

Destination Borneo

‘Going up the river arms was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings.’

Joseph Conrad wrote about the Congo, but he may as well have been talking about Borneo. When you’re deep in the heart of the Borneo jungle, it’s easy to imagine that you’ve slipped back in time to a world where plants and animals went about their business undisturbed by human beings.

First and foremost, Borneo is the result of a grand experiment. It answers the question of what would happen if you put a giant island right on the equator, sprinkled it with a vast amount of genetic material, soaked it with heaping quantities of sunlight and water, and then waited a few million years. The result is an explosion of life in exuberant abundance – Mother Nature’s wildest fantasy.

Borneo is 1000 species of orchids with heavenly aromas, and flowers three-feet across that stink like rotting meat. It is towering dipterocarp trees shrouded in a lattice of strangler figs and wide-eyed orangutans peering from the green walls of forest. It is hornbills soaring above canopy like modern-day pterodactyls or iridescent snakes that look like slithering gemstones. It is coral reefs that burst with clouds of tropical fish and mangrove swamps where crocodiles wait with patient eyes.

Not surprisingly, the people who call Borneo home are almost as diverse as the nature that surrounds them. From the dozens of indigenous peoples who’ve been on the scene for at least 40,000 years, to the more recent immigrants like the Chinese and Indians, walking down a crowded Borneo street is like snorkelling over a particularly healthy coral reef: the eye is drawn here and there by flashes of brilliant colour and beguiling shapes.

With such a rich cultural and natural bounty, it’s hardly surprising that Borneo was one of the great prizes of the imperial age, and the modern-day map of the island reflects its varied ancestry. The Indonesian state of Kalimantan occupies almost two-thirds of the island, laying claim to its entire southern region; the Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak occupy most of the island’s north; while the tiny oil-rich sultanate of Brunei lays claim to two slivers of land between Sabah and Sarawak.

Unfortunately, the riches of the Borneo environment are an irresistible temptation for modern industrial society. The primary tropical rainforest that once blanketed the island almost from coast to coast has been cut right back to the spine of the island and a few pockets in other parts of Sabah and Brunei. A quick look at any recent satellite image of the island only confirms the worst: the network of logging roads expands with each passing day, creating rivers of dirt down which the trees of the rainforest are funnelled to the waiting world.

Despite the damage done by modernity, Borneo is still a place with great attractions. Both above and below the surface of the ocean, the natural environment of Borneo is among the most biodiverse in the world. And if you like to experience nature by getting right among it, this is the place for you – Borneo is a vast natural playground where you can spelunk, jungle trek, scuba dive and snorkel to your heart’s content. And with cheap airfares from Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore and Bangkok, along with comfortable, modern cities along its coasts, it’s easy to see why adventure travellers the world over are making tracks to Borneo.

‘Borneo is 1000 species of orchids with heavenly aromas, and flowers three-feet across that stink like rotting meat.’

Getting Started

Despite its image as one of the wildest places on earth, Borneo is an incredibly easy place in which to travel. In the coastal areas of Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei, you will find good infrastructure, excellent transport and a decent range of good accommodation. Kalimantan is generally less developed and more challenging, but it's still within reach of ordinary adventurous travellers. Indeed, perhaps the biggest surprise for most travellers to Borneo is just how 'first world' it all seems.

In terms of cost, the essentials of life – food, lodging and most forms of transport – are quite cheap indeed. It's the luxuries – coastal resorts, independent river-travel and journeys deep into the jungle – that can really add up.

WHEN TO GO

Travel is possible any time in Borneo. It's hot and humid, with ample rain falling throughout the year, usually in the form of afternoon showers. While there's little or no seasonal temperature variation, there is an indistinct rainy season from October to February, but it's not usually enough to interfere with travel. It's sometimes said that the best time to climb Mt Kinabalu is between March and October, but most locals agree that it's pointless to try to determine a 'dry' season on the mountain.

If you're interested in indigenous culture, you might consider visiting at the beginning of June, when the local Dayak peoples of Sarawak hold their Gawai Dayak celebrations. Otherwise, the best time to visit Borneo is whenever you can find the time.

See Climate (p291) for more information on the weather.

See Climate Charts (p291)
for more information

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

What you bring to Borneo will depend on what you plan to do there – if you plan to go up Mt Kinabalu, go jungle trekking or diving, you'll have to consider your kit carefully. The most important thing to remember is to travel light – dragging a heavy pack or suitcase around is troublesome in any climate, but in the tropics, it's murder. Keep in mind that even if you forget something, you can buy most things that you need in the bigger cities such as Kota Kinabalu or Kuching. The exceptions are specialised outdoor gear such as leech socks, good backpacks, snorkelling and diving gear, and really large-sized clothing.

Unless you've got business in Borneo, you won't need any formal clothes. Men should keep in mind that most adult males in Borneo don't wear shorts in cities or towns, particularly not in smart restaurants or hotels. Likewise, women should remember that Borneo is largely Muslim and relatively discreet clothing is a good idea – you certainly don't have to cover your hair, but walking around with a tank top or bikini top is a bad idea.

Here are a few things you should definitely consider bringing:

- Leech socks – if you're going jungle trekking, you'll be glad for these when the leeches make their move.
- Fast-drying synthetic clothing – cotton really never dries in the jungle, so bring something that will dry fast and not weigh you down.
- Good books – there are a few good bookstores in Sabah and Sarawak, but if you're picky about what you read, you'll be happy you brought some from home.
- Medicine – you can get most medicines in Borneo but it can take time.
- Gifts – if you plan to visit longhouses, a few trinkets from home will be appreciated.
- A song – after your longhouse hosts treat you to a song, they'll expect you to reciprocate.

SAMPLE DAILY BUDGETS

SABAH & SARAWAK

Budget

Guesthouse accommodation (per person): RM15
Two *kedai kopi* (coffee shop) meals: RM7
One bus trip: RM5
One entry fee: RM3
Snacks, drinks and sundries: RM5
Total: RM35

BRUNEI

Budget

Guesthouse accommodation (per person): B\$35
Two *kedai kopi* meals: B\$6
One bus trip: B\$2
Snacks, drinks and sundries: B\$5
Total: B\$48

KALIMANTAN

Budget

Guesthouse accommodation (per person): 80,000Rp
Two simple meals: 20,000Rp
One bus trip: 15,000Rp
Snacks, drinks and sundries: 10,000Rp
Total: 125,000Rp

Midrange

Simple hotel accommodation (per person): RM50
Two typical meals: RM20
One bus trip: RM5
One taxi ride: RM10
One entry fee: RM3
Snacks, drinks and sundries: RM10
Total: RM98

Midrange

Simple hotel accommodation (per person): B\$60
Two typical meals: B\$25
One bus trip: B\$2
One taxi ride: B\$10
Snacks, drinks and sundries: B\$10
Total: B\$107

Midrange

Simple hotel accommodation (per person): 250,000Rp
Two typical meals: 35,000Rp
One bus trip: 15,000Rp
One taxi ride: 30,000Rp
Snacks, drinks and sundries: 20,000Rp
Total: 350,000Rp

COSTS & MONEY

Borneo can be a very cheap place in which to travel. Food, in particular, is generally very cheap. Indeed, we know of few places where you can eat so well for so little. Meals in a typical *kedai kopi* (coffee shop) average about US\$2. Accommodation costs are roughly what you expect to pay in other parts of Southeast Asia. Public transport is quite cheap and even air travel is within the reach of most budget travellers.

If all you plan to do is see a few of the main sights and relax on a beach somewhere, you will find Borneo competitive with, say, Thailand. It's when you want to experience some of Borneo's famous jungles or coral reefs that things can get expensive. Trips into Sabah's two brilliant conservation areas, Danum Valley and Maliau Basin, will really dent your wallet, as will diving in places such as Pulau Sipadan or Layang Layang. Likewise, if you've read Redmond O'Hanlon's *Into the Heart of Borneo* and want to follow in his footsteps, you'll have to shell out upwards of US\$1000.

Fortunately, some of Borneo's greatest highlights, including Gunung Mulu National Park, Mt Kinabalu, Niah Caves and Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park, are all reasonably inexpensive to visit.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Borneo has occupied the world's imagination for centuries and there is no shortage of books about the island. Easily the best recent title is *Stranger in*

the Forest by Eric Hansen, in which the author recounts his 1976 journey across the island in the company of Penan guides. It is not just the difficulty of the feat – Hansen is the only Westerner ever to cross Borneo on foot – it is the author's brilliant and sensitive storytelling that makes the book a classic. One cannot read the book without a sense of real sadness, for the world and the people Hansen describes in his book are now almost completely gone. If you read only one book before going to Borneo, make it this one.

The most popular book about Borneo is Redmond O'Hanlon's *Into the Heart of Borneo*, which is a humorous account of the author's 1983 journey up a river in Sarawak to a mountain on the border with Kalimantan. While O'Hanlon makes a bit much of what was a fairly unremarkable journey, one cannot help but enjoy his colourful narrative.

Espresso with Headhunters: A Journey Through the Jungles of Borneo by John Wassner tells of a more extensive and adventurous recent river/land trip by an Australian traveller (and inveterate caffeine and nicotine addict). Not nearly as famous as O'Hanlon's book, this book actually gives a more realistic account of what life is really like in Sarawak. We only wish he had chosen a different title – it's time to let the whole headhunter thing in Borneo die a quiet death.

Three Came Home by Agnes Newton Keith cannot strictly be called travel literature, but it's one of the most fascinating books on Borneo. Newton Keith spent most of WWII in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp in Sarawak with her young son. The woman's toughness and hope in the face of appalling conditions makes a great and inspiring read. This book has recently been reprinted and is easy to find online. It's the follow-up to her excellent *Land Below the Wind*, which tells of her life in Borneo before the war.

Another book about Borneo during the war is *Escapes and Incursions* by Kevin Smith. The book covers two main themes: escapes by mostly Australian prisoners of war before and during the famous Sandakan Death March (the escapes section), and secret missions by Allied forces in Borneo during the war (the incursions section). Again, it's not typical travel lit, but if you enjoy wartime history, this is an absolute must.

If you climb Mt Kinabalu, you can't help but notice the gaping chasm of Low's Gully to your right as you climb the final summit pyramid. *Kinabalu Escape: The Soldier's Story* by Rich Mayfield tells of the British Army's ill-fated 1994 attempt to descend the gully. The expedition, which was a textbook case in how not to run an expedition, led to an expensive rescue operation and the near-deaths of several team members. Think of it as a tropical version of *Into Thin Air*.

Finally, if you want to get a sense for what life was like in Borneo during the time of the 'white rajahs', you'll do no better than *My Life in Sarawak* by Margaret Brooke, the Rane of Sarawak (wife of Charles Brooke). This adventurous woman embraced Borneo wholeheartedly and her sympathetic portraits of its people are fascinating.

INTERNET RESOURCES

There's no better place to start your web explorations than at lonelyplanet.com. Here you'll find succinct summaries of travelling to most places on earth, postcards from other travellers and the Thorn Tree bulletin board, where you can ask questions or dispense advice when you get back. You can also find travel news and updates to many of our most popular guidebooks.

Other websites with useful Borneo information are:

Brunei Government (www.brunei.gov.bn) The Brunei government's site has daily news updates, links to all the ministries and a brief background on the country.

HOW MUCH? KALIMANTAN

Litre of petrol: 4500Rp
Street snack (a few satay sticks): 4000Rp

Cup of tea in *kedai kopi*: 2,000Rp

T-shirt: 20,000Rp

Beer (large bottle of Bintang beer): 20,000Rp

Litre of bottled water: 3000Rp

HOW MUCH? BRUNEI

Litre of petrol: B\$0.72

Street snack (a few satay sticks): B\$2.50

Cup of tea in *kedai kopi*: B\$1

T-shirt: B\$10

Beer: unavailable

Litre of bottled water: B\$1

HOW MUCH?

SABAH & SARAWAK

Litre of petrol: RM1.90

Street snack (Chinese pork bun): RM1

Cup of tea in *kedai kopi*: 50 sen

T-shirt: RM10

Beer (large bottle of Tiger beer): RM10

Litre of bottled water: RM1.50

Google Earth (<http://earth.google.com>) This service is one of the best ways to check out exactly where Borneo's forests remain intact and where they've been logged.

Indonesia: Society & Culture (<http://coombs.anu.edu.au/WWWVLPages/IndonPages/WWWVL-Indonesia.html>) The Australian National University's links site is a good place to do some serious Indonesia/Kalimantan research.

Tourism Malaysia (<http://travel.tourism.gov.my>) Malaysia's national tourism organisation has some limited information about Sabah and Sarawak on its site.

World Wildlife Fund Heart of Borneo Page (www.wwf.org.uk/heartofborneo) This site has good information on the Heart of Borneo project and an absolutely heartbreaking graphic on forest loss in Borneo.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

THE BEST OF BORNEO

Two Weeks

Fly into **Kota Kinabalu** (KK; p88) and spend a day or two in the city getting acclimatised to the tropics. A day trip out to the palm-fringed islands of **Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park** (p102) is highly recommended.

Next, head up to **Kinabalu National Park** (p106) and attempt Mt Kinabalu. Drag your weary limbs back to KK and then fly to **Miri** (p200) and hit **Niah Caves National Park** (p197). Return to Miri and then fly up to **Gunung Mulu National Park** (p205). You'll want to spend as long as you can here checking out the caves, the canopy walkway and the Pinnacles.

From Gunung Mulu, there are several ways to return to KK: heading overland via the Headhunter's Trail to Limbang and from there back to KK, taking a series of boats down the Sungai Baram to Miri and then on to KK or flying directly from Mulu to KK.



Some of Borneo's best sights are clustered in the northwest part of the island, within easy travelling distance of Borneo's main gateway, the city of Kota Kinabalu. This popular two-week itinerary is convenient and easy – apart from the climb up Mt Kinabalu. It's the best way to see some of Borneo's real highlights in a limited time.

KK TO KUCHING: A COASTAL ODYSSEY

One Month

Fly into **KK** (p88) and spend a few days settling into the old backpacking life. Wander the night market and take a boat out to the islands of **Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park** (p102).

Then, head up to **Kinabalu National Park** (p106) and do battle with the granite beast. After bagging the summit, you might head to Poring Hot Springs to soak them weary bones or search for the elusive rafflesia.

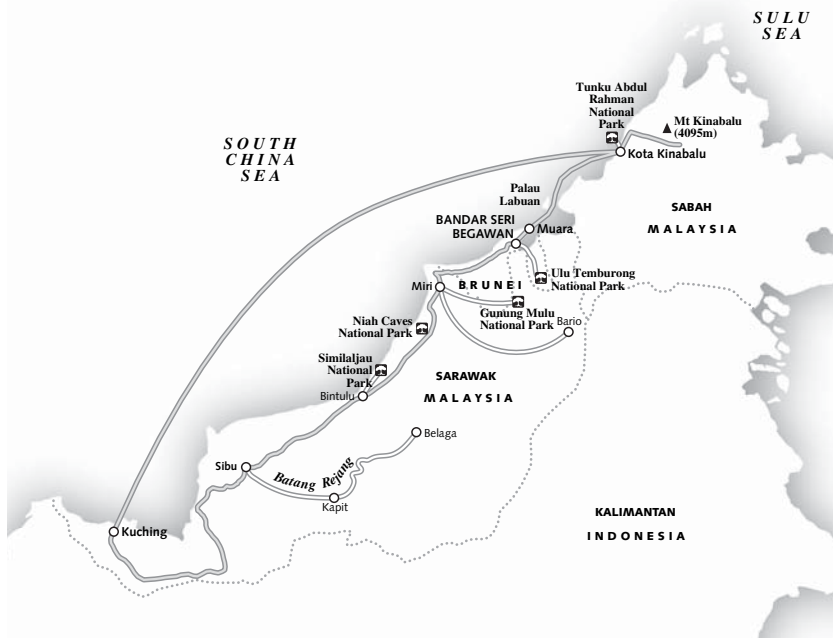
Next, take the ferry from KK to **Pulau Labuan** (p121) and on to **Muara** (p230) in Brunei, the port of **Bandar Seri Begawan** (BSB; p221). Spend a day or two in BSB checking out the museums and mosques and then take the speedboat ride through the marshes to **Bangar** (p233), which is one of Borneo's best boat rides.

Continue overland to **Miri** (p200) and take your pick: fly up to **Gunung Mulu National Park** (p205) for some caving and climbing or fly up to the **Kelabit Highlands** (p212) for a spot of longhouse trekking. Return to Miri and continue down the coast to **Niah Caves National Park** (p197) to check out the limestone caves there.

From Niah, head onward to **Bintulu** (p194), with a possible sidetrip to **Similajau National Park** (p196), then it's on to **Sibu** (p185), where you can embark on a river journey up the **Batang Rejang** (p189) into the interior, stopping in **Kapit** and **Belaga**.

Head back to Sibu and then dash down to wonderful **Kuching** (p162) and then fly back to KK.

The northwest coast of Borneo is adventure from north to south. This journey down the coast from KK to Kuching is the best way to take it all in. You'll experience the island's three most important cities, several of its best national parks and you'll have the opportunity to head up the Batang Rejang, the so-called 'Amazon of Borneo'.

**ROADS LESS TRAVELLED****THE FULL MONTY: RIGHT ROUND BORNEO**

Two Months

A trip right around the coast of the world's third-largest island is for hardcore travellers. Fly into **KK** (p88) and go down the northwest coast of Borneo to **Kuching** (p162). The usual route is via ferry from KK to **Pulau Labuan** (p121) and on to **Muara** (p230) in Brunei, the port of **Bandar Seri Begawan** (BSB; p221). Be sure to include a side trip to **Bangar** (p233).

From BSB, travel to **Miri** (p200) and consider a side trip into **Gunung Mulu National Park** (p205) or a flight up to **Bario** in the **Kelabit Highlands** (p212). Continue down to **Niah Caves National Park** (p197). From Niah, travel to **Bintulu** (p194) and onward to **Sibu** (p185), where you can catch a boat for the river journey up **Batang Rejang** (p189). Head back to Sibu and then to **Kuching** (p162), Borneo's cultural capital. From Kuching, head overland to **Pontianak** (p237) in Kalimantan. After checking out the city, fly south to **Pangkalan Bun** (p250), from which you can visit **Tanjung Puting National Park** (p253). Then, continue along the coast to **Banjarmasin** (p260), where you can check out the surrounding rivers.

Next, go up to **Balikpapan** (p267), and on to **Samarinda** (p272), the gateway to **Sungai Mahakam** (p277). Head up the river into the interior and then return to Samarinda. The next leg up to **Berau** (Tanjung Redep; p282) is a 16-hour hell ride. After the journey, head out to **Pulau Derawan** (p284) and treat yourself to some relaxing island life. Continue by boat up to **Tarakan** (p287), where you can catch boats onward to **Tawau** (p151). The remaining trip from KK via **Lahad Datu** (p144), **Sandakan** (p133), and **Kinabalu National Park** (p106) will seem like child's play after the wilds of Kalimantan...until you tackle Mt Kinabalu.



For those who want to see it all (or pretty damn much of it) and don't mind some rough travel en route, this is the mother of all Borneo trips – the full circuit right round the outside of the world's third-largest island.

TAILORED TRIPS

SABAH PLUS MULU: THE NATURAL WONDERS OF THE NORTH

Two to Three Weeks

Fly into **Kota Kinabalu** (p88) and spend a day or two enjoying everything the city has to offer. Next, take the bus up to **Kinabalu National Park** (p106) and make the trek up to the summit to see the sunrise over Borneo. Descend the mountain and treat yourself to a soak in **Poring Hot Springs** (p116) before continuing by bus to the east side of Sabah, where you can visit with our orangutan cousins in **Sepilok Orang-Utan Rehabilitation Centre** (p138).

The next stop is the **Sungai Kinabatangan** (p143), accessed via **Sukau**. After enjoying the wildlife along the river, head down to **Lahad Datu** (p144). If your budget allows, stay at **Borneo Rainforest Lodge** in **Danum Valley** (p145).

If you're a diver, you'll want to tack on a trip down to **Semporna** (p149) and **Pulau Sipadan** (p150), one of the world's great dive sites.

Then, it's a flight back to KK and, if time and budget allow, a flight to Sarawak's **Gunung Mulu National Park** (p205). You'll want to give this as much time as you can, because it's simply spectacular.



ON THE TRAIL OF RAJAS AND SULTANS

Three weeks

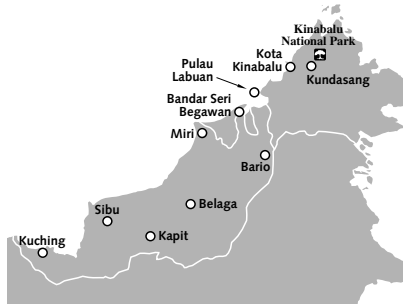
Fly into **KK** (p88) and check out the old Jln Gaya area and Australia Place to learn about the city's colonial and wartime history. From here, head inland to **Kinabalu National Park** (p106) and continue just a bit further to **Kundasang** (p115) to check out the Kundasang War Memorial.

Return to KK and head by ferry to **Pulau Labuan** (p121), which is rich in WWII history. Next, continue by boat to Brunei's **Bandar Seri Begawan** (BSB; p221). Spend a few days in and around BSB checking out mosques, museums and palaces.

Next, head down the coast to **Miri** (p200) and take a flight up to **Bario** (p213) in the Kelabit Highlands, where you can immerse yourself in Kelabit culture.

Head back to Miri and continue by bus to **Sibu** (p185), where you can catch a boat up the **Batang Rejang** (p189) to **Kapit** and **Belaga**, where you can check out the historical sites of the so-called 'white rajahs'.

Return to Sibu and head down to **Kuching** (p162), which is Borneo's most culturally rich city. From Kuching, it's an easy flight back to KK.



Snapshot

These days, cranky old men at your typical *kedai kopi* (coffee shop) in Borneo will most likely be decrying the current high cost of living, due to the rise in the price of crude oil. The odd optimist among them will likely point out that they've all got more money in their pockets to pay for the high prices of goods, due to the fact that the entire island has been undergoing something of an economic boom, particularly the Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak.

It's a sure bet that politics will follow the state of the economy in most *kedai-kopi* conversations. In Malaysia, the current government of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is going through a difficult period as it has been hit by several scandals in the last year, including charges of corruption and cronyism. Religious freedom in Malaysia is becoming another contentious issue due to several high-profile incidents in the last two years.

In Sarawak, the Bakun Hydroelectric Project is currently in the final stages of construction. When completed, it will be the second-largest dam in Asia outside of China, and aims to provide East Malaysia with a large increase in electrical-generating capacity. Plans are being discussed to lay sub-marine cables from Borneo to Peninsular Malaysia where excess capacity will be sent. The Bakun dam will flood an area the size of Singapore in the Malaysian rainforest.

On the positive side, in 2007 an initiative was announced by the Malaysian, Bruneian and Indonesian governments in cooperation with the World Wildlife Fund and the International Tropical Timber Organization to create the Heart of Borneo conservation area, using conservation areas and sustainable forestry to protect 2 million hectares of rainforest straddling all three countries that share the island of Borneo.

Whatever happens, it is clear that Borneo is one of those places in the world where the forces of conservation and consumption clash. It is, quite literally, a contest between mind-boggling diversity and a creeping monoculture. The island is a place where all those arguments about wilderness preservation versus economic development take on a horrible reality. It is the place where the first-world desire for hardwood furniture takes the form of a chain saw biting into a towering rainforest giant, or, conversely, where enlightened conservation efforts mean an undisturbed night in the jungle canopy for a family of orangutans.

The fact is, Borneo is one of the most important places on earth right now. It is a treasure trove of unbelievable biodiversity and almost all of this biodiversity hangs in the balance. The next two decades or so will determine the fate of hundreds of species unique to Borneo. What the world stands to gain in terms of a few pieces of nice furniture or a few million barrels of palm oil, it will lose in terms of unimaginable and irreplaceable living forms. One of the most important things we can do as travellers is to go to Borneo now and get out there on the front lines and see just what this battle looks like up close – and to see what we all might lose.

FAST FACTS

Population:
 Kalimantan – 12,223,300
 Sabah – 2,449,389
 Sarawak – 2,357,500
 Brunei – 374,577

GDP:
 Sabah – US\$8 billion
 Sarawak – US\$8.8 billion
 Brunei – US\$9.5 billion

Borneo is one of only two places in the world where you can see wild orangutans

Mt Kinabalu is the highest mountain in South East Asia

UNESCO World Heritage Sites: Gunung Mulu and Kinabalu National Park

The first season of *Survivor* was shot on Pulau Tiga in Sabah

Plants: Borneo is home to 40% of all palm species in the world

Animals: Borneo is home to 20% of all snake species in the world

There is no record of any human entering Sabah's Maliau Basin until the 1980s

On the Road



CHRIS ROWTHORN Coordinating Author

This pretty much speaks for itself: I was dead tired and pretty cold by the time I reached the summit of Mt Kinabalu in Sabah. But I was happy to be on top. The last time I was there, it was very windy and pouring with rain and I could see nothing.

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MUHAMMAD COHEN Committed to seeing things from every angle, Muhammad Cohen climbs toward the bird-watching pavilion some 30m up a tree in East Sabah's Danum Valley Conservation Area, hardly the first time his research has put him up a tree.