

Brunei



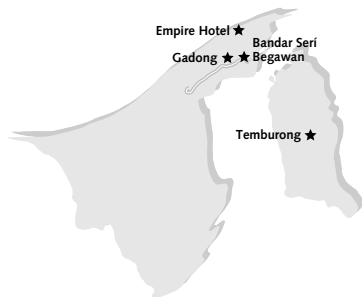
'Where is Brunei?' is usually the first question travellers ask – a query that can easily be solved with a map. 'What is Brunei?' – now that's a much more difficult question to answer. It may seem like nothing more than a bucktoothed bite mark nibbled off the Bornean coast, but there is a lot more to this wee sultanate than meets the eye, and that's where things get tricky.

So perhaps it's best to start with the things that Brunei is not. Brunei is not an ubermodern emirate bustling with a Vegas-like energy, nor is it an uptight Muslim stronghold ruled with an iron fist. This may surprise visitors at first – especially when they discover that the serene capital city (10 points if you can name it without looking at the highlights!) seems to prefer ramshackle stilt villages to architectural allegories for world domination. But make no mistake, Brunei isn't a backwater oil rig either. In fact, for many centuries the sultan's power extended across the entirety of Borneo and over to the Philippines.

But far more interesting than the tall tales of erstwhile power is watching how this micronation grapples with its modern identity. Youngsters memorise names of popular recordings with the same alacrity as historical minutia, while higher up in the ranks, princes ride the waves of 'black gold', erecting myriad monuments to misguided spending. Day trippers will barely peer beyond the very staid mosques, markets and museums, so it's well worth hanging around as the Napoleonic bravado melts away to reveal a spellbinding saga of one sultan and his faithful people.

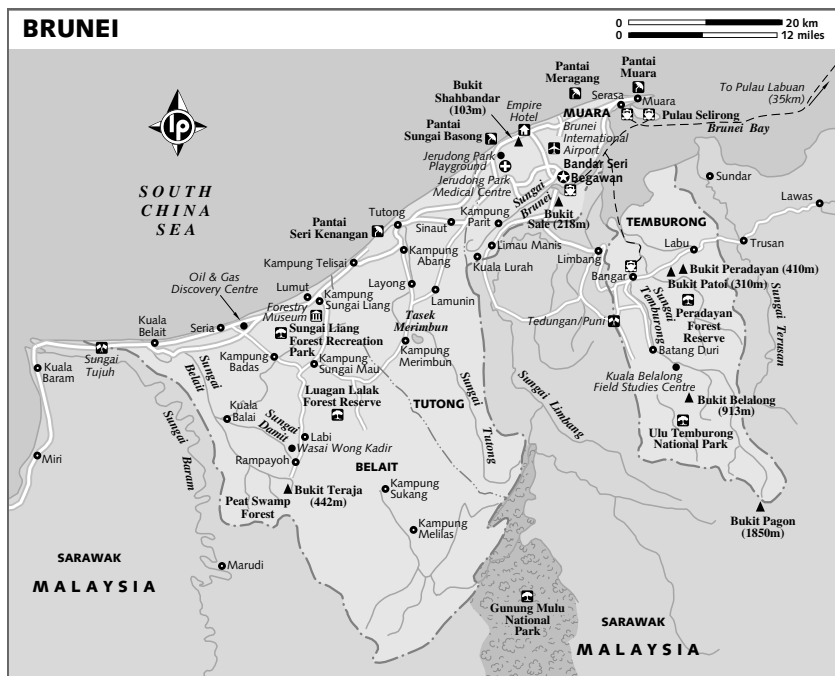
HIGHLIGHTS

- Wandering through spaceship-like mosques, a wobbly wooden stilt village, and several historical museums in Brunei's quiet capital, **Bandar Seri Begawan** (p577)
- Unleashing your inner sultan during a lavish weekend at the gold-encrusted **Empire Hotel** (p586)
- Trudging through untouched acres of pristine rainforest in **Temburong** (p590)
- Discovering Brunei's version of nightlife at the shopping malls in **Gadong** (p583)
- Diving mouth-first into the country's unique dining scene, sampling the gamut of **local cuisine** (p584)



■ POPULATION: 390,000

■ AREA: 5765 SQ KM



HISTORY

The earliest recorded references to Brunei's presence relate to China's trading connections with 'Pu-ni' in the 6th century, during the Tang dynasty. Prior to the region's embrace of Islam, Brunei was within the boundaries of the Sumatran Srivijaya Empire, then the Majapahit Empire of Java. By the 15th and 16th centuries, the so-called Golden Age of Sultan Bolkiah (the fifth sultan), Brunei Darussalam had itself become a considerable power in the region, with its rule extending throughout Borneo and into the Philippines.

The Spanish and Portuguese were the first European visitors, arriving in the 16th century, but failing to make inroads by force. In the early 19th century, the more subtle approach of the British, in the guise of Sarawak's first raja, James Brooke, spelled the end of Brunei's power. A series of 'treaties' was forced upon the sultan as Brooke consolidated his hold over the town of Kuching. In 1888 Brunei became a British protectorate and was gradually

whittled away until, with a final dash of absurdity, Limbang was ceded to Sarawak in 1890, dividing the crippled sultanate into two parts.

In 1929, just as Brunei was about to be swallowed up entirely, oil was discovered, turning the tiny state into an economic power overnight. The present sultan's father, Sultan Omar Saifuddin, kept Brunei out of the Malayan confederacy, preferring that the country remain a British protectorate and the oil money remain on home soil. He's credited with laying the foundations for Brunei's solid development.

In 1962, in the lead up to amalgamation with the new state of Malaysia, the British pressured Brunei to hold elections. The opposition Ra'ayat Party, which wanted to keep Brunei independent and make the sultan a constitutional monarch within a democracy, won an overwhelming victory. When the sultan refused to allow the new government into power, an armed rebellion broke out, supported by the Indonesian government. The uprising was quickly crushed with

British military backing, and the 'Abode of Peace' has been under emergency laws ever since.

Saifuddin abdicated in 1967, leaving the throne to his popular son and heir, Sultan Hassanah Bolkiah. Early in 1984 the new ruler reluctantly led his tightly ruled country into complete independence from Britain. As a former public-school boy and graduate of Sandhurst Royal Military Academy, the sultan rather enjoyed British patronage and the country still has close ties to Britain.

After independence, Brunei veered towards Islamic fundamentalism, adopting a national ideology known as Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB). This institutionalised dogma stresses Malay culture, Islam and monarchy, and is promulgated through the ministries of education, religious affairs and information. In 1991 the sale of alcohol was banned and stricter dress codes were introduced, and in 1992 the study of MIB became compulsory in schools.

In recent years signs have begun to emerge that Brunei is not the model state it once was. The government has recognised a relatively small but growing unemployment problem, and disaffected youths have been blamed for isolated incidents of crime. The most disaffected youth of them all, the sultan's younger brother Prince Jefri, became a byword for extravagance both in his private life and, rather more seriously, in his role as finance minister (see the boxed text, p587). The sultan sacked Jefri in 1997, but the damage had been done, and Brunei found itself with seriously depleted financial reserves.

Perhaps as a result of these factors, the prevailing climate in Brunei today seems to be one of controlled reform as the sultan struggles to keep pace with the modern world. In 2004 the legislative council was finally restored after 20 years of 'emergency' law. So far the 29 incumbents are all royal relatives or cronies, but the constitution has been amended to allow the council to grow up to 45 members in the future, with 15 of them elected by the public. In another significant step, former radical leader Muhammad Yasin Abdul Rahman, who was once jailed for his part in the 1962 rebellion, has been allowed to form a new opposition party, the National Development Party.

The mere mention of the words 'election' and 'opposition' must have brought the sultan out in a sweat, as he promptly hedged his bets by adding another clause to the constitution stating that he 'can do no wrong in either

his personal or any official capacity'. Perhaps the sultan was worried that his marriage to a 27-year-old Malaysian journalist (technically his third wife – he's still married to the first, and divorced his second in 2003) might have undermined his popularity. Either way, don't expect to see Bruneians at a polling booth any time soon.

Whatever its political waverings, Brunei's wealth still allows its citizens to enjoy an unprecedented standard of living. Literacy stands at 94%, average life expectancy is 77 years, and there are pensions for all, free medical care, free schooling, free sport and leisure centres, cheap loans, subsidies for many purchases (including cars), short working weeks, no income tax and the highest minimum wages in the region. The sultan even marked his 60th birthday in 2006 by awarding civil servants their first pay rise in 20 years. Economic diversification and new deep-sea explorations for oil aim to keep the cash rolling in, and as long as it does, the people of Brunei should stay happy with their lot.

NATIONAL PARKS & RESERVES

Brunei has one major national park and several forest reserves, including the following:

Lake Merimbun (p588; 1.2 sq km) Centred on Brunei's largest lake, this park, 27km inland south of Tutong, has trails and nature observation posts.

Peradayan Forest Reserve (p589; 10.7 sq km) A section of the Peradayan Forest Reserve in Brunei's Temburong district; treks through the jungle lead to the summits of Bukit Patoi (310m) and Bukit Peradayan (410m).

Ulu Temburong National Park (p590; 500 sq km) An untouched expanse of forest, with trails and a canopy walk; accessible by longboat only.

BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN

pop 258,000

If you're expecting some kind of lavish mini-Dubai, think again – Brunei may fancy itself an oil state, but there's no nouveau-riche ostentation here, and the country's capital is as polite and unassuming as its people, wearing its wealth almost prosaically in places. For visitors on a layover, BSB's wide, quiet streets will form the entirety of their Bruneian experience. And while there's plenty to keep you occupied for a couple of days, the city itself is unlikely to inspire any great devotion. However, if you take the time to slow down and talk with the locals, you may find

BRUNEI IN...**One Day (just passing through, or on a layover)**

Start in Bandar Seri Begawan (BSB) and test out our tailor-made **walking tour** (p579), which tackles the capital's clutch of spaceship-like mosques and historical museums. Then cross the river in a water taxi to visit the bobbly wooden homes in **Kampong Ayer** (Water Villages; p578), the world's largest floating city. Break for high tea at the **Empire Hotel** (p586), a lavish bastion of Italian marble and gold plating plunked down on the jungle-like seafront. If you're still around in the evening, head to **Gadong** (p583) for some serious shopping (DVDs!) and dare your tastebuds with a dinner of **ambuyat** (p584) – Brunei's most Bruneian dish.

One Week

Take your time exploring downtown BSB, spreading our 'one day' itinerary over two leisurely afternoons and tossing in a search for proboscis monkeys on a **wildlife boat cruise** (p581) down the Sungai Brunei.

After absorbing Bandar's version of city living, it's time to head to Temburong – Brunei's version of the Wild West. Join up with a tour for a lazy longboat ride deep into the virgin rainforests of **Ulu Temburong National Park** (p590). Spend the night among cawing hornbills and giggling macaques before making your way to **Bangar** (p589) for a glimpse of village life.

Two days of sweaty jungle-trekking warrants a big reward: three blissful days at the **Empire Hotel** (p586), Brunei's infamous 'seven-star' luxury resort. Enjoy poolside virgin daiquiris (remember, no alcohol here!), gut-busting buffet dinners, a golf course and a visit to **Jerudong Park Playground** (p585) – the sultanate's unofficial monument to reckless spending.

that there's more than meets the eye in this modest metropolis.

ORIENTATION

The central core of BSB is an easily navigable grid facing south towards the busy Sungai Brunei (Brunei River). Stilt villages sprawl on the opposite side of the shore and are connected to the centre by bridges and water taxis. Buildings in central Bandar are spread out and there isn't a lot of shade, so hats and sunscreen are advised. Although the downtown is relatively quiet, there are plenty of sights, restaurants and shops, many of which are located around the Yayasan Complex. The main bus station is also located near the waterfront on Jln Cator. The airport is 5km from the city centre.

INFORMATION**Bookshops**

Paul & Elizabeth Book Services (☎ 222 0958; 2nd fl, Block B, Yayasan Complex, Jln Pretty) A small range of English-language paperbacks, including some ancient LP guides!

Emergency

Ambulance (☎ 991)

Fire (☎ 995)

Police (☎ 993)

Internet Access

Paul & Elizabeth Cyber Café (☎ 222 0958; 2nd fl, Block B, Yayasan Complex, Jln Pretty; per hr B\$1; ☎ 8am-9.30pm) On the 2nd floor overlooking the central atrium in the northern building of the complex. Decent connections, bad soundtrack.

Internet Resources

For detailed information about visiting Brunei, visit www.tourismbrunei.com. Lately, blogging has become quite popular – check out the boxed text on p585 for local perspectives on the sultanate.

Medical Services

Jerudong Park Medical Centre (☎ 261 1433; Tutong-Muara Hwy; ☎ 24hr) Private medical facility with high standards of care.

RIPAS Hospital (☎ 224 2424; Jln Tutong; ☎ 24hr) A fully equipped, modern hospital across the Edinburgh Bridge on the western side of Sungai Kedayan.

Money

HSBC (☎ 225 2222; cnr Jln Sultan & Jln Pemanha; ☎ 9am-3.30pm Mon-Fri, 9-11am Sat) Charges a fee of B\$15 to change most travellers cheques. There's also an ATM.

Rupiah Express (ground fl, Britannia House, 1 Jln Cator; ☎ 8am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 8am-3pm Sun) Exchanges cash only.

BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN

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BRUNEI

Post

Main post office (cnr Jln Sultan & Jln Elizabeth Dua; ☎ 8.30am–4.30pm Mon–Thu & Sat, 8.30–11.30am & 2–4pm Fri) Be sure to stop in to the adjoining Stamp Gallery (same hours as post office).

Tourist Information

At the time of research there was no tourist-information centre in Bandar's CBD; however, word is that a visitors centre and adjoining art gallery will be opening in the Old Custom Building along the riverfront. See p592 for information about Brunei's tourism board.

SIGHTS

Sprawling Bandar doesn't lend itself to wandering tourists, especially under the tropical sun. The Royal Regalia Museum, Omar Ali Saifuddien Mosque and Kampong Ayer (Water Village) are located in the city centre (and are included in our tailor-made **walking tour**, p579), while the remaining sights orbit central BSB several kilometres away. Small sights, like the Kota Batu Mausoleum, have been woven into our walking/taxi tour. Buses, taxis and private vehicles are the best ways to explore these spots. The main bus and taxi terminals are located on Jln Cator (pronounced 'kay-tor'), two blocks from the waterfront.

If you intend to visit a mosque, please dress appropriately. (Preferably long pants and polo shirt for men, and covered shoulders and knees for women. A full-length gown and scarf are provided to women at mosque entrances.) Also note that places of worship are not open to tourists during prayer times. The best times of day for a visit are between 8am and 11am, 1.30pm and 3pm, and 4pm and 5.30pm. Visits on Thursdays and Fridays are usually forbidden.

Royal Regalia Museum

A celebration of the sultan and all the trappings of Bruneian royalty, the **Royal Regalia Museum** (☎ 222 8358; Jln Sultan; admission free; ☎ 8.30am–4.30pm Sun–Thu, 9–11am Fri) belongs at the top of any Brunei itinerary. The 1st floor is dominated by a recreation of the sultan's coronation day parade, including a huge gilded royal cart, on which the newly crowned sultan was pulled through the streets of BSB.

On the mezzanine floor of the museum you'll find a selection of gifts received by the sultan. Of course, when you are called upon to give a gift to the Sultan of Brunei, you must

inevitably confront the question: what do you give the man who has everything? Here you'll see how various heads of state and royalty have answered this question (hint: you'll never go wrong with priceless gold and jewels). We particularly like the mother of all beer mugs given by Queen Elizabeth, the fine abalone-shell chest given by the Philippines, and the Benjarong porcelain from Thailand.

Visitors must remove their shoes before entering and photography is strictly prohibited beyond the main foyer.

Omar Ali Saifuddien Mosque

Named after the 28th sultan of Brunei (the late father of the current sultan), the **Omar Ali Saifuddien Mosque** (☎ 222 2623; admission free; ☎ 8am–noon, 2–3pm, 5–6pm & 8–9pm Sat–Wed) was built in 1958 at a cost of about US\$5 million, and stands next to Sungai Kedayan in its own artificial lagoon. The 44m minaret makes it the tallest building in central BSB, and woe betide anyone who tries to outdo it – apparently the Islamic Bank of Brunei building nearby originally exceeded this height, and consequently had to have its top storey removed by order of the sultan. Listen for the call to prayer that echoes throughout the city centre, starting before dawn or at dusk.

The interior is simple but tasteful, though it's no match for the stunning exterior. The floor and walls are made from the finest Italian marble, the stained-glass windows were crafted in England and the luxurious carpets were flown in from Saudi Arabia and Belgium. Jigsaw enthusiasts can admire the 3.5 million-piece Venetian mosaic inside the main dome. The ceremonial stone boat sitting in the lagoon is a replica of a 16th-century *mahligai* (royal) barge.

The external compound is open between 8am and 8.30pm, and non-Muslims may enter the mosque itself outside prayer times. Remember to dress appropriately and to remove your shoes before entering. You may also be able to take the elevator to the top of the minaret or walk up the winding staircase (ask permission from staff first). The view over the city and Kampong Ayer is excellent.

Jame'Asr Hassaniil Bolkiaah Mosque

The largest mosque in the country, **Jame'Asr Hassaniil Bolkiaah Mosque** (☎ 223 8741; Jln Hassan Bolkiaah, Gadong; admission free; ☎ 8am–noon, 2–3pm, 5–6pm & 8–9pm Sat–Wed), was built in 1992 to

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Hassanal Bolkiah Mu'izzaddin Waddaulah, the current sultan of Brunei, is named after two of his great-great-great-great-great-(etc)-grandfathers. The first, Bolkiah, was Brunei's fifth sultan, ruling from 1485 to 1524. His reign was known as Brunei's Golden Age, as it was during this time that the sultanate expanded to dominate the Malay region and the Philippines. After adding a Sulu princess to his coterie of wives, Bolkiah mysteriously died (some say he was poisoned by a golden needle) leaving the ever-expanding empire to his son.

The sultan takes the name Hassanal from Brunei's ninth sultan, Muhammad Hassan. Considered to be another of Brunei's great rulers, Hassan was instrumental in re-establishing links to lands lost by the previous sultans. He sent his second son to Sulu, where he became sultan – Sulu's sultanate still traces its ancestry to Hassan. Hassan is also credited with passing down a code of law, which is still used in today's courts.

Needless to say, when Hassanal Bolkiah ascended to the throne, he had some pretty big shoes to fill...

celebrate the 25th year of the current sultan's reign. While some prefer the facade of the Omar Ali Saifuddien Mosque, the interior here is best described as jaw-dropping. The sheer volume is in itself amazing, not to mention the myriad woven rugs scattered across the men's prayer hall. At the grand opening, the sultan gave every attendee a gold-embroidered prayer rug.

The structure's four main minarets and two golden domes are a fantastic sight when illuminated in the evening and can be photographed from several locations around town. Oh, and yes, it's *Hassanal* and not *Hassanal* like the sultan (we asked around – no one knew why!)

It's located en route to Gadong, about 2.5km northwest of the city centre. To get to the mosque, take bus 22 or 1 (Circle Line) from the bus station in BSB centre.

Kampong Ayer

Housing an estimated 20,000 people, Kampong Ayer is made up of 28 water villages built on either side of Sungai Brunei. This jumble of wooden planks and shacks is considered to be the biggest water village in the world, and the locals love calling it 'Asia's Venice' (there's really no resemblance, though – well, other than the turbid water part).

If you've never visited a water village before, now's your chance. A new **Kampong Ayer Cultural and Tourism Gallery** was just opening its door when we visited. This brand new information centre will focus on the history, lifestyle and crafts of the Kampong Ayer people. A viewing tower offers panoramic views of the bustling scene below. Walk across one

of the planks west of the Yayasan Complex and you'll find yourself in the heart of the action. Or, you can charter a water taxi for B\$30 (a bit of negotiating is a must) to have a look-see from the river. Finding a taxi won't be a problem, as the boatmen will have spotted you before you spot them. Afternoon rides are ideal, especially if you'd like to check out the Istana Nurul Iman (opposite) as well.

Brunei Museum

Sitting on a bluff overlooking Sungai Brunei, the **Brunei Museum** (☎ 222 3235; Jln Kota Batu; admission free; 🕒 9.30am–5pm Sun–Thu, 9–11.30am & 2.30–4.30pm Fri) is 4.5km east of central BSB. The main building contains the excellent **Islamic Art Gallery**, which has some wonderful illuminated (decorated) copies of the Quran, as well as an incredible model of the Dome of the Rock, executed in mother of pearl and abalone shell.

In the same building, the **Oil and Gas Gallery** is surprisingly interesting. It answers all of your questions about how they get the stuff from under the ground to your nearest gas pump. Finally, don't miss the **Brunei Traditional Culture Gallery**, also in the main building. It's got good exhibits on all aspects of Bruneian culture, from circumcision (ouch!) to the invigorating sport of grass sledding (?).

Descend the stairs from the car park behind the museum, then turn right to reach the **Malay Technology Museum** (admission free; 🕒 9.30am–5pm Sun–Thu, 9–11.30am & 2.30–4.30pm Fri) A pair of rooms here have interesting life-sized recreations of stilt houses with accompanying information on traditional cultures. Gallery 1 features water villages and includes reconstructions

of how *kampung* (village) architecture has evolved over the last 150 years. Gallery 2 has exhibits of handicrafts and fishing techniques practised by the people of the water villages. Gallery 3 shows the tools and techniques used by the indigenous tribes of the interior for food gathering, agriculture and hunting.

To get to the museum, take bus 39 from the bus station in central BSB.

Istana Nurul Iman

The best way to measure the grandeur of a structure is by counting the bathrooms. The sultan's **Istana Nurul Iman** (Jln Tutong) has 257, making it the largest residential palace in the world. With a price tag of over US\$350 million, this 1788-room behemoth is, if you can believe it, more than four times the size of the Palace of Versailles and three times larger than Buckingham Palace.

Designed by Filipino architect Leandro Locsin, the design aesthetics of the palace draw heavily on an airport terminal concept. From an art-historical perspective it feels more like a Monet – from far away it's quite a sight, but from up close the whole thing doesn't really make sense.

Those who want to get inside the palace will have to time their visit with the Hari Raya festivities at the end of Ramadan – the sultan only opens the palace doors for three days in September, shaking hands and giving out goodies to his faithful subjects.

If you're visiting Brunei during the other 362 days of the year, then the best way to check out the palace is from Taman Persiaran Damuan – a large landscaped park along the riverbank just beyond the palace when travelling from the city centre. The palace's backyard can also be viewed from a water taxi along the river. Your boatman can also take you past **Pulau Ranguu**, in the middle of the river, which is home to a large colony of proboscis monkeys. The best time to head out is late afternoon, so you can catch the monkeys around sunset and then get dropped off at the park to see the palace in the evening. Asking prices will probably start at B\$40, but you should be able to hire a boat for B\$28.

Arts & Handicrafts Centre

Built to help develop local craftwork, the **Arts & Handicrafts Centre** (☎ 224 0676; Jln Kota Batu; admission free; 🕒 7.45am–12.15pm & 1.30–4.30pm Mon–Thu & Sat, 8.30am–2.30pm Fri & Sun) sits on the waterfront

towards the Brunei Museum like an aged Floridian timeshare. It's visible from town and within easy walking distance. While the concept of such a centre is a marvellous idea, it's a little disappointing if you're interested in traditional crafts; only new silverwork and weaving produced by the students are available, and some items are very expensive. If you're really serious about investing some cash, you can pick up the *Directory of Handicraft Entrepreneurs* here.

WALKING TOUR Bandar In Brief

If you're short on time, most of Bandar's main attractions can be tackled in a single morning. Start at the **Royal Regalia Museum** (1; p577) for a lesson in Bruneian Sultans 101. If you're captivated by the country's well-documented history, then check out the taxi tour add-on below. After perusing rooms full of priceless (and useless) artefacts, head down Jln Sultan passing **Dewan Majlis** (2), home of the legislative assembly. In Brunei, criminal indiscretions, like petty theft, are handled by the so-called English Court, while the Muslim Court controls religious matters, including divorce, and



WALK FACTS

Start Royal Regalia Museum

Finish Kampong Ayer

Distance 1.4km

Time Two hours

ne'er the two courts shall meet. Pass the **Tugu Clock (3)**, the 'ground zero' from which all distances in Brunei are measured, as you head to the stunning **Omar Ali Saifuddien Mosque (4; p577)**. Next, walk to the **Yayasan Complex (5)** for an obligatory food break. Stop in the Hua Ho Supermarket to sample Brunei's best-known sweets (p584).

If you have time, hop on a water taxi and head across the busy Sungai Brunei to check out **Kampong Ayer (6; p578)**, the world's largest stilt village. See p578 for more information about the floating city.

Taxi Tour Add-on: In the Footsteps of the Sultans

If you have a bit more time, and a few extra Brunei bucks to burn, consider adding on the following taxi tour, which details the colourful and fascinating history of Brunei's sultans – the world's longest bloodline.

Start at the **Kota Batu Mausoleum**, on Jln Kota Batu just before the Brunei Museum. Here you'll find the final resting place of Brunei's greatest sultan, Bolkiah, who at the height of his reign, pulled all of Borneo and part of the Philippines under Bruneian rule. He was known for using a mix of charm and intelligence rather than his sword when negotiating territorial disputes. See p578 to learn more about Brunei's 'Golden Ruler'. Also on the sacred grounds are the buried remains of Sharif Ali, Brunei's third sultan. Sharif married the daughter of the second sultan and ascended to the throne when there were no male heirs to take his father-in-law's place. He was very well respected, and ruled his sultanate with a great deal of religious discipline, which earned him the nickname *Sultan Berkat*, or 'Blessed Sultan'. Brunei's first mosque and stone fortress are also among his accomplishments. He was a direct descendant of the prophet Mohammed. Archaeologists believe that the remains of Brunei's first sultan, Muhammad Shah, are also buried at this riverfront site.

Hop back in the car and head towards central BSB along Jln Kota Batu, which turns into Jln Residency. While driving along the waterfront you'll pass the gabled **Twelve Roofs House** (Bumbungan Dua Belas; admission free; ☎ 9am–4.30pm Mon–Thu & Sat, 9–11.30am & 2.30–4.30pm Fri), which was once the residence of the British High Commissioners. Today the complex displays photos illustrating British involvement in Brunei and the 'special relationship'

between the two countries. After centuries as a local hegemony, Brunei gradually lost its grip and was taken over the British. The sultanate gained complete autonomy in 1984, but keeps close ties with Queen Elizabeth II.

Follow Jln Tutong over the Edinburgh Bridge towards the **Royal Mausoleum**, the final resting place of several sultans, including Omar Ali Saifuddien III, known as the 'Architect of Modern Brunei' for the significant advances that were made during his reign. Conspicuously absent from the deceased is the 22nd sultan, Muhammad Alam, who enjoyed the kind of reputation usually reserved for a Mongolian warlord. Dubbed the 'King of Fire', Alam finally realised his unpopularity and surrendered to his siblings, and when mercifully given a choice of execution, opted to be publicly garrotted...

Continue on to **Istana Nurul Iman** (p579), the sultan's palace. The palace guards get a bit flustered if you slow down to take pictures at the gate, so it's best to continue on and grab a couple of snaps from Taman Persiaran Damuan – a quiet picnic area along the river with great views back to the palace.

Back in the city centre, it's worth stopping by **Istana Darussalam**, the birthplace of the current sultan. The traditional Malay home sits rather inconspicuously beside a makeshift car park in desperate need of some weeding, but the structure itself is quite elegant. Access is not allowed, although it's worth a glimpse from the outside, as it is a lot smaller and humbler than one might think an old *istana* would be.

Head down the aptly named Sultan Hassanali Bolkiah Highway to Brunei's biggest roundabout (the country has more roundabouts than people!), home of the stunning **Jame'Asr Hassaniil Bolkiah Mosque** (p577).

Take a few minutes to drive around **Kampung Kiarong**, just south of the mosque. This community, sandwiched between the mosque and the royal palace, is home to a variety of distinguished locals – most are relatives of the sultan.

TAXI TOUR FACTS

Start Kota Batu

Finish Empire Hotel

Distance 23km

Time Two hours

Taxi per hour B\$40 to B\$50

Rental car per day B\$130 to B\$150

Head back onto the highway passing several buildings sprouting up from the tropical floor. These are some of the recent billion-dollar blunders made by the sultan's brother, Prince Jefri (see boxed text, p587). Brunei's two biggest white elephants sit at the end of the road: the erstwhile amusement centre, **Jerodung Park Playground** (p585) and the sultanate's seven-star resort, the **Empire Hotel** (p586).

TOURS

It's a cinch to get around Bandar under your own steam, but for a trip to beautiful Temburong, or for a 'night safari' along Sungai Brunei, we recommend linking up with a tour.

Major tour operators in the city include the following:

Borneo Guide (☎ 876 6796; www.borneoguide.com; Block B 1st fl, Warisan Mat Mat, Gadong) Excellent service and a variety of eco-programs around Brunei and Borneo.

Freme Travel Services (☎ 223 4280; www.freme.com; 403B-407B Wisma Jaya, Jln Pemancha) Offers a variety of tours, including the city and Kampong Ayer, and trips to Ulu Temburong and Pulau Selirong.

Mona Florafauna Tours (☎ 223 0761; www.i-s-d-s.com/mona; 209 1st fl, Kiaw Lian Bldg, Jln Pemancha) Specialises in outdoor and wildlife tours around Brunei.

Sunshine Borneo Tours & Travel (☎ 244 6509; www.exploreborneo.com; No 2, Simpang 146, Jln Kiarong) Runs tours of the city and at the Ulu Ulu Resort in Temburong. They also have a counter at the airport, an office at the Empire Hotel and an office in Kiarong.

SLEEPING

A sleepover in the sultanate is a pricier endeavour than in nearby Malaysia. Most of Brunei's accommodation abides by the old 'special price for you' market mantra, meaning that rack rates are usually much higher than what you'll actually pay. Unlike other Southeast Asian countries, the best lodging deals can usually be scouted on the internet. The Empire Hotel (p586), Brunei's most luxurious sleeping spot, sometimes offers bargain-basement deals that can rival the midrange options – check its website for details.

During our visit we heard murmurs about homestays and B&B establishments starting up in Kampong Ayer. Check with the tourism board (p592) or Borneo Guide (above) for details.

Budget

Budget prices in Brunei are more like midrange options in the rest of Malaysia, and there's only one truly 'cheap' option in town.

Pusat Belia (Youth Centre; ☎ 222 2900, 8765515; Jln Sungai Kianggeh; dm B\$10; ☎ ☎) No backpacker comforts here: this is the kind of classic youth hostel that should remind you of school trips or summer camps, and still caters to exactly that kind of local clientele. The single-sex four-bed bunkrooms are basic but adequate, with rather iffy bathrooms; reception is only sporadically staffed, but hang around and someone should find you. And no, that symbol's not a misprint – the youth centre really does have its own swimming pool (B\$1, open 9am to 7pm).

KH Soon Resthouse (☎ 222 2052; <http://khsoon-resthouse.tripod.com>; 140 Jln Pemancha; s/d B\$35/39, with shared bathroom B\$30/35; ☎ ☎) It's quite a step-up in price from the hostel to this simple Chinese-run place, but you don't get a whole lot for your extra 25 bucks apart from more space, better service and plenty of local information. Still, it's the only other budget option anywhere near the centre, and the bus station's almost right opposite.

Nazira Guest House (☎ 261-2053; hmarzuqo@brunet.bn; Spg 730-34 Kampong Jerudong; r from B\$40; ☎ ☎) Located near the Jerudong area, about 15 minutes from central BSJ, Nazira is a homey (albeit slightly musty) option set on a residential block. Fully furnished apartments are also available.

Midrange

If you're watching the pennies, the jump from budget to midrange accommodation can seem pretty brutal, though at least all rooms have air-con, TV, hot water and IDD phones.

Terrace Hotel (☎ 224 3554; www.terracebrunei.com; Jln Tasek Lama; r B\$60-80; ☎ ☎ ☎) Even if you're on a tight budget, consider spending a little more to enjoy the comforts of this excellent midrange hotel. Rooms are clean and well taken care of, and there's a great little swimming pool and wireless internet access. Deluxe rooms cost about B\$10 more than standard rooms, but are well worth the price.

Jubilee Hotel (☎ 222 8070; www.jubileehotelbrunei.com; Jln Kg Kianggeh; r from B\$70; ☎ ☎) Not quite as appealing as the Terrace, the Jubilee offers simple and clean standard rooms (the deluxe rooms aren't worth the extra price). On-site facilities include a Thai restaurant and billiards. Rates include airport pick-up and breakfast.

Traders Inn (☎ 244 2828; tradersinn@brunet.bn; Lot 11620, Jln Gadong, Gadong-Beribi; r B\$80-120; ☎ ☎) If you want to stay out of the centre, this comfortable business hotel is usefully located within easy

reach of the Gadong shops. The bathrooms could use a bit of spiffing up, though – they are currently the colour of dirty teeth.

Brunei Hotel (☎ 224-2372; www.quanix.com/business/bruhote1; 95 Jln Pemancha; r B\$176-220, ste B\$242-440; 🏠 📺) Hovering at the upper end of mid-range, the Brunei is an earnest business hotel used to train hospitality workers. Huge humidifiers and slightly mentholated air-con help you breathe, and you even get a mini-lunch (dry, of course). It's the closest midrange option to the bus station.

Also recommended:

Grand City Hotel (☎ 245 2188; grandcity@brunei.net; Jln Batu Bersurat, Kg Pengkalang Gadong; r B\$88; 🏠 📺) Good value and near the shops in Gadong.

Orchid Garden Hotel (☎ 233 5544; www.orchidgardenbrunei.com; Jln Berakas, Kg Anggerek Desa; r B\$180; 🏠 📺 🚿) Unmemorable but clean. Popular with tour packages. Free shuttle service links guests to Gadong and central BSB.

Top End

For those whose wallets overfloweth, and need to be in the city centre (usually business travellers), Bandar has a couple of solid options. If you're going to drop some serious bling, we highly recommend hanging your hat at the opulent Empire Hotel (p586).

Rizqun International Hotel (☎ 243 3000; reservation@rizquninternational.com; Abdul Razak Complex, Gadong; r from B\$320; 🏠 📺) The premier tourist hotel in the Gadong district is much more sophisticated than you'd expect for something growing out of a shopping mall.

Sheraton Utama Hotel (☎ 224 4272; www.sheraton.com/utama; Jln Tasek Lama; r from B\$400; 🏠 📺 🚿) Brunei's only Western chain hotel flies the flag for international standards on the edge of the town centre. Amenities are rife, and the lounge bar has live music on Saturday, a rare treat in BSB.

EATING

Eating: the only thing Bruneians like to do more than shop. Most of Bandar's top noshes are located beyond the small city centre. See the boxed text on p584 for everything you need to know about local cuisine.

Restaurants

Ayamku Restaurant (Jln Perancha; meals from B\$3.50; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Brunei's answer to KFC, this is one of the cheapest places in town to get a meal. You can get a big piece of fried chicken,

some rice and a drink for about B\$3. And the chicken is surprisingly good. One note: this may be purely coincidental, but many of the diners here seemed remarkably plump for Southeast Asians.

Nur Wanita (☎ 242 6789; Unit 10 Block B, Kiarong Complex; dishes B\$4-10; 🍴 lunch & dinner) A fantastic new restaurant in the Kiarong area, this chic venue serves authentic dishes from Northern Thailand. It's exceptionally popular during lunch when nearby office monkeys swing by to transport their tastebuds.

I-Lotus (☎ 242 2466; No 20 Simpang 12-26, Kg Rimba, Jln Tunku Link; dishes B\$5-15; 🍴 lunch & dinner) You'll need a cab or a very keen sense of direction to find this posh Chinese restaurant, but you'll be glad you put in the effort.

Nyonya Restaurant (☎ 223 1236; Yayasan Complex; mains B\$6.80-18.80; 🍴 lunch & dinner) The wide-ranging menu and bistro-style air-con chic accentuate the appeal of this popular place on the Yayasan's central courtyard. As well as steak, soup, sandwiches, seabass, and Indian, Chinese and Malay dishes, there's a good-value selection of pasta (B\$3 to B\$7.80).

Port View Café (☎ 223 1467; Jln MacArthur; mains B\$7-10.50; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Not the most original name, but sure enough, the split-level Port View does indeed gaze out over the water towards Kampong Ayer. The downstairs café menu includes simple Western, Chinese and Malay dishes, while upstairs is a little more expensive and features Thai, Chinese and Japanese food.

Villa Mauri (☎ 233 5585; Spg 369, Jln Muara, Kpg Sungai Tilong; dishes B\$8.80-16; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Brunei's best tribute to the Bootland, Villa Mauri's menu reads like a poem: *risotto Milanese, linguine alla pugliese, farfalle al salmone affumicato*. Chequered tablecloths further enhance the Mediterranean vibe – too bad there's no wine list...

Aminah Arif (☎ 223 6198; Unit 2-3 Block B Rahman Bldg, Spg 88, Kiulap; meals B\$22; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Aminah Arif is synonymous with *ambuyat* (p584) – Brunei's signature dish. If you're up for trying a bowl of wiggly white goo, then this is the place. Aminah's daughter has opened up her own restaurant, Seri Balai Food House, next door, and uses the same family recipe.

Food Courts, Markets & Hawker Stalls

Informal eating is the cornerstone of BSB's food scene, and every major shopping centre has its own air-conditioned food court. The

Yayasan Complex and Gadong's Mall shopping centre are some of the larger specimens.

Taman Selera (Jln Kumbang Pasang; dishes B\$1-8) It's not much to look at, but this night-time food spot, across from the Terrace Hotel, offers everything from burgers and noodles to seafood and traditional Muslim dishes (halal, curries etc). The 'smooters' (B\$2) at stall four are a damn good approximation of a real ice-cream milkshake.

Kianggeh Food Court (Jln Residency; dishes B\$2; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Take in the sunset views over Kampong Ayer while devouring scrumptious local dishes like savoury satay sticks and a big bowl of *soto* (noodle soup) with chicken and yellow noodles. Swing by in the morning for some *roti canai* (flaky flat bread).

Go Food Court (2nd fl, Yayasan Complex; dishes from B\$3; ☎ lunch & dinner) Strut past large plastic aquariums full of the daily catch and choose from an array of food stalls – each one with plate polaroids for the uninitiated. Grab a chair amid the cafeteria-style seating and enjoy your cheap grub while taking in the views of the royal barge.

Pasar Gadong (Lr Sultan, Gadong) Brunei's most famous night market, Pasar Gadong is a bustling marquee of munch parked near the big shopping centres in Gadong. Vendors offer every cooked comestible imaginable, from satay and barbecued fish to chicken wings and *kueh melayu* (sweet pancakes filled with peanuts, raisins and sugar), though quality varies widely. Annoyingly there's nowhere to sit, so you will either have to eat on your feet or take your grub elsewhere.

Self-caterers can walk across the canal to the local produce market, **Tamu Kianggeh** (Jln Sungai Kianggeh; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner), for a handful of fresh snacks. The large **Hua Ho Supermarket** (☎ 223 1120; Yayasan Complex; ☎ 10am-10pm) is a good place for self-catering and has a bunch of Bruneian treats (p584).

SHOPPING

Shopping is Brunei's national sport. Seriously – we might as well label this section 'Entertainment'. Locals bop through the shopping malls scouting out the best deals while bemoaning the fact that their micro-nation doesn't have enough variety. Things can get pretty hectic at the markets – the combination of food and shopping (Brunei's two biggest delights) can be a total bloodbath!

Escape the oppressive heat at the ritzy Yayasan Complex located in the city centre near the mosque. Here you'll find everything from the big brand names (Versace, Guess etc) to a variety of high-end local boutiques selling fabrics and jewellery. There are several great places to eat (see opposite), and don't miss the Hua Ho Department Store, with its cache of traditional Bruneian treats in the basement (p584). There is a small art studio, called **Ratna Dina Arif Gallery** (☎ 866 6934; admission free; 2-4pm Mon, 10am-4.30pm Tue, Thu & Sat, 10am-5pm Fri & Sun) located on the 2nd floor of Yayasan exhibiting a slew of paintings by local artists.

The country's only traffic jam occurs nightly in Gadong, a suburb of BSB, as locals eagerly clog the streets while trying to find a parking space. This is Brunei's main shopping district and features several large complexes including Centrepoint and The Mall, each one a large air-conditioned bastion of commerce. And, just for the record, Brunei's only McDonald's is in Gadong. The Kulilap area, next door, also has a couple of window-shopping-worthy malls, including Seri Q-Lap, which houses Brunei's most popular Cineplex.

As far as souvenirs are concerned, the boxes of *keropol udang* (prawn crackers) are a local fave, and they transport quite well. Textiles are also quite popular – silk is sold at very reasonable prices. For something a bit more upscale, try *jong sarat*, a hand-woven cloth made from gold and silver threads. It can be found at the Arts and Handicrafts Centre in Kota Batu, around 1km east of central Bandar. And don't forget about those DVDs, sold almost everywhere. Make sure you acquaint yourself with the system of coloured dots representing the quality of each recording.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Bandar Seri Begawan is Brunei's capital city and air hub. See p592 for information about getting to/from BSB.

GETTING AROUND

This section offers information on getting around the capital. See p594 for information on getting around Brunei.

To/From the Airport

Buses 23, 24, 36, and 38 will get you to/from the airport, about 4km northwest of the city, for B\$1. Leaving the terminal, keep to the right and walk south for about 300m to the bus stop.

MAKAN: THE BRUNEIAN REMIX

If there's one word you should learn during a visit to Brunei, it's *makan*, meaning 'food' in Bahasa Malaysia. *Makan* isn't just a word, it's a way of life (because, the locals joke, there's nothing else to do!) This micro-nation really knows how to chow down.

Ambuyat

If Brunei had a national dish, it would be *ambuyat*. Remember that kid in kindergarten who used to eat paste? Well, this comes pretty darn close. Made from the pith of the sago tree, which is ground to a powder and mixed with water, this glutinous mass was popularised during WWII, when the Japanese invaded Borneo and cut off the rice supply.

To eat *ambuyat*, begin by jabbing your chopsticks into the bowl of quivering white goo. Now these aren't your usual chopsticks – Bruneian chopsticks are attached at the top (so don't snap them in two!) making it easier to curl up the gelatinous globs before dunking the contents into a flavourful sauce. *Ambuyat* itself doesn't have a taste – it's the sauce that gives it its zing. Shrimp-and-chilli mixes are the most popular, although you can technically dip the dish in anything you'd like (we've heard of people using vanilla ice cream!) After your *ambuyat* is sufficiently drenched, place the dripping mass in your mouth and swallow – don't chew – just let it slide down your throat...

Ambuyat is widely available throughout Brunei – stop by the famous Aminah Arif (p582) or Seri Balai, both well known throughout the country for perfecting their recipes.

Snacks

Three meals a day? Hardly! Bruneians will always find an excuse for a quick nosh and, as a result, they've perfected some delicious 'tween-meal treats. *Chakoi* is our favourite – it's the Bornean version of a *churro* chopped into bite-sized bits. Go for the *kawin chakoi* (*kawin* means marriage), which is flavoured with a scrumptious mix of butter and kaya. The Hua Ho Supermarket in Yayasan serves up some of the best *chakoi* in town – it's lightly fried and always made to order. A generous helping costs a wallet-busting B\$1.

If you are invited to a Bruneian home, you'll probably be served *bualulu* with your tea. This simple dessert is made from eggs, flour and sugar. *Kuripit sagu*, a biscuit-like version of *buahulu* is jazzed up with mild coconut flavours.

Wash it all down with *cendol* (pronounced like 'chendol'), a murky coconut beverage with floating bits of green and brown (kinda like boba tea, although not as sweet). The taste is indefinable (you'll agree with us when you try it), but it's surprisingly refreshing after a long day of sightseeing. Ask around for *cendol Temburong* – a special provincial brew available only around Ramadan.

Tell the driver where you are headed – if it's on the route to the central bus station then he'll let you off. Taxis will charge around B\$20 for trips between the airport and city centre (the price goes up by at least B\$5 after 6pm); taxis are unmetered, so agree on the price before getting in. For a cheaper alternative, many hotels offer free or inexpensive pick-up service from the airport, so enquire when you book.

Bus

The government bus network covers most sights in and around the city, and the international ferry terminal at Muara. Routes for local buses are displayed at the bus station, beneath the multistorey car park on Jln Cator, and numbers are displayed on each bus. Apart from the 40-minute Muara express service

(B\$2), all fares are B\$1. Buses to the Gadong area run every 15 minutes; other routes are less frequent (there's usually one bus per hour to Muara terminal). Public transport operates daily between 6.30am and 6pm.

Some useful routes:

Airport Buses 23, 24, 36, and 38.

Brunei Museum and Malay Technology Museum
Bus 39.

Gadong Buses 1, 22 and 55.

Jame'Asr Hassanal Bolkiah Mosque Buses 1 and 22.

Jerudong Park Playground Buses 55 and 57.

Muara Buses 37, 38 and 39.

Car & Taxi

Hiring a car is a good way to explore Brunei, and there's definitely some gratification in saying you did a cross-country road trip

(in under two hours!). Prices start at around B\$130 per day. Rental agencies can arrange pick-ups/drop-offs at your hotel. Drivers can be arranged for an additional fee. See p594 for additional information about renting a car.

If you're staying within the city centre, taxis are a fine option. Negotiate the price before setting off. Trips around town cost around B\$10; it's about B\$35 to the Muara ferry terminal. Rates can climb by 50% after 6pm.

AROUND BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN

The sights strewn beyond the capital make a strong case for spending more than a day in Brunei.

JERUDONG

Jerudong's two white elephants – the Empire Hotel and the Jerudong Park Playground –

should rank high on your to-do list if you want to uncover the real Brunei.

Jerudong Park Playground

Perhaps the biggest birthday gift ever, **Jerudong Park Playground** (☎ 261-1894; Jerudong; admission & unlimited rides B\$15, or admission B\$1 & individual rides B\$3; 🕒 5pm-midnight Wed-Fri & Sun, 5pm-2am Sat) is a sprawling amusement park that was once a private playground for the royal family. Divided into two sections, one for teens and adults, and one for the youngsters, it's now in a semidormant state – most of the rides have been sold to other amusements and those that remain are 'closed for maintenance'. This gives the park a rather bizarre air – a mix of locals and tourists meander around slightly aimlessly, looking at the defunct attractions with a mixture of awe and bewilderment, like inhabitants of the *Planet of the Apes* discovering a postapocalyptic Manhattan.

A DJ'S SPIN ON BRUNEI: JENNY MALAI ALI

Jenny Malai Ali, a well-known radio personality, gives us her spin on what makes Brunei really tick. Born in Brunei to a British mother and Bruneian father, Jenny has lived all over the world, returning to Brunei several years ago to settle down and start a family. We stopped by the radio station for a chat – here's what she had to say:

'Hm...where to begin!? Well, I love Brunei and I think it's quite an appealing place for a visitor, even if they don't have oodles of time to explore. Obviously we're a small country, so there aren't a million things to see, but we have all of the creature comforts one would want, not to mention genuine Bruneian hospitality.

It's funny, though, as much as I love it here, Brunei really is a land of strange contradictions. We are all so proud to be Bruneian, but we readily embrace the country's imminent globalisation. Everyone adds a faux French prefix like 'Le' or 'De' to their establishment's name, and the hippest restaurants serve American or Japanese food – sushi is so 'in' right now. We're really into food here, namely because alcohol is prohibited...

Right now we are entering an MTV generation – we love acronyms and catchy bumper stickers. Teenagers dress to be noticed and everyone buys cars they can't afford. Actually, there are a lot of people living an alternative lifestyle – quite a few lesbians and transgender individuals – but I think that's more a function of living in a sexually repressed society. It's hard sometimes, you can't even hold hands with your partner.

Bruneians are obsessed with the internet – chatting, Facebook-ing etc – but blogging has really taken our country by storm. Bloggers are our local heroes. If you're interested, I'd check out: www.ranoadidas.com, he's an adopted member of the royal family. And the writer of www.anakbrunei.blogspot.com is a former government employee – he's quite patriotic.

Ultimately, we desperately want to be a modern Islamic nation, but for some reason we haven't quite pulled it off. We have a beautiful country – a scenic shoreline and an untouched rainforest – but every time we build something, like Jerudong for example, it doesn't quite work out! Dubai's pulled it off – I don't know why we aren't there yet...but we'll get there...

Jenny Malai Ali is well-known TV presenter and radio personality. She lives in Bandar Seri Begawan with her husband and son.

SMS: SIX MUST-SEES

After our interview with radio celeb Jenny Malai Ali (boxed text, p585), she quickly turned the tables, pointing the microphone in our direction for a pop quiz about life on the road. As we chatted about our impressions of Brunei, Jenny encouraged her listeners to send in ideas for our guidebook via SMS. Who better than a smattering of locals to give excellent insider travel tips, right? Well, we received over 50 text messages during our 30-minute interview; these were our six favourites:

- Go rafting from Taman Negera to Batang Duri in Temburong
- Take a boat safari through Kampong Ayer, then down Sungai Brunei to see the monkeys and palace
- Pusat Belia is the cheapest place to sleep in the whole country
- The best time to visit is during Hari Raya – don't forget to stop by the Istana Nurul Iman!
- Spend the night at a homestay in Kampong Ayer
- Visit Serasa Spit and Pulau Pilingpilangan at the easternmost tip of Brunei

When the big rides aren't working, admission is discounted to B\$5. Sleeveless blouses or shirts are not allowed and proper footwear is required. On Saturdays the park is open until 2am, and there are food and drink stalls in the car park.

It's rumoured that the park will be re-opening many of the rides in the near future and revitalising the grounds. We're not holding our breath...

Empire Hotel

Imagine a zillion-tonne hunk of Italian marble dipped in gold and tossed into the rainforest – you've just pictured the fanciful **our pick Empire Hotel & Country Club** (☎ 241 8888; www.theempirehotel.com; Muara-Tutong Hwy, Kampung Jerudong; r incl breakfast from B\$250; ♿ ♿ ♿). Built on the same scale as a Las Vegas casino, the resort was commissioned by Prince Jefri (see the boxed text, opposite) as – get this – lodging for guests of the royal family. Construction costs were estimated at a whopping US\$1.1 billion, an astronomical sum considering the Petronas Towers in KL cost US\$1.9 billion to build! The property was quickly transformed into an upscale resort in order to recover some of the construction costs (they still have a *long* way to go). Among the resort's spoils are two camel-shaped lamps made from pure Baccarat crystal, topped with solid gold accoutrements. They cost over US\$500,000 each, and one of them lives in the Emperor Suite (B\$22,000 per night), home to the world's most opulent indoor swimming pool. Rooms for

more conservative wallets have hand-woven carpets, gold-plated power points, and enormous bathrooms with marble floors.

Getting There & Away

It's easy to get to the playground on buses 55 or 57 from the bus station, but the last bus leaves at 5.30pm and getting back to town can be a problem. Major hotels have shuttle services for about B\$20 per person. A taxi back to BSB will cost about B\$35. Taxis can be organised at a moment's notice from reception at the Empire Hotel.

MUARA

While technically located within the same district as Bandar Seri Begawan (officially called the Brunei-Muara District), rural Muara feels like a different world.

Beaches

Not many people come to Brunei for a sun 'n' sand experience, but if you do have some spare time to stretch out on the dunes, there are a couple of options around the small port of Muara.

Two kilometres from town, **Pantai Muara** (Muara Beach) is a popular weekend retreat. The white sand is clean, but like many beaches in Borneo, it's littered with driftwood and other flotsam that comes in with the tide. It's quiet during the week and has food stalls, picnic tables and a children's playground.

Other beaches include **Pantai Serasa**, a thin bit of beach on an equally thin spit of land

jutting out into the sea. The Royal Brunei Yacht Club is here, as well as a water-sports centre and lots of food stalls on the weekend. About 4km west of Muara along the Muara-Tutong highway, **Pantai Meragang** (Crocodile Beach) is another beach that's pleasant and not quite as crowded as the others on weekends. There are a couple of food stalls and it's a good place for a picnic, but it's difficult to get to without your own transport.

Pulau Selirong

Known as 'Mosquito Island', this small island (25 sq km) off Brunei Bay, about one hour by boat from Muara, is on the itinerary of some tour companies for day trips – see p581 for operator listings. The island is a good example of mangrove ecology, with 2km of wooden walkways and an observation tower. A guide is necessary and caution is advised because of venomous snakes. A permit from the Forestry Department must be obtained in advance (which can be arranged by a travel agency within one working day).

Getting There & Away

Buses 37, 38 or 39 go from BSB to Muara town (B\$2); bus 33 will take you from there to Pantai Muara or Pantai Serasa (B\$1).

TUTONG & BELAIT DISTRICTS

The Tutong and Belait districts form the bulk of the big western section of Brunei. Most travellers merely pass through the region en route between Miri (Sarawak) and BSB, but there are a few mildly diverting attractions for those who have several days to spend in the country. Buses ply the coastal highway, but if you want to see the sights, the best way is to take a tour or rent a car.

TUTONG

pop 19,150

About halfway between Seria and BSB, Tutong is the main town in central Brunei. The town itself is unremarkable, but the area is famous in Brunei for two things: white sand and pitcher plants. Tutong has six species of pitcher plants and the locals cook a variety of dishes in their insect-catching sacs. The local sand (seen in patches along the side of the highway) is so white that Bruneians will often take pictures with it while pretending that it's snow. There's a great beach a couple of kilometres outside Tutong town near Pantai Seri Kenangan, often simply referred to as **Pantai Tutong**. Set on a spit of land, with the ocean on one side and the Sungai Tutong on the other,

LAND OF THE WHITE ELEPHANTS...

...sounds so romantic, but we're not talking about pale pachyderms.

Any of Brunei's buildings mentioned in the same breath as Prince Jefri tend to come with a sigh and a seven-digit price tag. The ultimate bored little rich boy, Jefri's appointment as finance minister was like putting a kid in charge of all the candy in the candy store, and his financial flights of fancy were truly epic. His acquisitions through the Amedeo Development Corporation included five luxury hotels overseas, not least the Beverly Hills Hotel in Los Angeles, and by the time the sultan cut him off, the prince had spent almost US\$4 billion on himself, with personal possessions including 2000 cars, nine private jets, multiple lavish residences (including an apartment at the opulent Place Vendôme in Paris) and some much-discussed gold-plated toilet brushes.

Prince Jefri left Brunei for London on a 'limited' US\$500,000-a-year allowance in 2004, barely enough to support his five wives and 35 children, but continued to enjoy an outlandish lifestyle, prompting the sultan and the Brunei Investment Agency (BIA) to pursue him again through the courts for an estimated US\$16 billion in missing funds. In early 2006 things got even more confusing: the British press reported that the sultan ended the veritable battle royale, and had unexpectedly agreed to drop the charges. Attempts have been made to mend the serious dent in the sultan's bank account – most of the rides at Jerudong were sold to other amusement parks and Jefri's ultimate beachside guest house was turned into a hotel (the Empire Hotel no less!), but there are dozens upon dozens of buildings around Brunei that sit empty and unkempt as they are slowly reclaimed by the unrelenting jungle.

the casuarina-lined beach is arguably the best in Brunei. The royal family clearly agrees, as they have a surprisingly modest palace here for discreet getaways. Us plebeians, sadly, have to make do with picnic tables, a simple restaurant and food hawkers at weekends. The turn-off to the beach is near the Tamu Tutong, where a **market** is held every morning.

TASEK MERIMBUN

The 7800-hectare **Merimbun Heritage Park** is 27km inland from Tutong, gazetted as an ASEAN Heritage Park to protect Tasek Merimbun, Brunei's largest lake. The black-water habitat is unique in Borneo, dyed a distinctive tea colour by tannin from leaves falling in the water, and supports a wide variety of birds, mammals and snakes. It's a pretty, tranquil spot surrounded by forest and rarely troubled by large groups. It is possible to pitch a tent along the lake, as there are bathroom facilities, but make sure you ask the local chief if you can stay on his land first. He'll say yes, but it's good manners to double check. A wander around the lake will set you back a whopping B\$1.

The only way to get there on your own is by car or as part of a tour from BSB (see p581). If you drive, note that the road gets pretty rough between Lammuni and the lake; drive through the *kampung* and stick to the main road.

JALAN LABI

As you enter the Belait district, east of Seria, a road branches inland to Labi, taking you past some prime forest areas. This *jalan* is the easiest way into the interior of Brunei and it offers the chance to see some Iban longhouses, most of which come complete with car parks and mod-cons (see the boxed text, p430 for details about the longhouse lifestyle). Nothing on this road is a must see, but if you've got a few extra days in Brunei, it makes for a good day away from BSB.

The **Forestry Museum** (admission free; 8am-12.15pm & 1.30-4.30pm Mon-Thu & Sat) is located down the Simpang 50 turn-off. It's a simple place that makes for a good leg-stretch on the way to Kuala Belait or into the interior further down Jln Labi. There are cleared walking trails through primary forest and a small museum detailing the history of logging and conservation in the region. The collection of insects is a sneak preview of what's to come on a trip down to Labi.

More than 50km south of the coastal road, the *kampung* of **Labi** is a small Iban settlement with a few fruit orchards. Note that there is a fork in the road just before Labi (as you head south, away from the main coastal road). Take the left fork to reach Labi and Teraja; don't take the right fork, which is marked Jln Labi Lama (Old Labi Rd). Several 'drive-up' longhouses are located beyond Labi.

From the end of Jln Labi, one can make a day hike all the way to Gunung Mulu National Park (p452). A guide and proper border-crossing paperwork are required – ask a tour operator (p581) in BSB for more information.

If you are trying to access Jln Labi without a vehicle, take a bus from BSB towards to Sarawak border and ask the bus driver to let you off at 'Junction to Labi'. After getting off, grab a coffee at the pistachio-coloured building on the side of the road and ask around for a ride into the interior (don't pay more than B\$10).

SERIA

pop 30,097

Seria, a company town spread out along the coast between Tutong and Kuala Belait, is a transit stop on the road to Sarawak. This is where Shell Brunei has its major installations, and the low bungalows accommodate company staff and the Gurkha troops brought in to protect their work.

The coastal plain between here and Kuala Belait is the main centre for oil production in Brunei, and at a beach just outside town the curvy **Billionth Barrel Monument** commemorates (you guessed it) the billionth barrel of oil produced at the Seria field. From the beach, oil rigs are visible, jutting up on the horizon.

If that's just not enough hydrocarbons for you, the flashy new **Oil & Gas Discovery Centre** (☎ 337 7200; www.shell.com.bn/ogdc; off Jln Tengah; adult/child/teenager B\$5/1/2; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Thu, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun) aims to put an 'edutainment' spin on the industry, appealing particularly to young science buffs. The complex includes an exhibition hall, a gallery, a theatre, an education centre and even a playground with a skate park to keep any disaffected youths happy. The Discovery Centre is opposite the town centre, on the foreshore. You could walk to it from the bus station, but it will be a hot 500m indeed. It's clearly signposted.

The only place to stay in Seria is the passable **Hotel Koperasi** (☎ 322 7589; Jln Sharif Ali Seria; s/d B\$55/65; 🏠) about 150m from the bus station.

About 10 buses a day run between Seria and BSB (B\$6, two hours). There are regular local buses between Seria and Kuala Belait (B\$1, every 30 minutes between 6.30am and 7.30pm), where you can catch buses onward to Miri and Kuching. Brunei transport are now running buses to Tutong and Belait from the main bus station, no longer from Tamu Kianggeh. Private vehicles should note that there is a toll (B\$3) located 18km before the Malaysian border.

KUALA BELAIT

pop 31,178

The last stop before Sarawak, Kuala Belait is the main town in Belait district and the place to get buses to Miri. 'KB' has colonial shop-houses in the town centre, the **Silver Jubilee Park** (Jln Maulana) and a reasonable beach, though most travellers just hustle through on their way to or from Sarawak. The HSBC bank has an ATM, diagonally opposite the bus station on Jln McKerron.

If you're looking for a bite, take a stroll down **Jalan Pretty**, where you'll find a variety of simple restaurants and Chinese *kopitiam*. Spend the night at the well-run **Hotel Sentosa** (☎ 333 4341; www.bruneisentosahotel.com; 92-93 Jln McKerron; r B\$85-95; 🏠), conveniently situated near the bus station.

TEMBURONG DISTRICT

While Malaysia has plundered its cache of lush jungle to keep its economy afloat, Brunei has surfed the waves of 'black gold', leaving its rainforest untouched. Temburong, the smaller of Brunei's puzzle-piece land claims, is plunged deep into the heart of neighbouring Sarawak like an emerald dagger.

For information on getting to/from Temburong, see right of the Bangar section.

BANGAR

pop 3500

The 'capital' of Temburong, quiet Bangar is but a three-street town on the banks of Sungai Temburong. The speedboat trip to reach Bangar is a highlight in itself, roaring down Sungai Brunei and slapping through the open sea of Brunei Bay, then tilting and

weaving through dense mangroves into the mouth of Sungai Temburong. Bangar can be visited as a day trip if you catch an early boat, but you'll get more out of it if you stay over and explore the area more thoroughly.

At the time of research, there were plans to reopen the tourism office – hopefully renovations will be well under way by the time you read this. Escape the balmy air at **Restoran Hijrah** (☎ 522 1522; Kedai 8; dishes B\$2.50-12; 🍽️) breakfast, lunch & dinner), a *kedai kopi* (coffee shop) up the road from the boat wharf. The menu offers a good mix of Chinese and Malay flavours, including the region's famous *udang gallah* (river prawns) and steamboat meals (B\$12 to B\$16, minimum two people).

Spend the evening at **Bangar Guest House** (Jln Batang Duri; r B\$20; 🏠), a great find located several kilometres from the pier. Rooms are immaculate and there's always service with a smile.

Boats to Bangar (B\$6, 45 minutes, about one per hour from 7am to early afternoon) operate from the jetty just east of the riverfront satay stalls, along Jln Residency. The last boat back to BSB leaves Bangar at 4pm.

Temburong has two main roads; both are sealed but traffic is light. One leads south to Batang Duri and the other runs between the east and west borders with Sarawak. Private and unofficial taxis are the only form of transport in the district, and drivers congregate near the wharf. They don't have meters, and prices must be negotiated.

BATANG DURI

The **Sumbiling Eco Village** (www.sumbiling.blogspot.com) is a new ecofriendly project in the Batang Duri area. Borneo Guide (p581) runs this rustic camp in cooperation with the local Iban.

PERADAYAN FOREST RESERVE

Fifteen kilometres southeast of Bangar and protected within the **Peradayan Forest Reserve** (admission free) are the peaks of **Bukit Patoi** (310m) and **Bukit Peradayan** (410m), which can be reached along walking tracks (bring your own water and trail food). For those who can't be bothered with the trouble or the expense of Ulu Temburong National Park (p590), this is a fine and easy alternative.

The 330m trail up to the top of Bukit Patoi is a steep and sweaty climb that starts at the

PRACTICALITIES

- The *Borneo Bulletin* is Brunei's English-language daily newspaper.
- English radio broadcasts can be heard on the FM bands Pilihan Network and Pelangi Network.
- State television channel RTB can be received on Channel 5.
- Electricity in Brunei is 220V to 240V, 50 cycles, with UK-type three-square-pin plugs
- Brunei uses the metric system.

entrance to the park. It's very much worth the trek as the scenery is breathtaking. Keep an eye out for hornbills, even if you can't spot one, you will likely hear their distinctive calls. Every year, the Bukit Patoi Challenge tests the endurance of willing participants with a 15km dash through the jungle.

Most walkers descend back along the same trail, but it's possible to continue over the other side of the summit and around to Bukit Peradayan. The trail eventually rejoins the road some 12km from Bangar near the Labu Km 5 marker. Allow at least three hours for the walk from Bukit Patoi to Bukit Peradayan and back to the road. This trail is harder and indistinct in parts.

A private car (the only means of getting there) will cost about B\$10 each way. Hitchhiking is also an option. The road to the Peradayan Forest Reserve – and Lawas (Sarawak) – is across the bridge from Bangar wharf, on the east side of the river.

ULU TEMBURONG NATIONAL PARK

Beautiful Ulu Temburong National Park is tucked inside the larger Batu Apoi Forest Reserve, a wild expanse of primary rainforest that covers most of southern Temburong. In the last few years, this stunning realm of green has become the most promoted attraction in the wee sultanate. Tourists and locals have been flocking here ever since.

The main feature at the park is the 60m canopy walkway, which is reached by a 1200-step climb up a shiny brass tower. The apparatus itself looks like a carpenter's scaffolding, but the views from the walkway are breathtaking (if you can get over the vertigo, as the tower wobbles in the wind).

The only accommodation in the park is the **Ulu Ulu Resort** (www.ululuresort.com), managed by Sunshine Borneo Tours (p581). Accommodation prices start at B\$248 and include transport and guided treks. Rooms vary in quality – we liked the private doubles the most.

The park is not accessible by independent travellers, as longboat hire is necessary. The vessels along the river service tour groups – and even if you convinced a boatswain to take you, it would cost almost B\$200. Tour packages are available with several companies, and start at around B\$180 for a day trip.

DIRECTORY**ACCOMMODATION**

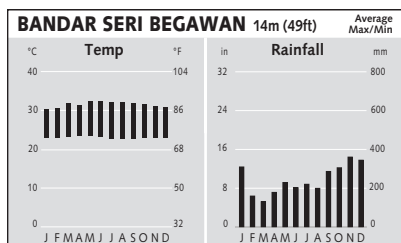
There are about 2800 rooms in Brunei spread across 35 establishments. Accommodation in Brunei is significantly more expensive than in neighbouring Malaysia. Budget places are under B\$60, midrange is B\$60 to B\$200, and top end is over B\$200. Most prices quoted are net, inclusive of 10% service charge. If you are unsure if your room rate is all-inclusive, simply ask if the amount is 'plus-plus' – a 'yes' means that the service charge has *not* been included. See p581 for more information about sleeping in the sultanate.

BUSINESS HOURS

Government offices are open from 7.45am to 12.15pm and 1.30pm to 4.30pm (closed on Friday and Sunday); non-government offices are generally open from 8am to 5pm Monday to Friday and from 8am to noon on Saturday. Most shops in the central area of Bandar Seri Begawan open daily around 10am and are closed by 6pm. Shops and shopping malls generally open around 9am or 10am and close around 9.30pm (some may close earlier on Sunday). Hours are usually shorter during the fasting month of Ramadan. Eateries generally serve breakfast from 7am to 11am, lunch from noon to 2.30pm, and dinner from 6pm to 11pm. For post-office opening hours, see p592. For bank opening hours, see opposite.

CLIMATE

Like the rest of Borneo, Brunei experiences high average temperatures, humidity and rainfall. Temperatures consistently fall



between 24°C and 31°C, with an average humidity of 79%. Average annual rainfall is about 3295mm. Although Brunei doesn't really have marked wet and dry seasons, the wettest months are from September to January, during the northeast monsoon, and the driest period is February to April.

CUSTOMS REGULATIONS

Duty-free allowances for persons over 17 years of age are 200 cigarettes or 250g of tobacco, 60ml of perfume and 250ml of eau de toilette. Non-Muslims may import two bottles of liquor and 12 cans of beer, which must be declared upon arrival.

The importation of drugs carries the death penalty.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Countries with diplomatic representation in Bandar Seri Begawan:

Australia High Commission (Map p576; ☎ 222 9435; www.bruneidarussalam.embassy.gov.au; Jln Pemancha)

Canada High Commission (Map p576; ☎ 222 0043; www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/Brunei; Bldg 1 Jln McArthur)

France (Map p576; ☎ 222 0960; www.ambafrance-bn.org; Unit 301-305 51-55 Kompleks Jalan Sultan, Jln Sultan)

Germany (Map p576; ☎ 222 5547; www.bandar-seri-begawan.diplo.de; 2nd fl, Unit 2.01, Block D, Yayasan Complex)

Indonesia (Off Map p576; ☎ 233 0180; www.indonesia.org.bn; 4498 Simpang 528, Jln Muara, Kampung Sungai Hanching Baru)

Malaysia High Commission (Off Map p576; ☎ 238 1095; mmalbrnei@kln.gov.my; 61 Simpang 396, Jln Kebangsaan, Kampung Sungai Akar)

Singapore High Commission (Off Map p576; ☎ 226 2741; www.mfa.gov.sg/brunei; 8 Simpang 74, Jln Subok)

UK High Commission (Map p576; ☎ 222 2231; http://ukinbrunei.fco.gov.uk/en; 2nd fl, Block D, Yayasan Complex)

USA (Map p576; ☎ 222 0384; amembassy_bsb@state.gov; 3rd fl, Teck Guan Plaza, Jln Sultan)

HOLIDAYS

Brunei has many of the same holidays as Malaysia, based on the Islamic calendar but including Chinese New Year, Christmas Day and New Year's Day.

Brunei National Day 23 February; parades and processions in downtown BSB to celebrate Brunei's independence.

Hari Raya Aidiladha Variable February/March.

Muslim New Year (Hizrah) Variable.

Royal Brunei Armed Forces Day 31 May.

Prophet's Birthday Variable (in Malaysia and Brunei only).

Sultan of Brunei's Birthday 15 July; a lively event marked by fireworks, processions and yet more parades in downtown BSB and around Brunei. Festivities continue through the entire month of July.

Hari Raya Aidilfitri Variable around September/October; the sultan opens the palace to visitors.

LEGAL MATTERS

The sale of alcohol is illegal in Brunei, and drinking in public is strictly prohibited. For being caught in homosexual acts you can be jailed for up to 10 years and fined B\$30,000.

MAPS

A tome of maps printed by Brunei Press, known simply as *Brunei Darussalam Street Directory*, is the best source for any of your road queries. Most hotels in central Bandar Seri Begawan have cartoon maps highlighting the city's main attractions.

MONEY

The official currency is the Brunei dollar (B\$), available in denominations of \$1, \$5, \$10, \$50, \$100, \$500 and \$1000. Singapore dollars can be used within Brunei (exchanged at an equal rate); however, Brunei dollars will usually not be accepted as legal tender in Singapore.

Banks are generally open from 9am to 4pm during the week, and from 9am to 11am on Saturdays. A couple of banks cater to late shoppers by staying open into the evening (especially in the Gadong area). On Fridays, banks close for midday prayer between 11am and 2.30pm.

There is no sales tax in Brunei. Some hotels add a 10% service charge, though this is mostly included in the published price. Tipping after a meal is not widely practiced in Brunei.

Major credit cards (Visa, MasterCard and American Express) are widely accepted.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Bruneians are quite camera friendly, but it's always polite to ask before clicking – and don't be surprised if they ask to snap your picture as well! Note that photography is strictly prohibited inside mosques, museums and military installations.

Photo shops can be found in Bandar's major shopping centres, while digital cameras and memory cards can also be purchased in mobile phone stores. Photographs can be burned on to CDs at most internet cafes and computer shops. For parts and repairs, it is best to consult the Yellow Pages or stop by a photo shop.

POST

Post offices open from 8am to 4.30pm Monday to Thursday and on Saturday, and 8am to 11am and 2pm to 4pm on Friday.

TELEPHONE

To call Brunei from outside the country, the country code is ☎ 673; from Brunei, the international access code is ☎ 00. Within Brunei, there are no area codes.

Hello card (hallo kad), Netcard (netcad) and Payless are the most common phonecards and can be purchased from most retail stores in denominations of B\$5, B\$10, B\$20 and B\$50. These can be used in public booths to make international calls. Most hotels have IDD phones with reasonable local rates.

Prepaid SIM cards from DST and b.mobile, the two major mobile service providers, are available for purchase from authorised dealers in popular shopping areas.

Note that if you have a Malaysian SIM card, it will not work within Brunei unless you use a special dial-out access code. Access rates are astronomical.

TOURIST INFORMATION

At the time of research, Brunei did not have a tourism information centre; however, the government's tourism authority, known simply as **Brunei Tourism** (☎ 238-2822; www.tourismbrunei.com; Ministry of Industry & Primary Resources, Jln Menteri Besar) has a wonderful website with oodles of information on accommodation, sights, local festivals, transport, photographs and maps. Plans are under way to open a small visitors centre in central BSB at the customs wharf.

For additional information on Brunei, check out the following websites:

www.brudirect.com Up-to-date news and current affairs.

www.brunei.gov.bn Brunei's official government website.

VISAS

All visitors must have a valid passport or internationally recognised travel document valid for at least six months beyond the date of entry into Brunei.

Everything you need to know about entering Brunei can be found in the Brunei Border Crossings boxed text (opposite).

There are 49 nationalities that do not require a visa. Citizens of Malaysia, Singapore, the UK, Luxembourg, Ireland, Denmark, Austria, Belgium, Finland, the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, Italy, France, Spain, Slovenia, Greece, Cyprus, Malta, the Czech Republic, Portugal, Hungary, Estonia, Slovakia, Lithuania, Poland, Latvia, South Korea, Norway, New Zealand, Iran, Oman, the UAE and Iceland do not require a visa for visits of 30 days or less. Citizens of Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, Canada, Japan, Switzerland, the Maldives, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, Peru and Ukraine get 14 days or less. US citizens get 90 days before having to renew their visa. Citizens from Australia, Bahrain and Kuwait entering by air can get a 30-day multi-entry visa on arrival for B\$30; citizens of China and Qatar qualify for 14 days (also B\$30). Israeli nationals are barred from entering Brunei.

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

As Brunei is a conservative Muslim society, dressing modestly is highly advised. Muslim women usually do not shake hands with men, thus a hand may not be extended to travellers of the opposite gender.

TRANSPORT

GETTING THERE & AWAY

To enter Brunei, many travellers will need to obtain a visa in advance; however, citizens of visa-restricted nations can get a 72-hour transit permit upon arrival at the international airport if they can supply proof of departure. For detailed information about border controls, please consult the Brunei Border Crossings box (opposite).

BRUNEI BORDER CROSSINGS

Fancy a stopover in Brunei to check off another country on your list? Before you make the trip, check out www.mfa.gov.bn/visainformation/visaarrangements.htm or www.immigration.gov.bn/002/html/melawat.html for the most up-to-date information about visas (also listed on opposite). The sites list all countries whose citizens do not require visas or who can obtain them upon arrival. Automatic entry permits are awarded in increments of 14 or 30 days depending on your nationality (Americans score 90 days). Citizens of countries not on the list must apply for their visas in advance (Israeli citizens are barred from entering Brunei). Visitors who require a visa can get a 72-hour transit pass if they are arriving by air and their onward destination is different from their origin.

Brunei has five other entry points besides the airport: Sungai Tujuh (Miri-Brunei), Kuala Lurah (Brunei-Limbang), Puni (Limbang-Temburong), Labu (Temburong-Lawas), and Serasa Ferry Terminal. Crossings open at 6am and close around 10pm, but note that the Puni border closes for noon prayer on Friday, and traffic at Kuala Lurah has been known to cause three-hour delays, so plan accordingly.

The Serasa Ferry Terminal in Muara links passengers to Pulau Labuan (Sabah), Limbang (Sarawak) and Lawas (Sarawak). A car-ferry service is in the works and will provide service to Menumbok on mainland Sabah.

When travelling overland from Miri (Sarawak) to Kota Kinabalu (Sabah) you'll rack up a whopping 10 chops in your passport (make sure you have a couple of blank pages!):

- Exit Malaysia at Sungai Tujuh (Miri)
- Enter Brunei at Sungai Tujuh (Belait)
- Exit Brunei at Kuala Lurah
- Enter Malaysia at Kuala Lurah (Limbang, Sarawak)
- Exit Malaysia at Tedungan
- Enter Brunei at Puni
- Exit Brunei at Labu
- Enter Malaysia at Lawas
- Exit Sarawak
- Enter Sabah at Sindumin
- Continue on to Kota Kinabalu

In the last few years, regular bus service from Miri to Bandar and Bandar to Kota Kinabalu has made this adventure through the jungle of red tape a lot easier on the nerves. Note that if you are passing through with your own transport, the Puni (Brunei) crossing is at the side of the road. There are proper border control posts everywhere else now, except for the one in Lawas as you enter from Temburong, where, at the time of research, you still have to stop by the roadside (but this post should be open soon). When the bridge being built across the Trusan river in Lawas is complete there will be only one ferry crossing left.

Oh, and while travelling between Bandar and Temburong don't forget to carry your passport, as you'll technically be passing through Malaysian waters.

Air

Brunei International Airport (☎ 233 2531, flight enquiries 233 1747) is about 4km from the centre of Bandar Seri Begawan.

Royal Brunei Airlines (Map p576; ☎ 221- 2222; www.bruneiair.com; RBA Plaza, Jln Sultan) flies to 20 major cities scattered throughout Asia, Australia, the Middle East and Europe.

Stopover flights go to London and Frankfurt for connections throughout Europe and further afield.

Four other airlines offer services to regional destinations:

Malaysia Airlines (MAS; ☎ 222 4141; www.malaysiaairlines.com; 144 Jln Pemancha)

Philippines Airlines (www.philippinesairlines.com; no office in Brunei)

Singapore Airlines (☎ 224-4901; www.singaporeair.com; 1st fl, Wisma Raya Bldg, 49-50 Jln Sultan).

Thai Airways (☎ 224 2991; www.thaiair.com; 4th fl, Kompleks Jln Sultan, 51-55 Jln Sultan)

Land

In the last few years, express buses have started to link Brunei's capital, Bandar Seri Begawan, with Miri (Sarawak, Malaysia) and Kota Kinabalu (Sabah, Malaysia). Brunei transport are now running buses to Tutong and Belait from the main bus station, no longer from Tamu Kianggeh. The bus to Kota Kinabalu (with possible stops in Limbang and Lawas) and the bus to Pontianak (with possible stops in Miri and Sibul, not Kuching) leave from across the street from Tamu Kianggeh. The bus to Kuching was not in operation at the time of research, but it is in the pipeline. The price for a one-way ticket to KK is B\$45, to Pontianak one way it's B\$80. The same rates apply if people want to stop along the way (as they are supposed to be point to point routes).

Boat service between Malaysian Borneo and Brunei can be much more convenient for those travelling overland between Sabah and Sarawak – crossing through Brunei will add ten stamps to your passport (and you're likely to wait in line for each one!) See p593 for detailed border information, especially if you are planning to use a private vehicle.

Car rentals are much more economical than taxi service. See right for information about rental-car operators (almost all are located in BSB or at the airport).

Sea

Most boats to/from BSB operate from the Muara Ferry Terminal, in Muara, about 25km northeast of the city (a B\$2 bus ride and a B\$40 taxi ride to/from BSB). Arrive 45 minutes before your boat, just in case there's a line at customs. There are regular ferries between Muara and Pulau Labuan in Sabah, (B\$15, 1½ hours, six departures between 7.30am and 4.40pm), Lawas and Limbang. From Pulau Labuan, there are two ferries a day onward to Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Passengers are charged B\$1 departure tax at the ferry terminal.

Another way to get to Limbang or Lawas in Sarawak is to go via Pulau Labuan (see p403).

GETTING AROUND

Transport around Brunei is by bus, rental car or taxi. The public bus system is easy and reliable, but only operates in and around Bandar Seri Begawan between 6am and 6pm daily. Taxis are a fine way of exploring central BSB. At the time of research there was no centralised taxi service number, all taxis can be found at the central bus station and in front of the Sheraton Utama. Ask your hotel for a contact if you need a cab – there are only 42 drivers in the country! For longer distances it is more cost-effective to rent a vehicle or take a bus. Boats to/from Bangar (B\$6, 45 minutes, about one departure per hour from BSB from 7am to 4.30pm) operate from the jetty along Jln Residency. Boats generally don't depart until they've got enough passengers to warrant the trip, so you'll probably have to wait. Temburong has a limited road network, and taxis are the only way to get around independently.

Intra-Brunei buses connect BSB's central bus terminal on Jln Cator to the towns of Seria (B\$6, two hours) and Kuala Belait (\$7, 2½ hours). However, if you are making your way between BSB and Sarawak, it is quicker to take a direct bus to Miri. Seria and KB aren't the most interesting destinations if you're on a tight travel schedule...

Hiring a car is the most cost-effective way of exploring Brunei. All-inclusive rentals start at around B\$130; surcharges may apply if the car is taken into Sarawak. Petrol is cheap (fun fact: there are only Shell stations in Brunei) and the main roads are in good condition; some back roads require a 4WD. An international driver's permit is required for driving in Brunei, and remember, Bruneians drive on the left side of the road.

If you will be driving your own vehicle, note that the usage of mobile phones while driving is strictly prohibited and punishable by hefty fines. Cameras and radars monitor phone usage, speed limits and buckled belts, so even if you don't see a cop, you could still find yourself with a hefty bill when returning your rental.

Rental operators in BSB include the following (all are located at the airport):

Avis (☎ 242 6345)

Budget-U-Drive (☎ 234 5573)

Hertz (☎ 245 2244)

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