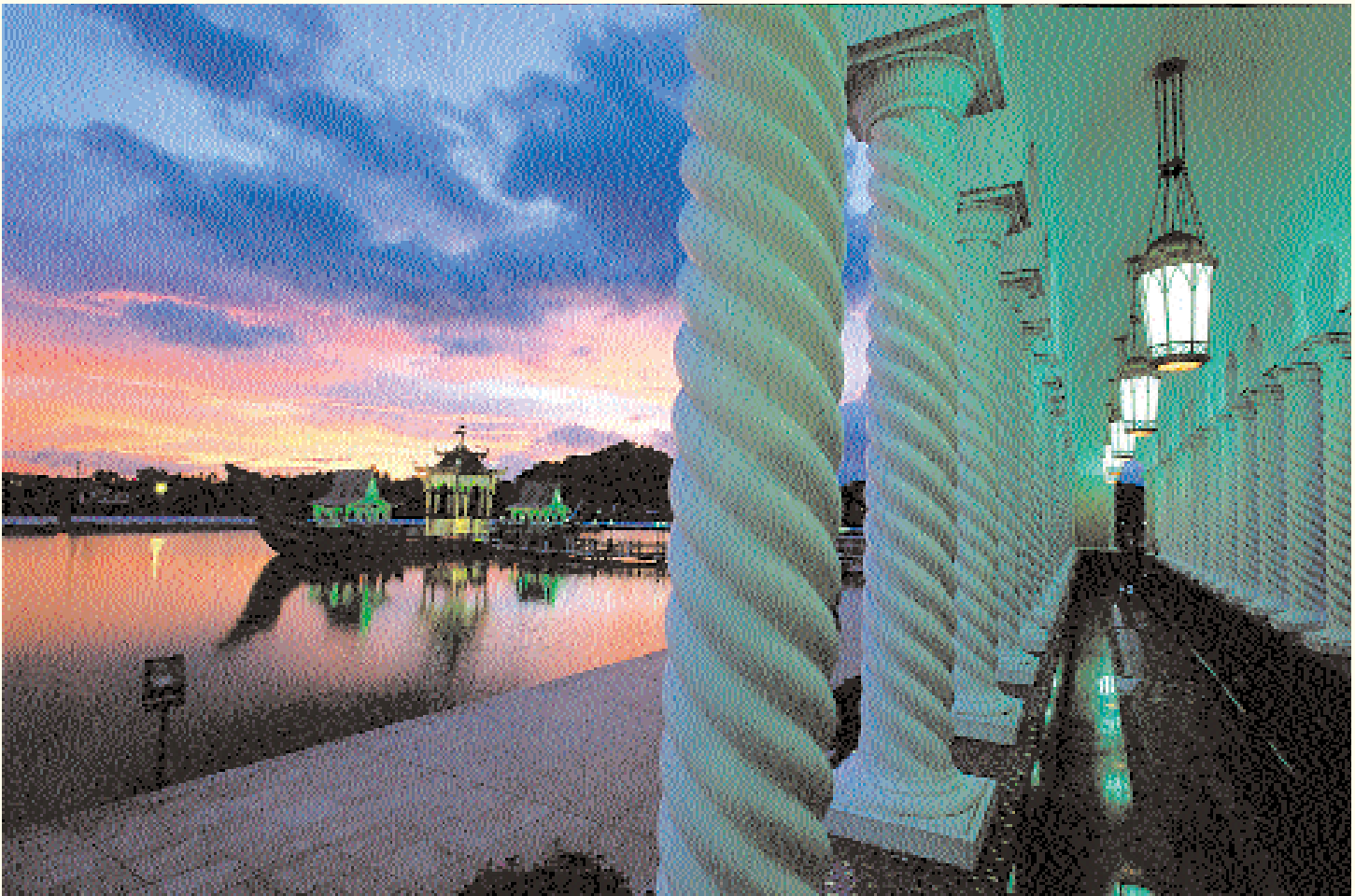


Borneo's Peaceful Kingdom of Unexpected Treasures

Brunei-Islamic Tourism



The oil rich Sultanate of Brunei Darussalam (Brunei, the Abode of Peace) is an aptly named little known gem of a destination, nestled on the northern shores of the huge island of Borneo, which it once ruled along with parts of the southern Philippines.

As a result of numerous colonial intrusions from the Spanish, Dutch and British, present day, independent Brunei now covers only 5,765 km², or less than 1% of Borneo's landmass, and is bordered on all sides by the Malaysian state of Sarawak and the South China Sea.

Fortunately for Brunei, vast reserves of oil and gas have been discovered on and off shore, turning Brunei into one of the world's

wealthiest countries on a per capita basis.

Today, this fairyland kingdom is ruled by Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah, considered the world's wealthiest monarch descendent from an unbroken royal lineage dating back to the early 15th century.

With over two thirds of the population professing the Islamic faith, Brunei is ruled according to the national philosophy of the

Malay Islamic Monarchy, with most people practicing a pious but tolerant form of Islam. Brunei's attractions are found in its natural and cultural assets : the vast stretches of virgin tropical rainforests covering over 70% of the land, and its rich Malay culture, traditions and colorful history dating back centuries and reading like the pages of an adventure epic, replete with tales of ➤

City Tourism

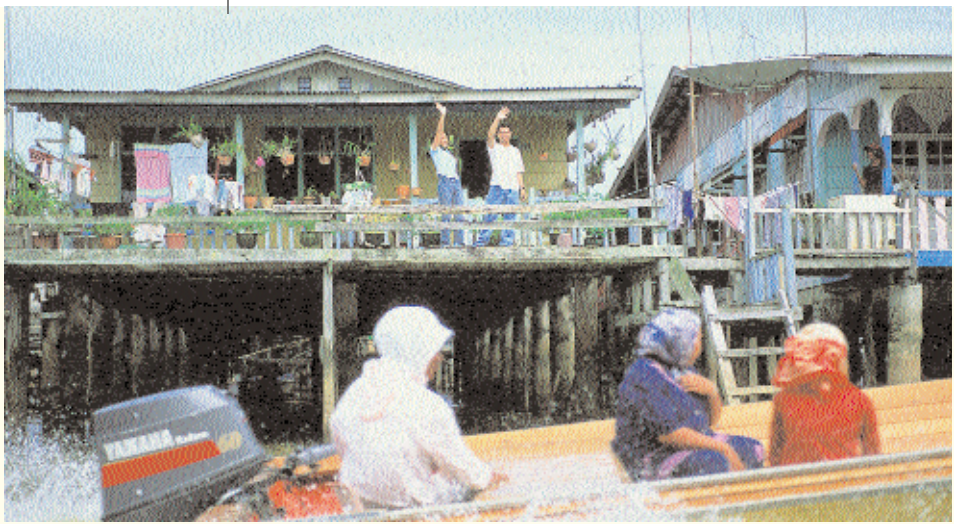
sultans, princesses, pirates, headhunters and swashbuckling European adventurers.

This little slice of paradise is packed with a variety of easy to reach attractions, such as the tiny capital of Bandar Seri Begawan, probably South East Asia's loveliest capital, a green, airy and well maintained garden city free of the crowds, traffic jams, pollution, noise and trepidation found in the region's other capitals. Bandar Seri Begawan, often simply referred to as Bandar or BSB, boasts about the world's largest water village, Kampong Ayer, where some 30 thousand people still live in wooden houses on stilts, linked by water taxis to the mainland and combining an age-old traditional lifestyle with the amenities provided by the modern age and wealth of the country. Overlooking Kampong Ayer is one of the region's architectural wonders, the majestic Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien mosque, built in 1958 by Brunei's previous ruler, a sight to behold, especially at dusk when the fading sunlight plays with the soft toned illuminations of the dome and minarets and the call to prayer reverberates across the water village and downtown area.

Further down by the river is the impressive Istana Nurul Imam - the Sultan's palace and the world's biggest residential palace with 1,788 rooms, complete with horse stables, polo field and a private heliport, which opens to citizens and visitors alike only once a year, during the celebrations marking the end of the fasting month of Ramadan.

In addition, Bandar and its surroundings have a number of interesting museums, including the opulent Royal Regalia Museum, which provides a good insight into the decorum and pomp of Brunei royalty, as well as lively day and night markets, many parks and nature reserves, a seemingly endless supply of restaurants, coffee shops and shopping areas, including many modern shopping complexes and department stores, such as the impressive Yayasan Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah complex in downtown Bandar or the newly opened Mall in the commercial area of Gadong.

Bandar is located in the Brunei - Muara district, the smallest but most populated of Brunei's four districts. Outside Bandar, in the Tutong and Belait districts, but never too far due to the country's small size, a number of



Houses built on shallow water.

بيوت مبنية على الماء الضحل.



There is plenty of amusement for the children.

هناك الكثير من المتعة للأطفال.

interesting natural and cultural attractions can be easily visited on day trips, such as the hauntingly beautiful Merinbun lake, a remote jungle surrounded black water lake that is a heaven of tranquillity and is recognized as an ASEAN national heritage site, or the traditional native longhouses near Labi, as well as the oil producing areas of Kuala Belait and Seria, and the many forest and nature reserves dotted throughout the country.

More serious nature lovers will head across Brunei bay to the district of Temburong, separated from the rest of Brunei by the Limbang Division in Malaysia's state of Sarawak. Temburong is the least populated, hilliest and most jungle covered district in Brunei, home to many native longhouses and to some of Asia's best nature reserves and field study centers, such as the world famous Ulu Temburong National Park and the Kuala Belalong Field Study Center, offering an exciting array of eco-tourism and adventure activities.

Nature lovers will definitely be spoiled in Brunei : pristine rainforests and coral reefs, mangrove covered islands and river banks, easy to visit nature reserves, canopy walkways, an abundance of migratory and native birds, endemic species of plants, insects, micro fauna and mammals, such as the strange looking proboscis monkey, and a rich, abundant, diverse and pristine ecosystem.

Because of its wealth and the religious restrictions on what Muslims can eat, Brunei has not exploited its rainforests for timber extraction and the mostly settled and urbanized population is not in the habit of hunting wildlife or clearing land for shifting cultivation by burning the forest - hence the pristine environment.

But Brunei is not just about rainforests. There are a number of good business and tourist hotels allowing for comfortable stays, beaches and islands to frolic in the South China Sea, water sports and white water activities, wrecks and reef diving, sport fishing, rock climbing, mountain biking, all kinds of sporting facilities, world class golf courses, polo and horse riding, invigorating health spas, many outdoor and indoor playgrounds to keep the kids entertained, surprisingly good shopping opportunities, delicious food from local to international fare, several state-of-the-art meeting, conference, convention and exhibition venues.

Brunei, located some five degrees north of the equator, enjoys a warm and humid tropical climate year round with no marked rainy season, and is not at risk from typhoons, earthquakes or volcanic activity.

It is a unique destination combining the best features of an Islamic environment and the delights of eco tourism. ■