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Borneo – Sandakan Wildlife Search

By Walter Rajah

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Sandakan is situated on the East Coast of Sabah, Malaysian Borneo. On its West is the interior mountain range and on the East is the Sulu Sea. Sandakan is definitely a dream location for travelers interested in wildlife and nature. Our Sandakan Wildlife Expedition brings you closer to three of the worlds most exciting conservation programmes: Turtle Conservation on the Turtle Island Parks, Orang Utan Rehabilitation Center in Sepilok and the Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary. In addition, this expedition takes you to Gomantong Caves where the largest collection of edible birds' nest is found.

Turtle Island Park

The Turtle Island Park, lying some 40Km north of Sandakan and close to the Philippines border, comprises of a group of three beautiful tropical islands – Pulau Selingan, Pulau Bakungan Kecil and Pulau Gulisan. The total park covers an area of 1,740 hectares embracing not only the three islands but also the surrounding coral reefs and the sea. Pulau Selingan and Pulau Bakungan Kecil seem to attract the Green Turtles to come and nest here while the Hawksbill Turtles prefer Pulau Gulisan. No obvious reasons can be found for these turtles' choice of nesting areas. The Green and Hawksbill Turtles come ashore to nest all year round but the best time to visit is between July to October because more turtles come to lay their eggs during this period. However, at least a few turtles do come up to nest every night of the year.

Turtles normally arrive on the islands after dusk. While waiting for the sun to set and the arrival of these turtles, there are many activities that you can explore. The tropical white sandy beaches are ideal for relaxing and tanning whilst the crystal clear water is fantastic if you fancy snorkeling or watching the beautiful sea lives and corals. The park is also a great spot for a BBQ picnic under the long hours of golden sunshine. You can also wander around the island to witness how many turtles have arrived in the island the previous few nights as these turtles leave their marks on the sand.

The Park Rangers will inform you after the first sighting of incoming turtles. You will be escorted to the nesting turtle by the rangers to watch the eggs being laid. Clutches of freshly laid eggs are then excavated and transplanted to the protected turtle hatchery, with minimum delay, to ensure that other wild predators, mainly monitor lizards, do not eat or destroy them. After a period of incubation, the eggs

will hatch and the hatchlings will be released to the sea. The release of hatchlings is normally done early morning or night and are released at various locations on the islands again to avoid wild predators. When the hatchlings are released on the shore, they scatter in all directions and instinctively head for the sea. Once they enter the water, they are washed ashore by the incoming waves, but after a few attempts they swim strongly out to the sea. The hope is for these hatchlings to survive the rough sea and to one day return to the Turtle Island Parks.

Sepilok Orang Utan Rehabilitation Centre

The most popular native of Borneo is the Orang Utan; one of nature's most endangered animals. Located 25Km from Sandakan is the world-famous Sepilok Rehabilitation Centre which has been around since 1964. Set in 43 square km of protected and beautiful rainforest at the edge of Kabili Sepilok Forest Reserve, the sanctuary helps once captive Orang Utans learn to fend for themselves in

the wild. This sanctuary also enables you to come in close contact with these amazing animals and witness an exciting conservation programme in action. However, you are restricted to walkways and are not allowed to touch these animals in order to protect them from any diseases. The centre also provides medical care for orphaned and confiscated Orang Utans as well other wildlife such as Gibbons, Sumatran Rhinos and Elephants.

In their natural settings, Orang Utan babies stay with their mothers for a period of six years while they are taught the skills needed to survive in the wild, with climbing as the most important skill. At this centre, these babies are paired up with older Orang Utans to learn these essential skills. Meal times are the highlights to both the Orang Utans and visitors to the centre. There are two feeding times each day. This is when about 60 semi-wild Orang Utans swing from their jungle habitat on to the feeding platforms for their daily meals of milk and bananas. Once there is no food left, these animals zip back into the jungle but occasionally some will come back to pose for the last remaining visitors.

There is an Information Nature Education Centre and a mini-theatre within the sanctuary where you can watch a documentary video on the work of the Sepilok Orang Utan Rehabilitation Centre.

Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary

The Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary lies within the massive floodplain of the lower Kinabatangan River. The sanctuary covers an area of 27,000 hectares and is one of the richest eco-systems on earth. This area is a must visit for any nature lover wanting a taste of an incredible nature experience. These floodplain forests develop as the river meets the lowland. Common features of the floodplain forests are ox-bow lakes, freshwater swamp rainforests and limestone hills.

These wetlands around the lower Kinabatangan link aquatic and terrestrial habitats and help regulate water quality and quantity, as well as maintain the ecosystem's ecological functions, forming a sanctuary for a rich and diverse fauna and flora. It has the highest density and diversity of wildlife in Malaysia. It is also one of only two known places on Earth where ten primate species, including the endangered proboscis monkeys (endemic to Borneo Island), orang utans and Sumatran Rhino. In addition, the rich sanctuary is also home to 200 species of bird as well as 50 mammal species.

The best way for you to view the wildlife and tropical wilderness of this area is by taking an early

morning or an evening river cruise along the Kinabatangan River and also a cruise to the ox–bow lakes. See also the colourful local villagers living along the river on stilt houses. You can stay at the excellent Sukau River Lodge, which is erected from local materials consisting of wooden huts built on stilts.

Gomantong Caves

The Gomantong Caves, located in limestone hills around the lower Kinabatangan River, have been popular for their edible birds' nests for centuries. These nests are known for their medicinal values amongst the local Chinese community and are collected by using local materials of rattans and bamboo to make ladders that hang over 100 feet above the cave floor.

Once these nests are collected, they are soaked in water where all the mud and feathers are removed leaving clear birds nest which can be sold to the local Chinese community or exported around the world. The collectors of these nests can earn a very high amount of money and consequently, the collecting of nests is tightly controlled by a licensing system.

Walter Rajah is owner of Exploration Borneo Tours. Visit his site at <http://www.explorationborneo.com> for more information and images of Borneo – The Exotic Island Paradise. Check out all the travel packages to Borneo and subscribe to EBT Travel Newsletter for the latest events, travel news, Borneo articles and cheap deals

Borneo – Exotic Island Paradise

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SABAH is Malaysia's premier nature adventure destination situated in the northern tip of Borneo Island, the third largest island in the world. Sabah is popular for its wildlife conservation attractions, rain forest, surrounding nature and islands, beach resorts, tropical white sandy beaches, crystal clear water, and its warm and friendly people. If you are thinking of visiting Borneo, these places of interest and activities will whet your appetite!

Mount Kinabalu

Let me begin with my favorite place and definitely not to be missed if you are visiting Borneo, Mt. Kinabalu (4,093m). It is the summit of Borneo and the tallest mountain in South East Asia. This mountain is sacred to the locals. Thousands from around the world have trekked to its peak. At the feet of this mountain is Kinabalu National Park, a botanical paradise where rare plants are found: rare orchids, nepenthes pitcher plants and the rafflesia, the largest flower in the world.

Sepilok Orang Utan Rehabilitation Centre

If you havent heard yet, the most popular native of Borneo is the Orang Utan. The world–famous Sepilok Rehabilitation Centre enables visitors to come in close contact with these amazing animals. This sanctuary allows visitors to witness an exciting conservation programme in action. Set in 43 square km of beautiful rainforest, the sanctuary helps once captive Orang Utans learn to fend for

themselves in the wild. Watch how these orphaned Orang Utans being taught to climb, and then go to a platform where you can witness them coming in from within the forest for their daily meals of milk and bananas.

Danum Valley Rain Forest

If nature is close to your heart, then this next destination I am going to introduce you is a must visit, Danum Valley. Danum Valley is nestled deep in the rain forest of Borneo where nature is at its most pristine. As you travel deeper and deeper into the jungle, you will suddenly come across a magical paradise of the Borneo Rainforest Lodge (BRL), erected overlooking the magnificent setting of the Segama River and flanked by tall hill ranges. BRL is an impressive resort, designed by naturalists and built on stilts using traditional timber materials, and has the comfort of a 3–Star Hotel. I totally recommend Danum Valley to those who yearn to see wildlife in a primeval Borneo rainforest – the rare Sumatran rhino, proboscis monkeys, Orang Utan, elephants and over 275 species of birds.

Tunku Abdul Rahman Island Park

When you think you have enough of sightseeing and you want to take a days break idling around to charge your energy, then I suggest you take a 30–minute boat trip to Tunku Abdul Rahman Park. The park is made up of five beautiful islands and is a well–known sanctuary where peace and tranquility prevails. The tropical white sandy beaches are ideal for relaxing and tanning. The crystal clear water

is fantastic if you fancy snorkeling or watching the sea lives and corals. The park is also a great spot for a BBQ picnic under the long hours of golden sunshine. Other activities include windsurfing, fishing, parasailing, kayaking and bird watching.

Golfing Holidays

If golf is your sport, then try the numerous high quality golf courses in Sabah. One of the courses as described by its designer – I had to create a masterpiece by combining the natural splendor of the mountains and the seas, with ingenious architecture, and create a first class championship course to provide an enjoyable, yet challenging game for top professional golfers and amateurs alike" – Graham Marsh. Enough words said for the quality of golf courses here.

White–Water Rafting

For the true adventure seeker looking for an adrenaline–pumping activity, Sabah offers some of the most exhilarating thrills in the world. My scariest experience, only because I am not a good swimmer, is white–water rafting down the Padas River (a grade–3 river). Whilst trying to negotiate the rapids along this raging river for a distance of about 5 kilometers, do enjoy the breathtaking view that the surrounding rain forest does offer. However, be warned, dont take your eyes off the rapids and waves too long!

Scuba Diving

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Off the North Eastern coast of Borneo lies a tiny jewel of an island, Sipadan, with a marine ecosystem so perfect and unique that it is world renowned as one of the best dive spots in the world. Sipadan Island rises as a pristine Coral Sea mount, 650 meters from the floor of the Sulawesi Sea. This pinnacle off the eastern coast of Borneo is an oceanic magnet for marine life. As soon as you enter the crystal clear waters of Sipadan Island, you'll understand why you have endured a journey that has taken you halfway around the world. As you begin to descend into this tropical water, you'll also understand why the World Wildlife Fund says, "No other spot on the planet has more marine life than this island."

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