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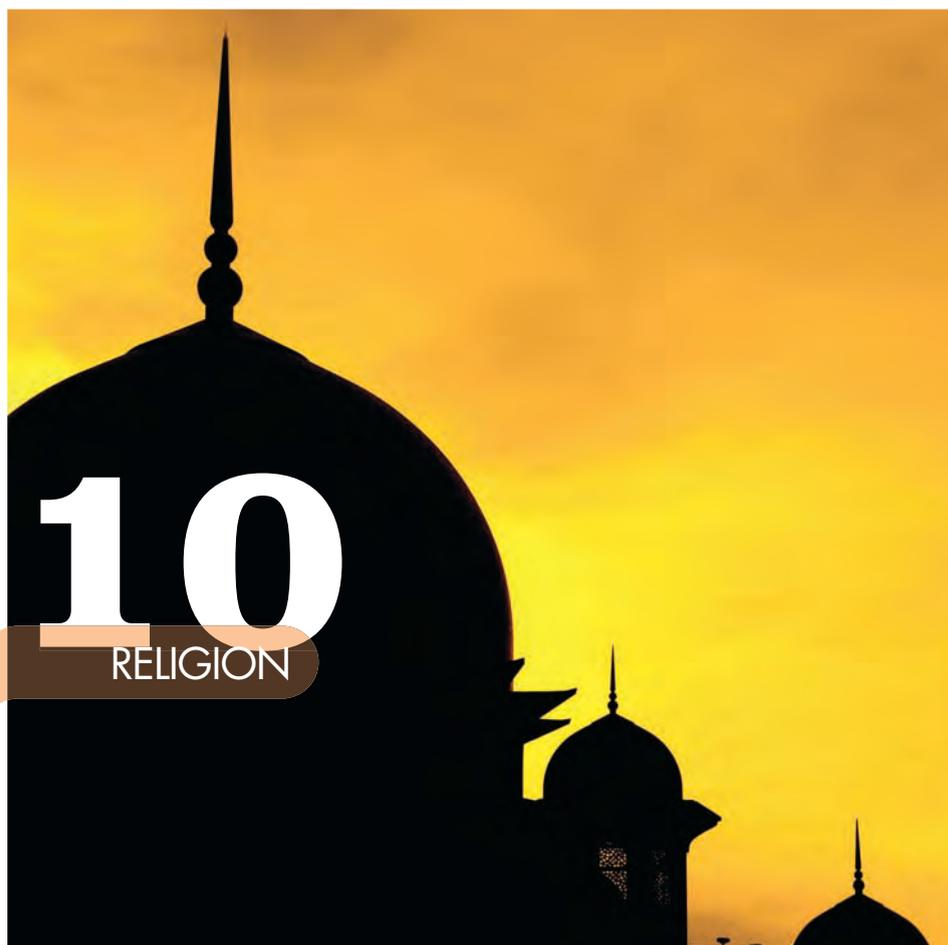
On the Cover

THE RESPLENDENT SULTAN OMAR ALI SAIFUDDIN MOSQUE IN BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN IS A VISION IN GOLD AND MARBLE

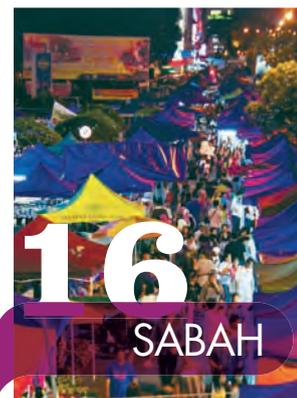
Photo: Brunei Tourism



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Remote islands, mighty mountains and ecological beauty – it's all here in spades



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Mapping it out

Brunei takes up a fraction of the island of Borneo, which it shares with Malaysia and Indonesia. But as Tara Harrison discovered, its small size makes it easy to experience each district's distinct offerings



Top Right:
A footbridge in Kampong Ayer water village
Photo: Brunei Tourism

Right: Iban traditional dress
Photo: Brunei Tourism

BELAIT

Taking up half of Brunei's territory, this district is responsible for the wealth you see in the capital, Bandar Seri Begawan. Rich veins of black gold lie beneath Belait and oil pumps, known as nodding donkeys, are scattered throughout the landscape.

Given its reputation as an oil rich region, it is surprising to learn that Belait is one of the best places to see the indigenous longhouses that characterised Brunei before the oil boom. A pre-oil Belait was inhabited by the Penan and Iban people. The Iban people lived in longhouses, a dwelling unique to this region. A longhouse is a village under one roof, divided into family partitions and joined by a communal passage. There are four of these endemic structures around the area of Labi and the largest is home to more than 100 people.

BRUNEI-MUARA

This northernmost district of Brunei is home to the capital city, Bandar Seri Begawan and despite being the smallest geographically, it is

the most populous. From palaces to mosques, this district has architectural wonders in spades. Nurul Iman Palace fuses Islamic and Malay design and is the largest residential palace in the world at over 200,000 square metres – in case you're wondering, that much space will get you 1788 rooms.

The majority of Brunei is rainforest, but this district is the most urban. Brunei-Muara boasts the must-see water village of Kampong Ayer. Communities are linked by more than 75km of walkways. This Venice of the East is reached via boat or a narrow footbridge.

TEMBURONG

Physically separate from the other three districts of Brunei, the exclave of Temburong sits next to a tract of Malaysian territory. It is the least populated of the districts and has a village atmosphere. From the very start your journey will feel intrepid as you catch a speedboat from the capital to gain access to the district. While crossing rivers and narrow mangrove channels, keep a look out for proboscis monkeys that often can be seen on the shoreline.



THE FACTS

BRUNEI DARUSSALAM
MEANS

*“ABODE OF
PEACE”*

**BRUNEI IS LOCATED
IN BORNEO,
THE THIRD LARGEST
ISLAND IN THE WORLD**

BORNEO IS DIVIDED BETWEEN

**Brunei,
Malaysia
&
Indonesia**

THE CAPITAL OF BRUNEI IS
**BANDAR SERI
BEGAWAN**, USUALLY
REFERRED TO AS BANDAR

**IT IS RULED BY THE
SULTAN OF BRUNEI**

TEMPERATURES RANGE BETWEEN
23 AND 32
DEGREES YEAR-ROUND

IT IS A DRY **COUNTRY**,
although visitors can bring two bottles of
liquor or 12 cans of beer

**VISITORS SHOULD ALWAYS
DRESS MODESTLY**

The right hand is used to eat and pass gifts

**VISAS ARE GRANTED UPON
ARRIVAL FOR STAYS OF UP
TO 30 DAYS**

The main attraction here is the Ulu Temburong National Park. There are no roads so the journey to the interior is onboard a traditional longboat. The highlight is a canopy walkway which is 50 metres high and gives you the chance to get up close to the teeming life in this park – one scientist reportedly found 400 different beetle species on just one tree.

TUTONG

A mere 30 minute drive from the bustling metropolis of Bandar is a district that is markedly different. Tutong has more of a Malaysian feel. The drawback here is the Tasek Merimbun Heritage Park. If you're lucky you may spot the clouded leopard – a majestic big cat of Borneo.

All eight species of hornbills that are native to Borneo can be found here. It also contains the largest lake in Brunei, a dark body of water cloaked by jungle. The water is black because it filters through a peat forest. There is also an island perched in the middle of the lake, reachable by a wooden boardwalk. 📍



News



FACELIFT ON THE CARDS FOR BRUNEI AIRPORT

A major redevelopment of Brunei Airport is set to take place over the next 36 months to modernise the International Terminal. The focus of the expansion is on emphasising public safety, ease of access and comfort. The project will drastically improve the existing layout and enhance passenger convenience. Floor areas will be expanded while the current security system will also be improved.

Operations of the airport are expected to continue as normal throughout the redevelopment and a program has been put in place to minimise any potential disruptions throughout the construction period. The expected completion date is November 7, 2014. For more information, visit www.bedb.com.bn



MALAYSIA HOLIDAYS HEADS OUTDOORS

Malaysia Holidays have announced a new cultural tour of Brunei. The six-day Longhouse, Rainforest and Caves of Borneo Tour is priced from \$1515 with daily departures available.

On the tour, guests will experience one of the world's largest water villages, the Jame'asr Hassanil Bolkiah Mosque which showcases classic Islamic architecture, a traditional longhouse and the World Heritage listed Mulu Caves. For more information, visit www.malaysiaholidays.com.au

EMPIRE ON THE HORIZON



New Horizons Holidays is currently offering a package at the five-star Empire Hotel and Country Club in a superior room. Located 15 minutes from the airport and beside the South China Sea, the luxurious property boasts a professionally designed golf course, a bowling alley and three cinemas.

Priced from \$309, the package includes four nights' accommodation for the price of three and full breakfast daily. It is valid for sale and travel from April 1 to March 31, 2013. A half-day Home Cooked Brunei Tour can be added on for an extra \$110 per person. For more information, visit www.newhorizons.com.au

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INTREPID GOES URBAN

Travellers to Brunei can experience a number of day tours off the tourist trail with Intrepid's Urban Adventures. Launched in 2010, the day tours use local guides to provide guests with a unique insight into a region. Out of the three options available, the Home Cooked Brunei Urban Adventure is the most popular among travellers and offers interaction with a local family. The tour begins by visiting a riverside market before dining with a host family in Kampong Ayer water village.

Also offered is a three-hour Brunei Proboscis Monkey Safari. At \$78 per person, the boat safari takes guests through Brunei's mangroves where they can keep an eye out for the elusive proboscis monkeys. For more information, visit www.intrepidtravel.com



ORION EMBARKS ON FAREWELL CRUISE

The *Orion II* is making its final Brunei expedition later this year before the vessel is handed back to its previous owners in mid November.

The 10-night Rajahs, Riches and Rainforest voyage departs from Kota Kinabalu for Singapore on August 4, 2012. The voyage will visit key destinations in Malaysian Borneo, including the renowned dive site Pulau Labuan and the Similajau National Park to provide guests with a snapshot of the region's diverse ecosystem. The itinerary also takes in Bandar Seri Begawan in Brunei and is priced from \$8150 with some reduced fares available. For more information, visit www.orionexpeditions.com

RBA RAISES FREQUENCY OF FLIGHTS TO AUSTRALIA

Royal Brunei Airlines has increased its services to Melbourne from four times weekly to daily.

Minister for Tourism and Major Events in Victoria, Louise Asher, said "South-East Asia is one of Victoria's fastest growing markets and these additional Royal Brunei Airlines services will enable greater tourism and trade linkages and opportunities across this valuable growth market." Flights will depart Melbourne daily at 12:25pm and arrive in Bandar Seri Begawan at 5:35pm. Return flights will depart Bandar Seri Begawan daily at 11:50am and arrive in Melbourne at 8:45pm. The daily services are also set to improve connections and travel options for passengers travelling to a number of key overseas destinations, including London and Bangkok. For more information, visit www.brunecair.com

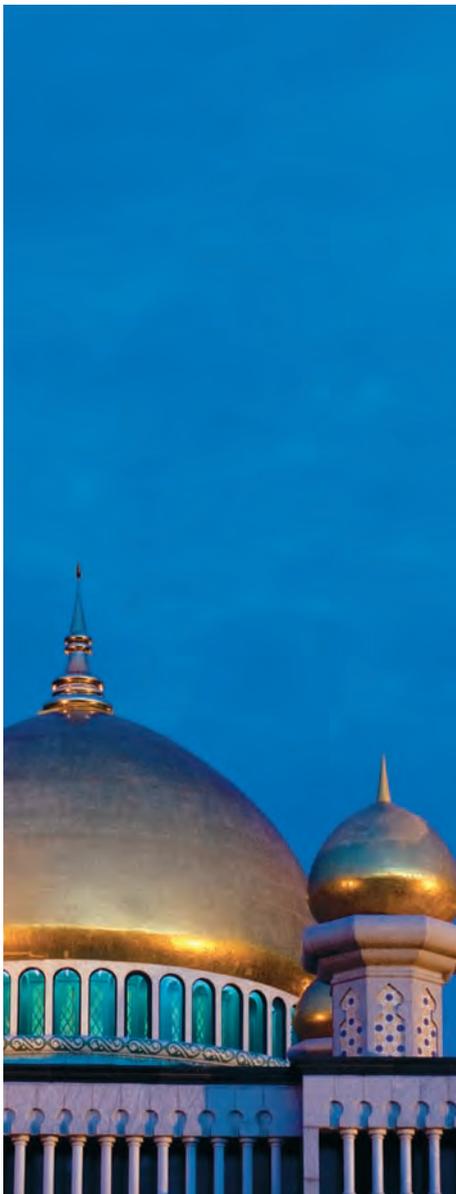


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BOASTING BRUNEI'S BEST



Above: Many mosques benefit from oil prosperity
Photo: Thinkstock

Right: Brunei is replete with gold
Photo: Thinkstock

Above right: Kampong Ayer water village
Photo: Brunei Tourism

Top right: Bruneian rainforest
Photo: Brunei Tourism

Far right: The Istana Nurul Iman Palace
Photo: Brunei Tourism



Brunei may have a modest population of less than 400,000, but the country can lay claim to some pretty impressive titles. Louise Wallace took a closer look on a recent visit to Bandar Seri Begawan



1. THE WORLD'S LARGEST PALACE

Home to the Sultan of Brunei, The Istana Nurul Iman Palace holds the Guinness Book of Records title as the world's largest palace. Costing an estimated \$1.4 billion, the palace features 1788 bedrooms, 257 bathrooms, an air-conditioned stable and five swimming pools. That's on top of an enormous garage, 564 chandeliers and 18 elevators. The palace is not open to the public except during some Islamic celebrations when it receives about 110,000 visitors over three days.

2. THE WORLD'S LARGEST WATER VILLAGE

Located a short distance from Bandar Seri Begawan, Kampong Ayer is home to over 39,000 residents, making it the world's largest water village. The buildings and homes sit on top of wooden stilts, connected by 29km of footbridges and 36km of boardwalks. Access to the village is only by water taxi, though residents can easily get by without visiting the mainland – the water village has its very own police station, medical clinic, mosque and school.

3. THE SECOND RICHEST ROYAL

The 29th Sultan of Brunei, Hassanal Bolkiah, is adored by local Bruneian folk for his generosity. He often drops

thousands of dollars as service tips and makes regular visits to local community functions. The current sultan was named as the second richest royal in the 2011 Forbes Rich List with an estimated personal wealth of around \$40 billion. That probably explains why his garage houses 165 Rolls Royce vehicles.

4. A MAJOR PLAYER IN OIL AND GAS

Brunei is the world's fourth largest producer of liquefied natural gas and one of the leading oil producers in South East Asia, making it one of the wealthiest economies in the world. Since oil was first discovered in 1929, Brunei has ramped up production to its current level of around 180,000 barrels per day. Some 90% of Brunei's exports are dominated by crude oil and gas.

5. THE WORLD'S OLDEST RAINFOREST

The Temburong National Park is one of the world's oldest nature reserves, estimated to be 100 million years old. There are about 15,000 species of flowering plants, 3000 species of trees and 420 species of resident birds. Accessible only by boat, it is often regarded as the best preserved tropical rainforest in the region. 🌿



Hotel Check

THE BRUNEI HOTEL,
BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN

WELCOME:

6/10

I was greeted in a friendly manner at the front desk. But while the concierge was quick to locate my booking, once the paperwork was dealt with I might as well have been invisible. Staff left me to find my room with my bags slung over my shoulder.

ACCOMMODATION:

6/10

The Brunei Hotel, one of the oldest in the sultanate, waved goodbye to its classic decor in 2010 as part of a full refurbishment. The lobby features modern furnishings, but the rooms are minimalistic and not in a good way. The beds were hard, the walls paper thin, and there was no hairdryer or extra blankets.

FACILITIES:

6/10

While the hotel is centrally located, its dearth of on-site facilities let it down. There is a prayer room and meeting rooms to cater for 500 delegates, but no internet facilities, gym, or pool. The breakfast spread was also below par, with the morning menu largely limited to cornflakes, noodles and eggs.

SERVICE:

7/10

The hotel staff were courteous, friendly and always happy to share a morning greeting. They were generally close at hand and eager to help out whenever possible.

AMBIENCE:

8/10

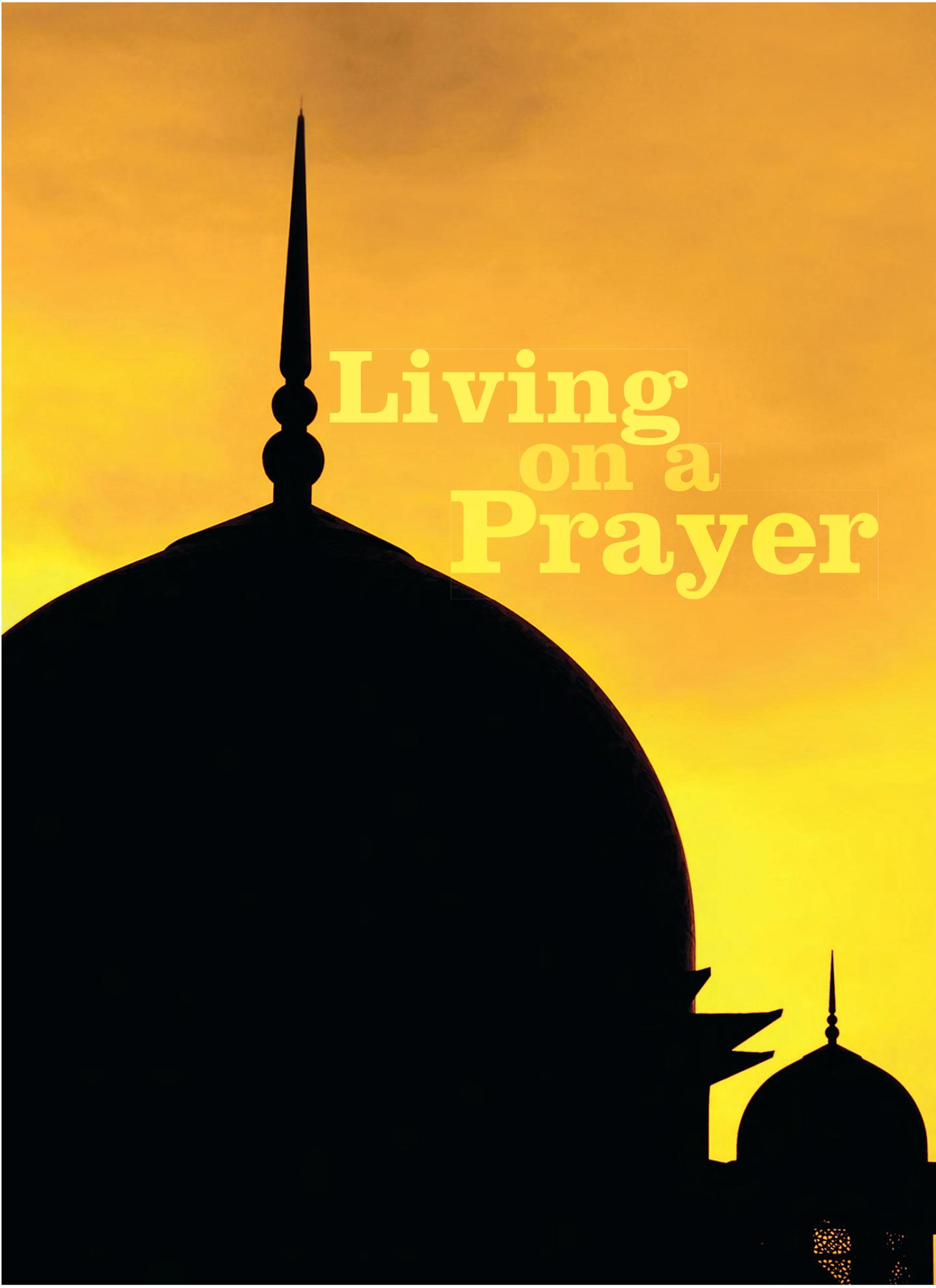
The Brunei Hotel had quite a funky vibe to it, helped largely by new brightly coloured furnishings in the lobby area. However, I only passed a handful of guests during my stay, which detracted from the atmosphere of the hotel.

OVERALL:

66%

All in all, the Brunei Hotel was satisfactory. While the facilities were not top-notch, the property was comfortable and the staff were friendly. More affluent travellers will opt for The Empire Hotel no doubt, but this establishment will suit stopover clients.

Rack rates for an overnight stay in a single room with breakfast at The Brunei Hotel start from \$B120 (\$94). For more information, visit www.thebruneihotel.com



Living on a Prayer



Main: Islamic architecture is a defining characteristic of Brunei

Right: 75% of Brunei's population follow Islam

All photos: Thinkstock



RELIGION IS TRADITIONALLY A TOPIC BEST AVOIDED AT DINNER PARTIES, BUT IN BRUNEI THE ISLAMIC FAITH REVEALS ITSELF IN EVERY ASPECT OF LIFE. **LOUISE WALLACE** RECENTLY WITNESSED THE DEVOUT RITUALS OF THE PIOUS CITIZENS OF THIS SMALL COUNTRY

All is quiet as the locals laze in the shade of the courtyard to escape the sweltering midday heat. The thick air induces drowsiness and my eyelids feel heavy. My muscles relax and my mind wanders, before a wailing cry stirs my attention and rouses my torpid neighbours into action.

Transfixed by the droning song emanating from the speakers above, a dozen sleepy Muslims wander towards the extravagant gold and marble mosque staircase. They seem reluctant at first, but the hypnotic music works like snake charmer's gesture and stirs them into action.

My guide Aziah explains that it's the Muslim call to prayer that brings them here. Some come from hours outside of the city to pray, while others have merely walked across the road from their workplace.

A devout Muslim herself, Aziah tells me 75% of Brunei's population follow Islam and that it is the country's official religion. Sultans have used oil revenue to promote the religion and build mosques across the country since the 1930s. Today, some 300,000 Bruneians dedicate their lives to Allah, so it's hardly surprising that the Muslim religion is omnipresent in the country.

For one, most Muslim women follow the traditional dress code, literally covering themselves from head to toe. As I look around the colossal mosque exterior, every female in sight wears a *hijab*, the headdress and black body gown that leaves nothing showing but their hands and face. Aziah braves a *hijab*, with long sleeves and long pants, despite the 35 degree heat. I struggle to cope with the intense humidity in my t-shirt and jeans and am certain she's melting under the surface. She shakes off the suggestion and assures me it's not that bad after several years of practice.

Not all locals follow the strict dress code however, and there are varying degrees of religious adherence. For instance, there is still the odd singlet or knee-length skirt in sight, and there are plenty of figure-hugging frocks in the shop fronts. But when you consider the standard school uniform covers female students from head to toe in a full length *hijab*, you get an idea of how central religion is to the country's heart.

A short stroll through the main quarter of Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei's capital city, reveals that the country's Muslim beliefs extend far beyond a simple dress code. Golden-topped mosques tower over office buildings, prayer



rooms are situated on every corner and the call to prayer echoes down the city streets. Islam is as not just a religion, it is a way of life here.

Men and women commit to five prayer sessions each day. Starting at dawn, they break at lunch time, 4pm, sunset and around 8pm to commune with Allah. Muslim men also attend a compulsory prayer session every Friday, taking a couple of hours out of their day. But that's not the end of it – even Brunei's work schedule revolves around the Koran. The working week runs from Monday to Thursday, plus Saturday or Sunday, leaving Friday – the Holy day – as a day of prayer. Workers also punch in at 7.45am, break for lunch at 12.15 and clock off at 4.30pm to allow time for prayer.

To an Australian with no religious convictions, I am astounded at the Muslim dedication to the Islamic faith. With such an overwhelming brief of rules to follow – not to mention a month of fasting for Ramadan – I am convinced the religious regulations must be malleable.

But my guide was quick to put me right. When I asked what happens when a Muslim skipped a prayer session or couldn't brave the dawn prayer, she was firm. "If you miss a prayer, it's your duty to make up for it later on... It's a sin to skip prayer." I couldn't help but wonder if she would have to make up hours of prayer after our day of touring, but was I too timid to inquire.

The high ceilings, marble staircases and crystal chandeliers make it a staggering vision of Islamic pride

Considering the central role of religion and Brunei's extraordinary wealth from its gas and oil resources, the architecture of Islam is, unsurprisingly, a prominent beneficiary. Some 111 mosques across the country have been built, with the more modest costing several million dollars and the more grandiose upwards of \$600 million. More than half a billion sounds like a hefty price tag, but when you catch a glimpse of the extravagant golden domes and soaring minarets, the cost is hardly surprising.

The Kiarong Mosque, the largest in Brunei, is no exception. The high ceilings, marble staircases and crystal chandeliers make it a staggering vision of Islamic pride. Delicate murals of fine porcelain decorate the walls and golden lacquer shimmers in the sun, making it appear more a palace than a place of worship.

But a place of prayer it certainly is. It's silent, and the only people in sight are clothed from head to toe in respectful attire. Several youngsters are waiting to go into their religious classes. But it's a far cry from Sunday school as I remember it – not a word is spoken between them as they patiently wait on the steps.

My childhood church certainly was not as grand either. The hand rail here is finished with gold and the colossal marble staircase is nothing short of magnificent. But it's inside the mosque that my



breath is completely taken away. The ceilings are soaring, bright and mighty, with a backlight that resembles something angelic. The carpets feature intricately woven designs with golden seams dotted throughout, and the walls are decorated with ancient golden scriptures painted in gold.

Reserved strictly for prayer, the astonishing surroundings are enough to make anyone admire the Islamic faith. But when I realise my mind is consumed with trying to calculate the sheer cost of such a lavish interior, I accept that I'm looking at things from a Western mindset.

I consult my guide, who seems perplexed when I estimate the price tag. She explains that the magnificence of religious sites is widely accepted among the community and that it is understood from a young age.

I can't help but feel a little ashamed and materialistic at her response and take a moment to reflect on how differently we lead our lives. Certainly Brunei feeds masses of money to mosques and religion, but its people are not motivated by money, fashion or fame. A far cry from the boldness of Western culture, Bruneian locals are reserved, humble people who are happy to dedicate their lives to Allah.

Needless to say, if I invested a fraction of the time to religion that the Bruneian people did, I would be too busy to worry about the costs. 



Main: The resplendent Omar Ali Saifuddin Mosque in Bandar Seri Begawan

Photo: Brunei Tourism

Above: The Koran is vastly important to Brunei's Muslim population

Photo: Thinkstock

Hotel Check

THE EMPIRE HOTEL & COUNTRY CLUB,
JERUDONG, BRUNEI

WELCOME

8/10

The hotel's vast driveways set the scene for the extravagant lobby, from where I was whisked to my room in a flash. The porters were quickly on hand with my luggage.

ACCOMMODATION

8/10

The Empire features the kind of opulence you would expect of an oil rich sultanate. The bathrooms are all clad in marble, the beds are laid with Egyptian cotton and the rooms are furnished with Italian fabrics. The only drawback was the high-tech lighting, which repeatedly turned on all the room lights in the middle of the night.

FACILITIES

10/10

The Empire wants for nothing. There is an 18-hole golf course, a luxury spa, gymnasium, seven restaurants and nine swimming pools. There's also a kids club and scuba-diving centre plus a whole lot more. If you've even thought about it, chances are The Empire has got it covered.

SERVICE

7/10

Hotel staff were courteous and always close at hand. But efficiency is not their strong suit, with many requests followed by a lengthy delay. With golf carts the only way to get around the 180 hectare property, I was often left waiting for long periods.

AMBIENCE

8/10

The Empire prides itself on design, with European furnishings contrasting with Islamic staples like gold and marble. The designer shopping alley is another extravagant addition, but I never once spied a guest inside, which was a little off-putting.

OVERALL

82%

For clients after a bit of pampering in an extremely grandiose setting, The Empire is certainly worth consideration.

Rates for an overnight stay in a deluxe room at The Empire Hotel & Country Club start from \$B298 (\$224). For more information, visit www.theempirehotel.com

The real jungle book

The jungle of Borneo is a wild place. Beneath the canopy dwell millions of creatures which make up the complex ecosystem. Louise Wallace took a closer look on a recent visit to Ulu Temburong National Park



My heart rate lifts a gear and beads of sweat gather on my forehead, slowly trickling down the sides of my reddened face. My legs feel heavy and my backside yearns for a break from the burning sensation. I glimpse behind me and gain a sense of accomplishment at the several hundred rickety steps that I've accounted for. But my heart sinks and curse words flood my mind as I look ahead, only to see hundreds more stairs before me.

Thankfully, my guide decides it is time for a break about 40 minutes into our sweaty adventure, pausing to guzzle some water and catch her breath. I eagerly follow her lead to give my burning buttocks a break and peel my saturated shirt from my sides, trying in vain to capture some breeze from the still air. We sit in silence for five minutes. But as our muscles relax and our breathing steadies, our focus switches from burning muscles to the untamed beauty of the Ulu Temburong National Park.

It is Brunei's only national park and my guide tells me the lush greenery occupies almost 40% of the Temburong district of Brunei. It's also an ancient primary rainforest and home to one of the most complex ecosystems in the world. Human impact is limited, largely because of its remote location within an exclave of Brunei. There is also no road access to the park, rendering it one of the most untouched reserves on the island of Borneo.

I have no doubt most of the reserve has never been trodden on, or even glimpsed. Rugged buttress roots and moss blankets are engulfed by lush trees, which seem to swallow us beneath the pristine rainforest canopy. Standing beneath the towering branches and endless vines, I feel like a small fish in an enormous pond. But my guide snaps me back to reality by abruptly resuming our journey.

I later discover there's 1260 steps to conquer on the Ulu Ulu canopy walk. Had I known this in advance, I would probably have stayed in bed. But as I reach that last step, the sweat is the furthest thing from my thoughts as I become transfixed on the untamed beauty before me. I stand above the rainforest canopy with a sense of achievement, marvelling over the blanket of lush rainforest below.

The return journey is much less taxing and we soon find ourselves at the Ulu Ulu Resort in a fraction of the time it took to make the ascent. Tucked away in the lip of the jungle, the resort is like a haven for the senses. Made entirely with local materials, the lodge sits right on the water's edge, with the sound of the rushing rapids close enough to tickle your ears. The cool breeze and hum of the cicadas adds the perfect finishing touch, allowing Mother Nature to work her magic.

After a few more hours of exploring the rainforest, the distant smell of pumpkin curry sends my salivary glands into a frenzy. My guide and I return to the lodge to devour our heavenly spread before sinking into our seats to admire a backdrop of trickling waterfalls. As we prepare for our return journey to the mainland, we pass a group gearing up for the afternoon jungle trek. I have to hold my tongue not to tell them how many steps they're about to face but I figure it's best to let them find out the hard way. ●



Main: An atmospheric trip through the jungle on the Temburong River

Photo: Brunei Tourism

Below right: The canopy walk above the Ulu Temburong rainforest

Photo: Louise Wallace

Bottom: The misty treetops conceal millions of plant and animal species

Photo: Brunei Tourism

What's on offer

Ulu Ulu Resort offers a range of activities and team-building exercises for clients of all fitness levels

- **Waterfall trek:** Clients get a chance to dust off the hiking boots for a spectacular walk through the jungle. It includes a long boat trip and the services of an experienced guide
- **Kayaking:** Don't expect to keep dry on this one. Participants travel the channels of the Temburong River with an activity coordinator along for the ride
- **Canopy walk:** Remember to take a water bottle and camera. There are well over 1000 stairs, but the view is worth every step
- **Night jungle walk:** Keep your eyes peeled on this night safari. Clients can test their mettle on a moonlight trek and take a boat ride, accompanied by an experienced guide
- **Tubing:** Not for the faint hearted, this tour takes clients along the river canals in rubber tyres. Pack your swimmers!





Sabah's

big

5

Boasting the oldest rainforest in the world, it's no surprise that Sabah is renowned for its jungle. But as Tara Harrison discovered, this green jewel of Borneo also has something for the water babies, the mountain climbers and the city slickers among us

Sabah has a wealth of wild attractions that extend beyond the coffee bean eyes of the orang-utans that reside in its thick jungle. From the biological wonderland of Mt Kinabalu to the diving menagerie that surrounds the offshore islands, nature-lovers will be in their element. And when the cries of the hornbills become too much, the city of Kota Kinabalu provides the perfect respite with its synthesis of Asian and Islamic culture and design.

1. THE ISLANDS

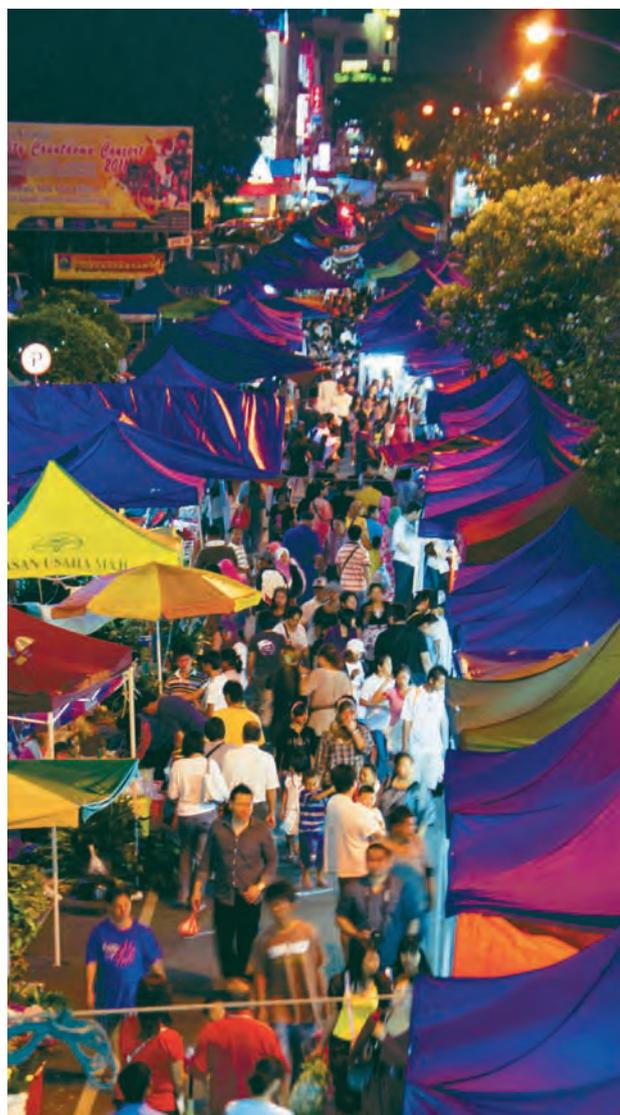
Sipadan Island, rated by experts as one of the top five diving sites in the world, should be the first stop for serious underwater explorers. A mere five degrees from the equator and boasting some 3000 extant species, it trades off the marine prosperity found in the Indochina Basin.



Main: Mabul Island's waters harbour an array of tiny marine species

Right: Bustling night markets in Kota Kinabalu

Below: The playful orang-utan calls Sabah home
All photos: Sabah Tourism



Turtles are a sure-fire spectacle on any dive here. In fact, they are so numerous that there is a diving site called turtle tomb – where the skeletons of green and hawksbill turtles settle in maze-like corridors. Diving is a year-long activity as the area is not afflicted by monsoon rains.

A 30 minute boat trip from Sipadan is its lesser known sibling, Mabul Island. Ringed by the Celebes Sea, it is one of the best muck-diving sites in the world. Marine macro photographers are drawn to the murky waters to snap the plethora of tiny life. This small island has bungalows that finger out over the water. Flamboyant cuttlefish, blue-ringed octopus, mimic octopus and bobtail squid can be found on the reef.

Finally, there's the famous island that spawned a reality TV empire. *Survivor* was first filmed on Palau Tiga island off the coast of west Sabah.

2. THE MOUNTAINS

Mount Kinabalu has more plants growing in its soil than Europe and North America combined. The botanical life is staggering. Pitcher plants sit on the forest floor with a billowing pouch that is both a lure and a trap for insects.

The pungent state flower of Sabah can be smelt before it is seen. The *Rafflesia* looks like and has the aroma of rotting flesh. Disgusting, but the varieties on this mountain can be seen nowhere else on earth.

Listed as a World Heritage site, trekkers experience different biomes as they ascend. The ecosystem starts with the fruit trees of the lowland forest and rises into an oak and chestnut forest. Up next is a sub-alpine meadow zone with buttercups, rhododendrons and raspberry bushes lying low to the ground. Further up is the enigmatically named cloud forest. Mist swirls and moisture drips,

carpeting the forest in moss and orchids – there are over 700 types of the cult bloom. A hike of 8.5km to Low's Peak is accessible for fit and healthy clients.

Mount Trusmadi ranks as the second highest peak in Sabah and is off the radar of tourists due to its rugged terrain. Ropes and ladders are in place for the steep incline but this is still a trek reserved for experienced climbers.

3. THE RAINFOREST

Sabah is defined by jungle but before embarking on a trip to the rainforest of Sabah you may want to learn a thing or two about it. The Rainforest Discovery Centre in Sandakan is the place to start. It has education exhibitions, a forest reserve and a plant discovery garden. There is a canopy walkway 25 metres high that enables visitors to identify common treetop dwellers. >>



Far left:
The Rafflesia, a flower that stinks of rotting flesh

Left: The hornbill is often spotted and heard in Sabah

Below:
A young orang-utan swings through the jungle

All photos: Sabah Tourism



There is also a treetop walkway in Danum Valley Conservation Area. A 27 metre high, 300 metre long bridge allows you to get close to the 200 species of tree per hectare. Visitors can stay in the Borneo Rainforest Lodge and guided walks are on offer. Wild marbled cats can be seen clinging to trees like lizards and the rare pygmy elephant is sometimes seen traipsing through waterways. For water displays, head to the spectacular Sungai Purut waterfall which holds seven spilling tiers. Fairy Falls is a thin slip of a waterfall and if swimming is your game, cool off in the leech-free jacuzzi pool.

4. THE WILDLIFE

Orang-utans are the celebrities of Sabah and Sepilok Orphanage gives visitors a chance to visit some of our closest relatives. Like any family

gathering, there is a mixed bag of personalities. Some are cheeky, some are shy, some lark above on ropes and one may just nick off with your hat.

One of only four orang-utan sanctuaries in the world, the centre aims to rehabilitate and educate and the visit begins with a video which highlights the plight of the endangered population. To reach the orang-utans, you walk on raised decking through rainforest that resounds with the screech of hornbills. There is a viewing platform to watch the apes being fed bananas and milk from brightly coloured buckets at 10am and 3pm.

Monkey business aside, Tabin Wildlife Reserve is home to three of the largest mammals in Sabah. Here you can see the Borneo pygmy elephant, the Sumatran rhinoceros and water buffalo. Smaller, but more surreal, is the native proboscis monkey.

5. THE CITY

A capital still in its infancy, Kota Kinabalu only gained city status in the year 2000.

The Filipino Night Market here takes place along the waterfront every night. Ramshackle tents cover stalls of fresh fish, meat, fruit and vegetables. Choose your ingredients and the vendors will cook them before your eyes. Smoke curls off the barbeque and food is served with hot, sweet or sour sauce in a small plastic bag tied at the top. This is Asian street food at its best.

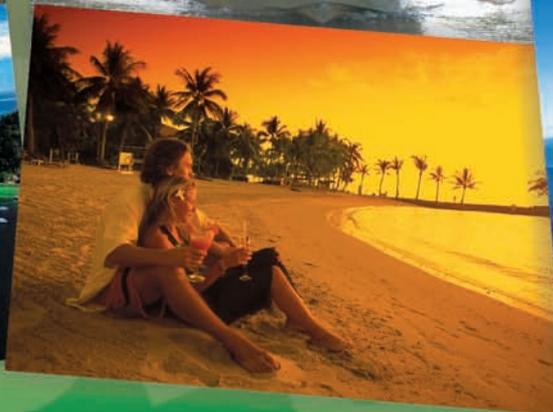
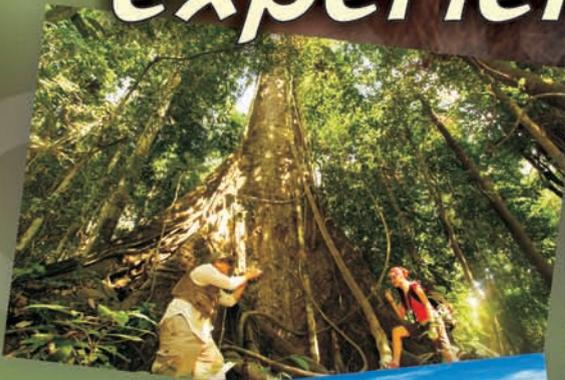
Kota Kinabalu's mosques are also striking. The City Mosque is white with blue accents, picking up on the reflections of the lagoon that surrounds it. The State Mosque is closer to the city centre and its main feature is a honeycomb dome of white and gold tiles that is shadowed by a tall spiked tower. 📍

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ALIVE

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