

BRUNEI ASIA'S TINY PARADISE

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Photos by Dominick A. Merle

BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN, BRUNEI



Brunei's modern capital

Imagine a tiny kingdom where the people's only complaint is that life is too easy.

No taxes whatsoever...zero unemployment...free medical and schooling...subsidized housing...a

crime rate so low that a stolen car is a serious news event...sunshine year round...and would you believe gasoline cheaper than water?

No wonder nobody gets nervous

here!

Welcome to the oil-rich Kingdom of Brunei, population under 400,000, at the northern tip of the sprawling island of Borneo on the South China Sea. Check your worries at the door.

«Sometimes I think the government treats us too good,» said Lia, a chambermaid at the Empire Hotel & Country Club in the low-rise capital city of Bandar Seri Begawan, the government being the current Sultan Hassanal

Bolkiah, off-and-on regarded as the richest man in the world.

«We love His Majesty, but maybe he spoils us a little.»

This refrain was told to me numerous times during my two-week stay in Brunei. Usually, whenever things seem too perfect, if you dig deep enough you'll uncover a few «Yes, but» responses. That did not happen.

In fact, aside from being «spoiled,» the consensus was that the government is often too quick to

Floating furniture delivery in the jungle



Brunei's royal mosque



lend a hand. A 20-something young man working in guest relations at a nearby hotel told me he had applied for subsidized housing and hoped it wasn't approved too soon because he was still looking for a bride.

How rich is Brunei? Let's start with the current Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, the 29th of an unbroken line of rulers dating back some 600 years. He reputedly owns or has owned some 6000 luxury autos including 500 Rolls Royces.

Once he leaves the ground has his choice of a Boeing 747 with gold-plated furniture, six smaller planes and two helicopters.

Yet, he often shows up being driven around his kingdom in a customized golf cart, casually asking people along the way, basically, «How am I doing?»

And if the oil bubble should suddenly burst? «His Majesty will find another solution,» was the common answer.

And how much are the rulers

adored? A few Sultans back, an artist was commissioned to design a new crown, with the explicit stipulation that he be sequestered during his work and executed upon completion to insure there would be no duplicate crown.

He accepted the commission with honor, created a beautiful crown and went to his death a hero. «Many of us would gladly do the same thing,» said our city tour guide, Up who related the incident. About the size of Delaware, Brunei is roughly 75 percent jungle and rainforest. One can literally walk from the capital of Bandar Seri Begawan into the jungle in less than 30 minutes. The backyard of

many homes is the jungle.

Bandar Seri Begawan is a spotless, modern, low-rise city and home to about 70 percent of Bruneians. There are a dozen or so major hotels, about 25 taxis and a car for every two residents (why not, given the price of gas?).

The sale of alcohol is prohibited throughout the kingdom but visitors are allowed to bring in limited amounts for personal consumption in the privacy of their rooms. A typical night on the town might include going to a restaurant, a movie, shopping or bowling, a particularly popular pastime.

Key attractions on the city tour include the famed Kampong Ayer,



Longboat in rainforest



Gelato girls in Brunei shopping mall

a cluster of water villages on stilts stretching across almost 10 kilometers along the Brunei River. The villages are connected by a complex web of walkways and bridges.

Brunei's civilization began here with fishing the chief livelihood, along with skilled craftsmen selling handicrafts. Today, there are more than 30,000 residents on Kampong Ayer, most travelling to their city jobs by small boats.

Dominating the city's landscape is the dazzling Sultan Omar Ali

Saifuddin Mosque with its main dome carved in pure gold. It is one of the most spectacular mosques in the Asia Pacific.

A drive into the suburban jungle area would take you past several «longhouses» where members of the legendary Iban and Dayak tribes---once the fiercest headhunters in Borneo---still live in partitioned sleeping areas.

There are often more than 20 families sharing the same longhouse. But today they earn their living primarily by farming,



Making a «sticks & stones» lunch table in the jungle



The Empire Resort in early morning

selling of handicrafts and putting on cultural shows for the tourists.

However, some age-old rules have survived. An item in the newspaper the next day told of a native court fining a man and a woman four buffaloes, a pig and \$500 in cash because it was perceived they were cheating on their respective spouses.

Although occupying less than one percent of Borneo's land area, Brunei is the only sovereign nation on the island, and by far the wealthiest. Borneo, third largest island in the world, is also shared by the Indonesian province of Kalimantan and the Malaysian

states of Sabah and Sarawak with the jungle areas intertwined.

Getting to this part of the world is not easy. There are no nonstop flights to Brunei from North America. From my home city of Montreal to Bandar Seri Begawan required roughly 36 hours each way including stopovers.

An international tourism show known as the Asean Tourism Forum was taking place in Brunei during my stay and the city was alive with visiting delegates and invited guest celebrities, including the current Miss World, Kaiane Aldorino of Gibraltar.

She routinely drew a crowd of

polite but curious Bruneians who first asked permission to take her photo, rather than simply shoot paparazzi style.

This is typical of Bruneians, we were told. Michael Jackson lived in Brunei for a short time after his sensational sex trial in California a few years ago. One of the Brunei princes was a fan of the late pop star and offered him use of one of

the many castles scattered throughout the kingdom.

«We would see Michael Jackson riding around in one of the royal golf carts,» said our city guide, Up. «We'd wave at him and he'd wave back. That was it. That's the way we are.»

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Veggie lady taking a break



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IF YOU GO:

No visas are required for North Americans for stays of 14 to 90 day.

We flew Philippine Air Lines from Vancouver to Manila, transferring to Royal Brunei Airlines to Brunei. Malay is the official language, but English is widely spoken.

About 75 percent of Bruneians are Muslims, but Christianity and

Buddhism are also practiced.

Lying some 400 kilometers north of the equator, the climate is pleasant with no distinct rainy season.

We stayed at the Empire Resort Hotel (www.theempirehotel.com), and the Rizqun International Hotel (www.rizquninternational.com) in the city, and at the Ulu Ulu resort (www.ululuresort.com) in the jungle.

For further information on Brunei, visit www.bruneitourism.travel