

Sarawak:

Malaysia's Hidden Paradise

> Text and photos:
by Dominick Merle

So I was eating a pizza and watching the Jay Leno show at the Borneo Hilton when... Hold on, there! The Borneo Hilton? It even sounds weird. Rewind to the Hollywood version! Cue the wild men with spears! Actually, I'm at the Hilton in Kuching, capital city of the Malaysian State of Sarawak on northwest Borneo, and the hotel has been doing business here for about 15 years, right up the street from Burger King and Kentucky Colonel and Blockbuster, where you can still actually rent one of those old movies about Borneo headhunters.



Dancers at a cultural show

مهرجان ثقافي

I knew that the Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur left the so-called Third World at least 20 years ago, and now looks more like a futuristic city with its glistening once-tallest-in-the-world twin towers. But

Sarawak? I had heard that this was the final frontier.

"Don't feel bad," our guide Majang told me. "There are some Malaysians who still think we live in trees."

Thirtyish, married with three children, Majang grew up in a 22-family Sarawak longhouse where more than 100 members of a tribe share a common roof with partitioned sleeping areas. He left the ▶

longhouse about seven years ago and now sports a soul-patch goatee, one long fingernail on his pinkie and a Hard Rock Café baseball cap. Like the song says, "How you gonna keep 'em back in the longhouse, after they've seen Kuching?"

But Majang would be returning to his roots the next day, guiding us on a three-hour drive inland to Batang Ai for a visit to one of approximately 5,000 longhouses still being used by 30 percent of the population of Sarawak, members of the Dayak, Iban, Bidayuh and Orang Ulu tribes. This is the part of Sarawak usually referred to as the "Hidden Paradise."

After our drive, we boarded a narrow longboat for a 30-minute ride to the longhouse. There were no men in loincloths or spears to greet us--most tribe members wear western clothes these days--but we did observe actual human skulls hanging from the ceiling of the long wooden structure. Looking much like a cluster of coconuts, they were merely mementoes of the headhunting expeditions of the 1930s, we were told.

The young men were away working the nearby pepper plant farms and rice paddies, two of the main means of support, along with the sale of homemade trinkets and souvenirs back at the longhouse. So we were greeted by a self-made witchdoctor, garbed in loincloth and feathers but also sporting a quartz wristwatch. He said he had received a "calling" to become a witchdoctor a few years ago, after retiring as a pepper plant picker. There were also some 20 women and children scattered throughout the structure.

The born-again Borneo witchdoctor, who looked to be in his 60s, was literally a one-man show, leading the women in tribal dances and later demonstrating his prowess at blowpipes, spear tossing and running a cockfight demonstration. Later the handicrafts were laid out on the longhouse floor and the shopping began.

Our group appeared to be attending the "matinee" performance. When we departed by longboat, a new batch of tourists was docking.

Most of the longhouses today have electricity and running water, and some are constructed in concrete rather than wood. In fact, we were to spend the night in what



Guide Majang was raised in a Sarawak longhouse

الدليل ماجانغ الذي ولد في بيت جماعي

turned out to be a five-star longhouse. It was named the Hilton; the hotel chain's only other property in Borneo.

Only this time, there were no fast-food outlets up the road. At least not yet. This Hilton was in the middle of one of the world's most ancient rainforests at Batang Ai.

The hotel is constructed like a traditional longhouse, but once inside all other resemblances are purely coincidental. Each of the 100 rooms has all of the amenities of a luxury hotel. Depending on where your room was located, however, it could be a long walk to breakfast.

The next morning we drove back to Kuching for a closer look at this capital city. Kuching is located some 30 miles down the coast from the South China Sea. The first settlers chose this site so they could be on the lookout for pirates coming from the sea and headhunters from the

interior. Life wasn't easy back then.

Today, Kuching has a population of roughly half million. It is known throughout Malaysia and other parts of Asia as "Cat City" because of its love affair with the felines. The name Kuching literally translates to cat in the Malay language. So you will see statues of cats throughout the city, and there is even a Cat Museum housed in a part of the Civic Center. But oddly enough, I can't recall seeing any real live cats in Kuching, although we were told that there is a special breed of tiger-striped cats, the result of crossbreeding with Japanese bobtails when the Japanese occupied Sarawak during World War Two.

Kuching's waterfront along the Sarawak River has been transformed from drab warehouses to a long esplanade with exotic food stalls, walk-in restaurants and handicraft shops. People from virtually all of Sarawak's 25-plus ethnic groups live ▶

here, so the variety of handicrafts is huge. Opposite the waterfront is the Main Bazaar, the oldest street in the city and the heart of Old Kuching. Numerous handicraft and antique shops can be found here as well, but the pace is a few beats quicker. This is where the locals bargain.

Kuching's city center can easily be negotiated on foot, including visits to temples, museums, crowded street markets and sprawling shopping complexes. We did so, and then got a good night's sleep in preparation for our final adventure early the next morning, to the mysterious and dangerous rainforest in Baku National Park.

At least that's what we had been told, time and time again, from the moment we first set foot on Sarawak. There were many strange creatures in the rainforest, the locals claimed, but be extra careful of the macaques, the most fearless monkeys on earth. We were given these warnings:

- 1-Don't look them in the eye. They will think you are challenging them and may attack.
- 2-Don't smile. The sight of flashing teeth is a sign of aggression to them.
- 3-Don't put on any lotions, creams or even deodorant as even a hint of perfume tends to make them violent.

So we each put on our cleanest dirty T-shirt, hardly washed ourselves at all, and headed out for Baku and its wild inhabitants. And as often happens on expeditions like this, there was no one home in the jungle. We did spot a rare proboscis monkey, but had to chase after it to get close enough for even a zoom camera.

Baku is Sarawak's oldest national park and is, in fact, home to some of the strangest wildlife and vegetation on earth, including plants that eat meat and snakes that fly from tree to tree. The pitcher plants, shaped like a cup and about the size of a hand, have a sticky substance at the base. When tiny rodents or small birds enter, they become stuck and are entombed.

Besides the monkey population, Baku's inhabitants also include bearded pigs, giant lizards, pit vipers and over 150 species of birds. But they all presumably took the day off when our deodorant-free group passed through.

Or perhaps even the jungle has become civilized these days. ■

(Dominick A. Merle is a travel writer and consultant based in Montreal)

IF YOU GO:

It's 20-plus hours by air to Malaysia from virtually anyplace in North America. We flew Malaysia Airlines from Newark, NJ to Kuala Lumpur. It's another two-hour flight from Kuala Lumpur to Kuching. No visas are required for North Americans, only a valid passport.

For further information on Malaysia and Sarawak, try the websites:
www.tourismmalaysia.gov.my
 and:
www.sarawaktourism.com,
 or write to Tourism Malaysia, 120 East 56th St., Suite 810, New York NY 10022.



Exotic selection of Sarawak fruit

تمّازج من فواكه ساراواك