

Going ape in Borneo



Observing orangutans at a wildlife sanctuary reminds us it is possible to protect endangered species

BY NANCY WIGSTON

When we tell friends we're travelling to Borneo—the large Southeast Asian island divided among the countries of Brunei, Malaysia and Indonesia—inevitably there are questions. Is it dangerous? Are there headhunters? No and no. We're going to visit Canadian friends who run a sustainable tourism business, and we want to see the legendary red-haired apes, the orangutans.

Kuching (Cat City)

Travelling to the Malaysian state of Sarawak, our first discovery is its riverside capital, Kuching—a place that just about defines serenity. “Kuching” means “cat,” and the city has happily adopted the domestic feline as its mascot. Besides a large cat statue whose clothes change according to seasonal holidays, Kuching has a cat museum and a cat-themed boutique at its gleaming new airport.

We wander Kuching's riverside promenade, gaze into charming old shops at the Main Bazaar and hop aboard a ferry to a sleepy village on the opposite shore, where multi-striped cakes are a specialty. Only the noonday heat seems dangerous.

An abundance of fresh and inexpensive foods are found at Kuching's hawker stalls and fine restaurants. At popular #27 Seafood, our lavish meal for four costs \$12. At more stylish spots, such as Secret Recipe, we enjoy seductive red velvet cake, durian cheesecake, cool drinks and blessed air-conditioning. Livable and walkable, Kuching seems like an idealized, tropical version of home.

Among the local sights, the Sarawak Museum, founded in 1891, is a must-see. Its ground floor is devoted to natural and political history, while

its second floor showcases the culture and artefacts of Borneo's indigenous peoples.

Mesmerized by the displays on native wildlife, we pause to regard the scary-sounding “flying snake” and an astonishing variety of pythons. Perhaps the most arresting ground-floor display is the giant hairball that was removed from a killer crocodile's intestines, complete with a human victim's dental plate.

Upstairs, in a meticulous replica of a native Iban longhouse, human skulls are attached to the interior roof. Upon seeing the skulls during a visit in 1972, a startled Queen Elizabeth asked, “Does any of this still go on?” (No—the practice of “headhunting” ended during colonial times in the 19th century, though some instances have been documented during episodes of ethnic violence in recent decades.)

Among the most treasured indigenous skills is textile weaving, and a visit to the Sarawak Textile Museum is another delight. The exhibition explains the entire process of making a textile, from raw material to the weaving stage, and visitors can even test their skills on the loom.

Orangutans

Less than 20 kilometres from Kuching's feline charms is the Semenggoh Wildlife Centre, established in 1975, where rehabilitated wildlife—most famously orangutans—is protected and studied in a rainforest setting. We number among 20-odd visitors this steamy morning, hoping to see these intelligent, red-haired apes.

In this forest preserve, with trees several storeys tall, the apes build their nests each night, far above the ground. At a viewing platform, we are rewarded with the sight of an adult male swinging from branch to branch—his arms

as long as two metres from fingertip to fingertip, his weight perhaps 118 kilograms.

In the Malay language, orangutan translates as “person of the forest.” Wild orangutans now number about 20,000 in Sarawak, but remain at serious risk from habitat destruction, the illegal pet trade and occasional annoyance among local humans over the orangutans' large appetites. At the feeding station, an affectionate 42-year-old orangutan mother and her five-year-old son feast on bananas and jackfruit that park caregivers have provided. Before the tourists' cameras click—flashes are banned—we are cautioned: “These are wild animals. Don't touch. Keep your distance.”

Semenggoh is a success story. Its rescue and rehabilitation of nearly 1,000 endangered mammals, birds and reptiles that were orphaned, kept as illegal pets or threatened by habitat loss has meant that the surrounding protected forest has reached carrying capacity. The apes we see are semi-wild—they return for helpings of a fruit-heavy diet, and in turn their biology and behaviour are studied. Now the main rehabilitation programs have been transferred to Matang Wildlife Centre in Kubah National Park.

Sustainable tourism

Not only does development adversely affect apes and other wildlife, it can also threaten traditional ways of life. Longhouses (connected apartments with “hallways” in common) can be home to as many as 200 separate families who trade in carvings and textiles, and farm rice and fruit. Can the old ways be profitable? Sustainable tourism may be the solution.

Our friend, Philip Yong of Borneo Adventure, remains hopeful about tourism's potential in the area. The longtime Toronto resident has family



In Malaysia's Sarawak state, the Semenggoh Wildlife Centre features famed—and protected—primates (top), while the nearby city of Kuching (translated literally as “cat”) celebrates its namesake at every corner.

roots in Kuching, and with Canadian co-founder Robert Basiuk, began Borneo Adventure in 1987. They worked at creating genuine interactions with upriver peoples; the result has been an ongoing and successful partnership with an Iban community in Ulu Ai, one of Sarawak's most pristine areas. Its clear rivers and abundant forest cover are also a known orangutan habitat.

With Borneo Adventure, small groups of two to four people travel with respect for people, wildlife and nature alike. Newly built lodges mean tourists can stay in the area without disrupting traditional longhouse life. Sustainable tourism companies rejoice when more land is protected, as occurred last year when the local government committed itself to protecting a population of about 200 orangutans living in an area spanning about 14,000 hectares near Sarawak's Batang Ai National Park.

Committed to maintaining the delicate balance between outsiders and those whose lives they affect, outfitters such as Borneo Adventure have proven it's in everyone's interest to protect the land, its people and its creatures. In Sarawak, hard work and optimism may just save the day. **MP**