

Borneo to be wild

There are wild times on the trail of the orang-utan in Borneo. **Ewen Bell** suggests where to start

GRACEFUL is not a word to describe orang-utans. They are more like larrikins. You don't get nicknamed the Wild Man of Borneo just for eating bananas, and in the jungles of the Malaysian state of Sabah these apes definitely are still wild.

I don't deny their skill and ability when it comes to climbing trees and swinging from the tips of branches, but their social manners unwind like a comedy routine. Such attention-seeking behaviour would have a child sent to bed without dinner.

Part of the fascination in observing their wild antics is the wonder they don't hurt themselves.

Every so often amid the screams and bravado a young male misjudges his swing and goes tumbling down the tree. Aside from intense embarrassment, rarely is any harm done.

Encountering wild animals makes your heart race. The unpredictability of orang-utans is intensified when no zookeeper or fence is there to help manage the situation.

The apes may be building a nest in the treetops, foraging for fruit among the branches or just goofing around and shaking up the neighbourhood.

Wilderness escapes in Borneo not only give travellers the thrill of being charmed by orang-utans, they help protect the animals and their habitat.

Feeding time at the sanctuaries may seem like a sideshow at first, but even these frenzied photo opportunities are a step along the path that leads back to the forest.

The behind-the-scenes welfare work to rehabilitate orang-utans displaced by the destruction of their habitat depends on tourist dollars.

Sepilok Rehabilitation Reserve, Sandakan

THIS rehabilitation centre, 20 minutes out of Sandakan, the second-largest city in Sabah, is the one that started it all.

Aside from the awareness and education value of Sepilok, the main aim is to help orang-utans return to the wild.

The apes are fed twice a day and though they're not camera-shy, they will avoid the rain.

Sepilok has many signs to remind visitors the use of insect repellent is banned. Orang-utans are curious creatures and will steal and investigate anything they can reach, including water bottles. Sometimes they confuse insect spray with a fancy drink and the results can be disastrous.

When feeding time is over there are optional treks around the sanctuary on which you can encounter playful orang-utans without the crowds.

www.sabahtourism.com

Borneo Rainforest Lodge

DEEP in the jungle of the Danum Valley, 70km west of the city of Lahad Datu, this lodge runs a comprehensive program of guided tours and wildlife spotting.

Once you've survived the three-hour drive into the forest, your lodge provides a comfortable base from which to explore the rainforest and look for orang-utans.

Danum Valley is famous for its huge old trees and all the creatures that call them home.

A stunning canopy walk takes you

THE DEAL



→ **Getting there:** Malaysian Airlines has daily flights Melbourne-Kuala Lumpur with connecting flights to most cities in Sabah. Fares from about \$1400. Ph: 13 31 33 or www.flightcentre.com.au Air Asia flies between Kuala Lumpur and many cities in Sabah several times a day. www.airasia.com

→ **More information:** www.sabahtourism.com

high above the forest floor to experience life from a monkey's perspective.

The orang-utans of Danum Valley are totally wild and there is no certainty you will see them.

If you do chance upon a family in the trees you might see them foraging for food, squabbling with their siblings or engaged in the daily ritual of building a treetop nest from leaves and branches.

A three-night package costs \$1150 and includes several excursions deeper into the jungle, all meals during your stay, and transfers from Lahad Datu.

www.borneorainforestlodge.com

Rasa Ria Resort, Kota Kinabalu

LESS than an hour from Kota Kinabalu is five-star luxury at the Shangri-La Rasa Ria Resort with secluded beachfront access, authentic Malaysian dining and a nature reserve for orphan orang-utans.

The resort is committed to financially supporting the orang-utans, not to mention hosting a steady stream of visitors.

Feeding times are twice a day and visitor numbers are strictly limited, so be sure to book your place when you book your room.

This popular beach break is a winner with families — you can bring the children face to face with the orang-utans in the jungle without having to rough it.

If you're not travelling with children, mix romance and wildlife with a three-night package at Rasa Ria that includes breakfast, transfers, chocolates and champagne for \$980 a room.

www.shangri-la.com/en/property/kotakinabalu/rasariaresort

The author travelled courtesy of Sabah Tourism



In the swing: displaced orang-utans learn to return to the wild at Sepilok Rehabilitation Reserve in Sabah.



Canopy capers: an orang-utan viewing post at Danum Valley, deep in the jungle.