

WILDERNESS OF SABAH

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Sabah is a land of natural riches. Flooded plains of lowland jungles are inhabited by exotic wildcats, Proboscis Monkeys swing through the branches of coastal mangroves and the white sands of small islands are graced by migratory turtles. And if you think the wildlife are having a great time, just wait and see what's in store for adventure seekers.

Kota Kinabalu is the capital of Sabah, and it is from here that most adventures in Borneo begin by acclimating to the weather and culture. You don't have to get far out of town before you're in the jungles of Borneo, and the Tambunan Rafflesia Reserve, about 60kms away by road, is the perfect place to begin exploring.

Rafflesia spotting sounds like a pretty simple caper at first. You take a local bus into the mountains and enjoy a stroll through the vines and leaches until you hit upon the exquisitely unique Rafflesia bloom. They may be one of the largest flowers in the world, but they are also one of the rarest.

The Rafflesia flower is little more than the out-turned surface of a pot of nectar, designed to lure insects to their sticky death with a scent often compared to rotting flesh. The brightly coloured red and orange petals provide further enticement to its unsuspecting victims, signposting the way to the fatally-sweet treasures within.

Once you're on the trail of the Rafflesia you really feel like you've arrived in Borneo. Surrounded by lush tropical forest all you can hear is the sound of birds clacking and calling in the tree-tops and a background buzz of insects. Humidity builds up during the day and every afternoon the clouds threaten rain. When it does fall you can hear it before it lands, the drops splashing into the canopy of leaves high above.

This is Borneo as I imagined it to be, a remote jungle track that Sir David Attenborough himself might have wandered in search of the very same botanical specimen.

Having conquered the jungle, the next goal is to conquer the mountain. Mt Kinabalu stands over 4000metres tall, the hike from park headquarters to summit covering 8 kilometres in distance but rising 2 kilometres in height. The steamy tropics at the base of the mountain contrast with the sub-zero temperatures experienced on the peak at sunrise. Mt Kinabalu is one of the world's great hill-climbs.

The path is steep. In places the track is replaced with steps made from timber or stones, weaving through trees and past waterfalls. Fitness is not a major obstacle provided you allow yourself time and plenty of rest stops to enjoy the orchids, pitcher plants and other flora.

For the guides and porters, however, getting to the top quickly is a matter of pride. It's like an expressway at times as these lean and keen fellows race past you, carrying half a fridge on their backs. When you catch up with the porters at Laban Rata Guest House, the base-camp at 3300metres, you realise why there's so much local traffic – everything you'll need for a night's sleep and a hot meal has been carried up the hill, including the guest house itself.

Things wind down in Laban Rata pretty early, partly due to physical exhaustion but mostly because everyone will be woken up at 2:30am to being the final assault. It's go hard or go home when you tackle Mt Kinabalu and the goal is to be on the top when dawn breaks. In total darkness a sleepy conga-line of adventurers shuffle upwards with the help of torches, gloves and very warm jackets.

The path ahead is mostly across bare exposed rock, and ropes have been fastened to the surface with steel posts to provide direction and support as you ascend. When you do reach the top it is eerily still. The dawn has yet to break and even the slightest of breeze is chillingly cold. Finally the sun peaks above the horizon, unveiling the view across the valley and bringing a little warmth to your face.

When it's time to descend the progress is much quicker, with the added bonus of a hot breakfast back at the guest house.

With the mountain behind you the floodplains of Sabah are next on the list. The Kinabatangan River brings travellers into close contact with

endemic species of birds, wildcats and elephants. Small boats are not only the best way to enjoy wildlife safaris in the lowland jungles, but the only way to reach the best campsites when the river is high.

With the help of a mosquito net and timber huts you can enjoy an overnight adventure on an oxbow island – just you, a few friends and a random assortment of animals. The essence of any good adventure is the probability of the unexpected and the potential for loss. Waking up in the morning to find your food supplies have been mauled by curious civets is exactly the sort of adventure you can expect from the Kinabatangan.

Orang-Utans and Proboscis Monkeys are occasionally seen when visiting remote jungles, but the best opportunities to view them in a natural habitat are the protective reserves. Sepilok's Orang-Utan Rehabilitation Centre and Sandakan's Proboscis Monkey Sanctuary offer excellent facilities which ensure a chance to view these fascinating creatures without disturbing their sanctuary.

It's little wonder that the Orang-Utans get all the attention, with their flashy red coats, big bright eyes and smiling faces. If the Orang-Utan is the "Wild Man of Borneo" then the Proboscis Monkey is the "Funny Man of Borneo" - their rubbery-looking noses and golden hair resemble some crazy uncle from the side of your family that no-one ever talks about.

Sandakan offers more than monkeys and mangroves, it is also the stopping off point for the Turtle Islands. These minor land masses off the coast are visited year-round by Greenback and Hawksbill Turtles, and a dedicated system of conservation has been established on the islands to improve the survival of the species.

Visitors to the main island of Pulau Selingan can enjoy the white sands and clear waters during the day, but once darkness has fallen guests are confined to the headquarters to await the turtles, and learn a little about their ecology. There is no certainty as to when the turtles will come ashore, but once the egg-laying has begun small groups of visitors are guided to the landing sites to observe the phenomenon.

If you want to hold a Greenback Turtle in your hand it's better to visit the hatchery than tackle a fully-grown adult. It takes seven weeks for the eggs to incubate, and every night guests can participate in releasing a new-born life into the ocean. With the help of tiny flippers the pint-sized Greenbacks head into the ocean, using the moon as their guide.

Swimming with the turtles is also an option when you head further south to Pulau Sipadan. This remarkable palm fringed island lies in the centre of the world's richest marine habitat. The shallow waters surrounding Sipadan extend for just a few metres before the continental shelf yields a dramatic 800metre drop-off.

It's an underwater playground for turtles that swoop along the limestone-edge before diving into the deep water and out of sight.

Experienced scuba divers can find themselves surrounded by schools of Barracuda, the occasional Leopard Shark and the majestic Eagle Ray. The reef gardens are no less impressive, adding to the reputation Sipadan has earned as one of the top dive sites in the world.

When the diving is over for the day you can relax under the shade of a thatched roof, either on Sipadan itself or the nearby islands of Kapalai or Mabul. This might be one of the most remote adventures in Sabah, but that doesn't mean you can't order a Pimms and Lemonade as you watch the sunset and reflect on this beautiful corner of Borneo.

