

Birds, bears, and boats in Borneo

By Kari Bodnarchuk

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

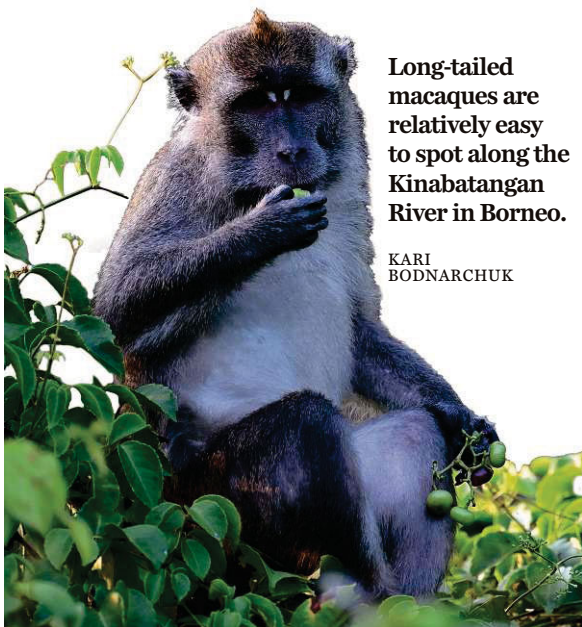
SANDAKAN, Malaysia — We soon realized why locals call a boat trip up the Kinabatangan a “river safari.” Within the first half-hour of our journey, we had spotted long-tailed macaques, hornbills, baby crocodiles, a rare kingfisher, and proboscis monkeys with their long noses and Buddha-like bellies. Over the next few days, during guided outings in a small motorboat, we would also see purple herons, endangered storks, and — a highlight of the trip — an orangutan.

The chocolate-colored Kinabatangan River stretches 350 miles through one of the oldest rain forests on Earth. It’s located in Malaysia’s Sabah province on the island of Borneo, the third-largest island in the world (behind Greenland and New

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Long-tailed macaques are relatively easy to spot along the Kinabatangan River in Borneo.

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Seeing birds and bears, traveling by boat in Borneo

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Guinea), which is divided into the Malaysian provinces of Sabah and Sarawak, Indonesia's Kalimantan province, and the tiny country of Brunei.

The Kinabatangan region in northeastern Borneo has protected wildlife sanctuaries and wetland areas and is known for its biodiversity with more than 350 species of birds (at least a dozen of which are endemic), pygmy elephants, gibbons, wild boars, sun bears (the world's smallest bears), and clouded leopards. It's essentially where "Wild Kingdom" meets the rain forest.

You can travel to remote villages along the river, such as Sukau and Abai, by boat (a couple can also be accessed by road). Either prearrange a stay with a local family or book an individual lodge that offers anything from rustic huts with thin mattresses and bug nets (but no doors or windows) to fully enclosed, air-conditioned cabins with hot showers and comfy beds.

The last time I traveled through Malaysia — as a young backpacker living on \$5 a day — I would have chosen a hut (\$100 for three days and two nights). This time, with a bigger budget and my 12-year-old daughter in tow — plus less tolerance for bugs and creepy critters — I chose a cabin (\$400 for three days and two nights, including boat tours and food — yummy curries and a lot of fresh fruit).

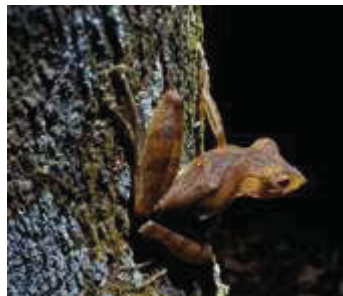
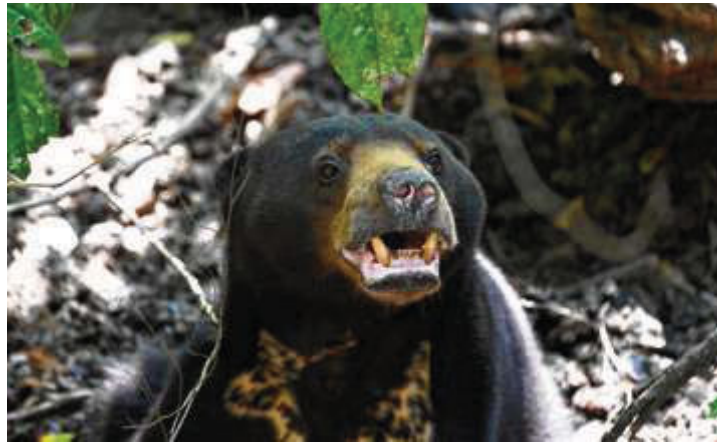
The jumping-off point for many river trips is Sandakan, a coastal city of about 439,000 in northeast Sabah that's just a three-hour flight from Kuala Lumpur on Peninsular Malaysia (flights on Air Asia run as little as \$33 each way). Spend a day exploring this walkable city, where you can climb 100 steps — past mango and jackfruit trees — to visit an English tea-house and a colonial villa once owned by American-author Agnes Keith and her British husband (a forest conservationist), enjoy Portuguese tarts at a local bakery, visit the bustling night

market, and pause at more somber landmarks to learn about the area's World War II history.

My daughter and I hopped aboard a 12-seat riverboat in Sandakan — with our guide and two other families — for a 90-minute ride to the Kinabatangan Wetlands Resort ("resort" is used loosely here). We crossed the salty Sandakan Bay and then made our way up the Kinabatangan River, passing through mangrove marshes, by tributaries that led to oxbow lakes, and near small villages where Malaysia's indigenous Orang Sungai live in homes built on stilts ("orang" means people and "sungai" means river). Eventually, we turned left up a narrow tributary where vegetation formed an arch over the waterway and created an impenetrable wall on either side of us. The boat took us to a quiet and remote corner of a wetland conservation area.

Our lodge, like most in this floodplain region, was built several feet above ground. A wide boardwalk made of Bornean hardwood led from the dock through a mangrove forest to a covered open-air lounge and then to a dining hall where we enjoyed local meals, played darts and ping pong, and met other guests (our group included a British family with three kids between 5 and 11 years old and a San Francisco couple with their 10-month-old baby, but other small groups came and went on river outings throughout the day). The boardwalk looped about three-quarters of a mile through forests of nipa palms, fig trees, and mangroves, connecting individual cabins built on stilts. Each spacious cabin had oversize twin beds, polished wood floors, a giant walk-in shower and a private outdoor shower, and a couch by a big window overlooking the jungle — perfect for spotting wildlife.

Over the next three days, we went on afternoon, sunrise, and night tours — all by boat. We set off at 6:15 a.m. one morning and spent time quietly drifting downriver and observing wild-



PHOTOS BY KARI BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

From top: A sun bear; a Collett's tree frog and black and yellow broadbill; a standard double room in a cabin at the Kinabatangan Wetlands Resort.

life along the way. Nderiy "Dido" Jor, our guide, spotted the first of two endangered Storm's storks we would see that morning — bright blue birds with reddish-orange beaks that number less than 500 worldwide — plus a flock of little egrets wading along the water's edge, a ruddy kingfisher with its ruby-red beak and orange body, and a white-bellied woodpecker.

Our daily sightings, in fact, sounded like a birder's checklist: stork-billed kingfisher, black-and-red broadbill, purple heron,

little egret, intermediate egret, lesser adjutant (an endangered type of stork), serpent eagle, and so many more.

On another outing, we saw silvered leaf monkeys (also called silvery langurs) leaping around the trees, with their long tails and tufts of fur on top of their heads. Nearby, we spotted a harem of proboscis monkeys with their distinctive long noses and orange bodies. These large monkeys — endemic to Borneo — can weigh up to 50 pounds, and we watched in awe as one of

the males flung himself through the air from one tree to another, branches bending and leaves fluttering under his weight as he landed.

We set off before sunset for a night tour and, after seeing a crocodile thrash around the water's edge and then disappear, we spotted an adult orangutan in a ficus tree. The kids' initial excitement rocked our little boat and then we all sat, spellbound, and watched the orangutan feast on figs from its perch. The orangutan slowly climbed down the tree, walked a short distance through the bush, and then climbed up another tree, its enormously long arms dangling by its sides and then stretching high up above its head as it ascended. Another small tour boat quietly approached — one of the few times we saw anyone else out on the water. We soon left to find a mangrove tree that had thousands of fireflies twinkling around it, looking like an over-illuminated Christmas tree.

Another night, Dido took us on a walking safari through the forest. We felt exposed without the buffer of boat and water between us and the wildlife, but it was a thrill to walk through a dense, chirping and buzzing jungle in the dark looking for nocturnal life. Dido used small lights to illuminate a black-spotted tree frog, giant spiderwebs, and a scorpion (which looked purple under UV light) and to point out bioluminescent mushrooms that glowed green at night. We spotted a large sambar deer with its shaggy brown coat and large antlers and caught a quick glance of a flying lemur overhead, which looked like a flying squirrel with the webbing between its legs.

The bugs weren't as bad as we expected in April — we kept legs and arms covered throughout and never needed bug nets — but it helped that we were there during dry season, which runs April through September.

We headed back to Sandakan on day three, passing by a couple of local villages and by fishermen net casting from small

boats.

Before traveling to western Sabah to hike Mount Kinabalu, we spent a day exploring the Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre and the nearby Borneo Sun Bear Conservation Centre, both in the town of Sepilok, about 15 miles from Sandakan (\$2 by bus or \$11 by taxi each way). If you didn't see orangutans in the wild — or even if you did — it's worth getting a good look at these fascinating animals up close as they feed, romp around, groom each other, lounge, and swing through the trees.

All the orangutans at the center have been orphaned or injured and will be released back into the wild, if possible. The same is true of the bears at the conservation center next door — one of the highlights of our trip. The Borneo Sun Bear Conservation Centre was opened in 2008 by Dr. Wong Siew Te, a Malaysian wildlife biologist and sun bear expert who earned his master's from the University of Montana and then returned to Borneo and made it his life's goal to protect, study, and rehabilitate sun bears (his colleagues call him the "papa bear of Borneo").

These tropical bears don't hibernate or like the heat, according to Wong, and spend their days foraging for food in the rain forest, trying to stay cool, and sleeping in their nests up in the trees. Most of the center's 44 bears were rescued from captivity as illegal pets or orphaned due to poachers. Each has its own distinct cream-colored patch of fur on its chest. As the world's smallest bear, sun bears grow up to only about 5 feet tall and 150 pounds.

You can sit on a bench or hang out on the elevated boardwalk and watch the bears digging for grubs or looking for termites in a rotted-out log. Or, if you're lucky, maybe you'll see one out in the wild — on a river safari or jungle hike through one of the world's oldest rain forests.

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