

Sabah



Malaysia's state of Sabah proves that there is a god, and we're pretty sure that he's some sort of mad scientist. Sabah was his giant test tube – the product of a harebrained hypothesis. You see, on the seventh day, god wasn't taking his infamous rest, he was pondering the following: 'what would happen if I took an island, covered it with impenetrable jungle, tossed in an ark's worth of animals, and turned up the temperature to a sweltering 40°C?'

The result? A tropical Eden with prancing mega-fauna and plenty of fruit-bearing trees. This 'land below the wind', as it's known, is home to great ginger apes that swing from vine-draped trees, blue-hued elephants that stamp along marshy river deltas and sun-kissed wanderers who slide along the silver sea in bamboo boats. Oh but there's more: mighty Mt Kinabalu rises to the heavens, governing the steamy wonderland below with its imposing stone turrets. The muddy Sungai Kinabatangan roars through the jungle – a haven for fluorescent birds and cheeky macaques. And finally there's Sipadan's seductive coral reef, luring large pelagics with a languid, come-hither wave.

In order to make the most of *your* days of rest, we strongly encourage you to plan ahead. Sabah's jungles may be wild and untamed, but they're covered in streamers of red tape. With a bit of patience and a lot of preplanning, you'll breeze by the permit restrictions and booked beds. Independent travellers may find Sabah a bit frustrating, but we promise that the hoop-jumping is well worth it.

HIGHLIGHTS

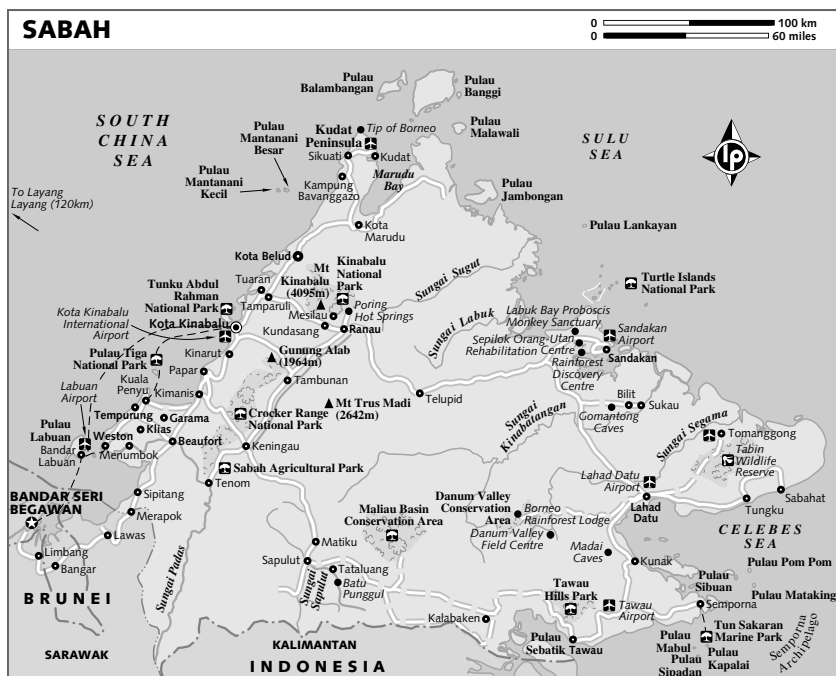
- Smiling in your scuba mask while doing the backstroke past tranquil turtles, slippery sharks and technicolour coral in the **Semporna Archipelago** (p388)
- Hoofing it over pitcher plants and granite moonscapes for the ultimate Bornean sunrise atop **Mt Kinabalu** (p357)
- Pressing your binoculars tight against your face as you spot soaring hornbills and nest-weaving orang-utans along the mighty **Sungai Kinabatangan** (p379)
- Getting ape close and personal with our ginger-haired cousins at the **Sepilok Orang-Utan Rehabilitation Centre** (p375)
- Enjoying vistas of green as far as the eye can see in the protected old-growth (primary) forest of the **Danum Valley** (p384)



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 087, 088, 089

■ POPULATION: 3.39 MILLION

■ AREA: 76,115 SQ KM



History

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

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

After independence, Sabah was governed for a time by Tun Mustapha, who ran the state almost as a private fiefdom and was often at odds with the federal government in Kuala Lumpur (KL). Even when the Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS; Sabah United Party, controlled by the Kadazan indigenous group) came to power in 1985 and joined Barisan Nasional (BN), Malaysia's ruling coalition party, tensions with the federal government were rife. In 1990 the PBS pulled out of the alliance with BN just days before the general election. The PBS claimed that the federal government was not equitably returning the wealth that the state generated, and in 1993 it banned the export of logs from Sabah, largely to reinforce this point. The federal government used its powers to overturn the ban, and despite ongoing discussions, to this day nothing has changed – only a small percent of revenue trickles back into state coffers.

As a result of this imbalance and its bad relations with the federal government, Sabah is the poorest of Malaysia's states, with an unemployment rate twice the national average (which is around 3.5%). Although the

state is rich in natural resources, 16% of the population lives below the poverty line. Part of the problem is a bizarre rotation system that forces a change of political administration every two years (see the boxed text, p43).

To compound the economic difficulties, Sabah has experienced an extraordinary population boom over the last couple of decades – in 1970 the total number of inhabitants was under 650,000, whereas now it's nearing 3.5 million. The government attributes this to illegal immigrants, claiming that there are around 1.5 million foreigners in the state, but whatever the truth, a solution will need to be found in the next few years for Sabah's stretched resources.

Climate

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

Visas & Permits

Sabah is semi-autonomous, and like Sarawak it has its own immigration controls. On arrival most nationalities are likely to be given a visa for three months' stay (on top of any time they had previously spent in Peninsula Malaysia). It is rare to be asked to show money or onward tickets.

Visas can be renewed at immigration offices at or near most points of arrival. If you miss the expiry date you can report to another immigration office, even if it's several days later, and explain your situation to the officials. For information on organising permits, see opposite.

National Parks & Reserves

Sabah's national parks are among the main reasons tourists visit the state. They include:

Crocker Range National Park (139 sq km) Preserving a huge swathe of forested escarpment overlooking the coast, this park has no facilities; see p396.

Kinabalu National Park (754 sq km) Easily accessible from Kota Kinabalu (KK), this is the state's largest and most popular national park. It offers mountain-trekking

at Mt Kinabalu, forest walks at the headquarters and Mesilau, and the hot springs at Poring; see p357, p365 and p365.

Pulau Tiga National Park (15 sq km) Three islands 50km southwest of KK: one formed by volcanic mud eruptions, one famous for sea snakes and the third virtually washed away by wave action; see p399.

Tawau Hills Park (29 sq km) Near Tawau in the state's southeast, this park has forested volcanic hills, waterfalls and hot springs; see p394.

Tun Sakaran Marine Park (325 sq km) Protects some of the best reef dive sites in the world; see p388.

Tunku Abdul Rahman (TAR) National Park (49 sq km) A group of five islands, one quite large, a few kilometres west of the capital. Features include beaches, snorkelling and hiking; see p354.

Turtle Islands National Park (17 sq km) Three tiny islands 40km north of Sandakan, protecting the nesting ground of green and hawksbill sea turtles; see p379.

The Sabah Foundation runs two reserves: the **Danum Valley Conservation Area** (p384) and the **Maliau Basin** (p394), and a third area, Imbak Canyon, is currently in the works. The **Tabin Wildlife Reserve** (p386) is managed by both the Forestry and the Wildlife Departments, though a private company manages the visitor facilities.

Tours

Independent travel in Sabah is limited compared to neighbouring Sarawak, and most travellers will have to rely on tour outfits at some point. Sabah has a huge number of tour operators, mostly based in Kota Kinabalu. A good operator can make life easier if you're short on time, and some places are simply too expensive or too much hassle to visit independently. If you run into problems with a tour agency, take your complaint to the **Sabah Tourism Board** (p344).

Getting There & Away

There are regular flights connecting Kota Kinabalu to a variety of international cities including Singapore, Manila, Shenzhen, Bandar Seri Begawan, Hong Kong, Cebu, Guangzhou, Macau, Seoul and Jakarta. Most visitors arrive at the state capital, Kota Kinabalu (KK), by air or boat, but it is possible to travel into Sabah overland from Sarawak via Brunei (see p593), and by boat, from Kalimantan (Indonesia; p393).

GAINING ENTRY TO THE WORLD'S BIGGEST THEME PARK

They call Sabah 'The World's Largest Themepark', and like any good attraction, Sabah has lines. You won't see frowning tourists queuing for their turn on the ride – instead you'll find disgruntled adventurers snared by red tape. As we researched our way across the island, we encountered scores of vacationers lamenting booked beds, or bemoaning being barred from national parks. So, we're coming right out and saying it – plan ahead!

The best way to get the most out of a Sabahan sojourn is to develop an itinerary before you arrive. Check out a couple of our suggested routes in the Itineraries section p24 to get a few ideas. Once you have a good sense of the sights you'd like to visit, find out if those destinations require permits. Mt Kinabalu (p359) and Tun Sakaran Marine Park (Sipadan; p388) are the two most popular spots in Sabah that have stringent visitation regulations imposed by the Malaysian government.

For a Kinabalu climb, it is best to book as far in advance as possible – six months is ideal although usually not feasible for most travellers. Head directly to the Sutera Sanctuary Lodges office in KK (p347) if you did not organise your climb before leaving home – sitting in front of the booking agents will increase your chances of finding a cancellation (although you'll probably have to reshape your itinerary once they offer you an inconvenient ascent date). Most of the beds have been gobbled up by tour operators, so if you can't snag a bed with Sutera, chances are you can find a travel agency around town that can sell you one (at a much higher price of course). Adventurers interested in tackling the mountain's *via ferrata* course should contact Mountain Torq (p359).

To delight in a famous Sipadan scuba session, divers must obtain a permit. You can roll the dice and show up in Semporna hoping to find a golden ticket, but remember, as with any game of luck, the house always wins. Permits could be cloaked in frilly vacation packages, or worse, you could be forced to dive every other site in the Celebes Sea before you're allowed to explore Sipadan's walls. In general, most dive centres in the area are very upstanding operations and can cater to your needs if you book well in advance (four weeks is ideal, but the earlier the better).

Swarms of travel agents in KK will try to convince you that Sabah can only be discovered whilst on a tour. This is simply not true. Yes, there are places like the Danum Valley that cannot be accessed by private vehicle, but hotspots like Sepilok, Sandakan or Sungai Kinabatangan can in fact be explored under your own steam.

Although neighbouring Sarawak lends itself more to a 'do it yourself' adventure, you may still encounter a few logistical snags when trying to hit up some of the more popular sights. Lodging at Gunung Mulu (p452) is limited, and although Bario (p458) does not see tonnes of tourism, the puddle-jumper planes have limited seating.

Getting Around

With the advent of cheap airfares, getting around Sabah has gotten a lot easier...well faster at least. A web of flight routes criss-crosses the state, connecting the capital, Kota Kinabalu, to smaller destinations like Sandakan, Pulau Labuan and Tawau. With a little preplanning you could find a flight that rivals the local bus prices.

A paved road makes a frowning arc from KK to Tawau, passing hotspots like Mt Kinabalu, Sepilok, Sandakan, Lahad Datu and Semporna (the gateway to Sipadan) along the way. Daily express buses service all of these places. It takes around ten hours to make this journey. Completing the loop (circling back to KK through the south) is a more difficult

task. An infrastructure of public buses does not yet exist here, however the road is mostly paved. If you can get a lift to Keningau, then the rest of the journey is a breeze.

It's important to note that many of Sabah's natural gems are managed by private organisations, so you may find yourself on a tour more times than not.

KOTA KINABALU

pop 579,300

West Malaysia has KL; East Malaysia has KK. Borneo's version of a capital city isn't the most distinguished spot, especially if it's your welcome mat to the island (as it is for most tourists). Dreams of gorgeous

jungles and charming seaside shanties will be quickly abandoned as you glimpse the unattractive grid of concrete structures from your airplane window.

The city is quick to blame its insipid central core on the atrocities of war. Originally founded as Jesselton, KK was razed by the Allies not once but twice during WWII, the first time to slow the Japanese advance and the second time to hasten their retreat. After the war the whole thing was rebuilt from scratch, and renamed Kota Kinabalu in 1963.

You'll end up spending a day or two in KK if you're game to see a number of Sabah's attractions, so make the most of your stay and eat your way across town. Steaming street noodles and fresher-than-fresh seafood beckon the palate, and the bar scene ain't half bad for a Muslim nation. If you're really stuck for things to do, ask the locals what the word 'Kinabalu' means. We're not gonna tell you the answer – namely because

there are a dozen different definitions – but we're pretty sure that you'll find them all rather interesting...

ORIENTATION

Downtown KK is a dense grid of concrete buildings nestled between the waterfront and a range of low, forested hills to the east. It's compact, walkable and easy to navigate – most of the restaurants, markets, accommodation, tourist offices and tour operators are located here. Transport terminals bookend the city on either side. The international airport is in Tanjung Aru, 7km south of central KK, while the Inanam bus station is 9km north.

There is a huge outdoor map at the beginning of Jln Gaya facing City Hall.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

Borneo Books 2 ☎ 088-538077; Ground fl, Phase 1, Wisma Merdeka; www.borneobooks.com 🕒 10am-7pm

INFORMATION	Sutera Sanctuary	Port View Seafood
Borneo Books 2.....1 C5	Lodges.....33 C5	Village.....(see 55)
Borneo Net.....2 C6	Traverse Tours.....(see 33)	Shikai.....59 B3
HSBC.....3 D5	Wisma Sabah.....34 C5	Tong Hing
Immigration Office.....4 B3		Supermarket.....60 D5
Indonesian Consulate.....5 B4	SLEEPING 🏠	
Main Post Office.....6 C6	Akinabalu Youth	DRINKING & ENTERTAINMENT 🎲
Maybank.....7 D5	Hostel.....35 C6	Bed.....61 A3
Mega Laundry.....8 B2	Borneo Backpackers.....36 D6	Cocoon.....62 C6
Net Access.....9 C6	Borneo Global	Rumba's.....(see 42)
Permai Polyclinic.....10 D5	Backpackers.....37 B5	Hunter.....(see 43)
Police Box.....11 D6	D'Green Hotel.....38 B2	Shamrock.....(see 63)
Queen Elizabeth Hospital.....12 B6	Borneo View Lodging.....39 B4	Shenanigan's.....63 A2
Sabah Parks.....13 B2	Hamin Lodge.....40 B3	The Loft.....(see 63)
Sabah Tourism Board.....14 D5	Jesselton Hotel.....41 D6	Upperstar.....64 C6
Standard Chartered Bank.....15 D5	Kinabalu Daya.....42 D6	
Tourism Malaysia.....16 B3	Le Meridien Kota	SHOPPING 🛍️
	Kinabalu.....43 B2	Borneo Trading Post.....65 A2
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	Lucy's Homestay.....44 D6	
Atkinson Clock Tower.....17 D6	One Hotel.....45 B4	TRANSPORT
Big Outdoor City Map.....18 C6	Promenade Hotel.....46 A3	Adaras Rent A Car.....(see 34)
Borneo Adventure.....19 A4	Rainforest Lodge.....47 C6	AirAsia.....66 D6
Borneo Divers.....20 D5	Step-In Lodge.....48 B2	Borneo Express.....(see 34)
Borneo Nature Tours.....21 B4	Summer Lodge.....49 C6	City Park Bus
Central Market.....22 B2	Travellers' Light.....50 D6	Station (Buses to
City Hall.....23 C6		Airport).....67 B2
Handicraft Market (Filipino	EATING 🍴	Extra Rent A Car.....68 A4
Market).....24 B2	7-Eleven.....51 C6	Kinabalu Rent A Car.....69 B4
Museum of Islamic	Bella Italia.....(see 41)	Minibus & Minivan
Civilisation.....25 B5	Centre Point	Station.....70 A4
Night Market.....26 B2	Basement Food	Minivan & Taxi
Sabah Art Gallery.....27 B6	Court.....52 B3	Stand.....71 C6
Sabah Museum Heritage	Kedai Kopi Fatt Kee.....53 C5	Padang Merdeka
Village.....28 B6	Kedai Kopi Fook	Bus Station.....72 C2
Sabah Museum Main Hall.....29 B6	Yuen.....54 B3	Pick-up/Drop-off
Sabah Museum Science &	Kohinoor.....55 A3	Zone Under
Education Centre.....30 B6	Kompleks Asia City.....56 B3	Segama Bridge
Signal Hill Observation	Little Italy.....57 D5	(for Kuala Penyu).....73 C6
Pavilion.....31 D5	Milimewa	Taxis.....74 B3
State Mosque.....32 A6	Superstore.....58 C6	

A brilliant selection of Borneo-related books, maps & a small used-book section. Plenty of those useful Lonely Planet guides too. Wink.

Consulates

Indonesian Consulate (☎ 088-218600; Lg Kemajuan, Karamunsing; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri)

Emergency

Ambulance (☎ 999 or 088-218166)

Fire (☎ 994 or 088-214822)

Police (☎ 999, 088-212092; Jln Dewan)

Internet Access

Every sleeping spot in town also has some form of internet connection, be it dial-up or wi-fi.

Borneo Net (Jln Haji Saman; ☎ 9am-midnight; per hr RM3) Twenty terminals, fast connections and loud headbanger music wafting through the air.

Net Access (Jln Pantai; ☎ 9-2am; per hr RM3) Plenty of connections and less noise than other net places in KK. LAN connections are available for using your own laptop.

Immigration Office

Immigration office (☎ 088-488700; Kompleks Persekutuan Pentadbiran Kerajaan, Jln UMS; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Thu, 8-11.30am & 2-5pm Fri)

Laundry

Hotel laundry service works out to be the same price as buying new clothes at the market – use an outside service instead.

Mega Laundry (☎ 088-238970; Ruang Sinsuran 2; ☎ 8am-8pm; per kilo RM6) This fast and efficient laundry is one of the few in KK open on Sunday. Ask them not to write your name on your laundry.

Maps

The Sabah Tourism Board (right) sells an excellent map of Sabah for RM2. Free maps of central KK are available at almost every hostel or hotel.

Medical Services

Permai Polyclinic (☎ 088-232100; 4 Jln Pantai) Private outpatient clinic.

Queen Elizabeth Hospital (☎ 088-218166; Jln Penampang) Past the Sabah Museum.

Money

Moneychangers are plentiful in KK, particularly in the Wisma Merdeka and Centre

Point malls; they are more convenient than banks, and sometimes have better rates.

HSBC (☎ 088-212622; 56 Jln Gaya; ☎ 9am-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 9am-4pm Fri) 24hr ATM.

Maybank (☎ 088-254295; 9 Jln Pantai; ☎ 9am-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 9am-4pm Fri) 24hr ATM.

Standard Chartered Bank (☎ 088-298111; 20 Jln Haji Saman; ☎ 9.15am-3.45pm Mon-Fri) 24hr ATM.

Post

Main Post Office (☎ 088-210855; Jln Tun Razak; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) Western Union cheques and money orders can be cashed here. Has an efficient poste restante counter.

Tourist Information

Sabah Tourism Board (☎ 088-212121; www.sabah-tourism.com; 51 Jln Gaya; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-4pm Sat, 9am-4pm Sun) Housed in the historic post office building, KK's main tourist office has helpful staff and a wide range of brochures, pamphlets and other information covering every aspect of independent and tour travel in Sabah. Ask about their homestay program.

Tourism Malaysia (☎ 088-248698; www.tourism.gov.my; Ground fl, Api-Api Centre, Jln Pasar Baru; ☎ 8am-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 8am-noon & 1.30-4.30pm Fri) This office is of limited use for travellers, but does offer a few interesting brochures on sights in Peninsular Malaysia.

Sabah Parks (☎ 088-211881; Lot 1-3, Ground fl, Block K, Kompleks Sinsuran, Jln Tun Fuad Stephens; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 8-11.30am & 2-4.30pm Fri, 8am-12.50pm Sat) Good source of information on the state's parks.

Borneo Images (☎ 088-270733; Suite A33A, 3rd fl, Tanjung Aru Plaza; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) A beautiful and informative gallery inspiring travel throughout the region. Definitely worth stopping by to get a photographer's perspective of Borneo.

SIGHTS City Centre

For a guided walk of the city's historical centre, try the **KK Heritage Walk** (☎ 012-802 8823; www.kkheritagewalk.com; RM200; ☎ 9am Tue & Thu). The two-hour tour, which can also be booked through several tour operators, explores colonial KK and its hidden delights. Stops include Chinese herbal shops, bulk produce stalls, a *kopitiam* (coffee shop), and Jln Gaya (known as Bond Street when the British were in charge). There's also a quirky treasure hunt at the end leading tourists to the Jesselton Hotel. Guides speak English, Chinese and Bahasa Malaysia.

You can wander up to the UFO-like observation pavilion on **Signal Hill**, at the eastern edge of the city centre, to escape the traffic and to get another take on the squatters' still village at Pulau Gaya. The view is best as the sun sets over the islands. From the top, it's also possible to hike down to the bird sanctuary on the other side.

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

SABAH MUSEUM COMPLEX

The **Sabah Museum** (☎ 088-253199; jmuzium@tm.net.my; Jln Muzium; RM15; 🕒 9am-5pm Sat-Thu) is centred on a modern four-storey structure inspired by the longhouses of the Rungus and Murut tribes. It's slightly south of the city centre, on the hilly corner of Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman and Jln Penampang.

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

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

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

A short walk towards town is another annex, the **Museum of Islamic Civilisation** (☎ 088-538234; admission included in the Sabah Museum ticket; 🕒 9am-5pm Sat-Thu), devoted to Muslim culture and history.

If you're heading east after KK, keep hold of your admission ticket – it will also allow you entry to Agnes Keith House (p372) in Sandakan.

To get to the museum complex, catch a bus (RM1) along Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman and get off just before the mosque. Bus 13 also goes right round past the Queen Elizabeth hospital and stops near Jln Muzium.

MOSQUES

A fine example of contemporary Islamic architecture, the **State Mosque** (Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman) is set some distance from the heat and noise of central KK. It's south of the city centre past the Kampung Air still village, not far from the Sabah Museum; you'll see the striped minaret and Octopussy-style dome on your way to or from the airport. Non-Muslim visitors are allowed inside, but must dress appropriately and remove their shoes before entering.

Heading north out of KK, you can't miss the four minarets and graceful dome of the Kota Kinabalu **City Mosque** (off Jln Tun Fuad Stephens), in Kampung Likas, about 4km north of the city centre. Overlooking the South China Sea, this mosque is more attractive than the State Mosque in terms of setting and design. Completed in 2000, it can hold up to 12,000 worshippers. It can be entered by non-Muslims outside of regular prayer times. To get there, take bus 5A from Wawasan Plaza going toward UMS (RM1.50). Just ask the conductor to drop you off outside the City Mosque after the Tanjung Lipat round about. Taxis are about RM15 each way.

LIKAS BIRD SANCTUARY

Opened in 2000 and protected by the WWF, the **Likas Bird Sanctuary** (☎ 088-246955; kkcbs@tm.net.my; Jln Bukit Bendera Upper; adult/child RM10/5; 🕒 8am-6pm Tue-Sun) sits across from the mosque, covering 24 hectares of mangrove swamp. The preserve attracts a variety of migratory birds, some from as far away as Siberia. To reach the bird sanctuary, see the directions to the City Mosque (above).

MARKETS

KK's brilliant **Night Market** (Jln Tun Fuad Stephens; 🕒 late afternoon-11pm) is a place of delicious contrasts: it huddles beneath the imposing Le Meridien as vendors hawk their knock-off wares. The market is divided into two main sections: the southwest end is given over mostly to produce, while the northeast end (the area around the main entrance) is a huge hawker centre, where you can eat your way right through the entire Malay gastronomy. If you've never seen a proper Southeast Asian market, this place will be a revelation.

KK's vast **Central Market** (Jln Tun Fuad Stephens; 🕒 6.30am-6pm) occupies a long stretch of waterfront real estate in the middle of town. While it's not as interesting as the Night Market, it's

fun to wander the aisles and watch as locals transact their daily business.

Sandwiched between the Central Market and the Night Market, the **Handicraft Market** (Filipino Market; Jln Tun Fuad Stephens; ☎ 10am-6pm) is a good place to shop for inexpensive souvenirs. Offerings include pearls, textiles, seashell crafts, jewellery and bamboo goods, some from the Philippines, some from Malaysia and some from other parts of Asia. Needless to say, bargaining is a must!

On Sundays, a lively Chinese street fair takes over the entire length of **Jalan Gaya**. If you're not digging the KK vibe, this manic market will change your mind.

Beyond the City Centre

Some of KK's best attractions are located beyond the city centre, and it's well worth putting in the effort to check 'em out.

MARI MARI CULTURAL VILLAGE

Located about 25 minutes outside of the city centre, the **Mari Mari Cultural Village** (☎ 019-820 4921; www.traversetours.com, Jln Kiansom; adult/child RM150/130) is the most interactive centre of its kind in all of Borneo. Visitors are taken on a three-hour show/tour (beginning at 10am, 3pm and 7pm), which winds through the jungle passing various tribal dwellings along the way. At each stop, tourists learn about the indigenous way of life, and can try their hand at a variety of interesting (and fun) activities, like traditional bamboo cooking, rice-wine making (and drinking!), fire starting, tattooing, blowpipe shooting etc. But the most fascinating part of the tour is little tribal tidbits offered by your guide. For example, in the Dusun tribe, an immense stone would be placed at the entrance of a longhouse as a testament to the strength of warriors living inside. In the Lundaya tribe a knife must always be kept over the mouth of a rice wine bottle to ensure that no evil spirits mix with the wine. A short dance recital and delicious meal (lunch or dinner depending on the time of visitation) are included in the visit – the centre must be notified of any dietary restrictions in advance. A trip to the cultural village can be combined with a white-water rafting tour (see opposite for more information).

There is also a small chute – **Kiansom Waterfall** (RM1; ☎ dawn-dusk) – about 400m beyond the cultural village, which is easily accessible by private transport or on foot. The

area around the cascade lends itself well to swimming and it's a great place to cool off after a visit to Mari Mari.

Travellers interested in plant life should consider a visit to the **Orchid DeVilla Farm** (☎ 088-380611; orchiddevilla@yahoo.com, www.orchid-de-villa.com.my; Jln Kiansom; ☎ 8am-5pm), located halfway between central KK and the cultural village (at 'Km 6'). The farm specialises in rare Bornean orchids, hybrid orchids, cacti and herbal plants, and services all of the five-star hotels in the region.

MONSOPIAD CULTURAL VILLAGE

In the small town of Penampang, about 13km south of KK, this high-quality Kadazan-Dusun **cultural village** (☎ 088-761336; www.monsopiad.com; RM65; ☎ 8.30am-5pm) on the banks of Sungai Moyog is named after a legendary warrior and headhunter, whose direct descendants established this private heritage centre in 1996. The hefty entrance fee includes a tour, a dance performance and several activities (similar to Mari Mari). The highlight is the House of Skulls, which supposedly contains the ancient crania of Monsopiad's unfortunate enemies, as well as artefacts illustrating native rituals from the time when the *bobolian* (priest) was the most important figure in the community.

Many tour companies include Monsopiad on local itineraries. To get here independently, take a bus from central KK to Donggongon (RM1), where you can catch a minivan to the cultural village (RM1). You can also take a taxi or charter a minivan direct from KK for around RM35.

LOK KAWI WILDLIFE PARK

If you'd like to check out the orang-utans but won't make it out to Sepilok or the Kinabatangan, a visit to **Lok Kawi Wildlife Park** (☎ 088-765710; Jln Penampang, Papar Lama; adult/child RM20/10; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm) is highly recommended, especially for those with children in tow. There are plenty of other animals as well, from tarsiers to rhinos. Don't miss the giant aviary at the top of hill, with its ominous warning sign 'beware of attacking birds'!

It's best to arrive by 9.50am at the latest – feedings take place throughout the park at 10am. After the various feedings, an interactive show takes place at the stage around 11.15am everyday. After feeding time, most of the animals take their daily siesta – only the humans are silly enough to stay out in the scorching midday sun.

The 17B minibus goes to Lok Kawi (RM2). Visitors with a private vehicle can access the park via the Papar–Penampang road or the Putatan–Papar road. Travel agents offer half-day tours, or you can hire a taxi, which will cost around RM100, including a two-hour wait.

TOURS

KK has a huge number of tour companies, enough to suit every taste and budget. Head to Wisma Sabah – this office building is full of agents and operators. We've listed tour operators for relevant destinations throughout this chapter, so check each section to scout out the best company for you. The following options have an office in KK and offer a broad range of reputable tours.

Borneo Adventure (☎ 088-486800; www.borneoadventure.com; Block E-27-3A, Signature Office, KK Times Square) Award-winning Sarawak-based company with very professional staff, imaginative sightseeing and activity itineraries and a genuine interest in local people and the environment.

Borneo Authentic (☎ 088-773066; www.borneo-authentic.com) A friendly operation offering a variety of package tours including day-trip cruises on the Klias River.

Borneo Divers (☎ 088-222226; www.borneodivers.info; 9th fl, Menara Jubili, 53 Jln Gaya) Longest-established Borneo dive outfit; can arrange courses and dives just about anywhere and has its own dive shop. It's possible to get discounted rates as a walk-in.

Borneo Eco Tours (☎ 088-438300; www.borneoecotours.com; Pusat Perindustrian Kolombong Jaya, Mile 5.5 Jln Kolombong) This is a place with a good reputation, arranging tours throughout Malaysian Borneo, including travel to the Kinabatangan area.

Borneo Nature Tours (☎ 088-267637; www.borneonaturetours.com; Block D, Lot 10 Kompleks Sadong Jaya) Professional and knowledgeable operation managing bookings for Danum Valley's beautiful Borneo Rainforest Lodge (p385).

John Nair (☎ 019-811 2117; nair_john@yahoo.com) Not technically a company – John is a freelance guide who helped the BBC produce the orang-utan documentary shown regularly at Sepilok. He offers private guiding services and usually hangs out at Hunter's (p352) in the lobby of the Kinabalu Daya.

Sutera Sanctuary Lodges (☎ 088-243629; www.suterasanctuarylodges.com; Lot G15, Ground fl, Wisma Sabah, Jln Haji Saman; ☎ 9am–6.30pm Mon–Fri, 9am–4.30pm Sat, 9am–3pm Sun) Make this your first stop in KK if you're planning to climb Kinabalu and didn't book your bed in advance. Go now! Hurry!

Traverse Tours (☎ 088-260501; www.traversetours.com; Lot 227, Wisma Sabah, Jln Tun Fuad Stephens) An excellent and forward-thinking operator with plenty of new products.

SLEEPING Budget

Although Kuching's backpacker scene is a bit more design oriented, KK delivers with sheer volume. Hostels proliferate faster than horny rabbits in Sabah's gateway city, and intense competition equals lower rates. If you want to window-shop before dropping your rucksack, head to 'Australia Place' when you arrive in town. This area, orbiting the Sabah Tourism Board, is stacked to the brim with pleasant budget options.

Recently, a group of budget hotel and hostel owners have banded together to form the **Sabah Backpacker Operators Association** (SBA; www.sabahbackpackers.com) in an effort to help shoe-string travellers in the region. Check out their website for discount deals on accommodation and tours.

Lucy's Homestay (Backpacker's Lodge; ☎ 088-261495; Lot 25, Lg Dewan, Australia Pl; dm/s/d incl breakfast RM18/45/50) We have a soft spot for lovely Lucy and her homey homestay in the Australia Place. There's loads of charm here, with wooden walls smothered in stickers, business cards and crinkled photographs. If you're looking for a quaint home away from home, you'll find it here. Laundry service starts at RM15 per load.

Akinabalu Youth Hostel (☎ 088-272188; akinabalu@yahoo.com; Lot 133, Jln Gaya; dm/r incl breakfast from RM20/50) Friendly staff, fuchsia accent walls and trickling Zen fountains make this a solid option among KK's hostels, particularly if you find a quiet time to take advantage of the gratis internet and DVDs. Accommodation is mostly in basic four-bed rooms, with windows facing an interior hallway.

Summer Lodge (☎ 088-244499; www.summerlodge.com.my; Lot 120, Jln Gaya; dm/d RM28/65; ☎ ☎) Summer Lodge feels a bit like a bed factory, with mattresses indiscriminately stuffed behind every door. Quality varies so you'll probably have to check out a few rooms before you find a comfy one. The friendly owners also run a hostel (dorm beds/doubles from RM25/60) near the base of Mt Kinabalu (1.5km away). Transport between accommodation costs RM17 (one way).

Step-In Lodge (☎ 088-233519; www.stepinlodge.com; Block L, Kompleks Sinsuran, Jln Tun Fuad Stephens; dm with fan/air-con RM28/38, d with fan/air-con RM70/90; ☎ ☎) This popular spot wins the award for KK's smartest hostel with larger-than-normal bunk beds, comfy mattresses, *real* coffee at breakfast, and

an excellent (not to mention knowledgeable) staff. These clever touches make Step-In feel much more homey than some of the factory-style operations nearby. Ask about special rates for families.

Green View Lodging (☎ 088-255872; 1336 Jln Mat Salleh; r with shared bathroom from RM68; 🚽 📺) Green View is trying something new by offering simple private accommodation at the lowest price possible. Beds sit on low-slung box springs and there are mini plasma TVs in the deluxe rooms. To reach central KK, it's a RM10 taxi ride, or jump on bus 16, bus 16A or the Penambang bus – all three stop near the front door. Other backpacker options include:

Borneo Backpackers (☎ 088-234009; www.borneobackpackers.com; 24 Lg Dewan, Australia Pl; dm/d incl breakfast from RM20/65; 🚽 📺) This long-running backpackers just got a fresh coat of paint (although it's still a bit cramped).

Borneo Beachouse (☎ 088-218331; www.borneobeachouse.com; 122 Oorong Ikan Lais, Jln Mat Salleh, Tanjung Aru; dm RM22) Rooms are uber-basic, but it's one of the only options around with self-service kitchen facilities, and there's a supermarket down the street. Located near the airport (15-minute walk).

Borneo Global Backpackers (☎ 088-270976; www.bgbackpackers.com; 29 Karamuning Godown, Jln Karamuning; dm/r RM25/58; 🚽 📺) Feels a bit like a warehouse, but nonetheless popular with the budget crowd. Located at the southern end of town. Ask about tours to Semporna and Sungai Kinabatangan.

Hamin Lodge (☎ 088-272008; Lot 19, Block C, Kompleks Sedco; www.haminlodge.com; dm/tw from RM28/62; 🚽 📺) A great find. Ten-bed dorms are cramped, but basic private rooms are good value.

Travellers' Light (☎ 088-238877; Lot 19, Lg Dewan, Australia Pl; www.travellerslight.com; dm/d incl breakfast from RM25/65; 🚽 📺) Only a few rooms here, but they're spick and span.

Midrange

Lately, KK's midrange options seem to be sliding towards either end of the budget spectrum. Although backpacker hangouts and top-end treats are in great proliferation, there are still several spots around town suiting those Goldilocks out there.

Rainforest Lodge (☎ 088-258228; Jln Pantai; www.rainforestlodgekk.com; dm/s/d/ste from RM30/98/128/148; 🚽 📺) Fire-engine-red facades are currently luring curious travellers – it's the newest place in town. The deluxe double rooms are quite attractive, but the windowless ones fall a bit short. There are a few overpriced dorm rooms, but this place has much more of a midrange feel.

One Hotel (☎ 088-233234; www.onehotel.com.my; 1 Kompleks Sadong Jaya, Jln Karamuning; r RM70; 🚽 📺) Just outside the city centre in the Sadong Jaya complex, this newer hotel has a cache of small en suite rooms at record-low prices. It's a RM10 cab ride into town and there's a taxi rank conveniently located near the entrance. Wi-fi available.

Kinabalu Daya (☎ 088-240000; www.kkdayahotel.com; Lot 3-4, Block 9, Jln Pantai; r/ste incl breakfast from RM130/240; 🚽 📺) Hallways leading to nowhere and strangely placed elevators give Kinabalu Daya a certain 'ten-year-old's-Lego-project' vibe. Nevertheless, tonnes of tourists swear by this midrange stalwart – and we can see why – it's smack dab in the centre of the action and the Best Western branding ensures a certain amount of familiar comfort. It's your best bet for RM140.

D'Borneo Hotel (☎ 088-266999; www.dborneohotel.com; Block L, Kompleks Sinsuran, Jln Tun Fuad Stephens; r from RM140; 🚽 📺) The 'D-apostrophe' gives this downtown option a certain *je ne sais quoi*, but there's nothing particularly boutique about it. The two biggest draws are the exceptionally friendly staff, and the spacious deluxe rooms that feel larger than most rooms in the same price range. Free wi-fi sweetens the deal.

A 'hypermall' complex, 1Borneo, located about 20 minutes north of the city centre, has a few chain hotel options geared towards business travellers (there are roughly 900 hotel rooms on the grounds). A free shuttle bus connects the development to the city centre. Tourists who seek an international standard of comfort and don't mind being removed from the action should consider staying at one of the following options:

Novotel (☎ 088-529888; www.accorhotels.com; 1Borneo Hypermall, Jln UMS, d from RM160; 🚽 📺) A real stunner, but stunningly far from the city centre.

Tune (☎ 03 7962 5888; www.tunehotels.com; 1Borneo Hypermall, Jln UMS, d from RM50; 🚽 📺) Great for small budgets and business travellers.

Top End

Central KK has several full-facility hotels vying for the lucrative top-end trade. Hefty promotional discounts frequently apply outside high season, so you'll seldom have to pay full price if you're looking for a little luxury.

Jesselton Hotel (☎ 088-223333; www.jesseltonhotel.com; 69 Jln Gaya; r from RM 215; 🚽 📺) Mock-colonial wood and marble give the place plenty of character, and the single suite even has its own fishpond! There's also a very good restaurant, coffee shop, business centre and a red London

KK GETAWAY

If you've got the dime (and the time) why not turn your KK layover into a luxury beach vacation? Here are two sexy options located just a few kilometres north of the city:

our pick **Shangri La Rasa Ria Resort** (☎ 088-792888; www.shangri-la.com; Pantai Dalit, Tuaran; r from RM450; 🚗 📺 🍷) This sister resort of the Shangri La Tanjung Aru Resort in KK occupies a fine stretch of peach-hued dunes about 45 minutes north of the KK airport. It's a sprawling resort complete with its own 18-hole golf course, several fine restaurants, an amoeba-esque pool and a relaxing spa. The resort's best feature is the small nature sanctuary with a few resident orangutans – a well-kept secret amongst the locals. The resort will arrange airport transfer from KKIA when you book, otherwise, it's a RM50 taxi-ride from KK.

Nexus Resort Karambunai (☎ 088-411222; www.nexusresort.com; Jln Sepangar Bay, Tuaran; r from RM430; 🚗 📺 🍷) About seven kilometres north of the Rasa Ria Resort, you'll find this snazzy beach resort on Sabah's west coast. Like the Rasa Ria, it's got a great 18-hole golf course, a good slice of sand, a lagoon-like pool, several restaurants and a spa. The standard rooms are getting a little long in the tooth here, so it's better to splurge for a step up. The resort will arrange airport transfer from KKIA when you book, otherwise, it's a RM50 taxi ride from KK.

cab to shuttle you to the airport. Go for a non-smoking room, even smokers will probably find the puff-friendly rooms too 'fragrant'.

Le Meridien Kota Kinabalu (☎ 088-322250; www.kotakinabalu.lemeridien.com; Jln Tun Fuad Stephens; r from RM300; 🚗 📺 🍷) 'If you can't undercut 'em, outclass 'em' seems to be the motto at KK's most central five-star venture, which just reeks of luxury, from the complimentary internet access to the flatscreen TVs and DVD players. The eye-watering prices come down a little in low season, and may even get as low as RM200 if you catch the right discounts.

Promenade Hotel (☎ 088-265555; www.promenade.com.my; Lg Api Api 3; r from RM300; 🚗 📺 🍷) Very popular with international tour groups and Malaysian business travellers, this mammoth hotel near the south of the city is right on the foreshore and commands great ocean views. Amenities are plentiful, and discounts of 30% or more make it a solid bargain.

Shangri La Tanjung Aru Resort (STAR; ☎ 088-225800; www.shangri-la.com; Tanjung Aru; r from 700; 🚗 📺 🍷) The Shangri La is the perfect choice for those who want to combine the attractions of Kota Kinabalu with the features of a tropical resort. It's a sprawling complex, dotted with swaying palms and metal gongs, located in the Tanjung Aru area about 3km south of the city centre.

Sutera Harbour (☎ 088-318888; fax 088-317777; www.suteraharbour.com; 1 Sutera Harbour Blvd; r from RM800, packages & discounts available; 🚗 📺 🍷) While not as 'old-world Asia' as the stunning Shangri La, Sutera caters to big spenders with a cache of five-star amenities orbiting the vaulted lobby. Some of the rooms (especially those with car-

peting) feel a bit tired, so don't hesitate to ask to see a couple of options. A second on-site tower, the Magellan, offers additional rooms.

EATING

KK is one of the few cities in Borneo with an eating scene diverse enough to refresh the noodle-jaded palate. Besides the ubiquitous Chinese *kedai kopi* (coffee shops) and Malay halal restaurants, you'll find plenty of interesting options around the city centre – head to the suburbs if you're looking for some truly unique local fare.

In recent years, the local government has cracked down on shady dining establishments, implementing a health code grading system from 'A' to 'C' ('A' being the best; consider giving restaurants with no grade a miss). Gratings are usually displayed on storefronts or windows. Also, all ice served in eating establishments is privately produced using filtered water.

Restaurants & Cafes

Kedai Kopi Fook Yuen (G33 Ground fl, No 4 Kompleks Asia City; kaya RM2.60; ☎ 6.30am-1am) Cheap and quick, a snack of sweet *kaya* is the perfect energy booster after a morning of sightseeing. And this isn't your standard Singaporean coconut-egg-jam, Sabahans have developed their own version of this tasty confection. Wi-fi available.

Kedai Kopi Fatt Kee (28 Jln Bakau; mains from RM5; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) The woks are always sizzlin' at this popular Chinese place next to Ang's Hotel. Long lines are guaranteed, but it's always worth the wait. Their *sayur manis* (p350) cooked in *belacan* (shrimp paste) is

MAKAN: KK-STYLE

Kota Kinabalu may be light on sights, and its urban core isn't a stunner, but the city comes up trumps in the food category. KK's veritable melting pot of cultures has fostered a lively dining scene that differentiates itself from the rest of Malaysia with a host of recipes fusing foreign recipes and local ingredients.

KK's four essential eats are:

Sayur Manis

Also known as 'Sabah veggie', this bright green jungle fern can be found at any Chinese restaurant worth its salt. It's best served fried with garlic, or mixed with fermented shrimp paste. The *sayur manis* plant is a perennial and can grow about 3m high. It is harvested year-round so there's a very good chance that your plateful of weeds was plucked from the jungle only a few days prior. Adventurous eaters might want to try other local produce like *tarap*, a fleshy fruit encased in a bristly skin, or *sukun*, sweet-tasting tuber used to make fritters.

Filipino Barbecue

Located at the north end of the KK Night Market, the Filipino Barbecue Market is the best place in town for grilled seafood at unbeatable prices. Hunker down at one of the crowded tables and point to your prey. Once the waitress has sent your order off to the grill, she'll hand you a cup (for drinking), a basin (to wash your hands) and a small plate to prepare your dipping sauce (mix up the chilli sauce, soy sauce, salt and fresh lime for your own special concoction). No cutlery here! Just dig in with your bare hands and enjoy steaming piles of fresher-than-fresh seafood. Figure around RM15 for a gut-busting meal.

Hinava

Perhaps the most popular indigenous appetiser, colourful *hinava* is raw fish pickled with fresh lime juice, chilli padi, sliced shallots and grated ginger. The melange of tangy tastes masks the fishy smell quite well. The best place to try *hinava* is Grace Point, a posh local food court near Tanjung Aru. You'll find it at the 'Local Counter' for around RM2 per plate (the portions are small – the perfect size for a little nibble).

Roti Canai

The ubiquitous *roti canai*, a flaky pancake fried on a skillet, is served from dawn 'til dusk at any Indian Muslim *kedai kopi* around town. Although the dish may appear simple, there's actually a lot of skill that goes into preparing the perfect platter. The cook must carefully and continuously flip the dough (*à la* a pizza parlour chef) to create its signature flakiness. *Roti canai* is almost always served with sauce, usually *dhal* (lentil curry) or another curry made from either chicken or fish.

a classic, and the salt-and-pepper prawns are great.

Kah Hiong Ngui Chap (☎ 019-870 0080; Block A, Ground fl, Kolam Centre Phase 2, Jln Lintas; mains from RM5.50; ☎ 7am-3pm) Head to Kah Hiong if you're craving the ultimate local experience. Tucked away in KK's suburban sprawl, this bustling restaurant specialises in *ngui chap* (beef soup) served with a special chilli sauce. Everyone knows about this spot – it's a local institution and has been featured on the local TV channel as one of the spots in town for a bite.

Shikai (☎ 088-484242; G15-16 Kompleks Asia City, Jln Asia City; mains from RM9; ☎ lunch & dinner) Fancy lanterns dangle above jet-black furniture and

swishing Lazy Susans. Lunch specials start at RM9 per dish, although weekend dim sum is the biggest draw. Vegetarians will find plenty of excellent tofu options scattered throughout the pan-Asian menu.

D Junction (☎ 088-703131; Batu 3, Jln Lintas; beer RM7, mains from RM10; ☎ lunch & dinner) Located just beyond the city centre, this small complex has a clutch of high-end franchised eating options including Royal Chino restaurant (serving delicious dim sum on weekends), Indian Spice Garden (specialising in North Indian favourites) and Umai (a Japanese affair overflowing with spicy sushi rolls and saucy karaoke). There's a sociable bar on the ground

level with plenty of Tiger on tap, and a surprisingly excellent shrimp wonton soup.

Bella Italia (☎ 088-313366; 69 Jln Gaya; mains RM19; ☎ lunch & dinner) In an attempt to muscle-*ini* their way into the competition, Bella Italia, in the Jesselton Hotel, has started a special 50% discount deal for pasta dinners between 5pm and 7pm.

Little Italy (☎ 088-232231; Jln Haji Saman; mains from RM23; ☎ lunch & dinner) Dear homesick holiday-maker; this is your place. Create your own carbo-lode with a variety of saucy tributes to the Bootland. All things considered, it's a rather pricey endeavour, but it's definitely worth stopping by if you're in desperate need of a rice respite.

Port View Seafood Village (☎ 088-221753; Lot 18, Waterfront Esplanade; dinner from RM50; ☎ lunch & dinner) This cavernous Chinese seafood specialist feels like an aquarium where you can eat the displays – we've never seen such an extravagant array of live fish. Even if you don't eat here, it's worth walking into the foyer to check out the veritable cascade of turquoise tanks.

Kohinoor (☎ 088-235160; Lot 4, Waterfront Esplanade; dinner about RM50; ☎ 11.30am-2.30pm & 5.30pm-11pm) There are several excellent restaurants along the Waterfront Esplanade, including this Indian place offering comfortable indoor seating and a breezy outdoor patio. Take advantage of their authentic tandoori oven and don't forget to grab a side of pillowy garlic naan.

TANJUNG ARU

In the early evening, head to Tanjung Aru at the south end of town near the airport for sunset cocktails and light snacks along the ocean. The area has three beaches – First Beach offers up a few restaurants, Second Beach has steamy local stalls, and Third Beach is a great place to bring a picnic as there are no establishments along the sand. A taxi to Tanjung Aru costs RM20, or you can take public transport (RM1.80) – take bus 16, 16A or city bus 2.

First Beach Café (☎ 088-245158; Aru Drive, Tanjung Aru; drinks RM10, mains RM8-20; ☎ 9am-2am) This restaurant boasts the best sunsets in KK and it's hard to argue: it's right on the beach at Tanjung Aru and you can literally step down from your table onto the sand. This is a good spot for light nibbles and beer in the evening.

Tanjung Aru Seafood Restaurant (☎ 088-245158; Tanjung Aru; dinner from RM60; ☎ 11am-2pm & 5-10pm) It's more about the sunset than the seafood here, but diners never complain (until they

see the bill!). While locals prefer scruffy seafood markets around Sinsuran, this spot is a perennial expat fave. There's a cultural show on the weekends starting at 7pm.

Hawker Centres & Food Courts

Night Market (off Jln Tun Fuad Stephens; meals from RM2; ☎ dinner) The night market is the best, cheapest and most interesting place in KK for dinner. Vegetarian options available. For details on the Night Market see p345.

Centre Point Basement Food Court (Basement fl, Centre Point Shopping Centre, Jln Pasar Baru; mains RM3-10; ☎ lunch & dinner) Your ringgit will go a long way at this popular and varied basement food-court in the Centre Point mall. There are Malay, Chinese and Indian options, as well as drink and dessert specialists.

Grace Point (Grace Point, Tanjung Aru; mains RM2-8; ☎ lunch & dinner) Take bus 15 out near Tanjung Aru for some local grub at this KK mainstay. The development is actually quite chic compared to the smoke-swathed food courts in the city centre – KKers joke that the public bathrooms here are Borneo's nicest (and it's true!). Go for the Sabahan food stall (located in the far right corner when facing the row of counters) and try *hinava* – see opposite for more info.

Self-Catering

There are a variety of places to stock up on picnic items and hiking snacks, including the centrally located **Milimewa Superstore** (Jln Haji Saman) and **Tong Hing Supermarket** (Jln Gaya). **7-Eleven** (Jln Haji Saman; ☎ 24hr) is conveniently open throughout the evening.

DRINKING & ENTERTAINMENT

Averaging 12 cans of beer a month per capita (not including smuggled goods), Sabahans are big drinkers by Malaysian standards, and KK's nightlife allows plenty of scope for visitors to join the party. The **Waterfront Esplanade** (Jln Tun Fuad Stephens) houses a good number of upscale 'resto-bars', while Beach St, in the centre of town, is a semi-pedestrian street cluttered with bars and eateries. Live music (usually karaoke) takes place almost every night in the latter's central round. Most of KK's larger venues rely heavily on live music to pull in the punters, providing regular employment for a whole flotilla of local and Filipino cover bands. The quality of the performances is often encouragingly high, but drinks are quite pricey.

KAMPUNG ADIDAS

Malaysia's backwater version of a hiking shoe, 'kampung Adidas' is the secret ingredient for a stumble-free jungle trek. These flimsy pieces of footwear take the shape of an authentic Adidas soccer cleat, but are made entirely of rubber (kinda like a souped-up Croc). They're everywhere: local guides wear 'em, the porters dashing up Mt Kinabalu have a pair or two – even some of the finalists in the Kinabalu International Climbathon (p362) were wearing them when they crossed the finish line in record time! 'Kampung Adidas' can be purchased almost anywhere in Malaysia that sells cheap shoes. They cost around RM5 per pair – roughly a hundred times cheaper than those trekking boots you have in your rucksack...

Bed (☎ 088-251901; Waterfront Esplanade) Get those bed puns ready: the space that launched a thousand quips is arguably the fulcrum of KK nightlife, and it's a rare night out that won't see you ending up in Bed at some point. Bands play from 9pm, followed by DJs til closing.

Cocoon (☎ 088-211252; Jln Tun Razak Segama) In the busy corner of town opposite the Hyatt, Cocoon is a smart bar-restaurant that goes all bar in the evening when the live bands emerge. The post-gig DJs have a tendency to talk over the records, but at least their R&B-leaning tunes are danceable.

Shenanigan's (☎ 088-221234; Hyatt Regency Hotel) Following the international 'Irish pub' model, from dodgy draught Guinness to drunk and incapable patrons, this has long been a popular establishment in KK. Live bands perform most nights from 9pm and the place is totally rammed on weekends. Prices are horrendous (up to RM30 for a small beer) but get better during happy hour.

Blue Note (☎ 088-225800; Shangri La Tanjung Aru Resort) If you're staying out of town or just fancy a change, the spacious Blue Note doles out plenty of DJed tunes, though jazz aficionados may feel cheated.

Hunter's (☎ 016-825 7085; Kinabalu Daya Hotel) A favourite for local guides and expats, Hunter's offers up karaoke, sport on the plasma TV and balmy outdoor seating in the heart of the action.

Shamrock (☎ 088-249829; 6 Anjung Samudra, Waterfront Esplanade) Well, the Irish have landed

in KK and they've brought everything with them (except the bad weather): Guinness, meat stews and Kelly green decor.

Also worth a look:

Upperstar (Jln Datuk Saleh Sulong) Opposite the Hilton, this pleasant semi-outdoor bar offers cheap booze and decent pub grub.

Rumba (Le Meridien Kota Kinabalu, Jln Tun Fuad Stephens) Upbeat and danceable tunes are spun at this happenin' night spot.

The Loft (Waterfront Esplanade) Yet another option along the pub-lined waterfront. Good place for sunset cocktails.

SHOPPING

Locals love their shopping, and the market-going spirit quickly rubs off on visitors; see p345 for details of the best ones to visit. Soon you'll find yourself bargaining for pearls at the Handicraft Market or haggling for a souvenir T-shirt at Jalan Gaya's Sunday street fair. Upmarket tribal art and souvenirs are available at **Borneo Trading Post** (☎ 088-232655; Lot 16, Waterfront Esplanade, Jln Tun Fuad Stephens).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

In March 2009, **JetStar** (www.jetstar.com) and **Tiger Airways** (www.tigerairways.com) announced a bevy of new flights from Singapore, giving AirAsia some serious competition when it came to Borneo-bound flights. Since then, it has been cheaper than cheap to hop on a flight to KK from various Southeast Asian destinations. These days, flying through Borneo can actually be cheaper than taking a bus (and obviously much less of a time suck). Flights can be purchased online up to 24 hours before the scheduled departure. **Malaysia Airlines** (MAS; ☎ 1-300 883 000, 088-515555; www.malaysiaairlines.com; 1st fl, Departure Hall, KKIA; ✈ 5.30am-7.30pm) has similar flight schedules, although they are usually much more expensive than the budget carriers. MASwings services domestic destinations like Mulu, Miri, Sandakan and Lahad Datu.

Please note that the two terminals at Kota Kinabalu International Airport are not connected to one another, in fact they feel like two different airports. Most airlines operate out of the swankified Terminal 1, with the exception of AirAsia, Tiger Airways and charter flights, which depart from Terminal 2.

AirAsia (within Malaysia ☎ 03-2171 9333; www.airasia.com; Ground fl, Wisma Sabah, Jln Gaya) offers the following international flights to/from KK: Shenzhen, Macau, Jakarta, Manila

and Singapore. Within Malaysia, flights go to/from Johor Bahru, Kuala Lumpur and Penang in Peninsular Malaysia, and Kuching, Labuan, Miri, Sandakan, Sibuan and Tawau in Borneo. The AirAsia counter at Terminal 2 of KKIA handles all bookings less than 24 hours prior to departure. It's open from 8am to 7pm.

Boat

All ferries, including taxi boats out to Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park, operate from the Jesselton Point Ferry Terminal, commonly referred to as 'the jetty' by locals and taxi drivers. A lot of construction was underway during our visit, so it's best to get a heads up about departure locations from your local accommodation. All passengers must pay an RM3 terminal fee for ferries departing from Kota Kinabalu.

Passenger boats connect KK to Pulau Labuan twice daily (first/economy class RM39/31), with onward service to Brunei; see p403) and to Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park (see p357), and a schedule is in the works to link the state capital to Pulau Tiga.

Bus & Minivan

You need to know ahead of time where you want to travel because there are several different stations around KK serving a variety of out-of-town destinations. In general, buses heading east depart from Inanam (Utara Terminal; 9km north of the city) and buses heading south leave from Padang Merdeka Bus Station (also called Wawasan or 'old bus station'; at the south end of town). Buses, minivans and private taxis serving destinations on the west coast and northern Sabah operate from the Padang Merdeka Bus Station. Local buses (RM1.80) from Wawasan can take tourists to Inanam if you don't want to splurge on the RM20 taxi. If you're going to Poring Hot Springs, take a minivan to Ranau and switch to a Poring-bound minivan.

Have your hotel call ahead to the bus station to book your seat in advance. Same-day bookings are usually fine, although weekends are busier than weekdays. It's always good to ring ahead because sometimes transport will be halted due to flooding caused by heavy rains.

Taxi

Share taxis operate from the Padang Merdeka Bus Station. Several share taxis do a daily run

between KK and Ranau, passing the entrance road to the Kinabalu National Park office. The fare to Ranau or Kinabalu National Park is RM20 or you can charter a taxi for RM80 per car (note that a normal city taxi will charge RM150 to RM200 for a charter).

Train

The North Borneo rail line is currently closed and a reopening date has yet to be confirmed.

GETTING AROUND

Take a deep breath – transport in KK can be a bit of a nuisance, with two unconnected airport terminals (one of which is *still* under construction), taxi drivers that bend the 'standardised cab fare' rules and bus interchange stations situated at the opposite ends of the city. Ask around to find out the best ways to get about town – locals are always up on the cheapest and fastest way to get around.

To/From the Airport

Kota Kinabalu International Airport (KKIA) is 7km southwest of the centre. To reach the airport using public transport, try city bus 2 and bus 16A (RM1; do not take bus 16 as it does not go all the way to the airport). These buses can be boarded at the City Park station downtown. Both of these buses service Terminal 2 (AirAsia's terminal); at the time of research there was no public transport to Terminal 1, although that will no doubt change (look for city bus 1 to access this terminal). Public transport runs from 6am to 7pm daily. Taxis heading from the terminals into town operate on a system of vouchers (RM20), sold at a taxi desk on the terminal's ground floor. Taxis heading to the airport should not charge more than RM20 if you catch one in the city centre. For those taking one of AirAsia's popular late-evening flights, a taxi to/from the airport will cost RM30.

Don't forget to check which airport terminal you are using as the two terminals are not located near one another.

Car

The major car-rental agencies have counters on the first floor at KKIA and branch offices elsewhere in town. Manual cars start at RM100 per day and most agencies can arrange chauffeured vehicles as well.

MAIN DESTINATIONS AND FARES FROM KOTA KINABALU

The following bus and minivan transport information was provided to us by the Sabah Tourism Board and should be used as an estimate only: transport times can fluctuate due to weather, prices may change and the transport authority has been known to alter departure points.

Destination	Duration (hr)	Price (RM)	Terminal	Departures
Beaufort	2	10	Padang Merdeka	7am-5pm (frequent)
Keningau	2½	13	Padang Merdeka	7am-5pm (eight daily)
Kota Belud	1	10	Padang Merdeka	7am-5pm (frequent)
Kuala Penyu	2	18	Segama Bridge	8-11am (hourly)
Kudat	3	18	Padang Merdeka	7am-4pm (frequent)
Lahad Datu	8	40	Inanam	7am, 8.30am, 9am, 8pm
Lawas (Sarawak)	4	20	Padang Merdeka	8.30am & 1.30pm
Mt Kinabalu NP	2	15	Inanam & Padang Merdeka	7am-8pm (very frequent)
Ranau	2	15	Padang Merdeka	7am-5pm
Sandakan	6	33	Inanam	7.30am-2pm (frequent) & 8pm
Semporna	9	50	Inanam	7am, 8.30am, 9am, 8pm
Tawau	9	55	Inanam	7.30am, 2pm, 8pm
Tenom	3½	25	Padang Merdeka	8am, noon, 4pm

Adaras Rent A Car (☎ 088-216671, 088-211866; adarasrac@hotmail.com; Lot G-03, Wisma Sabah)

Borneo Express (☎ 088-268009; G25, Wisma Sabah, Jln Tun Fuad Stephens)

Extra Rent A Car (☎ 088-218160, 088-251529; www.e-erac-online.com; 2nd fl, Beverly Hotel, Jln Kemajuan)

Kinabalu Rent A Car (☎ 088-232602; rentcar@po.jaring.my; Lot 2.47, 2nd fl, Kompleks Karamunsing)

Mayflower Car Rental (☎ 012-803 3020, 088-221244; D3-3A, 3rd fl, Block D, Plaza Tanjung Aru)

Minivan

Minivans operate from several stops in KK, including the Padang Merdeka Bus Station and the parking lot outside Milimewa Superstore. They also circulate the town looking for passengers. Since most destinations within the city are within walking distance, it's unlikely that you'll need to catch a minivan. If you do catch one, most destinations within the city cost RM1.

Taxi

Most of KK's taxis have meters, but few drivers will agree to use them. Set prices rule the roost, but you should always negotiate a fare before heading off. There are several hubs where taxis congregate, including the Milimewa Superstore in the centre of town. Figure on around RM7 to RM10 for a ride in the city centre.

AROUND KOTA KINABALU

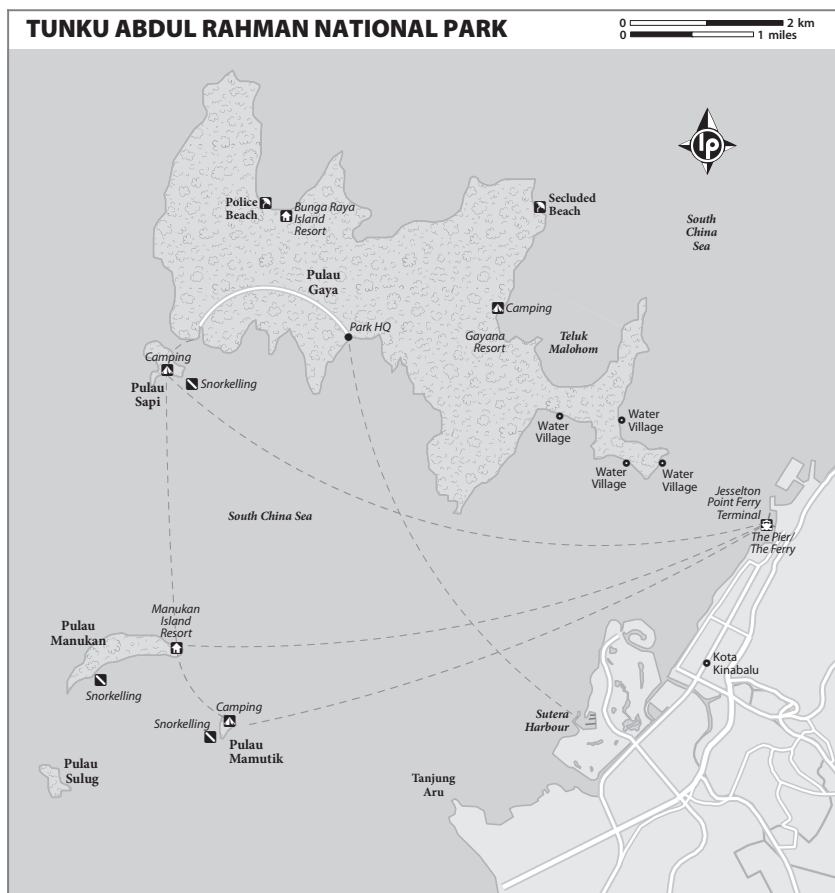
TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN NATIONAL PARK

Just west of Kota Kinabalu, the five islands of Manukan, Gaya, Sapi, Mamutik and Sulug and the reefs in between make up the **Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park** (admission RM10), covering a total area of just over 49 sq km. Only a short boat ride from the KK city centre, they have some nice beaches and the water in the outer areas is usually clear, offering ideal day-trip material for anyone wanting to escape the city and unwind.

Pulau Manukan

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

Equipment for hire on the island include masks and snorkels (RM15), beach mats (RM5) and bodyboards (RM10); a security deposit is payable.



Manukan Island Resort (☎ 088-302399; www.sutera-sanctuarylodges.com; villa RM910; 🚻 🚿), managed by Sutera Sanctuary Lodges, has the only accommodation on the island, comprising 20 villas, a restaurant, swimming pool and tennis courts.

Pulau Mamutik

A mere 300m from end to end, tiny Mamutik offers the best snorkelling in the group with a lovely coral garden and a nice beach that runs up and down the east coast of the island. There's no resort here, but camping (RM5 per person, payable on arrival) is possible. There's also a small store/restaurant/snorkel-rental place, although it's a good idea to bring your own supplies from the mainland.

Pulau Sapi

Dwarfed by nearby Pulau Gaya, pin-sized Pulau Sapi (Cow Island) is another popular and attractive little island that offers snorkelling and attractive beaches (although at the time of research some tourists have complained that the water has been quite filthy). The island is separated from Gaya by a very shallow 200m channel that you can swim across if you feel up to it. Otherwise, the main activities here include wading, relaxing on the beach around the jetty or exploring the trails through the forest. There's a decent coral garden around the southeast point of the island, but it's no match for the coral garden off Mamutik. There are changing rooms, toilets and barbecue pits, as well as a

TOP FIVE BORNEO TREKS

Borneo is like a steaming equatorial cauldron bubbling over with a veritable encyclopaedia of flora and fauna, and the best way to discover this fascinating world is by trekking straight through it. We've assembled a list of our five favourite treks – if you can check off three of these, consider yourself an accomplished adventurer. Those who tick off all five are Borneo superstars.

- **Mt Kinabalu** (opposite) Yes Kinabalu, we all know that you're the big cheese. And, yes, the reputation is well deserved. In addition to the summit's granite spires offering awe-inducing views, there are several pleasant jaunts around the mountain's base, including the 6km Liwagu Trail, which would be swarming with people if it weren't for the fact that it's located below the island's most celebrated climb.
- **Kelabit Highlands** (p458) Borneo's real trekking hotspot is Sarawak's stunning Kelabit Highlands, spiking up along the Indonesian border like the spine of a sleeping dinosaur. This is the closest it gets to Himalayan teahouse treks in Borneo as visitors pass between hidden runes and lonely longhouse communities peppered throughout the region.
- **Temburong** (p590) Due to the surplus of oil and gas, Brunei never had to log its pristine rainforest to earn a few extra bucks. Thus, the jungle in Temburong (the smaller of the sultanate's two puzzle-piece-like land holdings) is a stunning realm of sweltering old-growth (primary) forest. All-inclusive adventures through this emerald expanse can be organised through one of several tour operators based in Bandar Seri Begawan (p581; self-planned excursions are currently impossible due to national park regulations and transport restrictions).
- **Headhunters Trail** (p455) According to legend, the Headhunters Trail was an ancient tribal warpath (it was actually a docile trading route) – today it's a fantastic two-day jungle trek connecting the island's green interior to the crystal coastal waters. Fit trekkers can include a side trip to the Pinnacles – an expanse of jagged stone that looks like a collection of granite toothpicks. But be warned: if the Kinabalu climb is, say, a '7' on the difficulty scale, then the Pinnacles add-on is about a '10'.
- **Bako National Park** (p423) Bako is one of the most rewarding 'do it yourself' destinations in all of Borneo and it proves that you don't have to travel deep into the jungle to mingle with the island's famous wildlife. Try the Telok Limau Trail (12km), ending at a stunning deserted beach, or the Lintang Trail (5.25km), boasting samples of the park's diverse vegetation. Proboscis monkeys and sneaky macaques abound. See p86 for important trekking tips in Borneo.

small snack kiosk. There is also an outfitted camp site (RM5 per person) here but you'll need to bring over most of your supplies from the mainland.

Pulau Gaya

With an area of about 15 sq km, Pulau Gaya is the Goliath of KK's offshore islands, rising to an elevation of 300m. It's also the closest to KK and is covered in virtually undisturbed tropical forest. The bays on the east end of the island are filled with bustling water villages, inhabited by Filipino immigrants (legal and otherwise) who live in cramped houses built on stilts in the shallow water, with mosques, schools and simple shops, also built on stilts. Residents of KK warn against exploring these water villages, saying that incidents of theft and other crimes have occurred.

If you want to spend the night (and all of your money), try **Bunga Raya Island Resort** (☎ 088-442233; www.gayana-eco-resort.com; villas from US\$649; 📶), a stunning property with fresh-faced wooden bungalows on a fertile patch of beachfront.

Pulau Sulug

Shaped like a cartoon speech bubble, Sulug has an area of 8.1 hectares and is the least visited of the group, probably because it's the furthest away from KK. It only has one beach, on a spit of land extending from its eastern shore. Unfortunately, the snorkelling is pretty poor around this island. If you want a quiet getaway, Sulug is a decent choice, but you'll have to charter a boat to get here (see *Getting There & Away*, opposite), as the normal boats don't stop here. If you want a

secluded beach and don't want to lay out for a charter, you'll do better by heading to Manukan and walking down the beach to escape the crowds.

Getting There & Away

Boats to the islands are arranged inside the waiting room at KK's Jesselton Point Ferry Terminal (commonly known as 'the jetty' by locals and taxi drivers). Inquire at the counter for the next available boat. Sign up for your chosen destination and then take a seat until there are enough passengers (usually eight) to depart. Services run from 7am to 6pm daily but it's best to catch a boat in the morning, as it's much harder to make up boat numbers in the afternoon. Boats also run from Sutera Harbour – which is more convenient for those staying near Tanjung Aru (or for those wanting to reach Pulau Gaya). Return fares to Mamutik, Manukan and Sapi hover around RM25. You can also buy two-/three-island passes for RM33/43.

The set fee for boat charter to one island is RM204, but you can negotiate a lower price. Try to deal directly with a boatman if you do this – don't talk to the touts who prowl the area. And don't consider paying until you return to the dock.

Note that there is an RM3 terminal fee added to all boat journeys, and a RM10 entrance fee to the marine park, paid when you purchase your ticket (if you are chartering a boat this is usually included).

NORTHWESTERN SABAH

The biggest draw in northwestern Sabah is, of course, the awesome Mt Kinabalu, ruling over the island with its granite fist. Before darting off to eastern Sabah's cache of superlative sights, why not stick around for a day or two to check out the small coastal towns and stilt villages.

MT KINABALU & KINABALU NATIONAL PARK

Towering above the island with its haunting husk of granite and halo of cotton-puff clouds, 'Borneo's roof' majestically rises over Sabah's swatch book of rainforest greens as if it were shouting 'climb me!' to wandering travellers. And climb it they

do. Mt Kinabalu, or Gunung Kinabalu in Bahasa Malaysia, is the region's biggest tourist attraction.

As far as mountains go, the 4095m peak of Mt Kinabalu may not be as wow-inducing as, say, a Himalayan sky poker, but Malaysia's first Unesco World Heritage Site is by no means an easy climb. Around 60,000 visitors of every ilk make the grueling trek up Borneo's ultimate Thighmaster each year, returning to the bottom with stories of triumph, pictures of sun-lit moonscapes, and *really* sore legs.

Amazingly, the mountain is still growing: researchers have found it increases in height by about 5mm a year. On a clear day you can see the Philippines from the summit; usually, though, the mountain is thoroughly wreathed in fog by mid-morning.

History

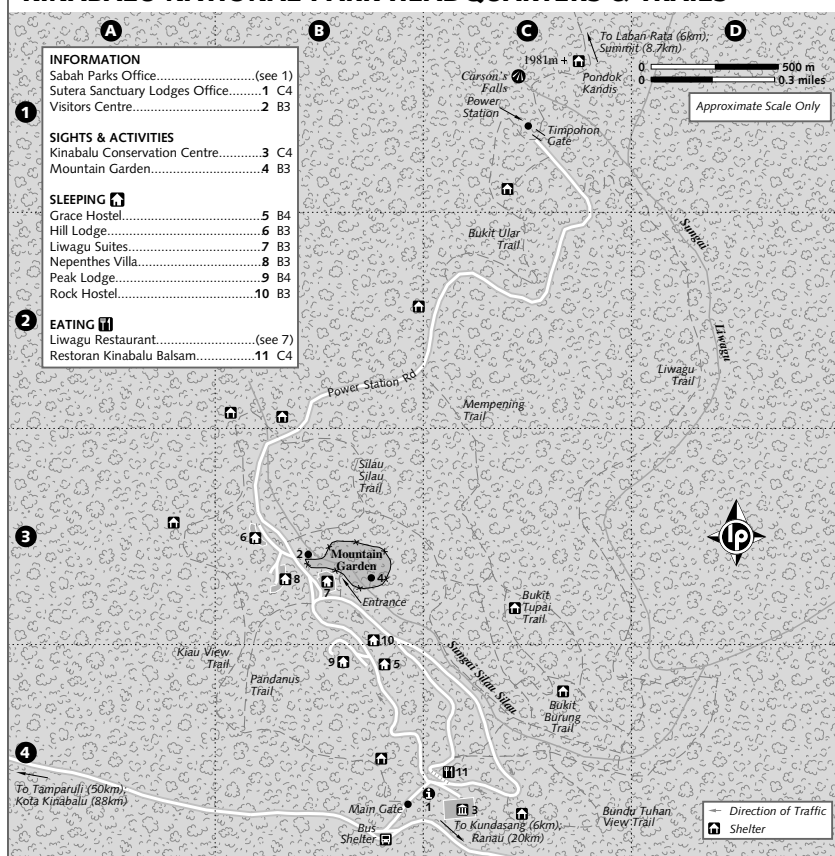
Although it is commonly believed that local tribesmen climbed Kinabalu many years earlier, it was Sir Hugh Low, the British colonial secretary on Pulau Labuan, who recorded the first official ascent of Mt Kinabalu in 1851. Today, Kinabalu's tallest peak is named after him; thus Borneo's highest point is ironically known as Low's Peak.

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

Theses days, the elaborate chicken dances are no more, although climbing the mountain can still feel like a rite of passage.

Check out Mountain Torq's website (www.mountainorq.com) for more fun facts about Kinabalu's history. They opened Asia's first *via ferrata* course in 2007 (see the boxed text, p359, for details).

KINABALU NATIONAL PARK HEADQUARTERS & TRAILS



Geology

Many visitors to Borneo assume that Mt Kinabalu is a volcano, but the mountain is actually a huge granite dome that rose from the depths below some nine million years ago. In geological terms, Mt Kinabalu is still very young. Little erosion has occurred on the exposed granite rock faces around the summit, though the effects of glaciers that used to cover much of the mountain can be detected by striations on the rock. There's no longer a snowline and the glaciers have disappeared, but at times ice forms in the rock pools near the summit.

Orientation & Information

Kinabalu National Park HQ is 88km by road northeast of KK and set in gardens with a

magnificent view of the mountain. At 1588m the climate is refreshingly cool compared to the coast; the average temperatures are 20°C in the day and 13°C at night. The hike to the summit is difficult – see p360 for detailed information about the climb

On the morning of your arrival, pay your park entry fee, present your lodging reservation slip to the Sutera Sanctuary Lodges office (Map p358) to receive your official room assignment, and check in with the Sabah Parks office (Map p358) to pay your registration and guide fees. See opposite for more on pricing details. Making advance accommodation bookings is *essential* if you plan on climbing the mountain (see p363 for more information).

PERMITS, FEES & GUIDES

OK, this is where things appear to get tricky, but it's actually quite simple: a park fee, climbing permit, insurance and a guide fee are *mandatory* if you intend to climb Mt Kinabalu. All permits and guides must be arranged at the **Sabah Parks office** (Map p358; ☎ 7am-7pm), which is directly next door to the Sutera Sanctuary Lodges office, immediately on your right after you pass through the main gate of the park. Pay all fees at park HQ before you climb and don't ponder an 'unofficial' climb as permits (laminated cards worn on a string necklace) are scrupulously checked at two points you cannot avoid passing on the way up the mountain. Virtually every tour operator in KK can hook you up with a trip to the mountain, but it's significantly cheaper to do it on your own – just make sure you plan ahead.

All visitors entering the park are required to pay a **park entrance fee**: RM15 for adults and RM10 for children under 18 (Malaysians pay RM3 and RM1 respectively). A **climbing permit** costs RM100/RM40 for adults/children, while Malaysian nationals pay RM30/RM12. **Climbing insurance** costs a flat rate of RM7 per person. **Guide fees** for the summit trek cost the following: RM85 per small group (one to three

climbers) or RM100 per large group (four to six climbers). Climbers ascending Kinabalu along the Mesilau trail will pay an extra RM10 (small group) or RM20 (large group) for their guide. Your guide will be assigned to you on the morning you begin your hike. If you ask, the park staff will try to attach individual travellers to a group so that guide fees can be shared. Couples can expect to be given their own guide. Guides are mostly Kadazan from a village nearby and many of them have travelled to the summit several hundred times. Try to ask for a guide who speaks English – he or she (usually he) might point out a few interesting specimens of plant life. The path up the mountain is pretty straightforward, and the guides walk behind the slowest member of the group, so think of them as safety supervisors rather than trailblazers.

So, the total minimum price for a couple climbing the mountain is (drum roll please) RM164.50 per person, and that does not include the RM360 for room-and-board on the mountain at Laban Rata (that's a grand total of RM524.50 for all of you math whizzes out there).

Optional extra fees include a taxi ride from the park office to the Tempohon Gate

VIA FERRATA

In 2007, Mountain Torq dramatically changed the Kinabalu climbing experience by creating an intricate system of rungs and rails crowning the mountain's summit. Known as *via ferrata* (literally 'iron road' in Italian), this alternative style of mountaineering has been a big hit in Europe for the last century and is just starting to take Asia by storm. In fact, Mountain Torq is Asia's first *via ferrata* system, and, according to the Guinness Book of World Records, it's the highest 'iron road' in the world!

After ascending Kinabalu in the traditional fashion (p360), participants use the network of levers to return to the Laban Rata rest camp along the mountain's dramatic granite walls. Mountain Torq's star attraction, the **Low's Peak Circuit** (RM380; minimum age 17 years old), is a four-to-five-hour scramble down metres upon metres of sheer rock face. This route starts at 3800m, passing a variety of obstacles before linking up to the Walk the Torq path for the last part of the journey. The route's thread-like tightrope walks and swinging planks will have you convinced that the course designers are sadistic, but that's what makes it so darn fun – testing your limits without putting your safety in jeopardy. Those who don't want to see their heart leaping out of their chest should try the **Walk the Torq** route (RM300; minimum age ten years old). This two-to-three-hour escapade is an exciting initiation into the world of *via ferrata*, offering dramatic mountain vistas with a few less knee-shaking moments.

No matter which course you tackle, you'll undoubtedly think that the dramatic vertical drops are nothing short of exhilarating. But the best part about the whole adventure actually happens a few weeks later, when you're back home showing off your eye-popping photos to friends: 'yeah, look at that shot of me dangling off the edge...I'm so hardcore...'

Via ferrata may be an Italian import, but Mountain Torq is pure Bornean fun. For more information about Mountain Torq check out www.mountaintorq.com.

(RM16.50 per vehicle, one way, four-person maximum), a climbing certificate (RM10) and a porter (RM102 per trip to the summit or RM84 to Laban Rata) who can be hired to carry a maximum load of 10kg. You'll see scores of porters huffing past you during your ascent as they carry supplies to Laban Rata. In case you're curious (we were!), they get paid RM8 per kilogram lugged in each direction (adult males carry around 30kg on each jaunt), and they often make two or three trips *per day*).

EQUIPMENT & CLOTHING

No special equipment is required to successfully summit the mountain, however a headlamp is strongly advised for the predawn jaunt to the top – you'll need your hands free to climb the ropes on the summit massif. Expect freezing temperatures near the summit, not to mention strong winds and the occasional rainstorm. Check out our tailor-made packing list (below) for more information, and don't

forget a water bottle, which can be refilled at unfiltered (but potable) tanks en route.

The Climb to the Summit

Climbing the great Mt Kinabalu is a heart-pounding two-day adventure that you won't soon forget. You'll want to check in at park headquarters at around 9am (8.45am at the latest for *via ferrata* participants; p359) to pay your park fees (p359), grab your guide and start the ascent (four to six hours) to Laban Rata (3272m) where you'll spend the night before finishing the climb. On the following day you'll finish scrambling to the top at about 2.30am in order to reach the summit for a breathtaking sunrise over Borneo.

Although you will see hikers of all ages making the journey, a climb up Kinabalu is only advised for those in adequate physical condition. The trek is tough, and the ascent is unrelenting as almost every step you take will be uphill. You will negotiate several obstacles along the way, including slippery stones, blinding humidity, frigid winds and slow-paced Japanese 50-some-things in Chanel tracksuits. Check out left for information on what to pack for your mountain adventure.

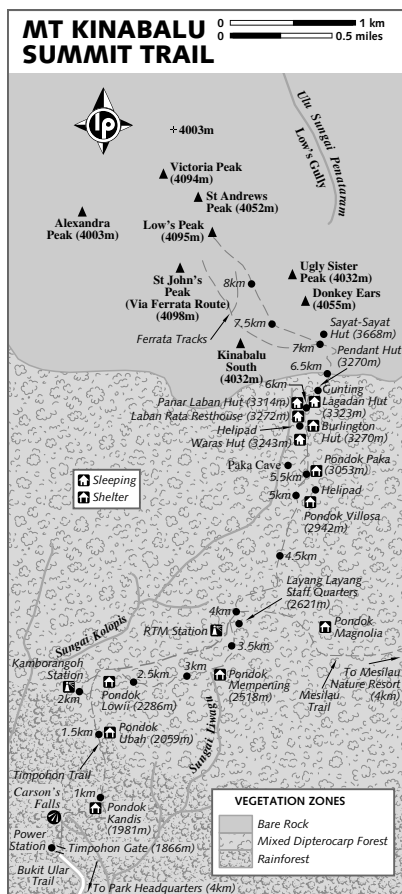
There are two trail options leading up the mountain – the Timpohon Trail and the Mesilau Trail. If this is your first time climbing Kinabalu, we strongly advise taking the Timpohon Trail – it's shorter, easier (but by no means easy!) and more convenient from the park headquarters (an hour's walk or short park shuttle ride; RM16.50 one way per vehicle, four-person maximum). If you are participating in Mountain Torq's *via ferrata*, you are required to take the Timpohon Trail in order to reach Laban Rata in time for your safety briefing at 4pm. The Mesilau Trail offers second-time climbers (or uber-fit hikers) the opportunity to really enjoy some of the park's natural wonders. This trail is less trodden so the chances of seeing unique flora and fauna are higher.

As you journey up to the summit, you'll happen upon signboards showing your progress – there's a marker every 500m. There are also rest shelters (*pondok*) at regular intervals, with basic toilets and tanks of unfiltered (but potable) drinking water. The walking times that follow are conservative estimates – don't be surprised if you move at a slightly speedier pace, and certainly don't

KINABALU PACKING LIST

- headlamp (with spare batteries)
- comfortable running shoes or *kampung adidas* (p352)
- wool socks and athletic socks
- hiking shorts or breathable pants
- three T-shirts (one made of lightweight synthetic material)
- fleece jacket
- lightweight shell jacket or rain jacket
- fleece or wool hat
- fleece gloves
- long johns
- hand towel
- water bottle
- light, high-energy snacks
- camera
- money
- earplugs for dorms

The aforementioned items should easily fit into a small waterproof backpack. Apply a dab of sunscreen and insect repellent before you depart. See p86 for more information about trekking in Borneo.



be discouraged if you take longer – everyone's quest for the summit is different.

TIMPHONH GATE TO LAYANG LAYANG

'Why am I sweating this much *already*?'

The trip to the summit officially starts at the Timpohon Gate (1866m) and from there it's an 8.72km march to the summit. There is a small bathroom outhouse located 700m before the Timpohon Gate, and a convenience shop at the gate itself for impulse snack and beverage purchases (get a 100-Plus!).

After a short, deceptive descent, the trail leads up steep stairs through the dense forest and continues winding up and up for the rest of the trip. There's a charming waterfall, **Carson's Falls**, beside the track shortly after the

start, and the forest can be alive with birds and squirrels in the morning. Five *pondok* (shelters) are spaced at intervals of 15 to 35 minutes between Timpohon Gate and Layang Layang and it's about three hours to the Layang Layang (2621m) rest stop. Near Pondok Lowii (2286m) the trail follows an open ridge giving great views over the valleys and up to the peaks.

LAYANG LAYANG TO PONDOK PAKA

'Why did I put all that extra crap in my rucksack?'

This part of the climb can be the most difficult for some – especially around the 4.5km marker. You've definitely made some headway but there's still a long trek to go – no light at the end of the jungly tunnel quite yet. It takes about 1½ hours to reach Pondok Paka (3053m), the seventh shelter on the trail, 5.5km from the start. You'll welcome the few flat sections near Pondok Paka lying between the seemingly endless steps. This stretch is good for spotting pitcher plants, although you probably won't see any growing by the side of the track – look among the dense vegetation.

PONDOK PAKA TO LABAN RATA

'Why did I pay all that money just to climb a freakin' mountain!'

Also known as the 'can't I pay someone to finish this for me?' phase, this part of the climb is where beleaguered hikers get a second wind as the treeline ends and the summit starts to feel closer. At the end of this leg you'll reach Laban Rata (3272m), your 'home sweet home' on the mountain (see p363 for more sleeping information). Take a good look at the slender signpost announcing your arrival – it's the propeller of the helicopter once used to hoist the construction materials to build the elaborate rest station. This leg takes around 45 minutes.

LABAN RATA TO SAYAT-SAYAT HUT

'Why am I waking up at the time I usually go to bed back home?'

It's 2am and your alarm just went off. Is this a dream? Nope. You're about to climb the last part of the mountain in order to reach the summit before sunrise. Most people set off at around 2.45am, and it's worth heading out at this time even if you're in great shape (don't forget your torch). The one-hour climb to Sayat-Sayat hut (3668m) involves

ADDING INSULT TO INJURY

As your two-day Kinabalu adventure comes to an end and you limp across the Timpohon Gate a shrivelled bundle of aching muscles and bones, don't forget to glance at the climbing records chart. Every year the **Kinabalu International Climbathon** (<http://climbathon.sabahtourism.com>) attracts the fittest athletes from around the world for a competitive climb-off as dozens of hikers zoom up the mountain *a la* the Road Runner. In 2008, Agustí Roc Amador from Spain set the men's record by completing the roundtrip (that's up to the summit and back to the gate – just to be clear) in 2 hours and 44 minutes. Corinne Favre from France set the women's record with a total time of 3 hours and 17 minutes.

And it's not just the clock-beaters who put casual trekkers to shame: the oldest person to reach the summit was a Japanese lady who battled her way to the top at the grand old age of 90. So just remember, when you're smugly slinking by slower hikers, there are pensioners out there who would leave you for dead...

a lot of hiker traffic and the crossing of the sheer Panar Laban rock face. There is little vegetation, except where overhangs provide some respite from the wind. It is one of the toughest parts of the climb, especially in the cold and dark of the predawn hours. Thick ropes are used to pull yourself up the granite sheets; it's hard work in places, but it feels great to use arm muscles instead of your weary legs. It's a bit of a mad dash as the jumble of headlamped hikers scurry over jagged rocks and narrow steps.

SAYAT-SAYAT HUT TO SUMMIT

'Why is it so darn cold out?! I'm standing near the equator for Pete's sake!'

After checking in at Sayat-Sayat, the crowd of hikers begins to thin as stronger walkers forge ahead and slower adventurers pause for sips from their water bottle. If you are able to position yourself ahead of the crowd, stop every so often to look back down at the climbers below you – they look like pilgrims on a silent spiritual quest (even the headlamps look like flickering candles). Despite the stunning surroundings, the last stretch of the summit ascent is, of course, the steepest and hardest part of the climb. Some spots are so precarious that you'll be thankful you couldn't see exactly what you were doing as you climbed up!

From just beyond Sayat-Sayat, the summit looks deceptively close and, though it's just over 1km, the last burst will take between one to three hours depending on your stamina. You might even see shattered climbers crawling on hands and knees as they reach out for the top of Borneo.

Once you're motionless at the top – waiting for the sun to rise – the coldness really starts to set in.

THE SUMMIT

[Speechless]

This is it – the million-dollar moment (or the RM600+ moment for those who are keeping score...) Climbers crowd together while jockeying for the essential photograph of the summit sign. Flashbulbs go off like lightning waking up sleepy eyes, and everyone obsesses over trying to nab a seat at the official summit point, forgetting that the sunrise can be glimpsed from anywhere on the mountain.

The summit warms up quickly as the sun starts its own ascent between 5.45am and 6.20am, and the weary suddenly smile; the climb up is a distant memory and the trek down merely an afterthought.

True adventurers should sign up with Mountain Torq to climb back to Laban Rata along the world's highest *via ferrata* (see p359 for details).

THE JOURNEY BACK TO THE BOTTOM

'Why didn't I believe anyone when they said that going down was just as hard as going up?!'

You'll probably leave the summit at around 7.30am and you should aim to leave Laban Rata no later than 12.30pm. The gruelling descent back down to Timpohon Gate from Laban Rata takes between three to four hours (if you're returning to the bottom along the Mesilau Trail it will take more time than descending to the Timpohon Gate). The weather can close in very quickly and, although you probably won't get lost, the granite is slippery

even when it's dry. During rainstorms the downward trek feels like walking through a river. Slower walkers often find that their legs hurt more the day after – quicker paces lighten the constant pounding as legs negotiate each descending step. If you participated in the exhilarating *via ferrata* (p359) you will be absolutely knackered during your descent and will stumble into Timpohon Gate just before sunset (around 6pm to 6.30pm).

A 1st-class certificate can be purchased for RM10 by those who complete the climb; 2nd-class certificates are issued for making it to Laban Rata. These can be collected at the park office.

Walks Around the Base

It's well worth spending a day exploring the marked trails around park headquarters; if you have time, it may be better to do it before you climb the mountain, as chances are you won't really feel like it afterwards. The various trails and lookouts are shown on the map on p358.

The base trails interconnect with one another like a tied shoelace, so you can spend the day, or indeed days, walking at a leisurely pace through the beautiful forest. Some interesting plants, plenty of birds and, if you're lucky, the occasional mammal can be seen along the **Liwagu Trail** (6km), which follows the river of the same name. When it rains, watch out for slippery paths and legions of leeches.

At 11am each day a **guided walk** (RM3) starts from the park office and lasts for one to two hours. The knowledgeable guide points out

flowers, plants, birds and insects along the way. If you set out from KK early enough, it's possible to arrive at the park in time for the guided walk.

Many of the plants found on the mountain are cultivated in the **Mountain Garden** (Map p358; RM5; ☎ 9am, noon & 3pm) behind the visitors centre.

Sleeping

LABAN RATA (ON THE MOUNTAIN)

Organising your accommodation on the mountain can be the most difficult part of your Kinabalu adventure. Access to the summit is essentially rationed by access to the huts on the mountain at Laban Rata (3272m) and this *must* be booked in advance (the earlier the better). In order to have any hope of clear weather when you reach the summit, you must arrive around dawn, and the only way to do this is by spending a night in one of the huts at Laban Rata. Yes, Sabah Parks will let you attempt a one-day ascent, starting around 7am, but by the time you get to the summit in mid-afternoon, it will almost certainly be clouded over or raining. And, just in case you're thinking about it: a) they won't allow a night climb and b) they will not allow an 'unofficial' climb (permits are carefully checked at several points on the mountain).

Sutera Sanctuary Lodges (see p347) in Kota Kinabalu operates almost all of the accommodation here, but space is very limited. Many travellers report extreme frustration with booking huts on the mountain –

FLORA & FAUNA OF MT KINABALU

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

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

Deer and monkeys are no longer common around park HQ, but you can see squirrels, including the handsome Prevost's squirrel and the mountain ground squirrel. Tree shrews can sometimes be seen raiding rubbish bins. Common birds are Bornean treepies, fantails, shrews, sunbirds and laughing thrushes, while birds seen only at higher altitudes are the Kinabalu friendly warbler, the mountain blackeye and the mountain blackbird. Other wildlife includes colourful butterflies and the huge green moon moth.

they complain that the booking system is disorganised and inefficient, the huts are often full or it's difficult to get a confirmed booking. Bookings can be made online, in person or over the phone. We did a little experiment of our own and had four different people (tourists and locals) contact Sutera Sanctuary Lodges (pronounced 'sutra') to try and book accommodation two weeks before their desired climb time. Each person was offered different climbing date options and a different set of caveats involving accommodation restrictions and pricing.

The most common sleeping option is the heated dormitory (bedding included) in the Laban Rata Resthouse, which sells for RM360 per person. Three meals are included in the price; see right for more information about eating at Laban Rata. Non-heated facilities surrounding the Laban Rata building are also available for RM320 per person (meals included). Yes, the inflated prices feel monopolistic, and to make matters worse, Sutera is trying to force climbers to stay in the park for two nights – one night at Laban Rata and one night at the base.

The other option at Laban Rata is to stay at **Pendant Hut** (Map p361), which is owned and operated by **Mountain Torq** (see the boxed text, p359; pricing is on par with Sutera). All guests sleeping at Pendant Hut take two of three meals at Sutera's cafeteria, and are required to participate in (or at least pay for) the *via ferrata* circuit. Pendant Hut is slightly more basic (no heat – although climbers sleep in uber-warm sleeping bags), however, there's a bit of a summer-camp vibe here while Laban Rata feels more like a Himalayan orphanage. Prices for Pendant Hut are comparable to Sutera.

See p359 for information about additional fees associated with climbing Kinabalu.

PARK HEADQUARTERS (AT THE BASE)

The following sleeping options are located at the base of the mountain and are all operated by Sutera Sanctuary Lodges (p347). As per Sutera's monopolistic reputation, these options are overpriced when compared to the non-affiliated sleeping spots outside the park (p366).

Grace Hostel (Map p358; dm RM120) Clean, comfortable 20-bed dorm with fireplace and drink-making area.

Hill Lodge (Map p358; r RM390) These semi-detached cabins are a good option for those who can't face a night

in the hostels. They're clean and comfortable, with private bathrooms.

Liwagu Suites (Map p358; r RM490) These hotel-like rooms (four in total) can be found in the Liwagu Building. While they sleep up to four people, they're best for couples as they contain only one bedroom and one living room.

Nepenthes Villa (Map p358; lodge RM760) These attached two-storey units fall somewhere between hotel rooms and private lodges. They have two bedrooms (one with a twin bed, one with a queen) and verandahs offering limited mountain views.

Peak Lodge (Map p358; lodge RM660) These semi-detached units have two bedrooms (one with a bunk bed and one with two twin beds), pleasant sitting rooms, fireplaces and nice views from their verandahs.

Rock Hostel (Map p358; dm RM120) Somewhat institutional 20-bed hostel with similar facilities to the Grace Hostel. Twin-share rooms are available here as well (RM350 per room).

Eating

LABAN RATA (ON THE MOUNTAIN)

At Laban Rata the cafeteria-style restaurant in the **Laban Rata Resthouse** (Map p361) has a simple menu and also offers buffet meals coordinated with the usual climbing times. Most hikers staying at Laban Rata (either in one of Sutera's huts or at Pendant Hut) have three meals (dinner, breakfast and lunch) included in their accommodation packages (see p363 for sleeping information). It is possible to negotiate a price reduction if you plan on bringing your own food (boiling water can be purchased for RM1 if you bring dried noodles). Note that you will have to lug said food up to Laban Rata. Buffet meals can also be purchased individually – dinner costs RM45. A small counter in the dining area sells an assortment of items including soft drinks (RM5.50), chocolate (RM5), pain relievers and postcards.

PARK HEADQUARTERS (AT THE BASE)

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

Restoran Kinabalu Balsam (Map p358; dishes RM5-10) The cheaper and more popular of the two is this canteen-style spot directly below the park office. It offers basic but decent Malaysian, Chinese and Western dishes at reasonable prices. There is also a small but well-stocked

shop in Balsam selling tinned and dried foods, chocolate, beer, spirits, cigarettes, T-shirts, bread, eggs and margarine.

Liwagu Restaurant (Map p358; dishes RM10-30) In the visitors centre, this is more expensive than the Balsam, but there's a huge range of dishes, including noodles, rice and seafood standards. An 'American breakfast' is pretty ordinary here – the cheaper breakfast at the Balsam canteen is better value.

Getting There & Away

It is highly advised that summit seekers check in at the park headquarters by 9am, which means that if you're coming from KK, you should plan to leave by 7am, or consider spending the night somewhere near the base of the mountain.

A shuttle bus runs from the Pacific Sutera (9am), the Magellan Sutera (9.10am) and Wisma Sabah (9.20am) to Kinabalu National Park HQ, arriving at 11.30am (RM40). In the reverse direction, it leaves Kinabalu National Park HQ at 3.30pm. There is also a shuttle bus from Kinabalu National Park HQ to Poring Hot Springs at noon (RM25) and another at 3.30pm (RM25) to Mesilau Nature Resort.

Express buses and minivans travelling between KK and Ranau (and Sandakan) pass the park turn-off, 100m uphill from the park entrance. Air-con express buses (RM15, three hours) and taxis leave from both Inanam and Padang Merdeka (Wawasan) stations (see p354). A share-taxi from one of these transport junctions is significantly cheaper than hailing a cab in the city centre (RM150).

AROUND MT KINABALU

Kinabalu National Park is home to Borneo's highest mountain and some of the island's best-preserved forest. Most travellers make a beeline for the mountain and the main park headquarters area, but the following spots are also worth exploring.

Mesilau Nature Resort

This lovely slice of country is the trailhead for an alternative approach up Mt Kinabalu, often favoured by trekkers as it's more challenging than the main route and much less crowded than park headquarters. The Mesilau route wanders up the mountain and links up with the Timpohon route to continue the ascent to Laban Rata. Arrange your trip with Sutera Sanctuary Lodges (p347) and your guide will meet you at Mesilau.

See p359 for more information about permits and fees. Mesilau Nature Resort is 30 minutes beyond the entrance to Kinabalu (when driving towards Ranau from KK).

Kundasang Memorial

The junction for the Mesilau Nature Resort on the KK–Ranau Hwy is the site of the **Kundasang War Memorial** (Kundasang; RM10; ☎ 8am–5.30pm). There are English and Anzac gardens here, commemorating the prisoners from these countries who died on the infamous Sandakan Death Marches (p373). In the Anzac Garden you can see a full list of the dead and at the back of the gardens there is a viewpoint that offers a stunning view of Mt Kinabalu.

The memorial is in Kundasang, 10km east of Kinabalu National Park headquarters. You'll know you're in Kundasang when you see the market stalls on either side of the road. Take the turn on the left for Mesilau Nature Resort. The memorial is on the right 150m after the turnoff. Look for the flags and the stone fort-like structure above the road.

Ranau

Ranau is a collection of concrete shop blocks on the road between KK and Sandakan. There's a busy Saturday **night market**. While the surrounding valley is quite lovely, the town itself is rather uninspiring. After your epic Kinabalu climb, head to **Tagal Sungai Moroli** (admission RM10) in Kampung Luanti for a truly unique massage experience. The term 'tagal' means 'no fishing' in the local Kadazan-Dusun language, as the fish in the river (a species known locally known as '*ikan pelian*') are not to be captured – they are special massage fish. The townsfolk claim that they've trained the little swimmers to gently nibble at weary feet.

Poring Hot Springs

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

If you're expecting some kind of natural paradise with rock pools and the like, think again: the setting is real forest but the facilities themselves are quite patently manmade.

SUPER SIZE ME

If Borneo were in the game of stealing slogans, it would probably choose 'super size me'. And it wouldn't take long to figure out why. Everything about Borneo (from its biodiversity to its topography) is on a totally different scale than the rest of the world – it's like the island's taking steroids.

Here are a few examples:

- The biggest flower on the earth, a parasitic plant known as the rafflesia, blossoms on Borneo to a whopping 1m in diameter (p432).
- The Sarawak Chamber, the biggest cave chamber a tourist can visit, is located in Gunung Mulu National Park (p452).
- The Kinabalu giant red leech can grow up to 30cm in length – that's longer than the average foot of an adult human male. (Luckily, it doesn't feed on humans!)
- Southeast Asia's highest point is Mt Kinabalu (p357), a stunning granite fortress rising 4095m. And let's not forget, Borneo is the third biggest island on the planet (only Greenland and New Guinea are larger).

Steaming, sulphurous water is channelled into pools and tubs where visitors can relax their tired muscles after the trek to the summit of Mt Kinabalu. For some, it's a huge anticlimax, for others it's a perfect playground worth far more than the customary quick stop. Don't forget a towel and your swimming trunks.

A **Tropical Garden** (adult/child RM3/1.50; ☎ 9am-4pm), a **Butterfly Farm** (adult/child RM4/2; ☎ 9am-4pm Tue-Sun) and an **Orchid Garden** (adult/child RM10/5; ☎ 9am-4pm) are also part of the Poring complex. Rafflesia sometimes bloom in the area; look out for signs in the visitors centre and along the road.

Up above the trees and houses, the **Canopy Walkway** (adult/child RM5/2.50; ☎ 9am-4pm) consists of a series of walkways suspended from trees, up to 40m above the jungle floor, providing unique views of the surrounding forest. Get there early if you want to see birds or other wildlife.

Sleeping & Eating

It's worth spending a night around the base of Kinabalu before your ascent, and there are plenty of accommodation options suiting everyone's budget. All of the following lodging options have an on-site restaurant.

The accommodation at Mesilau and Poring is run by Sutera Sanctuary Lodges (p347). At forested Mesilau, the Bishop's Head Resthouse has dormitory beds for RM120 per person. Rooms at Crocker Rage Lodges cost RM315. Chalets at Ugly Sister's Peak Lodge start at around RM895 per night, while Low's Peak

Lodge will set you back RM1065. The lodges at Poring fall into the same price range.

There are also plenty of privately owned sleeping options looping around Kinabalu's base. Most of these are located along the road between the park headquarters and Kundasang (6km east of the park's entrance).

Puncak Borneo Resort (☎ 012-828 0866; Kundasang; dm/s/d incl breakfast from RM40/168/188; ☎ ☑) A respectable choice, Puncak (pronounced 'poon-chak') makes a few worthy attempts at style with lipstick-red accent walls and animal-print rugs. The stairs up to the reception can feel like an impossible obstacle if you've just climbed the mountain.

Cottage Hotel (☎ 088-888885; Kundasang; www.thecottagehotel.com.my; r RM126; ☑) Popular with tour operators, this fine option offers prim rooms and great views of the mountain. Backpackers can cash in on slower nights – simply rock up and ask them about their RM60 deal which includes room and full board. Wi-fi available.

Kinabalu Rose Cabin (☎ 088-889-233; krc145@yahoo.com; Km 18, Jln Ranau-Tuaran; r RM130-250) Look for the shiny blue-roofed pagoda and you've found Rose Cabin. Rooms are as kitschy as their shimmery brochures, but frequent mid-week discounts sweeten the deal. A minivan from park HQ should cost around RM5.

Kinabalu Pine Resort (☎ 088-889388; Kundasang-Ranau Hwy; r from RM150) A paradigm of country club landscaping, this welcoming camp-style resort is extremely popular with Sabahans, who sit on the wooden balconies while enjoying the

breezy sunsets. Ask for a room with hardwood floors – the carpeting here is a bit tattered.

Getting There & Around

The area around Mt Kinabalu is easily accessible from KK, with buses running at a high frequency throughout the day (7am to 8pm). KK roundtrip buses stop in front of park headquarters and in Ranau (RM15, two hours).

Shuttle buses and minivans are constantly moving tourists around the base of the mountain and taxis can be hired if you don't have time to wait for public transport. Minivans operate from a blue-roofed shelter in Ranau servicing the nearby attractions (park HQ, Poring etc) for RM5. Opting for a taxi will set you back RM30 (if you negotiate). The national park operates a van service between the headquarters and Poring for RM25 – it leaves the park HQ at noon.

TUARAN

Tuaran, 33km from KK, is a bustling little town with tree-lined boulevard-style streets and a distinctive nine-storey **Chinese pagoda**. There's little point stopping in the town itself unless you happen to pass through on a market day, but the surrounding area conceals a couple of luxury resorts (p349) and two stilt villages.

Mengkabong Water Village, a Bajau (indigenous group) stilt village built over an estuary, was once a very picturesque spot, though it's not very special now. The settlement at **Penimbawan** is much more appealing; to get there, take a minivan to Serusup (RM1.50) and charter a motorboat (RM40). The trip up the river takes about 15 minutes, and the boat will wait while you wander the plankwalks of the village. The villagers are friendly, but you're better off going with someone who speaks Malay, because it can feel a bit intrusive just wandering around.

Given the town's proximity to KK (with its heaps of accommodation options), you probably won't need to stay in town. However, if for some reason you need a room, try **Orchid Hotel** (☎ 088-793789; 4 Jln Teo Teck Ong; r from RM80; ♿). It's somewhat overpriced but it'll do the trick for a night.

All buses north pass through Tuaran, and minivans shuttle regularly to and from KK (RM5 to RM10, 30 minutes). Minivans to Mengkabong are less frequent and cost RM1. Regular minivans go from Tuaran to Kota Belud (around RM10, 30 minutes).

KOTA BELUD

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

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

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

Sleeping & Eating

Most people visit Kota Belud as a day trip from KK, since you can make it there and back with plenty of time for the market. One reason to stay overnight here is the stunning view of Mt Kinabalu at first light. There are several homestays in the area; check out www.sabahtourism.com for details. Try **Kota Belud Travelers' Lodge** (☎ 088-977228; 6 Plaza Kong Guan; dm RM25, r RM60-85; ♿), a simple affair in the centre of town. It's about 200m southwest of the mosque in a shopping block (it's well marked, so finding it shouldn't be a problem).

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

Getting There & Away

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

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

KUDAT

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

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

Swing by **New Way Car Rental & Souvenir Centre** (☎ 088-625868; 40 Jln Lo Thien Chok) if you want to explore the area under your own steam. They can also book your accommodation on Pulau Banggi (opposite).

Easily the best deal in town, if not the entire region, **Ria Hotel** (☎ 088-622794; 3 Jln Marudu; r RM80-108; 📶 📺) hits all the right notes: clean, spacious, well-appointed rooms, nice bathrooms with hot showers, and little balconies (some with scenic views). It's a short walk southwest of the bus station.

our pick Kudat Riviera (☎ 088-249276; www.exquisiteborneovillas.com; Pantai Kulambu; villa incl breakfast from US\$540; 📶 📺 🍷 🍹) is Borneo's newest attempt at opulence, and boy is it a success. Stunning villas are constructed in a dreamy Balinese style – go for an ocean-facing Rice Barn Villa – the perfect incarnation of 'tribal chic'.

The bus station is in Kudat Plaza, which is in the western part of town, very close to the Ria Hotel. Bus destinations include KK (RM20, three hours) and Kota Belud (RM15, ninety minutes). Minivans also operate from this station and other points in town.

AROUND KUDAT

The area around Kudat is prime package-tour territory, although the area can easily be explored by private vehicle (4WD is always a

safe bet for any off-roading). Either way, make sure you take in one of the lovely tropical sunsets – Sabah's west coast is famous for 'em!

Rungus Longhouses

The indigenous people of the Kudat area are known as the Rungus, a subgroup of Sabah's Kadazan-Dusun race. The Rungus inhabit the Kudat Peninsula and the Pitas Peninsula, on the far side of Marudu Bay. The Rungus are famous for their basketry, beadwork and fine longhouses, which house one extended family, rather than several unrelated families, as is the case with other groups in Borneo (see p430 for more information on Borneo's longhouses).

These days, as with many other indigenous people in Borneo, most of the Rungus have abandoned their longhouses in favour of Malay-style wooden or concrete-brick houses. However, the Rungus maintain two fine **longhouses** (Bavanggazo Rungus Longhouses; ☎ 088-621971; per person per night from RM70) in Kampung Bavanggazo.

Make no mistake, these longhouses are primarily set up for display purposes and to attract tourists, but a night here still provides visitors with a good chance to interact with Rungus people and learn about their culture. The rates include dinner and breakfast and simple cultural entertainment. You will sleep in a traditional room in one of the longhouses with insect netting above your bed.

Kampung Bavanggazo is 44km south of Kudat on the north-south highway (look for the milepost reading 'Kudat 44km'). There is a sign off the highway that reads 'Kg. Bavanggazo 'Rungus Longhouse''. Follow this road (Jln Tinangol) down the hill for about 1.5km, cross a bridge and go uphill to the left. You will quickly come to the first longhouse, and the second one is at the top of the hill 800m further on. There is no public transport right to the longhouses. All KK-Kudat buses and minivans will stop at Kampung Bavanggazo if you ask the driver. A taxi from Kudat will cost around RM50.

Tip of Borneo

Sabah's northernmost headland, at the end of a wide bay some 40km from Kudat, is known as Tanjung Simpang Mengayu, or the Tip of Borneo. Magellan reputedly landed here for 42 days during his famous round-the-world voyage. Once a wild promontory, this windswept stretch where the cliffs meet the sea has

been co-opted as a tourist attraction – there's a large, truncated globe monument dominating the viewpoint. A sign warns visitors not to climb down onto the rocks that form the mainland's actual tip, effectively guaranteeing that tourists will do exactly that – so watch out for crashing waves if you follow suit...

There's no public transport, so you'll need to negotiate for a taxi from Kudat (around RM60, including waiting time upon arrival) or drive yourself (we suggest washing the dust off the car before returning it to the rental agency). **TYH Borneo Tours** (☎ 017-830 1188) and **Exotic Adventure** (☎ 019-589 0719; G-40-3A KK Times Square, Jln Coastal Hwy, Kota Kinabalu) offer guided day trips from KK, which stop at the Rungus longhouses along the way. Figure on around RM250 per person.

OFFSHORE ISLANDS

The real highlights of northwestern Sabah lie offshore – and we're not talking about Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park. The first gem is Pulau Mantanani, perfect tropical islands lying about 40km northwest of Kota Belud. The second is Layang Layang, a diving mecca about 300km northwest of KK – it's basically just an airstrip built on a reef way out in the middle of the South China Sea. Famous for great visibility, seemingly endless wall dives and the occasional school of hammerheads, it's second only to Sipadan (p388) on Malaysia's list of top dive spots.

Pulau Mantanani

Pulau Mantanani Besar (Big Mantanani Island) and **Pulau Mantanani Kecil** (Little Mantanani Island) are two little flecks of land fringed by bleach-blond sand and ringed by a halo of colourful coral, about 25km off the coast of northwest Sabah (about 40km northwest of Kota Belud).

The **Borneo Sea Resort** (☎ 088-230000; www.bornsea.com/mantanani; 3-day/2-night all-inclusive dive packages from RM1900; 🏠) sits on a nice private beach at the west end of the big island. The bungalows here are quite nice, with tile floors, hot-water showers and bathtubs, large double beds, verandahs and air-con. Sea kayaks are available for rent and would allow you to explore the area, but be careful as there are strong currents offshore and you could easily get washed out to sea. KK operators offer day trip diving packages for those who don't want to stay on the island.

Pulau Banggi

Travellers who want to fall off the map, or at least get off the tourist trail for a few days, might want to visit the remote island of Pulau Banggi, which lies some 40km northeast of Kudat. The Banggi people, known locally for their unusual tribal treehouses, are Sabah's smallest indigenous group, and speak a unique non-Bornean dialect. The island is an interesting spot to explore for a day, and the surrounding reef islands can also be visited on dive trips organised from KK.

Accommodation is provided by a small government **resthouse** (r RM40) and the modest **Banggi Resort** (☎ 019-587 8078; r fan/air-con RM35/55, huts RM70; 🏠), which can arrange boat trips and other activities. The small huts have kitchens and twin beds. This place can get fully booked on weekends, so reserve in advance.

Kudat Express (☎ 088-328118; one way RM15) runs a ferry between Kudat and the main settlement on Pulau Banggi. It departs the pier (near the Shell station) at 9am daily. In the reverse direction, it leaves Pulau Banggi daily at around 3pm.

Layang Layang

Some 300km northwest of KK, Layang Layang is a tiny island surrounded by a coral atoll. It's an exclusive **dive location**, well known to scubaholics as part of the famous Borneo Banks. As you would guess from its isolated location, the reef here is healthy and diverse. Although it may not be quite as colourful as the reef at Sipidan, it's likely to be one of the most unspoilt reefs most divers have seen. And the best part is that it just goes on and on, with new surprises waiting up and down its length. The visibility here is usually excellent, sometimes extending to 30m or more. While hammerheads are occasionally sighted, it might be better to consider them a bonus, and to concentrate on the reef fish, which are abundant and varied. There are also plenty of reef sharks in attendance, along with a healthy population of rays.

Layang Layang Island Resort (in Kuala Lumpur ☎ 03-2162 2877; www.myoutdoor.com/layanglayang; 6-day/5-night all-inclusive package twin-share per person from US\$1250; 🏠 🍷) is the only game in town here and it's all about the diving. The five daily meals – that's right, five – are scheduled around the dive times. The standard rooms are very comfortable, with air-con, TV, private verandahs and hot-water showers.

The all-inclusive packages include accommodation, food, twelve boat dives and tank usage. Package rates for non-divers start at US\$850. An extra night costs \$180/\$125 diver/non-diver.

The resort operates its own Antanov 26 aircraft, which flies every Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Sunday between KK and Layang Layang. The flight over from KK in this barebones Russian prop plane is a big part of the adventure: it feels more like a military transport than a commercial airliner. The return flight costs US\$285, which is not included in the accommodation/food/dive package.

EASTERN SABAH

A trip to eastern Sabah is like one giant tongue twister. The names of the towns and rivers sound like meditation mantras or mythical beasts: Kinabatangan, Gomantong, Pinuanakan. Sabahans will spot you a mile away as you fumble over five-syllable words, but don't let these syllabic setbacks deter you from visiting. Once you've crossed Kinabalu off your Bornean to-do list, head here for the remainder of Sabah's world-class sights.

Travel agents will wave fancy brochures in your face encouraging you to link up with a tour, but many of the area's attractions can be done under your own steam. After snagging some snaps of the jolly ginger apes at Sepilok, swing through the roaring Sungai Kinabatangan for a wildlife-watching river cruise. Then go on to the sparkling islands of Semporna Archipelago for some top-notch scuba at Sipadan. Those with a bit more time on their hands (and a sizeable stash of cash) should indulge in a jungle safari around the Danum Valley, or a bone-busting trek-a-thon through the Maliau Basin, commonly called Sabah's Lost World.

SANDAKAN

pop 453,750

Sandakan has been a dot on traders' maps for centuries. After the nearby natural wonders – Sepilok (p375) and an archipelago of idyllic islands (p378) – the city's biggest draw is its turbulent history, retold through religious relics, haunting cemeteries and stunning colonial mansions. Although Sandakan is far less exciting than it used to be, the city has

plenty of character and even a certain down-market charm. Once the shop shutters come down in the evening the centre can feel a bit deserted and creepy, but head to the lively Bandar Indah area: nights are best spent clinking cocktails at sunset, singing karaoke and devouring an aquarium's worth of seafood.

History

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

In the 18th century Sandakan came under the suzerainty of the sultan of Sulu, who ruled the southern islands of what is now the Philippines. In the early 1870s the Scottish adventurer and arms dealer William Clarke Cowie managed to obtain permission to start a settlement at Pulau Timbang, in Teluk Sandakan. The township quickly became known as Kampung German due to the large number of German traders who emigrated here.

In 1879 the settlement relocated to its current position and the city of Sandakan was established by then British Resident William Pryer. The port quickly boomed and many modern advances were seen here even before Hong Kong or Singapore. In 1883 Sandakan became the capital of British North Borneo, a status it held until WWII. Allied bombing and Japanese retaliation in 1945 virtually destroyed the town, and in 1946 the capital was moved to the equally devastated Jesselton, now called Kota Kinabalu.

Orientation

The centre of Sandakan consists of only a few blocks squashed between the waterfront and a steep escarpment from where you can look out over the bay (Teluk Sandakan). In the centre you'll find most of the hotels, restaurants, banks and local transport.

Like many Malaysian towns, Sandakan has suburbs and outlying areas extending considerable distances down the main highway, denoted by their distance from the centre, eg Batu 1 (Mile 1). Check out Batu 4 for additional lodging, eating and drinking options. Express buses to KK and other destinations

dispenses advice on everything from regional attractions to local restaurants and can link travellers together for group excursions.

Sight & Activities

Central Sandakan is light on 'must-see' attractions, although history buffs will appreciate the *Sandakan Heritage Trail* brochure available at the tourist office.

The **Puu Jih Shih Temple**, 4km west of the town centre, is a large Buddhist temple perched on a steep hill overlooking Teluk Sandakan. Take a bus to Tanah Merah and ask for directions. Closer to the centre of town, the **Sam Sing Kung Temple** dates from 1887 and fronts the municipal *padang*. Another building of note is the 19th-century **St Michael's & All Angels Church** (off Jln Puncak), one of the few stone buildings in Malaysian Borneo. Prison labourers lugged the stones across the jungle during the church's construction – perhaps not the best example of Christian charity!

For travellers seeking something a bit more obscure, try the **Japanese Cemetery**, located beyond the city's large Chinese cemetery near the Agnes Keith House. A Japanese woman established the cemetery in the 1890s – her name was Kinoshita Kuni, known to the English as Okuni of South Seas. She was a successful madam who ran the lucrative 'Brothel 8', which once stood on Lebu Tiga. Today the cemetery is quite small, but at one time there were hundreds of buried dead (most of them prostitutes). A monument to the fallen Japanese soldiers of WWII was erected in the cemetery in 1989.

AGNES KEITH HOUSE

On the hill above town, overlooking Teluk Sandakan and the scruffy port itself, is **Agnes Keith House** (Jln Istana; RM15; ☎ 9am-5pm), an old two-storey wooden villa now renovated as a museum. Keith was an American author who came to Sandakan in the 1930s with her husband, the Conservator of Forests, and ended up writing several books about her experiences, including the famous *Land Below the Wind*. The Keiths' villa was destroyed during WWII and rebuilt identically upon their return in 1946. The house fell into disrepair during the 1990s, but Sabah Museum restored it as a faithful recreation of Keith's original abode.

The villa documents Sandakan in all its colonial splendour, with detailed displays on the

lives of the Keiths. Most poignant are mementos of Agnes' imprisonment by the Japanese during WWII, when she had to try to care for her young son under gruelling conditions. Her book, *Three Came Home*, recounts those years. The admission price includes entry to the various branches of the Sabah Museum in KK (p345) – now didn't we tell you to keep hold of your ticket? Also on the grounds is the English Tea House & Restaurant (p374), conveniently ignoring Keith's US background and the fact that she found Sandakan to be 'too British' when she first arrived!

To reach the museum, follow Jln Singapura from the city centre and turn right up the hill, or head up the shady *Tangga Seribu* (100 Steps) to Jln Residensi Drive and turn left. Just below the museum gardens is an **observation pavilion** built by the local Rotary Club, which offers more fine views.

SANDAKAN MEMORIAL PARK

Now just a quiet patch of woods, **Sandakan Memorial Park** (Taman Peringatan; admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm) was the site of a Japanese POW camp and starting point for the infamous 'death marches' to Ranau. Of the 1800 Australian and 600 British troops imprisoned here, the only survivors by July 1945 were six Australian escapees. See opposite for more information.

Large rusting machines testify to the camp's forced-labour program, and a pavilion at the centre of the park includes accounts from survivors and photographs from personnel, inmates and liberators. In 2006 the original march route was officially reopened as a memorial trail – see www.sandakan-deathmarch.com for details.

To reach the park, take any Batu 8 (or higher-numbered) bus from the local bus terminal in the city centre (RM1.80); get off at the 'Taman Rimba' signpost and walk down Jln Rimba. A taxi from downtown costs about RM15 one way.

Tours

It is possible to visit many of the attractions around Sandakan independently – to see wildlife, however, you'll need a guide, and the easiest way to arrange this is by taking a tour. The town has plenty of general tour operators offering packages to Sepilok, Sungai Kinabatangan, the Gomantong Caves and the Turtle Islands National Park. Hotels

THE SANDAKAN DEATH MARCHES

Sandakan was the site of a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp during WWII, and in September 1944 there were 1800 Australian and 600 British troops interned here. What is not widely known is that more Australians died here than during the building of the infamous Burma Railway.

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

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

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

As a final bitter irony, it emerged after the war that a rescue attempt had been planned for early 1945, but intelligence at the time had suggested that there were no prisoners left at the Sandakan camp.

in Sandakan and Sepilok can also arrange tours, as can agents and accommodation in KK (p341).

Discovery Tours (☎ 089-274106; www.discoverytours.com.my; 9th fl, Wisma Khoo Siak Chiew, Lebu Empat) Popular operator servicing the majority of Sabah's major attractions.

MB Permai Tours (☎/fax 089-671535; 1st fl, Sandakan Airport) Tours and car rental from RM120 per day (4WD from RM380).

Sabah Holidays (☎ 089-671718; www.sabahholidays.com; Ground fl, Sandakan Airport) Tours, rental cars and minivans, with a branch in KK.

Sepilok Tropical Wildlife Adventure (☎ 089-271077; www.stwadventure.com; 13 Lebu Tiga) Mid-priced tour specialist. Owners of Sepilok Jungle Resort and Bilit Adventure Lodge on Sungai Kinabatangan.

SI Tours (☎ 089-213502; www.sitoursborneo.com; 10th fl, Wisma Khoo Siak Chiew, Lebu Empat) This full-service agency opened Abai Jungle Lodge in December 2006 as a base for Kinabatangan tours. Also has an airport branch.

Wildlife Expeditions (☎ 089-219616; www.wildlife-expeditions.com; 9th fl, Wisma Khoo Siak Chiew, Lebu Empat) Tour menu includes its Sukau River Lodge on the Kinabatangan. Has a KK office.

Sleeping

Over the last two years, the number of hotel rooms has doubled in Sandakan despite the

decrease in tourists, so spontaneous travellers won't be too hard-pressed to find an available room. If you're only passing through Sandakan to see the orang-utans, it's better to stay at Sepilok itself, since the rehabilitation centre is about 25km from town.

Sunset Harbour Botik Hostel (☎ 089-229875; www.sunsethostels.com; 1E, HS14, Harbour Square Complex; dm/d incl breakfast from RM20/60; ☎ ☑) The dorm rooms are bit too 'little orphan Annie', but there are excellent kitchen facilities here and a large market around the corner to buy your meal-to-be.

Sandakan Backpackers (☎ 089-221104; www.sandakanbackpackers.com; Lot 108, Block SH-11, Harbour Square Complex; dm/s/d RM25/40/60; ☎ ☑) Cheap sleeps is the name of the game – the young backpacker crowd seems to congregate here (maybe 'cause they're on a package tour?).

Nak Hotel (☎ 089-272988; www.nakhotel.com; Jln Pelabuhan Lama; dm/r incl breakfast from RM30/88; ☎ ☑) If you're into architectural anomalies (or Soviet-style riffs) then this concrete behemoth might be the place for you. Picky travellers fear not – the owners have a real *nak* for chic interior decor, outfitting the oddly shaped rooms with clever design details. Don't miss the hotel's kick-ass roof lounge, (Balin; p374) – a must even if you're not staying here.

The Mark's Lodge (☎ 089-210055; themarks@streamyx.com; Lot 1-7, Block 36, Bandar Indah; r from RM154; 🏠 📺) The word 'boutique' is written in fogged glass across the front entrance – just in case you didn't get the memo. This business-class hotel, located at Batu 4 (Bandar Indah) is a solid option for a comfortable sleep with no surprises (good or bad). Go for a non-smoking room. It's a RM12 cab ride into town and a RM40 drive to Sepilok.

Hotel Sandakan (☎ 089-221122; www.hotelsandakan.com.my; Lebuah Empat; r/ste incl breakfast RM240/310; 🏠 📺) A three-star establishment offering comfortable but characterless Western-style rooms. Back in Agnes Keith's time, staying here would have cost you just \$8...

Also worth a look:

Hotel London (☎ 089-216371; www.hlondon.com.my; 10 Lebuah Empat; d incl breakfast RM55; 🏠 📺) Renovated up from its shoestring roots; rooms are clean and comfortable.

Swiss Inn Waterfront Sandakan (☎ 089-240888; www.swissgarden.com; Harbour Square Complex; r from RM120; 🏠 📺) Fresh-faced with pleasant ocean views. Try negotiating for big discounts – they're never fully booked.

Eating & Drinking

When Sandakan's Old Market was demolished, the stalls were moved to a rather soulless new building along the sea. Although atmosphere is a bit lacking, **New Market** (Jln Pryor) is still a great place for cheap breakfast or lunch. Raw food at ground level includes the only unadulterated ground coffee in town. Upstairs find strictly halal food stalls, with a mix of Chinese and Malay up another level. Try the on-site Imperial Seafood Restaurant (halal).

The city's large Chinese population means that there are excellent homages to the motherland, and the region's port history equals fresher-than-fresh seafood. For an authentic Malay meal, head to the KFC in the new Harbour Square Complex development on the sea – don't eat there! – the restaurants surrounding it are cheap and flavourful.

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

way that makes central Sandakan seem deader than the morgue in a ghost town. Bars generally close around 1am or 2am, music venues slightly later.

Sim Sim Seafood Restaurant (dishes RM5; Sim Sim 8; 🍷 breakfast & lunch) During a visit to Sandakan, you'll see scores of tour groups passing through, but we guarantee that none of them will stop at this rickety spot hidden amongst a chaotic tangle of driftwood. Located in the heart of a stilt village, Sim Sim Seafood Restaurant is a dockside fishery, where the daily catch is unloaded and sorted. A cluster of red plastic patio furniture huddles in the corner – just grab a seat and point to your prey! Sim Sim is located outside the city centre – ask a cab to drop you off at 'Sim Sim Bridge 8'.

Fat Cat V (☎ 089-216867; 21 Lebuah Tiga; dishes RM3-10; 🍷 breakfast & lunch) Forget I to IV, for once the sequel is just as good as the originals. The corpulent kitty proclaims itself a 'Restaurant for Everyone', and the broad menu of Malay, Chinese and fast food, plus juices, shakes and floats, helps justify its popularity. The cake shop next door is equally good.

Kedai Ang Bang Guan (☎ 089-213854; Jln Buli Sim Sim; mains from RM15; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Just east of downtown, next to Sandakan's main mosque, Ang Bang Guan is a tasteful and tasty take on Chinese seafood.

our pick English Tea House & Restaurant (☎ 089-222544; www.englishtheahouse.org; 2002 Jln Istana; mains RM24-40, cocktails RM26.50; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Soak up the *recherché* colonial atmosphere and elegant food at this exquisitely restored restaurant on the grounds of the historic Agnes Keith House. The manicured gardens are a particular joy, with wicker furniture and a small croquet lawn overlooking the bay, perfect for afternoon tea (RM17.25), a round sunset Pimms, or perhaps some snobbish guffawing.

our pick Balin (☎ 089-272988; www.nakhotel.com; Jln Pelabuhan Lama; drinks from RM7, mains from RM15; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Bringing a certain LA rooftop sexiness to Sandakan, Balin is your best bet for nightlife in the city centre. The three tiers of uber-chill lounge space are accented by a factory's worth of pillows.

Self-caterers have a few options:

Gentingmas Mall (☎ 089-210010; 26 Jln Pryor)

Milimewa Superstore (☎ 089-235021; Centre Point, Jln Pelabuhan Lama)

Suntos Supermarket (cnr Lebuah Tiga & Jln Dua)

Getting There & Away

AIR

Malaysia Airlines (☎ 089-273966; cnr Jln Pelabuhan Lama & Lebuah Dua) has daily flights to/from KK and KL.

AirAsia (☎ 089-222737; Jetliner, Lebuah Dua) operates two daily direct flights to/from KL and KK.

MASwings (☎ 1-300-883000; cnr Jln Pelabuhan Lama & Lebuah Dua) offers one daily flight to/from Tawau and two to/from KK.

BUS

Buses to KK, Lahad Datu, Semporna and Tawau leave from the long-distance bus station in a large parking lot at Batu 2.5, 4km north of town, not a particularly convenient location. Most buses and all minivans leave in the morning. Get the latest schedule from hotels or the tourist office. To reach the bus station, catch a local bus (RM1) from the stand at the waterfront. A taxi from the station to town is around RM10.

Bus companies have booths at the long-distance bus station and touts abound. Most express buses to KK (RM40, six hours) leave between 7.30am and 2pm, with a couple of evening departures. All pass the turn-off to Kinabalu National Park headquarters (RM30).

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

Minivans depart throughout the morning from Batu 2.5 for Ranau (RM24, four hours) and Lahad Datu (some of those continuing to Tawau). Minivans for Sukau (RM15) leave from a lot behind Centre Point Mall in town.

Please note that it is impossible to get a ride from KK to Sandakan around Ramadan or Chinese New Year if you have not booked your ticket ahead of time.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The airport is about 11km from downtown. The Batu 7 Airport bus (RM1.80) stops on the main road about 500m from the terminal. A coupon taxi from the airport to the town centre costs RM24; going the other way, a taxi should cost around RM20.

BUS & MINIVAN

The local bus terminal is on Jln Pryer, in front of Gentingmas Mall. Buses run from 6am to

about 6pm on the main road to the north, Jln Utara, designated by how far from town they go, ie Batu 8. Fares range from RM1 to RM4.

Local minivans wait behind Centre Point Mall, fares cost from RM2. Use them for the Pasir Putih seafood restaurants and the harbour area.

TAXI

Taxis cruise the town centre, and park near main hotels. Many hotels will steer you toward a preferred driver, not a bad thing. Short journeys around the town centre should cost RM5; it's RM12 to Bandar Indah and RM40 for a lift to Sepilok.

SEPILOK

The little hamlet of Sepilok sees almost as many visitors as the granite spires of Mt Kinabalu. With up to 800 visitors daily, Sepilok's Orang-Utan Rehabilitation Centre (SORC) is the most popular place on earth to see Asia's great ginger ape in its native habitat. Those who have time to stick around will also undercover several scenic nature walks, a sanctuary for the elusive proboscis monkey and a couple of great places to call home for a night or two.

Orientation & Information

Sepilok's main attraction, the Sepilok Orang-utan Rehabilitation Centre, is located at 'Batu 14' – 14 miles (23km) from Sandakan. The street connecting the highway to the rehab centre is lined with a variety of accommodation suiting all budget types. The Rainforest Discovery Centre is also along this road. The proboscis monkey sanctuary at Labuk Bay is further up the road (in the direction of KK) and is accessible via taxi or private vehicle. See p378 for details. Banks and medical services are located in Sandakan. Money can be changed at the upmarket sleeping spots (for a hefty change fee).

Sights & Activities

SEPILOK ORANG-UTAN REHABILITATION CENTRE (SORC)

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

WILD MAN OF BORNEO

The term 'orang-utan' literally means 'man of the wild', or 'jungle man' – a testament to the local reverence for these great ginger apes. Traditionally, orang-utan were never hunted like other creatures in the rainforest; in fact, Borneo's indigenous people used to worship their skulls in the same fashion as they did the heads taken from enemy tribesmen.

Orang-utans are the only species of great ape found outside Africa. A mature male is an impressive, but to mention hairy, creature with an armspan of 2.25m, and can weigh up to 144kg. Dominant males also have distinctive wide cheek pads to reinforce their alpha status. It was once said that an orang-utan could swing from tree to tree from one side of Borneo to the other without touching the ground. Sadly this is no longer the case, and hunting and habitat destruction continue to take their toll; it's estimated fewer than 15,000 specimens now exist in the wild.

Orphaned and injured orang-utans are brought to Sepilok to be rehabilitated to return to forest life. When we visited there were only seven primates 'on campus'. It's unlikely you'll see this many at feeding time – three or four is more likely, or maybe none at all.

Feedings are at 10am and 3pm and last for around 30 to 50 minutes. Schedules are posted at the **visitor reception centre** (☎ 089-531180; soutan@po.jaring.my; admission RM30, camera fee RM10; ☎ 9-11am & 2-3.30pm). Tickets are now valid for one day only; in the past, tickets entitled buyers to a pair of feedings, so afternoon arrivals could revisit the next morning on the same ticket. Far more annoying than this (reasonable) change in policy is park staff's angry denials of the change. The feeding platform is a short jaunt over a wooden walkway.

A worthwhile 20-minute video about Sepilok's work is shown five times daily (9am, 11am, noon, 2.10pm and 3.30pm) opposite reception in the **Nature Education Centre** auditorium.

Use the lockers provided for your valuables – orang-utans and macaques have been known to relieve tourists of hats, bags, sunglasses, cameras and even clothing. It's especially important that you don't bring any containers of insect repellent into the reserve,

as these are highly toxic to the apes and other wildlife. Spray yourself before entering.

SORC is supported by a UK-based charity and its orang-utan adoption scheme is a particular hit with visitors: for UK£25 a year you can sponsor a ginger bundle of fun and receive updates on its progress. For details, pick up a leaflet or contact **Sepilok Orang-Utan Appeal UK** (www.orang-utan-appeal.org.uk). If you're really taken with the place Sepilok has one of the most popular overseas volunteer programs in Malaysia. Apply through **Travellers Worldwide** (www.travellersworldwide.com).

If you want to explore further, several **walking trails** (☎ 9am-4.15pm) lead into the forest; register at the visitor reception centre to use them. Trails range in length from 250m to 4km, and different paths are open at different times of year. Guided night walks can be arranged through the centre or at the various lodges. There's also a 10km trail through mangrove forest to **Sepilok Bay**. A permit from the **Forestry Department** (☎ 089-213966; Jln Leila, Sandakan) is required in advance for this route. The department can also arrange basic overnight accommodation at the bay (RM100) or a boat back to Sandakan (RM150). Some travel or tour agencies can assist with the permit and other arrangements.

RAINFOREST DISCOVERY CENTRE (RDC)

The **Rainforest Discovery Centre** (RDC; ☎ 089-533780; adult/child RM10/5; ☎ 8am-5pm), about 1.5km from SORC, offers an engaging graduate-level education in tropical flora and fauna. Outside the exhibit hall, a botanical garden presents varying samples of tropical plant life, with the accompanying descriptions every bit as vibrant as the foliage. There's a 1km lake-side walking trail as well. A series of eight canopy towers are being built – three have been completed. Paddleboats (RM5) are available to ride around the inviting lake near the centre's entrance.

It's best to get there either at 8am or 4pm, as the wildlife tends to hibernate during the sweltering hours in the middle of the day. A proper visit along the trails and towers takes around 1½ hours.

LABUK BAY PROBOSCIS MONKEY SANCTUARY

Proboscis monkeys (*Nasalis larvatus*) are an even more exclusive attraction than orang-utans. After all, you can see orang-utans in

Sumatra but the proboscis is found only on Borneo. These reddish-brown primates, one of nine totally protected species in Sabah, can grow to 72cm with a tail almost as long, and they can weigh up to 24kg. Named for their long bulbous noses, proboscis monkeys are also pot-bellied with white faces, and the males are constantly, unmistakably aroused. With the arrival of Europeans, Malays nicknamed the proboscis *monyet belanda* (Dutch monkey).

An eco-friendly plantation owner has created a private **proboscis monkey sanctuary** (☎ 089-672133; www.proboscis.cc; RM60, camera RM10, video RM20), attracting the floppy conked locals with sugar-free pancakes at 11.40am and 4.30pm feedings. A third feeding at 2.30pm often occurs during a ranger-led hike deeper in the sanctuary. An estimated 300 wild monkeys live in the 600-hectare reserve. Animals in the reserve generally steer clear of human contact, except for those mischievous macaques with their 'up in your grill' attitude as they try to snag snacks and sunhats.

The sanctuary offers package trips. A half-day visit costs RM160, including transfers from Sandakan (RM150 from Sepilok). Overnight trips with meals and a night walk start at RM250. Food and accommodation are provided at the Nipah Lodge, on the edge of the oil-palm plantations that surround the sanctuary. Independent travel here is difficult; it's 15km down a rough dirt track off the main highway (see p378 for more information).

Sleeping & Eating

Although most tourists rush in and out of Sepilok faster than the flash of a camera, it's well worth spending the night in this sleepy township. Most accommodation options are scattered along Jln Sepilok, the 2.5km-long access road to the rehabilitation centre. At the time of research the Forestry Department was building staff quarters at the RDC – it's worth getting in touch with the centre to see if those are complete and available to tourists.

Sepilok B&B (☎ 089-534050, 089-532288; www.sepilokbednbreakfast.com; Jln Arboretum; dm/s/d RM23/40/60) The former head of Sabah's reforestation division manages this unpretentious option, which has a palpable summer camp vibe. It's popular with large groups, who pile into the simple dorm rooms accented with pale pastel drapery. Crooked picnic tables and varnished lounge chairs offer backpackers plenty of room to chill out after a sweaty day of orang-utanning under the equatorial sun. The B&B is opposite the forest research centre, about 250m off Jln Sepilok and 1km short of the SORC entrance.

ourpick Paganakan Dii (☎ 089-532005; www.paganakandii.com; dm/d RM28/98; ☎ ☑) Hands down the best budget place to stay at in Sepilok (if not all of Sabah), this welcoming and quiet retreat sits deep within a deer preserve on the far side of the highway. Chic design details (made from recycled materials), crisp white linen and friendly staff will have you thinking that the owners surely left a zero off the price tag. Overall, staying in the

OLD KING COAL...

...wasn't such a merry old soul. In 2008, TNB, the national energy company, decided to revive a terminated coal fire power plant project. The original construction site was in the port town of Lahad Datu, but planners are now eyeing a site near Sandakan, Sabah's second largest city. The target construction zone is only a few hundred metres from the Kabili-Sepilok Forest Reserve, which is home to Sepilok's beloved orang-utans. This prospective project has greatly angered the local population, who care deeply about their pristine forest preserve and resident apes.

What You Can Do To Help

Anton Ngui, a local environmental activist and owner of Paganakan Dii (above), says 'help us by asking the locals about their views on this impending disaster.' He feels strongly that the promises of 'development' and 'job generation' are insincere and do not outweigh the irreparable damage that the plant will do to the environment. 'Ask your accommodation provider about supporting the local anti-coal campaign and encourage them to play an active part in the fight to preserve the orang-utans' habitat.' Petition forms are widely available – even online (www.savesandakan.com) – encouraging the government to ban 'power-hungry conglomerates from destroying one of the last vestiges of Sabah's rainforest.

longhouse-inspired dorms or duplex doubles is a great reason to get stuck in Sepilok... oh right, and don't forget to see the orang-utans too... Transfers to the Sepilok Rehabilitation Centre are included in the price.

Sepilok Forest Reserve & Labuk B&B (☎ 089-533190, 089-223100; labukbb@yahoo.com; dm/d/chalet from RM28/65/180; ♿ 🚽) Dorm and double rooms (located in the Labuk B&B portion of the property) are fine – it's the chalets that are the property's *pièce de résistance*. The comfortable cabins are peppered across an obsessively maintained acreage (think golf course). There's a relaxing pool-like jacuzzi on the grounds as well, which is reserved for chalet guests (or backpackers willing to drop an extra RM8).

Sepilok Jungle Resort (☎ 089-533031; www.sepilokjungleresort.com; dm RM28, r 69-130; ♿ 🚽) Everyone seems to stay here but it's hard to see why. Don't trust the snazzy website – the superior rooms are institutional and musty, and the staff is indifferent, except when steering unhappy guests to 'deluxe' (read: pricey) digs. Maybe this place should be renamed 'The Last Resort'...

Uncle Tan's (☎ 089-531639; www.uncletan.com; dm/tw incl all meals RM38/100; 🚽) Uncle Tan built a reputation amongst backpackers for providing great river tours along the Kinabatangan. Now he's set up shop right in the heart of Sepilok with a couple of thatch-roofed gazebos and a stack of backpacker shacks – they're pretty dank but unbeatable cheap.

Sepilok Nature Resort (☎ 089-535001; http://sepilok.com; r RM250; ♿ 🚽) Run by very exclusive Pulau Sipadan Resort and Tours, these rattan-accented chalets are luxuriously furnished and have private verandahs overlooking scrumptious gardens and a shaded lagoon. Breakfast (RM35) and dinner (RM55) are available at the on-site restaurant.

Most accommodation in the Sepilok area serves breakfast – some offer guests three-meal packages. The **SORC cafeteria** (meals from RM5; ☎ 7am-4pm) vends sandwiches, noodle bowls, rice plates, snacks and beverages, though they are known for running out of items during the tourist rush. **Mah Fung Enterprise** (☎ Mon-Sat), across from the turn-off to the RDC, sells cold drinks, snacks, sunscreen and insect repellent. There's also a small hut with a blue fence at Batu 14 serving bread and cold drinks.

Getting There & Away

If you are coming directly from Sandakan, a taxi should cost no more than RM40 (either from the airport or the city centre). Bus 14 from Sandakan (RM3) departs hourly from the city centre and stops at the RDC. If you are coming from KK, board a Sandakan-bound bus and ask the driver to let you off at 'Batu 14'. You will pay the full RM33 it costs to reach Sandakan (which is only another 23km up the road). Pay no attention to the blue signs on the side of the highway marking the kilometres – they don't correlate to the antiquated 'Batu' system that most locals use.

Taxi 'pirates', as they're known, wait at Batu 14 to give tourists a ride into Sepilok. It's RM3 per person for a lift. Travellers spending the night can arrange a lift with their accommodation if they book ahead of time. Walking to the SORC is also an option – it's only 2.5km down the road.

To reach the Labuk Bay Proboscis Monkey Sanctuary have the KK-Sandakan bus drop you off at Batu 19 (Mile 19; 32km from Sandakan), but note that it's too far from the highway to walk, so you will have to arrange transport from the junction (it's a 15-minute drive). Shared vans from Sepilok/Sandakan to Labuk Bay cost RM110/RM130 per person.

You can usually organise a pick-up (in a shared van from the Kinabatangan operators) from Sepilok after the morning feeding if you are planning to head to Sungai Kinabatangan in the afternoon. Set off around noon to reach the river for the afternoon cruises. Accommodation in Sepilok selling bus tickets back to KK will charge an extra RM10 'agency fee', so it is best to buy your ticket in advance if you can.

SANDAKAN ARCHIPELAGO

Located further north from Sabah's highly promoted Semporna Archipelago, the Sandakan Archipelago, off the coast of its namesake port, is a quieter collection of emerald isles. The diving isn't as stellar as Sipadan, but the vibe is noticeably more laidback. Consider giving Turtle Islands National Park a miss if you're heading to Mabul (p388), you'll probably see a greater number of sea turtles while diving (or snorkelling) around Sipadan.

Lankayan

Lovely Lankayan (Pulau Lankayan) was all the buzz when we visited. A quieter alternative

to the dive-centric islands in the Semporna Archipelago, this beautiful bump in the sea has one resort, **Lankayan Island Resort** (☎ 089-673999; www.sipadan-resort.com; Batu 6, Bandar Tyng, Sandakan), a popular spot for young romantics. There are 23 cabins dotted along the sand where jungle meets the sea. All-inclusive four-day/four-night packages start at RM3160/RM2544 for divers/non-divers. The island is located about 1½ hours from Sandakan by boat (included in your accommodation package).

Turtle Islands National Park (Selingan)

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

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

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

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

For more information on sea turtles (and how you can make sure you do them no harm), see p77.

Tours can be arranged through a travel agency or directly with **Crystal Quest** (☎ 089-212711; cquest@tm.net.my; Jln Buli Sim Sim, Sandakan), and include air-con chalet accommodation on Pulau Selingan and speedboat transfers. Package prices start from RM220 per person (shared bathroom), going up to RM700 per night for full board with guide. Facilities are limited and tour companies often make block reservations, so it's worth booking ahead to make sure you don't get stuck with the most expensive option.

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

SUNGAI KINABATANGAN

An artist painting a portrait of the mighty Sungai Kinabatangan would need a palette of green, blue, and brown...lots and lots of brown... This mighty muddy river is Sabah's longest, measuring a lengthy 560km from its headwaters deep in the southwest jungle to the marshy delta on the turquoise Sulu Sea.

The Kinabatangan's great menagerie of jungle creatures is an ironic by-product of the rampant logging and oil-palm industries. As plantations and camps continue to gobble up virgin rainforest, the area of unruffled jungle becomes thinner, forcing the animals to seek refuge along the river's flood plains. Dozens of tin boats putter along the shores offering tourists the opportunity to have a close encounter with a rhinoceros hornbill or perhaps a doe-eyed orang-utan. Even if you went ape over Sepilok's crew of ginger beasts, seeing an orang-utan in the wild is a truly magical experience (we saw three!).

Sights & Activities

WILDLIFE RIVER CRUISE

Wildlife is the number one reason to visit Sabah, and a cruise down the Kinabatangan is almost invariably a highlight of any nature-nutter's trip. In the late afternoon and early morning, binocular-toting enthusiasts have a chance of spotting an ark's worth of wildlife – from nest-building orang-utans and nosy proboscis monkeys to stealth samba deer and

timid pigmy elephants. Mammals can be seen at anytime of year, moving around in small groups while travelling through plantations. Colourful birds are another main draw. Bird-watchers commonly spot all eight varieties of Borneo's hornbills, plus brightly coloured pitas, kingfishers, and, if you're lucky, you may also come across a Storm's stork or the bizarre Oriental darter (also known as a snake-bird). Avian wildlife is more numerous and varied during rainier months (usually October to late March), which coincides with northern-hemisphere migrations. Though friendly for birds, the rainy season isn't very accommodating for humans. Flooding has been a problem of late and a couple of lodges will sometimes shut their doors when conditions are severe.

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

TREKS

Depending on the location of your lodge, some companies offer short treks (one to three hours) through the jungle. Evening hikes are usually shorter and focus on indigenous insect life. Headlamps should be carried in your hand, rather than worn on your head – bats tend to be attracted to light sources and may fly into them; they also secrete an enzyme causing localised paralysis (it's temporary but nonetheless uncomfortable). Most lodges rent out torches for RM5.

GOMANTONG CAVES

Many Kinabatangan tour packages offer an optional side trip to the Gomantong Caves. These limestone caverns are Sabah's most famous source of swiftlet nests used for the eponymous birds-nest soup. There are two types of soup-worthy birds nests: black nests and white nests. Nests of the black variety are a mix of twigs and spit, while the white nests are purely made from the birds' saliva. The white nests are significantly more valuable and Gomantong's got a whole bunch of 'em. A kilogram of white swiftlet spit can bring in over RM2000 – making nest-grabbing a popular profession despite the perilous task of shimmying up bamboo poles to pluck the prized puke.

In the last few years visitation has been restricted due to dwindling bird populations (cash-hungry locals were taking the nests before the newborn birds had enough time to mature). Today, the caves operate on a four-month cycle, with closings at the beginning of the term to discourage nest hunters. It's worth asking around before planning your visit – oftentimes the caves are empty or off-limits to visitors. The four-month cycles are strictly enforced to encourage a more sustainable practice of harvesting.

The forested area around the caves conceals plenty of wildlife and a few good walks. The most accessible of the caves is a 10-minute walk along the main trail near the **information centre** (☎ 089-230189; www.sabah.gov.my/jhl; adult/child RM30/15, camera RM30, video RM50; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-4.30pm). Head past the living quarters of the nest collectors to get to the main cave, **Simud Hitam** (Black Cave). You can venture in, though it involves wading ankle-deep through a bat shit cocktail covered in squirming roaches. A 45-minute uphill trek beyond the park office leads to **Simud Putih** (White Cave), containing a greater abundance of prized white nests. Both trails are steep and require some sweaty rock climbing.

It is possible to visit the caves under one's own steam, usually by private vehicle. The turnoff to the caves is located along the road connecting Sukau to the main highway. Minivans plying the route between Sandakan and Sukau (RM17) can drop you off at the junction, but you'll have to walk the five additional kilometres to the park office. If the world-famous caves at Gunung Mulu or Niah are on your Borneo itinerary then it's probably worth giving Gomatong a miss.

Sleeping & Eating

A few nights along the mighty Kinabatangan can be a fantastic way to unwind. In the last few years, river cruises have become exceedingly popular and these days there are dozens of lodges vying for your precious ringgit.

In Kinabatangan lingo, a 'three-day/two-night' stint usually involves the following: arrive in the afternoon on day one for a cruise at dusk, two boat rides (or a boat/hike combo) on day two, and an early morning departure on day three after breakfast and a sunrise cruise. When booking a trip, ask about pick-up and drop-off prices – this is usually extra. The 'B&Bs' along the Kinabatangan – like the B&Bs

elsewhere in Sabah – do not fit the Western definition of a traditional bed and breakfast. No dainty grey-haired dames serving milk and cookies by a roaring fire – these are basic, budget-friendly sleep spots, many of which don't even include breakfast in the price.

Be wary of travel agents selling a bevy of Kinabatangan options – you might think that they've hooked you up with the lodge of your choice, but then you find out that they 'accidentally' booked you in somewhere else. If you have a sense of which place will suit your fancy, it's best to book with them directly to avoid winding up at a lesser lodge for the same price.

See p382 for information about getting to the Sungai Kinabatangan under your own steam.

SUKAU

Sukau means 'tall tree' in the local dialect, and the name is quite fitting. The tiny town sits on the river amongst the skyscraping branches of a shaded thicket. For many years, Sukau was the only place along the Kinabatangan catering to wildlife enthusiasts. Today, it's still the most popular place to hang one's hat, but the abundance of lodging options means that the town can feel a tad busier than one might expect whilst on a 'safari'. If you are planning to visit Sungai Kinabatangan on your own, then Sukau is your best option for lodging and river tours.

There is a small **internet cafe** (one hr RM1.50; ☎ 9am-6pm) in the cream-tinged building along the main road (yes, the town is *that* small that buildings are referred to by their colour).

Sukau B&B (☎ 019-583 5580, 089-565269; www.sukaubnb.com; dm/s/tw incl breakfast RM20/40/40) The road leading into Sukau ends here: a grassy knoll with longhouse-style accommodation and a small cottage in the back. It's a good spot for backpackers, sporting clean (and cheap!) bedrooms and a passable common bathroom that's not as cringe-worthy as a lot of backwater backpacker places in Borneo. Two-hour cruises cost RM80 per boat (six person maximum), night cruises are RM100. If you're arriving on your own, around ask around for a boy named Sue – he'll get you sorted.

Sukau Greenview B&B (☎ 013-869 6922, 089-565266; sukau_greenview@yahoo.com; s/tw RM45/60, meals RM10) Another cheapie in central Sukau, this pleasant option offers nine rooms (all with twin-size beds) in a small cottage-style lodge. It's basic (the floors are made from particle

board) but comfy enough for the price. River cruises cost RM35, night rides are RM45 and trips to Oxbow Lake are RM45 (prices are per person). The friendly owners can organise a Sandakan-bound van (RM30 per person) when you depart – it leaves at 6.30am.

Barefoot Sukau Lodge (☎ 089-235525; www.barefootssukau.com; r per person RM80, meals RM25) Barefoot's best features are the scenic eating area over the river and the super-smiley staff (the English is a bit thin, but they get an 'A' for effort). The rooms are small but covered with thick coats of white paint. A two-day/one-night package costs RM200 and includes accommodation, three meals and one cruise. If you're interested in photography, ask for Mr Cede Prudente...

Last Frontier Resort (☎ 016-676 5922; www.thelastfrontierresort.com; 3-day/2-night package RM450) Known throughout the Kinabatangan region for their excellent fusion cuisine, this Belgian/Malaysian-owned crash pad sits high, high up (538 steps!) on a hill overlooking the flood plains. Sadly a Sherpa is not included in the rates.

Kinabatangan Riverside Lodge (☎ 089-213502; www.sitours.com; 3-day/2-night package RM550) The rooms don't get tonnes of natural light, but you'll only be in your room at bedtime. During the day, you'll be snooping around for wild creatures on pleasant river cruises (your seat will have a back rest – a luxury around these parts!) and hikes. There's a looping nature trail in the back and the adorable dining area abounds with stuffed monkeys and faux foliage. Pick-ups can be arranged at Sandakan airport or at Sepilok Orang-Utan Rehabilitation Centre for an extra fee.

Sukau Rainforest Lodge (☎ 089-220210, 088-438300; www.sukau.com; 2-day/1-night package RM850) A swish common space stuffed with gongs, tiki torches and *bubu* (local fish traps) welcomes guests after their riverine adventure. The ambience gets a ten out of ten; we'll give the rooms a six – they're standard fare with simple white walls and token accent sculptures. Don't miss the 440m annotated boardwalk in the back that winds through the canopy.

BILIT

Bilit is the new Sukau, with its own collection of jungle lodges and homestays. All of the accommodation here is located at the end of a *very* rutty road (4WD needed!) or on the far side of the river, which means that independent travel here is not as simple as in Sukau.

Even if you are willing to pay through the nose for a water taxi, most of Bilit's riverine sleeping spots require advanced notification and bookings.

Nature Lodge Kinabatangan (☎ 013 863 6263, 088-230534; www.naturelodgekinabatangan.com; 3-day/2-night package dorm/chalet RM300/335) Located just around the river bend from Bilit, this charming jungle retreat is an excellent choice for backpacker budgets. The campus of prim bungalows is divided into two sections: the Civet Wing caters to penny-pinchers with dorm-style huts, while the spiffed-up Agamid Wing offers higher-end twin-bed chalets. The three-day/two-night packages include three boat tours, three guided hikes *and* all meals!

Proscosis Lodge Bukit Melapi (☎ 088-240584; proscosislodge@sipadandivers.com; 2-day/1-night package twin share per person RM330) Despite the snarky management, Proscosis Lodge has created a sociable ambience with its large bar area and comfy tree-stump seating. The wooden bungalows, strewn along a shrubby hill, have oxidised cooper-top roofs that clink when it rains. The two-day/one-night packages include three meals, one river cruise and a pick up from the Lapid jetty.

Bilit Rainforest Lodge (☎ 089-202399; www.tropicalg.com; 2-day/1-night package from RM350, 3-day/2-night package RM700; ♿ ♿) One of the more luxurious sleeping spots along the Kinabatangan, this snazzy option caters to an international clientele with huge bungalows, modern bathrooms and generous amounts of gushing aircon. The two-day/one-night packages include three meals, accommodation and a three-hour evening cruise around Oxbow Lake.

Bilit Homestay Program (☎ 013-891 3078, 019-537 8043; bilit2002@hotmail.com; 3-day/2-night package RM360) A twist on the Kinabatangan experience, this cultural program offers accommodation in locals' homes (visitors sleep in a private room). The three-day/two-night packages include meals, accommodation, activities and transfers. It is best to book ahead, however if you don't, this part of Bilit can be accessed by private vehicle or minivan (4WD is a must for the last 5km of rutty road). Look for the wooden advert swinging from the home of the *haji awang* ('chief who has performed the hajj') – you can't miss it. Walk-in rates are pricier: RM50 per night (not including meals) plus RM45 for one day of activities.

Kinabatangan Jungle Camp (☎ 089-533190; labukbb@yahoo.com; www.kinabatangan-jungle-camp

.com; 2-day/1-night package RM400) GAP Tours (a popular international tour company) uses the facilities here, and when it isn't booked out, this earth-friendly retreat caters to a niche market of birders and serious nature junkies. Packages include three meals, two boat rides, guiding and transfers. The owners, Robert and Annie, also run the Labuk B&B (p378) in Sepilok, and four out of five travellers opt for a Kinabatangan-Sepilok combo tour.

UPRIVER

The following options are way out in the middle of nowhere.

Mescot (Miso Walai Homestay; ☎ 089-551064; www.misowalaihometstay.com; r RM70) This admirable community eco-tourism initiative is a refreshing alternative to the big lodges, and it's great value to boot – rates include all meals and village transfers. In addition to the usual smattering of river trips and guided hikes, there are also potential volunteer opportunities on the community's wetland restoration project. Definitely one worth supporting.

Abai Jungle Lodge (☎ 089-213502, 013-883 5841; www.sitoursborneo.com; 2-day/1-night packages from US\$260) Managed by SI Tours (the same company that runs Kinabatangan Riverside Lodge; p381), Abai Jungle Lodge sits 37km upstream from Sukau just as the river emerges from the secondary forest. Eco-conscious attempts are being made at this jungle-clad hideaway – rainwater is collected in cisterns above the chalets, which run on eco-friendly diesel engine generators. Tree-planting projects and a bird-observation tower will attract nature enthusiasts as well. The lodge also helps facilitate a local homestay program (RM50 per person per night, including meals).

Getting There & Away

Taking a bus instead of tour-operated transport to – or at least near – Sungai Kinabatangan can save quite a bit of cash. To reach Sungai Kinabatangan by bus from KK, board a Tawau- or Lahad Datu-bound bus and ask the driver to let you off at 'Meeting Point' (sometimes called 'Sukau Junction') – the turnoff road to reach Sukau. If you are on a Sandakan-bound bus, make sure your driver remembers to stop at the Tawau-Sandakan junction – it's called 'Batu 32' or 'Checkpoint' (sometimes known as Sandakan Mile 32). The blue signs on the side of the highway mark kilometres and do not correlate to the antiquated 'Batu'

BYE BYE BIRDIE

Palm oil plantation...logging farm...palm oil plantation...logging farm... Seems like some parts of Sabah and Sarawak have turned into a brown-and-green checkerboard of industry. Certain forested areas are well protected by stringent government decrees, however rampant deforestation has become a serious problem for several species of bird that require large swathes of jungle through which to fly. Dwindling rainforest also affects many of the nation's endangered species like the cherished orang-utan. Tourists are quick to raise their raised fists in disapproval, but is it *all* bad? See p78 for the full story.

system. It should cost no more than RM30 to reach 'Meeting Point' from KK. From Sepilok or Sandakan, expect to pay around RM15 to reach 'Batu 32', and around RM20 if you're on a Sandakan-Tawau bus and want to alight at 'Meeting Point'. A minivan ride to 'Meeting Point' from Lahad Datu costs RM17. You can arrange transport from these drop-off points with your tour operator or with a local minivan. Don't get on the *Birantihanti* buses – they stop anytime someone wants to get on or off, which could quadruple your travelling time. When buying your bus tickets remember to tell the vendor where you want to get off so you don't get overcharged.

If you are travelling to Sukau or Bilit with your own transport, note that the Shell petrol station on the highway at the turnoff to Sukau is the last place to fill up before arriving at the river. The road is paved all the way to Sukau, so a 4WD is not obligatory. The last five kilometres to Bilit are extremely rutty, so a 4WD is recommended here.

LAHAD DATU

pop 105,200

'Lahad Datu' literally means 'place of princes' in the Sulu dialect, but there's nothing particularly regal about this portly port town. In fact, the city would probably qualify as Sabah's most boring destination if it weren't for the rumours of seafaring pirates, who eschew Johnny Depp romanticism in favour of speedboats and machine guns...

There's no real reason to stop in Lahad Datu, except to arrange a visit to the Danum

Valley, Maliau Basin or Tabin Wildlife Reserve. **Borneo Nature Tours** (☎ 089-880207; www.borneonaturetours.com; Lot 20, Block 3, Fajar Centre), who run the Borneo Rainforest Lodge (BRL), and the **Danum Valley Field Centre** (☎ 089-881092; Block 3, Fajar Centre) have offices next to each other in the upper part of town – known as Taman Fajar, or Fajar Centre. Make sure you enter the correct office – we've heard of several tourists booking their Danum expedition with the wrong company. See p385 for the difference between the two Danum options (and yes, these are your only two options).

Around the block, you'll find the booking office of **Tabin Wildlife Holidays** (☎ 088-267266; www.tabinwildlife.com.my), a secondary forest sanctuary on the other side of Lahad Datu.

Don't be surprised if cars frequently slow down and honk as you walk by. These are private taxis that shuttle people between the upper and lower parts of town (where the bus station is) for RM5.

Sleeping & Eating

Lahad Datu lodging is pretty grim, although when we visited there was construction underway on two new properties (we've got our fingers crossed that they'll open in 2010). They are located two blocks away from the Executive Hotel; the current titleholder for the city's best stay.

If you need a quick bite while waiting for your Danum-bound transport, there's a **MultiBake** (cakes from RM1.80; ☎ 8am-10pm) – Malaysia's franchised patisserie – in Fajar Centre (they have free wi-fi too!). **Dovist** (mains from RM5; ☎ lunch & dinner), also around the corner from the Danum booking offices, is a respectable spot for a more substantial meal. It's worth stopping by one of the convenience stores in Fajar Centre to stock up on a couple of snacks before your trip into the Danum Valley.

Tabin Lodge (☎ 089-889552; Jln Urus Setia Kecil; s/d from RM20/30; ☎) Housed in a conspicuous structure smothered in brown paint, this dowdy option might convince budgeters to splurge on the Executive Hotel. In some rooms the walls, ceiling and floor are covered with tiles, giving off a creepy Chinese water torture vibe.

Executive Hotel (☎ 089-881333; 238-240 Jln Teratai; s/d/ste from RM80/100/295; ☎) A big 'EH' welcomes guests to Lahad Datu's most upmarket sleeping option. Tuxedoed receptionists move at glacial speeds, but the rooms are good

enough for your one-night layover. Go for a superior room – the ‘standard’ ones don’t have windows. There’s wi-fi in the lobby.

Getting There & Away

MASwings (☎ 1800-88 3000, outside Malaysia 03-7843 3000) currently operates four daily flights to Lahad Datu from KK. The airport is in the upper part of town near Fajar Centre. You must take the first flight of the day (departing KK at 7am) if you don’t want a one-day layover in town before heading to the Danum Valley.

Express buses on the KK–Tawau route stop at the Shell station (Taman Fajar) near the Danum Valley office in the upper part of town. Other buses and minivans leave from a vacant lot near Tabin Lodge in the lower part of town. There are frequent departures for Sandakan (RM35, 2½ hours), Sukau (RM17, two hours), Semporna (RM25 to RM30, two hours) and Tawau (RM25 to RM30, 2½ hours). Transport services slow down at around 2.30pm so it’s best to make a move by lunchtime. The last minivans technically depart at 5pm, but if there aren’t enough people they’ll wait until morning. Charter vehicles and 4WDs wait in an adjacent lot.

DANUM VALLEY CONSERVATION AREA

They say that at any given time, there are over a hundred scientists doing research in the Danum Valley. And we aren’t surprised – this steaming old-growth forest overflows with colourful wildlife – it’s like owning one of those relaxation machines that coos and caws when you’re trying to fall asleep. Except at Danum, you get to see the animals too.

This stunning realm of vivid greens is part of a slice of land known as the Sabah Foundation Concession Area, which is managed by **Yayasan Sabah** (Sabah Foundation; www.yasnet.org.my), a semigovernmental organisation tasked with both protecting and utilising the forest resources of Sabah.

It’s effectively impossible to visit Danum as an independent traveller, but if you have the time and the cash, the valley is undoubtedly one of Sabah’s highlights. There are two places to stay in the park (opposite) – they are about an hour’s drive away from each other, so you’ll have to decide where you want to stay before making your way into the jungle.

Sights & Activities

Both the BRL and the Danum Valley Field Centre (see p383 for their details) offer a va-

riety of jungle-related activities. Only the BRL has official nature guides, whereas the Field Centre offers park rangers.

TREKKING

The main activities at the BRL and the Danum Valley Field Centre are walking on the meandering trails. At the BRL, take advantage of the well-trained guides who can point out things you would have never seen on your own. The **Coffincliff Trail** is a good way to start your exploration of the area and get your bearings. It climbs to a cliff where the remains of some Dusun coffins can be seen (although the provenance of the coffins is unclear). After reaching a viewpoint, you can either return the way you’ve come or detour around the back of the peak to descend via scenic **Fairy Falls** and **Serpent Falls**, a pair of 15m falls that are good for a quick dip. The **Danum Trail**, **Elephant Trail** and **Segama Trails** all follow various sections of the Sungai Danum and are mostly flat trails offering good chances for wildlife spotting. All can be done in an hour or two. The **Hornbill Trail** and **East Trail** have a few hills, but are still relatively easy, with similarly good chances for wildlife sightings. Finally, if you just need a quick breath of fresh air after a meal, the **Nature Trail** is a short plankwalk near the lodge that allows you walk into the forest unmolested by leeches.

There are heaps of fantastic trails weaving around the Field Centre – you must bring a ranger along if you aren’t a scientist (note that a guide is better than a ranger though).

BIRD-WATCHING

Danum Valley is very popular with bird-watchers from around the world, who come here to see a whole variety of Southeast Asian rainforest species, including the great argus pheasant, the crested fireback pheasant, the blue-headed pitta, the Bornean bristlehead and several species of hornbill, among many others. Some of the guides at the BRL are particularly knowledgeable about birds, and attempts are made to match birders up with these pros. The access road and canopy walkway are good for early morning bird sightings and you’ll likely make a few worthwhile sightings right from the verandah of your cabin.

CANOPY WALKWAY

As you’ll probably know, most of the action in a tropical rainforest happens up in

the forest canopy, which can be frustrating for earthbound humans. The BRL's 107m canopy walkway provides a good chance to get up in the action. The swinging bridges traverse a nice section of forest, with several fine mangaris and majau trees on either side. Bird-watchers often come here at dawn in hopes of checking a few species off their master list. Even if you're not a keen birder, it's worth rolling out of bed early to see the sun come up over the forest from the canopy walkway – when there's a bit of mist around, the effect is quite magical. It's located on the access road, a 10-minute walk from the lodge.

NIGHT DRIVES

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

Night drives leave the BRL most evenings; the best trips are the extended night drives, which depart at about 8.30pm and return at 1am or 2am. Things you'll be glad you brought include a light waterproof jacket, camera with flash, binoculars and a powerful torch. Drives can be arranged at the Field Centre as well, although you'll probably have to arrange the vehicle one day in advance.

Sleeping & Eating

There are two lodging options in the Danum Valley, each with their own set of pros and cons. If price is paramount go for the Field Centre – wildlife fanatics who value professionally trained guides should pick the BRL.

The **Borneo Rainforest Lodge** (BRL; ☎ 088-267637; www.borneonaturetours.com; standard/deluxe 3-day/2-night full-board package from RM1890/2750) is a class act deep within the buzzing haze of Sabah's remaining old-growth forest. After a recent refurbishment, both the standard and deluxe rooms offer all the amenities of an international-class hotel. Go for the deluxe if you can – they have private jacuzzis on the wooden verandahs that overlook the quiet ravine – so romantic! Honeymooners should go for Kempas D11 – this room has a secluded jacuzzi in its

own wooden pagoda. Meals are taken on a beautiful terrace also fronting the river. We were pretty impressed with the assortment of dishes at the buffet – especially since it all had to be lugged in by 4WD. The BRL's only downfall is their marketing strategy. Yes, the lodge is lovely and the outdoor jacuzzis in the superior rooms are undoubtedly lavish, but this is by no means a five-star resort. And how could it be? Surrounded by relentlessly encroaching jungle and steamy tropical mist, we're impressed that this much luxury exists so deep in the rainforest. Guests who temper their expectations will adore the ambience and find plenty of creature comforts at their fingertips (no aircon though).

Danum Valley Field Centre (☎ 089-880441, 088-326318; resthouse r & board from RM155; ♿) An outpost for scientists and researchers, the field centre also welcomes tourists. Accommodation at the centre is organised into three categories: hostel, resthouse and VIP. We recommend the resthouse rooms, which are located at arm's length from the canteen (the only place to eat). These rooms are basic but clean, sporting ceiling fans and twin beds. Towels are provided for the cold-water showers. The simple hostel is about a seven-minute walk from the canteen, and the barrack-style rooms are separated by gender. The two VIP rooms have aircon and hot water. All buildings at the field centre run on generated power, which shuts off between midnight and 7am. There are no professionally trained guides at the centre – only rangers who can show you the trails. You might luck out and find a friendly researcher who will point you in the direction of a few cool things, but some of the scientists (especially the birders) are quite reclusive. There is a kitchen on the campus, however it is reserved for the research assistants. Tourists take their meals in the cafeteria-style canteen (veggie friendly).

Getting There & Away

The Danum Valley Conservation Area is only accessible by authorised private vehicle. Travellers staying at the Borneo Rainforest Lodge will depart from the lodge office in Lahad Datu at 9am, arriving at the lodge by lunchtime. If you do not want to spend the night in Lahad Datu, it is recommended that you take the morning MASwings flight from KK arriving in Lahad Datu at 7.55am. If you have pre-booked, the driver will wait should your flight be delayed. Walk-ins should head to the

booking office in either KK or Lahad Datu, but be prepared to wait for a few days until there is availability. Guests have the option of chartering a private vehicle into the park for a hefty fee.

Tourists staying at the Danum Valley Field Centre must board one of the two jungle-bound vans that leave the booking office in Lahad Datu at 3.30pm on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Transport is RM60 per person each way – ask about all-inclusive packages for discounts. Vans return to Lahad Datu from the Field Centre at 8.30am on the same days. There are 12 seats in each van and this is the only way to reach the centre unless you charter a pricey private vehicle.

Figure on at least 2½ hours to make the trip through the rutty jungle roads (it took us five hours – our vehicle got stuck in the mud!).

TABIN WILDLIFE RESERVE

Tabin's patch of jungle is starting to emerge as an alternative to the great Danum Valley. This 1205-sq-km reserve consists mainly of lowland dipterocarp forest with mangrove areas at the northern end. Tabin is mostly secondary forest, but that doesn't seem to trouble the wildlife. The stars here are the elephants and primates – gibbons, red-leaf monkeys and macaques. Bird life is abundant, and there's a herd of the endangered Sumatran rhino, though you're unlikely to see them.

The park is managed by **Tabin Wildlife Holidays** (☎ 088-267266; www.tabinwildlife.com.my; Lot 11-1, Block A, Damai Point, Kota Kinabalu), which runs the on-site Tabin Wildlife Resort, an attractive retreat with a clutch of upscale chalets. At the time of research a hostel was being built on the grounds to attract the penny-pincher crowd. Camping is prohibited. Five trails snake out into the jungle from in front of the resort. Try the Elephant Trail (800m) if you're interested in belching mud pits. The Gibbon Trail (2.8km) leads to the pretty Lipa Waterfall.

An all-inclusive day-trip package to the park (8am to 2.30pm) costs RM210 per person. The three-day/two-night 'Observation 'n' Nature' package will set you back RM1010.

Tabin can be accessed with a rental vehicle (4WD is a must). There are several entrances to the reserve; the easiest one to navigate to is near the junction of Ladan Tunggu and Ladang Premai (it's 15km from Lahad Datu airport to Ladang Kajai). Pay the RM5 entry fee at the park's second gate (there are six gates in total).

SEMPORNA

pop 133,000

Semporna is the kind of town that makes tourists want to swear – especially if they're travelling on a tight schedule. As your bumpy ride trundles into this sleepy burg, you'll quickly realise that you haven't reached your oceanic Eden just yet. Semporna is one of those necessary evils – a lacklustre layover that'll snag you for a night on your way to paradise. Several lower-priced scuba centres have set up shop in town, but we highly recommend splurging on the island accommodation nearby (p388).

Orientation & Information

If you're arriving in Semporna under your own steam, leave the bus and minivan drop-off area and head towards the mosque's spiking minaret. This is the way to the waterfront. Follow the grid of concrete streets to the right until you reach 'Semporna Seafont' – a collection of newer structures decked out in primary colours that starkly contrast with the charmless pastels throughout the rest of town. This neighbourhood (which feels more like Havana than Southeast Asia) is home to a cluster of diving outfitters, each stacked one next to the other in a competitive clump. Sleeping and eating options crowd around this area as well.

Although money moves quickly around town as tourists drop some serious ringgit on diving adventures, ATMs are few and far between. The closest bank to the 'Semporna Seafont' is the yellow-bannered **Maybank** (☎ 089-784852) on Jln Jakarullah. Expect small lines and the occasional beggar, especially in the evening. Dragon Inn (opposite) has a small air-conditioned internet lounge for those needing to update their blog.

The local navy base has the closest **decompression chamber** (☎ 089-783100).

Diving

'Diving' is the answer every tourist provides when someone asks them why they're in Semporna, and 'Sipadan' is the answer to 'where do you want to dive?' Scuba is the town's lifeline, and there's no shortage of places to sign up for some serious bubble blowing. Operators are clustered around the 'Semporna Seafont', a newer neighbourhood near the Dragon Inn, while other companies have offices in KK. Due to the high volume of interest, it is best to do your homework

and book ahead – diving at Sipadan is limited to 120 persons per day. If time isn't an issue, consider swinging through town to examine your options, book your dive package, and come back a few weeks later to hit the waves.

See p388 for everything you need to know about diving at Sipadan (and at the other sites in the Tun Sakaran Marine Park).

Sleeping

Semporna is no great shakes, but the town offers a lot of passable options at the low end of the budget spectrum. If you've already signed up with a scuba operator ask them about sleeping discounts (and don't be shy about trying to finagle a good deal, especially if you're sticking around for a while). Some dive centres, like Scuba Junkie, offer cheap in-house sleeps, both in Semporna and in the marine park (see below), while others will point you in the direction of Dragon Inn. Keep an eye out for newer spots not mentioned here – high demand means an ever-increasing number of places to crash.

Dragon Inn (Rumah Rehat Naga; ☎ 089-781088; www.dragoninnfloating.com.my; 1 Jln Kastam; dm RM15-20, r incl breakfast RM66-88; 🍷 📺) The owners are going for a tiki-chic vibe, and although it's a bit more memorable than the other options in town, the decor kinda falls flat. Long rows of dark rooms sit on stilts above the greenish tidewater at the far corner of the town's dive-centric district. Go for the 'standard' private rooms (RM66) – they are identical to the 'front row' rooms (RM88).

Seafest Hotel (☎ 089-782333; www.seafesthotel.com; Jln Kastam; r incl breakfast from RM200; 🍷 📺) Six storeys of bay-view, business-class comfort at the far end of the 'Semporna Seafrest' neighbourhood. It's affiliated with Seafest fishery, so check the restaurant's catch of the day. Don't be shy about asking for discounts.

Other options include:

Borneo Global Sipadan Backpackers (☎ 089-785088; borneogb@gmail.com; Jln Causeway; dm/tr incl breakfast RM22/90; 🍷 📺) Dozens of dorm beds.

Scuba Junkie Backpackers (☎ 089-785372; www.scuba-junkie.com; Lot 36, Block B, Semporna Seafrest; dm/r incl breakfast RM30/80; 🍷 📺) Sociable spot offering 50% discounts for divers.

Sipadan Inn (☎ 089-782766; www.sipadan-inn.com; Block D, Semporna Seafrest; r incl breakfast RM84; 🍷 📺) Spotless rooms are light on decor. A better deal than Dragon Inn's RM88 rooms.

Eating

You can't go wrong with any of the options around the 'Semporna Seafrest'. Try one of the restaurants at the Seafest Hotel complex for some authentic Chinese cuisine. Scuba Junkie's restaurant specialises in Western fare and claims to have the best pizza in town (not a hard feat when you're one of two places serving slices). If you wanna go native, sample the *nasi lemak* or *korchung* (rice dumplings) – Semporna is well known for these two dishes.

Anjung Paghalian Café (Jln Kastam, mains RM3-5; 🍷 dinner) Beside the Tun Sakaran Marine Park entrance sign, this indoor/outdoor place on a pier features fish, prawn, chicken, squid and venison sold by portions (for two or more people) and cooked in your choice of up to 12 different styles. It also has standard Malay hawker stalls and even one which serves burgers.

Mabul Steak House (☎ 089-781785; Semporna Seafrest; mains from RM4; 🍷 lunch & dinner) This easy-going balcony restaurant's large and glacial 'ice-blended juices' are a soothing antidote for sucking bottled air. For further chilling, there's a leather couch and overstuffed chairs around a huge TV showing movies or sport. The RM4.90 and RM7.90 set meals won't leave you cold – or hungry.

Getting There & Away

The advent of uber-cheap airfares has made Semporna easily accessible from both KK and KL. Flights on AirAsia can cost as little as RM9 from KK, and RM89 from KL – including tax. Planes land at Tawau Airport, roughly 28km from town. Tawau–Semporna buses (RM15) will stop at the airport if you ask the driver nicely. Buses that do not stop at the airport will let you off at Mile 28, where you will have to walk a few (unshaded) kilometres to the terminal. If you are staying at midrange or top-end digs, chances are your accommodation will arrange any necessary airport pick-ups and drop-offs. Remember that flying less than 24 hours after diving can cause serious health issues, even death.

The bus 'terminal' hovers around the Milimewa supermarket not too far from the mosque's looming minaret. Morning and night buses to KK (RM50, 9 hours) leave at around 7am or 7pm. Minivans to/from Tawau (RM10 to RM15, 1½ hours),

Lahad Datu (RM20 to RM25, 2½ hours) and Sandakan (RM35 to RM40, 5½ hours) arrive and depart around the grocery store area as well. All run from early morning until 4pm.

Semporna is the gateway to the islands in the Tun Sakaran Marine Park, see p391 for information on accessing the archipelago.

SEMPORNA ARCHIPELAGO

The stunning islets of the Semporna Archipelago freckle the cerulean sea like a shattered earthen pot – each sandy chunk a lonely spot on the ocean's mirror-like surface. Bands of sun-kissed sea gypsies patrol the waters scooping up snapping crabs and ethereal shells. But another world exists deep below – a silent realm inspiring even more wonder and awe. Sipadan's technicolour sea walls reach deep down – 2000m to the distant ocean floor – and act like an underwater beacon luring docile turtles, slippery sharks and waving mantas.

Orientation & Information

The Semporna Islands are loosely divided into two geographical sections: the northern islands (protected as **Tun Sakaran Marine Park**, gazetted in 2004) and the southern islands. Both areas have desirable diving – Sipadan is located in the southern region, as is Mabul and Kapalai. Matakang and Sibuan belong to the northern area. If you are based in Semporna you'll have a greater chance of diving both areas, although most people are happy to stick with Sipadan and its neighbours.

Consider stocking up on supplies (sunscreen, mozzie repellent etc) before making your way into the archipelago. Top-end resorts have small convenience stores although the prices are inflated. ATMs are nonexistent, but all resorts accept credit cards (Visa and Mastercard). Mabul has a small police station near the village mosque, as well as a small pharmacy shack selling basic medical and hygiene supplies in the fishing village. Internet is of the wi-fi variety and is available only at the upmarket sleeping options.

The closest **decompression chamber** (☎ 089-783100) is at the naval base in Semporna.

Diving

Maybe the name Semporna doesn't ring a bell – that's because the key word here is 'Sipadan'.

Located 36km off Sabah's southeast coast, **Sipadan** (also called 'Pulau Sipadan') is the shining star in the archipelago's constellation of shimmering islands. The elliptical islet sits like a clay-tinged crown atop a stunning submerged pinnacle with its world famous near-vertical walls. This underwater beacon is a veritable weigh station for virtually all types of sea life, from fluttering coral to school-bus-sized whale sharks. Sea turtles and reef sharks are a given during any dive, and luckier scuba-holics may spot mantas, eagle rays, octopus, even scalloped hammerheads!

Roughly a dozen delineated dive sites orbit the island – the most famous being the aptly named **Barracuda Point**, where streamers of barracuda collide to form impenetrable walls of undulating fish flesh. Reef sharks seem to be attracted to the strong current here and almost always swing by to say hello. **South Point** sits at exactly the opposite end of the island from Barracuda Point and usually hosts the large pelagics (manta magnet!). The west side of the island features technicolour walls that tumble down to an impossibly deep 2000m. The walls are best appreciated from out in the blue on a clear afternoon. The east coast tends to be slightly less popular, but oodles of turtles and sharks are still inevitable.

Although Sipadan outshines the neighbouring sites, there are other reefs in the marine park that are well worth exploring. The macro-diving around **Mabul** (or 'Pulau Mabul') is world-famous. In fact, the term 'muck diving' was invented here. The submerged sites around **Kapalai**, **Matakang** and **Sibuan** are also of note.

While it is technically possible to rock up and chance upon an operator willing to take you to Sipadan the following day, we strongly suggest that you book in advance (the earlier the better; see p341 about preplanning in Borneo). The downside to pre-booking, of course, is that you can't visit each dive centre's storefront to suss out which one you like best, but Johnny-come-latelies might be forced to wait a few weeks before something opens up. The government issues 120 passes (RM40) to Sipadan each day (this number includes divers, snorkellers and day-trippers). Bizarre rules and red tape, like having certain gender ratios, make the permit process even more frustrating. Each dive company is issued a pre-determined number of passes per day (usually around eight to 12 tickets for companies

based in Semporna) depending on the size of their operation and the general demand for permits. Each operator has a unique way of 'awarding' tickets – some companies place their divers in a permit lottery, others promise a day at Sipadan after a day (or two) of diving at Mabul and Kapalai. No matter which operator you choose, you will be required to do a non-Sipadan intro dive unless you are a Divemaster that has logged a dive in the last six months. Permits to Sipadan are issued by day (and not by dive) so make sure you are getting at least three dives in your package.

A three-dive day trip costs between RM250 and RM450 (some operators include park fees, other do not – make sure to ask), and equipment rental (full gear) comes to about RM50 or RM60 per day. Cameras (around RM100 per day) and dive computers (around RM60 per day) are also available for rent at most dive centres. Snorkellers will drop RM100 for a day of bubble blowing. Top-end resorts on Mabul and Kapalai offer all-inclusive package holidays (plus a fee for equipment rental).

Although most of the diving in the area is 'fun diving', Open Water certifications are available for scuba virgins, and advanced coursework is popular for those wanting to take things to the next level. Diving at Sipadan is geared towards divers with an Advanced Open Water certificate (currents and thermoclines can be strong), although experienced Open Water divers should not have any problems (they just can't go as deep as advanced divers). A three-day Open Water course will set you back between RM750 and RM850. Advanced Open Water courses (two days) cost around RM700 to RM850, and the Divemaster certification runs for around RM1850.

The following dive operators are amongst the growing laundry list of companies in the area. Several operators are based at their respective resorts, while others have storefronts and offices in Semporna and/or KK. No matter where your desired operator is located, it is *highly* recommended that you contact them in advance.

Billabong Scuba (☎ 089-781866; www.billabongscuba.com; Lot 28, Block E, Semporna Seafront) Semporna-based outfit with reasonable prices. Accommodation can be arranged at a rickety 'homestay' on Mabul.

Blue Sea Divers (☎ 089-781322; www.thereefdivers.com; Semporna Seafront) Reputable day-trip operator in Semporna. Request chicken curry for your post-dive lunch.

Borneo Divers (☎ 088-222226; www.borneodivers.info; 9th fl, Menara Jubili, 53 Jalan Gaya, Kota Kinabalu) The original operators in the area, Borneo Divers were the good folks who unveiled Sipadan to an awestruck Jacques Cousteau. They have maintained their high standards throughout the years offering knowledgeable guides and comfy quarters. Their office is located in Kota Kinabalu. See p390 for information about their comely resort on Mabul. Recommended.

Scuba Junkie (☎ 089-785372; www.scuba-junkie.com; Lot 36, Block B, Semporna Seafront) Popular with the young backpacker crowd, Scuba Junkie invented the hard sell in Semporna. Prices are kept low and diving gear is well maintained. Ask about cheap sleeps – they'll hook you up with a budget bed on Mabul or in the hostel across from their storefront (p387). If you're sleepless in Semporna, stop by their restaurant in the wee hours for some greasy pizza.

Sipadan Scuba (☎ 089-784788, 919-128; www.sipadanscuba.com; Lot 23, Block D, Semporna Seafront) Twenty years of Borneo experience and an international staff makes Sipadan Scuba a reliable choice. This is the only PADI 5 Star Instructor Development Centre in Semporna. Recommended.

Sipadan Water Village (☎ 089-784100; www.svvresort.com; Jln Kastam) A private operator based at the Mabul resort with the same name (p390).

SMART (www.sipadan-mabul.com.my) The dive centre operating at Sipadan-Mabul Resort and Mabul Water Bungalow; both are located on Mabul (p390).

Uncle Chang's (Borneo Jungle River Island Tours; ☎ 089-785372; 36 Semporna Seafront) Offers diving and snorkelling day trips, plus stays at its 'lodge' on Mabul (p390) or Maiga (RM80 per person).

Sleeping

From opulent bungalows to ragtag sea shanties, the marine park offers a wide variety of accommodation catering to all budget types. Sleeping spots are sprinkled across the archipelago with the majority of options clustered on the peach-fringed island of Mabul (Sipadan's closest neighbour). All options, regardless of budget type, include three meals per day in the price. Divers and snorkellers can also opt to stay in the town of Semporna (p387), which offers a slightly better bang for your buck, but you'll miss out on post-dive chill sessions along flaxen strips of sand, and fiery equatorial sunsets that plunge into the crystalline sea. Also, Semporna is noticeably farther away from the park's oceanic treasures.

SIPADAN

Although it has been several years since the government banned Sipadan sleepovers, we

just wanted to reiterate that it is not possible to stay here. The island is under the control of the Wildlife Department and is patrolled by rangers and local army personnel. Day trips to the island and its house reef are capped at 120 individuals.

MABUL

Beautiful Pulau Mabul is a great place to be based for some serious Sipadan scuba. Mabul itself is also an excellent spot to strap on a mask and check out the world-class macro-diving. This sandy bump in the sea is home to a fishing village and a community of Bajau Bajau (sea gypsies).

Budget

As you've probably noticed, a trip to Sipadan can be a very pricey venture. Mabul has a large clump of cheapies, but remember the old adage – you get what you pay for.

Mabul Beach Resort (☎ 089-784788, 089-919128; www.sipadanscuba.com; per person r RM80-120) Owned and operated by Scuba Junkie, this brand new spot on Mabul is shaking things up for shoe-stringers. No more are the days of dingy 'long-house' accommodation – divers will finally be able to get a good night's sleep. Most of the resort was still under construction when we visited, but we think it looks very promising!

The following options are located within Mabul's 'town' (and we use that term lightly) of sea shanties. The quality is fairly similar at all four places: in need of an upgrade. At the time of research we noticed a couple of renovation attempts underway, but guests should still expect uber-basic digs in wobbly shacks, flimsy mattresses, grim toilet stalls, cold showers, floating pieces of rubbish and roosters crowing in the early morning. The tightest of wallets will appreciate the chilled-out atmosphere and local vibe, but light sleepers and choosier travellers should consider dropping the extra cash to stay elsewhere. All options feature communal bathrooms unless otherwise noted.

Arung Hayat Resort (☎ 089-782526; per person r/stc RM50/80) An autonomous homestay with low-slung beds, baby blue walls and plenty of smiles. Divers with Scuba Junkie can opt to stay here. They also caters to non-divers.

Billabong (☎ 089-781866; per person r RM50) Six basic rooms hovering on stilts above the ebbing tide. Associated accommodation for Billabong Scuba (p389).

Lai's Homestay (per person r RM60) Features a large, wood-planked verandah stretching over the sea. Slightly

newer, but still shanty-esque. Affiliated with Big John Scuba.

Uncle Chang's (☎ 089-781002; per person dm/s/d RM50/120/60, per person d with aircon & private bathroom RM90; 🍷) A Sipadan backpacking stalwart catering to the like-named dive operator (p389). We've received reports from several travellers that a charming family of rats also calls this place home.

Midrange & Top End

With the noticeable increase in quality comes a noticeable increase in price. Watch out folks, some of these prices are in US dollars!

Seaventures Dive Resort (☎ 088-261669; www.seaventuresdive.com; 4-day/3-night dive package from RM1950; 🍷) A worthy attempt at offering tourists something unique, this oceanic eyesore sits just off of Mabul's silky shoreline. The upshot: excellent diving at your toes. The downside: after your daily scuba sesh, you're stuck living aboard an ugly iron oilrig.

Borneo Divers Mabul Resort (☎ 088-222226; www.borneodivers.info; 3-day/3-night dive packages from US\$660; 🍷 📺) The oldest dive centre in the region used to have a resort on Sipadan until they closed it down in 2005. Today, they continue to provide top-notch service on Mabul with an earth-friendly focus. The U-shape of accommodation is in semi-detached mahogany bungalows with bright yellow window frames. Open-air pavilions with gauzy netting punctuate the perfectly manicured grounds. Overall this is one of the best bangs for your buck on the island. Ask about on-site camping opportunities to cut back on costs. Wi-fi available in the dining room.

Sipadan-Mabul Resort (SMART; ☎ 088-486389; www.sipadan-mabul.com.my; 3-day/2-night dive package from US\$762, non-divers US\$503; 🍷 📺) Even though the summer-camp styling suits the tropical landscape, the prices here are a bit out of whack. If you're gonna splurge why not go all the way and snag a room at SMART's sister property (see opposite). Wi-fi is available in the dining area.

Sipadan Water Village Resort (☎ 089-751777; www.swwresort.com; 4-day/3-night package from RM3500; 🍷 📺) Outmoded design details (although when were wooden tarantula ornaments ever in style?) quickly set the tone here – this resort-on-stilts doesn't pull off 'graceful elegance' quite like Mabul Water Bungalow next door despite the idyllic location. If you decide that this is the spot for you, then go for the 'grand deluxe' bungalows.

Mabul Water Bungalow (☎ 088-486389; www.mabulwaterbungalows.com; 3-day/2-night dive package from US\$1045, non-divers \$640; 🏠 📍) The ritzier sister of Sipidan-Mabul Resort (opposite), this floating enclave of temple-like chalets and taupe golf carts is one of the poshest addresses in all of Borneo. The rooms are effortlessly opulent, and the resort's only suite, the Bougain Villa, features a trickling waterfall in the bathroom, its own private dock and glass floors revealing the starfish-strewn sea floor. Wi-fi available.

KAPALAI

Although commonly referred to as an island, Kapalai is more like a large sandbar sitting slightly under the ocean surface. From afar, the one hotel, **Sipadan-Kapalai Resort** (☎ 089-673999; www.dive-malaysia.com; Mile 6, Bandar Tyng, Sandakan; 4-day/3-night package from RM2480; 🏠 📍), looks like it's sitting on palm trunks in the middle of the sea. The resort designers went for a sea-gypsy theme and tacked on an opulent twist, making the sea cabins out of shiny lacquered wood.

MATAKING

Mataking Island (☎ 089-782080; www.matakingisland.com; 3-day/2-night package from US\$640; 🏠 📍) is the only accommodation on little Mataking. This sandy escape has some beautiful diving, which is usually dwarfed by Sipadan further south.

POM POM

Pom Pom needs no cheerleading – this stunning, secluded haven sits deep within the Tun Sakaran Marine Park, about one hour by boat from Semporna. **Sipadan Pom Pom Island Resort** (☎ 089-781918; http://pompomisland.com; 4-day/3-night package from RM3085; 🏠 📍) runs the only operation on the island. Reed-and-thatch bungalows are spacious and offer seaviews from the spacious balconies.

ROACH REEFS

This network of artificial reefs was once the private underwater playground for a wealthy businessman, but today **Roach Reefs Resort** (☎ 089-779332; www.roachreefsresort.com; 4-day/3-night package from RM3200; 🏠 📍) has opened its doors to tourists.

Getting There & Around

All transport to the marine park is funnelled through the town of Semporna. See p387 for detailed information on how to reach Semporna, and remember, it is a *serious* health

risk to fly within 24 hours of your last dive (it's also unsafe to dive directly after flying due to poorly pressurised cabins and dehydration). Tourists who are staying on one of the many offshore islets must book ahead as space is quite limited and there is no public transport to any of the archipelago's islands. Your accommodation will arrange any transport needs from Semporna or Tawau airport (usually for an extra fee), which will most likely depart in the morning (meaning that if you arrive in Semporna in the afternoon, you will be required to spend the night in town before setting off into the park). Transport to Tun Sakaran's breathtaking dive sites (Sipadan!) is always included in your dive package. Chartered boats from Semporna can be scouted – check out the motley crew of bobbing vessels parked outside the Seafest Hotel. Raish (pronounced like 'rice'; ☎ 012-811 0934) offers the cheapest water-taxi service around the marine park at RM200 per ride (eight-person maximum). His English isn't stellar so you might have to recruit a local to help translate.

TAWAU

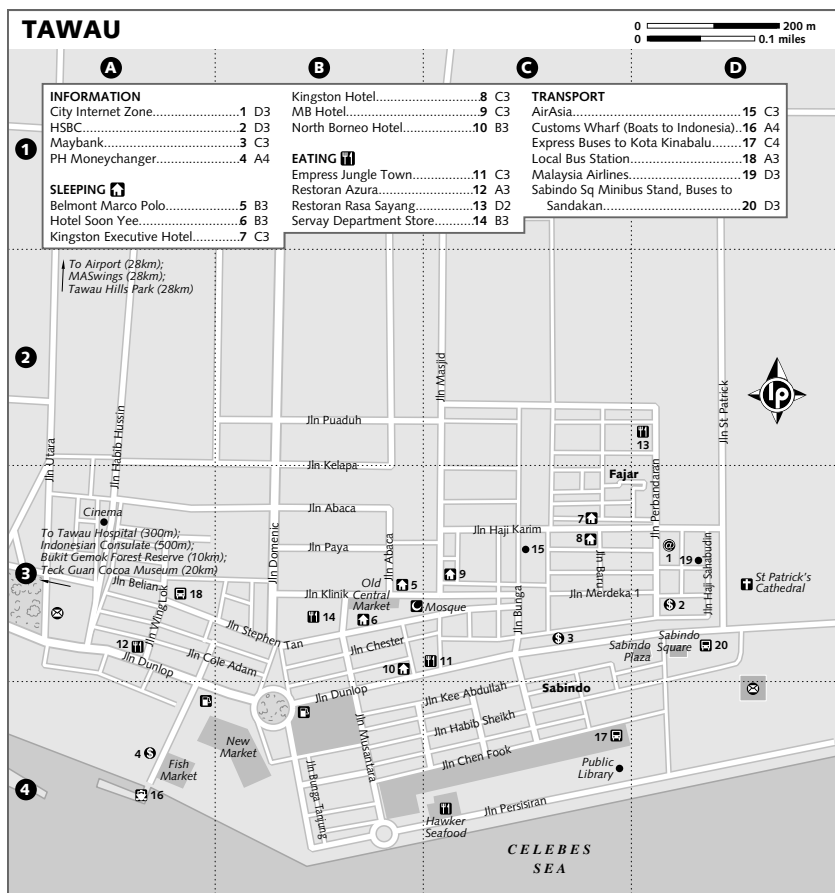
pop 354,250

If you liked Sandakan's nondescript port vibe, then you'll love Tawau – Sabah's most forgettable spot. Though it's known as a Bugis (ethnic group) city, a massive stilt village east of town houses many of the Filipino and Indonesian immigrants who eke out a living on the waterfront. Patchy street lighting doesn't help the atmosphere, and travellers, especially women, may feel more comfortable in pairs after dark. Locals do seem quite proud of their town, however. Check out www.etawau.com for recommendations.

The only lure for travellers is the border: Tawau is the only crossing point with Kalimantan where foreigners can get a visa to enter Indonesia. The (so far) low-profile Indonesian consulate (see p392), about 200m beyond Tawau Hospital, has remained fast and friendly while foreigners have been few. But even the most successful applicant will have to spend at least one night in town before shipping off. Divers with Sipadan on the brain needn't pass through Tawau.

Information

City Internet Zone (☎ 089-760016; 37 Kompleks Fajar, Jln Perbandaran; per hr RM2-3; ☎ 9am-midnight)
HSBC (Jln Perbandaran) ATM.



Indonesian consulate (☎ 089-772052; 089-752969; Jln Tanjong Batu; 🕒 8am-noon, 1-4pm) Efficient one-day service (usually) for visas.

Maybank (📠 089-762333; Jln Dunlop)

PH Moneychanger (☎ 089-776389; Kompleks Kojasa) Changes cash in harbour area.

Sights

Tawau is pretty light on sights and isn't worth going out of your way to stop by. The **Teck Guan Cocoa Museum** (☎ 089-775566; 5-person guided tour RM100; 🕒 8-11.30am & 1.30-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat) is a testament to Tawau's burgeoning cocoa industry. A tour includes a 20-minute video, detailed dioramas and hands-on presentations. A taxi from Tawau town to the museum (40 minutes away) costs RM40 each way – the taxi can wait

at no extra charge while you tour the grounds (two hours maximum). The **Bukit Gemok Forest Reserve** (adult/child RM5/1), located 10km from Tawau town centre, is a fantastic park sitting on 445 hectares of protected land. Developed in the early 1990s, the jungle here has only recently become popular with trekkers, Hash runners and tour groups – many consider it to be far better than the trails around Poring Hot Springs. A taxi to the park costs RM20.

Sleeping

Splurge for a midranger if you're stopping through Tawau. They cater to local businessmen and are excellent bang for your buck – miles beyond anything you can get in KK for a similar price.

Hotel Soon Yee (☎ 089-772447; 1362 Jln Stephen Tan; r RM22-38; 🚻) No prostitutes, no phones, no hot water (except in shared bathrooms), but lots of value and camaraderie in this guesthouse. Cheaper fan-cooled rooms have shared bathrooms.

North Borneo Hotel (☎ 089-763060; fax 089-773066; 52-53 Jln Dunlop; r RM50-80; 🚻) Strategically placed between the Sabindo and Fajar quarters, this older hotel has large rooms, many with terraces overlooking the street, and surprisingly appealing bathrooms, most with bathtubs. Not fancy, but good value.

Kingston Executive Hotel (☎ 089-702288; fax 089-702688; 4581-4590 Jln Haji Karim; d RM87-109; 🚻 📺) The swankier add-on to the old Kingston Hotel across the street, this 'executive' strives for boutique touches, like bucket sinks and trippy art. Some rooms have duvets made from *kain songket* (traditional Malay handwoven fabric with gold threads).

MB Hotel (☎ 089-701333; hotelmayblossom@yahoo.com; Jln Masjid; r from RM110; 🚻) MB knows what's important: a comfortable night's sleep. The hallways could use a facelift and the lobby is going for a 'minimal' theme, but who really cares – the rooms are outfitted with modern business amenities (including the fastest wi-fi in Borneo) that edge out the Heritage Hotel nearby, since a sleep here is slightly cheaper.

Belmont Marco Polo (☎ 089-777988; bmph@tm.net.my; Jln Klinik; s/d from RM220/250; 🚻) Forestry executives will feel at home with mahogany shutters and other elegant wooden accents at Tawau's luxury leader. For work, there's wi-fi, for play there's transport to the golf course nearby.

Eating

Locals love splurging on the buffet lunch at the Belmont Marco Polo (above) which, for RM14.80 (RM22 on weekends), is a steal considering the variety of tasty bites. The interior courtyard around the Kingston Hotel has a few local haunts serving up tasty dishes, and the seafood in the Sabindo area is top-notch albeit slightly pricey.

Restoran Azura (☎ 012-863 9934; Jln Dunlop; dishes RM3-6; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Recommended for its tasty South Indian food and snicker-worthy menu, Azura serves up a killer fish-head curry and sundry 'tits-bits'. The noodles are pretty good too. There's another branch in Sabindo Sq.

Restoran Rasa Sayang (☎ 089-777042; Jln Haji Karim; dishes from RM5; 🍽️ lunch & dinner) Part of Tawau's

burgeoning restaurant quarter, this is a neat Chinese diner doing good-value set meals (RM15) and novel specials such as prawn mango rice.

Empress Jungle Town (☎ 089-776393; 54 Jln Dunlop; mains RM5.75-30; 🍽️ lunch & dinner) A rather bizarre new enterprise attempting to recapture the rainforest experience *inside* a restaurant, right down to the semi-convincing fake trees, piped birdsong, cascading water and, um, mirror ball. Unlike most jungles, though, this plastic paradise has a snack bar, a karaoke lounge and a cafeteria-style menu of Chinese and Western dishes.

Self-caterers should try the **Servay Department Store** (Jln Musantara), across from the Old Central Market, for everything from picnic lunches to DVDs of dubious authenticity.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Malaysia Airlines (☎ 089-761293; Jln Haji Sahabudin) has daily flights to both KK and KL. **AirAsia** (☎ 089-761946; Jln Bunga) has two daily direct flights to KK, although the second flight of the day is often cancelled if the plane is empty. **MASwings** (☎ 1300-883 000) flies to Sandakan twice daily, the afternoon flight continuing to KK.

BOAT

Boats for Indonesia leave from the customs wharf near the fish market. Fast ferries *Tawindo* or *IndoMaya* to Tarakan (RM75, 3½ hours) leave every morning except Sunday. Several companies run boats daily to Nunukan (RM40, one hour), an alternative border crossing. Most sailings continue or connect to Tarakan (from RM35), three hours from Nunukan.

BUS

When purchasing your bus ticket to leave KK, it's best to do it in advance to avoid the rush of touts that create a veritable mosh pit before departures. Buses leave around 8am or 8pm – there's nothing in between (so swing by around lunchtime to snag your ticket). Daily express buses for KK (RM75, 9 hours) leave from behind the Sabindo area in a large dusty lot.

Buses to Sandakan (RM30, five hours), depart hourly 7am to 2pm from the stand in Sabindo Sq, one block on a diagonal from the KK terminus, behind the purple Yassin Curry

House sign. That's also the spot for frequent minivans to Semporna (RM8 to RM10, two hours), Kunak (RM8 to RM10, 1½ hours), Lahad Datu (RM17 to RM20, three hours) and Sandakan (RM32 to RM35, six hours).

Getting Around

Tawau's airport is 28km from town along the main highway to Semporna and Sandakan. A shuttle bus (RM12) to the local bus station in Tawau's centre leaves six times daily. A taxi costs RM45.

TAWAU HILLS PARK

Hemmed in by agriculture and human habitation, this small reserve has forested hills rising dramatically from the surrounding plain. The park (RM10) was gazetted in 1979 to protect the water catchment for settlements in the area, but not before most of the accessible rainforest had been logged. Much of the remaining forest clings to steep-sided ridges that rise to 1310m Gunung Magdalena.

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

There's accommodation at **Tawau Hills Park headquarters** (Taman Bukit Tawau; ☎ 089-753564; dm/chalet RM20/200). Rates are lower on weekdays.

Tawau Hills is 28km northwest of Tawau. A taxi will cost about RM30 to RM40.

MALIAU BASIN CONSERVATION AREA

Looking down on Sabah with Google Earth, the eye is immediately drawn to what looks like the crater of an giant extinct volcano in the middle of the state, about 45km north of the border with Kalimantan. Zooming in, the heart starts to beat with excitement, for you cannot help but notice one thing: there are no roads here, only winding rivers and lush rainforest. This is the **Maliau Basin Conservation Area** (MBCA; www.ysnet.org.my/Maliau), known very appropriately as 'Sabah's Lost World'.

The Maliau Basin is run by the Sabah Foundation, and is the single best place in Borneo to experience the wonders of an old-growth tropical rainforest. More than that, it is one of the world's great reserves of biodiversity, a dense knot of almost unbelievable genetic richness. As such, it deserves to rank high on the itinerary of anyone interested in the natural world, as well as deserving

the strongest protections afforded by the Malaysian government and world environmental bodies. And a visit to the basin is always a poignant affair, as you'll share the road with a parade of logging trucks hauling trees out of the forest at an astonishing rate.

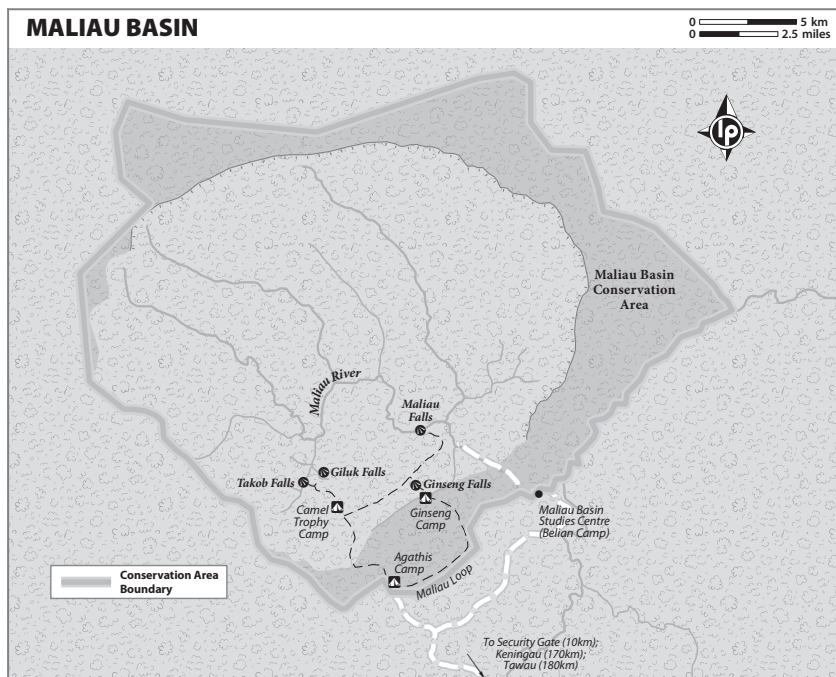
Unbelievably, there is no known record of human beings entering the basin until the early 1980s (although it is possible that indigenous peoples entered the basin before that time). It is only recently that the area has been opened up to a limited number of adventurous travellers, and it's still an expensive and time-consuming destination that is practically impossible to visit on your own.

Orientation & Information

Maliau Basin is located in the southern part of central Sabah, just north of the logging road connecting Tawau with Keningau, a minimum of five hours' drive from either of these towns by 4WD vehicle. It is part of the Yayasan Sabah Forest Management Area, a vast swath of forest in southeastern Sabah under the management of **Yayasan Sabah** (www.ysnet.org.my), a semigovernmental body tasked with both developing and protecting the natural resources of Sabah. Innoprise Corporation, the commercial arm of Yayasan Sabah, runs tours to the basin through its subsidiary **Borneo Nature Tours** (☎ 088-267637; www.borneonaturetours.com; Lot 10, ground fl, Block D, Kompleks Sadong Jaya, Kota Kinabalu), which also runs Borneo Rainforest Lodge (p385). Other tour operators in Sabah can also arrange tours of the park.

The **MBCA security gate** is just off the Tawau-Keningau Rd. From the gate, it's a very rough 25km journey to the **Maliau Basin Studies Centre**, for researchers, and about 20km to **Agathis Camp**, the base camp for most visitors to the basin.

Independent visits to the basin are difficult: proficient 4WD drivers could probably get there under their own steam with private vehicles, and you could arrange for guides and porters at the security gate, if none are out with tours at that time, but the overall expense would likely be similar to an organised tour, once vehicle rental costs are taken into account. It is likely that as the Tawau-Keningau road improves (it is due to be paved) and interest in the basin increases, independent travel will become easier. Check online for the latest information when you plan your tour.



Accommodation in Maliau Basin is in the form of simple camps, which range from basic bunkhouses such as Agathis Camp to **Camel Trophy Camp**, a wood-frame two-storey hut with private bedrooms. None of the camps are luxurious, but after a day on the trail fighting leeches, they'll seem like paradise.

Trekking

The trek through the Maliau Basin will undoubtedly be the most memorable hike of your Borneo experience, but it'll be a serious drain on funds. **Borneo Nature Tours** (☎ 088-267637; www.borneonaturetours.com; Lot 10, Ground fl, Block D, Kompleks Sadong Jaya, Kota Kinabalu) is the main operator here offering a five-day/four-night all-inclusive tour of Maliau Basin starting at RM3350. The package is purposefully cost prohibitive to eliminate those who aren't the most die-hard nature fans. The density of the old-growth forest is striking, and as it is more remote than the Danum Valley, the preserved wildlife is even better.

Several treks are possible in the basin, ranging from short nature walks around Agathis Camp to the multiday slog to the

rim of the basin via Strike Ridge Camp. The vast majority of visitors to the basin undertake a three-day/two-night loop through the southern section of the basin that we'll call the Maliau Loop. This brilliant route takes in wide swathes of diverse rainforest and four of the basin's waterfalls: Takob Falls, Giluk Falls, Maliau Falls and Ginseng Falls. Do not attempt the trek unless you are in excellent shape (in fact, Borneo Nature Tours will require a letter from a doctor testifying to your ability to undertake the trek). Your tour operator will supply a guide and porters to carry your food. You'll be in charge of your daypack, camera, leech socks, walking clothes and dry kit for the evening.

Getting There & Away

There is no public transport to the park and your transport will be arranged by your tour operator. Access is by 4WD vehicle from either Tawau or Keningau. Most organised tours operate from Tawau, from which the ride takes about five hours under good conditions. There are frequent delays en route

as logging trucks often get bogged down in the mud. Once at the security gate to the park, you'll have to take an even narrower dirt track to Agathis Camp.

SOUTHWESTERN SABAH

The Crocker Range is the backbone of south-western Sabah, separating coastal lowlands from the wild tracts of jungle in the east. Honey-tinged beaches scallop the shores from KK down to the border, passing the turbid rivers of the Beaufort Division. Offshore you'll find Pulau Tiga, forever etched in the collective consciousness as the genesis site for the eponymous reality show *Survivor*, and Pulau Labuan, centre of the region's oil industry and the transfer point for ferries heading onto Sarawak and Brunei.

THE INTERIOR

The southwest interior of Sabah is dominated by the **Crocker Range**, which rises near Tenom in the south and runs north to Mt Kinabalu. The range forms a formidable barrier to the interior of the state and dominates the eastern skyline from Kota Kinabalu down to Sipitang. Once across the Crocker Range, you descend into the green valley of the Sungai Pegalan that runs from Keningau in the south and to Ranau in the north. The heart of the **Pegalan Valley** is the small town of **Tambunan**, around which you'll find a few low-key attractions.

While much of the Crocker Range has been gazetted as **Crocker Range National Park**, there are few facilities for visitors. Likewise, the Pegalan Valley has no real must-see attractions. However, the Crocker Range and the Pegalan Valley make a nice jaunt into rural Sabah and are particularly suited for those with rental cars. As you make your way over the range between KK and Tambunan, you'll be treated to brilliant views back to the South China Sea and onward to Mt Trus Madi. The road itself is a lot of fun to drive, and you might find yourself craving a sports car instead of the Proton rental you're likely to be driving.

Tambunan

Nestled among the green curves of the Crocker hills, Tambunan, a small agricultural service town about 81km from KK, is the first settlement you'll come to in the range. The region

was the last stronghold of Mat Salleh, who became a folk hero for rebelling against the British in the late 19th century. Sadly Salleh later blew his reputation by negotiating a truce, which so outraged his own people that he was forced to flee to the Tambunan plain, where he was eventually besieged and killed.

Near the top of the Crocker Range, next to the main highway 20km from Tambunan, is the **Tambunan Rafflesia Reserve** (☎ 088-898500; RMS; ☎ 8am-3pm), devoted to the world's largest flower. The rafflesia is a parasitic plant that grows hidden within the stems of jungle vines until it bursts into bloom. The large bulbous flowers can be up to 1m in diameter. The 12 or so species of rafflesia here are found only in Borneo and Sumatra; several species are unique to Sabah, but as they only bloom for a few days it's hard to predict when you'll be able to see one.

Tambunan's only tourist accommodation is **Tambunan Village Resort Centre** (TVRC; ☎ 087-774076; 24 Jln TVRC, Kampung Keranaan; r & chalet RM50-90; ☎), about 2km from the tiny town centre. The staff at the centre can help arrange trips up Mt Trus Madi. If you're driving here from KK, the centre is just south of the Shell station on the main road.

Regular minivans ply the roads between Tambunan and KK (RM10, 1½ hours), Ranau (RM12, two hours), Keningau (RM7, 1 hour) and Tenom (RM12, two hours). KK-Tenom express buses also pass through, though you may have to ask them to stop. The minivan shelter is in the middle of Tambunan town. Minivans to KK pass the entrance to the rafflesia reserve; you'll usually be charged for the whole trip to KK.

Mt Trus Madi

About 20km southeast of Tambunan town is the dramatic **Mt Trus Madi**, Sabah's second-highest peak, rising to 2642m. Although logging concessions encircle the mount, the upper slopes and peak are wild and jungle-clad and classified as forest reserve. Ascents are possible, however it's more challenging than Mt Kinabalu, and more difficult to arrange. Independent trekkers must be well equipped and bring their own provisions up the mountain. It is possible to go by 4WD (RM300) up to about 1500m, from where it is a five- to seven-hour climb to the top. There are places to camp halfway up the mountain and on the summit. Before setting off, you

are strongly advised to hire a guide (RM200) or at least get maps and assistance from the **Forestry Department** (Jabatan Perhutanan; ☎ 087-774691) in Tambunan. Trekking packages can be booked at agencies in KK (p347).

Keningau

If you have a bent for the bucolic, you'll probably want to skip Keningau – this busy service town has a touch of urban sprawl about it, and most visitors only pass through to pick up transport, use an ATM or stock up on supplies. As far as attractions go, you might check out **Taipak-gung**, a colourful Chinese temple in the middle of town, or the large **tamu** (market) held every Thursday.

For a sleepover, try **Hotel Juta** (☎ 087-337888; www.sabah.com.my/juta; Lg Milimewa 2; standard/superior d from RM195; 🏠), which towers over the busy town centre. It's convenient to transport, banking and shopping needs. There is a restaurant on the premises.

There are eight daily express buses to/from KK (RM13, 2½ hours) and four to/from Tenom (RM7, 1 hour). These buses stop at the Bumiputra Express stop on the main road across from the Shell station. Minivans and share-taxis operate from several places in town, including a stop just north of the express bus stop. There are services to/from KK (RM25, 2½ hours), Ranau (RM18, three hours) and Tenom (RM7, one hour).

Tenom

This sleepy little town at the southern end of Crocker Range has seen better days but still manages to be more attractive than traffic-choked Keningau. Tenom was closely involved in uprisings against the British in 1915, led by the famous Murut chief Ontoros Antonom, and there's a **memorial** to the tribe's fallen warriors off the main road. Most people pass through Tenom on their way to the nearby Sabah Agricultural Park (right).

If you somehow get stuck in town, spend the night at **Orchid Hotel** (☎ 087-737600; Jln Tun Mustapha; s/d RM35/44; 🏠) – it's the lesser of the town's two evils (there are actually three iffy hotels in town, but 'the lesser of three evils' don't sound quite right).

Minivans operate from the *padang* in front of the Hotel Sri Perdana. Destinations include Keningau (RM6, one hour) and KK (RM20, two to four hours depending on stops). There are also regular services to Tambunan (RM12,

two hours). Taxis congregate at a rank on the west side of the *padang*.

Sabah Agricultural Park

Heaven on earth for horticulturalists: the vast **Sabah Agricultural Park** (Taman Pertanian Sabah; ☎ 087-737952; www.sabah.net.my/agripark; adult/child RM25/10; 🕒 9am-4.30pm Tue-Sun), about 15km northeast of Tenom, is run by the Department of Agriculture and covers about 1500 acres (610 hectares). Originally set up as an orchid centre, the park has expanded to become a major research facility, tourist attraction and offbeat camp site (RM10), building up superb collections of rare plants such as hoyas, and developing new techniques for use in agriculture, agroforestry and domestic cultivation.

Due to the size of the place, a fair bit of walking in the hot sun is involved (bring sunscreen, sun hats and sufficient clothing). Exploring by bicycle would be a good idea, but the fleet of rental bikes here has just about rusted to the point of immobility. There is a free 'train' (it's actually more like a bus) that does a 1½-hour loop of the park, leaving from outside the reception hourly from 9.30am to 3.30pm.

Take a minivan from Tenom heading to Lagud Seberang (RM3). Services run throughout the morning, but dry up in the late afternoon. Tell the driver you're going to Taman Pertanian. The park entrance is about 1km off the main road. A taxi from Tenom will cost around RM60.

Batu Punggul

Not far from the Kalimantan border, Batu Punggul is a jungle-topped limestone outcrop riddled with caves, towering nearly 200m above Sungai Sapulut. This is deep in Murut country and the stone formation was one of several sites sacred to these people. Batu Punggul and the adjacent Batu Tinahas are even traditionally believed to be longhouses that gradually transformed into stone. It can be difficult and expensive to get here, but this is a beautiful part of Sabah that few tourists visit, and it offers a chance to rub shoulders with the jungle Murut.

Batu Punggul is located a 10-minute motorboat ride upstream along the Sungai Sapulut from the Murut longhouse community of Tataluang. To reach Tataluang, take a bus to Keningau (left) where you must charter

a jeep for the three-hour drive (figure on around RM275).

BEAUFORT DIVISION

With Borneo's clutch of tongue-twisting tribal names (try saying 'Balambangan' three times fast!), it's a pleasure asking for a bus to Beaufort. This shield-shaped peninsula, popping out from Sabah's southwestern coast, is a marshy plain marked with curling rivers and fringed by golden dunes. Tourists with tight travel schedules should consider doing a wildlife river cruise at Klias or Garama if they don't have time to reach Sungai Kinabatangan. Yes, the Kinabatangan is better, but packs of proboscis monkeys can still be spotted here, and it's only a day trip from KK.

BEAUFORT

Born as a timber town, Beaufort has reinvented itself with the proliferation of palm-oil plantations. A suitable pit stop for tourists travelling between Sabah and Sarawak, this sleepy township is the gateway to white-water rapids on the Padas River and the monkey-filled Klias and Garama areas. The Padas River divides Beaufort into two sections: the aptly named Old Town with its weathered structures, and New Town, a collection of modern shophouses on flood-phobic stilts.

White-water rafting enthusiasts can book a river trip with **Riverbug** (☎ 088-260501; www.traverse-tours.com; Wisma Sabah, Jln Haji Saman, Kota Kinabalu), the premiere operator in the area. **Borneo Wavehunters** (☎ 088-432967; www.travelmateholidays.com; Lot 27, Block D, Kuala Inanam, Kota Kinabalu) is another reputable outfitter with a band of cheery guides. Day trips organised out of KK cost around RM200 per person, including transfers by van, and normally require 24 hours' advance notice. Tourists who seek calmer waters can ride the rapids of Sungai Kiulu (bookable through the aforementioned operators) near Mt Kinabalu.

There's really no need to spend the night in Beaufort, but if you must, then try the **MelDe Hotel** (☎ 087-222266; 19-20 Lo Chung Park, Jln Lo Chung; s/d/ste RM60/75/85; 📶). The rooms are a bit crusty in the corners, but it's passable for a night's sleep while in transit. Go for a room on one of the upper floors – they have windows. The Chinese restaurant under the inn is very popular with locals. MelDe is located in Old Town. If you're stopping in town for a bite,

make sure you try a pomelo (football-sized citrus fruit) – Beaufort is famous for 'em.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Express buses operate from near the old train station at the south end of Jln Masjid (the ticket booth is opposite the station). There are departures at 9am, 1pm, 2.15pm and 5pm for KK. The fare is RM9 and the journey takes 1½ hours. There are departures at 9.10am, 10.30am, 1.45pm and 6.20pm for Sipitang. The fare to Sipitang is RM4.50 and the trip takes 1½ hours. The KK to Lawas express bus passes through Beaufort at around 3pm; the trip from Beaufort to Lawas costs RM13 and takes 1¾ hours.

Minivans operate from a stop across from the mosque, which is at the north end of Jln Masjid. There are frequent departures for KK (RM9, two hours), and less-frequent departures for Sipitang (RM11, 1½ hours), Lawas (RM15, 1¾ hours) and Kuala Penyu (until around 2.30pm, RM6, one hour). To Menumbok (for Labuan) there are plenty of minivans until early afternoon (RM8, one hour).

Taxis depart from the stand outside the old train station, at the south end of Jln Masjid. Charter rates include: KK (RM60), Kuala Penyu (RM50), Sipitang (RM32), Menumbok (RM50) and Lawas (RM100).

Kuala Penyu

Tiny Kuala Penyu, at the northern tip of the peninsula, is the jumping-off point for Pulau Tiga if you are not accessing 'Survivor Island' via the new boat service from KK. From KK, minivans leave from behind Wawasan Plaza (RM10 to RM15, two hours). From Beaufort minivans to Kuala Penyu (RM5 to RM10) leave throughout the morning, but return services tail off very early in the afternoon, so you may have to negotiate a taxi or local lift back. A minivan to/from Menumbok costs RM50 per vehicle.

Tempurung

Set along the quiet coastal waters of the South China Sea, the serene **our pick Tempurung Seaside Lodge** (☎ 088-773066; 3 Putatan Point; www.borneo-authentic.com; 3-day/2-night package from RM450) is the perfect place for hermits who seek a pinch of style. The main lodge was originally built as a vacation home, but friends convinced the owners that it would be a crime not to share the

lovely property with the world. Rooms are scattered between several chalet-style bungalows accented with patches of jungle thatch. The packages include fantastic meals. Nightly rates are also available.

Borneo Express (☎ 012-830 7722) runs buses from KK (departing from Wawasan) at 6.45am, 10am and 12.30pm daily. Ask the driver to let you off at the junction with the large Kuala Penyu sign. The bus will turn left (south) to head towards Menumbok, you want to go right (north) in the direction of Kuala Penyu. If you arranged accommodation in advance, the lodge van can pick you up here (it's too far to walk). Buses pass the junction at 9.30am and 3.30pm heading back to KK. If you're driving, take a right at the junction and keep an eye out for the turnoff on the left side of the road just before Kuala Penyu. We suggest calling the lodge for directions. A charter taxi from Beaufort will cost about RM50.

Klias

The tea-brown Sungai Klias looks somewhat similar to the mighty Kinabatangan, offering short-stay visitors a chance to spend an evening in the jungle cavorting with saucy primates. There are several companies offering two-hour river cruises. We recommend **Borneo Authentic** (☎ 088-773066; www.borneo-authentic.com; package trip RM150), the first operator to set up shop in the region. Trips include a large buffet dinner and a short night walk to view the swarms of fireflies that light up the evening sky like Christmas lights. Cruises start at dusk (around 5pm), when the sweltering heat starts to burn off and animals emerge for some post-siesta prowling.

There is no accommodation in Klias, although Borneo Authentic can set you up with one of their comfy rooms at the Tempurung Seaside Lodge nearby (opposite). Tourists can make their own way to the row of private jetties 20km west of Beaufort, however most trip-takers usually sign up for a hassle-free day trip from KK (which ends up being cheaper since you're sharing transport).

Garama

Narrower than the river in Klias, the Sungai Garama is another popular spot for the popular river-cruise day trips from KK. Chances of seeing fireflies are slim, but Garama is just as good as Klias (if not better) when it comes to primate life. Gangs of proboscis monkeys

and long-tailed macaques scurry around the surrounding floodplain offering eager tourists plenty of photo fodder.

Like Klias, the tours here start at around 5pm (with KK departures at 2pm), and after a couple of hours along the river, guests chat about the evening's sightings over a buffet dinner before returning to KK. There are currently four operators in the area, the best being **Only In Borneo** (☎ 088-260506; www.oibtoours.com; package tour RM190), an offshoot of Traverse Tours. They have a well-maintained facility along the shores of Sungai Garama and offer an overnight option in prim dorms or double rooms.

While it is technically possible to reach Garama with one's own vehicle, the network of unmarked roads can be tricky and frustrating, especially at night when nothing is lit (and water buffalo start to wander the roads).

Weston

The little village of Weston – a couple shacks clustered around a gold-domed mosque – is the jumping-off point for the surrounding wetlands. The area was bombed beyond recognition during WWII, but recent conservation efforts have welcomed groups of curious proboscis monkeys. **Weston Wetland Paradise** (☎ 019-821 7919; www.westonwetland.com) operates a variety of package tours including river-cruise day trips and sleepovers at their swamp-side lodge, **Borneo Eco-Stay** (all-inclusive package RM230). The dorm facilities are rustic at best, but we've heard that renovations will probably be under way by the time you read this. **Century Proboscis Monkey** (☎ 016-832 2443) is the only other operator to offer river cruises around Weston's estuaries. Day trips to the wetlands cost around RM200 per person (around RM130 if you can arrange your own transport to the jetty).

Menumbok

The tiny hamlet of **Menumbok** is where you catch the ferry to Pulau Labuan (which then provides continuing ferry service to Brunei or Sarawak). A charter taxi from Beaufort costs RM60, minivans from Kuala Penyu cost RM50 per vehicle. The car ferry to Pulau Labuan departs daily at 10.30am and 4.30pm (RM5 per person, RM40 per car). There is a direct bus service connecting Menumbok to KK (see left).

PULAU TIGA NATIONAL PARK

Outwit, outplay and outlast your fellow travellers on what is known throughout the

world as 'Survivor Island'. The name Pulau Tiga actually means 'three islands' – the scrubby islet is part of a small chain created during an eruption of mud volcanoes in the late 1890s. Over a hundred years later, in 2001, the island had its 15 minutes of fame when it played host to the smash-hit reality TV series *Survivor*. TV junkies still stop by for a looksee, although the 'tribal council' was destroyed in a storm and the debris was cleared after it turned into a home for venomous snakes. Whatever your viewing preferences though, it's still a great place for relaxing on the beach, hiking in the forest and taking a cooling dip in burping mud pits at the centre of the island.

Nearby, the hard-to-pronounce Pulau Kalampunian Damit is little more than a large rock covered in dense vegetation but is famous for the sea snakes that come ashore to mate, hence the island's nickname, **Snake Island**. On any one day up to 150 snakes can be present, curled up under boulders, among roots and in tree hollows. It's a fascinating phenomenon, made doubly enigmatic by the fact that the snakes are never seen on nearby Pulau Tiga. Pulau Tiga Resort runs boat trips to the island (RM35 per person), with a stop en route for snorkelling.

Sleeping & Eating

The main player on the island, **Pulau Tiga Resort** (☎ 088-240584; www.pulau-tiga.com; per person RM175-330; ♿) was originally built to house the production crew for the *Survivor* series (Jeff Probst stayed in Cabin E). Accommodation is available in dorm-style 'longhouse' rooms (three beds in each), and private cabins have double beds and plenty of air-con. The beach-facing grounds offer amazing views of the sunset. A detailed map is available for those that want to track down the beach where the Pagong Tribe lived (called Pagong Pagong Beach). There's currently only one staff member that was working here when *Survivor* was being filmed – he was friendly enough to entertain all of our dorky questions (we were big fans back in the day).

Sabah Parks (☎ 088-211881; www.sabahparks.org.my; Lot 1-3, Block K, Kompleks Sinsuran, Jln Tun Fuad Stephens, Kota Kinabalu; 🕒 8am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Thu, 8am-11.30am & 2-5pm Fri) has more basic lodging on the island for less affluent survivalists. It's right next door to Pulau Tiga Resort, about 10m from where 'Tribal Council' was once held. Facilities here

are limited and there's no restaurant, though a cooking area is provided.

Getting There & Away

Pulau Tiga is 12km north of Kuala Penyu off the Klias Peninsula. The boat ride takes about 20 minutes and can be pretty bumpy if there's any wind about. Boats leave at 10am and 3pm from the south side of the river in Kuala Penyu. Most visitors to Pulau Tiga come as part of a package with one of the resorts, in which case transport all the way to the island from KK will be included in the price. Otherwise, you could try just showing up in Kuala Penyu and asking if you can board one of the day's boats out to the island (we don't recommend this option as priority is given to resort guests with bookings). For Sabah Parks' lodgings try to hop a ride with the Pulau Tiga Resort boat – it'll be way cheaper than chartering your own craft (RM400).

PULAU LABUAN

pop 85,000

Pulau Labuan is Sabah's version of Vegas, but if you're expecting schmancy hotels and prostitutes you're only half-right... The island doesn't feel seedy though; in fact, think of Labuan as a giant airport terminal – everything here is duty free, because politically, it's part of a federal territory governed directly from KL.

The sultan of Brunei ceded Labuan to the British in 1846 and it remained part of the Empire for 115 years. The only interruption came during WWII, when the Japanese held the island for three years. Significantly, it was on Labuan that the Japanese forces in North Borneo surrendered at the end of the war, and the officers responsible for the death marches from Sandakan (see p373) were tried on the island.

Bandar Labuan is the main town and the transit point for ferries linking Kota Kinabalu and Brunei.

Information

Arcade Moneychanger (☎ 087-412545; 168 Jln OKK Awang Besar) Cash and travellers cheques. Inside Labuan Textile shop.

Bertam Mass Money Changer (Jln Bunga Raya) Cash and travellers cheques. Near the ferry terminal.

Harrisons Travel (☎ 087-412557; 1 Jln Merdeka) Handy and reputable travel agency.

HSBC (☎ 087-422610; 189 Jln Merdeka) ATM.

Maybank (☎ 087-443888; Financial Park) ATM.

Labuan Tourism Action Council (☎ 087-422622; Ground fl, Labuan International Sea Sports Complex; 8am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) Located about 1km east of the town centre, this is the most useful information office in town. They stock the excellent *Fly Drive Labuan Island & Town Map of Labuan*.

Tourist Information Centre (☎ 087-423445; www.labuantourism.com.my; cnr Jln Dewan & Jln Berjaya; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat) Tourism Malaysia office. Less useful than Labuan Tourism Action Council.

Sights & Activities

BANDAR LABUAN

Labuan's uncharismatic main settlement is light on character but has a couple of passable attractions. The **Labuan Museum** (☎ 087-414135; 364 Jln Dewan; admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm) takes a glossy, if slightly superficial, look at the island's history and culture. The most interesting displays are those on the different ethnic groups here, including a diorama of a traditional Chinese tea ceremony (the participants, however, look strangely Western). There's also an excellent diorama of a water village.

On the coast just east of the centre, the Labuan International Sea Sports Complex houses the **Marine Museum** (☎ 087-425927; Jln Tanjung Purun; admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm). It's a decent little museum with a good shell collection and displays of marine life found in the area. Don't forget to head upstairs where you'll find a 42ft-long skeleton of an Indian fin whale. The real highlight, however, and a guaranteed hit with the kids, is the 'touch pool' opposite reception. This has to be the only shark-petting zoo we've ever seen (fret not: the sharks are less than a metre long).

AROUND PULAU LABUAN

Labuan used to be known for its **diving**, with no fewer than four major wrecks off the coast, but the downturn in tourism has caused operators to suspend all activities since 2004. If visitor numbers improve diving may resume; check with **Borneo Divers** (☎ 088-222226; www.borneodivers.info) in KK.

The **WWII Memorial (Labuan War Cemetery)** is an expanse of lawn with row upon row of headstones dedicated to the nearly 4000 Commonwealth servicemen, mostly Australian and British, who lost their lives in Borneo during WWII. The cemetery is near the golf course, about 2km east of town along Jln OKK Abdullah. A **Peace Park** on the west of the island at Layang Layangan commemo-

rates the place of Japanese surrender and has a Japanese war memorial.

Towards the northern tip of the island, **Labuan Bird Park** (☎ 087-463544; admission free) offers refuge to a wide range of species in three geodesic domes, and a swathe of rainforest. Nearby, the **Chimney**, believed to be part of an old coal-mining station (though strangely it was never actually used as a chimney), is the only historical monument of its kind in Malaysia, and has good views along the coast.

Pulau Kuraman, Pulau Rusukan Kecil and Pulau Rusukan Besar are uninhabited islands lying southwest of Labuan that are now protected as the **Labuan marine park**. The beaches are pristine, but dynamite fishing has destroyed much of the coral. You can hire boats from the jetty at the Labuan International Sea Sports Complex to explore the marine park. A day's charter costs around RM400 to RM600 per group of six people.

Sleeping

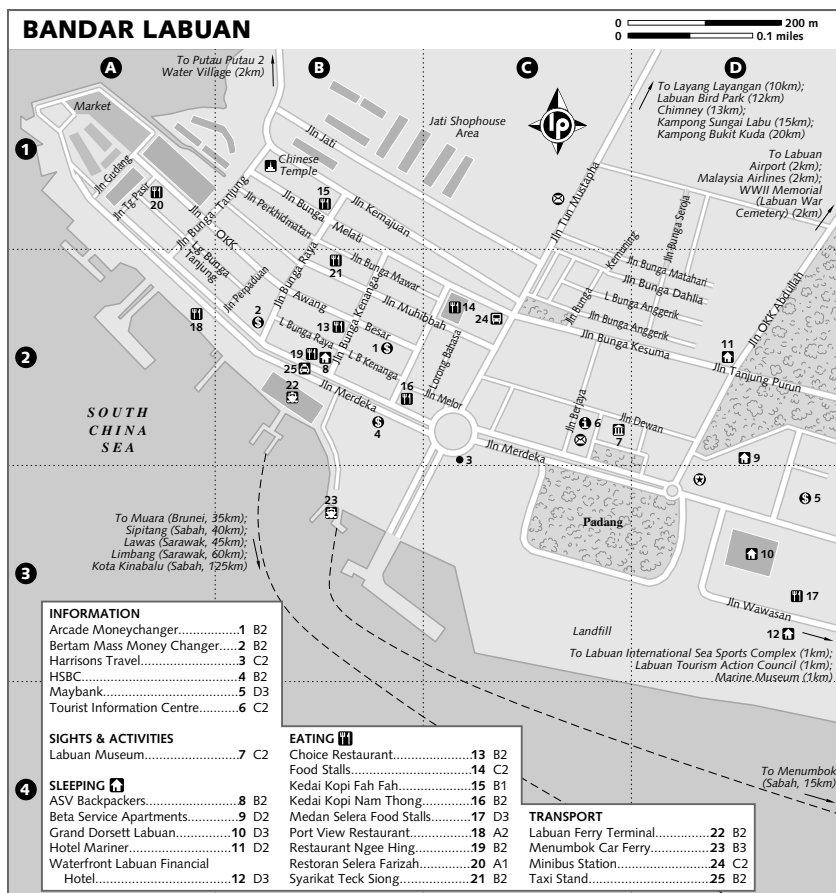
our pick We're stingy with our 'Our Pick' symbols, but **Labuan's Homestay Programme** (☎ 087-422622; www.labuantourism.com; r/2 days incl full board RM65/140) deserves three. This excellent service matches visitors with a friendly local in one of three villages around the island: Patau Patau 2, Kampong Sungai Labu and Kampong Bukit Kuda. Some of the homes are just as grand as one of the international-class hotels on the waterfront! If you want to be near Bandar Labuan, ask for accommodation at Patau Patau 2 – it's a charming stilt village out on the bay. Stay a bit longer and learn how to make *ambuyat*, a Bruneian favourite p584.

A serviced apartment can be a real money saver for families and small groups. **Beta Service Apartment** (☎ 087-453333; johar@fpl.com.my; Financial Park, Jln Merdeka; apt RM155) offers 84 suites, each with a full kitchen.

Note that unlike most urban hotels in Sabah, you must book ahead in Labuan as the city is full of visiting expats in the oil business.

ASV Backpackers (☎ 087-413728; asvjau@yahoo.com; Lot U0101, Jln Merdeka; r with shared bathroom RM28; ☎) We don't know how long this place is going to last, namely because Labuan doesn't have a roaring backpacker scene, but this quiet spot is dirt cheap with the dirt. It's actually better than most of the dingy midrangers around town.

Hotel Mariner (☎ 087-418822; mhlabuan@streamyx.com; 468 Jln Tanjung Purun; r from RM110; ☎) Pitched at the low-end business-class market, this



smart block offers good facilities for the price. Rooms come with fridges, laminate floors and neat, spacious bathrooms.

Waterfront Labuan Financial Hotel (☎ 087-418111; lesbn@tm.net.my; 1 Jln Wawasan; r RM360-580, ste RM580-2150; 🚗 🚶 🚲) Not just for merchant bankers – this is a large, luxurious leisure hotel with full facilities and a small marina attached. The rooms are spacious here and some have great sea views. There's a huge outdoor pool and a restaurant. Wi-fi available. All in all, it's a comfortable place to stay.

Grand Dorsett Labuan (☎ 087-422000; www.dorsett hotels.com; 462 Jln Merdeka; r RM473; 🚗 🚶 🚲) The Grand Dorsett (once a link in the Sheraton chain) has everything you would expect from an international hotel, with five-star rooms,

good restaurants and a pub hosting live bands. Weekend room-only (without breakfast) rates are a fraction of the published prices.

Eating

Kedai Kopi Fah Fah (cfr Jln Bunga Raya & Jln Bunga Melati; meals RM3-10; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) With indoor and outdoor seating, an English menu, tasty fresh juice and cheap beer, this simple Chinese restaurant is a good choice. We particularly liked their *kway teow goreng* (fried flat rice noodles).

Other Chinese *kedai kopi* to choose from in town include **Kedai Kopi Nam Thong** (Jln Merdeka; meals from RM3; 🍳 breakfast & lunch), which has chicken rice and fried noodle stalls, and **Restaurant Ngee Hing** (Jln Merdeka; meals from RM3;

☺ breakfast & lunch), which has a stall that does a good bowl of laksa (it's directly opposite the ferry terminal and serves as a good place to wait for a ferry). If you prefer a Muslim *kedai kopi*, you could try **Restoran Selera Farizah** (Lg Bunga Tanjung; meals from RM3; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner), which serves roti, curries, *nasi campur*, accompanied by the inevitable pro-wrestling videos.

Choice Restaurant (☎ 087-418086; 104 Jln OKK Awang Besar; dishes RM1.20-10; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Forget false modesty, the Choice simply proclaims 'We are the best', and this seems to be corroborated by the popularity of the authentic Indian meals with the authentic Indian residents who turn out for roti, fish-head curry and *sambal*.

Port View Restaurant (☎ 087-422999; Jln Merdeka; dishes RM15-30; ☺ lunch & dinner) An outpost of the successful Chinese seafood franchise in KK, this waterfront restaurant has air-con indoor seating and outdoor seating that affords a nice view over Labuan's busy harbour. It's one of the few proper sit-down restaurants in town (that is, something nicer than a *kedai kopi*). We liked the baby *kailan* (Chinese vegetable) with crab sauce and butter prawns, which had the unusual addition of sesame to the sauce. Beware of a secret hidden charge in the form of 'special napkin' (tell them at the outset that you don't need it). Service can be a little slow and erratic.

In addition, you'll find outdoor **food stalls** at the east end of Jln Bunga Mawar and in the **Medan Selera Complex** near the Grand Dorsett. Self-caterers can do their grocery shopping at **Syarikat Teck Siong** (Jln Bunga Mawar).

Getting There & Away

Malaysia Airlines (☎ 1300-883000; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my; airport) has flights to/from KK (45 min-

utes) and KL (2½ hours), which are usually booked full of oil prospectors.

Passenger ferries (1st/economy class RM39/31, 3¼ hours) depart KK for Labuan from Monday to Saturday at 8am and 1.30pm. On Sunday they sail at 8am and 3pm. In the opposite direction, they depart Labuan for KK from Monday to Saturday at 8am and 1pm, while on Sunday they depart at 10.30am and 3pm. Note that the air-con on these ferries is always turned up to 'arctic' – bring a fleece.

Numerous express boats go to Muara port in Brunei daily (1st/economy class RM40/35, one hour) between 9am and 4.30pm, returning between 7.30am and 3.30pm. From Brunei the cost is B\$18/15 for 1st/economy class, with six departures between 7.30am and 4.40pm.

There are also daily speedboats from Labuan to Limbang in Sarawak (RM28, 2.30pm, two hours) and Lawas, also in Sarawak (RM33, 12.30pm, two hours). There are also daily speedboats to Sipitang (RM25, 40 minutes).

Car ferries go to Menumbok (passenger/car RM5/40, two hours, three times daily) from a separate dock to the east. Speedboats (RM10) do the journey in about 30 minutes and leave roughly every hour between 8am and 4pm.

Getting Around

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

Taxis are plentiful and there's a stand opposite the local ferry terminal. The base rate is RM6.60 for short journeys, or RM10 to the airport.

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