the water. There's a restaurant and recreation centre as well as the Marine Ecology Research Centre. Prices include breakfast, entry to the research centre and ferry transfers. The resort has a **KK sales office** (☎ 088-245158; Wisma Sabah, Jln Haji Saman, Kota Kinabalu) and a desk at the ferry terminal; note that walk-in rates at the terminal may be up to 70% less!

The resort's Island Restaurant and GB Café provide meals, while the Beach Bar and Hornbills Nest Lounge offer drinks (and karaoke) until midnight.

### PULAU SAPI

Pulau Sapi (Cow Island) lies just off the southwestern tip of Pulau Gaya, linked by a sandbar at low tide, and has some of the best snorkelling in the park. With an area of only 0.1 sq km, the island has small but good beaches and 5km of nature trails snaking around the interior. Macaques live in the forest and sometimes go down to the beach to look for crabs – they're also happy to prey on foolish tourists and can be quite aggressive. Mind your bags and other gear if macaques are about, and never feed them.

There's no accommodation on Sapi, unless you plan to camp, but there are shelters, changing rooms, toilets, barbecue pits and a small snack kiosk.

If you can't dive but still want to catch some underwater action, **Borneo Seawalking** (☎ 088-249115; [franleiw@tm.net.my](mailto:franleiw@tm.net.my)) can dispatch you down to 5m here by means of pressurised diving helmets, offering 20 to 30-minute walks along a cleared trail for RM250. You may look like a cross between Neil Armstrong and a toilet seat, but if this is your only chance to get a subsurface look at Sabah's amazing marine life we'd recommend you take it.

### PULAU MAMUTIK

This is the smallest island in the park, but is gaining in popularity now it has a café, resthouse, equipment hire and a clearly demarcated snorkelling area. There are decent beaches right around the island and some good coral reefs, particularly on the eastern side.

### PULAU SULUG

Shaped like a cartoon speech bubble, Sulug has an area of 8.1 hectares and is the least visited of the group, probably because it's the furthest away from KK. It has only one beach, on the eastern shore, but the swimming and snorkelling are quite good and it makes for a quiet day trip away from the crowds, especially at weekends.

### GETTING THERE & AROUND

Boats out to the islands are arranged at the KK ferry terminal and run from 7.30am to 5.30pm. It's best to go early, as you may have to wait until there's enough people to fill up the boat. The return fare to Manukan, Sapi or Mamutik is RM17, while Sulug costs RM19; hiring a whole boat to visit one island costs RM204. If you want to visit several islands, you can book a round-trip island-hopping ticket (RM27/37/47 for 2/3/4 islands), or negotiate a transfer price with someone else's boatman on the islands themselves.

The Gayana Island Resort (left) runs the only ferry service to Gaya, with nine daily runs between 8am and 11pm (return RM15, 1½ to two hours). Return transfers to KK and the other islands start at RM100 per boat (up to 12 people).

### Monsopiad Cultural Village

In the small town of Penampang, about 13km south of KK, this superb Kadazan-Dusun cultural village (☎ 088-761336; [www.monsopiad.com](http://www.monsopiad.com); admission RM50; 8.30am-5pm) on the banks of Sungai Moyog is named after a legendary warrior and headhunter, whose direct descendants established this private heritage centre in 1996. The hefty entrance fee includes a tour of the recreated traditional houses and craft workshops, exhibitions and dance performances, and a chance to watch or try various local activities such as blowpipe shooting, slingshot hunting, rice harvesting and betel-nut chewing. The

highlight is the House of Skulls, which supposedly contains the ancient crania of Monsopiad's unfortunate enemies, as well as artefacts illustrating native rituals from the time when the *bobohizan* (priestess) or *bobolian* (priest) was the most important figure in the community.

Many tour companies include Monsopiad on local itineraries. To get here independently, take a bus from central KK to Donggongon (RM1), where you can catch a minivan to the cultural village (70 sen). You can also take a taxi or charter a minivan direct from KK for RM15.

### Sabah Zoological & Botanical Park

A Wildlife Department project 10 years in the making, this conservation-minded 280-acre park at Lok Kawi, about 20km south of KK, should be fully operational by early 2007. It's a cut above your average zoo, with carefully designed open enclosures giving local and foreign visitors the chance to see orang-utans, proboscis monkeys, bear cats, elephants (look out for the stud bull!), Sumatran rhinos and even tigers. The highlight, though, is the 1 sq km aviary, fenced in only with light netting and packed with exotic birdlife. A 1.5km walking trail through the 200-acre botanical garden is already open, with more walking and cycling paths planned.

At the time of research there was no public transport to the park, though it is hoped the management will come to an arrangement with the local council soon. In the meantime you can take a minivan to Sabindo (RM2.50) and ask around for a lift, or negotiate a taxi from KK.

### Beaches

There are a few shallow paddling beaches near the highway south of KK. The nearest is at the plush Shangri-La Tanjung Aru Resort, but other accommodation is strung out along the coast between the airport and Papar, especially around the nascent resort of Beringgis. The beaches won't win any awards, but you could pleasantly laze away a day or two before catching a plane.

### ACTIVITIES

**Kindawan Riding Centre** (☎ 088-225525; www.kindawan.com; Kampung Laut, Jln Papar, Kinarut) is run by a professional Australian riding coach.

This beachside school has a full stable of noble steeds to hire for lessons or pleasure rides; rates start at RM50 per hour.

### SLEEPING

**Seaside Travellers Inn** (☎ 088-750555; www.seaside-travellersinn.com; Kampung Laut, Km 20 Jln Papar, Kinarut; dm RM25, r with shared bathroom RM30-55, with private bathroom RM60-99; a i s ) This small family-run resort is 20km south of KK on the way to Papar and is a reasonable alternative to the more lavish establishments, offering plenty of facilities (including a TV room with VCD player) and outdoor activities. All prices include breakfast, and free airport transfers are available on request.

**Beringgis Beach Resort** (☎ 088-752333; www.beringgis.com; Kampung Beringgis, Km 26 Jln Papar, Kinarut; r RM190-300; a s ) One of the nicer tourist-class resorts on this stretch, with plenty of facilities and a particularly good selection of games, from darts to *congkak* (a popular shell game) and Sumazau dance lessons.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

To get to the beaches south of KK, take a Papar bus or minivan (RM3) from behind Wawasan Plaza. The hotels and other establishments are signed off the main road.

### Papar

Mainly consisting of long, low shophouses, this little coastal Kadazan town is 38km south of KK. Local produce includes coconut wine and there's a *tamu* (weekly market) on Sunday. There's a beach out of town where you can swim, and you can take a boat ride along Sungai Papar.

On Monday, Wednesday and Saturday, Sutera Harbour operates the **North Borneo Railway** (☎ 088-263933; www.northborneorailway.com.my; adult/child RM180/130), featuring a renovated British Vulcan steam engine that does the run from Tanjung Aru train station in KK to Papar and back. The train leaves KK at 10am and returns from Papar at 2pm.

You can also hop on a Beaufort-bound diesel train with the locals, get off at Papar (RM2.40, one hour) and return to KK later. **Tanjung Aru train station** (☎ 088-254611) in KK will have the latest schedule.

Buses and minivans leave throughout the day from behind Wawasan Plaza in KK (RM3, one hour).

### Pulau Layang Layang

Some 300km northwest of KK, Layang Layang is a tiny island surrounded by a coral atoll. It's an exclusive **dive location**, well known to scubaholics as part of the famous Borneo Banks.

Layang Layang has a growing reputation among divers as a good alternative to the wasted coral found in many other sites around Sabah. You also get the dubious thrill of entering a geopolitical hot spot, as Layang Layang is one of the disputed Spratlys, a collection of about 600 islands, reefs and atolls strategically located in the South China Sea. With the prospect of undersea oil reserves and rich fishing, parts of the Spratlys are claimed by China, Vietnam, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei. China and Vietnam have already clashed over Chinese occupation of several islands, and Malaysia has a small naval base on Layang Layang, ostensibly to help keep the peace.

Layang Layang covers less than 1 sq km, but is surrounded by an atoll more than 7km long and 2km wide. The diving is excellent, particularly down the wall, where pelagic species such as tuna and barracuda are encountered, and reef sharks and hammerheads are seen regularly. Soft corals are a feature and manta rays are visible in shallower water. It's also a breeding ground for sea birds such as boobies and terns.

Layang Layang can only be visited as part of an expensive tour. There is only one resort on the island, **Layang Layang Island Resort** (☎ 03-2162 2877; www.layanglayang.com), run by a company based in KL. Access to the resort and dive areas is only possible between February and October; six-day packages cost US\$950 per person (based on two sharing), including five (!) meals a day and three dives. For other agents offering dive charters and trips to the area see p427.

### KINABALU NATIONAL PARK

Towering above the coastal plain and what's left of the lush tropical forests of northern Borneo, Mt Kinabalu is the biggest tourist attraction in Sabah and the centrepiece of the vast 754-sq-km Kinabalu National Park. The towns scattered around its base also have some attractions of their own, so you can easily spend a few days here instead of charging straight for the summit.

### Mt Kinabalu

☎ 088

As mountains go, the 4095m peak of Mt Kinabalu may seem modest compared to the world's other great ranges, but Malaysia's first Unesco World Heritage site is in fact the highest mountain between the Himalayas and New Guinea, and is almost 1500m taller than its nearest rival, Mt Trus Madi. Amazingly, it's still growing: researchers have found it increases in height by about 5mm a year. On a clear day you can see the Philippines from the summit; usually, though, the mountain is thoroughly wreathed in cloud by mid-morning.

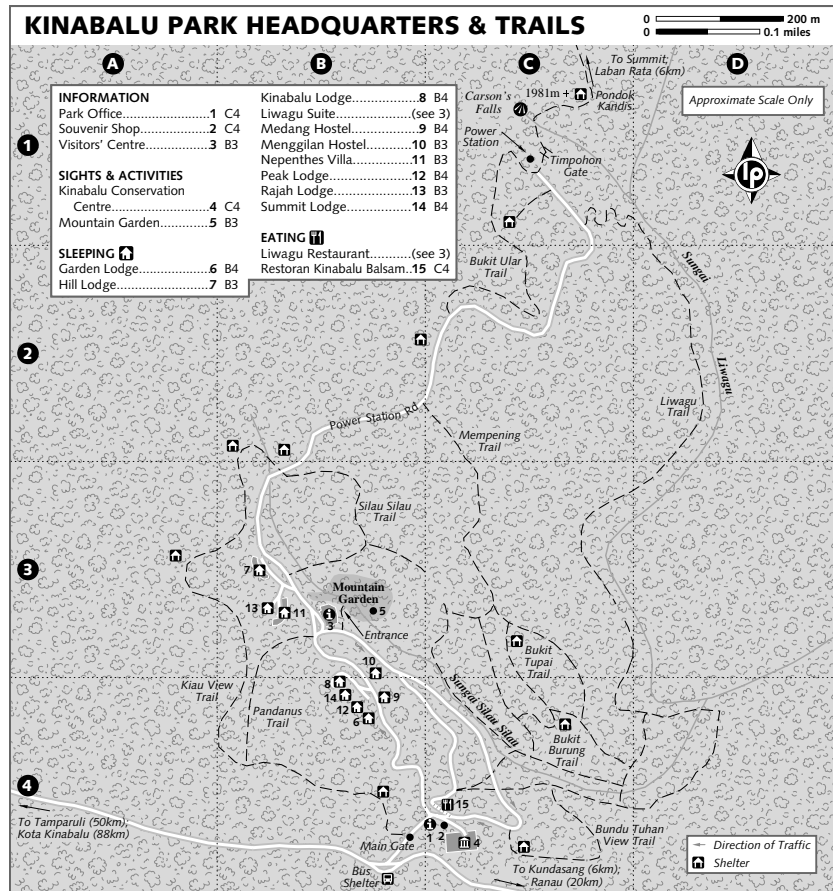
While it's by no means a breeze, Mt Kinabalu is one of the easiest mountains in the world to climb, and thousands of people of all ages and fitness levels scale the summit every year. All you need is some stamina, determination and weatherproof clothing – it can get very cold and wet up there.

Even if you decide not to do the climb, the park itself is a beautiful spot, and many visitors come just to escape the heat and humidity of the coast. There are walking trails in the rainforest at the base of the mountain, the climate is agreeably cool and accommodation both inside and outside the park is good.

### HISTORY

The first recorded ascent of the mountain was made in 1851 by Sir Hugh Low, the British colonial secretary on Pulau Labuan. Kinabalu's highest peak is named after him, as is the mile-deep 'gully' on the other side of the mountain.

In those days the difficulty of climbing Mt Kinabalu lay not in the ascent, but in getting through the jungle to the mountain's base. Finding willing local porters was another tricky matter – the tribesmen who accompanied Low believed the spirits of their dead inhabited the mountain. Low was therefore obliged to protect the party by supplying a large basket of quartz crystals and teeth, as was the custom. In time, the spirit-appeasement ceremonies performed by the guides upon reaching the summit became more and more elaborate, so that by the 1920s they had come to include loud prayers, gunshots, and the sacrifice of seven eggs and seven white chickens. You have to wonder at what point explorers started thinking the locals might be taking the mickey...



These days getting to the foot of the mountain is a piece of cake, but Low's Gully remains a trickier proposition. In 1994 one of the groups in the first expedition to abseil into the gully got stuck and could not be rescued for three weeks. It was only as recently as February 1998 that a joint British-Malaysian expedition explored the bottom, returning with several newly discovered species of plants and insects.

#### GEOLOGY

From its immense size you might think Mt Kinabalu is the ancient core of Borneo, but the mountain was actually formed relatively recently. Its origins go back a mere nine million years (we did say *relatively*

recently), when a mass of igneous rock was pushed up from the depths below. This upward movement continues today.

In geological terms, too, Mt Kinabalu is still very young. Little erosion has occurred on the exposed granite rock faces around the summit, though the effects of glaciers that used to cover much of the mountain can be detected by striations on the rock. There's no longer a snowline and the glaciers have disappeared, but at times ice forms in the rock pools near the summit.

#### ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

Kinabalu park headquarters is 88km from KK and set in gardens with a magnificent view of the mountain. At 1588m the climate

is refreshingly cool compared to the coast; the average temperature ranges from 20°C in the day to 13°C at night.

Accommodation at park headquarters can be tight, and even tighter on the mountain. Reservations are made through **Sutera Sanctuary Lodges** (☎ 088-243629; www.suterasanctuarylodges.com; Lot G15, Wisma Sabah, Jln Haji Saman, Kota Kinabalu; 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat, 8.30am-12.30pm Sun). In theory only advance reservations are accepted; if you just show up at the park you might get lucky, but don't count on it. During public holidays, particularly Chinese New Year, it's almost impossible to get a place. Sutera offers its own all-inclusive tours for RM390 per person, based on twin share.

On arrival, pay your entry fee (adult/child RM15/10) at the park gate and check in at the park office (Map p438). If you're staying overnight, present your reservation slip and you'll be allocated your bed or room. Valuables can be deposited in safety boxes at the office and excess baggage can be stored here (per item RM1) until you return from the mountain.

All the hostels and resthouses are within walking distance of the park office. In the visitors centre (Map p438) down the road, past the hostels, is the Liwagu Restaurant and an exhibition centre; the daily slide show (RM2) presented here gives an excellent introduction to the mountain. The **Kinabalu Conservation Centre** (Map p438; admission RM3; 11.9am-3pm) is also worth visiting, with good displays on the natural and cultural history of the area.

Next to the park office is a souvenir shop (Map p438; 11.7am-7pm) selling film, ice creams and souvenirs. If you don't have a raincoat, you can buy one here for RM15. There's also a reasonable range of books on the park and other places in Sabah, and a 30-minute film processing service.

#### PERMITS & GUIDES

Many climbers come here on prebooked packages from KK (per person from RM250), but it's easy enough to make the trip independently. A climbing permit (adult/child RM100/40) and insurance (RM7) are compulsory for any ascent. You should pay these charges at park headquarters before you climb.

A guide is only compulsory if you intend to venture beyond Laban Rata, ie to the summit. Guide fees are RM70 per trip for one to three persons, RM74 for four to six people, and RM80 for seven to eight climbers (the maximum per guide); if you plan to come down by a different route, you'll pay an extra RM10 to RM12 per group.

A guide is assigned to you on the morning you begin your hike. If you ask, the park staff can try and attach individual travellers to a group so that guide fees can be shared. Couples can expect to be given their own guide.

The guides and porters are usually Kadazan from local villages, and not employees of the national park. Some of these professional guides are amazing, and rack

#### FLORA & FAUNA OF MT KINABALU

Mt Kinabalu is a botanical paradise, designated a Centre of Plant Diversity as well as a Unesco-listed heritage site. The wide range of habitats supports an ever wider range of natural history, and over half the species growing above 900m are unique to the area.

Among the more spectacular flowers are orchids, rhododendrons, and the insectivorous *Nepenthes* (pitcher plants). Around park headquarters there's dipterocarp forest (rainforest); creepers, ferns and orchids festoon the canopy, while fungi grow on the forest floor. Between 900m and 1800m there are oaks, laurels and chestnuts, while higher up there's dense, rhododendron forest. On the windswept slopes above Laban Rata, vegetation is stunted, with sayat-sayat a common shrub. The mountain's uppermost slopes are bare of plant life.

More mammal species are seen in the lowland rainforest around Poring Hot Springs than at higher altitudes around park headquarters. Deer and monkeys are no longer common, but you can see squirrels, including the handsome Prevost's squirrel and mountain ground squirrel. Tree shrews can sometimes be seen raiding rubbish bins. Common birds are Bornean treepies, fantails, bulbuls, sunbirds and laughing thrushes, while birds seen only at higher altitudes are the Kinabalu friebird warbler, the mountain black-eye and the mountain blackbird. Other wildlife includes colourful butterflies and the huge green moon moth.

up hundreds of ascents in their years on the job. The park porters, who unlike the guides are often women, are if anything even fitter, running up and down once or twice a day with massive loads of supplies for the Laban Rata huts.

A good guide should be able to point out pitcher plants and other interesting sights, but as the trails are pretty straightforward they're more safety supervisors than wayfinders, so will generally position themselves behind the slowest member of their group – don't be surprised if you barely see your guide for the duration of the trek!

Porters can also be hired, though there's not much reason to take a lot of stuff up to the mountain. The fee on the main trail up to Laban Rata/Sayat-Sayat/summit is RM76/88/100 per trip for a maximum load of 10kg.

#### EQUIPMENT

As long as it's not raining you can walk as far as Laban Rata in normal hiking gear. Dress in layers so you can take off and put on clothes as necessary. It's only at the summit that you'll need warm clothes – you can rent jackets (RM10) and buy hats and gloves (RM4 to RM10) at Laban Rata if you don't have your own. A raincoat or rain poncho is also recommended. Wear strong, comfortable shoes with good grip.

A torch is required if you're getting up before dawn – standard flashlights can be hired for RM15 at Laban Rata, but you may want to bring a head torch instead, to keep your hands free for the trickier parts of the summit. Bring snacks for the climb and food if you intend to do your own cooking. Water bottles can be filled along the trail. Even when it's cloudy the sun is fierce at that altitude, and you will need sunblock.

The park headquarters has an ample supply of walking sticks (RM5), which can really help spare your joints on the way to and from Laban Rata.

#### WALKS

It's well worth spending a day exploring the marked trails around park headquarters; if you have time, it may be better to do it before you climb the mountain, as chances are you won't really feel like it afterwards. The various trails and lookouts are shown on Map p438.

All the trails link up with others at some stage, so you can spend the whole day, or indeed days, walking at a leisurely pace through the beautiful forest. Some interesting plants, plenty of birds and, if you're lucky, the occasional mammal can be seen along the Liwagu Trail, which follows the river of the same name. When it rains, watch out for slippery paths and legions of leeches.

At 11am each day a guided walk (RM3) starts from the park office and lasts for one to two hours. The knowledgeable guide points out flowers, plants, birds and insects along the way. If you set out from KK early enough, it's possible to arrive at the park in time for the guided walk.

Many of the plants found on the mountain are cultivated in the Mountain Garden (admission RM5; 9am, noon & 3pm) behind the visitors centre.

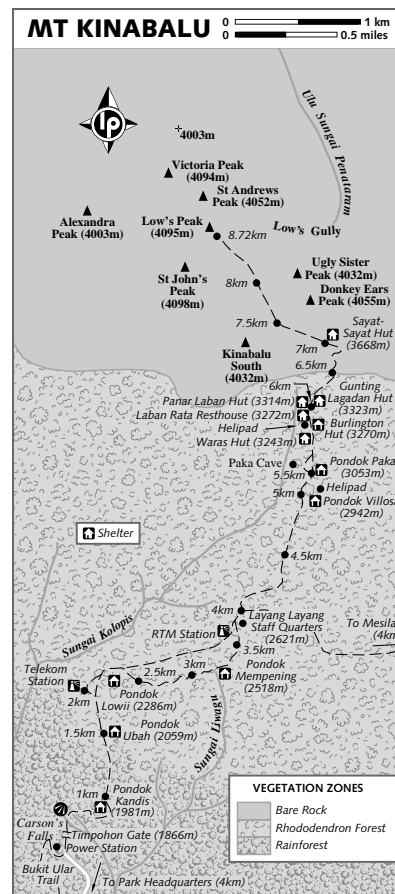
#### THE CLIMB

It's possible to climb Mt Kinabalu in a day if you're fit enough, but for most visitors it's a two-day exercise, and it's generally far more enjoyable that way. The usual routine is to trek as far as Laban Rata on the first day, then climb to the summit for sunrise and return to park headquarters the next day. The park recommends that you start by 10am to make Laban Rata in good time, but this is probably conservative – leaving by 11am should be fine if you're reasonably fit, though many groups set off between 8am and 9am.

Dawn on the summit is often an all-too-brief glimpse across Borneo at 6am before the clouds roll in to blank out the morning sun. Sometimes the summit is socked-in already, at other times the sun shines through till 10am or later. You won't know until you get there, but that's part of the adventure.

Either way, it is wise to stay overnight at park headquarters at least the night before the climb. This will allow you to make an early start and to acclimatise a bit – Mt Kinabalu is high enough for altitude sickness to occur.

The climb is uphill virtually all the way; it is unrelentingly steep in places and there are seemingly endless steps (2500 if you're counting) as far as Laban Rata. Then it gets a whole lot tougher. The trail becomes even steeper as you approach the summit



then disappears altogether on vast, near-vertical fields of slippery granite, ending with a scramble up a long pile of rocks. Every step can be a struggle as you gasp for breath in the thin air.

The secret to climbing Mt Kinabalu is stamina. Take it slowly – very slowly if you're tired and out of breath. Many people start off briskly then have to take increasingly frequent rest breaks, while the old hands just keep trudging along. Take it easy and walk at a comfortable pace, even if that means getting stuck behind a crowd of Chinese tourists for a while.

Signboards showing your progress are spaced along the trail and there's a marker every 500m. There are rest shelters (*pondok*)

at regular intervals, with clean, squat-style toilets and tanks of cool, fresh drinking water. The walking times that follow are conservative estimates published by the Sabah Parks office.

You can also access the trail to Laban Rata from the Mesilau Nature Resort (see p444).

#### Park Headquarters–Power Station

The trail officially starts at the Timpohon Gate (1866m), from where it's an 8.72km walk to the summit. Unfortunately it's nearly an hour's uphill walk from park headquarters to the gate, often known as the 'power station' because of the electric company's facility next door. A bus shuttles back and forth from the park office area between 7am and about 5pm; it only takes 15 minutes and will considerably shorten your day's walking. An earlier start can be negotiated with the park office. The cost is RM15, or RM4 per person for groups of five or more. If you're on a tour your driver will drop you here after sorting out permits etc at the headquarters.

It is not much fun walking along the road, though the Liwagu Trail to the power station is a scenic alternative for those who can afford to add an extra three hours or so to the climb.

#### Power Station–Layang Layang

After a short, deceptive descent, the trail leads up steep stairs through magnificent tall forest. There's a small waterfall, Carson's Falls (Map p411), beside the track shortly after the start, and the forest can be alive with birds and squirrels in the morning. Five *pondok* are spaced at intervals of 15 to 35 minutes and it's about three hours to Layang Layang (2621m), where there are staff quarters. At Pondok Kandis (1981m) the tall forest gives way to dense, stunted rhododendron forest. Near Pondok Lowii (2286m) the trail follows an open ridge giving great views over the valleys and up to the peaks.

#### Layang Layang–Pondok Paka

It's about 1¼ hours on to Pondok Paka (3053m), the seventh shelter on the trail and 5.5km from the start. The trail passes through increasingly stunted rhododendron forest, leaving walkers more exposed to the elements. You'll suddenly be acutely aware of the few flat sections that intersperse

the endless steps! This stretch is good for pitcher plants, although you probably won't see any growing by the side of the track – look along the dense vegetation.

A half-hour detour can be made to **Paka Cave** (Map p441) – a rock overhang with a bamboo platform where early explorers spent the night before tackling the summit. It is not that interesting and can be left for the descent, when the lungs are less taxed.

#### Pondok Paka–Laban Rata

Laban Rata (3272m) marks the end of the treeline and is the night's resting spot for most people attempting the summit. This leg takes about 45 minutes to walk. The main resthouse has heating, hot water, comfortable beds and a restaurant with fine views – it's perfectly positioned for sunset, which can be just as scenic as sunrise at the top. There's also a flat area sometimes used as a volleyball court if you're feeling overly energetic! There are three other accommodation units, all with basic cooking facilities and hot showers, but no room heaters.

#### Laban Rata–Sayat-Sayat

The one-hour climb to Sayat-Sayat hut (3668m) involves crossing the sheer Panar Laban rock face. Vegetation is no more than waist high, except where overhangs provide some respite from the wind. It is one of the toughest parts of the climb and doesn't get any easier in the dark and cold at 3am, when the early risers from Laban Rata are urged onwards to see the dawn.

Thick ropes are used to haul yourself up the granite sheets; it's hard work in places, but somehow it feels good to be using arm muscles instead of legs! It's worth remembering that some of the ropes are mainly just to show the way, and there's no need to cling onto these at all times if you're comfortable walking normally – try not to laugh as you stride freely past people bent double to keep hold of their 'lifeline'... Narrow wooden steps and hand rails help in places, but you'll often find yourself using rocks or bushes for support as you gasp for breath.

#### Sayat-Sayat–Summit

The last stretch of the summit ascent is, of course, the steepest and hardest part of

the climb. Past Sayat-Sayat, more desolate rock-faces and hoisting await the string of climbers stretched out in the dark, trying to keep warm while holding ropes and torches. In the daylight, thick veins of quartz seem like painted lines on the rock face, and in some precarious spots you'll be glad you couldn't see exactly what you were doing as you climbed up!

The summit looks deceptively close and, though it's just over 1km, the last burst can take up to two hours from Sayat-Sayat. Many people are reduced to crawling on hands and knees up the last few boulders to the small area that is the top of Borneo. Climbers crowd together, perched over the mysterious abyss of Low's Gully, and huddle against the cold, priming their cameras for a shot of the sunrise and the nearby peaks, which rejoice in quirky names such as 'Donkey Ears'.

It can get very crowded up there; don't be surprised to be sharing your experience with a hundred or more people, all jockeying for the essential picture with the summit sign. When the sun has risen and the photos are taken, there's a quick exodus down the mountain to Laban Rata, while the savvy late risers make their relaxed way to a far less crowded summit.

The climb down to the power station takes about five hours – don't underestimate the descent, and leave plenty of time to get back before nightfall. Allow another hour to walk from the power station to your accommodation. While easier than the climb up, it can be a lot more jarring on joints and under-used muscles. Aim to leave the summit by about noon and to be well underway by 1pm. The weather can close in very quickly and, although you probably won't get lost, the granite is slippery even when it's dry.

A 1st-class certificate can be purchased for RM10 by those who complete the climb; 2nd-class certificates are issued for making it to Laban Rata – no mean feat in itself. These can be collected at the park office.

#### SLEEPING

Overnight accommodation is available around park headquarters, on the Ranau road between the park turn-off and Kundasang, at Mesilau, at Poring Hot Springs and at Laban Rata on the mountain.

Accommodation in the park, including mountain huts, is booked through **Sutera Sanctuary Lodges** (☎ 088-243629; [www.suterasanctuarylodges.com](http://www.suterasanctuarylodges.com); Lot G15, Wisma Sabah, Jln Haji Saman, Kota Kinabalu; 📍 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat, 8.30am-12.30pm Sun). Book as far in advance as possible (at least several days to a week) and note that on weekends, school holidays and public holidays all the accommodation may be taken. Prices can double during major holidays like Chinese New Year.

Reservations can be made by email, fax or phone, but they will not be confirmed until fully paid for. Deposits are theoretically required for accommodation in the park (eg RM20 for a dorm bed and RM100 for an annexe suite), payable when you check in at park headquarters. In fact you may not be asked for the money, but bring some extra cash just in case.

#### Park Headquarters

There's a variety of good accommodation at park headquarters to suit all budgets.

The 20-bed **Medang Hostel** (Map p438; dm RM46) and the 28-bed **Menggilan Hostel** (Map p438; dm RM46) are clean and comfortable, have cooking facilities and a dining area with an open fireplace. Hot water for showers is sporadic.

The other possibilities are as follows:

**Garden Lodge** (Map p438; up to 6 people RM380) Two bedrooms.

**Hill Lodge** (Map p438; tw RM135)

**Kinabalu Lodge** (Map p438; up to 8 people RM540)

Four bedrooms.

**Liwagu Suite** (Map p438; r RM255)

**Nepenthes Villa** (Map p438; 4 people RM380) Two bedrooms.

**Peak Lodge** (Map p438; 3 people RM300) Two bedrooms.

**Rajah Lodge** (Map p438; up to 6 people RM1500) The most luxurious choice, with three bedrooms.

**Summit Lodge** (Map p438; RM300 for up to 4 people) Two bedrooms.

#### On the Mountain

It costs RM46 per person to stay in the mountain huts near Laban Rata (all on Map p441), which include the 12-bed Waras and Panar Laban huts and the 44-bed Guntung Lagadan hut, all with basic cooking facilities. These places are more spartan and aren't heated, but sleeping bags are provided and they're close to the restaurant.

**Laban Rata Resthouse** (Map p441; ☎ 872907; 4-bed r with shared bathroom per person RM69) This has heating and hot-water showers in the shared bathroom; the toilets don't quite keep up with the demand and are a little grotty, with freezing-cold water in the taps. Nevertheless, this is by far the most comfortable overnight stop on the mountain. Limited double rooms (RM180) and a four-person suite with bathroom (RM300) are also available.

The security is not great up at Laban Rata and travellers have reported thefts of personal items in the past.

#### Outside the Park

It's generally preferable to stay in the park, mainly because the lodging is reasonable value and it's more convenient for the mountain and walking trails.

#### SPEED FREAKS

With up to 160 people on the summit trail at any one time, there's always an element of competition among the fitter climbers, and it has to be said that there's considerable personal satisfaction to be gained from overtaking long columns of struggling tourists, clocking up a good ascent time or being among the first few people to the top. However, not many visitors would be able to keep pace with the locals, and particularly not with those who compete in the annual Kinabalu International Climbathon.

Established in 1987, this 21km race pits the real mountain hardcores against each other every September/October, testing the endurance of people who have lived at altitude all their lives. The current record (held, surprisingly, by a Mexican) is just two hours 41 minutes, and the speediest 'veteran' in the over-60s category put in a highly impressive time of three hours 12 minutes, faster than the quickest young female runners. And yes, that is up *and* down the mountain.

It's not just the clock-beaters who put casual trekkers to shame, either: the oldest person ever to reach the summit was a Japanese lady who battled her way to the top at the grand old age of 90. So when you're basking in smugness as you survey the sweeping views after your own heroic summit effort, just remember there are pensioners out there who would leave you for dead...

However, there are numerous places to stay outside the park, most on the road between the park headquarters and Kundasang, with views either onto the mountain or over the cultivated valley south of the park. Keep your entry receipt if you plan to make trips outside the park.

**Travellers Adventure Lodge Kinabalu** (☎ 888 067; dm RM17) A rare budget option, this cute little cabin nestles in the Kinabalu foothills off the road towards Bundu Tuhan, 1km away from the park entrance. Facilities are basic but there are hot showers and kitchen facilities, all for less than you'd pay in KK!

**Kinabalu Rose Cabin** (☎ 889233; <http://kinabalu.rosecabin.8m.com>; Km 18, Jln Ranau-Tuaran; dm RM30, r RM70-200) This clean and friendly place has spacious rooms with balconies facing Mt Kinabalu. The surrounding grounds are terraced vegetable and flower gardens, and the restaurant has a fine, varied menu. Rooms usually cost 40% more on weekends. It's about 1km southeast of park headquarters; a minivan from there will cost RM5.

## EATING

### Park Headquarters

There are two restaurants at park headquarters. Both restaurants open every day at 6am, closing at 10pm on weekdays and 11pm on weekends and public holidays.

**Restoran Kinabalu Balsam** (Map p438; dishes RM5-10) The cheaper and more popular of the two is this canteen-style spot directly below the park office. It offers basic but decent Malaysian, Chinese and Western dishes at reasonable prices. There is also a small but well-stocked shop in Balsam selling tinned and dried foods, chocolate, beer, spirits, cigarettes, T-shirts, bread, eggs and margarine.

**Liwagu Restaurant** (Map p438; dishes RM6-20) In the visitors centre, this is more expensive than the Balsam, but there's a huge range of dishes, including noodles, rice and seafood standards. An 'American breakfast' is pretty ordinary here for RM12; the cheaper breakfast at the Balsam canteen is better value.

### On the Mountain

At Laban Rata, on the mountain, the **Laban Rata Resthouse restaurant** (Map p441; dishes RM5.20-20.70) has a simple menu and also

offers buffet meals coordinated to the usual climbing times – lunch and dinner cost RM30, the 2am pre-trek breakfast is RM18 and the mid-morning descent brunch is RM25. If you want you can get a beer here (RM18), though climbing with a hangover is really, really not a good idea (trust us, we've tried it).

The hostel also sells assorted items such as postcards, film, soft drinks, headache tablets and other basic medicines, chocolates and walking sticks.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air-con express buses (RM15, three hours) leave from Kota Kinabalu for the national park around 7.30am daily. Check the schedule and book on weekends. Buses and minivans going to Ranau or Sandakan will drop you off at the entrance road, 100m from the park headquarters. Returning, you can flag down any transport passing the turn-off; traffic is most regular between 8am and noon.

Tamparuli is where the road up the coast to Kudat branches for Kota Belud and Ranau. From Kota Belud to Kinabalu National Park (RM10, two hours), first go to Tamparuli and take a minivan heading to Ranau.

Minivans leave park headquarters for Poring Hot Springs (RM15, 45 minutes) three times a day. You can hire a minivan for RM60, or go to Ranau and take a van or taxi from there.

Air-con express buses to Sandakan (RM25, four hours) pass the park headquarters several times a day. Minivans heading to Ranau (RM5) are more frequent but usually dry up by 5pm.

## Mesilau Nature Resort

This lovely slice of country is the trailhead for an alternative approach up Mt Kinabalu, often favoured by trekkers as it's more challenging than the main route and much less crowded than park headquarters. The 5.5km Mesilau route meets up with the main trail to Laban Rata at Layang Layang. Arrange your trip with **Sutera Sanctuary Lodges** (☎ 088-243629; [www.suterasanctuarylodges.com](http://www.suterasanctuarylodges.com); Lot G15, Wisma Sabah, Jln Haji Saman, Kota Kinabalu; 7 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat, 8.30am-12.30pm Sun) and your guide will meet you at Mesilau. It takes a little longer (four hours) to

reach Laban Rata, but the advantages are fewer people and more sightings of pitcher plants. Guide fees are higher than on the main trail (RM84/90/100 for up to 3/6/8 people).

Even if you don't plan to climb the mountain, it's worth spending a day or two at the resort. It has superb accommodation, nature trails and a resident group of very knowledgeable local guides. There's also an **exhibition centre** (resort ☎ 088-871733; admission free; 7 8am-4pm).

Nearby is the **Mount Kinabalu Golf Club** (☎ 088-888255; [mkgc@tm.net.my](mailto:mkgc@tm.net.my); green fees RM60-100), an 18-hole 80-acre course. At an elevation of just under 2000m, it's the highest golf club in Southeast Asia. Playing on this golf course adds yards to your drive because of the thin air.

The turn-off for Mesilau on the highway in Kundasang is also the site of the **Kundasang War Memorial** (admission free; 7 8.30am-5pm Mon-Sat, 9am-4pm Sun). A memorial plaque here commemorates the POWs who died here after their forced march from Sandakan during WWII (see p464). The exquisite garden is laid out on two levels, with a host of beautiful tropical flowers like bougainvillea and heliotrope.

Mesilau's accommodation is also run by **Sutera Sanctuary Lodges** (☎ 088-243629; [www.suterasanctuarylodges.com](http://www.suterasanctuarylodges.com); Lot G15, Wisma Sabah, Jln Haji Saman, Kota Kinabalu; 7 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat, 8.30am-12.30pm Sun) and is made up of eight small chalets tucked away in shaded areas of the forest. The Bishop's Head Resthouse has dormitory beds for RM46 per person, while the Crocker Range Lodge and Witt Range Lodge are three-bedroom units priced at RM450. The remaining buildings are chalets with kitchens that sleep four (RM450) to six people (RM520).

The **Renanthera Restaurant** (dishes RM10-20; 7 breakfast, lunch & dinner) serves Malay, Chinese and Western meals, and the Malaxi Café serves breakfast, drinks and snacks.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Mesilau is 20km from park headquarters and there's no public transport going there. The road to the resort turns north off the main highway at Kundasang. It's 10km to the resort from this intersection. A taxi or minivan to Mesilau costs RM65 from Kinabalu park headquarters.

## Ranau

☎ 088

Ranau is a curious collection of concrete shophouse blocks set in a lovely green valley on the route between KK and Sandakan. There's a busy *tamu* on Saturday at the bridge a few hundred metres south of town, but few travellers stay overnight since the main attraction is Poring Hot Springs about 19km to the north. Ranau is primarily a place to get a bus connection to/from Poring or Mt Kinabalu.

Central Ranau is only a few hundred metres across and forms a near-perfect square. Express buses park at a stop on the main road, in the top eastern corner of town. The blocks of shophouses accommodate the usual cafés and hotels, and minibuses gather on the streets around the central taxi park and at a stand just off the main road out east.

There's an ATM at the Bank Simpanan Nasional and internet access at **Top Computer** (per hr RM2), just above it.

If you get stuck in Ranau between buses, there are a couple of small hotels in town. West of the main street, **Rafflesia Inn** (☎ 871667; Block E, Sedco Bldg; r RM30-65; a ) gives you a choice of shared or private bathrooms and fan or air-con rooms. The sheets are a cheery pink but the toilets seem strangely close to the ground!

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Morning bus and minivan services operate regularly from Ranau. Minivans to Tambunan (RM12, two hours) and Keningau (RM18, three hours) traverse a hazardous mountain road (see p448). Express buses leave Ranau for KK (RM15, 3½ hours) from 7am to about 1.30pm. Minivans (RM15) and share-taxis (RM20) leave Ranau daily until about 5.30pm. The morning runs are more frequent.

All bus services to KK pass the entrance to Mt Kinabalu National Park (RM5). If you get stuck, you can take a share-taxi (RM20) or charter a minivan to park headquarters for RM50.

Air-conditioned express buses are the best way to travel, and these leave Ranau for Sandakan between 7.30am and noon (RM30, four hours). Minivans go throughout the day but can take a while to fill up. All transport passes the Sepilok Orang-Utan Rehabilitation Centre; ask to be dropped off.

On weekends it's easy and cheap to get to the hot springs from Ranau. The price is RM5 per person and the transport leaves when it's full. On weekdays it isn't quite so easy, especially if you arrive in Ranau during the afternoon – you may have to charter a minivan or taxi for RM20.

### Sabah Tea Garden

This working organic tea farm (☎ 088-440 882; www.sabahtea.net), the largest single plantation of its kind in Borneo, has recently turned itself into a very credible tourist attraction, going well beyond the humdrum self-promotion you might expect from a commercial enterprise. With varied accommodation and a wide range of activities on offer, including jungle trekking and mountain biking, visitors can currently choose from five packages starting at RM20 per person for day trips and RM120 per person for overnight stays. If you have the time (and fancy a cuppa), it's a worthwhile detour.

The tea garden is just off the road to Sandakan, a short drive from Ranau.

### Poring Hot Springs

One of the few positive contributions the Japanese made to Borneo during WWII, this unlikely spa resort (admission adult/child RM15/10) has become a popular weekend retreat for locals. The complex is actually part of the Kinabalu National Park, but it's 43km away from the park headquarters, on the other side of Ranau.

If you're expecting some kind of natural paradise with rock pools and the like, think again: the setting's real forest but the facilities themselves are quite patently manmade. Steaming, sulphurous water is channelled into pools and tubs where visitors can relax their tired muscles after the trek to the summit of Mt Kinabalu. For some it's a huge anticlimax, for others a perfect playground worth far more than the customary quick stop.

Hordes of butterflies amass on the hibiscus and other flowers, and Poring is also famous among bird-watchers, with all kinds of feathered specimens to be seen around the gardens and along walking trails.

Rafflesia sometimes bloom in the area around the springs; look out for signs in the visitor centre and along the road.

## SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

### Baths

The outdoor tubs (admission free; 7am-6.30pm) are of varying sizes and can easily fit a couple of people. They have hot- and cold-water taps to regulate the temperature. The water from the springs is extremely hot; there's a rock pool to cool off in after your bath.

Malay and Chinese visitors often stay fully clothed in the pools (even with jeans on!). Given the less than private layout, Western women may wish to follow suit and at least wear shorts and a T-shirt over their bathing suits.

Private spa cabins (standard/deluxe per hr RM15/20) are also available. A standard cabin has a tub and shower, while the deluxe versions have a lounge area, spa, shower and toilet and can accommodate up to eight people.

### Gardens

Although the springs are the main attraction, also part of the Poring complex are a Tropical Garden (adult/child RM3/1.50; 7am-4pm), a Butterfly Farm (adult/child RM4/2; 7am-4pm Tue-Sun) and an Orchid Garden (adult/child RM10/5; 7am-4pm) You may see two rescued orangutans who frequent the area in the Tropical Garden.

### Canopy Walkway

Up above the trees and houses, the Canopy Walkway (adult/child RM5/2.50; 7am-4pm) consists of a series of walkways suspended from trees, up to 40m off the jungle floor, providing unique views of the surrounding forest. The springy walkways are not for the faint-hearted, but they're quite safe and great fun. Get there early if you want to see birds or other wildlife.

### Walks

There are several kilometres of forest trails around the springs. The Kipungit Waterfalls are only about 15 minutes' walk away; there's a beautiful spot in a cool glade where you can swim at the base of the falls.

Over the stream the trail gets steeper, and after another 15 minutes you reach what are known as the Bat Caves, which are just a jumble of huge boulders between which bats and swiftlets roost. There's not much to see but the surrounding forest is very

pretty. A trip to the Langanan Waterfall is 1¼ hours away on the same trail via Kipungit and the bat caves. This walk is legendary among bird-watchers as a haunt of the rarely seen blue-banded pitta. If you plan to walk to Langanan, let the parks office at the entrance to Poring know.

### SLEEPING & EATING

It's a good idea to book your accommodation at Poring in advance at **Sutera Sanctuary Lodges** (☎ 088-243629; www.suterasanctuarylodges.com; Lot G15, Wisma Sabah, Jln Haji Saman, Kota Kinabalu; 7 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat, 8.30am-12.30pm Sun). It's possible just to show up, but Poring is a popular place, especially on weekends.

The two Serindit Hostel buildings offer 72 dorm beds between them, charging RM46 per person. Blankets and pillows are provided free of charge.

Kitchenette cabins and air-con chalets with full facilities are also available. The four-bed Tempua Lodge is RM110; Enngang Cabin and Rajawali Chalet each sleep six people and cost RM150 and RM380 respectively. The mosquitoes at Poring can be vicious, so bring coils and insect repellent.

The Rainforest Restaurant (resort ☎ 088-878 801; mains RM9-21; 7 breakfast, lunch & dinner) serves Chinese, Malay and Western food and overlooks the rock pool and the river. There are also inexpensive eating places right opposite the park entrance. If you're self-catering, you can buy food for cooking here as well, though it's cheaper to bring your own from KK.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Poring is 19km north of Ranau along a sealed road and can be reached by minivan, taxi or hitching. Access is generally from Ranau (see p445), but minivans run from the park headquarters at Mt Kinabalu to Poring three times a day (RM15).

Leaving Poring can be tricky. Minivans depart for Ranau from outside the park office at the springs at around 6.30am, and then at roughly 10am and 2pm, depending on demand (RM5). On weekends there are nearly always share-taxis parked near the office; the fare is by negotiation but with a full load it should only cost RM5 per person.

## SOUTH OF KOTA KINABALU

The Crocker Range is the backbone of western Sabah, rising from near Tenom in the south and peaking in the north at massive Mt Kinabalu and its outlier, Mt Trus Madi. Nearly 1500m below the range is the fertile coastal plain, where KK and other large settlements sit. Logging has taken a devastating toll on most of Sabah, but the Crocker still has some good stands of intact forest, and much of it is now preserved as the **Crocker Range National Park**. Unfortunately, the park has no tourist facilities or accommodation, though there is a small visitors centre by the road near the Sunsuron Pass, with a couple of short trails where you can see wild orchids.

The main highway through the Crocker Range climbs steeply from KK over Gunung Alab via the Sunsuron Pass to Tambunan, then veers south to the central valley towns of Keningau and Tenom. From here you can travel by road to Batu Punggul.

Heading south from KK, another major road follows a coastal plain past Papar before reaching Beaufort, Sipitang and the Sarawak border. A popular and scenic way of closing the loop is to take the railway from Beaufort to Tenom (see p453), and then back to KK via Keningau and Tambunan.

### Tambunan

☎ 087

Nestled among the green curves of the Crocker hills, Tambunan, a small agricultural service town about 81km from KK, is the first settlement you'll come to in the range. The region was the last stronghold of Mat Salleh, who became a folk hero for rebelling against the British late in the 19th century. Sadly Salleh later blew his reputation by negotiating a truce, which so outraged his own people that he was forced to flee to the Tambunan plain, where he was eventually besieged and killed.

## SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

### Tambunan Rafflesia Reserve

Near the top of the Crocker Range, next to the main highway 20km from Tambunan, is the **Tambunan Rafflesia Reserve** (admission RM5), devoted to the world's largest flower. The rafflesia is a parasitic plant that grows hidden within the stems of jungle vines until it bursts into bloom. The large bulbous

flowers can be up to 1m in diameter. The 12 or so species of rafflesia are found only in Borneo and Sumatra; several species are unique to Sabah, but as they only bloom for a few days it's hard to predict when you'll be able to see one.

The information centre (☎ 774691; 11 8am-5pm) has interesting displays and information on the rafflesia. From the centre, eight nature trails (RM10) lead into the forest where the rafflesias can be found. Whether you will find one in bloom is very much a matter of luck, though the staff at the centre can tell you the locations of the latest sightings. In theory, guides run daily field visits (RM20) at fixed times, but staff aren't always available. If the centre is closed, you can still walk down the trails. For information on whether there are flowers blooming, give the centre a call first.

Even if there are no rafflesias, there are pleasant walks and plenty of other wildlife in the reserve – a new species of legless lizard was recently discovered here. There is also a good walk to Sensuron Waterfall, just off the highway about 4km from the information centre towards KK. It's a 45-minute walk down to the falls from the highway, and near the starting point on the other side of the road is a lookout point and picnic tables.

### Other Sights & Activities

In a cemetery just off the main road, 750m out of town towards Ranau, is Mat Salleh's gravestone.

There's little of interest in the small town but it's a tranquil spot to stay for a couple of days if you want to get out into the surrounding hills or trek up the challenging Mt Trus Madi (right). A good time to visit is in May, when activities associated with the Pesta Kaamatan (Harvest Festival) take place.

If you have your own 4WD, or are well equipped for trekking, you can strike out and explore some of the Crocker Range itself. The Mawar Waterfall, out towards Ranau, makes for a good adventurous trip: start on the main road 7.5km past the KK turn-off, where there is a small shop and a very difficult-to-see sign to 'Air Terjun Mawar'. Turn left and keep going past rural areas and new settlements, high up into the mountains. It is beautiful countryside, though the road is long and tortuous and fords a small river.

### SLEEPING & EATING

**Tambunan Village Resort Centre** (TVRC; ☎ 774076; bhvsb@tm.net.my; 24 Jln TVRC, Kampung Keranaan; r RM50-90; a ) Tambunan's only tourist accommodation is about 2km from the tiny town centre, with several buildings (including a karaoke bar and a rice-wine factory!), a small boating lake and grounds that span a river. As well as the various grades of room and chalet, you can sleep in a bamboo longhouse for RM50 or camp for RM10. If you're planning on eating here, note that the small restaurant closes around 7.30pm. The centre is the best place to arrange trips to surrounding areas, including Mt Trus Madi.

If you want to experience local life for a couple of days, Tambunan also has its own homestay programme (☎ 774581).

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Regular minivans ply the roads between Tambunan and KK (RM10, 1½ hours), Ranau (RM12, two hours), Keningau (RM7, one hour) and Tenom (RM12, two hours). KK–Tenom express buses also pass through, though you may have to remind them to stop.

Minivans to KK pass the entrance to the rafflesia reserve; you'll usually be charged for the whole trip to KK.

### Mt Trus Madi

On the opposite side of the highway from Tambunan's shopping area, a road leads to Sabah's second-highest peak, 2642m-high Mt Trus Madi. Though Trus Madi is surrounded by logging concessions, the upper slopes and peak are wild and jungle-clad and classified as forest reserve.

The muddy trails to the summit can be treacherous in parts – just the thing for those who find the open expanses of Mt Kinabalu a bit pedestrian. Independent trekkers must be well equipped and take all food and water up the mountain. With good maps or a guide, it is possible to go by 4WD up to about 1500m, from where it is a five- to seven-hour climb to the top; otherwise you can expect the trek to take three days altogether. There are camping spots halfway up the mountain and on the summit.

Before setting off, you are strongly advised to hire a guide or at least get maps

and assistance from the Forestry Department (Jabatan Perhutanan; ☎ 087-774691) in Tambunan.

Also in Tambunan, the **Tambunan Village Resort Centre** (☎ 087-774076; bhvsb@tm.net.my) can arrange treks; guides cost RM200 per day (up to eight people), and a 4WD will cost RM300 per trip. If you need a porter to carry your gear, it'll cost you another RM150 per day. You may be able to negotiate a package price for the whole trip.

To get to the mountain from Tambunan, take the road towards Kaingaran and turn onto the southeast road after Kampung Batu Lapan, which will take you onto a network of logging roads. By foot it's a 28km walk from Tambunan along the pleasant valley road then up through logging roads to the peak.

### Keningau

☎ 087

If you have a bent for the bucolic, you'll probably want to skip Keningau – this busy service town has a touch of urban sprawl about it, and most visitors only pass through to pick up transport, use an ATM or stock up on supplies. For locals, though, it's a different matter: attracted by the prospect of well-paid employment, people have flocked here from neighbouring districts, as well as from Indonesia and the Philippines, and the town's population has more than doubled since the 1960s. It's also a good place to buy a Swedish chainsaw!

There is a large *tamu* every Thursday. Though the town is deep in the heart of Murut country, it's most unlikely you'll see anyone dressed in traditional tribal wear.

### SLEEPING & EATING

Keningau has plenty of hotels, though the cheaper places can be very seedy.

**Hotel Kristal** (☎ 338888; Jln Pegalan; s/d RM60/65; a ) Hardly stellar standards, but the Kristal is at least convenient for the KK/Tenom buses if you miss a connection and have to stay overnight. Just don't ask where the toilet seats went.

**Hotel Juta** (☎ 337888; www.sabah.com.my/juta; Lg Milimewa 2; s RM230-270, d RM240-280, ste RM450-2500; a ) Keningau's lone top-end option towers between a temple and a mosque near the minivan stand, with comfortable rooms and its own Chinese restaurant. As with many such places, you'll rarely have to pay more

than 50% of the published rates! It's often used for functions and government workers, so you may want to book in advance.

There are plenty of small restaurants and *kedai kopi* in the streets off the market and the main road.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Express buses from KK (RM14.30, 2½ hours) pass through eight times daily, with four continuing on to Tenom (RM6).

Minivans and share-taxis (the main form of transport here) congregate in a large parking area off the main highway, leaving for KK (RM25, 2½ hours), Ranau (RM18, three hours) and Tenom (RM7, one hour). The last minivan to Ranau leaves around noon, so don't be late arriving in Keningau. The road to Ranau is a hairpin gravel road which follows a deep river-chasm much of the way. After heavy rain the bank is often washed away in places and vehicles may have to turn back.

Other transport gathers in complete chaos near the Chinese temple, about 200m southwest of the highway parking lot. From here, minivans and Land Cruisers make the journey deep into the centre of Sabah to Sapulut. From Sapulut, travellers go by chartered boat to Batu Punggul (see p451), then back to Sapulut and on through to Tawau. The roads are rough and it's not a comfortable journey.

A logging road also runs down the rugged and spectacular Crocker Range from Keningau towards the coast, linking up with the Papar–Beaufort road. It's only recommended for 4WD vehicles, and logging trucks always have right of way.

### Tenom

☎ 087

Nestled in a cool, cloud-shrouded valley at the end of the railway line from KK, Tenom is the home of the friendly Murut people, most of whom are farmers. It's a fertile area known for its coffee, which is widely sold, and soya beans, maize, vegetables and cocoa are also grown here.

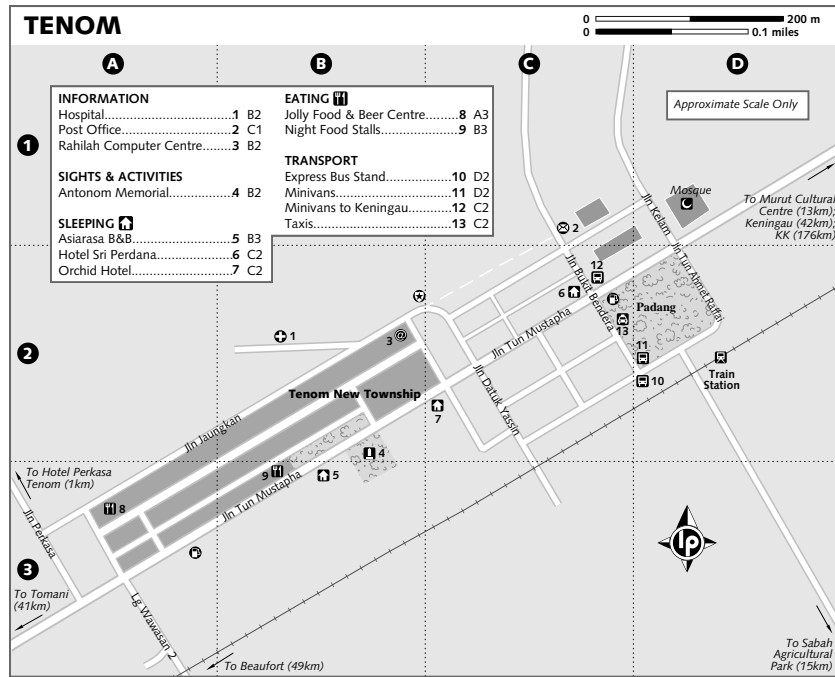
### INFORMATION

**Hospital** (☎ 735577)

**Post office** (Jln Bukit Bendera)

**Rahilah Computer Centre** (☎ 735568; Jln Jaungkan; per hr RM2.50; 11 8am-10pm) Internet access.





## SIGHTS

Like Tambunan, Tenom was closely involved in uprisings against the British in 1915, led by the famous Murut chief Ontoros Antonom, and there's a memorial to the tribe's fallen warriors off the main road.

Despite the peaceful setting and the chirpy council signs exhorting civic spirit (Love Tenom, Keep It Clean and Green!), there's little to do in the compact, slightly neglected town centre. The Sabah Agricultural Park is the area's main attraction (see opposite).

About 13km out of town is a modern replica of a Murut longhouse, which houses the fledgling Murut Cultural Centre. The centre was built to record something of the area's local traditions, as longhouses as far away as Tomani have either been burnt or abandoned in the last few years. So far displays are limited to a small museum (11 9am-5pm Sat-Thu), examples of traditional carving and occasional craft demonstrations, but further activities should be added as the centre develops.

## SLEEPING

**Asiarasa B&B** (☎ 737588; Jln Tun Mustapha; dm RM15, r RM35-45; a ) If you really need a cheap bed, this slightly iffy carpeted hostel can put you up in a four-bed dorm, and has its own café-restaurant.

**Orchid Hotel** (☎ 737600; [excelng@tm.net.my](mailto:excelng@tm.net.my); Block K, Jln Tun Mustapha; s/d/tw/tr/stc RM33/44/50/60/80; a ) The nicest option in the town centre, with discount singles often available at RM28. The bathrooms let the side down a bit, but the large suite room is a minor bargain.

**Hotel Sri Perdana** (☎ 734001; 77 Jln Tun Mustapha; s RM47, d RM50-63; a ) Despite the narrow single beds and ineffective electric showers, this hotel is good value for a quick overnight, especially when promotional rates apply. There's a café underneath, and minivans to Keningau stop right opposite.

**Hotel Perkasa Tenom** (☎ 735812; Jln Perakasa; r RM70; a ) Perched high on the hill above Tenom, accessed by a steep 1km road, the blockish Perkasa is a quiet place surrounded by low forest and walking trails. At the right time of year it's possible to see

rafflesia flowers nearby. It has all the services of an upper midrange hotel, including a bar and restaurant. A taxi to the door will cost RM5.

## EATING

As well as the hotel restaurants, there are plenty of *kedai kopi* and small cafés around town selling basic Chinese and Muslim food. Food stalls set up in the evening in front of the New Township shops and are open until about midnight.

**Jolly Food & Beer Centre** (☎ 735283; 29 Tenom New Township; dishes RM5-10) At the far end of the shop complex, Jolly's does exactly what it says on the sign, with slightly smarter Chinese inside and a take-what-ever's-on-offer stall whipping up noodles for the street seating.

**Tenom Superstore** (Jln Datuk Yassin) Self-caterers can stock up here.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Bus

Minivans park around the *padang* (field), opposite the Hotel Sri Perdana and near the post office; when they're ready to go, they cruise up and down the street drumming up business. Most are going to Keningau (RM6, one hour), but some go to KK (RM20, three to four hours). There are also regular services to Tambunan (RM12, two hours). An express bus to KK (RM20, 3½ hours) leaves daily from near the train station at 7am, 8am, noon and 4pm.

### Taxi

Taxis congregate at a rank on the west side of the *padang*. Share-taxis also make the run to Keningau (RM7), Ranau (RM25) and KK (RM30). Early morning is the best time to catch one.

### Train

**Tenom Train station** (11 735514) is just south of the *padang*. In practical terms the train is usually the least useful form of transport going, but here it's the only way to head west without backtracking all the way to KK, and the 2½-hour trip to Beaufort (economy/1st class RM2.75/8.35), following the course of Sungai Padas, is the one section that's scenic enough to be well worth your time. Bring lots to eat and drink, as delays and cancellations are common, especially if there's been heavy rain.

## Sabah Agricultural Park

Heaven on earth for horticulturalists: this vast park (Taman Pertanian Sabah; ☎ 737952; [www.sabah.net.my/agripark](http://www.sabah.net.my/agripark); adult/child RM25/10; 11 9am-4.30pm Tue-Sun), about 15km southeast of Tenom, is run by the Department of Agriculture and covers about 1500 acres (610 hectares). The park is one of the best reasons to visit the Tenom area, and green-fingered or not, if you're the least bit interested in tropical plants, it can't be missed.

Originally set up as an orchid centre, the park has expanded to become a major research facility as well as a tourist attraction, building up superb collections of rare plants such as hoyas and developing new techniques for use in agriculture, agro-forestry and domestic cultivation.

For visitors, however, it's all about enjoying the tranquil atmosphere and taking in the amazing diversity of the region's tropical flora. Seeing everything in detail could take about two or three days, so it's lucky you can stay overnight! Highlights include the Native Orchid Centre, which has largest collection of orchid species in Southeast Asia; walking trails in the forested hills surrounding the park; 21 themed ornamental gardens; a bee research centre; and the Living Crop Museum, which explains how various plants are used and cultivated. Fishing and canoeing are possible on the three lakes, and kids should also enjoy the small animal park and the 'adventure island'. To get around you can follow the marked paths, rent bicycles for RM3 per hour, ride the mini-tram or take a guided tour.

The park has a hostel (dm RM25), a restaurant, shop and information centre. It's also possible to camp on one of the lake islands for RM10 per person.

To get here, take a minivan from Tenom heading to Lagud Seberang (RM3). Services run throughout the morning, but dry up in the late afternoon. Tell the driver you're going to Taman Pertanian. The park entrance is about 1km off the main road. A taxi from Tenom will cost RM20, though you'll have to negotiate waiting time if you want to come back with the same driver.

## Batu Punggul

Not far from the Kalimantan border, Batu Punggul is a jungle-topped limestone outcrop riddled with caves, towering nearly

200m above Sungai Sapulut. This is deep in Murut country and Batu Punggul was one of several sites sacred to these people. Batu Punggul and the adjacent Batu Tinahas are even traditionally believed to be longhouses that gradually transformed into stone. It can be difficult and expensive to get here, but this is a beautiful part of Sabah that few tourists visit, and it offers a chance to rub shoulders with the jungle Murut.

There are settlements all the way up the river, and you should be able to arrange longhouse stays by talking to local people in Sapulut town; note that this may involve trying *tapai* (tapioca wine), a strange brew indeed for the uninitiated! Otherwise the only formal accommodation is the **Batu Punggul Lodge** complex, centred on a traditional-style Murut longhouse. Accommodation is on floor mats and must be pre-arranged by the Rural Development Corporation (KPD; in KK ☎ 088-291327; [kpd@sabah.gov.my](mailto:kpd@sabah.gov.my); Wisma Pertanian Sabah, Jln Tasik). The resort offers jungle walks, canoeing and visits to the nearby caves. It's a popular place with youth groups and can get crowded during school holidays, but mostly it's nearly empty. Packages and itineraries covering Batu Punggul can be arranged with various tour companies in KK (see p427).

The trip involves a long ride over rough logging roads via Keningau to the village of Sapulut, from where it is about three to five hours (depending on the water level) by motorised longboat along the jungle-lined Sungai Sapulut. It's possible to get there independently, but hiring a boat for the river transport is expensive (about RM250 per group). Minivans and Land Cruisers leave from Keningau (RM30, three hours) for Sapulut. You can also get there from Tawau in East Sabah, a long Land Cruiser journey over rough roads (RM50, eight hours).

In theory you could head into the Maliau Basin (see p475) from Batu Punggul, but this would be one almighty undertaking independently and could involve days, if not weeks, of trekking. Plan *very* thoroughly if you want to attempt it...

## Beaufort

☎ 087

Despite the rather dandy name, Beaufort is nothing more than a quiet provincial town about 90km south of KK. There are a few remaining wooden shophouses

on the main street, which have a certain dilapidated charm in the evenings when hundreds of twittering swiftlets pack the telegraph wires like dysfunctional Christmas lights. For most visitors, though, it's little more than a stop-off on the way to Brunei or Tenom.

### INFORMATION

Post Office (☎ 211521; Jln Masjid)

Public Bank (☎ 214844; 7 Block B, Jln Lo Chung)

### WHITE-WATER RAFTING

White-water rafting is popular through the Padas Gorge south of Beaufort, and is at its best between April and July, when water levels on Sungai Padas create Grade 2 to 4 conditions. The calmer Sungai Kiulu nearby is also commonly used for first-time rafters. Day trips organised out of KK cost RM150 to RM200 per person, including transfers by charter train, and normally require 24 hours' advance notice.

**Riverbug** (☎ 088-260501; [www.traversetours.com](http://www.traversetours.com); Wisma Sabah, Jln Haji Saman, Kota Kinabalu) is one of the main specialist outfits operating here; for other tour companies, see p427.

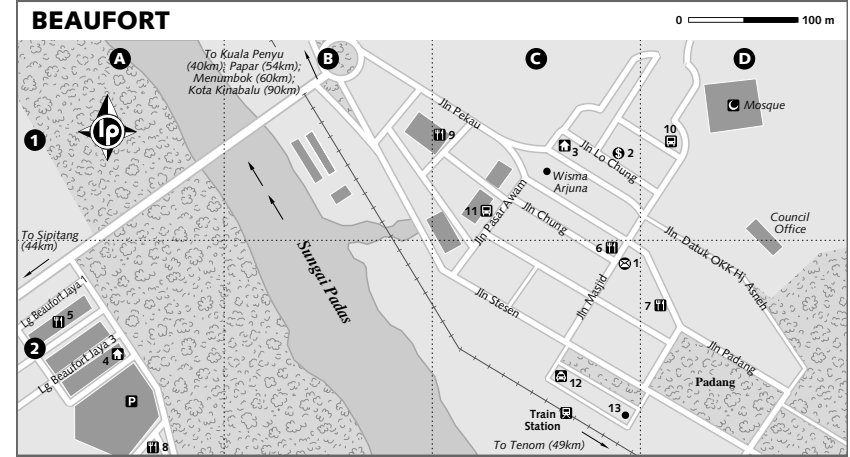
### SLEEPING & EATING

**Mandarin Inn** (☎ 211800; Lg Beaufort Jaya 3; s/d RM35/42; a) Acceptable standards but not the most convenient location, across the river from the train and bus station.

**Beaufort Hotel** (☎ 211911; 19-20 Lo Chung Park, Jln Lo Chung; s/d RM36/50; a) Upstairs in the salmon-pink building at the end of its block, the Beaufort is not at all bad for the price, and rooms even have proper power showers. There is an arrow in each room showing Muslims which way to pray, but it does seem to be pointing in the wrong direction!

**Restoran Kim Wah** (☎ 214998; Jln Pekau; dishes RM3-10) A smart Chinese establishment with a good range of dishes, including claypot meals and varied sauces such as mango, honey or garlic. If you like your air fresh rather than conditioned, there's a more basic outlet under the Beaufort Hotel.

**Beaufort Baker** (☎ 211262; Lg Beaufort Jaya 1; pastries from 50 sen) For a good selection of cakes, buns and other pastries, this local bakery is just round the corner from the Mandarin. There's a second branch in the town centre on Jln Chung.



Self-caterers can stock up at the two massive hypermarkets in town:

**Bestamart** (☎ 222858; Jln Padang)

**CNF** (☎ 222501; Block L, Beaufort Jaya)

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

#### Bus

Buses and minivans gather at the mini bus terminal opposite the mosque, and along Jln Pasar Awam in the town centre. Express buses call at the station, leaving morning and afternoon for KK (RM9, 1½ hours). The KK to Lawas express bus passes through Beaufort at around 3pm; the fare from Beaufort to Lawas is RM13. Express buses to Sipitang (RM4) pass through until 1.30pm. You can buy tickets in advance from the booth by the train station. Minibuses to Kuala Penyu (RM6) leave in the morning.

Minivans that are nearly full cruise around town honking hopefully at pedestrians. There are frequent departures for Papar (RM7) and KK (RM9, two hours), and less-frequent departures for Sipitang (RM6, 1½ hours), Lawas (RM15, 1¾ hours) and Kuala Penyu (until around 2.30pm, RM5). To Menumbok (for Labuan) there are plenty of minivans until early afternoon (RM8, one hour).

#### Taxi

Taxis from the stand outside the station can ferry you round town or to other towns such as Kota Kinabalu (RM50), Menumbok (RM80) and Lawas (RM100).

### INFORMATION

Post Office.....1 C2

Public Bank.....2 C1

### SLEEPING

Beaufort Hotel.....3 C1

Mandarin Inn.....4 A2

### EATING

Beaufort Baker.....5 A2

Beaufort Baker.....6 C2

Bestamart.....7 D2

CNF.....8 A2

Restoran Kim Wah.....9 C1

Restoran Kim Wah II.....(see 3)

### TRANSPORT

Bus Terminal.....10 D1

Minivan Stands.....11 C1

Taxi Stand.....12 C2

Ticket Booth for Express Buses.....13 C2

### Train

It is possible to take the Sabah State Railway from KK to Beaufort, but it's a slow trip (economy/1st class RM5.60/17, 2½ hours) and a bus or minivan is quicker. For schedules and bookings, contact the stations at **Beaufort** (☎ 211518), **Tenom** (☎ 735514) and **Tanjung Aru** (☎ 088-254611).

The track between Beaufort and Tenom (RM2.75/8.35, 2½ hours) following Sungai Padas is more scenic, and worth doing if you have the time – book in advance, as trains are small and cancellations are common. There's no air-conditioning on the train and major delays can be expected after heavy rain. Make sure you bring something to eat and drink because it could be a long journey.

## Kuala Penyu

Kuala Penyu is at the northern end of a flat, swampy peninsula dotted with water buffalo. If you want to get to Pulau Tiga National Park, this is the place to come. The town is unremarkable, but there are some good beaches nearby. The best is around the headland from the estuary, 8km out of town; there are picnic tables and toilets but no other facilities.

Recommended by readers, the **Tempurung Seaside Lodge** (☎ 088-773066; 3 Putatan Point; [info@borneo-authentic.com](mailto:info@borneo-authentic.com); r RM110) sits on a small hill with views of the South China Sea and is a beautiful place to unwind for a couple of days. Prices include breakfast, lunch and dinner. The bamboo rooms are simple but nicely done, with fan-cooled rooms and a veranda almost above the white-sand beach. The only problem is getting out there; your best bet is to phone or email the lodge and see about getting picked up in KK or Kuala Penyu. Even if you have your own transport, it's a good idea to contact them for directions.

The lodge also runs tours of the wetlands around nearby Sungai Klias, which is habitat for proboscis monkeys, various birds and crocodiles. The cruise costs RM60 per person and includes dinner and refreshments. Many companies offer tours here from KK, but as transport is included these are, obviously, more expensive.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

From KK minivans leave from behind Wawasan Plaza (RM10, two hours). From Beaufort minivans to Kuala Penyu (RM5) leave throughout the morning, but return services tail off very early in the afternoon, so you may have to negotiate a taxi or local lift back. A minivan from Kuala Penyu to Menumbok costs RM6. The town itself is bisected by a river; a pontoon ferry shuttles back and forth between 6am and 6pm.

## Pulau Tiga National Park

The name Pulau Tiga means 'Three Islands', but only two of the original three remain in this 15-sq-km park north of Kuala Penyu. Pulau Tiga is the largest island; about 1km to the northeast lies tiny Pulau Kalamunian Damit; and in between are the remains of the third island, Pulau Kalamunian Besar, now only a sandbar eroded by wave action.

The islands themselves are recent creations, formed in 1897 by the eruption of mud volcanoes. Continuous volcanic activity has taken place over the last hundred years, and still continues in the form of bubbling mud and escaping methane gas. In 2001 the main island, Pulau Tiga, was the location for the first season of the US reality TV show *Survivor*, and is heavily marketed now as 'Survivor Island'. Whatever your viewing preferences, it's still a quiet and relaxing place to visit, blessed with fine sandy beaches, a network of walking trails and good snorkelling throughout the year.

**Pulau Kalamunian Damit** is little more than a large rock covered in dense vegetation but is famous for the sea snakes that come ashore in their hundreds to mate. On any one day up to 150 snakes can be present, curled up under boulders, among roots and in tree hollows. It's a fascinating phenomenon, made doubly enigmatic by the fact that the snakes are never seen on nearby Pulau Tiga. Not surprisingly, the local name for this islet is Pulau Ular (Snake Island). If you do come out here, beware of the snakes – they are extremely poisonous.

## SLEEPING & EATING

All accommodation is on Pulau Tiga.

**Sabah Parks** (☎ 088-211881; [www.sabahparks.org.my](http://www.sabahparks.org.my); Lot 1-3, Block K, Kompleks Sinsuran, Jln Tun Fuad Stephens, Kota Kinabalu; ʘ 8am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Thu, 8am-11.30am & 2-5pm Fri) Has more basic lodgings on the island for less affluent survivalists. Facilities here are limited and there's no restaurant, though a cooking area is provided.

**Borneo Survivor Resort** (☎ 088-919686; [www.borneosurvivor.com.my](http://www.borneosurvivor.com.my); packages RM88-268; a ) Shameless cash-in or healthy competition? It's a tough call, but as long as it maintains its favourable rates (and 20% discounts) the BSR should do OK. Rates depend on whether you plump for a plush chalet, communal longhouse or basic camping; meals, transfers, park fees and a jungle trek are included.

**Pulau Tiga Resort** (☎ 087-885650; <http://pulau-tiga.com>; a ) Pulau Tiga's first resort complex seems unfazed by its upstart rival. A two-day package from KK is about RM300, including meals, drinks, transport and the park entrance fee. Other activities

like diving, fishing, boating, water sports and trips to Snake Island incur additional costs. A four-day Mini Survivor Package is also available for those seeking a bit of off-screen adventure.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

If you're not on a prearranged tour to Pulau Tiga, head for Kuala Penyu and ask around for a boat – it should cost around RM140 for the return trip. Don't leave it too late to come back or you may miss the last minivan out of Kuala Penyu. The two resorts arrange their own transport from KK, and the Pulau Tiga Resort also has twice-daily boat transfers from its jetty in Kuala Penyu.

## Sipitang

Sipitang is 44km south of Beaufort, 144km from KK and just 18km from the Sarawak border. Located on a wide, shallow bay, Sipitang is pleasant enough, with a pastel mosque and lots of seafood eating, though you'd probably only stop here if you missed a bus.

If you are heading to Lawas for a boat to Brunei or Limbang, you should spend the night in Lawas to make sure you catch the early-morning departures.

Heading into Sarawak, buses stop at **Mera-pok**, where passports and visas are checked at both Sabah and Sarawak immigration offices. The offices are open every day from 6am until 10pm.

Sipitang has a number of *kedai kopi* and food stalls on the main street, and some easy-to-find hotels if you have to stay the night.

Minivans ply between Beaufort and Sipitang (RM4, 1½ hours) throughout the day. Buses go to Merapok in Sarawak for RM3. From Beaufort there are buses to KK and Labuan and trains to Tenom (see p453).

## Pulau Labuan

☎ 087 / pop 76,000

Eight kilometres off the coast of Sabah, at the mouth of Brunei Bay, lies the small, quiet island of Labuan. It's had its historical moments, especially during WWII, but is now probably best known as a duty-free stopover on the north-south sea routes. Most travellers just pass through Labuan briefly en route to Brunei.

Labuan was once a coal-mining centre and now has major petroleum gas installations. Politically the 92-sq-km group of islands is a federal territory governed directly from KL. It was originally conceived as an offshore banking haven, though these days the Silver Hair Programme increasingly targets foreign senior citizens looking for a retirement base, a bit like a low-rent Miami.

The sultan of Brunei ceded Labuan to the British in 1846 and it remained part of the Empire for 115 years. The only interruption came during WWII, when the Japanese landed and held the island for three years. Significantly, it was on Labuan that the Japanese forces in North Borneo surrendered at the end of the war, and here that the Japanese officers responsible for the death marches from Sandakan (see p464) were tried. There's a war cemetery and peace park to mark these horrific events.

Bandar Labuan is the main town and the transit point for ferries. The population is a mix of Muslim Malays, native groups such as the Kadazan, Dusun, Bugis and Bajau, and large contingents of Chinese, Indians (including a long-standing Sikh presence) and other foreign nationals.

## INFORMATION

Facilities in town include the following:

**Arcade Moneychanger** (☎ 412545; 168 Jln OKK Awang Besar) Cash and travellers cheques.

**Family Fun Centre** (☎ 422660; Financial Park; per hr RM3; ʘ 9.30am-10pm) Internet access.

**Harrisons Travel** (☎ 412557; 1 Jln Merdeka) Handy and reputable travel agency.

**HSBC** (☎ 422610; 189 Jln Merdeka)

**Maybank** (☎ 443888; Financial Park)

**Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 423445; [www.labuantourism.com.my](http://www.labuantourism.com.my); cnr Jln Dewan & Jln Berjaya; ʘ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat) Tourism Malaysia office.

## SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

### Bandar Labuan

Labuan's uncharismatic main settlement is light on character but has a couple of passable attractions. The **Labuan Museum** (☎ 414462; 364 Jln Dewan; admission free; ʘ 9am-5pm) takes a glossy, if slightly superficial, look at the island's history and culture. The most interesting displays are those on the different ethnic groups here, though there's also



**GETTING THERE & AWAY****Air**

Malaysia Airlines has a desk at the airport, and currently runs regular flights to KK and KL, while FAX flies to Miri three times daily. Air Asia also has daily flights to KL, often much cheaper than Malaysia Airlines.

**Boat**

Passenger boats (% 417333) are plentiful and some morning boats can fill up quickly; tickets can be bought in advance or just before departure at the relevant terminal building. You pay a 50 sen departure tax before boarding.

Car ferries go to Menumbok (RM5, two hours, three times daily) from a separate dock to the east. Speedboats (RM10) do the journey in about 30 minutes and leave roughly every hour between 8am and 4pm.

All other boat services leave from the shiny new International Ferry Terminal. Speedy passenger ferries connect Labuan to KK (economy/1st class RM31/36, two hours, four daily).

There are two daily express boats heading to Limbang (RM25, two hours) and one service to Lawas (RM25, two hours) departing every day except Tuesday and Thursday, when travellers will have to go via Sundar.

Numerous express boats go to Muara port in Brunei daily (economy/1st class RM27/33, one hour) between 8am and 4pm, returning between 7.30am and 3.30pm. From Brunei the cost is B\$16/20 for economy/1st class. Note that the schedule changes regularly, and extra services may be available on weekends and public holidays, when it's worth booking in advance.

**GETTING AROUND**

Labuan has a good minibus network, based on a six-zone system. Buses leave regularly from the parking lot off Jln Tun Mustapha. Their numbers are clearly painted on the front, and fares range from 50 sen for a short trip to RM2 for a trip to the top of the island.

Taxis are plentiful and there's a stand opposite the local ferry terminal. The base rate is RM6.60 for short journeys, or RM8 to the airport.

**NORTH OF KOTA KINABALU**

The road north from the capital leads to small coastal towns and stilt villages, then over low hills to the market town of Kota Belud and the small port of Kudat. The northern region is home to the Rungus people, and the very end of the island has been turned into something of a tourist attraction, known as the Tip of Borneo.

Ownership of the offshore islands to the north and east is disputed with the Philippines, and most of these are out of bounds to foreigners.

**Tuaran**

% 088

Tuaran, 33km from KK, is a bustling little town with tree-lined boulevard-style streets and a distinctive nine-storey Chinese pagoda. There's little point stopping in the town itself unless you happen to pass through on market day, but the surrounding area conceals a couple of luxury resorts and two stilt villages.

Mengkabong Water Village, a Bajau stilt village built over an estuary, was once a very picturesque spot, though it's not very special now.

The settlement at Penimbawan is much more appealing; to get there, take a minivan to Serusup (RM1.50) and charter a motorboat (RM40). The trip up the river takes about 15 minutes, and the boat will wait while you wander the plankwalks of the village. The villagers are friendly, but you're better off going with someone who speaks Malay, because it can feel a bit intrusive just wandering around.

**SLEEPING & EATING**

**Sulaman Lake Resort** (% 791500; Jln Kampung Serusup; r RM40-75; a ) If you want to spend more time around the estuary, try this stilt lodge on the water by the Serusup jetty. There's a range of accommodation, from basic rooms to stilt huts and a three-bed villa (RM130), plus a 'floating' restaurant. It's quiet on weekdays and the lodge can arrange boat tours and fishing.

**Shangri-La Rasa Ria Resort** (% 792888; www.shangri-la.com; Pantai Dalit; r from RM546; a i ) This is a large luxury beach development on the road to Mengkabong, next to the Dalit Bay Golf & Country Club; as well as all the usual trappings and facilities, the resort

has its own Nature Interpretation Centre, including a fledgling orang-utan rehabilitation project staffed by volunteers. Special packages are offered on the internet and through travel agencies.

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

All buses north pass through Tuaran, and minivans shuttle regularly to and from KK (RM4, 30 minutes). Minivans to Mengkabong are less frequent and cost RM1. Regular minivans go from Tuaran to Kota Belud (RM7, 30 minutes).

**Kota Belud**

% 088

You might think Kota Belud isn't much to look at, but every Sunday a huge *tamu* takes place on the outskirts of this small, sleepy town. The market is a congested, colourful and dusty melee of vendors, hagglers, browsers, gawpers and hawkers, all brought together by a slew of everyday goods in a bustle that consumes the whole town each and every week. A smaller version takes place on Wednesday.

A *tamu* is not simply a market where villagers gather to sell their farm produce and to buy manufactured goods from traders; it's also a social occasion where news and stories are exchanged. Sadly, tourists now often outnumber buffalo, and the fascinating local Bajau horsemen have mostly moved away from the car park, though some do put on a show for visitors.

Visitors looking for tribal handicrafts and traditional clothing will be disappointed, but the market is certainly lively and you can enjoy a good breakfast here after looking around. The hilly views from the *padang* may also tempt you to stay a while and do some walking away from the Sunday crowds.

Offshore, Pulau Mantanani offers good reef and wreck diving away from the busier east-coast sites, with regular sightings of dugong; packages can be arranged through **Scuba Paradise** (% 266695; www.scubaparadiseborneo.com.my; Wisma Sabah, Jln Haji Saman, Kota Kinabalu), starting at RM560.

**SLEEPING & EATING**

Most people visit Kota Belud as a day trip from KK, since you can make it there and back with plenty of time for the market.

One reason to stay overnight here is the stunning view of Mt Kinabalu at first light. There are several homestays in the area; try checking out [www.sabahtourism.com](http://www.sabahtourism.com) for details.

**Kota Belud Travelers' Lodge** (% 977228; kbtravelerslodge@yahoo.com; 6 Plaza Kong Guan; dm RM25, r RM65-85; a ) A new hostel-type lodge near the centre of town. The owners can also arrange day trips from KK for RM280, including horse riding and a visit to a Bajau village.

Kota Belud is hardly a gastronome's delight, but plenty of tasty snacks can be picked up at the Sunday market. There are plenty of Chinese and halal coffee shops around the municipal offices.

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

Minivans and share-taxis gather in front of Pasar Besar, the old market. Most of these serve the Kota Belud-KK route, (RM5, two hours) or Kudat (RM10, two hours), departing between 7am and 5pm. On Sunday, *tamu* day, the number of vehicles has to be seen to be believed!

To get to Kinabalu National Park, take any minibus going to KK and get off at Tamparuli, about halfway (RM5, 30 minutes). There are several minivans from Tamparuli to Ranau every day until about 2pm, all of them passing the park entrance (RM5, one hour). To go all the way to Ranau costs RM8.

**Kudat**

% 088

Kudat is a quiet port town in the very north of Sabah, 190km from KK. The surrounding countryside is home to the friendly Rungus people, tribal cousins of the Kadazan, but the town itself displays noticeable Filipino influences, as much of the trade here is with Malaysia's northeastern neighbour.

Kudat itself is fairly unremarkable, but increasing tourist traffic has been brought to the area by the development of the so-called Tip of Borneo as a coach-party attraction (see p461). There are also some good beaches west of town and homestay opportunities in Rungus longhouses near the highway, but unless you prearrange a tour you'll need a car or taxi to reach them.

**INFORMATION**

Around town you'll find:

**Maybank** (☎ 611146; Kedai Sedco, Jln Melati)

**New Way Car Rental & Souvenir Centre** (☎ 088-625868; 40 Jln Lo Thien Chok) You can book accommodation at Pulau Banggi here, see opposite.

**SLEEPING & EATING**

**Hotel Sunrise** (☎ 61517; Jln Ibrahim Arshao; r RM20-48; a ) If you can ignore the footprints where some of the doors seem to have been kicked open, this is a perfectly decent budget option in a handy location.

**Hotel Kinabalu** (☎ 613888; 1243 Jln Melor; s RM42, d RM56-77; a ) One of several similar hotels on Jln Melor, in the newer section of town. Deluxe rooms come with fridge, and there are some good big bathrooms. For some obscure reason the satellite TV here only runs 16 hours a day, but surely you have better things to do anyway.

**Upper Deck Hotel** (☎ 622272; Jln Lintas; r RM80-100, ste RM160; a ) Perched atop the Milimewa Superstore, with its own cake shop on the other side, this place has bright, clean rooms and good views of the harbour.

**Ria Hotel** (☎ 622794; 3 Jln Marudu; r RM88-98, ste RM268; a i ) Kudat's latest arrival is a model of shiny midrange quality, the décor is light brown, with laminate floors, floral linen, internet café and – don't get too excited – complimentary minibar. Easily the best deal in town.

**Restoran Rakyat** (☎ 621600; 47 Jln Lo Thien Chok; dishes RM1-5; h breakfast, lunch & dinner) **Spilling** onto the street in the pedestrianised new part of town, the Rakyat is one of the few places that stays open reasonably late, serving a good range of Muslim food.

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

**FAX** flies four times weekly to Sandakan, continuing to KK twice a week. Buses and minivans make the trip from KK (RM18, around three hours); you can also catch a quicker share-taxi (RM23). The two-hour journey from Kota Belud costs RM10.

**Around Kudat****BEACHES**

You'll find some of Sabah's best beaches around Kudat, where the water is shallow and safe for paddling. **Bak Bak**, about 11km from Kudat, is the town beach. It has clear water, picnic and toilet facilities and food

stalls on weekends, though the beach itself is only a narrow strip of sand against a retaining wall. The fishing villages further north of Bak Bak have some even better white-sand beaches, but there is no accommodation available.

Bak Bak is difficult to get to from Kudat without your own transport – count on at least RM20 for a taxi there and back.

**LONGHOUSE TOURS**

Many Rungus people now build their own houses in preference to living in the highly flammable old longhouses, but there are still some interesting longhouse settlements around Kudat, and it's one of the best places in Sabah to try out the communal lifestyle in a homestay for a day or two. Communities open to travellers include Matunggung, Misompuru, Maranjak, Pongugadan and Bavanggazo, or you could just ask around in Kudat and hope for an invitation.

A traditional Rungus longhouse has a thatched roof with enclosed bamboo-slatted sides. Inside, each family's living quarters, called *valai*, is composed of sleeping, dining and living areas, and an attic. With advance notice, most tourist-oriented longhouses can put on performances to present traditional north Sabahan culture to visitors; displays such as *monggol* (dance and music), *mangatip-atip* (bamboo show) and *monggurali* (nose flute) are regular favourites.

For day trips the typical entrance fee is around RM22, while overnight stays start at RM30 per person (room only). Tour operators in KK (see p427) can also arrange visits, including transport, meals and performances. If you're planning to go on your own, phone ahead to arrange a pick-up from the relevant bus stop.

The traditional dress for Rungus women is a black sarong and colourful, beaded necklaces. On festive occasions, heavy brass bracelets are worn as well. The Rungus tribes produce some elaborate beadwork and you can sometimes buy their handicrafts at the Sunday *tamu* held at Sikuati, 23km south of Kudat. Sikuati is on the highway, 1km from the coast, where there is a good beach. Teluk Sikuati has a long, sweeping white-sand beach, though the water can be choppy and it is not as clear as that around Bak Bak.

**TIP OF BORNEO**

Sabah's northernmost headland, at the end of a wide bay some 40km from Kudat, is known as Tanjung Simpang Mengayu, or the Tip of Borneo. Magellan reputedly landed here for 42 days during his famous round-the-world voyage. Once a wild promontory, this windswept stretch where the cliffs meet the sea has been co-opted as a tourist attraction over the last couple of years, and is now substantially paved, with a large, truncated globe monument dominating the viewpoint. Facilities include a car park, souvenir shops and a small café. A multilingual sign warns visitors not to climb down onto the long black rocks that form the actual tip of the mainland, effectively guaranteeing that plenty of people will do exactly that – watch out for waves if you follow suit...

As most visitors only stop in briefly as part of a coach tour, the Tip can be very quiet outside the daily peak times, and sunset in particular can be a real highlight, with a clear sightline to the point where the sun meets the horizon. Bring insect repellent to ward off the dusk mosquitos!

There's no public transport, so you'll need to negotiate for a taxi (around RM50, including waiting time) or take a tour (around RM140 from Kudat).

**PULAU BANGGI**

After years at the heart of territorial disputes with the Philippines, this small island off the northern coast finally seems set to open up for visitors. The Banggi people, known locally for their unusual tribal treehouses, are Sabah's smallest indigenous group, and speak a unique non-Bornean dialect. The island is an interesting spot to explore for a day, and the surrounding reef islands can also be visited on dive trips organised from KK. **Pulau Balambangan**, on the boat route from Kudat, has several significant archaeological sites.

Accommodation is provided by a small government rest house (r RM40) and the modest **Bonggi Resort** (r RM90-115; a ), which can arrange boat trips and other activities. Book through **New Way Car Rental & Souvenir Centre** (☎ 088-625868; 40 Jln Lo Thien Chok) in Kudat.

To get here independently, take the express boat from Kudat (economy/1st class RM15/18, one hour), which leaves at 1pm and returns around 7am the next day. Private boats cost around RM300 per day.

**EAST SABAH**

Once you've knocked off Mt Kinabalu, forget about the west coast – most of Sabah's truly special attractions are found on the eastern side of the state, where seemingly endless palm-oil plantations conceal untouched primary jungle, temperamental tropical rivers, comical monkeys and elusive big mammals. The east coast, too, shelters coral reefs and marine life that would give its western counterpart the bends.

One or two sights are pretty well the exclusive preserve of tour groups, but with a bit of planning an independent traveller could take in Sepilok and Labuk Bay, a half-day at the Gomantong Caves, a trip to the fabulous Sungai Kinabatangan and some world-class diving or snorkelling at Tun Sakaran Marine Park. If your budget will stretch to something really special, you could indulge in a few days in the magnificent Danum Valley, or even explore the Lost World of the Maliau Basin.

**Sandakan**

☎ 089 / pop 347,000

Sandakan is a busy commercial centre at the entrance to a beautiful, island-studded bay. Most activity centres on the docks and wharves that sprawl along the waterfront. Barges, ferries and motorboats of every description buzz around, unloading fish and other produce, and taking away rattan, timber, rubber, copra, palm oil and bird's nests. West of town, passenger ferries shuttle back and forth to Zamboanga in the Philippines. In the bay, container vessels ride at anchor awaiting their turn to unload.

Sandakan has character and even a certain downmarket charm, though once the shop shutters come down at night the centre can feel disconcertingly deserted. The real attractions lie outside town, but there's excellent seafood to enjoy and beautiful views from the hills at sunset.

**HISTORY**

At the height of the timber boom Sandakan was said to have the world's greatest concentration of millionaires. It was perhaps an extravagant claim, but the area has always been renowned for luxury goods such as pearls, sea cucumbers and bird's nests, and



history. In 2006 the original march route was officially reopened as a memorial trail – see [www.sandakan-deathmarch.com](http://www.sandakan-deathmarch.com) for details.

To get there, take any Batu 8 or higher bus (RM1.30); get off at the turn-off signposted 'Taman Rimba' and walk down Jln Rimba to reach the park. A taxi will cost about RM15, if you can find a driver who knows where to go!

## TOURS

It is possible to visit many of the attractions around Sandakan independently; to see wildlife, however, you'll need a guide, and the easiest way to arrange this is by taking a tour. As well as the specialist local outfits, Sandakan has plenty of general tour operators offering packages to Sungai Kinabatangan, the Gomantong Caves, Turtle Islands National Park and other regional destinations. Hotels in Sandakan and Sepilok can arrange tours, as can agents in KK (see p427).

**MB Permai Tours** (☎ 671535; 1st fl, Sandakan Airport) Tours and car rental from RM100 per day (4WD from RM350).

**Si Tours** (☎ 673502; [www.sitoursborneo.com](http://www.sitoursborneo.com); 10th fl, Wisma Khoo Siak Chiew, Lebuhr Empat) Can arrange trips to Pulau Selingan and organise Sukau lodging for the Kinabatangan.

**Wildlife Expeditions** (☎ 219616; [www.wildlife-expeditions.com](http://www.wildlife-expeditions.com); 9th fl, Wisma Khoo Siak Chiew, Lebuhr Empat) Runs tours to the Kinabatangan and operates the Sukau River Lodge there. It also has an office in KK (see p427).

## SLEEPING

### Budget & Midrange

If you're only passing through Sandakan to see the orang-utans, it's better to stay at Sepilok itself, since the rehabilitation centre is about 25km from Sandakan. There is hardly any budget lodging in town, and the few really cheap places are usually establishments of ill-repute or immigrant dosshouses. All rooms quoted have private bathrooms.

**MayFair Hotel** (☎ 219855; 24 Jln Pryer; s/d RM40/50; a i ) A real travellers' favourite, so much so that locals have taken to booking in English to ensure they get a room! Each tidy room has its own big TV and DVD player, with a massive library of carefully categorised VCDs in reception (gigantic animal

movie, anyone?), and the affably grumpy owner will arrange laundry, organise transport and even lend you a laptop for internet access (RM4 per hour). It's a cast-iron bargain, and consequently very popular.

**Hung Wing Hotel** (☎ 218855; [hungwing@yahoo.com.my](mailto:hungwing@yahoo.com.my); Lot 4, 13 Lebuhr Tiga; r RM53-77; a i ) Pitched primarily at Chinese businessmen, the new Hung Wing isn't fancy but caters amply to travellers' needs, particularly with the good, big shower heads. Prices go down the further you go up, so staying on the 5th floor can save you money as well as keeping you fit!

**Malaysia Hotel** (☎ 218322; 32 Lg Dua; s/d RM60/70; a ) If the May Fair is full, chances are they'll direct you to this slightly smarter choice around the corner. It's not always the friendliest place, but standards are just right for the price and there's a very popular *kedai kopi* underneath.

**Hotel Nak** (☎ 272988; [www.nakhotel.com](http://www.nakhotel.com); Jln Pelabuhan; r RM60-80, ste RM100; a ) Seen from the outside, it's hard to believe this was once Sandakan's best hotel – quite frankly, it looks completely nak-ered. Inside, though, rooms are reasonable if not exactly impressive, and you get some sea views, along with the randomly patterned bed linen.

**Hotel Ramai** (☎ 273222; Jln Leila; r RM65-140; a ) If you're planning on catching a boat to the Philippines, the Ramai is the nearest decent option to the wharf, out west of the post office. It's a modern place with good-sized rooms.

## Top End

**Hotel Sandakan** (☎ 221122; [www.hotelsandakan.com.my](http://www.hotelsandakan.com.my); Lebuhr Empat; r RM220-240, ste RM280-330; a i ) Recently elevated to three-star status, the Sandakan offers good Western-style rooms and a range of facilities, including Chinese and Japanese restaurants and a lounge bar. Back in Agnes Keith's time, staying here would have cost you just \$8...

**Sabah Hotel** (☎ 213299; [www.sabahhotel.com.my](http://www.sabahhotel.com.my); Km 1, Jln Utara; r from RM290; a s ) The only international-standard hotel in town, and a favourite with Sepilok tour groups and Malaysia Airlines pilots, this is a comfortable, luxurious place set in quiet gardens with a swimming pool, spa, sporting facilities, playground, lounge and two restaurants. The Amadeus pub has games and regular live bands.

## EATING

Sandakan has dozens of cheap Malay and Chinese *kedai kopi* serving the usual rice or noodle dishes. Note that relatively few places here stay open past late afternoon; for a proper evening out, it's better to head for the lively Mile 4 area (see p466).

For no-frills food, try the waterfront market next to the local bus station. A couple of ringgit will get you a decent meal, but hygiene isn't always great. There's more market food at the night market that sets up outside the post office each evening.

There are a number of basic seafood restaurants in the stilt villages to the west of the centre, often recommended by locals; ask around for the latest hot tips, or simply take a minivan out to the giant prawn statue and explore from there. Dishes are sold by weight, and you can expect a good fishy feed to set you back around RM30 or so.

**Restoran Zakaria III** (☎ 214786; Jln Tiga; dishes RM1-6; ₪ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Right opposite Wisma Sandakan, this open-sided Muslim eatery does a good line in Indian food, including *murtabak*, biryani, fresh juices and 11 different types of roti. The restaurant even has menus in English for the Malay language-challenged.

**Apple Food & Drink Corner** (☎ 212981; 23 Lg Dua; dishes RM1-12; ₪ breakfast & lunch) A pristine air-conditioned Chinese café-bistro offering all kinds of rarefied entries in the rice/noodle spectrum, from pineapple and apple-fried to Indonesian and Thai recipes, plus a few Western and 'miscellaneous' options.

**Fat Cat V** (☎ 216867; 21 Lebuhr Tiga; dishes RM3-10; ₪ breakfast & lunch) Forget I-IV, for once the sequel is just as good as the originals. The portly pussy proclaims itself a 'Restaurant for Everyone', and the broad menu of Malay, Chinese and fast food, plus juices, shakes and floats, helps justify its popularity. The cake shop next door is equally good.

**Hawaii Restaurant** (☎ 273107; City View Hotel, 23 Lebuhr Tiga; dishes RM4.50-25; ₪ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Book a table, Danno – it's about as Hawaiian as a pizza, but this unpretentious restaurant in the City View Hotel serves up a mean mixed bag of good-value Western dishes, set menus (including breakfasts) and cheap local grub.

**Ocean King Seafood Restaurant** (☎ 618111; Batu 2.5, Jln Batu Sapi; dishes RM10-25; ₪ breakfast,

## THE SANDAKAN DEATH MARCHES

Sandakan was the site of a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp during WWII, and in September 1944 there were 1800 Australian and 600 British troops interned here. What is probably not widely known is that more Australians died here than during the building of the infamous Burma Railway, accounting for nearly one eighth of all Australia's Pacific casualties.

Early in the war, food and conditions were bearable and the death rate stood at around three per month. However, as the Allies closed in, it became clear to the officers in command that they didn't have enough staff to guard against a rebellion in the camps. They decided to cut the prisoners' rations to weaken them; disease spread and the death rate began to rise.

It was also decided to move the prisoners inland – 250km through the jungle to Ranau, on a route originally cut by locals to hamper the Japanese invaders, passing mainly through uninhabited, inhospitable terrain. On 28 January 1945, 470 prisoners set off; 313 made it to Ranau. On the second march, 570 started from Sandakan; just 118 reached Ranau. The 537 prisoners on the third march were the last men in the camp.

Conditions on the marches were deplorable: many men had no boots, rations were less than minimal and many men fell by the wayside. In typically brutal fashion, the Japanese disposed of any prisoners who couldn't walk. Once in Ranau, the surviving prisoners were put to work carrying 20kg sacks of rice over hilly country to Paginatan, 40km away. Disease, starvation and executions took a horrendous toll, and by the end of July 1945 there were no prisoners left in Ranau. The only survivors from the 2400 at Sandakan were six Australians who escaped, either from Ranau or during the marches.

As a final bitter irony, it emerged after the war that a rescue attempt had been planned for early 1945, but intelligence at the time had suggested that there were no prisoners left at the Sandakan camp. If the proposed action had only been taken, who knows how many more might have survived.



lunch & dinner) A little more sophisticated than its water-village cousins, you'll find this big stilted restaurant jutting out from the shore about 5km west from the city centre. Seafood dishes are charged by weight.

**English Tea House & Restaurant** (☎ 222544; www.englishteahouse.org; 2002 Jln Istana; mains RM17-33; 🍽 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Soak up the recherché colonial atmosphere and elegant food at this exquisite restored restaurant in the grounds of the historic Agnes Keith House. The manicured gardens are a particular joy, with rattan furniture and a small croquet lawn overlooking the bay, perfect for afternoon tea (RM17.25) or a sunset Pimms.

Self-caterers can buy supplies at these places:

**Gentingmas Mall** (☎ 210010; 26 Jln Pryer)

**Milimewa Superstore** (☎ 235021; Centre Point, Jln Pelabuhan)

## DRINKING & ENTERTAINMENT

If you're wondering where everyone goes when Sandakan shuts down in the evening, just hop in a taxi to Bandar Indah, commonly known as Mile 4. This buzzing grid of two-storey shops is the playground of choice for locals and expats alike, packed with restaurants, bars, karaoke lounges and nightclubs. It comes alive at night in a way that makes central Sandakan seem deader than the morgue in a ghost town.

Bars generally close around 1am or 2am, music venues slightly later. Popular venues include the following:

**After 5** (☎ 227699; Lot 8, Block 14) Live music and karaoke.

**Public Utilise Bistro (PUB)**; ☎ 238782; Lot 6-7, Block 8) Food and drinks.

**Subway Café** (☎ 225741; Lot 1, Block 8) Drinks and food.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

**Malaysia Airlines** (☎ 273966; Wisma Sabah, Jln Haji Saman) currently has regular flights to KK and KL.

**Air Asia** (☎ 222737; Lebuah Dua) has two daily direct flights to KL and three weekly to Johor Bahru, with promotional fares starting at RM170. FAX runs rural air services to KK, Kudat, Tawau and Tomanggong, near the Tabin Wildlife Reserve.

## Boat

Several companies run passenger ferries between Sandakan and Zamboanga (18 hours), in the Philippines; it's a popular route with immigrant Filipinos returning to visit their families. **Velvet Success** (☎ 212872) runs weekly fast ferries (economy/1st class RM250/265) via Bongao and Jolo, while **Ti-marine** (☎ 224009) has evening boats (tickets RM250 to RM360) twice a week. Tickets can be bought from the Karamunting jetty, about 4km west of town, where you also clear immigration when boarding. To get to the jetty, take a Pasir Putih bus (RM1).

## Bus

The long-distance bus station is inconveniently located in a large parking lot at Batu 2½, 4km north of town. Air-con express buses to KK, Semporna and Tawau wait here. Most buses, and all minivans, leave in the morning. To get to the bus station, catch a local bus (70 sen) from the stand at the waterfront. A taxi from the station to town is RM5.

Bus companies have booths at the station, with eager touts trying to drag potential customers to the 'right' bus. Don't bother coming all the way out here just to check timetables – the tourist office and hotels can generally fill you in.

Most express buses to KK (RM34, six hours) leave between 6.30am and 2pm, with a couple of evening services. All pass the turn-off to Kinabalu National Park headquarters (RM25).

Buses depart regularly for Lahad Datu (RM20, 2½ hours) and Tawau (RM30, 5½ hours). There's also a bus to Semporna (RM30, 5½ hours) at 8am. If you miss it, head to Lahad Datu, from where there are frequent minivans to Semporna.

Minibuses to Ranau cost RM24 and the journey takes about four hours. Minivans depart frequently throughout the morning from the bus station for Lahad Datu, some going on to Tawau. There are also minibuses for Sukau (RM15) that leave from the local bus station in town.

## GETTING AROUND

### To/From the Airport

The airport is about 11km from the town centre. The Batu 7 Airport bus (RM1.50) runs from Centre Point to the airport, stopping

on the main road about 500m from the terminal. A coupon taxi from the airport to the town centre costs RM17.50; going the other way, a cab should cost around RM15.

## Taxi

Taxis swarm all over the town centre, particularly near the markets and main hotels. Short journeys around the town centre should cost RM5, and a trip out to Sepilok is RM30.

## Sepilok Orang-Utan Rehabilitation Centre

☎ 089

One of only four orang-utan sanctuaries in the world, the Sepilok Orang-Utan Rehabilitation Centre (SORC) occupies a corner of the Kabili-Sepilok rainforest reserve about 25km north of Sandakan. The centre was established in 1964; it now covers 40 sq km and has become one of Sabah's top tourist attractions, second only to Mt Kinabalu.

The centre has arguably suffered from its own success, and at busy times more than 700 visitors per day can flood the centre, with camera-clicking tourists far outnumbering the poor primates. More seriously, constant contact with humans has exposed the orang-utans to diseases, which can make rehabilitation to the wild all but impossible. Expansion plans should solve some of the overcrowding problems.

Orang-utans are the only species of great ape found outside Africa. A mature male is an impressive, not to mention hairy, creature with an armspan of 2.25m, and can weigh up to 144kg. Dominant males also have distinctive wide cheek pads to reinforce their alpha status. It was once said that an orang-utan could swing from tree to tree from one side of Borneo to the other without touching the ground. Sadly this is no longer the case, and hunting and habitat destruction continue to take their toll; it's estimated fewer than 15,000 specimens now exist in the wild.

Orphaned and injured orang-utans are brought to Sepilok to be rehabilitated to return to forest life, and so far the centre has handled about 100, although only about 20 still return regularly. It's unlikely you'll see this many at feeding time – three or four is more likely, perhaps a dozen on a good day, or maybe none at all. Females that have

returned to the wild often come back to the feeding platforms when they're pregnant and stay near the centre until they've given birth.

The orang-utans are fed fruit twice daily from a platform in the forest, about 10 minutes' walk from the centre. This feeding is just to supplement what they can find for themselves in the jungle – if trees are fruiting, few apes will turn up.

Young orang-utans in particular are endlessly appealing, with ginger fur and intelligent eyes. Macaques may also join the feeding frenzy, and you can see other wildlife such as flying squirrels around the centre. It's quite dim under the forest canopy, so if you're taking photographs, you'll need ASA 400 film.

### INFORMATION

The feeding schedule is usually at 10am and 3pm but it can change, and the morning and afternoon programmes are posted at the visitor reception centre (☎ 531180; soutan@pojaring.my; admission RM30, camera fee RM10; 🕒 9am-noon & 2-4pm), where there's a souvenir shop and a cafeteria. Tickets are valid for two feedings, so if you arrive in the afternoon you can stick around until the next morning without having to pay twice.

The Nature Education Centre, opposite the reception, has some interesting displays on the orang-utans themselves and the other wildlife in the reserve, concentrating particularly on the conservation issues threatening Borneo's jungle habitats. A 25-minute video about the centre's work is shown five times daily in the auditorium next door. The whole centre closes for lunch from noon (11am on Fridays), though ticket holders can still use the walking trails.

Be sure to use the lockers provided for your valuables – orang-utans and macaques have been known to relieve tourists of hats, bags, sunglasses, cameras and even clothing. It's especially important that you don't bring any containers of insect repellent into the reserve, as these are highly toxic to the apes and other wildlife. Spray yourself before entering.

The SORC is supported by a UK-based charity, and it's come up with some imaginative ways of fundraising to help finance essential projects. The orang-utan adoption scheme is a particular hit with visitors: for UK£25 a year you can sponsor a ginger bundle of fun and receive regular updates

on its progress. For details, pick up a leaflet or contact **Sepilok Orangutan Appeal UK** ([www.orangutan-appeal.org.uk](http://www.orangutan-appeal.org.uk)). The centre is also involved in rhino conservation; see [www.sosrhino.org](http://www.sosrhino.org).

More directly, donations of nappies, towels, bottles and even soft toys for the baby 'tans are always appreciated. If you're really taken with the whole set-up and want to get personally involved, Sepilok has one of the most popular overseas volunteer programmes in Malaysia (see p498).

About 1km up the road, you can also visit the **Rainforest Interpretation Centre (RIC)**, ☎ 531522; admission free; ⌚ 8.30am-4pm Mon-Sat), part of the forest research facility run by the Forestry Department and the WWF. The centre has informative displays on the tropical ecosystem and its own 1km lakeside walking trail. Donations are appreciated.

#### WALKS

If you want to explore further, several **walking trails** (⌚ 9am-4.15pm) lead into the forest; register at the visitor reception centre to use them. Trails range in length from 250m to 4km, and different paths are open at different times of year. Guided night walks can be arranged through the centre or at the various lodges.

There's also a 10km trail through a mangrove forest to **Sepilok Bay**, where you can stay overnight or get a boat back to Sandakan. A permit from the Forestry Department (☎ 213966; Jln Labuk, Sandakan) is required for this route, and should be obtained in advance, either direct, from SORC or through a travel agency.

Note that you wander through the forest at your own risk. Although orang-utans are not usually aggressive, on no account should you provoke or pester any wild animal. If you are carrying any food, the macaques will scent it and try to relieve you of it – don't argue with them because they'll probably win.

Make sure you wear hiking boots and take plenty of water; you can expect to find leeches and plenty of mosquitoes.

#### SLEEPING & EATING

Sepilok has some very good accommodation, scattered along Jln Sepilok (the 2.5km-long access road to the rehabilitation centre) and off the main highway. Rates include breakfast, and all these places can arrange

transport, local walks and tours to Sungai Kinabatangan and the Turtle Islands.

**Labuk B&B** (☎ 533190; [labukbb@tm.net.my](mailto:labukbb@tm.net.my); Mile 15, Jln Labuk; r per person RM20-30) A couple of kilometres from Sepilok, several sappy dogs guard a slightly shabby Malay-style house, which plays host to visiting wildlife researchers and other passing travellers. Buses to Batu 15 and higher can drop you at the sign.

**Sepilok Jungle Resort** (☎ 533031; [www.sepilokjungleresort.com](http://www.sepilokjungleresort.com); dm RM18, r RM40-120; a i ) Set in pleasant sprawling gardens with boating lakes, walkways, sculpted concrete buildings and ornaments, this popular place is about 100m east off Jln Sepilok just before the centre. There's plenty of room, and accommodation ranges from poky four-bed bunk dorms to smart 'executive' rooms in the new wing. Most overnight visitors end up here, and the verandah café can be a bit of a social hub.

**Sepilok B&B** (☎ 534050; [www.sepilokbednbreakfast.com](http://www.sepilokbednbreakfast.com); Jln Arboretum; dm RM20, r RM55; a i ) The location's less convenient, but the newly renovated budget rooms here, dolled up with spotless bamboo walls and colourful art, are infinitely more attractive than their counterparts at the Jungle Resort. Even the dorm has its own attached bathroom! The B&B is opposite the forest research centre, about 250m off Jln Sepilok and 1km short of the SORC entrance.

**Sepilok Resthouse** (☎ 534900; [sephse@tm.net.my](mailto:sephse@tm.net.my); dm RM20, r RM50-80; a ) Catering primarily for volunteers, this cute little house is ideally situated right outside the centre, but it's often full and staff don't always make as much effort for walk-in visitors. Still, if you can get a bed it's a nice place to hang out.

**Sepilok Nature Resort** (☎ 765200; <http://sepilok.com>; r RM200; a i ) If you simply must have your dose of luxury, Pulau Sipadan Tours' only land-based property is an impressive collection of fancy individual chalets scattered around beautiful forest gardens. It's mainly used by tour groups.

**Rehabilitation centre cafeteria** (meals from RM4; ⌚ 7am-4pm) Serves breakfast, sandwiches, noodle and rice dishes, snacks and drinks. At busy times it may run out of almost everything.

**Mah Fung Enterprise**, a small store opposite the Sepilok B&B turn-off, sells basic provisions.

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

To get directly to the rehabilitation centre from Sandakan, look for the blue bus marked 'Sepilok Batu 14' from the local bus stand next to the market on the waterfront (RM3.50, 30 minutes). Minivans also make the trip every hour or so. Returning, the last bus leaves for Sandakan at 4.30pm.

Regular buses, also marked 'Batu 14' or higher, can drop you at the turn-off to Jln Sepilok, 2.5km from the orang-utan centre.

Most of the B&Bs and guesthouses can organise transport to/from the bus station and the airport. A taxi should cost around RM30 one way.

#### Labuk Bay Proboscis Monkey Sanctuary

If you haven't had enough monkeys after Sepilok, this private sanctuary (☎ 672133; [www.proboscis.cc](http://www.proboscis.cc); admission RM60, camera fee RM10), run by an unusually ecofriendly plantation owner, offers reliable viewings of another unique primate, the proboscis monkey. Pot-bellied, big-nosed and a little ungainly, these engaging animals are known in Malay as *orang belanda* (Dutchmen) – hardly a compliment to the first natives of the Netherlands who stepped onto Borneo's shores!

Feeding times here are at 11.30am and 4.30pm. Around 70 monkeys visit the feeding area regularly, enticed by specially formulated sugar-free pancakes, so you have an excellent chance of seeing a good number of animals, as well as the inevitable scrounging macaques. The regular feeders are divided into two family groups and one bachelor troop, each with their own dominant male. Another 300-odd totally wild monkeys live in the 600-hectare reserve, but generally steer clear of human contact. As well as the proboscis, two dinky collared Scops owls roost right by the exit from the visitor centre.

Food and accommodation are provided at the Nipah Lodge, on the edge of the oil-palm plantations that surround the sanctuary. Organised through the centre, a day visit costs RM160, including transfers from Sandakan; overnight trips, with meals and night walk, start at RM250. You can also arrange to be dropped at Sepilok on your way back. Getting here independently is tricky as it's 15km off the main highway down a rough dirt track. A taxi from Sandakan will charge around RM150 return.

#### Turtle Islands National Park

Known as Pulau Penyu in Malay, this park 40km north of Sandakan is comprised of three small islands, Pulau Selingan, Pulau Bakungan Kecil and Pulau Gulisan, within swimming distance of nearby islands belonging to the Philippines.

Though numbers have fallen off, two species of marine turtles – the green and hawksbill – come ashore here to lay their eggs at certain times of the year, giving the islands their name. Since the laying seasons for each species are virtually complementary, it's possible to see one or the other at almost any time of year.

Sea turtles are harmless vegetarians that spend most of their lives at sea. They are strong, graceful swimmers that grow to a great age and size. The green turtle commonly lays on Pulau Selingan and Pulau Bakungan Kecil between July and October, while the smaller hawksbill turtle lays its eggs on Pulau Gulisan from February to April. The eggs are collected by permanent staff based on Pulau Selingan and transferred to fenced hatcheries, where they are safe from illegal collection by fishermen who eat or sell them.

The only way to visit the Turtle Islands is on an organised overnight tour. While the income from visitors is undoubtedly important to help finance the conservation programme, it's easy to feel that this has turned the whole thing into a bit of a circus – on any one night you can have 30-odd gaping tourists clustered round a single laying turtle, and allowing visitors to handle baby turtles before releasing them seems highly dubious practice. Photography is allowed without flash, but there's always someone who can't work out how to adjust their camera correctly, and three accidental discharges will generally result in the ranger banning pictures altogether. Hardcore conservationists and nature lovers may find the whole experience as frustrating as it is rewarding.

For more information on sea turtles (and how you can make sure you do them no harm), see p64.

Tours are arranged through a travel agency or directly with **Crystal Quest** (☎ 089-212711; [cquest@tm.net.my](mailto:cquest@tm.net.my); Jln Buli Sim Sim, Sandakan), and include meals, air-con chalet accommodation on Pulau Selingan and speedboat

transfers. Package prices start from RM220 per person (shared bathroom), going up to RM380 for full board with guide. Facilities are limited and tour companies often make block reservations, so it's worth booking ahead to make sure you don't get stuck with the most expensive option.

Most boats leave at 9.30am, so you'll have the whole day to hang around the tiny island before the evening turtle viewing. Swimming and snorkelling help pass the time, and there's a small information centre (7 6.30-9pm) above the cafeteria, but you might want to bring a book!

A RM10 conservation fee is charged on top of the package price, plus a further RM10 camera fee.

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Transport to the islands is from the wharf on Jln Buli Sim Sim, east of Sandakan's centre. The bumpy high-speed trip to the islands takes about one hour, depending on the weather.

#### Gomantong Caves

Mmm, tasty: these limestone caves are Sabah's most famous source of the swiftlet nests used for birds-nest soup and other coveted products (see the boxed text opposite). The caves are 5km south off the road to Sukau, 20km from the main highway. They're difficult, but not impossible, for independent travellers to reach without their own transport.

The area around the caves is covered in forest and dense vegetation, concealing plenty of wildlife and some good walks. The most accessible of the caves is a 10-minute walk along the trail near the information centre (% 089-230189; www.sabah.gov.my/jhi; adult/child RM30/15; 7 8am-noon & 2-4.30pm). Head past the living quarters of the nest collectors to get to the main cave, Simud Hitam (Black Cave). You can venture in, though it involves wading through ankle-deep guano alive with cockroaches and other insects, as seen on BBC TV's *Planet Earth* series – just imagine David Attenborough's earnest tones washing over you as you gaze on the mountainous piles of bird and bat shit. In the nesting season, you can watch the nests being collected from the cave roof by men skinning up long, precarious-looking bamboo poles.

The left-hand trail from the office leads to the top of the mountain. After a few metres the trail forks again. To the right, a 15-minute walk brings you to a top entrance to the cave, while the left-hand trail continues for 30 minutes and leads high up the mountain to Simud Putih (White Cave). This cave contains the more valuable white nests. Both trails are steep and involve some sweaty rock climbing.

The easiest way to see the caves is to take a tour from Sandakan; most operators include a visit as part of the standard package to Sungai Kinabatangan.

From Sandakan, minivans go directly to Sukau (RM15) – ask to be dropped at the turn-off for the caves. You can also take a minivan for Lahad Datu, get out at the Sukau junction and take another van to the cave turn-off (each leg costs RM10). Either way, you'll have to walk 5km from the turn-off to the ticket office, unless there's a vehicle going down at the same time. Bring your passport because the guard at the gatepost at the start of the road may ask to see it.

Gomantong is quite difficult to reach; if you're spending some time in Borneo it's worth remembering that the great caves of Gunung Mulu and Niah national parks in Sarawak are more spectacular and easier to visit. Even the Madai Caves (p476) near Lahad Datu are more accessible.

#### Sungai Kinabatangan

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Proclaimed somewhat grandly as Malaysia's 'Gift to Earth', the mighty, muddy Sungai Kinabatangan is Sabah's longest river, measuring 560km from its headwaters in the southwest to the point where it empties into the Sulu Sea. Logging and clearing for plantations have devastated the upper reaches of the river, but by a strange irony the riverine forest near the coast is so hemmed in by oil-palm plantations that an astonishing variety of wildlife is crammed into its limited boundaries.

The number one reason to come here is the wildlife, and the Kinabatangan is almost invariably a highlight of any nature-nutter's trip to Sabah. Mammals can be seen at any time of year. Most bird activity happens in the wet season (October to March), but conditions can be uncomfortable, to say

#### NEST BEST THING *Tom Parkinson*

How do you get a guidebook author to eat birds-nest soup? Um, bet him three beers, apparently. I was distinctly dubious about what I'd got myself into at first, imagining twiggy concoctions so grotesque that it was actually a relief to find out that the nests are in fact only made from the solidified saliva of the swiftlet, with the feathers and assorted debris removed. After seeing the caves, birds and collectors, though, I was even looking forward to the bravado of completing my culinary challenge. So it came as a bit of a blow when I realised that virtually no restaurant in the whole of Borneo serves birds-nest soup. (Illegal harvesting is a significant problem; see Madai Caves, p476, for more details.)

Luckily you don't have to go far to find alternatives: the many Chinese speciality shops in Sabah and Sarawak sell a bewildering range of goodies made from this sought-after spit. I briefly contemplated trying to make my own soup from the dried product (apparently all you need is water, rock sugar and a slow cooker, plus maybe a few red dates and chillis), but at RM160 for a 100g pack of Weetabix-like nests this seemed a little extravagant just to win a wager. In the end I plumped for some soft sweets, diplomatically flavoured with honey and ginseng, and a small bottle of rock-sugar nest solution, the next best thing to the dreaded soup. And then, dear reader, I ate them.

So, what can I say about the experience? Well, if you're expecting something Fear-Factor gross you may be disappointed – the flavour's more aromatic than anything, with a slightly sickly sweetness from the sugar and a slimy texture from the saturated nest, and certainly much more palatable than durian. In the end, OK, I may be a sucker for a free drink, but at least I've proved that I'm not afraid to try new things. Now, where did I put those sago grubs...

the least. In recent years, the annual floods have become progressively worse, with heavy rain lasting well into March; in 2006 entire villages had to be evacuated and the majority of tourist lodges and camps were unable to operate until the water levels went down. Conversely, during the dry season the river's oxbow lakes may not have any water in them at all.

A narrow corridor of rainforest clings to the northern riverbank from the Sandakan-Lahad Datu road downstream to the mangrove-fringed estuary. Sightings of proboscis monkeys are common among the mangroves in the late afternoon, long-tailed and pig-tailed macaques are everywhere, and wild orang-utans are also often seen, particularly nesting in the trees downstream.

There's a chance of seeing marbled cats in the forest, and flat-headed cats are seen regularly at night along the Menunggal (a tributary of the Kinabatangan); other mammals include deer, giant squirrels and some very shy elephants.

Bird lovers will find the bird-watching incredible: all eight of Borneo's hornbill species are seen regularly, two species of the gorgeous pittas are reasonably common, and if you're lucky you may also come

across Storm's stork and the bizarre Oriental darter or snake-bird.

The success rate of animal-spotting largely depends on luck and the local knowledge of your guide – don't be afraid to ask hard questions about the specifics of your trip before you sign up. Elephants and other larger animals come and go, as herds often break up to get through the palm plantations.

#### SLEEPING & EATING

Independent travel to the Kinabatangan is tricky, and good guides are a must off the beaten track, but if wildlife is your passion, you simply have to make room in your budget to visit this incredible place. Any tour operator in KK or Sandakan can organise a trip, or arrange your visit direct with your chosen accommodation.

#### Jungle Camps

Uncle Tan's Wildlife Camp (% 531639; www.uncletan.com) It's not hard to spot someone who's been to Uncle Tan's – most visitors just can't stop raving about the place. Faithfully run by the family of the late Mr Tan, the standard package costs RM280 for a two-night, three-day stay in the forest, which includes meals, boat safaris, jungle treks and transport. The

## CONSERVING THE KINABATANGAN

Older than the Amazon and just as alluring, the lower Sungai Kinabatangan floodplain is home to an astonishing variety and richness of plants and wildlife. Like many wetland environments, however, its survival is tenuous. Sabah's economic reliance on plantations and logging puts huge pressure on the 100-million-year-old forest, and an estimated 20% of its area has been cleared since 2001, mainly by illegal loggers. Larger animals, like the Asian elephant and Sumatran rhino, as well as proboscis monkeys and orang-utans, are being squeezed out of their habitat for the sake of palm oil, the river is slowly choking on silt from upriver logging, and run-off from deforested areas upstream means flooding gets worse every year. Fortunately, in the last few years some action has been taken to try and save this precious environmental resource from further destruction.

In 1999 some 26,000 hectares in the lower Kinabatangan were declared a protected area, and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) announced its 10-year Partners for Wetlands project. In 2002 the organisation succeeded in upgrading the lower Kinabatangan to bird sanctuary status, and in 2005 the area was finally gazetted as a full wildlife sanctuary.

Now in its third phase, the project still has plenty to do here: current priorities include habitat conservation and the restoration of the 'Corridor of Life' linking upper and lower river zones, an essential factor in sustaining wildlife populations and avoiding human-animal conflict.

Despite some successes, the WWF has been criticised for its strategy of forming links with big business. Also, some feel that the WWF brief is quite limited and gives upriver communities little regard, expecting them simply to fit in to the new tourism economy generated by conservation and upmarket lodges. The organisation is trying to involve the local community more, however, and recently opened a modest site office in Sukau. It has also been active in supporting local homestay initiatives.

The sad reality, however, is that unless the upriver logging stops, the Kinabatangan has a short future, regardless of what happens in the floodplain downstream. Nonetheless, in Sabah money does all the talking, and the WWF 'partnership' with big business recognises that the loggers and palm-oil barons are not going away any time soon. Whatever its limitations, the wetlands project is a start, and gives the Kinabatangan a crucial chance for survival.

You can contact **Partners for Wetlands** (☎ 088-248490; mslee@wwf.org.my) in KK, visit the organisation's website at www.wwfmalaysia.org/pfw, or write to WWF Malaysia, Partners for Wetlands Project, PO Box 14393, 88850 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah.

accommodation here is very basic, and you'll want plenty of mosquito repellent. The camp is particularly susceptible to flooding (some guests have been *swimming* with elephants!) but stays open as long as possible in the rains. Book early for peak periods.

**Kinabatangan Jungle Camp** (☎ 220299; singmata@streamyx.com) Run by the owners of the Labuk B&B at Sepilok, this is more of a lodge-like facility on the edge of the Lower Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary. Packages cost around RM350 for an overnight trip.

### Lodges

Sukau is the main village on the lower Kinabatangan, 42km off the main highway between Lahad Datu and Sandakan. Lodges operated by tour companies near Sukau offer wildlife experiences and more, in luxurious comfort. There's not much difference between them – all have comfortable, mosquito-proof rooms

with fan and bathroom, fully catered meals and bar, and trained guides.

On a twin-share basis, expect to pay RM250 upwards per person per night at a lodge, including transfers and activities. Many tours include Gomantong Caves as part of the package, but you can opt out of this if you wish. See Tours under Sandakan (p464) and KK (p427) for company listings.

Reliable lodges include the following:  
**Borneo Proboscis River Lodge** (☎ 019-850 9221; lyndatang@pd.jaring.my; r RM100-250; a ) Packages also available.

**Sukau Rainforest Lodge** (☎ 088-438300; www.sukau.com) Run by Borneo Eco Tours.

**Trekkers Lodge Kinabatangan** (☎ 088-252263; www.trekkerslodge.com) Dorm packages from RM240.

### Other Accommodation

If you have time and want to do things a little more independently, you can stay in

Sukau itself and hire a local guide for day trips on the river and its tributaries. A three-hour cruise costs around RM70 to RM100.

**Sukau B&B** (☎ 230269; camping RM5, r per person RM20) On the river about 1km east of the village, this friendly family guesthouse provides meals, boat hire and transfers on request. Thanks to a good location and stilted construction, it's also one of the last places to flood when the river gets high!

**Sukau Tomanggong Riverview Lodge** (☎ 235525; nbsafari@streamyx.com; r with breakfast RM50-60) Another pleasant place by the river, just down the road from the B&B, with small cabins and attached baths. Local-style meals (and beer) are served in the terrace restaurant.

**Miso Walai Homestay** (☎ 660016; www.misowalaihometstay.com; r RM56-65) This excellent community ecotourism initiative is a superb alternative to the big lodges, and great value to boot – rates include all meals and village transfers. As well as putting you up in comfortable family accommodation, the homestay programme offers two-hour river trips (per person RM20), cultural performances (per person RM48) and other excursions, and can also organise experienced local wildlife guides (per group RM45). There are even ongoing volunteer opportunities on the community's wetland restoration project. Definitely one worth supporting.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Minivans go to Sukau from Sandakan (RM15, two hours), or you can take a minivan to Lahad Datu and get out at the Sukau turn-off. Expect to wait a while for a minivan from here to Sukau (RM10, one to 1½ hours). If you're on a tour, transport will be provided. Note that during the wet season the Sukau road becomes very muddy and public transport is often suspended; 4WD transport can be arranged in Sandakan or with your accommodation for around RM200 per vehicle.

If you're heading south from Sukau, ask to be dropped at the highway, where you can catch a minivan to Lahad Datu or possibly a bus to Semporna – it'll save you repeating the long drive from Sandakan.

### Lahad Datu

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Like Sandakan, Lahad Datu is a busy town set on a lovely bay, with a hill at its back and a slightly scrappy water village on its out-

skirts. This area of eastern Sabah is known for its pirates, who eschew Johnny Depp romanticism in favour of speedboats and machine guns. According to local gossip, one crew even walked right into town some years ago, shot up the buildings and robbed a bank! Raids on ships and coastal villages are not uncommon, so it's probably not the best idea to hire a boat here.

There's no real reason to stop in Lahad Datu, except to arrange onward transport or visits to the Danum Valley, Maliau Basin and Tabin Wildlife Reserve. **Borneo Nature Tours** (☎ 880207; www.br1.com.my; Block 3, Lot 20, Fajar Centre) and the **Danum Valley Field Centre** (☎ 881092; Block 3, Fajar Centre) have offices next to each other in the upper part of town.

If you plan to visit the Tabin Wildlife Reserve independently (see p476), it's best to contact the **Wildlife Department office** (Pejabat Hidupan Liar; ☎ 884416), just in case a permit is necessary. It's four blocks south of the Danum Valley Field Centre office.

Don't be surprised if cars frequently slow down and honk as you walk by. These are private taxis that shuttle people between the upper and lower parts of town (where the bus station is) for RM3.

### SLEEPING & EATING

Lahad Datu has plenty of hotels and restaurants in both the upper and lower parts of town.

**Royal Palms Hotel** (☎ 888170; Jln Tengah Nipah; r RM50-80; a ) Recent renovation makes the Palms a good deal, with all-new fittings and decent deluxe rooms (standard rooms come without windows). It's round the corner from the bus station, facing the sea and the big blue mosque.

**Executive Hotel** (☎ 881333; 239-240 Jln Teratai; r with breakfast RM115-197; a ) On the western edge of the lower town, this is a slightly smarter option. Weekend rates are roughly a third cheaper.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

FAX (☎ 03-8775 4000) currently operates five daily flights to KK.

Express buses, minibuses and minivans leave from a vacant lot near the waterfront in the lower part of town. There are frequent departures for Sandakan (RM18, 2½ hours), Sukau (RM12, two hours), Semporna (RM15, two hours) and Tawau (RM15,

2½ hours). All transport to Semporna and Tawau pass the Kunak turn-off for Madai Caves; the fare is RM8. There are plenty of services to all these places until around 3pm, and share-taxis are also available.

### Danum Valley Conservation Area

As in the Kinabatangan, business and conservation sit side by side in the Danum Valley, 81km west of Lahad Datu – it's part of a vast logging concession owned by the Sabah Foundation, which set aside the conservation area (day/overnight admission RM20/30) to preserve 438 sq km of pristine wilderness on Sungai Segama. Extensive research into rainforest ecology is carried out here, and the area has been well patronised by foreign politicians and Hollywood starlets.

In 2000, a massive new pulp-wood plantation project planned for the Kalabakan area southwest of Danum caused outrage among conservation groups. Environmental impact surveys discovered that the area has the highest concentration of orangutans in the world, not to mention large populations of other species such as gibbons, hornbills and sun-bears. As a result, in 2006 the government announced a plan to phase out all logging in the area by the end of 2007, and is working with the WWF to develop a management plan.

Even while logging continues, the conservation area still manages to support an incredible diversity of wildlife. At present, natural riches include 200 tree species per hectare; 275 bird species (many endemic to Borneo); and 110 species of mammals, including great rarities such as the Sumatran rhino, Wallace's flying frog and the beautiful clouded leopard.

It's effectively impossible to visit Danum as an independent traveller, but if you have the time and the cash, the valley is undoubtedly one of the highlights of Sabah. Trips and permits here can also be arranged through **Innoprise** (☎ 088-243245; [outthere@streamyx.com](mailto:outthere@streamyx.com); Menara Tun Mustapha, Jln Sulaman, Kota Kinabalu), the Sabah Foundation's official tour operator in KK.

### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

#### Jungle Walks

A number of trails have been cleared around the Borneo Rainforest Lodge, although most require you to take a guide, arranged

by either the lodge or the field centre. If you have a particular interest, insist on a specialist – some travellers have complained that their guides weren't as knowledgeable as expected.

There's a short nature trail near the lodge, with signs pointing out interesting facts about the surrounding forest. Longer trails follow Sungai Segama and the ascent up to Mt Danum (1093m), but one of the best climbs is up a bluff near the lodge, where there's an old tribal burial site in a cliff face. On the return it's possible to swim at refreshing waterholes.

Guided night walks are organised most nights, with the chance of seeing snakes, frogs and mammals such as flying squirrels and bearded pigs.

Comfortable, durable footwear is a must. Leeches are so common when it's wet that the lodge sells 'Danum Valley Blood Donor' T-shirts; see the boxed text, p620, for arthropod insights.

#### Canopy Walk

One of the lodge attractions is a long walkway suspended 25m above the rainforest floor. It's an ideal spot to look for bird life and saves you craning your neck to gaze into the treetops.

#### Night Drives

This has to be one of the best ways to see some of the valley's nocturnal mammals, though driving in the forest hardly gets a gold star for ecofriendliness, and sensitive souls might empathise with that 'caught-in-the-headlights' feeling. Expect to see one or two species of giant flying squirrels, sambar deer, civets, porcupines and possibly even leopard cats; lucky sightings could include elephants, slow loris and clouded leopards.

Night drives leave the Rainforest Lodge most evenings; the best trips are the extended night drives, which depart at about 8.30pm and return at 1am or 2am. Things you'll be glad you brought include a light waterproof jacket, camera with flash, binoculars and powerful torch.

#### Bird-Watching

Although there is a high diversity of bird species, rainforest sightings can oscillate between spectacular and spare; you have to put in the hours to get the results. The best

vantage points are along the access road to the lodge – see if you can get a lift up to the entrance in the late afternoon, and then walk the 4km back. You'll use your ears way more than your eyes, but hornbills are relatively common and argus pheasants are often heard.

#### Field Studies Centre

The field centre was set up by the Sabah Foundation, the Royal Society and a number of private companies to provide facilities for research and education in the rainforest. Many of the sponsors are involved in logging, but this seems to be a sign of constructive investment rather than a conflict of interest, and one of the main areas of study is forest regeneration.

You can visit the centre for information and displays on the local ecology and the various projects in progress. Activities can also be arranged here – guides cost RM30 per day, and a night-time or sunrise drive costs RM110 per vehicle (up to eight people).

There is accommodation here, but it's supposedly strictly reserved for scientists and researchers, so unless you're a great liar or can get a permit from the Sabah Foundation you're unlikely to get a bed. Still, if you do it well in advance it may be worth asking at the office in Lahad Datu and checking with tour companies on the off chance.

#### SLEEPING & EATING

**Borneo Rainforest Lodge** (☎ 089-880207; [www.borneorainforestlodge.com](http://www.borneorainforestlodge.com); chalets s RM690-870, d RM900-1080) Relishing its forest monopoly, the valley's only tourist facility is a first-class resort with vast, comfortable rooms, good dining and a bar. The hefty rates include three meals a day and activities such as day and night walks, the canopy walk and a night drive, but astoundingly, NOT transfers from Lahad Datu. Extended night drives also cost extra. Book at Borneo Nature Tours in Lahad Datu: call ☎ 089-880207 or visit its website [www.brl.com.my](http://www.brl.com.my); alternatively book with one of the many tour companies in KK (see p427).

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

The Danum Valley is 81km by road from Lahad Datu. The Borneo Rainforest Lodge has a daily scheduled shuttle from Lahad Datu for guests (per person RM100 to

RM150), and can also do individual transfers (RM150 to RM300). You may also be able to arrange transport with the Field Studies Centre (per vehicle RM250 to RM300). If you have your own car, a vehicle permit costs RM5.

#### Maliau Basin

If going off the beaten track is your thing, Sabah's so-called 'Lost World' is the kind of place that will just make you drool. The 390-sq-km crater, 25km in diameter and 1675m at its highest point, is protected as part of the 588-sq-km **Maliau Basin Conservation Area** (in KK ☎ 088-326300; [www.ysnet.org.my/maliau](http://www.ysnet.org.my/maliau); Menara Tun Mustapha, Jln Sulaman; conservation fee RM50, day/overnight admission RM25/50), which backs onto the Danum Valley reserve.

Make no mistake, this is the real deal: a huge expanse of virgin montane, heath and dipterocarp forest, much of it virtually unexplored. The diverse habitats support 1800 different plants, including over 80 types of orchid, plus 270 species of bird, 82 species of mammal and 30 species of amphibian. At least two completely new species of invertebrate have also been discovered here. It is quite literally a naturalist's paradise.

There are no roads within the conservation area, so trekking is the only way to see anything at all. Visitor facilities include seven camps with basic accommodation, 70km of walking trails and a 30m canopy observation platform at the Camel Trophy Camp. **Maliau Falls** is the most popular attraction for short-term visitors, requiring around three days for the return trek.

As the area is starting to be promoted to tourists, independent travel here is becoming increasingly feasible, but it's by no means a cheap affair. Transport is the biggest expense, costing RM600 from Tawau or RM720 from KK (up to five people); camp-site accommodation costs RM30 per person, meals between RM20 and RM35, and porters between camps charge RM100 per day plus RM15 per kilo of baggage. You may also obtain a permit from the Sabah Foundation, which can be done through its official tour operator **Innoprise** ([outthere@streamyx.com](mailto:outthere@streamyx.com)) in **Kota Kinabalu** (☎ 088-243245; Menara Tun Mustapha, Jln Sulaman) or in **Tawau** (☎ 755300; Block O, Jln Sabindo 3) before coming here, and be able to show proof of insurance that includes helicopter evacuation.

If you'd rather do it all the easy way, inclusive tour packages start around RM1110 per person for a group of 13, rising to as much as RM3625 for single occupancy (RM2225 with your own vehicle). You can book through Innoprise (p475).

### Tabin Wildlife Reserve

The **Tabin Wildlife Reserve** (☎ 088-264071; www.tabinwildlife.com.my), 48km east of Lahad Datu, was created in 1984 to help preserve some of Sabah's disappearing wildlife. Straddled by palm-oil plantations, it covers 1205 sq km of mostly lowland dipterocarp forest, with some mangrove forests in the reserve's northern reaches. Tabin falls under the auspices of the Forestry & Wildlife Department, though visitor facilities are run by a private company. While not completely made up of primary forest, it's still a rich area for wildlife viewing; there's a good chance you'll see Asian elephants, grey-leaf monkeys and an abundance of bird life, and the endangered Sumatran rhino is present, though it's unlikely you'll ever see one. There's also a mud volcano similar to those found on Pulau Tiga.

Like many places in Sabah, Tabin is easiest to visit on a tour. **Intra Travel Service** (☎ 088-261558; www.intra-travel.com.my; Level 1, No 5 Airport Terminal 2, Jln Old Airport; Kota Kinabalu) in KK operates the visitor accommodation and runs a variety of tours to Tabin, starting around RM400 per person. Facilities include a café and a choice of air-con chalets or 'Eco Tented Platforms'.

If you have transport and plan on visiting Tabin on your own, it's best to contact the **Wildlife Department office** (Pejabat Hidupan Liar; ☎ 089-884416) in Lahad Datu. Permits may not be necessary, but it's best to check first.

### Madai Caves

Like the better-known Gomantong Caves to the north, these limestone caves 69km south of Lahad Datu are famed for their bird's nests. At the entrance to the cave system is a sprawling *kampung* (village) of empty wooden shanties, which serve as crash pads for the collectors when nesting season starts. So highly prized are these little cups of swiftlet saliva that countless locals risk life and limb by climbing to the roof of the caves on precarious bamboo poles to gather the nests. The most valuable

nests are the white ones, which can fetch more than RM2000 per kilogram.

There have been environmental concerns because harvesting the nests before the swiftlet young are mature has decimated the population of swiftlets in the region. There's been an attempt to manage the harvesting in Malaysia, as well as innovations like creating environments for 'farming' the nests, but illegal harvesting is still a significant problem.

Exploring Madai alone is not an option – the caves shelter ancestral tombs, and you must have permission from the local villagers to enter. An experienced local guide is also essential to go any distance inside, as this involves scrambling around in dark corners and clambering up guano-slick rocks. Guides man the roadblock into the village; fees are entirely negotiable, but RM30 seems a reasonable rate. It's worth bringing your own torch.

The caves are 3km off the Lahad Datu–Tawau Hwy, near the small town of Kunak. All buses between Lahad Datu and Semporna or Tawau pass the turn-off; you may be able to get a minivan to take you right to the caves. Private 'taxi's to/from Kunak cost RM3, though traffic is light and you could end up walking to the highway.

### Semporna

☎ 089

The nondescript bay town of Semporna isn't going to capture many hearts on its own, but luckily the sea lapping its shores and stilt villages offers some of the finest islands and reefs in Southeast Asia, recently declared a national marine park.

Semporna is usually only visited as a base for diving and snorkelling trips. The best dive seasons are between April and July/August – especially between April and June – and during November and December. Be warned: there are plenty of unqualified, unlicensed cowboy operators out there, so if you value your life more than your budget it's worth checking carefully before booking anything! There's a **Maybank** (☎ 784852) on Jln Jakarullah.

### DIVING

Most local operators have offices in the Semporna Ocean Tourism Centre (SOTC), which is a stilt complex over the water off

Jln Custom. For details of dive outfits based in KK, see p427.

**Borneo Jungle River Island Tours** (Uncle Chang; ☎ 781789; unclechang99@hotmail.com; SOTC) Offers diving and snorkelling and has a budget lodge on Mabul.

**North Borneo Dive & Sea Sports** (☎ 781788; www.northborneo.net; SOTC) This is another good operator with offices in both Tawau and Semporna.

**Pulau Sipadan Resort & Tours** (☎ 761899; www.sipadan-resort.com; Jln Custom) Top-end company with resorts on Kapalai and Lankayan. Its head office is in Tawau.

**Scuba Junkie** (☎ 785372; www.scuba-junkie.com; 36 Semporna Seaford) Very popular, professional operator with international staff, its own hostel (dorm beds for divers RM10) and a good sociable attitude. Dives at all sites.

Prices vary considerably for dive packages, depending on the choice of accommodation and whether you include transport to Semporna. Booking ahead with a tour agency isn't necessarily cheaper, though it will guarantee you a place.

If you just show up in Semporna, a two-/three-day package should cost around RM250/300 per person, including equipment; snorkellers pay around RM150 per trip, and a three-day PADI open-water course will be around RM700. Booking from KK or abroad can be three or more times these prices. In low season walk-in rates may become more negotiable, so it's worth shopping around.

The marine park conservation fee (RM40) is valid for one week, but if you change operator you may have to pay again.

### SLEEPING & EATING

**Dragon Inn** (☎ 781088; www.dragoninnfloating.com.my; 1 Jln Custom; dm RM15, r RM66-260, with breakfast; a ) Occupying the bulk of the SOTC stilt complex, this is one Dragon worth chasing: the deceptively simple all-wood huts are nicely constructed, and the round chalet-style VIP rooms are a minor treat.

**Lee's Resthouse & Café** (☎ 784491; suisan@streamyx.com; r RM40-60; a i ) If you want accommodation near the bus stand, this friendly, clean hotel is a good central option with high standards. The air-con restaurant is one of the better eateries in town.

**Seafest Hotel** (☎ 782333; www.seafesthotel.com; Jln Kastam; r RM97-185; a ) This has six storeys of business-class comfort on the waterfront over the causeway, next to the Seafest fishery. Rooms on the 'executive' top floor are marginally smarter.

**Pearl City Restaurant** (☎ 781099; Dragon Inn, 1 Jln Custom; dishes RM10-20; 1 breakfast, lunch & dinner) The Dragon's 'floating' restaurant offers Chinese, Malay, plenty of seafood and some Western dishes. Power cuts aren't uncommon, but it stays open late and makes a good spot for a beer while the world (and sometimes its garbage) floats by.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Coming into Semporna, buses and minivans drop passengers around the Shell petrol station in the town centre. Minivans leave for Tawau (RM5, 1½ hours), Lahad Datu (2½ hours, RM12) and Sandakan (RM25).

### Tun Sakaran Marine Park

Gazetted in 2004 and also known as the **Semporna Islands Marine Park** (conservation fee RM40), Sabah's newest and largest marine park covers 325 sq km of tropical waters, including dive sites widely classed among the top 10 in the world.

The jewel in the crown is **Pulau Sipadan**, perhaps the most famous island in Borneo, 36km off the southeast coast. The island is the tip of a limestone pinnacle that rises 600m from the seabed, and attracts divers from all over the world.

Many of the other islands in and around the park also offer good diving and are used for training and accommodation by the various operators. Mabul is the usual operations base for multiday trips; there are

### SLEEPLESS ON SIPADAN

It is no longer possible to stay overnight on Pulau Sipadan. In January 2005 the Malaysian government decided that the ecological damage sustained over years of largely unchecked tourism and ruthless dynamite fishing had placed the island's fragile environment under serious threat, and all the existing resorts were duly demolished. The island is now under the control of the Wildlife Department, with park rangers, police and army personnel stationed there to oversee the dive operations; landings on the island are limited to 120 people per day. If you want to visit Sipadan, base yourself in Semporna or Pulau Mabul and book a day trip.

## ISLAND SECURITY

In April 2000 Sipadan made world headlines when Filipino gunmen landed on the island, overpowered the lone policeman and made off with 20 hostages, including a number of foreign tourists. The hostages were eventually released after nearly five tense months in captivity, but at least one other kidnapping (of Malaysians) subsequently occurred on the surrounding islands.

As a result of the raid, security on Sipadan and in nearby waters has been beefed up dramatically and travellers can expect far more protection than they previously had in these troubled waters. Geography and constant traffic between the islands make enforcing security a daunting task, but with no recent incidents of sea crime being reported, visitors at least shouldn't have too much cause for concern.

Boat transfers to your chosen site should be included in any dive package. Hiring a fishing boat for a day trip from Semporna costs around RM250.

For dive operators see p476.

## Tawau

☎ 089

A rundown port near the Indonesian border, Tawau is a centre for the shipping of timber, rubber, Manila hemp, cocoa, copra, tobacco and palm oil. Though it's known as a Bugis city, a massive stilt village east of town houses many of the Filipino and Indonesian immigrants you'll encounter eking out a living on the waterfront. Patchy street lighting doesn't help the atmosphere, and travellers, especially women, may feel more comfortable in pairs after dark. Locals do seem quite proud of their town, however, check out [www.tawau.com](http://www.tawau.com) for recommendations.

Boats from Tawau travel to Nunakan and Tarakan in Kalimantan, Indonesia.

## INFORMATION

Some facilities in town:

**City Internet Zone** (☎ 760016; 37 Kompleks Fajar,

Jln Perbandaran; per hr RM2-3; 7am-midnight)

**HSBC** (☎ 775722; Jln Perbandaran)

**Indonesian consulate** (☎ 752669; Jln Tanjong Batu)

**Maybank** (☎ 762333; Jln Dunlop; 7 Mon-Fri)

**PH Moneychanger** (☎ 776389; Kompleks Kojasa)

Changes cash.

## DIVING

There is so-so diving off Roach Reef, halfway between Tawau and Pulau Sipadan. The reef is mainly used for PADI training, though if you're just doing a course prior to diving elsewhere it may be best to do training in KK, as transport costs are lower. The following dive outfits have offices in Tawau: **North Borneo Dive & Sea Sports** (☎ 769950; [www.northborneo.net](http://www.northborneo.net); Grace Inn, Jln Haji Karim) Offers dive courses as well as trips to Sipadan, Roach Reef and other islands, including some across the border in Indonesia.

**Pulau Sipadan Resort & Tours** (☎ 765200; [www.sipadan-resort.com](http://www.sipadan-resort.com); 1st fl, 484 Bandar Sabindo) Does trips to Tun Sakaran Marine Park, including Sipadan and Lankayan.

**Reef Dive Resort & Tours** (☎ 770022; [www.mataking.com](http://www.mataking.com); Heritage Hotel, Jln Bunga) Dive trips based at its resort on Pulau Mataking.

**Sipadan Water Village Resort** (☎ 752996; [www.svwresort.com](http://www.svwresort.com); Tawau Airport) Runs the luxurious stilt resort on Pulau Mabul.

also dive resorts and sites around Lankayan, Matakang and Sibuan, plus a purpose-built rig resort on the Kapalai sandbar.

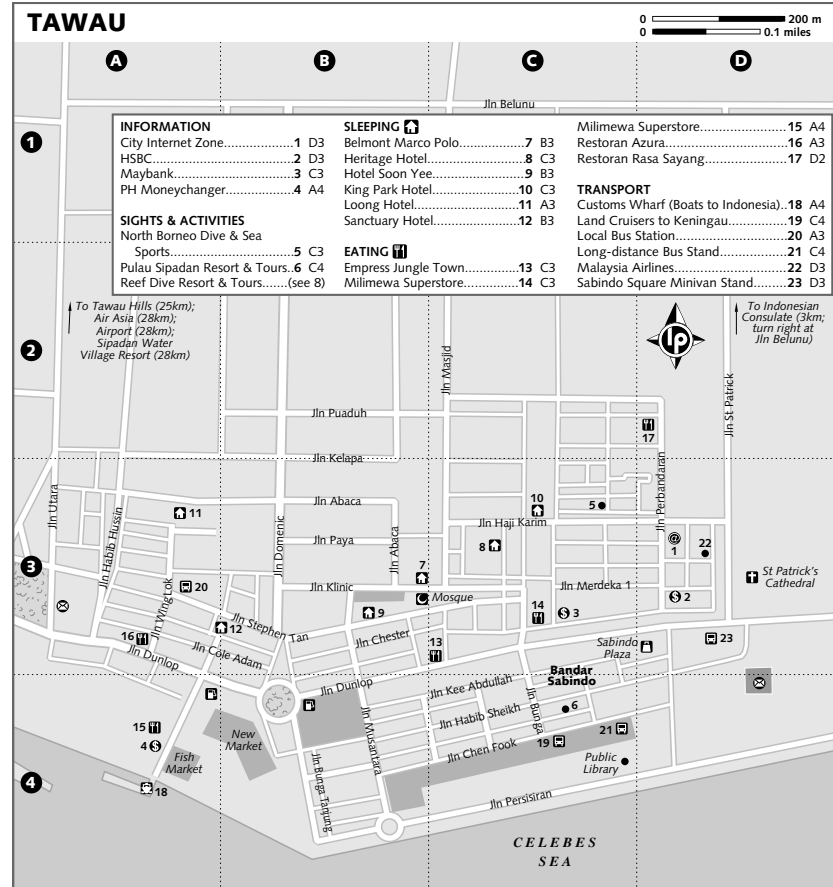
The islands' proximity to Indonesia and the Philippines ensures a hefty police and army presence; the patrol boats are also there to deter dynamite fishing, which has done considerable damage to many of the reefs off Semporna.

## DIVING

Dives are held from early morning until after dark by all operators, and qualified personnel accompany each trip. All visitors are briefed on local conditions when they arrive. Note that currents over the reefs can be quite strong.

One of the highlights of the park is the near-vertical 'wall' off the eastern side of Sipadan, where colourful tropical fish swim near the surface and huge groupers and wrasse nose about in the murky depths below. The deeper water is also home to schools of barracuda and tuna, occasional whale sharks and friendly hammerheads. Sea turtles are common, and experienced divers can explore an undersea cavern in which turtles periodically lose their way and perish.

Snorkelling is possible at all the dive sites, with good visibility and plenty to see.



In recent years government agreements have opened the door for dive trips from Sabah to unexploited areas nearby in Indonesia, such as to Pulau Sangalaki, which is about 150km southeast of Tarakan; there are 11 dive sites around the island, which is noted for its varied and abundant sightings of larger fish and marine species. Other dive spots include Pulau Kakaban and Pulau Maratua.

## SLEEPING

The so-called budget hotels in Tawau are poor value for money, but there are plenty of midrange choices.

**Hotel Soon Yee** (☎ 772447; 1362 Jln Stephen Tan; dm RM18, r RM22-40; a ) Unlike most budget

dosshouses, the Soon Yee seems very conscious of the backpacker (and guidebook) market, keeping standards acceptably high. The cheaper fan-cooled rooms have shared bathrooms.

**Sanctuary Hotel** (☎ 751155; 4263 Jln Chester; r RM40-60; a ) You couldn't accuse this place of being over-cheerful, and as sanctuaries go you can probably find quieter, but the spacious, tiled rooms are good value and it's handy for all forms of transport.

**Loong Hotel** (☎ 778100; 3868 Jln Abaca; r RM50-70; a ) This well-run and clean hotel has fairly large rooms, though some are a bit boxy. Its quiet location near the local bus stand makes it a good midrange choice, and receipts cheerily advise 'If you see people without a

smile today, give them one of yours!'. There's a good Chinese café underneath.

**King Park Hotel** (☎ 767700; [kingpark@streamyx.com](mailto:kingpark@streamyx.com); 30 Jln Haji Karim; r RM98-200, ste RM300-600; a ) There's a right royal theme running through this not-so-humble hostelry – even the lifts are labelled 'king' and 'queen'. Rooms are unexpectedly palatial, there's a fine garden restaurant and a health club on site, and regular discounts are available if your blue blood doesn't extend to your wallet.

**Heritage Hotel** (☎ 766222; [www.heritagehotel.com.my](http://www.heritagehotel.com.my); 210-213 Jln Bunga; r RM128-208, ste RM478; a i ) The Heritage provides smart business-class accommodation in a good location, throwing in perks such as minibars and complimentary newspapers, and is one of those rare places designed with some consideration for disabled guests. Promotional rates of around 30% less often apply.

**Belmont Marco Polo** (☎ 777988; [bmph@tm.net.my](mailto:bmph@tm.net.my); Jln Klinik; r RM160-195; a ) Undisputed top dog in Tawau, the Belmont doesn't have much in the way of top-end competition, pulling in the big spenders with Western standards and all-round sophistication. There's a restaurant, coffee house, lounge bar and salon, and the hotel even has its own golf course outside town. The front desk can arrange airport transfers and car hire.

## EATING

Tawau has a surprisingly varied restaurant scene, with plenty of choice on offer and a reputation for good cheap seafood. Chinese and Malay cafés are ubiquitous as ever, and hawker stalls seem to spring up wherever there's a vacant lot, with all kinds of Indonesian and Malay favourites.

**Restoran Azura** (☎ 012-863 9934; Jln Dunlop; dishes RM3-6; ₪ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Recommended for its tasty line in South Indian food, including fish-head curry and other 'tits-bits'. The noodles are pretty good too. There's another branch on Sabindo Sq.

**Restoran Rasa Sayang** (☎ 777042; Jln Haji Karim; dishes from RM5; ₪ lunch & dinner) Part of Tawau's burgeoning restaurant quarter, this is a neat Chinese diner doing good-value set meals (RM15) and novel specials such as prawn mango rice.

**Empress Jungle Town** (☎ 776393; 54 Jln Dunlop; mains RM5.75-30; ₪ lunch & dinner) A rather bizarre

new enterprise attempting to recapture the rainforest experience *inside* a restaurant, right down to the semi-convincing fake trees, piped birdsong, cascading water and, um, mirror ball. Unlike most jungles, though, this plastic paradise has a snack bar, a karaoke lounge and a cafeteria-style menu of Chinese and Western dishes.

For self-caterers, there are two large branches of Milimewa Superstore: near the fish market and on Jln Bunga.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

**Malaysia Airlines** (☎ 765522; Jln Sahabudin) has flights to KK and KL. **Air Asia** (☎ 1300-889933; Lot 6, Tawau Airport) has two daily direct flights to Tawau from KL, and one daily from KK, and also serves Johor Bahru four times weekly. **FAX** (☎ 03-8775 4000) flies to Sandakan up to three times daily.

### Boat

Boats for Indonesia leave from the customs wharf next to the fish market. Half a dozen companies offer daily boats and sell tickets near the customs wharf, opposite the fish market. A sign displays the next sailing times. To get to Tarakan you first have to take a boat to Pulau Nunukan (RM25 to RM48, one hour). Tarakan is another three hours from Nunukan (RM40 to RM100).

This route is no longer visa-free, so you will need to obtain a visa before travelling – check requirements with the **Indonesian consulate** (☎ 752669; Jln Tanjong Batu).

### Bus

Express buses for KK (RM55, 10 hours) and Sandakan (RM30, five hours) depart from in front of the public library at the eastern end of the town centre daily between 7am and 8pm; there are frequent departures till 9.30am. Book ahead if travelling on the weekend – ticket booths line the street where the buses park, with plenty of eager touts.

Minivans for other destinations depart from the stand on Sabindo Sq, behind the shops.

There are frequent minivans to Semporna (RM8, two hours) and Kunak (RM8), Lahad Datu (RM15, three hours) and Sandakan (RM32, 5½ hours).

Land Cruisers leave for the long, rough journey to Keningau (RM80, 11 hours)

from next to the express bus stand, leaving around 9am. This is also the route to Sapulut (RM50, eight hours) if you are planning to visit Batu Punggul.

## GETTING AROUND

Tawau's airport is 25km from town on the main highway to Sandakan. A shuttle bus to the local bus station in town (RM7) leaves six times daily. A taxi will cost RM35. Tawau's higher-end hotels may also provide cheaper transfers or shuttle services.

## Tawau Hills Park

Hemmed in by agriculture and human habitation, this small reserve has forested hills rising dramatically from the surrounding plain. The park (admission RM10) was declared

in 1979 to protect the water catchment for settlements in the area, but not before most of the accessible rainforest had been logged. Much of the remaining forest clings to steep-sided ridges that rise to 1310m Gunung Magdalena.

On a clear day the Tawau Hills Park's peaks make a fine sight. A trail leads to hot springs and a waterfall three hours' walk north of the park headquarters, and there's a 30-minute walk to Bombalai Hill (530m), to the south.

There's accommodation at **Tawau Hills Park headquarters** (Taman Bukit Tawau; ☎ 089-753564; dm RM20, chalet RM200). Rates are lower on weekdays.

Tawau Hills is 25km northwest of Tawau. A taxi will cost about RM30.

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