

Sarawak



While Sabah sees itself as 'nature', Sarawak plays up its cultural counterpoint. With a thriving indigenous population featuring dozens of dialects and tribes, Sarawak's local people are the keepers of Borneo – the ancient storytellers and guardians of lost traditions. Many communities still cling to the longhouse lifestyle, a coveted way of communal life steeped in hundreds of years of myth, legend and lore.

But make no mistake, Sarawak offers oh-so much more than blowpipes, rice wine and sacred dances. The state has its fair share of natural wonders as well. The yawning Niah Caves reveal the island's 40,000 years of human history through haunting burials and cryptic cavern drawings. Caves are super-sized at Gunung Mulu National Park – home to more bats than there are people in the entirety of Sarawak. Don't miss the trek up to the Pinnacles, a curious formation of limestone spikes shooting straight up into the balmy jungle air. Then it's on to the Kelabit Highlands, an earthen kingdom tucked high in the clouds along the dark green borders of Kalimantan. Wild macaques and prowling proboscis monkeys patrol the southern shores as they swing past trekking tourists in Bako National Park.

Ultimately, Sarawak is a land of dreaming – a place where fantasies are fulfilled. If you're imagining a world of steaming jungles, secreted villages, curious beasts and muddy treks into the unknown, then you've come to the right place. Sarawak promises to deliver on all of those magical Bornean stereotypes, and it'll keep you coming back for more.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Sipping wild teas and crunching savoury pineapple at a wobbly, wooden abode hidden deep within the **Kelabit Highlands** (p458)
- Wandering around catty **Kuching** (p409) *purr*using cluttered markets and colourful Chinese shophouses
- Exploring yawning caverns and trekking to the spiky Pinnacles in **Gunung Mulu National Park** (p452)
- Sharing smiles, stories and sips of cloudy rice wine while staying at a **longhouse** (p430)
- Snapping photographs of languid lagoons, ebbing tides and curious proboscis monkeys at **Bako National Park** (p423)



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 082, 083, 084, 085, 086

■ POPULATION: 2.5 MILLION

■ AREA: 124,449 SQ KM

History

Archaeological evidence suggests early humans lived in Sarawak as long as 40,000 years ago, 30,000 years earlier than on the Malay peninsula. The Chinese started arriving around the 7th century, along with other Eastern traders, and from the 11th century Sarawak came under the control of various Indonesian factions. Many of today's indigenous tribes migrated from Kalimantan, including the Iban, who came here around the end of the 15th century and now make up around 33% of the state's population.

From the 15th until the early 19th century Sarawak was under the loose control of the sultanate of Brunei. It was only with the arrival of Sir James Brooke, the first of three so-called white raja, that it became a separate political region.

Brooke, invalided from the British East India Company after being wounded in Burma, eschewed an easy retirement and set off on a voyage of discovery, aided by a sizable inheritance and a well-armed ship. He arrived in Sarawak in 1839, just in time to find the local viceroy under siege, providing the perfect opportunity to ingratiate himself with the ruling class. Brooke duly suppressed the rebellion, and by way of reward the sultan of Brunei installed him as raja of Sarawak in 1842.

When James Brooke died in 1868 he was succeeded by his nephew, Charles Brooke. Through a policy of divide and rule, and the ruthless punishment of those who challenged his authority, Brooke junior extended his control and the borders of his kingdom during his long reign, which lasted until his death in 1917.

The third and last white raja was Charles Vyner Brooke, the second son of Charles Brooke, whose rule was rudely interrupted by the arrival of the Japanese in WWII. After the Japanese surrender in August 1945, Sarawak was placed under Australian military administration until Brooke, who had fled to Sydney, decided to cede his 'kingdom' to the British in 1946. On 1 July Sarawak officially became a British Crown colony, thus putting Britain in the curious position of acquiring a new colonial possession at a time when it was shedding others.

Cession was followed by a brief but bloody anticeSSIONist movement supported chiefly by Anthony Brooke, Vyner Brooke's nephew and heir apparent. About 300 government officers

resigned in protest at being excluded from the political process, and the conflict climaxed in late 1949 when the governor of Sarawak was murdered by a Malay student. By 1951, however, the movement had lost its momentum and Brooke urged supporters to give it up.

Along with Sabah (then North Borneo) and Brunei, Sarawak remained under British control when Malaya gained its independence in 1957. In 1962 the British proposed including the Borneo territories into the Federation of Malaya. At the last minute Brunei pulled out, as the sultan (and, one suspects, Shell Oil) didn't want to see the revenue from its vast oil reserves channelled to the peninsula. At the same time, Malaya also had to convince the UN that Philippine claims to North Borneo were unfounded, as was Indonesia's argument that the formation of Malaysia was a British neocolonialist plot. The agreement was finally hammered out in July 1963, and in September of the same year the Federation of Malaysia was born.

This was also when the Indonesian Konfrontasi (Confrontation) erupted, initiated by then Indonesian president Achmed Soekarno, who hoped to destabilise the fledgling state. Paramilitary raids and army attacks across Kalimantan's border with Sarawak and Sabah continued until 1966. At the conflict's height 50,000 British, Australian and New Zealand troops were deployed in the border area, where some horrific confrontations occurred.

Internally, Sarawak also faced conflict during the early 1960s. The state's large population of impoverished Chinese peasant farmers and labourers were courted by the North Kalimantan Communist Party, which supported guerrilla activity. After the collapse of the Indonesian Communist Party in 1965, however, Indonesians and Malaysians combined forces to drive the rebels out of their bases in Sarawak.

Today Sarawak is the most multicultural state in Malaysia, with no outright ethnic majority. Economically it has avoided the pitfalls of unemployment and federal discord that plague its neighbour, Sabah, but the state budget deficit has grown steadily over the last five years and revenue still depends heavily on the much criticised timber industry. Accusations of corruption and cronyism are virtually a daily occurrence, and most people would be surprised to find out if

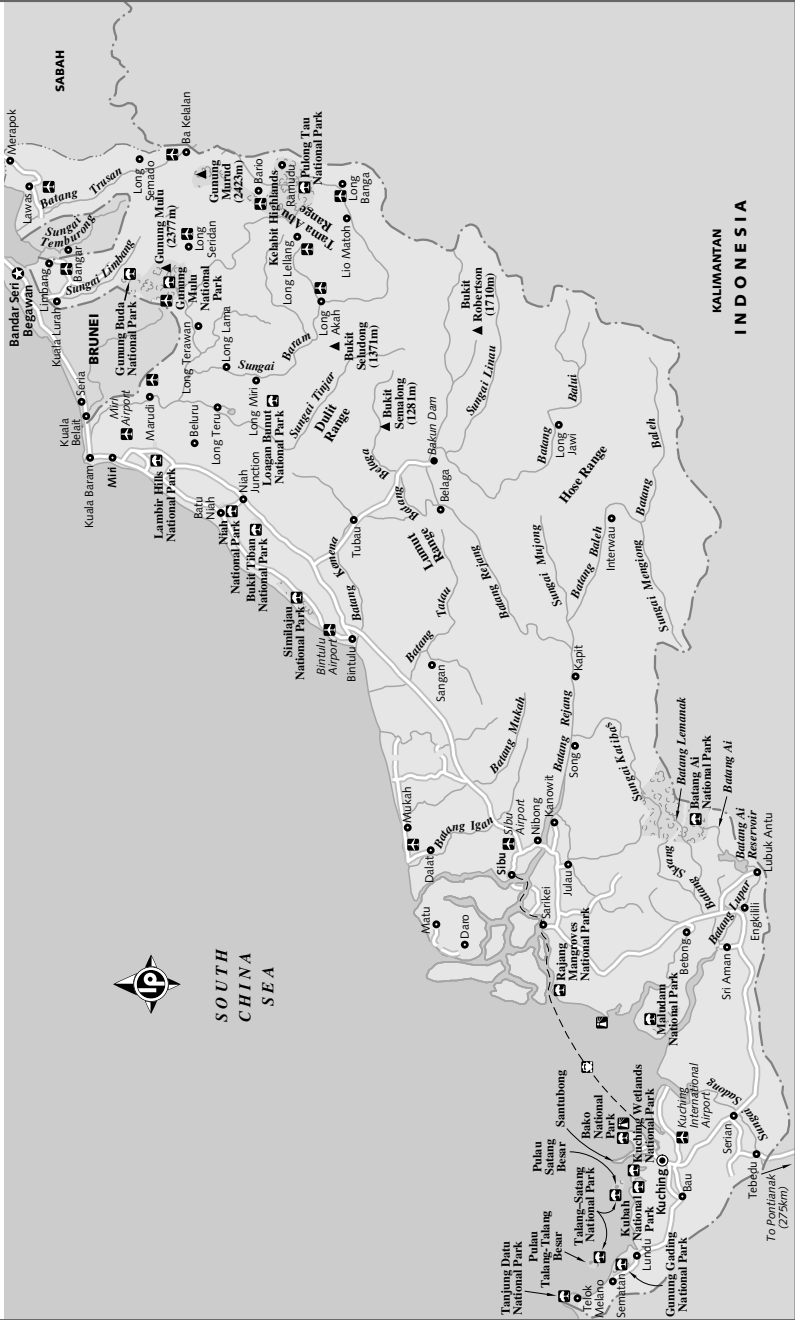
0 100 km
0 60 miles

SARAWAK

SARAWAK



SOUTH
CHINA
SEA



KALIMANTAN
INDONESIA

To Pontianak (275km)

a major company didn't have some link to a government office.

Despite the strongest showing for opposition parties since 1987, state elections in mid-2006 once again confirmed the ruling government amid widespread rumours of dubious tactics. Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud (now in his eighth term) has described his unchanged cabinet as 'transitional', but exactly what transitions are involved remains to be seen. In 2008, his son won a seat in the Malaysian parliament – he had no previous political experience.

Climate

Sarawak has a hot and humid climate, with temperatures generally between 27°C and

34°C. It's cooler up in the hills, especially in the Kelabit Highlands. The heaviest rainfall occurs with the northeast monsoon from November to February, though it rains throughout the year. There's an average annual rainfall of about 350mm to 450mm.

Visas & Permits

As a semiautonomous state, Sarawak has its own immigration controls designed to protect indigenous people from being swamped by migrants from the peninsula and elsewhere, and to prevent the smuggling of protected plants and animals. You will have to clear immigration every time you cross a border – travelling to or from the peninsula, Sabah, Brunei and, of course, Indonesia.

OFF WITH THEIR HEADS!

Borneo has often been dubbed 'The Land of the Headhunters' – a catchphrase popularised by the Sarawak Tourism Board when they chose it as their promotional slogan (then they promptly abandoned the motto after realising that travellers weren't particularly psyched about the threat of decapitation). Headhunting has been a key facet of Borneo's indigenous culture for over 500 years, yet many of the rites, rituals and beliefs surrounding the gruesome tradition remain shrouded in mystery.

The act of taking heads was treated with the utmost seriousness, and warriors practised two types of premeditated expeditions. The first was known as the *kayo bala* – a group raid involving several warriors – while the second, *kayo anak*, was performed by a lone brave, or a *bujang berani*. In the upper regions of the Batang Rejang, the *kayo anak* was a common method of wooing a prospective bride. Believe it or not, the most valuable heads were those belonging to women and children, who were usually hidden away from marauders near the longhouse hearth. Only the savviest and sneakiest warrior could ambush a child or woman as they bathed or picked berries unattended.

After a successful hunt, the warrior would wander the jungle, wrestling with the taken spirit rather than letting down his guard for a nap. In the morning, he would return to his longhouse where the head would be smoked and strung up for the others to see and honour. Heads were worshipped and revered, and food offerings were not uncommon. A longhouse with many heads was feared and respected by the neighbouring clans.

The fascinating tradition began its gradual decline in 1841 when James Brooke, at the behest of Brunei's sultan, started quashing the hunt for heads in order to attract foreign traders. No one wanted to trade in Borneo due to the island's nasty reputation for harbouring ferocious noggin-grabbing warriors. However, the sultan wasn't interested in importing goods – he wanted to charge traders hefty port taxes (Brunei's cache of black gold hadn't yet been discovered). A nasty skirmish involving a knife-wielding pirate and a Chinese merchant's noodle gave Brooke the opportunity to show the Dayaks that he meant business – he promptly executed the criminal.

Headhunting flew under the radar until WWII when British troops encouraged the locals to start swinging machetes at Japanese soldiers (many of their heads still hang as longhouse cranium ornaments). Today murmurs about headhunting are usually sensationalised to drum up foreign intrigue – the last 'tête offensive' was during the ethnic struggles in the late 1990s (in Indonesian Kalimantan). As Borneo's indigenous people continue to embrace Christianity over animistic superstition, many longhouses have dismantled their dangling dead. Although, if you ask around, you'll quickly learn that the heads haven't actually been tossed away – that would just be bad luck!

On arrival, travellers of most nationalities will be granted a three-month stay, though at some borders (particularly land crossings) you may only be given 30 days. Since you can easily spend a month exploring Sarawak, you may have to extend your visa. Extensions can be granted at the immigration office in Kuching (p412).

If you plan to visit any of the longhouses above Kapit on the Rejang or Boleh Rivers, you will need a free permit, which can be easily obtained in Kapit (p439).

The **Indonesian Consulate** (☎ 082-421734; 6th fl, Bangunan Binamas, Jln Padungan 93100, Kuching; 🕒 8.30am-noon & 2-4pm Mon-Fri) in Kuching is south of the city centre. Please note that during the time of research, plans were underway to move the office, although a new location has not been chosen. Most nationalities require visas to enter Indonesia, which is accessible from Sarawak by air at Pontianak or by land at Tebedu/Entikong. Visas may take several (usually three) days to process.

National Parks

Many of Malaysia's finest tracts of jungle and coastline lie within Sarawak's verdant borders. The following laundry list includes the state's finest preserves, many of which can be tackled on a day trip from Kuching or Miri.

Always take along your passport (or a photocopy of your passport), as you need to register at the following parks:

Bako National Park (p423) This 27-sq-km park has 17 trails and beaches to explore. It's about 1½ hours north of Kuching.

Batang Ai National Park (p434) This 240-sq-km park, deep in Iban country, is home to wild orang-utans. It's some 250km east of Kuching.

Bukit Tiban National Park A recovered logged area reforested and given park status in 2000, this 80-sq-km park is 50km northeast of Bintulu.

Gunung Buda National Park This 62-sq-km park sits up on the northeast side of Gunung Mulu National Park and contains similar karst formations and caves to those found at Gunung Mulu.

Gunung Gading National Park (p429) On Sarawak's extreme western tip near Sematan, the rafflesia flower is a major attraction at this 54-sq-km park.

Gunung Mulu National Park (p452) Sarawak's most popular national park (529 sq km) is east of Marudi near the Brunei border.

Kubah National Park (p427) This 22-sq-km park has hiking trails in a pristine rainforest and clear rivers to swim in. It's 20km west of Kuching.

Kuching Wetlands National Park (p427) Located a mere 15km from central Kuching, this mangrove reserve is home to a cornucopia of fascinating wildlife including Irrawaddy dolphins.

Lambir Hills National Park (p448) Famous for its diverse plant species, this 69-sq-km park is 32km south of Miri.

Loagan Bunut National Park This 10.7-sq-km park includes Sarawak's largest freshwater lake; it's in the Miri hinterland.

Maludam National Park This 431-sq-km sanctuary, about 70km northwest of Sri Aman, protects the red banded langur monkey and other primates.

Niah National Park (p450) This 32-sq-km park has massive caves and is the source of the raw ingredient for birds-nest soup; it's about halfway between Bintulu and Miri.

Pulong Tau National Park (p458) Sarawak's newest park (598 sq km) was gazetted in 2005 to preserve the rich jungle of the Kelabit Highlands.

Rajang Mangroves National Park This 94-sq-km park, in the Batang Rejang estuary on the coast west of Sarikei, provides a mangrove habitat for a variety of species.

Similajau National Park (p444) A coastal park (75 sq km), it has hiking trails, beaches and rivers – known for estuarine crocodiles – northeast of Bintulu.

Talang-Satang National Park (p432) A large marine park (194 sq km) protecting sea turtles, it includes the several *pulau* (islands) off the coast between Santubong and Sematan.

Tanjung Datu National Park (p432) This small national park (13.8 sq km) on the far southwest coast has beautiful beaches, clear rivers and coral reefs.

Currently, Batang Ai and Tanjung Datu do not have official accommodation or facilities for visitors, though it's possible to visit them through travel agencies or stay at private accommodation nearby.

Entry passes cost RM10 for adults and RM5 for children, and are issued at park entrances. Accommodation charges for national parks have been standardised across Sarawak. Most of the incidental charges are small and go towards upkeep of the park, but they can add up.

It's strongly recommended that you book accommodation in advance either through a tourist information centre or a **National Parks & Wildlife Booking Office** Kuching (☎ 082-248088; 🕒 8am-5pm Mon-Fri); Miri (☎ 085-434184, 436637; 452 Jln Melayu; 🕒 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun).

Sarawak's **Forest Department** (www.sarawakforestry.com) has an excellent website with national

park information, and online bookings are available at <http://ebooking.com.my>.

Tours

Sarawak has an incredible array of travel agencies and tour operators offering trips to every corner of the state. Some companies cater to special interests, such as photography, natural history and textiles, tattoos or crafts. Kuching has by far the highest number of companies.

The most common packages are centred on Gunung Mulu National Park, Sarawak's biggest attraction. In Kuching, the standard short-stay package will generally involve a city tour and visits to the Sarawak Cultural Village, Semenggoh Orang-utan Rehabilitation Centre and Bako National Park. One- to three-night trips to the longhouses south of Kuching are also big sellers.

As well as trekking tours, there is a growing number of adventure-sports activities, though Sarawak can't yet compete with Sabah in this department. Possibilities include potholing (caving), mountain biking and some reef diving. Almost any itinerary can be tailored to include a longhouse visit or local homestay, which often include cultural performances or communal activities such as cooking and harvesting.

Most tours are priced for a minimum of two people (and often five or six). Trips are often cancelled because of insufficient numbers, particularly with the cheaper tour operators – refunds should be immediate if a trip is cancelled. If you're looking for a group to join, you can leave a contact number with tour operators or the local tourist information centre.

If you found Sabah's rigid infrastructure to be stifling, you'll be able to breathe much easier in Sarawak – Malaysia's largest state is great for independent travel.

Getting There & Away

There are regular flights to Kuching from Kuala Lumpur, Johor Bahru, Kota Kinabalu, Macau, Penang, Hong Kong, Guangzhou, Bangalore, Perth and Singapore.

You can also enter Sarawak by land from Sabah, Brunei or Indonesia. These routes are all served by express buses. Express boats and speedboats run from the northern towns of Limbang and Lawas to Brunei, connecting with services to Sabah.

Getting Around

AIR

The recent advent of uber-cheap airfares has made travel around Sarawak a fair bit easier. Plane tickets are often similarly priced to bus tickets, if you can catch a good deal online.

The best way to reach Gunung Mulu National Park and the Kelabit Highlands (arguably the two best attractions in Sarawak) is by plane. Daily MASwings flights depart from Miri in the morning. We highly recommend booking in advance as there are only a handful of seats on each flight. There are multiple daily flights connecting Kuching and Miri.

BOAT

Transport by boat has long been the traditional way of getting around in Sarawak, though the use of this option has decreased in recent years as roads have improved. War parties and traders used to rely on brute paddling strength to get them up and down Sarawak's rivers; these days travel on larger rivers, such as the Rejang and Baram, is accomplished in fast passenger launches known by the generic term *ekspres* (express). These long, narrow boats carry around 100 people, and look a bit like ex-Soviet jumbo jets with the wings removed. Where and when the express boats can't go, river travel is still mainly by longboat, though these are now motorised.

Hiring a longboat is often your only option for reaching many spots. Be prepared to pay a fair bit for the experience, as fuel isn't cheap in remote areas (ie most of Sarawak). Getting a group together to share costs can be worth the time and effort.





LAND

Travel by road in Sarawak is generally good, and the road from Kuching to the Brunei border is surfaced all the way. Travellers arriving from elsewhere in Malaysia will be pleasantly surprised by the relative sanity of Sarawak drivers. Express buses ply the Kuching–Brunei route all the time, although it should be noted that the boat ride from Kuching to Sibul is significantly faster than the bus route.

KUCHING

pop 632,500

A capital, a kingdom, a cat, a colonial relic – Kuching wears many hats. Sarawak's main

INFORMATION		SLEEPING 		Ipanema..... 52 E3	
Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf.....(see 59)		Berambih Lodge..... 26 C2		Mojo..... 53 E3	
Cyber City..... 1 D2		Fairview..... 27 B4		Ruai.....(see 35)	
Everrise Moneychanger..... 2 E3		Harbour View Hotel..... 28 C3		Soho..... 54 E3	
Indonesian Consulate..... 3 F3		Hilton Hotel..... 29 D2			
Main Post Office..... 4 C2		Hotel Grand		SHOPPING 	
Majid & Sons..... 5 B2		Margherita Kuching..... 30 E2		ARTrageously	
Maybank..... 6 E2		John's Place..... 31 D3		Ramsey Ong..... 55 C2	
Mohamed Yahia & Sons.....(see 59)		Kuching Waterfront		Borneo	
Mr Clean..... 7 D3		Lodge..... 32 C2		Headhunters	
National Parks &		Lodge 121..... 33 C3		Tattoo &	
Wildlife Booking		Mr D's B&B..... 34 C2		Piercing Studio..... 56 C3	
Office..... 8 C2		Nomad..... 35 C3		Empress Studio..... 57 B2	
Popular Book Co.....(see 60)		Pinnacles..... 36 D3		Sarakraf.....(see 59)	
Standard Chartered		Singgahsana Lodge..... 37 C3		Sarawak Craft	
Bank..... 9 D2				Council..... 58 B2	
Visitors Information		EATING 		Sarawak Plaza..... 59 E2	
Centre..... 10 C2		a-ha Café..... 38 C3		Tun Jugah	
		Bla Bla Bla..... 39 C3		Shopping	
		Black Bean Coffee &		Centre..... 60 E2	
		Tea Company..... 40 C2			
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		Chin Sa Barbeque		TRANSPORT	
Art Museum..... 11 B3		Specialist..... 41 E3		AirAsia..... 61 E3	
Borneo Adventure..... 12 C2		Chinese Food Stalls..... 42 C2		Batavia Air..... 62 E3	
Borneo Interland Travel..... 13 C2		Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf.....(see 59)		Bus Stop for	
Brooke Memorial..... 14 C2		Green Hill Corner..... 43 C3		Pending Wharf..... 63 D2	
Bumbu Cooking School..... 15 C2		Hawker Centre..... 44 B2		Bus Stop for STC	
Cat Statues..... 16 E2		Junk..... 45 C3		Bus to Express	
Cat Statues..... 17 E2		Little Lebanon..... 46 B2		Bus Terminal..... 64 B2	
Great Cat of Kuching..... 18 F3		Living Room..... 47 C3		Matang	
Harmony Arch..... 19 C2		See Good Food Centre..... 48 D4		Transport Co.....(see 65)	
Hong San Temple..... 20 C2		Top Spot Food Court..... 49 D3		Petra Jaya Bus	
Islamic Museum..... 21 B3				Station..... 65 B2	
Natural Science		DRINKING 		Silk Air..... 66 E3	
Museum..... 22 B3		99..... 50 D3		STC/CLL Bus Stop..... 67 B2	
Sarawak Museum..... 23 B3		Cottage..... 51 D3		Taxi Stand..... 68 B2	
Siang Ti Miao..... 24 C2					
Tua Pek Kong..... 25 D2					

point of entry plays its romantic *Indochine* card quite well, yet manages to be Borneo's most trendy, forward-thinking destination. There's a certain cosmopolitan *je ne sais quoi* that floats through the air, especially in the evenings as hookah smoke fills the streets amid the clinking of designer cocktails – shaken not stirred, of course. In the daytime the colourful shophouses in Chinatown are abuzz as sweaty tinsmiths hawk their wares and tuxedoed businessmen line up for steamy meat buns on their lunch break.

Kuching means 'cat' in Malay, a mascot exploited at every souvenir stall and highway roundabout. The city was so named by Charles Brooke, one of the white rajahs, who must have sensed his capital's feline fierceness. Kuching embodies the spirit of a lion, sitting regally in its wild surrounds as it guards the roaring Sungai Sarawak from other prowlers.

ORIENTATION

The main sights – and most of the city – are on the south bank of the Sungai Sarawak.

The western end of the city is overlooked by the green-and-white Kuching Mosque, and is home to markets, local bus stations and museums. Most useful hotels, places to eat, banks and offices are between the mosque and the Great Cat of Kuching, 2km east. The waterfront is a quiet thoroughfare between the eastern and western parts of town.

Across the river from the wet market is the *istana* (palace). Nearby, Fort Margherita is on a low hill and visible from most points along the waterfront, while the new State Assembly Building looms large like a gilded circus tent.

Almost all attractions are within easy walking distance of each other; public buses or taxis are only needed to reach the Cat Museum (north of the river), the airport (about 12km south of town), the Express Bus Terminal (5km south) and the Pending wharf for the boat to Sibul (6km east). Most of the destinations listed in the Southern Sarawak section are doable as a day trip from Kuching.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

Mohamed Yahia & Sons (☎ 082-416928; Basement, Sarawak Plaza, Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman; ☎ 10am-9pm) Has English-language fiction and books on Borneo, plus Sarawak maps.

Popular Book Co (☎ 082-411378; Level 3, Tun Jugah Shopping Centre, 18 Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman; ☎ 9am-7pm) This is a more modern and spacious bookshop with a good selection of international titles, but fewer local interest books.

Emergency

Ambulance (☎ 999)

Fire (☎ 994)

Police (☎ 999)

Internet Access

Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf in Sarawak Plaza offers free wi-fi to their customers.

Cyber City (☎ 082-243680; www.cybercity.com.my; Taman Sri Sarawak Mall; per hr RM4; ☎ 10am-11pm Mon-Sat, 11am-11pm Sun) A clean, friendly place with printing and scanning services.

Laundry

Mr Clean (Jln Green Hill; per kg RM6; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat, 8am-4pm Sun) Reliable and economical; in the popular Green Hill area of town.

Medical Services

Kuching Specialist Hospital (KPI; ☎ 082-365777; Lot 10420, Block 11 Tabuan Stutong Commercial Centre) Good facilities for tourists and English-speaking staff.

Normah Medical Specialist Centre (☎ 082-440055; www.normah.com.my; Jln Tun Abdul Rahman) A private hospital with good facilities and staff, 4.5km west of town. It's favoured by many residents and expats.

Sarawak General Hospital (☎ 082-257555; Jln Ong Kee) For emergencies and major ailments only, 1km south of town.

Timberland Medical Centre (☎ 082-234991; Mile 3, Jln Rock) Private hospital 2km south of town with highly qualified staff.

Money

There is a RHB change counter at the airport. Expect money changers in town to only take large bills (B\$50, S\$50 etc.)

Everrise Money Changer (☎ 082-233200; 199 Jln Padungan; ☎ 9am-5pm) Cash only. Ever rise? Seriously?

Majid & Sons (☎ 082-422402; 45 Jln India) A licensed moneychanger dealing in cash only.

Maybank (☎ 082-416889; Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman; ☎ 9.15am-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 9.15am-4pm Fri) ATM 6am to midnight daily.

Mohamed Yahia & Sons (☎ 082-416928; Basement, Sarawak Plaza, Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman; ☎ 10am-9pm) Inside the bookshop here.

Standard Chartered Bank (☎ 082-252233; Jln Padungan; ☎ 9.15am-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 9.15am-4pm Fri)

Post

Main post office (Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg; ☎ 8am-4.30pm Mon-Sat) Closed on the first Saturday of every month.

Tourist Information

The excellent **visitors information centre** (☎ 082-410944; www.sarawaktourism.com; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun) is in the old courthouse. The centre's staff can tell you just about everything you need to know about travelling in Sarawak, and there are enough brochures to paper your living room. Maps abound and transport schedules are also readily available if you're unsure about which buses go where. Ask about the invaluable *Official Kuching Guide*.

The **National Parks & Wildlife Booking Office** (☎ 082-248088; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Haji Openg; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) is next door to the visitors centre and arranges accommodation at national parks (most people swing by to arrange an overnight stay at Bako National Park; p423).

Visas

Immigration office (☎ 082-245661; 2nd fl, Sultan Iskandar Bldg, Jln Simpang Tiga; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Visa extensions 3km south of town centre. From in front of the mosque, take Chin Lian Leong (CLL) bus 11 or 14A/B/C. Get off at Simpang Tiga.

SIGHTS

Like many cities, Kuching is a whole lot greater than the sum of its parts. There are a few interesting museums and historical attractions to keep you occupied, but the main attraction is the city itself. Leave plenty of time to wander aimlessly – try our walking tour (p414) to unveil the city's hidden treasures or pick up the baby-blue *Heritage Trail* pamphlet at the visitors information centre.

Note that the Astana and Fort Margherita, both on the northern banks of the Sungai Sarawak, are not currently open to the public.

Chinatown

Kuching's Chinatown is centred on Jln Carpenter and runs roughly from Jln Wyang to Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg. This area forms part of our Walking Tour (see p414). It's a collection of beautiful colonial-era shophouses and Chinese temples that is conducive to strolling (if you can take the heat). At the western end you'll find **Harmony Arch**, an ornate arch that marks the official entrance to the district. Continuing east along Jln Carpenter, you'll see **Siang Ti Miao** on your right. Take some time to enter the spotless main hall of this temple to soak up the gaudy brilliance (across the way you'll find a good Chinese hawker centre in case you need to fuel up).

At the very eastern end of Chinatown you'll find the **Hong San Si Temple**, which is easily Kuching's finest Chinese temple. Thought to date back to around 1840, this Hokkien Chinese temple was fully restored in 2003. The new stone carvings, done by stonemasons brought in from mainland China, are superb, as is the Buddhist altar.

There is a big celebration at this temple in April, with a long procession of floats, lion and dragon dancers and other groups winding their way through town following the altar of Kong Teck Choon Ong (the deity at the temple).

Finally, be sure to have a look at **Tua Pek Kong**, the temple on the red wedding-layer-cake structure on Jln Padungan at the end of Main Bazaar. It's the most popular temple in town for local Chinese residents.

Waterfront

The south bank of the Sungai Sarawak has been tastefully developed with a paved walkway, lawns and flowerbeds, a children's playground, cafes and food stalls. It's a quiet, pleasant place to walk or sit and watch the *tambang* glide past with their glowing lanterns. In the evening it's full of couples and families strolling by or eating snacks. While you're strolling, be sure to have a look at the **Brooke Memorial**, in front of the visitors information centre.

Sarawak Museum

Established in 1891 the **Sarawak Museum** (☎ 082-244232; www.museum.sarawak.gov.my; Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg; admission free; 🕒 9am-4.30pm) has a

fascinating collection of cultural artefacts and is a must-visit for anyone who wants to learn more about the region's indigenous peoples and natural environment. It consists of two wings connected by an ornate footbridge.

On the eastern side of the road is the **old wing**, opened in 1891, which currently contains the Ethnology Museum. Despite the name, displays touch on everything from natural history and geology to archaeology and anthropology; the most interesting exhibits are those dealing with the customs of Borneo's tribal peoples, including Melanau sickness images, Iban tattoos (see the boxed text, p416) and the infamous *palang* (see the boxed text, p438).

Upstairs in the Old Wing you'll find a recreated traditional longhouse display that you can enter and explore. Nearby are good wooden models of the different types of longhouse found in Sarawak. In the basketry section you'll find a beautiful Bidayu door charm, which was used to keep evil spirits out of the longhouse.

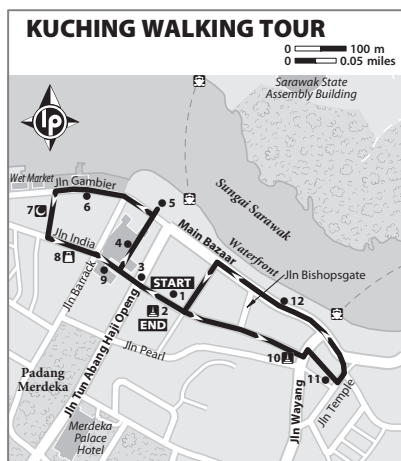
While you're at the Sarawak Museum, be sure to have a look at the **Art Museum** and **Natural Science Museum**, both of which are just down the hill from the museum's Old Wing. The former houses both permanent and temporary exhibits, some of which are very good. The latter was not open at the time of writing, but it is expected to open soon.

Islamic Museum

Over the hill from the Sarawak Museum, the **Islamic Museum** (Muzium Islam Sarawak; ☎ 082-244232; Jln P Ramlee; admission free; 🕒 9am-6pm) is well worth the walk. It's divided into seven thematically based rooms: weapons; decorative arts and domestic utensils; Qurans; Islamic architecture; science, technology, economy and literature; music and costumes; and the coming of Islam to the Malay Archipelago. Of particular note are the fantastic wooden and metal boxes in the decorative arts section and the fine carved panels in the architecture section.

Weekend Market

Kuching's best and busiest market, known locally as Pasar Minggu, sits along Jln Satok, west of the town centre. The market begins late on Saturday afternoon, when villagers bring in their produce and livestock and start trading. They sleep at their stalls and resume trading at around 5am on Sunday.



WALK FACTS

Start 43 Jln Carpenter

Finish Siang Ti Miao

Distance 2.2km

Duration 2½ hours (leisurely pace)

Things start to wind down at around noon. The air is heady with the smell of fresh coriander, ginger and herbs, which are stacked among piles of bananas, mangoes, custard apples and obscure jungle fruits sold by the local farmers' association. In the Chinese section of the market you'll find freshly cut-up boar and stinky durian when it's in season (November to February).

Cat Sights

Perched at the eastern end of Jln Padungan, the large white pussycat with the blue eyes, burgundy bow tie and wire whiskers is known as the **Great Cat of Kuching**. Other kitsch cat statues are opposite the Hotel Grand Margherita and on the waterfront. Yet another, at the roundabout at the east end of Jln Pandungan (once considered the centre of the city), features four cats on the bottom and four rafflesia flowers near the top.

Kuching's kitsch one-of-a-kind **Cat Museum** (☎ 082-446688; Bukit Siol, Jln Semariang; admission free, camera/video RM3/5; ☎ 9am-5pm), 11km from the city centre, pays homage to the origins of the city's name. It's all pretty light-hearted,

with plenty of trivia, photos, children's art and movie posters featuring cats.

The Cat Museum is in the UFO-shaped DBKU building, north of the river. It's too far to walk, so take a taxi (RM20) or the Petra Jaya bus 2B (RM1).

WALKING TOUR Undiscovered Kuching

Kuching reveals its charms quite quickly, making the city an instant fave among travellers. Charming Chinese shophouses beckon the click of a camera, rickety tin street stalls attract lunching locals with thick plumes of aromatic steam, and trendy nightspots bounce with the city's giddy glitterati as they sip imported wines. That said, the best thing about this catty capital is the fact that the longer one stays the better things get. We know you don't have oodles of time to let the hidden gems reveal themselves, so we teamed up with Jeremy Tan, a local history buff and photographer, to show you the *real* Kuching – Borneo's multicultural nexus of hot-blooded politicians, outspoken youths and trendsetting artists, all hiding under a glossy holiday veneer.

Start in the morning and skip the jam and toast at your hotel – you're in for the ultimate Bornean breakfast. Head to **43 Jln Carpenter (1)** and grab a seat at one of the rickety tables. Locals call this place Lau Ya Keng (in Hokkien) or Shang Di Miao (in Mandarin), which takes its name from the temple across the street. The stalls in this open-air food court serve up an eclectic assortment of native bites. There's noodles, laksa and, for the adventurous, a 50-year-old stall dishing out *kueh chap* – broth with pork entrails.

Cross the street to check out the colourful **Siang Ti Miao Temple (2; p413)**. The temple was completed in 1889 as a shrine to Shang Di (the Emperor of Heaven) and serves a Teochew congregation. The temple is currently under renovation (or restoration; the local Chinese have a hard time differentiating between the two, making preservation a bit tricky round these parts), perhaps to remove the garish figurines put on display in the late 1960s... The temple's most interesting celebration is the Hungry Ghost Festival, held on the 15th day of the seventh lunar month (around mid-August or early September). The Chinese believe that the gates of hell swing open for the entirety of their seventh month and the spirits of the dead are free to roam the earth. On the 15th

day, offerings of food, prayer, incense and paper money are made to appease the spirits. A priest blesses the offerings and promptly burns an enormous effigy to the Hell King in a dramatic bonfire. In the evening, parcels of food are doled out in a chaotic lottery, which is undoubtedly the most interesting part of the festival for a tourist to witness.

After leaving the temple grounds, head west down **Jln Carpenter (3)**, which locals called Attap Street. *Attap* is the Malay word for roofs made from *nipah* palm fronds. The street was once lined with *attap*-topped timber structures, all of which were incinerated in the Great Fire of 1884. At the end of Jln Carpenter you'll hit the **Old Court House (4)**, which was the main administrative centre around the time of the Great Fire. Today this unique architectural relic serves as the Sarawak Tourism Complex (stop in and grab some handy brochures!). Don't miss the Brooke Memorial, built in 1924, standing in the middle of the courtyard.

Across the road is the **Square Tower (5)**, which guarded the lazy river against marauders along with its companion bastion, Fort Margherita, across the river (currently closed). Both structures were erected around 1879, and over the last century the tower has served as a prison, a mess and dance hall.

From here, move on towards **Jln Gambier (6)**, named after the ubiquitous vine used for tanning, dyeing, betel chewing, and herbal medicines. After sampling a selection of Indian spices and Chinese herbs, have a look at the empty buildings across the street – this used to be the Old Market, a trading centre that pre-dates the reign of the white rajahs. In 2008 the local vendors were contentiously evicted to an area outside the city centre after the local government decided to extend the waterfront. Locals are fighting against the redevelopment as it would mean the demolition of several historic structures like the Cheko Market (1924), the Fish Market (1924) and the First Sarawak Museum (1889).

Still on Gambier Street, pay particular attention to a row of shops with distinctive Moorish facades. Don't miss the entrance to the **Indian Mosque (7)** – Kuching's oldest, built before the Brooke Era. Visitors may enter the mosque during non-prayer hours. Duck down the tiny passageway beside the mosque, hidden behind a profusion of spices, to reach **Jln India (8)**, once the main shopping district for imported textiles, brassware and household

goods. Converted into a pedestrian mall in the 1980s, it's a charming place for a stroll, especially Fridays when the young Muslim congregation emerges from their midday prayer.

There are several buildings of historical interest at the intersection of Jln Barrack (no relation to Obama) and Jln Carpenter; the **Round Tower (9)** is perhaps the most intriguing. Constructed in 1886, the building was used by the dreaded *kempeitai* (Japanese military police) during the Occupation. Today the structure hosts the Sarawak Craft Council, although most locals dare not step inside – its haunted (all buildings used by the *kempeitai* are haunted...).

Continue down Jln Carpenter, past your starting point, and head to **Hong San Si Temple (10; p413)**, also known by its Hokkien name, Say Ong Kong, at the corner of Jln Wayang. Remember the Great Fire of 1884 that destroyed the *attap* roofs? Well, according to legend, as the flames roared down the street, onlookers spotted a mysterious boy waving a black banner. Suddenly, the wind changed directions and the fire stopped just short of the shrine. Today the Hokkien people worship this child-god with a yearly procession – the largest in Kuching. For a bird's eye view of the city's colonial core, hop on the elevator to the top floor of the **Star Cineplex (11)** across street.

Swing around the corner on to **Main Bazaar (12)** and reward yourself with some retail therapy (see the boxed text, p421). Turn on Jln China and pass the faint clinking of the remaining tinsmith workshops before returning to our starting point – the colourful Siang Ti Miao Temple on Jln Carpenter. By now (around 11am) a nondescript cart on wheels will have set up shop dispensing scrumptious banana fritters, which are undoubtedly the best in town. Let your nose guide you – you can't miss it!

COURSES

There are several places around town that offer Malay and Bidayah cooking courses. Try **Bumbu Cooking School** (☎ 082-380050; bumbu.cookingclass@hotmail.com; 57 Jln Carpenter; per person RM70) or ask about the tailor-made cooking classes at Rom Orchid Garden (p417).

TOURS

Kuching is the main hub of Sarawak's tourist economy. Everything in our Southern

BEJALAI BODY ART

His reputation preceded him – Ernesto was *the* man to see around town for the best tattoos in all of Borneo. We were invited up to his studio – a saloon-style loft in central Kuching – to learn more about the mythos and mystery behind the coveted Iban *bejalai*. First we hung out among brass skulls and bamboo carvings as the monotonous buzz of the ink gun jittered in the hazy air. Then, over mugs of tepid insta-coffee and mounds of crinkled cigarette butts, we talked with the artist about the cultural significance of his art, and the meaning behind his tribal tattoos.

The *bejalai*, he explained, can loosely be defined as a journey, or a voyage of discovery. After leaving the safety of the village, a warrior-to-be would head out into unfamiliar lands. Lessons were learned and skills were taught, like boat building, hunting, shamanism and even traditional dancing. With each task mastered, the traveller would add a tattoo to their body creating a biographical constellation of swirling designs.

Traditionally an Iban would get their first tattoo around the age of 10 or 11. The initiating tattoo was the eggplant flower, or the *bungai terung*, drawn on each shoulder. The design was rich with symbolism, and commemorated the beginning of one's journey as a man (women were known to get them as well). The squiggly centre of the flower symbolised new life and represented the intestines of a tadpole, visible through their translucent skin. The plant's petals were a reminder that patience was a virtue, and that only a patient man could truly learn life's lessons.

After receiving the eggplant ornaments, the Iban was ready to leave home. Scores of tattoos followed, including the popular crab design, usually inked on a man's arm. The design symbolised strength, and evoked the strong legs and hard shell of the crafty sideways walkers. When animism was more widely embraced, the Iban believed that the design, when drawn with magical ink, could act like the actual shell of a crab, protecting bearers from the blade of a machete. For women, tattoos on the arm meant that they were skilled at craft making.

Sarawak section (national parks, orangutan sanctuaries, longhouses) can be visited by linking up with a tour operator (though most of these can be done on one's own as well). Most of the hotels listed offer their own tours or have links with an operator. Many companies also offer car hire, with or without driver. The visitors information centre has a photocopied list of well-established operators and can make objective recommendations based on your desires.

Reputable operators include but are not limited to:

Borneo Adventure (☎ 082-245175; www.borneoadventure.com; 55 Main Bazaar) Award-winning company that has set the standard for private tours in Borneo. The leader in cooperative projects benefiting Sarawak's indigenous people. Excellent guides.

Borneo Interland Travel (☎ 082-413595; www.bitravel.myjaring.net; 1st fl, 63 Main Bazaar) Offers a wide variety of tours near Kuching and throughout Sarawak at reasonable prices.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The three-day **Rainforest World Music Festival** (www.rainforestmusic-borneo.com) unites Borneo's indigenous tribes with international artists for a musical extravaganza in the Sarawak Cultural

Village outside Kuching. It's held annually in the middle of July. Check out our website (www.lonelyplanet.com) for an informative podcast about the festival.

SLEEPING Budget & Midrange

The recent fad in Kuching is trendy budget sleeping spots decked out with generous amounts of hip lounge furniture. These flash-packer dens have quickly overtaken the tired midrange hotels of yore.

Mr D's B&B (☎ 082-248852; www.misterdbnb.com; 26 Jln Carpenter; dm/s/tw/d from RM20/55/65/75; ☎ ☑) 'Tribal chic' is the name of the game here – the hang-out room at the entrance is stuffed with sassy leopard-skin pillows and there are arty black-and-white prints of tribal warriors on the wall. Rooms are quite standard though – they're very clean, but most of 'em don't have windows. Rather than signing a guest book, travellers are invited to doodle their good-bye message on the walls. Thoughtful perks include wi-fi throughout and power points beside everyone's pillow.

Fairview (☎ 082-240017; <http://thefairview.com.my>; 6 Jln Taman Budaya; dm/s/d RM25/50/70; ☎ ☑) An oldie but a goodie, Fairview scores big points for

Later on, the bravest travellers received the coveted throat tattoo as they evolved into a *bujang berani* (literally meaning 'brave bachelor'). The design – a fish body that morphs into a double-headed dragon – wanders up from the soft spot at the centre of the human clavicle, known as the 'life point' to the Iban.

In addition to the intricate rules of design, there were also several tattoo taboos surrounding the *bejalai* tradition. The most important faux pas to avoid was getting a tattoo on the top of one's hands – this area of the body was strictly reserved for those who had taken heads. Also, every animal inked facing inward must have something to eat – dragons were always depicted with a small lizard near their mouths – because if the design was left hungry it would feed on the bearer's soul.

Technically the *bejalai* never stopped during a warrior's life, although when they returned to their village, the tattoos acted like the stamps in a passport; visual aids when recounting stories of adventure. It is only through the *bejalai* that one could collect these veritable merit badges, and the number of tattoos acquired greatly increased one's desirability as a bachelor. It was also believed that a large number of tattoos enabled a soul to shine brightly in the afterlife.

Over the last century the tattooing materials have greatly changed. Traditionally, the ink was made from soot mixed with fermented sugarcane juice, and needles were made from bone or bamboo. Then brass needles were introduced, followed by steel, and in the 1970s household sewing needles were quite popular. Standard surgical steel needles are commonly used today.

The tradition of tattoos has evolved as well. In recent years, fewer Iban are getting inked, and those who do generally get designs commemorating trips to other countries, or military service. Although it is by no means a lost art, the tradition of *bejalai* body art is beginning to fade.

Ernesto K Umpie, 39, is a renowned Iban tattoo artist with a studio in downtown Kuching (p420). Visit www.borneoheadhunter.com to check out his work.

its unpretentious atmosphere and friendly owners who dispense oodles of information about hidden Kuching gems.

Nomad (☎ 082-237831; www.borneobnb.com; 3 Jln Green Hill; dm/s/tw/d from RM26/55/65/75; 📶 📺) There's a buzzing backpacker vibe at this Iban-run favourite. Bright patches of paint enliven the rooms, and guests congregate in the common area to hang out with the friendly management or watch the latest episode of Malaysian reality TV. Our favourite thing was the all-day breakfast – swing by the kitchen for toast, fruit and sugary snacks any time you want. If Nomad is full, try Tracks next door – it's owned by the same people (and looks exactly the same, except slightly smaller).

Rom Orchid Garden (☎ 082-447001; kakrom@tm.net.my; 333A, Lg 5, Jln Siol Kandi; r per person RM30; 📶) Located in a quiet *kampung* on the way to Bako National Park, Rom Orchid Garden is a small campus of traditional Malay homes. There's an on-site orchid garden, as the name would suggest, and thousands of other potted plants scattered throughout. If you want to check out Borneo's version of suburban life, why not give this place a whirl? There's also a great restaurant offering traditional cooking classes, so you won't have to go far for a good bite.

Lodge 121 (☎ 082-428121; www.lodge121.com; 121 Jln Tabuan; dm/s/d/tr RM30/59/79/99; 📶 📺) Polished concrete abounds at this mod charmer. The owners have transformed a commercial space into a multileveled hang-out for flashpackers. The dorm room is in the attic, and although the lack of bunks is welcoming, the mattresses are on the floor.

Pinnacles (☎ 082-419100, 012-8096866; www.pinnacleskuching.com; 21 Block G, Jln Borneo; dm/d RM30/60; 📶) As far as dorm rooms go, you'll probably do better at Singgahsana or Kuching Waterfront Lodge, but keep Pinnacles in your back pocket in case the other spots are full.

our pick Singgahsana Lodge (☎ 082-429277; www.singgahsana.com; 1 Jln Temple; dm RM30, r RM88-138; 📶 📺) Tourists can thank Singgahsana for upping the ante in Kuching's budget bed game. The trendsetting owners out-swanked the competition early on with an effective use of colourful accent walls and tribal knick-knacks – now everyone's playing catch-up, though no one has completely caught up just yet. Don't miss the hunting lodge-style bar at the top of the stairwell – it's only open to guests.

Kuching Waterfront Lodge (☎ 082-231111; www.kuchingwaterfrontlodge.com; 15 Main Bazaar; dm/d RM30/110; 📶 📺) The only spot right in the heart of the

Main Bazaar, this up-and-comer has a large welcoming lobby stacked with lacquered furnishings. Rooms are light on designer details, but they're comfortable enough (ask to see a few options before dropping your bags). The best deal here are the dorm rooms – they're slightly pricier than the competition so you'll usually find yourself with a suite to yourself!

Harbour View Hotel (☎ 082-274666; www.harbourview.com.my; Jln Temple; r from RM170; 📶 📺 📺) If it's modern comforts you're after, this is one of Kuching's best bargains – it offers full Western facilities for a thoroughly Southeast Asian price. The tall white building does indeed furnish good river vistas, and the buffet breakfast (RM10) is as lavish as one could wish for. The hotel also has an on-call doctor and bartender (hopefully not the same person). Big discounts are usually available.

Also worth a look-see:

Berambih Lodge (☎ 012-888 5589, 082-238589; 104 Jln Carpenter; dm/s/d RM20/35/45; 📶 📺 📺) Bamboo-lined common area feels like a Hawaiian holiday. Rooms could use a designer's touch.

John's Place (☎ 016-894 5592, 082-258329; 5 Jln Green Hill; r from RM55; 📶 📺 📺) Simple rooms are fresh and clean. Family suites are bright and spacious.

Top End

Keep an eye out for the white behemoth up the road from the Green Hill area – it's the new Novotel, and should be complete in 2010.

Hotel Grand Margherita Kuching (☎ 082-423111; www.grandmargherita.com/gmh; Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman; r incl breakfast from RM260; 📶 📺 📺) Kuching's sprawling Grand Margherita occupies a fine piece of real estate right on the river, smack dab in the middle of town. The rooms are of good quality and well kept, and the pool is welcome after a day of sightseeing.

FourPoints (☎ 082-280888; www.fourpoints.com/kuching; Jln Lapangan Terbang Baru; r RM265; 📶 📺 📺) A new competitor in the upmarket range, Four Points is a Sheraton product that provides sleek suites at competitive rates, 5km south of town.

Hilton Hotel (☎ 082-248200; www.kuching.hilton.com; Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman; r RM419; 📶 📺 📺) Dominating the waterfront even from across the street, the Hilton towers over Chinatown and offers prim rooms stuffed with the usual factory furnishings.

EATING

Kuching has the best selection of food in Borneo, boasting over a thousand choices,

ranging from hawk-stall fare through good seafood to first-class Italian. Cafes serving standard rice and noodle dishes, beef, roti (unleavened flaky bread) and *murtabak* (roti filled with mutton, chicken or vegetables) are everywhere. For good Western fare try the upmarket hotels.

Restaurants & Cafes

Pick up the *Official Guide to Kuching*, available at the tourist information centre, for a veritable laundry list of top eats. Check out <http://eatingoutkuching.com> for the latest goss on the hot places to eat.

Chin Sa Barbeque Specialist (Jln Padungan; chicken rice from RM3; 📶 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Eat in or take away at this popular Jln Padungan barbecue joint, where savoury chicken or pork slices over rice are the speciality of the house.

Rom Orchid Garden (☎ 082-447001; mains RM3-6) If you're out in the burbs, Rom is a great place for spicy Malay dishes. Stick around to try your hand in the kitchen – you can even spend the night (p417).

Black Bean Coffee & Tea Company (☎ 082-420290; Jln Carpenter; drinks from RM3.90; 📶 9am-6.30pm Mon-Sat) Serving fresh, fair-trade coffee, this quaint cafe, housed in a converted Chinese shop-house, strikes the guiltless balance between Starbucks and Sarawak.

a-ha Café (☎ 016-889 3622; 38 Jln Tabuan; mains RM6-28; 📶 breakfast, lunch & dinner) a-ha wouldn't look at all out of place in any cosmopolitan European capital, and the emphasis is firmly on healthy eating, with organic produce, all-natural ingredients and no MSG or artificial additives, plus a special 'healthy heart' menu. Whether you treat yourself to Norwegian salmon, ostrich steak or deer kebabs, or just pop in for a fruit 'n' vegetable smoothie, a-ha is a rare treat with virtually zero guilt factor. Wi-fi available.

Little Lebanon (☎ 082-247523; Japanese Bldg, Jln Barrack; mains from RM6, sheesha RM10.50; 📶 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Borneo's only Arabic restaurant sits in an elegant breezeway overlooking colourful Jln India. Belly dancing music wafts through the air as contented customers slurp some muddy Turkish coffee and dip their pita pillows into freshly mashed hummus. Swing by in the evenings for flavourful puffs on a *sheesha* pipe – there's celery and cherry, but mint is the best.

Bla Bla Bla (☎ 082-233944; 27 Jln Tabuan; mains from RM15; 📶 dinner Wed-Mon) Spiffier than a

pimp's outfit, Bla Bla Bla brings a splash of Hollywood to Kuching. The tasty fusion food is anything but 'blah', and patrons will adore the koi pond and golden Buddhas.

our pick Junk (☎ 082-259450; 80 Jln Wayang; mains from RM15; ☎ dinner Wed-Mon) The coolest car-boot sale you'll ever see, Junk is filled to the brim with...well...junk. But it's all so very chic – when you walk in you'll think, 'Did Amelie explode in here?' A favourite among Malaysian celebs, Bla Bla Bla's sister restaurant offers superb sophisticated Western food with an Italian bias. A word to the wise: don't set your watch by any of the wall clocks...

Living Room (☎ 082-233944; Jln Wayang; mains from RM25; ☎ dinner) Living Room completes Kuching's trendy triumvirate of fusion eats. The menu mixes the top noshes at Junk and Bla Bla Bla and guests dine in breezy open-air *salas*. You will no doubt find yourself wondering where you are: is this Borneo, Bali or Barcelona?

See Good Food Centre (☎ 082-251397; 53 Jln Ban Hock; meals from RM30; ☎ noon-11pm, closed 4th & 18th of the month) Follow the crowds of locals here to try Sarawak specialities such as lobster in pepper sauce, *midin* (crispy jungle fern) and *ambol* (bamboo or finger clam).

Hawker Centres & Food Stalls

Chinese Food Stalls (43 Jln Carpenter; meals from RM3; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Start your day with a brilliant, old-school Kuching breakfast (see Walking Tour, p414). Note that Chinese locals refer to this hawker centre as Lau Ya Keng in Hokkien.

Hawker Centre (Jln Khoo Hun Yeang; meals from RM3; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The best hawker centre in town, with both Malay and Chinese sections, is in the west end of town near Kuching Mosque (locals sometimes refer to this as the 'open-air market').

Green Hill Corner (Jln Temple; meals RM3-4; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Several stalls here crank out a variety of noodle and rice dishes, including a brilliant plate of *kway teow goreng* (fried rice noodles). The problem is that the chef who makes this dish only shows up when he damn well feels like it.

Top Spot Food Court (☎ 082-238730; Jln Padungan; meals RM4-35; ☎ lunch & dinner) The double entendre definitely holds true. This excellent rooftop plaza has acres of tables and a good variety of stalls. Order anything from abalone to banana prawns or numerous varieties of

fish, and chase it down with a cold bottle of Tiger. To get here, climb the stairs leading from Jln Padungan to Tapanga restaurant, and keep heading upstairs from there.

DRINKING & ENTERTAINMENT

Like most places in Borneo, a lively night scene usually focuses on an evening meal, but cosmopolitan Kuching has a clutch of spirited drinking spots as well (pun intended). Bars and other entertainment venues stay open until around 1am, although live music can blare on until later (especially on weekends). Beers cost around RM8 to RM10 (cocktails are a bit more) and keep an eye out for popular two-for-one happy hours. Oh, and just for the record, Fort Margherita does not dispense alcohol (actually, the whole campus is closed).

The *Official Kuching Guide* has a lengthier list for those who plan on sticking around for a while. Check out Kuching's trifecta of trendy restaurants; Bla Bla Bla, Living Room and Junk, for some pre- or post- (or between) dinner carousing (opposite).

The following options are a great place to start.

Jambu (32 Jln Crookshank) Jambu? Crookshank? The names in Kuching are pretty weird, but this local fave in a blazing pink bungalow, south of the city centre, is a hip spot to sling back a few designer cocktails with friends. Closed on Mondays.

Soho (☎ 082-247069; 64 Jln Padungan) This is arguably the hippest bar in the centre – even the name oozes London cool. Local *Gossip Girl*-esque youngsters hobnob to grind-worthy play lists of jazz, dance and latin beats. The atmosphere starts out relaxed but can definitely build up some heat under the red lights as the night draws on!

Mojo (Jln Chan Chin Ann) Wander through to the back of the Denise wine shop and you may think you've entered another world – this is a cocktail lounge every bit as fashionable as you might find in KL or Singapore, with a giggly young crowd trying to live up to the style.

Cottage (Crowne Plaza Riverside, 16 Jln Bukit Mata) Fitted out along the lines of an English pub (albeit one with no walls), proceedings start gently here with lunchtime and evening meals, leading into live music six nights a week.

Also worth a look:

99 (☎ 082-423799; 98-99 Jln Green Hill) Football on the big screen; thumping tracks on the weekend.

Ipanema (66 Jln Padungan) 'Minimal-chic' theme, with trendy tapas snacks.

Ruai (3 Jln Green Hill) Iban-themed pub below Nomad hostel.

SHOPPING

If it's traditional Borneo arts and crafts you're after, then you've come to the right place. Kuching is undoubtedly the best spot in Borneo for collectors and cultural enthusiasts. Traditional handicrafts include Orang Ulu beadwork, Bidayuh basket weaving, traditional wooden carvings and hand-woven rugs, to name just a few. Also, Sarawak pepper can be a unique and inexpensive gift for friends back home – the Malaysian government exports over 25,000 tonnes each year. Check out www.mpb.gov.my for more info about this aromatic spice.

Don't expect many bargains, but don't be afraid to negotiate either – there's plenty to choose from, and the quality varies as much as the price. Overpricing and dubiously 'aged' items are common, so be sure to spend some time browsing to familiarise yourself with prices and range before committing yourself to a purchase. Start on the aptly named **Main Bazaar** – a seemingly unending promenade of souvenir shops, some outfitted like art galleries, others with more of a 'garage sale' appeal. **Jln Carpenter**, a block behind Main Bazaar, has a few shops as well.

Sarawak Craft Council (Sarawak Handicraft Centre; ☎ 082-245652; www.sarawakhandicraft.com; 32 Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Daily demonstrations by local artists accent the eclectic and authentic assortment of tribal decor here.

ARTrageously Ramsey Ong (☎ 082-24346; www.arttrageouslyasia.com; 94 Main Bazaar) Moving away from customary handicrafts, this private gallery exhibits and sells mainly contemporary paintings, and champions local artists, including Mr Ramsey Ong himself, who is also a renowned fashion designer. It's run by the owners of Singgahsana Lodge (p417), who also happen to be amateur photographers.

Sarakraf (☎ 082-232771; Sarawak Plaza, 78 Jln Tabuan) High-end arts and crafts from around the state, with artists receiving 'fair' compensation for their talents. A cache of glossy photographs and coffee table books is also on sale.

Ourpick Borneo Headhunters Tattoo & Piercing Studio (Ministry of Pain; ☎ 019-856 6317; 47 Jln Wayang) International tattoo all-star Ernesto Umpie

inks customers with a variety of intriguing Iban designs. Check out the boxed text (p416) for the full story on Borneo's tribal body art.

Empress Studio (☎ 241009; 1B Jln India) Not much art goin' on here – this electronics boutique specialises in camera supplies, accessories and repairs. A great place to stop if you have any post- (or pre-) jungle camera woes.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

AirAsia (☎ in Malaysia 03-8775-4000, outside Malaysia +60-3-8660-4343; www.airasia.com; ground fl, Wisma Ho Ho Lim, 291 Jln Abell) has numerous daily flights to/from Kuala Lumpur at bargain-basement prices. They also fly to/from Penang and Johor Bahru. Within Borneo, they fly to/from Bintulu, Kota Kinabalu, Miri and Sibiu. Check for prices as they constantly change.

Batavia Air (☎ 082-626299; www.batavia-air.co.id; 1, ground fl, Padungan Arcade Garden, Jln Song Thian Cheok) has flights to/from Jakarta (Java) and Pontianak (Kalimantan) for around US\$50 one way.

Malaysia Airlines (MAS; ☎ in Malaysia 1300-883-000, 03-7843-3000, in Kuching 082-220618; www.malaysiaairlines.com; 215 Jln Song Thian Cheok) offers flights between Kuching and Kuala Lumpur (RM259) and Johor Bahru (RM199). They also fly between Kuching and Hong Kong and Guangzhou. Within Borneo, MAS flies to/from Bintulu (RM139), Kota Kinabalu (RM229), Miri (RM139) and Sibiu (RM89).

Silk Air (☎ 082-256772; www.silkair.com; 7th fl, Gateway Bldg, Jln Bukit Mata) has flights to/from Singapore.

Boat

Express Bahagia (☎ 082-410076) has boats running to and from Sibiu (RM45, 4½ hours), departing from the express boat wharf in Pending at 8.30am daily. Note that this is an easier and faster trip to Sibiu than the bus, which takes eight hours.

The express-boat wharf is 6.5km east of town in the suburb of Pending. Chin Lian Leong (CLL) bus 1 (RM1.50, 30 minutes) connects the wharf with Kuching. It operates from the STC-CLL bus stand near Kuching Mosque and stops on Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman just west of the Hotel Grand Margherita Kuching. Taxis from town cost RM20.

Bus

Long-distance buses depart from the **Express Bus Terminal** (Jln Penrissen), 5km southeast of the

BRINGING HOME A PIECE OF BORNEO

As you wend your way across the island, you'll happen upon thousands of potential souvenirs – masks, pearls, T-shirts, carpets, tattoos, spices – and sometimes it can be difficult to sort out the goodies from the crap.

Jln Main Bazaar in Kuching is a great place to shop, as is the Sarawak Craft Council (opposite) down the street. Here you'll find objects from all over the region. In Sabah, the markets of KK are filled with little gems like irregular pearls, sold at record low prices. Items made from indigenous materials (like rattan) are generally authentic; however, the masks aren't very Bornean (in fact, the colourful ones are Balinese). Most longhouses in Sarawak also have handicrafts for purchase, but many of these objects were actually produced in Kuching and shipped into the jungle. There's no need the stress about debating the authenticity of that wicker basket – simply ask and the locals will be honest about the product's origin.

If you are looking to bring home something more authentic (antiques, plants etc), make sure you're aware of any relevant regulations affecting your purchase. Most outlets can organise the necessary fumigation of wooden artefacts, as well as shipping. Some antiques such as cannons and jars are difficult to export. You'll need to get permission from the Sarawak Museum *before* you purchase the item. In general, it is illegal to export any plants or seeds without a permit from the Department of Agriculture (Sarawak pepper is OK), and animal parts (like leopard teeth or hornbill feathers) are strictly off limits. Seashells are commonly sold around KK and Semporna – please do not purchase these as it may encourage the pillaging of the ocean for more.

Some countries also restrict the importation of weapons as souvenirs. For example, Australian customs officials seem worried about the safety of suburban cats if blowpipes get in (although they may have a point...). The machete-esque *parang*, once the head-hunting weapon of choice, is another trinket you may have trouble explaining to your postman back home (never mind trying to get past your local customs agent!).

centre. There are regular services to Sibul (RM45, eight hours, 10 departures daily between 6.30am and 10pm), Bintulu (RM60, 10 hours, nine departures daily between 6.30am and 10pm), and Miri (RM80, 14 hours, eight departures daily between 6.30am and 10pm).

Numerous Sarawak Transport Co (STC) buses run between the terminal and city for 90 sen. The buses are 3A, 4B and 6, and leave from either in front of the mosque or on Jln Barrack behind the courthouse. A taxi costs RM20.

Border Crossings

The closest border crossing from Kuching into the Indonesian state of Kalimantan is located at Tebedu, near Serian. Travellers making land crossings into Kalimantan are required to obtain a visa beforehand from the **Indonesian Consulate** (☎ 082-421734; 6th fl, Bangunan Binamas, Jln Padungan; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2-4pm Mon-Fri) as the border posts at the Kalimantan border do not issue visas on arrival. Fees and requirements differ from country to country (it's usually RM170); contact the consulate for more information. Visas are granted upon arrival at Pontianak airport –

consider flying if you are short on time (around RM184) – overland visas usually take a few days.

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

Kuching International Airport (KCH) is 12km south of the city centre. At the time of research there were no public buses connecting the airport and the city centre. If you don't want to take a cab on arrival, then head left (which will feel counterintuitive as taxis head right) and walk for 500m until you hit the main route. Venture across the road to the bus shelter and flag a bus down (all buses in this direction are heading downtown). It may require a bit of patience, but the ride will only cost RM1.

To get to the airport from Kuching, take a Bau-bound bus and ask the driver to let you off near the airport. If the driver doesn't understand you, ask for 'Batu Sentosa' (or 'Mile 7'), but make sure you get off *before* the bus reaches the junction.

Taxis will cost around RM24. Buy a coupon before you leave at the counter outside the terminal entrance.

AROUND KUCHING



A

B

C

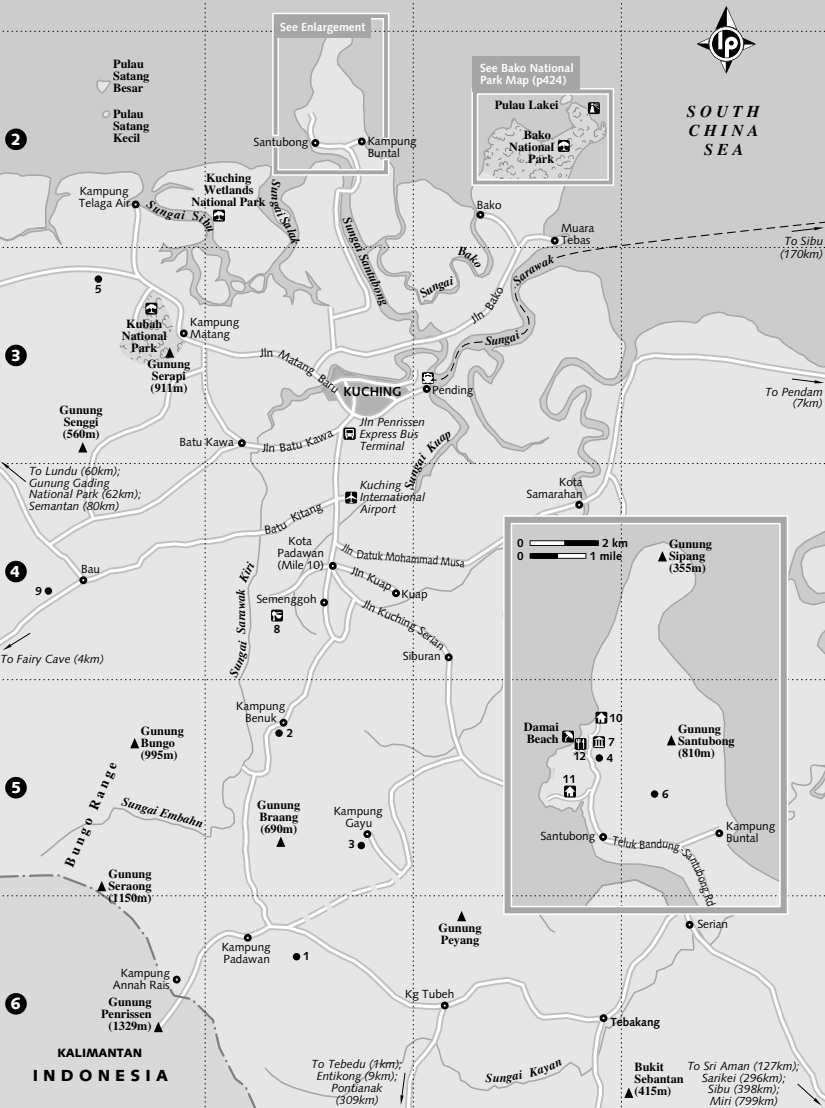
D

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

- 1 Bidayuh Longhouse (Kampung Annah Rais).....1 B6
- 2 Bidayuh Longhouse (Kampung Benuk).....2 B5
- 3 Bidayuh Longhouse (Kampung Gayu).....3 B5
- 4 Green Paradise Café.....4 C5

- Matang Wildlife Centre.....5 A3
- Rock Carvings.....6 D5
- Sarawak Cultural Village.....7 C5
- Semenggoh Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre.....8 B4
- Wind Cave.....9 A4

- SLEEPING**
- 10 Permai Rainforest Resort.....10 C5
 - 11 Village House.....11 C5
- EATING**
- 12 Damai Beach Resort.....12 C5



SARAWAK

SOUTH CHINA SEA

**KALIMANTAN
INDONESIA**

Bukit Sebantian (415m)
Sarikei (296km);
Sibu (398km);
Miri (799km)

Boat

Tambang (small passenger ferries) will ferry you across Sungai Sarawak for destinations such as Fort Margherita and the Astana. The fare is 30 sen, which you pay as you disembark. You can catch *tambang* at several jetties along the waterfront.

Car

There are several car rental agencies in the arrivals hall of Kuching International Airport. Despite the fact that they have different names, most of them are fronts for the same company, and it's very difficult to play one off against another in the hope of getting a better price.

Taxi

There are taxi ranks around the city centre and at the Express Bus Terminal. Most short trips around town cost between RM6 and RM10. Taxis in Kuching do not have meters, so be sure to settle on the fare before setting out. Luckily, most of the drivers are fairly honest and you don't have to bargain too hard.

SOUTHERN SARAWAK

Kuching's biggest asset is its proximity to a dozen natural wonders. The city is a great base for day trips to the coast and into the jungle. Almost all of the destinations in this section are within arm's reach of Kuching.

BAKO NATIONAL PARK

Bako National Park (☎ 082-478011; admission RM10; ☎ park office 8am-5pm) proves that you don't have to go too far to find Borneo's signature jungles stuffed to the treetops with wildlife. Sarawak's oldest national park is a 27-sq-km natural sanctuary located on a jagged jade peninsula jutting out into the South China Sea. Although it's only a stone's throw from the capital, it's well worth spending the night here.

Orientation & Information

Register for the park (adult/child RM10/5) upon arrival at the boat dock in Bako Bazaar. From here it's a choppy 30-minute boat ride to **park headquarters** (Telok Assam; ☎ 082-478011), where you'll find accommodation, a cafeteria and the park office. Staff will show you to

your quarters and can answer any questions you have about trails. There's a large trail map hanging outside the office; ask for a free copy. Storage lockers are available for RM5 per day.

There's a good, if slightly weathered, information centre here, with photos and displays on various aspects of the park's ecology. An entertaining video on the proboscis monkey is shown at regular times and also on request – ask at the office.

Sights & Activities

WALKING

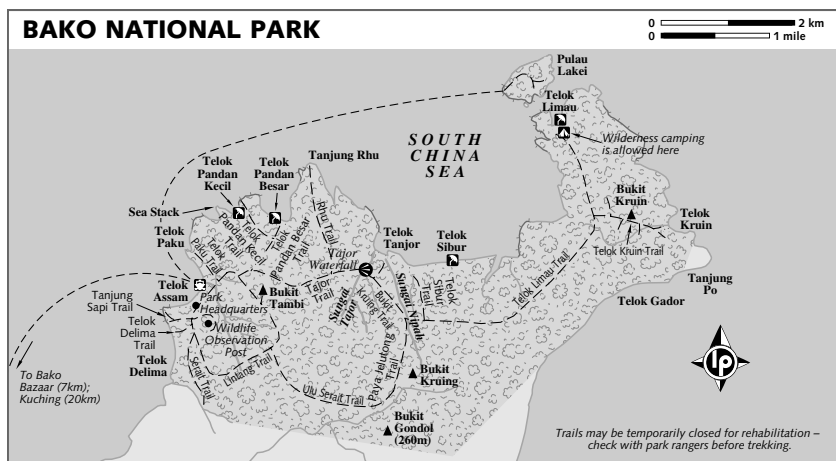
Bako has a total of 17 trails ranging from short walks around park headquarters to strenuous day treks to the end of the peninsula. Guides are available upon request at the park office (RM20 per hour), but it's easy to find your way around because all trails are colour-coded and clearly marked with splashes of paint. You don't have to go far to see wildlife (try the Telok Paku trail), and there are walks to suit all levels of fitness and motivation. Plan your route before starting out on longer walks, and aim to be back at Telok Assam before dark (about 6.45pm). Some trails may be closed for maintenance after the wet season – check at the park office before setting out.

If you have only one day in Bako, try to get here early and attempt the **Lintang Trail** (5.25km, four to five hours). It traverses a range of vegetation and climbs the sandstone escarpment up to the *kerangas*, where you'll find many pitcher plants as well as some grand views over the nearby island plateaus.

The longest trail is the **Telok Limau**, a 12km walk that's impossible to do as a return trip in one day. You will need to carry camping equipment or else arrange to be dropped off by boat in the morning and walk back to park headquarters (expect to be charged about RM165, and be sure to let someone know of your plans). A giant wooden billboard near the park office lists all trails and conservative time estimates.

Take adequate water or purification tabs and be prepared for intense sun (with sun hats and sunscreen) as it gets particularly hot in the *kerangas* and there's no shade for long stretches (sun-sensitive folks might consider lightweight long-sleeve shirts and trousers). Mozzie repellent is a good idea as well.

In the evening, park rangers may offer a guided night trek if there is enough interest from guests. This is an opportunity not to be



missed, as the wildlife present at night is entirely different from that seen during the day. The rangers are also particularly good at spotting things that an ordinary traveller would miss. Inquire at the welcome desk to see if there is a trek on that night. The trek lasts between 1½ to two hours and costs about RM10 per person.

WILDLIFE

Bako is a storehouse of incredible natural diversity: biologists estimate that the park is home to 37 species of mammals, 24 reptile species and 184 bird species (some of which are migrant species).

Walking trails pass through peat swamp, rainforest and, on the low sandstone plateau behind Telok Assam, *kerangas*. The latter, especially near the intersection of the Lintang and **Ulu Serait** trails, is a fascinating ecosystem where pitcher plants are common.

Animals include long-tailed macaques, silver-leaf monkeys, monitor lizards, palm squirrels and, at night, mouse deer, civets and culago (flying lemur). The best place to look for proboscis monkeys is along the beach at the end of the **Telok Paku Trail**, where they forage around the trees lining the cliff. Walk very quietly and listen for them crashing through the trees – they will see you long before you see them. **Telok Delima** trail offers a more close-up experience: listen for grunts and crashing vegetation and follow the sound with your eyes. You've also got a good chance of seeing them feeding around the mangrove boardwalk just before the park jetty in the late morning.

Bird-watching is best near the park headquarters, especially in and around the mangroves at Telok Assam.

The large bearded pig that hangs around near the cafeteria is a minor celebrity in the park and a big hit with kids. It often ambles by in the afternoons.

BEACHES

The beach at **Telok Pandan Kecil**, surrounded by spectacular sandstone rock formations, is gorgeous. Around the point is the famous **Bako Sea Stack**, which you have no doubt already seen on countless postcards; to get close to it for a photo, however, you'll have to hire a boat.

The quiet, attractive beach at **Telok Pandan Besar** is only accessible by boat from the park headquarters as the final descent from the cliff top of the trail is closed. The beach at **Telok Sibur** is accessible by foot but hard to reach as the descent is steep, and you have to negotiate through a mangrove swamp, but it is worthwhile as others rarely make it down here.

If you're thinking of hitching a boat ride to or from a beach, boats to beaches near park headquarters will cost around RM25 (one way or return), but to beaches further away it is quite expensive (eg RM80 to Telok Sibur). **Pulau Lakei**, on the park's northeastern tip, is also accessible by boat (RM120).

Sleeping & Eating

Bako's reputation is twofold among tourists: first, the park has amazing trails and wildlife; and second, the park's accommodation

is crap. The rooms at Bako have torn mozzie nets, dank bathrooms and a faint stench of mildew. Fortunately, plans are underway to build a new dormitory complex. Most people opt for a dorm room, although camping is allowed in a designated camping zone.

Bookings can be made at the **National Parks & Wildlife Centre** (☎ 082-248088; www.sarawaktourism.com; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Haji Openg; 🕒 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) in Kuching.

The **cafeteria** (🕒 7am-11.30pm) sells cheap buffet noodle and rice meals. The adjoining shop sells a good variety of reasonably priced tinned and dried food, chocolate, biscuits, film and toiletries, although fresh bread, produce and vegetables are not always available.

Getting There & Away

Arriving and departing Bako is dependent on the tides. Call ☎ 082-431-336 for daily tide information.

To get to Bako from Kuching, first take a bus to Bako Bazaar in Kampung Bako, then charter a boat to the park. Petra Jaya bus 6 leaves from near the Hawker Centre (open-air market) near Kuching Mosque in Kuching every hour (approximately) from 7.20am to 6pm (RM2.50, 55 minutes). The last bus back to Kuching leaves Kampung Bako at 5pm. You can also go by taxi all the way from Kuching (RM35, 45 minutes).

A boat from Bako Bazaar to the park headquarters takes 20 to 30 minutes and costs RM47 each way for up to five people. The chances are high that someone on the bus or at the pier will be looking to share a boat too.

Take note of the boat's number (or ask for the driver's mobile phone number) and be sincere when you agree to a pick-up time. If you do want to share a different boat back, tell park headquarters your boat number – staff are happy to call and cancel your original boat. Boats generally operate between 8am

and 5pm, though this is generally weather and tide dependent.

SANTUBONG PENINSULA (DAMAI)

The Santubong Peninsula is like Kuching's Malibu – a stunning seaside strip home to high-end resorts and the private villas of the elite. The main drawcards are the beaches, a golf course, modest jungle trekking and a clutch of seafood restaurants in the small fishing village of Kampung Buntal, at the base of the peninsula.

Sights & Activities

SARAWAK CULTURAL VILLAGE

Surrounding an artificial lake at the foot of Gunung Santubong, the **Sarawak Cultural Village** (☎ 082-846411; www.scv.com.my; adult/child RM60/30; 🕒 9am-5pm) is an excellent living museum. It has examples of traditional dwellings built by different peoples of Sarawak – Orang Ulu, Bidayuh, Iban and Melanau – as well as Malay and Chinese houses.

There are six buildings in all, plus a games centre and a shelter of the type used by the nomadic Penan in the jungle. The dwellings are staffed by tribespeople who demonstrate local arts and crafts, including basketry and weaving, blowpipe shooting, sago processing and bird's-nest goods production.

There's also a twice-daily performance showcasing the traditional dances of the various groups, which include spectacular physical feats such as the Melanau funeral pole dance (plus the corny 'Malaysia: Truly Asia' song). It's all quite touristy, of course, but tastefully done and sincere in intent.

Hotels and travel agencies in Kuching have packages that include admission, lunch and transport ranging in price from RM90 to RM150. If you're planning to get married in Sarawak, you can choose to tie the knot in style here according to Iban, Bidayuh, Orang Ulu or Malay ceremonies.

MISCHIEVOUS MACAQUES

The long-tailed macaques that hang about the park headquarters are great to watch, but they are cunning and mischievous – an attitude fostered by tourists who insist on offering them food. The monkeys (and some tourists) are opportunists and will make running leaps at anything they think they can carry off. Lock all your doors, close all your bags and do not leave valuables, food or drink unattended, especially on the beaches, at the canteen or on the verandahs. It's wise to leave the monkeys in peace – the males can be aggressive, and once you've seen a macaque tear open a drink can with its teeth you'll be happy that you didn't mess with them. If you get cornered, yell for the park staff. Monkeys are not a problem after dark.

There's no public transport to the village, but a shuttle bus leaves from the Riverfront and from the Hotel Grand Margherita Kuching at 9am and 12.30pm, returning at 1.45pm and 5.30pm (RM10 each way).

JUNGLE WALKING

The Santubong Peninsula offers good jungle walking within easy reach of Kuching, and more adventurous walkers can attempt the ascent of **Gunung Santubong** (910m), a 3.4km trail that takes around five hours one way.

An easy to moderate circular walk (2km, one to two hours) starts near the Damai Beach Resort and ends near the cultural village, passing a pretty **waterfall** on the way. Both trails start at the ramshackle **Green Paradise Café**, where you register and pay a RM1 fee. The trails are well marked so you shouldn't get lost, although it's a good idea to report in at the police box in Santubong village before setting off. If you really wish to put in the hours, there's a camp site near the café, but if you want to make an overnight trek you'd be better off investigating somewhere more adventurous like Bako National Park.

ROCK CARVINGS

Although they're a little difficult to find, the Santubong rock carvings on Sungai Jaong are worth seeking out, if you have an interest in archaeology. There's said to be nearly 40 of these artefacts, which are mostly carvings on boulders (including a distinct human figure), though it's unlikely you'll be able to find that many without spending quite a bit of time looking around. An accurate dating of the site hasn't been made yet, but it's thought to be at least a thousand years old. Chinese ceramic pieces from the Tang dynasty and evidence of ironmaking have also been found here, making it one of Sarawak's most important archaeological sites.

To reach the petroglyphs, turn into a gravel road south off the main road going into Santubong, about 3km after the turn-off for Kampung Buntal and near the 6km marker on the road to Damai. The gravel road will take you to two houses and a walking trail to the rock is behind them. You will more than likely need to ask a local for directions. The site is called Batu Gambar in Malay, but don't be surprised if the first local you ask does not know about it – keep trying and you'll find someone who does.

WILDLIFE TOURS

The Santubong area is home to a wide variety of wildlife, and guided wildlife tours are beginning to catch on here. Commonly spotted species include endangered Irrawaddy dolphins, known locally as *pesut*, estuarine monkeys, crocodiles, fireflies and all manner of birds

CPH Travel (☎ 082-242289; www.cphtravel.com.my; per person RM160, minimum 2 people), based in Santubong, runs wildlife tours to the area. See opposite for more information about cruise tours. If you are already in the Santubong-Buntal area, consider going with local Buntal boatman, **Mr Ehwan bin Ibrahim** (☎ 019-8265680), who offers a selection of tours of the area. Expect to pay around RM450 for a four-person boat for a dolphin-and-mangrove tour, and be sure to book three or four days in advance. **Camp Permai** (☎ 082-846847) offers guided kayaking tours for about RM60 per person.

Sleeping & Eating

Permai Rainforest Resort (☎ 082-846487; www.permai-rainforest.com; Damai Beach, Santubong; camp sites/long-houses/treehouses RM10/120/198, cabins RM208-228; 📶) This excellent ecofriendly nature retreat offers a choice of longhouse dorms, six- to eight-person cabins and luxury treehouse rooms (which include breakfast and minibar), as well as space for camping. Even better, the adjoining Camp Permai training centre (day entry RM5) is the best spot on the peninsula for leisure and adventure activities, with a high-ropes course, rock climbing, kayaking, boat cruises, obstacle course and abseiling to name but a few. This place is good for those travelling with children.

Village House (☎ 082-846166; www.villagehouse.com.my; Santubong; dm/d RM88/220; 📶 📺 📺) The owners of Singgahsana (p417) have done it again. Lipstick-red walls, double-stuffed mattresses, dreamy white linen and fusion cuisine – this is boutique elegance par excellence.

Damai Beach Resort (☎ 082-846999; www.damaibeachresort; Teluk Bandung, Santubong; r from RM220; 📶 📺 📺) The oldest hotel in Santubong, this sprawling resort has two distinct parts; classic ocean rooms and modern hillside suites. The beautiful Barok suites were inspired by traditional Bidayuh homes and have been constructed in a beautiful round structure. There are enough activities on the grounds to make you feel like you're on a cruise ship (in a good way).

There are several restaurants around the resorts in the peninsula. Kampung Buntal, a few kilometres away, boasts a large collection of seafood restaurants with attractive patios on stilts over the beach, all very popular with Kuching locals, the favourite being Lim Hok Ann near the end of the restaurant strip.

Getting There & Away

At the time of research Petra Jaya buses were no longer running between Kuching and Kampung Buntal, although a van service (RM3 to RM4) departing from Jln India has been shuttling passengers. Ask at the tourist information centre for the latest transport updates. For Santubong, take a taxi from Kampung Buntal (around RM10, 15 minutes). If you want to stay for a meal the only option is to take a taxi back to Kuching (around RM25, 45 minutes). There's also a shuttle to Damai that stops in front of Singgahsana Lodge in central Kuching.

A taxi to the resorts costs RM25 to RM45 from Kuching; if you want to be picked up after dinner, expect to pay RM60 for the return trip. A taxi from Kampung Buntal to any of the resorts should cost around RM10. Taxis can also be hired for a trip from the resorts out to Kampung Buntal and Santubong.

KUCHING WETLANDS NATIONAL PARK

Kuching Wetlands National Park makes for a fascinating half-day trip away from the state capital or from the Santubong area. The park is a mere 15km from Kuching proper (and only 5km from Damai), but this riverine realm feels like a whole different world. Although this protected mangrove forest is only 6610 hectares, it is known throughout Malaysia as being one of the top spots in the country to see the Irrawaddy dolphin, which feeds in shallow waters.

The only way to gain access to the park is by boat. Several local tour companies operate within in the park, offering a broad spectrum of half-day experiences. Most boats wander along the lazy Sungai Salak before slinking down one of the shaded tributaries. Some groups pay a brief visit to the Malay fishing village at Pulau Salak. We recommend the lauded dusk wildlife cruise run by CPH Travel, which leaves Santubong at around 4.30pm and returns three hours later. Visitors must book ahead (see opposite for more info).

Kuching Wetlands is located about 55 minutes away from the city central, and about a 30-minute boat ride from Damai. Most

tour companies servicing the park depart from either Damai or Santubong and will include hotel transfers (from either Kuching or Damai) in the rates. Access to the park is also available from Samariang or Telaga Air.

KUBAH NATIONAL PARK

Only 15km from downtown Kuching, **Kubah National Park** (☎ 011-225 003; adult/child RM10/5) is yet another good natural retreat within easy striking distance of the city. While Bako has the edge for wildlife, Kubah offers good trekking and the trails are more shaded, which is a plus for the sun-averse. The 22-sq-km park consists of a range of forested sandstone hills that rise dramatically from the surrounding plain to a height of 450m. There are waterfalls, walking trails and lookouts, and the beautiful rainforest is home to a wide variety of palms and orchids. Kubah National Park has also played host to two Hollywood productions: *Farewell to the King*, starring Nick Nolte, and the more recent *The Sleeping Dictionary*, with Jessica Alba.

Park accommodation can be booked through the Kuching **National Parks & Wildlife Booking Office**. (☎ 082-248088; www.sarawaktourism.com; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Haji Openg; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) next door to the visitors information centre. The Kubah park headquarters offers hostel, resthouse and double-storey chalet accommodation. There's no restaurant, but a kitchen is supplied with all facilities, including a fridge and utensils.

Matang Transport bus 11 leaves Kuching (from the stand near Kuching Mosque) for Red Bridge, near the turn-off for Kubah, at regular intervals (RM2, 40 minutes); there's no set timetable, but services run roughly every 90 minutes in the morning. Note that at the time of research this bus was not operating and may not be operating during your visit. From Red Bridge, near the Jublee Mas Recreation Park, it's a 4km walk to the park entrance, quite a lot of it uphill. Follow the signs for Matang Family Park, as the signposts for Kubah at the moment look like they're about to fall off. A taxi from town will cost at least RM75 return; arrange with the driver a time to be picked up. You can also try to get a ride on a private van (RM5 per person or RM45 for the whole van one way, leaving near Saujana car park).

MATANG WILDLIFE CENTRE

A short drive beyond Kubah National Park, the **Matang Wildlife Centre** (☎ 082-225012; admission

RM10; ☎ 8am-5.30pm) was set up as a rehabilitation centre for endangered species released from captivity, particularly Borneo's larger mammals. Although it's supposed to recreate natural conditions as closely as possible, there's no denying that it's better described as a zoo located in the jungle.

There are twice-daily feeding programs for orang-utans, sambar deer and crocodiles, as well as rainforest walking trails, including the **Rayu Trail**, which links up with Kubah National Park (three to four hours).

The animals are kept in enclosures, or sometimes even cages, and people who don't like zoos may find it depressing. It is important to remember, however, that the centre is part of an active rehabilitation program and that many of these animals will find themselves being released into the wild in the future.

The only practical options for getting here from Kuching are by taxi (about RM40 one way) or with a tour (around RM130 for an overnight stay). Walking from Red Bridge is not an option as the entrance is another 12km from the entrance to Kubah National Park. Hitching is an option, but we don't recommend it.

SEMENGGOH WILDLIFE REHABILITATION CENTRE

Semenggoh Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre (☎ 082-442180; adult/child RM3/1.50; ☎ 8am-12.45pm & 2-4.15pm) is a great place to sneak a peek at our ginger-haired cousins (no, not the Irish). Over 20 of Borneo's great orang-utans live in the centre, and although there isn't sufficient natural forest in the surrounding area to make actual reintroduction into the wild possible, it's still a good opportunity for a photo shoot. Semenggoh is noticeably less touristy (and much, much cheaper) than the widely publicised Sepilok Orang-utan Rehabilitation Centre in Sabah. Note that you're not guaranteed any orang-utan sightings, because the apes are free to come and go as they please. Feeding times are at 9am and 3pm.

Semenggoh is 24km south of Kuching. To get there, take STC bus 6 from Kuching (RM4, 40 minutes). At the time of research there were only two bus services per day, 7.30am and 1.30pm. Ask the bus driver for details on his desired return time. Get off at the Forest Department Nursery, then walk 1.3km down the paved road to the centre. The last return bus passes Semenggoh at

1.30pm, but you should be able to flag down a private van (RM3) or a bus from the main road. A taxi from Kuching to the centre costs around RM40.

Tour companies also operate guided day trips out to the centre for RM50 per person. Note that some tours don't leave sufficient time to explore the gardens and arboretum at the centre (ask before you sign up).

BIDAYUH LONGHOUSES

Longhouses near Semenggoh have been on the tourist circuit for decades. **Kampung Annah Rais** is one of the most commonly visited longhouses. It's an impressive structure with more than 100 doors, and has preserved its traditional look, apart from metal roofs and satellite dishes, that is. Standard price for admission to these longhouses is RM10. There are quite a few homestay options averaging RM300 for a two-day and one-night stay per person, including food and activities, and tourists can be accommodated even if they show up unannounced.

To get to Annah Rais, take a taxi or van from Kuching to Kota Padawan and try to find a shared van from the car park near the hornbill statues at the end of the main street (RM6 and up if there are sufficient passengers to share the ride; it costs RM40 to RM50 to charter the van).

BAU

About 26km southwest of Kuching, the little town of Bau is the access point to two interesting cave systems, which are typical of the caves found all across the island of Borneo. You won't find much to keep you around the town itself, but these jutting limestone caves make for an interesting trip away from the capital, particularly if you won't have the chance to visit the grander caves at Mulu or Niah Caves national parks. Take a picnic lunch, drinks and a good torch (which can also be hired at the entrance to each cave).

About 3km southwest of Bau, the **Wind Cave** (☎ 082-765490; adult/child RM3/1.50; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) is a network of underground streams on the banks of the Batang Kayan. Slippery, unlit boardwalks run through the caves, allowing you to wander along three main passages with chattering bats swooping over your head. Don't be tempted to leave the boardwalk if you see steps in the rock – this is probably the exit to a subterranean adventure-caving trail.

About 5km further south, **Fairy Cave** is an extraordinary elevated chamber 30m above the ground in the side of a cliff. You can follow the footsteps of generations of Chinese and wander the grotto making up your own names for the 'fairies' seen in the various anthropomorphic cave formations; if you want anything from these stony spirits, though, make sure you bring some incense. Reached by a steep concrete staircase, the cave is quite large and you could spend an hour exploring it.

From Kuching, STC or BTC bus 2 to Bau (RM4, one hour) departs every half-hour between 6.20am and 6pm. You can also take a detour here on your way to or from Gunung Gading National Park; two STC buses (2A) run to Lundu (RM7.80) daily.

To get to Wind Cave, take BTC bus 3 or 3A (RM1, one bus every 90 minutes or so) from Baru and walk the 700m to the entrance. For the Fairy Cave, take BTC bus 3 (RM1.40) and walk the 1.3km from the main road. The last bus back passes through at around 5.30pm. A taxi will cost around RM12 one way.

GUNUNG GADING NATIONAL PARK

There is some good walking in this pleasant little park (☎ 082-735714; adult/child RM10/5; ☎ 8am-12.30pm & 2-5pm), but most visitors come to see the rare *Rafflesia tuanmudae* (see the boxed text, p432). These massive flowers, blessed with a spectacular bouquet of rotting flesh, appear year-round but at unpredictable times and in varying locations. Check whether any are in bloom before heading to the park by ringing the park headquarters or the **National Parks Booking Office** (☎ 082-248088; www.sarawaktourism.com; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun); the flowers only last for a few days, so get here as soon as you can if one is in bloom.

The park features a plank-walk built around the area that the flowers are found. If unaccompanied by a ranger, do not step off the plankwalk as the rafflesia flower buds are small, difficult to spot and can easily be crushed underfoot. If a plant is far away from the main boardwalk, a park ranger may be able to guide you. Do not stray from where he walks and follow his instructions. Guiding fees are RM20 per hour (per group). November to January are said to be the peak blooming months.

Few visitors take much time to explore beyond the rafflesia, which is a shame as there are some well-marked **walking trails**.

The **hostel** (dm/r RM15/40) has fan rooms with shared bathroom and fully equipped kitchen. Two three-bedroom **lodges** (r RM150; 🛏) with cooking facilities sleep up to six people. Camping, where permitted, costs RM5 per person. Weekdays are the least busy times.

To get to Gunung Gading, first take STC bus EP07 from the Express Bus Terminal on Jln Penrissen to Lundu (RM10, 1¼ hours, four daily). The park entrance is 2km north of Lundu, on the road to Pantai Pandan; you can either walk there or take a taxi (RM15) from the Lundu bus station. Vans also operate on this route (RM2), but they only leave when full.

SEMATAN

Sematan, 107km northwest of Kuching by road, is a pleasant fishing village on the coast facing the South China Sea. An attractive promenade lines the waterfront, and a long concrete pier affords wonderful washed-out early morning views as mist shrouds the hills and the surf pounds away in the distance. The northern end of the promenade leads to some colourful stilt houses and a park commemorating the early Malay fishermen of the area. The beach here is clean, deserted and lined with coconut palms, but the water is very shallow. In the direction away from town, you can encounter bucolic picture-book kampung scenery set against the dramatic Gunung Gading range, perfect for a hike or a bicycle ride.

The Malay village of **Telok Melano** is about 30km down the coast from Sematan (if you're driving, hug the coast in a north westerly direction). It offers pristine beaches and clear blue water against the backdrop of Gunung Melano. Activities such as nature walks, camping, boat trips and fishing are offered, and homestay accommodation (averaging RM230 to RM300 a night, inclusive of meals, national park entrance, boat rental and other activities) with villagers can be arranged. Contact Mr Hashim at the **Fisheries Development Authority** (☎ 013-824 6785).

Sleeping & Eating

Jln Seacom heading west out of town leads to a few beach resorts. These are usually packed during the weekends, but you'll have the place to yourself on a weekday.

Sematan Hotel (☎ 082-711162; 162 Sematan Bazaar; r RM25-50; 🛏) A friendly place with simple tiled rooms and shared bathrooms, it's on

THE BORNEO LONGHOUSE

Longhouses are the traditional dwellings of the indigenous people of Borneo and the island's most distinctive feature of tribal life. These large communal dwellings, raised on stilts above the forest floor, can contain over a hundred individual family 'apartments' beneath one long, long roof. The most important part of a longhouse is the covered common verandah, which serves as a social area, 'town hall' and sleeping space.

The longhouse lifestyle is by no means a forgotten tradition in Borneo, even in the face of globalisation. Community living is a very sustainable way of life – most youngsters that leave for greener pastures (read: more money) usually keep close ties to their village and return home later on in life. Over time, some longhouse communities have upgraded their building materials from thatch and bamboo to wood and linoleum. But don't let the errant satellite antenna betray your wild Kipling-esque fantasies; a trip to a longhouse is a must for anyone who wants to know the real Borneo.

PLANNING A VISIT

You may be initially surprised to discover that longhouse visits can be a pricey venture. Tours are not cheap, and if you go on your own you'll need to pay for a boat and/or 4WD (figure RM300 to RM800), a guide (RM80 per day, plus RM35 per night) and lodging (usually RM10 per night).

There are two essential ingredients in organising a memorable longhouse visit: finding an excellent guide and choosing the right longhouse (the latter is always a function of the former). A great guide or tour company has a clutch of longhouse options and will always be receptive to the type of experience you desire. When searching for a tour operator or freelance guide, it is best to keep an open mind – after all, they are the experts – but do not hesitate to be upfront about your desires and concerns. Do you require a certain level of sleeping comfort? Might you have any dietary restrictions? Is it a heart-to-heart you're after? Will you be disappointed if you see a satellite dish dangling off the side of the structure? Do you want to be the only traveller at the longhouse, or would you prefer it if there were others?

Sarawak has plenty of tour operators and guides eager to take you (and your money) on Borneo's ultimate cultural adventure. Most operations are based in Kuching, though Miri has a handful as well. Guides in Kuching can plan your visit to the Sri Aman Division (Batang Skrang, Batang Lemanak and Batang Ai). Start in Sibu (try the tourist information centre) for trips along the Batang Rejang, although in the last few years this region has experienced some dubious guiding activity. Trekkers interested in connecting the dots between the longhouses of the Kelabit Highlands should fly to Bario and plan their adventure there.

Scouting a tour locally is significantly cheaper than any pre-departure booking on the internet, and it's well worth spending a day checking out your options – it can mean the difference between spending a sleepless evening with other sweaty tourists, or having a spirited evening (double entendre intended) swapping smiles, stories and shots of rice wine with the local inhabitants. If you want to assemble your own trip, the Sarawak Tourism Board publishes a yearly *Members Directory* listing all registered freelance guides and their contact information. Membership can be expensive and some of the best guides opt to work for tour operators rather than renewing their freelancer's licence. Unregistered freelance guides may be friendly and knowledgeable, but they cannot be held accountable if something goes wrong during your trip.

We cannot overstate the importance of doing your research and finding a great guide. Yes, you could potentially head upriver on your own, but you'll still need to find someone to take you to a longhouse. An invitation is essential, and turning up unannounced is not only bad manners, it also can be a major cultural faux pas. Even if you make your way into a longhouse without a guide, you will find major communication and cultural barriers. Interacting spontaneously with locals isn't always easy as the elders usually don't speak English, and the younger people are often out working the fields or have moved to the 'big city' to earn more money. A great guide usually knows several people at the longhouse (including the chief) and can act as a translator

while you try to strike up a conversation. Your guide will always keep you abreast of any cultural differences – like when and where to take off your shoes – so you needn't worry too much about saying or doing the wrong thing.

VISITING THE LONGHOUSE

When you arrive at a longhouse, you may be surprised to find that it's quite modernised, with satellite TV, electric lighting, corrugated iron and other upgrades – after all, even if their manner of living is old-fashioned, the people here are living in the 21st century. A longhouse is a way of life, not just a building. It embodies a communal lifestyle and a very real sense of mutual reliance and responsibility, and it is this spirit rather than the physical building that makes a visit special. Do your best to engage with the inhabitants of any community you are allowed to enter, rather than just wandering around snapping photographs.

Depending on the various goings-on at the longhouse, you may or may not spend time with the *tuai rumah* (chief) – although he (it's always a he) will usually 'show face' as it is impolite for him not to do so. Your guide will usually be the one showing you where to sleep – either on the verandah, in a specially built hut next door or in a resident's living room within the longhouse itself.

If you are travelling with your own guide, he or she will be in charge of organising your meals – whether it's a separately prepared repast, or a feast with some of the longhouse residents. The Iban in particular like to honour their guests by offering meat on special occasions. Vegetarians and vegans should be adamant about their dietary restrictions as vegetable dishes are often served in a chicken sauce. Meals will be plentiful no matter what, and it is not considered rude or disrespectful to bring your own food. Two important things to remember when eating with longhouse residents: don't put your feet near the food (which is always served in a 'family style' communal fashion) and don't step over anyone's plate if you need to excuse yourself from the eating area.

After dinner, when the generators start clicking off, it's time to hunker down with the evening's bottle of milky white broth: rice wine, or *tuak*. You'll be a big hit if you bring a bottle of brand-name liquor – 'Johnny Walker' and 'Southern Comfort' are oftentimes the extent of the locals' English vocabulary. The ceremonial shot glass will be passed from person to person amid chitchat and belly laughter. Drink the shot when it's your turn (you won't really have a choice – those Iban women can be pretty forceful!) and pass the glass along. *Tuak* may taste mild but it is pretty potent stuff, and you can expect a stunning hangover the next day. If you don't want to drink, you can pretend to have a medical condition. When you reach your limit, simply press the rim of the glass with your finger like you're pushing an eject button. If that doesn't work then feign a sudden medical condition. Smiles, big hand gestures and dirty jokes go a long way, even in your native language (and it'll all be second-nature when you're nice and lubricated!).

GIFTS

Gift giving has become rather controversial over the last few years, with locals, tourists and tour operators offering a wide variety of advice on the subject. Longhouse communities do not traditionally require gifts from guests; in fact, some say that the tradition of gift giving actually began when travellers started visiting. Your best bet to avoid any awkward cultural miscommunications is to ask your guide for their opinion. Longhouses set far away from the beaten track could use bulk bags of rice or sugar, while communities that are a bit more in touch with the modern world might appreciate items like pencils, toothbrushes or fishing line. Some travellers bring an item that can be shared over glasses of rice wine. Any way you do it, gifts are never a must, nor are they expected. Many tourists prefer contributing to the longhouse economy by taking a local longboat trip or buying one of the handicrafts for sale. If you are visiting independently, it's polite to bring a small gift for the family of the person who invited you.

the left-hand side of the road just before entering Sematan.

Kampung Pueh (☎ 013-827 4967; 2-day 1-night stays RM105, 3-day 2-night stays RM180) This Bidayuh Salako village about 9km outside of town has a longhouse homestay program. Activities include a trek up Gunung Gading as well as visits to local industries. Contact Mr Jehim Milos.

Sematan Palm Beach Resort (☎ 082-712388, 295 Jln Seacom; weekday/weekend r & chalets for 2 people RM153/180; 🍷) The best of the bunch on Jln Seacom, it has cheerfully painted chalets and a restaurant, and also rents out bicycles and sea kayaks. From the beach, you can walk all the way back to town, fording a small stream near its outskirts.

Sematan has a couple of Chinese *kopitiam* facing the waterfront and some Malay food stalls near the wharf.

Getting There & Away

To get to Sematan from Kuching, take STC bus EP07 to Lundu (RM10, 1¼ hours, four daily), then try to find a private hired van from the area around the Lundu bus station. A full van will cost around RM5 per person, but if you can't find any other fellow travellers, you'll end up paying between RM20 to RM30 for the whole vehicle.

TANJUNG DATU NATIONAL PARK

Located in the far west of the state, abutting the border with Kalimantan, this 14-sq-km park protects rainforest, unpolluted rivers and near-pristine beaches, on which endan-

gered turtles lay their eggs. The park boasts four trails, which include the **Telok Melano Trail** from Telok Melano village and the **Belian Trail**, which makes a steep climb up to the summit of Gunung Melano. The turtle hatchery on the beach is fenced off and strictly off limits.

For park information and permits, inquire at the **National Parks Booking Office** (☎ 082-248088; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg; 🕒 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) located next door to the visitors information centre (it's also worth stopping in here!).

Travel here is not recommended between October and March as the sea can get very rough. Snorkelling and scuba diving are allowed in certain areas; divers must be accompanied by an approved guide.

The only accommodation in the park is in the form of a **camp site** (camping per person RM5), for which you can make arrangements at the Kuching visitors information centre. If tenting is not your cup of tea, the Telok Melano homestays (p429) provide a convenient base.

Access for day trips is only possible by boat from Sematan; prices start at around RM450 for up to 10 people. If you visit Gunung Gading on the way, someone at the park office may be able to organise a boat for you; otherwise try the Sematan Hotel (p429).

TALANG-SATANG NATIONAL PARK

Talang-Satang National Park consists of two pairs of islands: Pulau Satang Besar and Pulau Satang Kechil (Big and Small Satang Islands) and Pulau Talang-Talang Besar and Pulau Talang-Talang Kecil (Big and Small Talang-

THE EXTRAORDINARY RAFFLESIA

People use words like bizarre, awe-inspiring or enigmatic upon viewing the rafflesia flower. One of the greatest wonders of the botanical world, the 1m-wide flower can elicit both astonishment at its incredible size and revulsion at its scent (it often emits a smell similar to that of rotting flesh). Even more amazing is the fact that this oddity erupts directly from the forest floor, with no visible stems or leaves.

The rafflesia plant is actually a parasite that lives entirely on the roots of a grapelike vine in the genus *Tetrastigma*. The parasite does not produce any food of its own, but instead forms a network of microscopic filaments that penetrate the vine's roots to steal water and nutrients.

In preparation for flowering, the parasitic rafflesia sends up a cabbage-like bud that grows on the forest floor for a year or more before blossoming. The flower itself is a giant succulent creation that is red in colour with white splotches all around. After two or three days the flower begins to deteriorate and within two weeks it is reduced to a blob of black slime.

Seeing a rafflesia is a very special treat. Not only are the flowers themselves fleeting and rarely encountered, but poaching and habitat loss has greatly reduced their numbers. Of the nine species thought to live in Borneo, only six have been spotted in the last 60 years.

IBAN LANGUAGE LESSON

The Iban language is quite similar to Bahasa Malaysia (the Malay language). Often there are simple suffix differences: *jalan* (road) is *jalai* in Iban, *makan* (eat) is *makai*, *salamat datang* (welcome) is *salamat datai* and so forth. The Iban traditionally expressed gratitude through gestures rather than words, so phrases like 'thank you' have been borrowed from Malay. Numbers have also been taken from Malay. The Iban word *nuan* connotes respect, much like *vous* in French or *usted* in Spanish. *Dik* is used among friends, and is the Iban equivalent of the French *tu*.

In general, Iban humour has a reputation for being quite filthy, and locals respond well to chatty visitors even if they are trying to communicate in their native language.

Also note that words can be pronounced slightly differently throughout Sarawak as there are several Iban dialects.

Good morning.

Good afternoon.

Good night.

Goodbye.

Thank you.

How are you?

Are you OK? (relating to health)

Pleased to meet you.

What's your name?

Can I take a photograph of you?

How much?

See you again.

I'm sorry.

I'm tired.

Salamat pagi.

Salamat tengah-hari.

Salamat malam.

Salamat tinggal.

Terima kasih.

Nama brita nuan?

Gerai nuan?

Rindu amat betemu enggau nuan.

Sapa nama nuan?

Tau aku ngambi gambar nuan?

Brapa?

Arap ke betemu baru.

Ampun aku.

Lelak.

Talang Islands). Together, these islands comprise Sarawak's first marine park, established in 1999 to protect sea turtle egg-laying habitat.

Pulau Satang Besar and Pulau Satang Kecil form the Satang section (9894 hectares), part of which is open to visitors, who must visit under park warden supervision. Permits are available from Kuching's **National Parks Booking Office** (☎ 082-248088; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) or the **Forestry Department** (☎ 082-348001; www.sarawakforestry.com; Hock Lee Center, Jln Datuk Abang Abdul Rahim). On Pulau Satang Besar visitors can watch fragile eggs being moved from the beach to a hatchery and, if especially lucky, witness baby turtles being released into the wild. Snorkelling and diving are permitted, but only within certain designated areas and divers must be accompanied by an approved guide.

The Talang-Talang section (9520 hectares) is off limits to visitors due to the islands' small size and the sensitivity of the marine turtles. Local villagers and fishermen have retained their right to access the park and continue their traditional activities.

The Sematan Hotel or Palm Beach Resort (see p429) can help arrange transport to the

park; boats cost around RM250. **CPH Tours & Travel** (☎ 082-243708; www.cphtravel.com.my) run tours to the area.

SERIAN

Serian is a tiny Bidayuh town 65km southeast of Kuching. Tour groups often stop here to have lunch or pick up gifts on the way to the longhouses located along nearby rivers (see below). Serian boasts a bustling **market**, where people from nearby longhouses come to sell jungle fruits and herbs, snake meat, sago grubs and other unusual produce.

STC bus 3A runs between Kuching and Serian (one way/return RM6/4, one hour, every half-hour between 6.15am and 6.45pm). The bus station is in the centre of Serian, near the market. Vans park behind Electra House and shuttle passengers to/from Kuching (RM6 per person).

SRI AMAN DIVISION

Originally known as Simangang, Sri Aman is a quiet town on the turbid Batang Lupar, halfway between Kuching and Sarikei. Sri Aman's main claim to fame is the *benak*, a tidal wave that periodically sweeps up the

river, scattering all craft in its path; it nearly took the life of writer W Somerset Maugham, an event he recorded in a short story called 'The Yellow Streak'. James Brooke's **Fort Alice**, a little downstream, was built in 1864 and is a prominent landmark.

The Skrang, Lemanak and Ai rivers flow into the Lupar, and visits to the river longhouse communities can be organised in Kuching (either with an operator or with a private guide). See the boxed text, p430, for more on longhouse visits.

Batang Skrang & Batang Lemanak

Lemanak has four longhouse communities, two of which have accommodation set up in a special building for tourists. Both **Serubah** and **Kesit** attract considerable numbers of tourists and evenings are often spent hanging out with your fellow travellers instead of the villagers. Sleeping arrangements are dorm-style, with a sprinkling of paper-thin mattresses, and the bathrooms are...well...we recommend holding it in till you get back to Kuching. If you're OK with sleeping on the longhouse verandah *la bujang berani* (Iban bachelor warrior), then try a visit at **Kacung** or **Ngemahili**.

Batang Ai

Live out your wildest *Heart of Darkness* fantasies along the muddy Batang Ai. A stunning reservoir acts like the region's welcome mat – its dimpled vales merely a sneak peek of the jungle yet to come. Cruise through thin rivulets that swish past lazy vines. Pass canopies of trees soaring overhead where thirsty branches twist towards the steaming earth as though they were reaching for water. This intricate network of river systems crawls deep into the island's interior until it reaches the **Batang Ai National Park** – a haven for wild orang-utans.

Nanga Sumpa, a local longhouse, has been lauded as one of the most impressive indigenous eco-tourism efforts in Borneo. Funded by Borneo Adventure (p416), the locals here have constructed a small courtyard of huts to accommodate their visitors. You'll pay a little more, but you'll probably be the only traveller sipping rice wine with the friendly villagers. Contract Borneo Adventure for package pricing.

If you crave the longhouse experience but can't live without your evening puffs of air-con, consider staying at the **Hilton Batang Ai Longhouse Resort** (☎ 083-584338; www.batang.hilton.com;

rRM366; 📞 📍) at the far end of the reservoir. Branding this jungle resort under the Hilton name has been a bit of a double-edged sword. Customers are attracted by the name, but the facility falls a tad short of the reputation. Had the resort gone with something like 'Batang Ai Jungle Lodge' – this place would probably be a big hit. The design scheme here is 'longhouse chic' and they pull it off quite well, although the rooms are beginning to show their age ('70s shag carpeting anyone?). There's a dial-up computer terminal, but it wasn't working when we visited. Transport to the lodge can be arranged at the Hilton Hotel in Kuching.

Although the infamous Batang Rejang is further from Kuching, a visit to Batang Ai's remote longhouses can prove to be far more rewarding. Tourist numbers are significantly smaller, and you don't have to waste your valuable vacation days to reach this realm of green and brown. Trips to Batang Ai should be booked in Kuching, either with a tour operator or with a private freelance guide. See the boxed text (p430) for everything you need to know about planning a longhouse visit.

BETONG DIVISION

The Betong Division has its own constellation of far-flung longhouses. The rural **Bukit Saban Resort** (☎ 082-647178; amab88@gmail.com; r from RM75), near the town of Betong along the Sibul-Kuching highway, is an excellent springboard for launching a multiday visit of off-the-beaten-path communities. There are large on-site obstacle courses for those who feel so inclined. Ask about leech therapy if you're not pressed for time.

CENTRAL SARAWAK

For those making a beeline between Kuching and the wilds of the north, Central Sarawak will merely be a riverine realm glimpsed out the window from an aeroplane seat. From high above, the expanse of deep greens and browns stretches along the horizon as curving waterways slither into the jungle, cutting across the terrain. Overland travellers will delight in sleepy harbour villages dotted along the quiet lowland coast, and those with a bit more time on their hands can head down the roaring Batang Rejang into Borneo's steamy interior.

BATANG REJANG

Carrying the mystic resonance of the exotic interior, the mighty Batang Rejang is Borneo's jugular, and the main trade artery for all of central and southern Sarawak. But if it's an Amazonic tangle of jungle vines you're after, you'll be sorely disappointed. These days, the Rejang feels like a wide, muddy conveyor belt for the insatiable logging industry. Topsoil and logging detritus have been clogging the waters for years, and it's not a pretty sight. And let's not forget the bungled Bakun Dam hydroelectric plant, which has yet to be completed thanks to mismanagement, financial problems and the overambitious scale of the project. The area south of the dam has already been emptied of an estimated 11,000 tribal people to make room for the reservoir – now there is talk of building an aluminium smelting plant.

It's not all bad though – the serpentine tributaries splintering off the main river hide dozens upon dozens of remote longhouse communities. Visiting a longhouse offers travellers the unique opportunity to interact with the island's indigenous peo-

ple, and it's an experience you won't soon forget. See p430 to learn more about longhouses and planning a visit. Trips to longhouses in the region can be organised in Kapit and Belaga, although it's worth stopping by the tourism offices in Kuching or Sibü to bone up on some useful background info first.

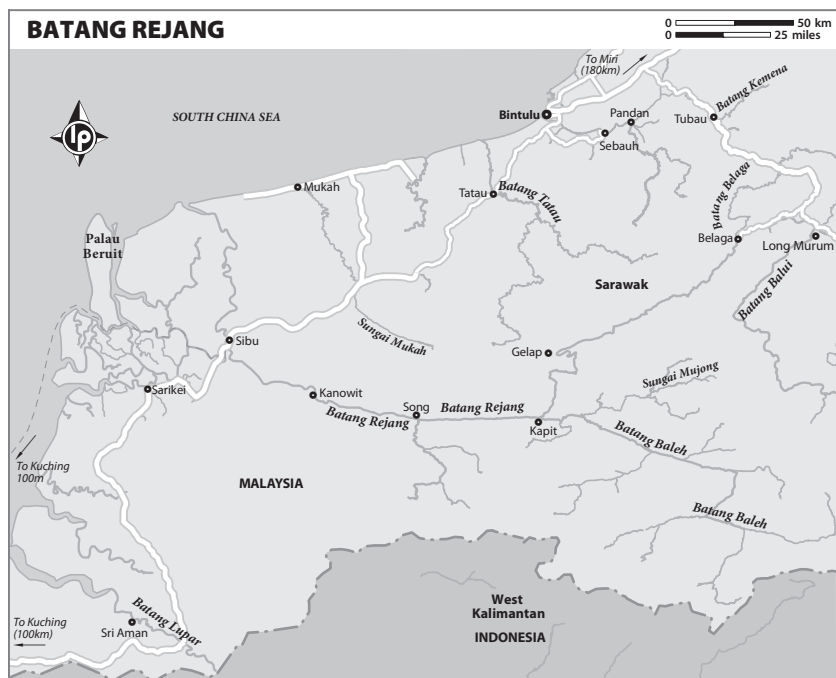
The best time for a trip up the Rejang is in late May and early June. This is the time of **Gawai Dayak**, a harvest festival, when there is plenty of movement on the rivers and the longhouses welcome visitors. There are also plenty of celebrations, which usually involve the consumption of copious quantities of *tuak* and arak.

Along the river, the only hotel accommodation available is in Song, Kanowit, Kapit and Belaga. You are technically required to have a permit (see p439) if you plan to travel beyond Kapit.

Sibü

pop 255,000

While Kuching takes the cat as its mascot, it comes as no surprise that Sibü aspires to



be a swan – the city is, after all, quite the ugly duckling. If you are from your nation's (or region's) 'second city', then you might have a soft spot for Sibü as you wander through the town's bustling markets. Locals are staunchly proud of their roaring burg despite the noticeable lack of attractions.

Sibü was once known as New Foochow, named for the Chinese migrants who came from Foochow (Fujian) province in the early years of the 20th century. Prior to this, the Melanau, then the Malays and the Iban, were the area's inhabitants.

Sibü is the gateway to the Batang Rejang and the centre for trade between the coast and the vast upriver hinterland. The Brookes were happy to let Sibü's capitalists manage the extraction of upriver wealth. Situated 60km upstream from the sea, Sibü is where the interior's raw materials are brought for transhipment and export. The wide, muddy river hosts a motley procession of fishing and cargo boats, tugs, barges laden with timber, express boats and speedboats skipping over their wash.

As well as its hectic waterlife, Sibü is known for a handful of superlatives, boasting Sarawak's tallest building (Wisma Sanyan) and longest bridge (the newly opened 1.22km-long Batang Rejang bridge), as well as the biggest town square in Malaysia. However, its attractions for travellers are limited, and most people only stay a night or two before pushing on up the Rejang.

ORIENTATION

Sibü lies on the north bank of the Rejang, near the river's confluence with the Batang Igan. A graceful seven-storey Chinese pagoda marks the western edge of the waterfront and a small clock tower marks the eastern; between the two, the concrete Pasar Sentral Sibü (PSS; Sibü Central Market) building dominates the view over Jln Channel.

The express boat wharf is at the new River Express terminal on the western end of the Rejang Esplanade. Also on the waterfront is the local bus station; the long-distance bus terminal is at Sungai Antu, 3km west of town. The airport is 20km east of the town centre.

INFORMATION

Greatown Travel (☎ 084-211243, 019-8565041; www.greatown.com; No 6, 1st fl, Lorong Chew Siik Hong 1A) Reliable inbound tour operator.

ibrowse Netcafé (☎ 084-310717; 4th fl, Wisma Sanyan, 1 Jln Sanyan; per hr RM3; ☎ 8am-10pm) Internet access.

Main post office (☎ 084-332312; Jln Kampung Nyabor; ☎ 8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-3pm Sat)

Rejang Medical Centre (☎ 084-330733; www.rejang.com.my; 29 Jln Pedada) A group of private specialist clinics with 24-hour emergency services.

Sibü General Hospital (☎ 084-343333; Jln Abdul Tun Rahman)

Standard Chartered Bank (Jln Tukang Besi) Opposite the visitors information centre; changes travellers cheques and has an ATM. Be prepared to wait for the cheques to go through.

Visitors Information Centre (☎ 084-340980; 32 Jln Tukang Besi; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) Has friendly and informative staff (ask for Jessie) who can help with information about upriver trips out of Song, Kapit and Belaga. Has plenty of materials, including maps, bus schedules and brochures on sights and travel to other destinations in Sarawak.

Yewon moneychanger (☎ 084-330577; 8 Jln Tukang Besi) South of the visitors centre; only changes cash.

SIGHTS

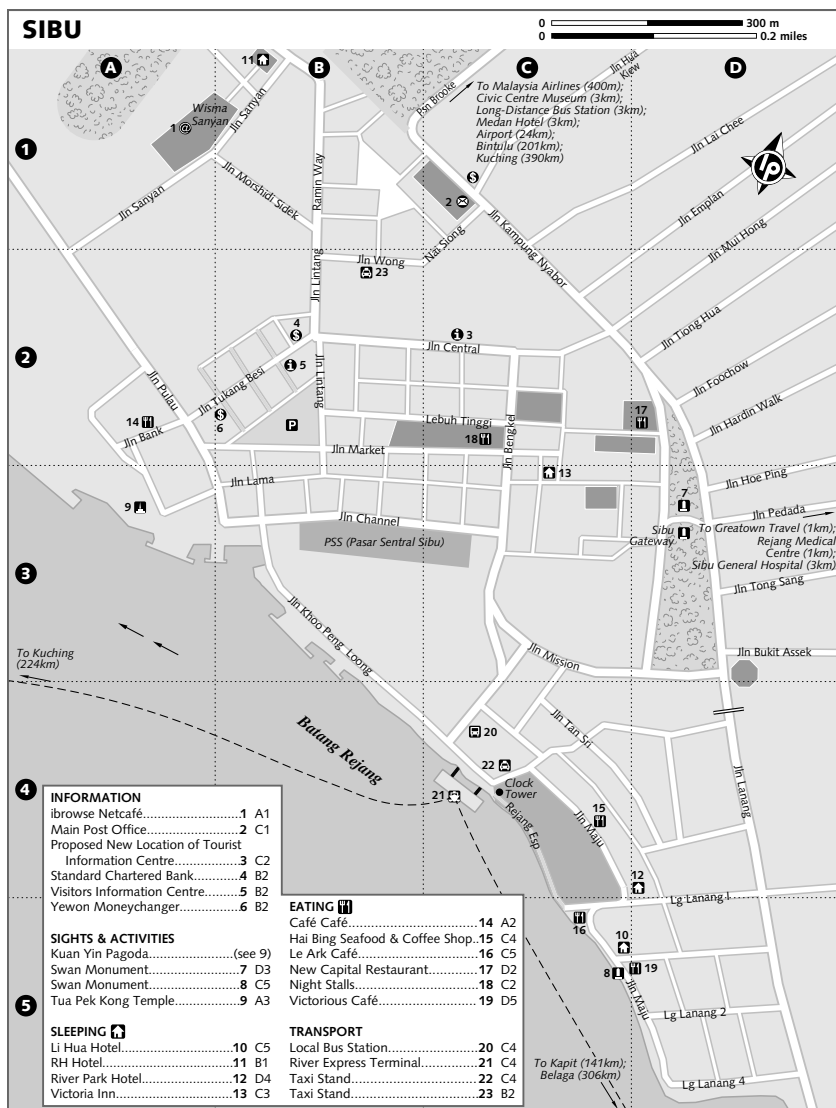
Tua Pek Kong Temple (Jln Temple; admission free; ☎ dawn-dusk) is an interesting riverside Chinese temple where, if you're lucky, you'll find Mr Tan Teck Chiang in attendance. Mr Tan will give you a tour of the temple and explain (in lavish detail) his interpretation of Taoism and Buddhism. You can also scale the seven-storey pagoda to get a brilliant view over the town and the muddy Batang Rejang as it makes its way seaward.

You can climb the seven-tiered **Kuan Yin Pagoda** (completed in 1989) for a great view over the river; the best time is sunset, when a wheeling mass of swiflets buzzes the tower at eye level.

North of the city centre, the **Civic Centre Museum** (☎ 084-331315; Jln Suarah; admission free; ☎ 8am-5pm Tue-Sun) tells the story of settlement along the Rejang through displays on the indigenous Melanau, Malay and Iban cultures and the Chinese settlers. To get here, take Sungei Merah bus 1A or 4 (90 sen) from the local bus station on the waterfront; the museum is down the side street by a petrol station.

The unusual **Mist Garden** (Jln Kampung Nyabor) is a refreshing patch of green amid the busy roads, moistened by cooling artificial sprays and appealingly neon-lit at night.

As well as the many 'no spitting/no sneezing' signs adorning lampposts, Sibü council does



its bit for civic spirit with a number of borderline kitsch **swan monuments**.

SLEEPING

Most of the budget lodging in SibU is of a very low standard and this is a city where even budget travellers should opt for a mid-range option if at all possible.

Li Hua Hotel (☎ 084-324000; Lg Lanang 1; r RM45-80; 🏠) On the riverfront, about 100m south (up-river) of the swan statues, you will find SibU's best-value hotel, with spotless tile-floor rooms and good views from the upper floors.

Victoria Inn (☎ 084-320099; 80 Jln Market; r RM50-85; 🏠) If the River Park and the Li Hua are full, this centrally located budget hotel is a

PALANG

If you thought that tribal body art stopped at tattoos, you are very, very wrong. However, unlike the ubiquitous skin ink, you probably won't come head to head, so to speak, with a *palang*. The *palang*, a long-standing Dayak tradition, is a horizontal rod of metal or bone that pierces the penis, mimicking the natural genitalia of the Sumatran rhino. As times change, this type of procedure is becoming less common, but many villages still have an appointed piercer, who uses the traditional method of a bamboo vice in a cold river. The real macho men opt for some seriously extreme adornments, from multiple *palang* to deliberate scarification of the penis. Most bizarrely, some men will even sew beads into their foreskins to make their nether regions resemble the giant rafflesia flower. (Overcompensating? Maybe...)

Surprisingly, the impetus behind these self-inflicted 'works of art' is actually to enhance a woman's pleasure rather than personal adornment. Among some communities these radical procedures were once just as important as lopping off heads.

See the boxed text (p416) for the inside scoop on local ink art.

good choice. It's a tightly packed warren of rooms about a block away from the high-rise Tanahmas Hotel.

River Park Hotel (☎ 084-316688; 51-53 Jln Maju; r RM55-80; ♿) The River Park is a fairly typical and well-run midrange hotel with friendly staff and a pleasant riverside location. Some of the rooms are a little old and noisy.

Medan Hotel (☎ 084-216161; Jln Pahlawan, Jaya Li Hua; s/d RM65/75) For those needing to stay near the Sibul bus terminal, prim and proper Medan will do the trick.

RH Hotel (☎ 084-365888; www.rhhotels.com; Jln Kampung Nyabor; r from RM260; ♿ ♿) Easily the best hotel in town, the RH has stylish new rooms with clean lines and good light. The bathrooms are spacious, there's a rooftop pool and it's connected to the Wisma Sanyan by a skybridge. Wi-fi is available.

EATING

Sibu is a great spot for local eats. Try *kam pua mee*, the city's signature dish, which is thin noodle strands soaked in pork fat and served with a side of roast pork. Check out www.sibu.sarawakfoodguide.com for the most up-to-date info on where to eat in town.

Victorious Cafe (Jln Maju; meals RM3-8; ☎ breakfast, lunch & early dinner) Dine under the gaze of the Sibul Swan at this popular mostly Chinese *kedai kopi* (coffee shop) across the street from the Li Hua Hotel. There's a stall here that makes a smoky and wonderful plate of *kway teow* (rice noodles), which you can wash down with a nice iced lemon tea.

Café Café (☎ 084-328101; 10 Jln Chiew Geok Lin; mains from RM3; ☎ 10am-10pm) Tucked down the street in the shadow of the towering pagoda,

this local hotspot puts a modern spin on the traditional *kedai kopi*. Excellent local fare (and a smattering of designer coffee beverages) is served up amid bodacious decor and flickering candles.

Hai Bing Seafood & Coffee Shop (☎ 321491; 31 Jln Maju; mains RM4-15; ☎ lunch & dinner) Two outlets for the price of one: go cafe-style streetside or head indoors for Chinese air-con eating. The special mixed vegetables (RM2) come with added seafood and are served in a hefty doughy 'nest'; it's nearer a main than a side order.

Le Ark Café (☎ 084-321813; Rejang Esplande; mains from RM8; ☎ lunch & dinner, breakfast also Sat & Sun) Undoubtedly the trendiest spot in town, Le Ark sits along the waterfront like a beached boat, serving up a variety of cocktails to trendier types who laze on the comfy patio seating. A selection of local and international eats is available as well.

New Capital Restaurant (☎ 084-326066; Jln Kampong Nyabor; meals around RM25 per person; ☎ lunch & dinner) If you feel like a splurge, this brilliant Chinese eatery is sure to satisfy, with excellent fresh fish, meat and vegetable dishes. We recommend the butter prawns and stir-fried *midin* washed down with a fresh fruit juice.

For Chinese and Malay snacks, try the evening food stalls that set up in the late afternoon along Jln Market. You'll also find several stalls on the 1st floor of PSS (Pasar Sentral Sibul).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Malaysia Airlines (☎ 1300-883 000; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my; 61 Jln Tuanku Osman) has several flights daily

from Sibu to Kuching (RM89), Miri (RM139), Kota Kinabalu (RM210) and Kuala Lumpur (RM319). **AirAsia** (☎ 1300-889 933; www.airasia.com; Jln Keranji) has dirt-cheap flights to/from Kuala Lumpur, Johor Bahru and Kuching.

Boat

If you are heading to Sibu from Kuching, check the local newspaper for the most up-to-date speedboat departure times (times to Kapit are published as well). Boats leave from the River Express Terminal at the western end of Jln Bengkel (which is at the southwestern end of town). There is one boat per day at around 11.30am (RM35).

Getting to Kapit is the first leg of the journey up Batang Rejang. Several boats motor the 140km from Sibu to Kapit (RM17 to RM30, three hours, departures between 5.30am and 1pm). Some boats continue up to Belaga, but most terminate in Kapit. All boat companies have booths at the terminal and they display their next departure times with large clocks outside their booths, making choosing your boat a snap. Contact the local branch of the **Sarawak River Board** (☎ 084-339936) for any additional inquiries.

Bus

Bus companies have ticket stalls at the long-distance bus station (Sungai Antu) and around the local bus station on the waterfront. Buses run between the long-distance bus station and Sibu's town centre all day for RM1. A taxi to/from town will cost RM10.

Buses run between Sibu and Kuching (RM40, eight hours, regular departures between 6.30am and 10pm), Miri (RM40, 7½ hours, roughly hourly from 6am to 10pm) and Bintulu (RM20, 3½ hours, roughly hourly from 5.30am to 6pm).

GETTING AROUND

Sibu's airport is about 20km east of town. Bus 3A runs to and from town every 1½ hours from 6.30am to 6pm (RM2.50, about 30 minutes). You could also try flagging down any rural bus that passes by. The coupon taxi fare into town is RM28.

The local bus station is on the waterfront. To get to the long-distance bus station, take Lanang Rd bus 21 (90 sen) from the local bus station. It leaves roughly hourly between

6.30am and 5.30pm. A taxi costs RM10. Taxi stands operate 24 hours a day. Try ☎ 084-320773 or ☎ 084-335787 if you are having a hard time finding service.

Kapit

pop 19,500

After a three-hour journey in what feels like a cramped space shuttle, you'll arrive in the 'kapital' of the mighty, murky Batang Rejang. It's not much to look at, but after a few hours you'll quickly discover that this far-flung trading centre is an important commerce hub for the smattering of longhouses hidden in the nearby jungle. Have a wander through the lively fresh markets and sample savoury jungle ferns. We recommend organising your longhouse visits from Kapit rather than Belaga as there is a wider variety of river systems from which to choose.

Fans of Redmond O'Hanlon's *Into the Heart of Borneo* know Kapit as the starting point of the author's jungle adventures, and if you want to head off up the Batang Baleh to emulate them, this is the place to make arrangements.

INFORMATION

It's important to take note that there's an antiquated permit system in place for those wishing to travel from Kapit and Belaga. However, we've never heard of any authority actually checking these permits, especially since, strangely, a permit is not required for travel in the other direction. The permit office is located in an ultra-modern building called **Resident's Office** (☎ 084-796963, 084-796242; http://www.kapitro.sarawak.gov.my; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, closed for lunch) on Jln Airport, past the old airport on the west side of town. It's a 15-minute walk in each direction.

If you're looking for a wireless internet connection, ask for 'wi-five'.

Good Time Cyber Centre (☎ 084-746303; 354 Jln Yong Chai; per hr RM3) Internet access.

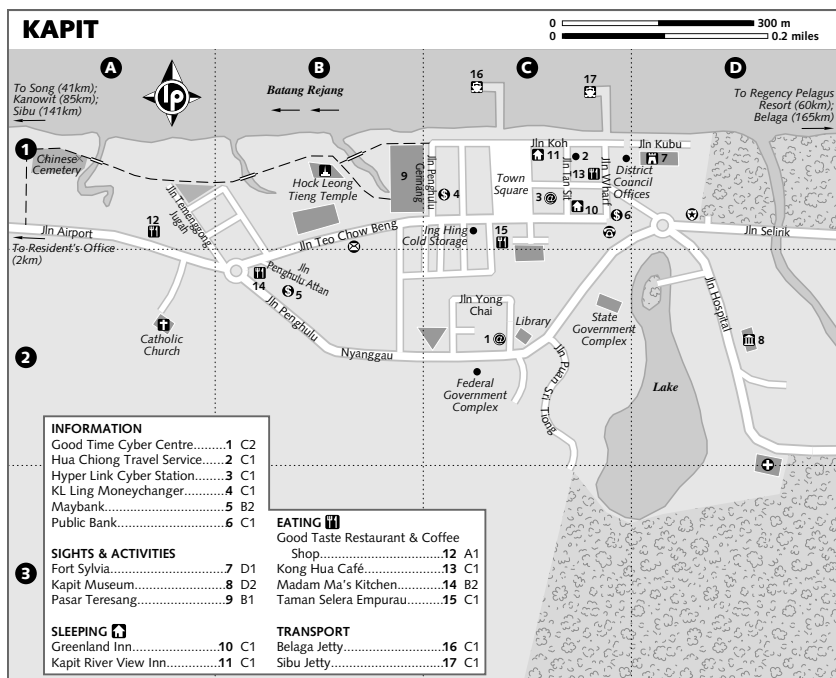
Hua Chiong Travel Service (☎ 084-796681; Jln Koh) Airline tickets and local travel services.

Hyper Link Cyber Station (17 Jln Tan Sit; per hr RM3) Internet access.

KL Ling Moneychanger (☎ 084-796488; Jln Penghulu Gerinang) Changes cash and travellers cheques.

Maybank (☎ 084-790122; 73C Jln Penghulu Atan)

Public Bank (☎ 084-790106; 64 Jln Wharf) Changes cash and travellers cheques.



SIGHTS

Another of the wooden fortifications marking the white rajahs' progress up the Rejang, **Fort Sylvia** (☎ 799171; Jln Kubu; admission free; ☞ 10am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Sun) was built as Fort Kapit in 1880 to help the peace and gain control of the upper Rejang. In 1925 the fort was renamed to honour Ranee Sylvia, wife of the third raja, Charles Vyner Brooke. The *belian* (ironwood) timbers have lasted amazingly well, even after massive flooding in 1934 almost reached the top of the doorway! In 1997 the fort was declared a historical building, and the Tun Jugah Foundation now runs it as a museum and a training centre for artisans, weavers and artists in the Kapit District.

The civic centre (Dewan Suarah) houses the **Kapit Museum** (Jln Hospital; admission free; ☞ 8am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat, closed 11.45am-2.15pm Fri). It has a couple of cultural displays and there's a relief map showing all the longhouses in the area, perfect for picking at random if you like a bit of spontaneity in your planning. Just opposite the centre is a lake with a network of small pagodas and wooden walkways, good for a stroll or a picnic.

The focus of activity in Kapit is invariably the **waterfront**, which is continually packed with ferries, barges and longboats, all swarming with people. It's fascinating to watch the activity on the water and to see people shouldering (or sometimes 'heading') impossibly heavy loads of every description up the steep steps from the wharf.

Some of these goods will end up in Kapit's colourful daily market, the **Pasar Teresang** (Wet Market). It's a chatty, noisy hive of grass-roots commerce, and the friendly vendors have a lot of fun trying to explain to tourists how to prepare and eat a galaxy of unfamiliar items.

TOURS

If you did not organise a longhouse visit from Kuching, then Kapit will do just fine. Rather than exploring the well-trodden Batang Rejang, ask around for tours that go up into the quieter Batang Belah. Tourists have expressed concern that there are crooked guides in Kapit and Belaga taking large sums of money without providing an adequate product. The Sarawak Tourism Board has strongly encouraged tourists to use licensed

guides, as only a licensed guide can be held accountable for any wrongdoings.

One of the most knowledgeable guides in the area is **Joshua Muda** (☎ 019-485 9190; joshuamuda@hotmail.com). He is Iban, and leads a variety of trips to traditional Iban longhouses along the Sungai Mujong, a tributary north of the Batang Baleh. Joshua is not a licensed guide, but he is very experienced and has even led more ambitious expeditions to the Kalimantan border. If you can't get hold of Joshua by phone or email, then head to the Greenland Inn – the receptionist should be able to put you in touch with him. If you want a registered guide try **Alice Chua** (☎ 019-485 9190), a pleasant Chinese woman that can organise a variety of local longhouse visits for around RM75 per person per day.

Although it is the general custom to visit a longhouse with a guide (see p430 for information about the longhouse experience), there are a few longhouse communities orbiting Kapit that are quite accustomed to independent travellers. Kapit's system of buses is quite easy to navigate – destinations are written in large letters on the sides of each van. If you know which longhouse you'd like to visit, simply ask around for the van that goes there. Note that the name of a longhouse is almost always the name of the chief (unless he has recently passed away), so if you know the name of your destination, you'll know the name of the chief when you arrive. Rumah Bundong (10km) is a 45-minute drive from Kapit and welcomes day trippers and overnighters (RM60).

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Baleh-Kapit Raft Safari A challenging two-day race recreating the experience of Iban and Orang Ulu people

rafting downstream with their jungle produce to Kapit. Teams of eight head 50km down the Balleh and Rejang rivers on homemade rafts, overnighing in Iban longhouses. It's usually held the last weekend in April. Check with the Kapit Resident's Office (☎ 084-796963, 084-796242) or the tourist office in Sibru for dates and entrance fees.

Gawai Dayak Beginning on 1 June, Gawai Dayak celebrates the end of the harvest season in Sarawak. This is the best time to visit the region's longhouses, as the Iban people cut loose in a mania of feasting, dancing and *tuak*-drenched celebrations.

SLEEPING

Kapit River View Inn (☎ 084-796310; krvin@tm.net.my; 10 Jln Tan Sit Leong; s & d RM55-60; 🚽) A good option with – as the name promises – a river view or two. Most rooms don't have windows though...

Greenland Inn (☎ 084-796388; 463-464 Jln Teo Chow Beng; s/d RM80/90; 🚽) Kapit has about as much in common with Greenland as Kuching does with Greenwich, but if you can ignore the geographical misnomer, this is a respectable step up from the budget class.

Regency Pelagus Resort (☎ 084-799051; www.theregencyhotel.com.my/Pelagus; full board s RM320-340, d RM400-440; 🚽 🚿) Inaccessible by road, Pelagus Resort is a unique longhouse-style resort that's a 45-minute boat ride from Kapit, within earshot of the roaring Pelagus Rapids. The two-tiered wooden design blends beautifully into the jungle, but the rooms are starting to look a bit tired and mildewed. Transport to the resort is arranged by the resort when bookings are made.

EATING

Kapit is packed with small restaurants and *kedai kopi*, but the best place to eat in the

NABAU: BORNEO'S NESSIE

In traditional Iban lore, the Nabau is a giant snake deity measuring over 30m long. An elusive reptile, the Nabau lives in the turbid waters of the upper Rejang, appearing in dreams but rarely rearing its dragon-like head. Heroes who glimpse the mega-beast are instantly blessed with good fortune.

In early 2009 a local conservation team was analysing the flood plains around the Batang Rejang from a helicopter when suddenly they spotted the Nabau. Out came the cameras and a series of photographs were taken. News of the uber-snake quickly spread on the web. Despite the hubbub surrounding the pictures, most scientists believe that the images were doctored and the Nabau remains purely a myth and local admonition.

Borneo's largest snake (whose existence has actually been proven) is the reticulated python, which can reach up to 10m in length. There are several documented cases of human fatalities – both strangulation and digestion – at the hands (so to speak) of these slithery creatures.

evening has to be the busy **Taman Selera Empurau** (Kapit Bypass Rd; dishes RM0.50-3.50), which is near the centre of town, roughly behind Ing Hing Cold Storage. In contrast to the rest of Kapit's dining scene, which is overwhelmingly Chinese, this market is almost exclusively Malay-Muslim. As such the emphasis is on *satay* and other *halal* dishes.

Kong Hua Café (☎ 084-796459; 1B Jln Wharf; dishes RM3-8; ☺ breakfast & lunch) This is a fine example of the type of old-school Chinese coffee shop that Malaysia does so well. Breakfast here is not much more than sugary snacks though.

Madam Ma's Kitchen (☎ 084-796119; Hotel Meligai, 334 Jln Airport; mains RM5-15; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Ma's is one of the only places in town with air-con, making it a refuge on a hot day (which is every day). The staff are friendly and speak some English, and the chicken curry is pretty tasty.

Good Taste Restaurant & Coffee Shop (☎ 084-798658; Wisma Ngieng Ping Toh, Jln Teo Chow Beng; dishes RM6-12; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Diner-style mixed cuisine attracts a loyal following among the office workers in the building above.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Boats do not travel along the Batang Rejang between dusk and dawn. Express boats leave for Sibu between 6.30am and 2.30pm (for information on boats from Sibu, see p439). Times are posted on the wharf and in the newspaper, although your best bet is simply to ask around, particularly at the hotels.

Boats depart for Belaga (RM30, five to six hours) at 9am. When the river is low, express boats can't get past the Pelagus Rapids, and smaller speedboats are used instead. Fares for these boats start at RM50. If you want to do a day trip to Pelagus, ask around the wharf or at your hotel, as the express boats don't stop there.

Express boats bound for the Batang Boleh depart before noon and go as far as Rumah Penghilu Jambi, Entawau and Balleh; all Iban longhouses. The last boat back to Kapit departs Rumah Penghilu Jambi at 12.30pm.

Belaga

pop 2500

By the time you pull into Belaga after the long journey up the Rejang, you may feel like you've arrived at the very heart of Borneo – in reality you're only about 100km from the

coastal city of Bintulu (as the crow flies). Despite this, Belaga certainly feels remote. It's the main bazaar and administrative centre along the upper Rejang.

INFORMATION

Belaga District Office (☎ 084-461339) Can arrange permits and guides. Behind Hotel Sing Soon Huat.

Hasbie Enterprises (☎ 084-461240; 4 Belaga Bazaar) Airline tickets, local travel services and internet.

Residence Office Bintulu (☎ 086-331896)

Residence Office Kapit (☎ 084-796963/796242)

TOURS

The main reason that tourists visit Belaga is to venture deep into the jungle in search of hidden longhouses and secreted waterfalls. But before you can share shots of rice wine with smiling locals, you have to find a tour guide. Unfortunately, we have received a lot of reports from unhappy travellers stating that there are several fraudulent operations in town. The Sarawak Tourism Board encourages tourists to use licensed guides, as only a licensed operator can be accountable for any wrongdoings. In Belaga, the most common form of fraud is overcharging.

We're not going to blacklist anyone here, but we will say this – if a mute girl approaches you, don't follow her. Try tracking down **Hamdani** (☎ 019-8865770) or **Hasbie** (☎ 084-461240) to organise your tours. You'll probably be able to find Hasbie at Belaga B&B. For Hamdani, you can swing by the Belaga Hotel and ask the receptionist to put the two of you in touch.

SLEEPING & EATING

Belaga's accommodation is of the cheap and cheerful variety, but if you're doing the long-house circuit you shouldn't really need to sleep here for more than a night or two.

Belaga B&B (☎ 086-461512; Lot 168, No 2b, Jln Penghulu Hang Nypia; r RM22-28) Affiliated with Sarawak Tourism, this cheapie has basic but clean rooms.

Hotel Belaga (☎ 084-461244; 14 Main Bazaar; r RM30-60; ☺) A convenient location makes up for less-than-perfect standards at Belaga's principal doss house. There's a decent Chinese *kopitiam* downstairs and a free washing machine sweetens the deal.

Hotel Sing Soon Huat (☎ 084-461307; 26-27 New Bazaar; r RM35-45; ☺) The bright-yellow building behind the Hotel Belaga holds this slightly less appealing establishment.

Jea Corner (off Jln Ului Lian; dishes from RM3; ☒ dinner) This tiny stall is literally the only place in Belaga still serving food after 6pm. It serves up a small variety of decent Malaysian rice-based dishes. The friendly proprietor, Albert, will probably find you before you find him. He has a wealth of information about the surrounding area and its people and culture – just don't get him started on politics!

Kafetaria Mesra Murni (Jln Temengong Mat; dishes RM3-5; ☒ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This family-run Muslim restaurant can lay claim to being the only real riverfront dining in Belaga. Try the decent *mee goreng* or the exceptionally refreshing *limau ais* (iced lime juice). It's past the park and playground.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Boat

Boats leave Kapit for Belaga (RM30, five to six hours) at 9am. When the river is low you'll need to take a speedboat instead; fares start at RM50. Returning to Kapit from Belaga, express boats leave Belaga early (between 6am and 6.30am), from where you can catch onward boats downriver to Sibul. Boats go upriver from Belaga as far as the Bakun Dam area near Rumah Apan (RM10, one hour), from where you can explore the resettled river country north of the Rejang. It's possible to do a loop back to Bintulu this way along a recently paved road.

Land

Instead of backtracking all the way to Sibul, you can cut across country via a concrete logging road, which links up with the main north-south coastal highway. A handful of 4WD pick-ups head to Bintulu (around RM50, 4½ hours) daily, mostly in the morning – check the handwritten signs in Belaga cafes or ask your guide. If you're heading north, you could ask to be dropped at the highway to catch a bus towards Miri. Vehicles wait in front of the Welcome Inn in Bintulu for the return trip.

Upriver from Belaga

About 40km upstream from Belaga, the Rejang divides into several rivers, including the mighty Batang Balui, which winds almost all the way to the Kalimantan border. Sadly, just below this junction is the site of the controversial Bakun Dam project, which was started in 1996 and is near completion. In order to build the dam, the surrounding forest

was logged and an estimated 11,000 people were forcibly resettled. Once the reservoir above the dam starts to fill, it will flood a huge stretch of the Balui valley and several other tributaries of the Rejang.

Because of the difficulty of getting boats above the dam, it's now very difficult to travel upriver on the Balui, which is a shame, because the upper reaches promise some of the most exciting river trips in Sarawak.

CENTRAL COAST

Sarawak's central coast is light on attractions, although an afternoon at Similajau National Park and an evening in Bintulu can quickly fill up your time if you have to layover while en route between Miri and the Batang Rejang.

Bintulu

pop 180,000

The name Bintulu means 'place of gathered heads' in an ancient local dialect – the area was prime noggin-nabbing territory until the Brooke era. In 1861 James Brooke set up shop and stamped out the gruesome tradition in order to encourage foreign trade (see the boxed text, p407, for a brief history of headhunting in Borneo). Today, Bintulu is an undistinguished commercial centre servicing offshore oil and gas installations and upriver logging.

ORIENTATION

Bintulu lies along the north bank of the Batang Kemena, within walking distance of the river mouth. All the places to stay and eat, banks and other services are situated in the riverside district south of the old airport. The waterfront just north of the shopping area along Jln Masjid has several busy markets. The long-distance bus station is 5km north of town at Medan Jaya, and the airport is 25km west of the centre.

INFORMATION

Bintulu Hospital (☎ 086-331455; off Jln Lebu Raya Abang Galau)

HSBC (☎ 086-315928; 25 Jln Law Gek Soon; ☒ 9am-3pm Mon-Fri) The best bank in Bintulu. There's an ATM here.

Standard Chartered Bank (☎ 086-334166; 89 Jln Keppel; ☒ 9am-3pm Mon-Fri) Another useful bank with an ATM.

Star Internet (Jln Law Gek Soon; per hr RM3; ☒ 9am-11pm) Internet access. Noisy with slow machines.

SLEEPING

Bintulu's ultra-budget lodgings can be on the dodgy side, and you may be better off paying a little more for peace of mind.

My House Inn (☎ 086-336399; 161 Jln Masjid; s/d RM35/40; 📶) Looking at this cheapie from the outside you'd be pretty glad this wasn't your house, but inside it's no worse than grubby in places, with tiled rooms and decent double beds.

Kintown Inn (☎ 086-333666; 93 Jln Keppel; r from RM70; 📶) These bright, modern rooms, done out in smart linen with some nice touches like big shower heads and fan headboards, are particularly good value. The location's also perfect for quick getaways.

Riverfront Inn (☎ 086-333111; riverf@tm.net.my; 256 Taman Sri Dagang; r from RM90; 📶) A long-standing favourite with business and leisure visitors alike, the Riverfront is low-key but still classy. It's well worth paying top whack to get a room overlooking the river – the view is pure Borneo. There's a decent cafe on the ground floor and wi-fi in the lobby.

ParkCity Everly Hotel (☎ 086-333666; www.pinganchorage.com.my; Lot 3062 Jln Tun Razak; r RM219; 📶) If you're looking for a little luxury on your layover, try the plush ParkCity Everly, housed in a modern skyscraper.

EATING

Chef (92 Jln Abang Galau; cakes from RM0.90; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) No chocolate salty balls here: this drool-inducing bakery-cafe can satisfy most sweet and savoury cravings, from local cakes and pastries to a good rendition of tiramisu (RM4.50).

Ban Kee Café (off Jln Abang Galau; meals from RM10; ☎ lunch & dinner) Run, don't walk, to this brilliant indoor-outdoor Chinese seafood specialist. It doesn't look like much, but the food is so good that you'll consider staying in town for a second night just so you can eat here again. Try the butter prawns or the baby *kailan* (a Chinese vegetable similar to baby bak choy). The food is fresh as can be.

Every evening, a busy **night market** (off Jln Abang Galau; meals from RM1; ☎ nightly from 5.30pm) sets up in a lot off a backstreet between the old airport and Jln Abang Galau. It's a good place to snack track for Malay dishes and fresh fruit.

Finally, there are several food stalls on the upper floor of the **Pasar Utama** (New Market; Jln Main Bazaar; meals RM2-5; ☎ breakfast, lunch

& early dinner). The stalls at the neighbouring **Tamu Bintulu** (Bintulu Market; meals RM2-5; ☎ breakfast, lunch & early dinner) sell fresh fruit and jungle produce.

GETTING THERE & AWAY**Air**

Bintulu airport is 25km west of the centre. A taxi there costs RM25.

Malaysia Airlines (☎ 1300-883-000, 086-331554; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my; Jln Masjid) flies between Bintulu and Kota Kinabalu (RM148), Kuching (RM139), Miri (RM73) and Sibul (RM81), as well as Kuala Lumpur (RM339).

AirAsia (☎ 1300-889933; www.airasia.com) connects to Kuching.

Bus

The long-distance bus station is 5km north of town. Travel between the two by local bus or taxi (RM10 to RM15).

There are frequent daily services between Bintulu and Kuching (RM60, 10 hours), Miri (RM20, 4½ hours) and Sibul (RM20, 3½ hours).

Van & Long-Distance Taxi

Taxis and vans congregate in front of the markets and alongside the Tua Pek Kong temple. The return-trip taxi fare to Simalajau National Park is RM80 per car.

GETTING AROUND

Taxis (official and unofficial) congregate alongside Tua Pek Kong temple and at the big taxi stand near the markets. Most taxi fares around town are RM5. The trip to the long-distance bus station costs around RM10 to RM15; the airport is RM25 to RM30.

Similajau National Park

Another one of Borneo's hard-to-pronounce destinations, **Similajau National Park** (☎ 086-391284; admission RM10; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-5pm), 30km north of Bintulu, is a quiet coastal park with nice white-sand beaches, good walking trails and simple accommodation. While the park does not have the habitat variety of Bako National Park, it's perfect if you want a quiet, relaxing natural getaway as you work your way along the coast of Sarawak.

Similajau occupies a narrow 30km coastal strip between the South China Sea and the typical logged-out secondary forest of

Sarawak. As such, it's one of the only havens for wildlife in this part of the state and a recent survey recorded 230 bird species, making it one of the most diversely inhabited areas in Sarawak. The forest is also home to 24 species of mammal.

The park headquarters occupies the south bank of the mouth of the Sungai Likau, though most of it lies north of the river, and is accessed by a suspension bridge.

You might be able to arrange a boat up the mangrove-lined Sungai Likau for RM50 per hour (one hour should be enough). If you go in the early morning, you'll see a range of birds, including hornbills, and maybe even some gibbons or macaques. Dolphins can occasionally be spotted out at sea, and marine turtles lay their eggs at certain points along the beach.

Note that estuarine crocodiles are found in the rivers of the park and around river mouths. *Do not* swim or wade in the park's rivers or near river mouths, and be careful when walking near the rivers early or late in the day. Three locals were killed by crocodiles in the area in 2002, so this is not a warning to be taken lightly.

WALKING

Similajau has a limited trail network, the backbone of which is a long trail (9.8km from park headquarters) to Golden Beach. It's a long, hot walk so take lots of water.

Trails are well marked and a guide isn't necessary. After crossing the river from headquarters, head left off the boardwalk towards the headland. It's about half an hour's walk to a pavilion from where you can enjoy the view back along the coast towards Bintulu.

Further along the coast, the main trail leads to **Turtle Beach** (7km) and **Golden Beach** (9.8km), two beautiful, deserted spots where turtles come ashore to lay their eggs. Other trails forge into the low hills behind the coast to the **Selunsur Rapids** (6.9km). To get to **Kolam Sebungong**, a natural pool fed by the Sebungong river, you'll have to organise a boat at park headquarters (about RM75 per boat, minimum five people). The trip takes 30 minutes and the pool is a 15-minute walk from the boat drop-off point. If you take the boat, you could also be dropped off at one of the other beaches along the way and walk back.

SLEEPING & EATING

Similajau can be visited as a day trip from Bintulu, but if you want to enjoy the beach, go for a night walk or do the entire length of the coastal trail, you should stay a night or two. Accommodation for the park can be booked through the park headquarters or the **National Parks & Wildlife Centre** (Sarawak Forestry Corporation; ☎ 085-434184) in Miri.

Comfortable accommodation is provided in the air-conditioned **Drive-In Chalets** (RM75), each with two rooms sleeping up to four people. The two **hostels** (dm/r RM15/40) can accommodate 16 and 72 people respectively, all in four-bed bunk rooms. There's also a **camp site** (per person RM5).

The park **cafeteria** (☎ 9.30am-6pm) has decent food and sundry items for sale. There are no stoves in the chalets or hostels, but there are refrigerators.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Bintulu is the gateway to Similajau National Park. There is no regularly scheduled bus or van transport to the park. A taxi or private car will cost RM40 each way from Bintulu – be sure to arrange a pick-up time when you get dropped off.

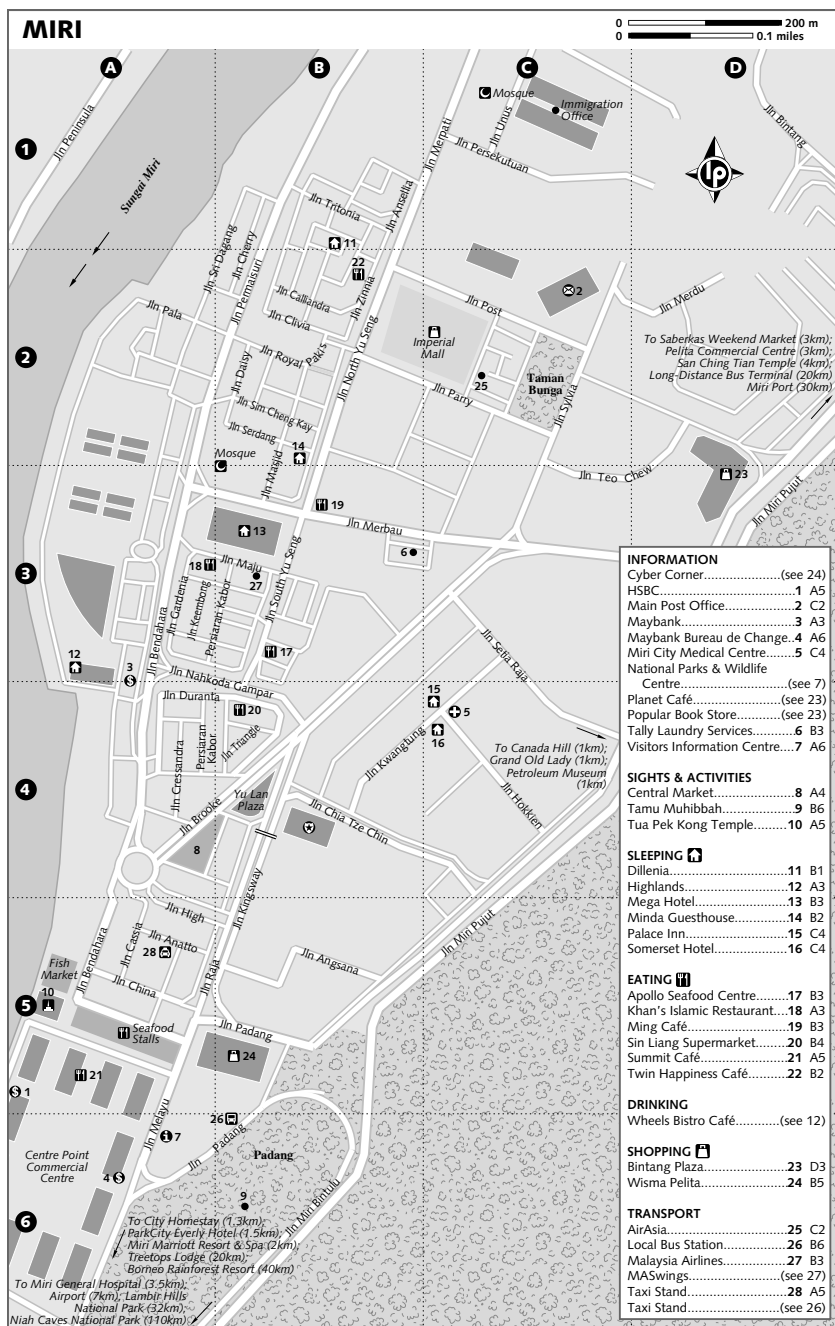
NORTHERN SARAWAK

The northern region serves up Sarawak's hat trick of natural beauties: Gunung Mulu National Park, the Kelabit Highlands and the Niah Caves. Use urban Miri as the jumping-off point to explore these treasures.

MIRI

pop 269,380

It's funny: the closer one gets to the Bruneian border, the more one notices shady characters coming out of the woodwork. Is it for the repressed Bruneians stepping over the border for some afternoon delight, or is it for the oil-loving expats who fill up suburban communities with their country club accommodation? (We're pretty sure it's the latter...) Either way, Miri's memorable cast of characters gives the city an interesting bordertown vibe, despite its size and population. Perhaps it's because Miri is the gateway point to a variety of Borneo's oft-travelled destinations. Tourists will have to pass by in order to reach Gunung Mulu National Park, the Kelabit Highlands and, for some, the Niah Caves.



Orientation

Miri lies on a narrow plain between the east bank of the Sungai Miri and low hills that were once covered in oil derricks. Most places to stay and eat are within walking distance of each other, spread out between the Centre Point Commercial Centre, local bus station and visitors information centre to the south and the main post office and immigration office to the north.

Travellers will need a bus or taxi to get to the long-distance bus station and the airport.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Popular Book Store (☎ 085-439052; 2nd fl, Bintang Plaza, 1264 Jln Miri Pujut) Good general selection.

INTERNET ACCESS

Cyber Corner (1st fl, Wisma Pelita, Jln Padang; per hr RM3)

Planet Café (1st fl, Bintang Plaza, 1264 Jln Miri Pujut; per hr RM4)

LAUNDRY

Tally Laundry Services (☎ 085-430322; Jln Merbau; ☎ 8am-6pm)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Miri City Medical Centre (☎ 085-426622; 918 Jln Hokkien) Private medical centre.

Miri General Hospital (☎ 085-420033; Jln Cayaha) South of town, off the Miri bypass.

MONEY

There are banks and ATMs all over town, and moneychangers are common.

HSBC (Lot 1268, ground fl, Miri Commercial Centre, Jln Melayu) There's an ATM here.

Maybank (☎ 085-412282; Lot 112, Jln Bendahara; ☎ 9.15am-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 9.15-4pm Fri)

Maybank Bureau de Change (☎ 085-438467; 1271 Centre Point Commercial Centre; ☎ 9am-5pm) Dedicated exchange and cash-advance facilities. Travellers cheques are changed here for RM10 per transaction plus 15 sen stamp duty per cheque.

POST

Main post office (☎ 085-441222; Jln Post)

TOURIST INFORMATION

The **visitors information centre** (☎ 085-434181; 452 Jln Melayu; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun) is at the southern end of the town centre. The helpful

staff can provide city maps, transport schedules and information on accommodation and tours. It also produces the useful free *Visitors' Guide to Miri*. You can book accommodation with the **National Parks & Wildlife Centre** (Sarawak Forestry Corporation; ☎ 085-436637, 085-434184) here for Gunung Mulu, Niah, Lambir Hills and Similajau national parks.

There is an information counter at the airport, and further city information is available on www.miri.net.my.

Sights

CITY CENTRE

The atmospheric old part of town begins around the southern end of Jln Brooke; this is the area most worth exploring. There's plenty of lively commerce around the Chinese shophouse blocks, the **Central Market** and the **Tamu Muhibbah**, where local Dayaks come to sell their vegetables. Also of note are the **Muslim and Chinese cemeteries** along the coastal road. The wide courtyard of the **Tua Pek Kong Temple**, near the fish market, is a good spot to watch the river traffic float by. During **Chinese New Year**, virtually the whole of this area is taken over by a lively street fair and the crowds cram in under red lanterns and gold foil.

Canada Hill, on the low ridge behind the town centre, is the site of Malaysia's first oil well, the **Grand Old Lady**. Bored in 1910, the well produced around seven barrels a day until it was abandoned in 1972. The **Petroleum Museum** (☎ 085-635516; Jln Canada Hill; admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm, last admission 4.30pm, closed Mon) has a few interesting displays on the source of the city's wealth. The hill itself is a popular exercise spot with a handful of refreshment kiosks, and it's worth walking up here at sunset just for the views across Miri to the South China Sea.

If you land in Miri on a weekend, don't miss the **Saberkas Weekend Market**, which takes place from Friday evening to midday Sunday, about 3km northeast of Bintang Plaza. It's one of the most colourful and friendly markets in Sarawak and vendors are more than happy to answer questions about the various products displayed.

Not far from the market site, in the suburb of Krokop, the **San Ching Tian temple** is the largest Taoist temple in Southeast Asia. Built in 2000, the design features intricate dragon reliefs brought all the way over from China.

LAMBIR HILLS NATIONAL PARK

Although **Lambir Hills National Park** (☎ 085-491030; admission RM10; 📄 park office 8am-5pm, last entry 4pm) doesn't have the spectacular scenery of Niah and Mulu, it is the closest primary rainforest to Miri (around 30km south) and it makes for a pleasant day trip out of the city. A perennial favourite among the locals, this scenic scrap of jungle offers waterfalls, picnic areas and a clutch of pleasant walking trails through its dipterocarp rainforest.

The national park covers 70 sq km and protects a range of low sandstone hills that reach a height of 465m at Bukit Lambir. Much of the forest was logged before the park was declared, but the secondary forest is beautiful in its own right – any given 50-hectare plot contains an amazing 1100 tree species (including wild bananas and the awesome 'wandering tree', which uses its branch to move around in search of more sunlight!) Indigenous fauna includes gibbons, tarsiers, pangolins and barking deer, though you are unlikely to see any of these close to the park headquarters. Lambir Hills is also home to many species of birds.

The park's main trail follows a small river to **Latuk Waterfall**, which has a picnic area and is suitable for swimming. It takes no more than 25 minutes to walk the 835m from park headquarters. Don't forget to register your name at the trailhead booth, especially if you plan to climb **Bukit Pantu** or **Bukit Lambir**, further afield.

There are no cooking facilities at the park, but a canteen sells rice and noodle dishes, drinks and basic provisions. Opening hours depend on demand but are generally from 8am to about 7pm.

From Miri, any bus (RM3, 35 minutes) bound for Bekenu or Niah Junction can drop you here. A taxi from Miri costs RM40.

Festivals & Events

Miri Cultural Heritage Week (Miri Heritage Centre)

A week-long festival of cultural activities, handicrafts and performances, held in September.

Miri International Jazz Festival (www.mirijazzfestival.com; the Pavilion, ParkCity Everly Hotel, Jln Temenggong Datuk Oyong Lawai)

Held in May, this growing event brings in an eclectic range of performers from across the international jazz scene.

Sleeping

Although there isn't much to see or do in Miri, its strategic position close to phenomenal

tourist attractions (not to mention phenomenal amounts of oil) has made it the most expensive burg in all of Borneo.

BUDGET & MIDRANGE

Choose your budget accommodation wisely – Miri's brothel business booms at some of the shadier by-the-hour digs. The following options are a safe bet.

Highlands (☎ 085-422327, 016-809 0328; www.borneojungles.com; 1271 Jln Sri Dagang; dm/r RM25/50; 📄 📄) Highlands styles itself a 'budget tourist and travel information centre', and scores a bull's eye on all counts. Look out for the affable owner, a Twin Otter pilot from New Zealand. If you're allergic to cats you might have to give this place a miss.

Dillenia (☎ 085-434204; dillenia.guesthouse@gmail.com; 846 Jln Sida; dm/s/d RM30/50/80; 📄 📄) Dillenia is a new backpacker option with eager-beaver management and fresh coats of paint on the walls.

Treetops Lodge (☎ 085-472172; www.treetops-borneo.com; Lot 210, Siwa Jaya; r incl breakfast per person RM35; 📄) Located south of Miri along the coastal road, this family-run option runs a laid-back cluster of cabins.

Somerset Hotel (☎ 085-422777; somerhot@streamyx.com; 12 Jln Kwangtung; r from RM99; 📄) The Somerset is a good Miri midranger in the centre of town. The staff may be light on smiles, but the rooms are clean enough for under RM100 (just barely!). There's wi-fi in the lobby.

Palace Inn (☎ 085-421999; siewpoh@pc.jaring.my; Lot 192 Jln Kwangtung; s/d from RM78/88; 📄) If Somerset is full, try this spot across the street.

Borneo Rainforest Resort (☎ 085-613888; www.borneorainforestresort.com; Km36 Miri-Bintulu Rd; r from RM110; 📄 📄 📄) Located 37km south of Miri (7km south of Lambir Hills), this jungly compound is a veritable tropical theme park. Although much of the campus feels like the product of a drunken architect (rooms with slanted floors and labyrinthine paths), it's a good place for some quality family time.

The following backpacker digs are definitely worth checking out:

City Homestay (☎ 085-428118, fax 085-436382; 1st fl Brighton Centre, Jln Temenggong Datuk Oyong Lawai; d from RM78; 📄) Located above the Marine Sea House Bistro near the ParkCity Everly Hotel. Great gusts of air-con pour through the prim rooms. New coats of paint and plasma TVs have spruced things up. The beds are really comfy too.

Minda Guesthouse (☎ 085-411422; www.minda.guesthouse.com; 1st & 2nd fl Lot 637 Jln North Yu Seng;

per person dm/tw RM20/25) Great value for money. The sundeck and bright common space sweeten the deal.

TOP END

Miri's top end spots often have discounts that drop the prices into the midrange category.

ParkCity Everly Hotel (☎ 085-440288; www.vh-hotels.com; Jln Temenggong Datuk Oyong Lawai; r from RM166; 📶 📺 🚿) The ParkCity Everly is a large resort-style hotel on the beach about 2km south of Miri city, very close to the Miri Marriott. The sea-view rooms have nice views and the swimming pool is excellent. There's wi-fi on the executive floor and in the lobby. Service can be a bit uneven, but if you can get a good rate here, it's worth considering for those who don't want to stay in the centre of town.

Mega Hotel (☎ 085-432432; www.megahotel.com.my; 907 Jln Merbau; r from RM190; 📶 📺 🚿) The aptly named Mega Hotel dominates central Miri with its imposing bulk. Things improve once you get past the busy and somewhat confused reception area. Rooms are clean and well maintained and there's 24-hour room service, a convenience store and wi-fi on the premises.

Miri Marriott Resort & Spa (☎ 085-421121; www.marriotthotels.com/myymc; Jln Temenggong Datuk Oyong Lawai; r from RM327; 📶 📺 🚿) Next door to the ParkCity Everly, the Marriott is the nicest place to stay in Miri. It's a large resort with a spa, a swimming pool, several restaurants and good common areas. Rooms are spacious with large bathrooms and balconies. Wi-fi is available on the premises.

Eating & Drinking

Dining in Miri caters to the diverse array of locals. There's something for every palate. For self-catering, the **Sin Liang Supermarket** (☎ 085-413762; Jln Duranta; 🕒 8.30am-9pm) is centrally located and well stocked.

our pick Summit Café (☎ 019-354 7306; Jln Melayu; mains from RM2; 🕒 breakfast & lunch) Not to be confused with the Summit Café across from the Apollo, this spot, specialising in traditional Kelabit cuisine, is a 10-minute walk southwest of Mega Hotel (in the 'Waterfront Area'; look for a big sign saying 'Tian Tian'). If Bario isn't on your travel itinerary, then a meal here is a must. Try the colourful array of 'jungle food' – *canko manis* (forest ferns), minced tapioca, and wild boar – served on leaves instead of plates. It's best to come for an early lunch, because once the food runs out they close!

Twin Happiness Cafe (☎ 085-421868; 747 Jln Merpati; dishes RM2.50-7; 🕒 breakfast & lunch) We all take our happiness where we can find it, and the twin joys of good Chinese food and cheap prices make this particular pleasure zone worth seeking out. Besides, how can you not love a place that serves 'drunken prawn'?

Ming Café (cnr Jln North Yu Seng & Jln Merbau; dishes from RM3; 🕒 lunch & dinner) Take your pick of Malay, Chinese, Indian and Western food at this ever-busy corner eating emporium. There's a good drink counter here serving fresh juices and signature tapioca teas.

Khan's Islamic Restaurant (229 Jln Maju; mains from RM4; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This simple canteen is one of Miri's best Indian eateries, whipping up tasty treats like mouth-watering tandoori chicken and *aloo gobi* (Indian potato and cauliflower dish), as well as the usual *roti canai*. It's opposite Mega Hotel.

Apollo Seafood Centre (4 Jln South Yu Seng; meals from RM30; 🕒 lunch & dinner) This deservedly popular Chinese seafood restaurant is a big hit with ex-pat visitors. Just about anything you order will be delicious, but we recommend the crabs and the fried *midin* with *belacan*. If you are a big spender, you could always go for some lobsters straight from the tank.

Wheels Bistro Café (☎ 085-419859; 1271 Jln Dagang) Underneath the Highlands hotel, this slightly dingy bistro-pub often has live music and is a favourite hang-out for Miri's expat community.

Getting There & Away

Miri is the main access point to reach Gunung Mulu National Park, the Kelabit Highlands and the Niah Caves.

AIR

MASwings (☎ 1300-883 000; www.maswings.com.my; Jln Maju), has flights to Gunung Mulu National Park and the Kelabit Highlands – see the respective destination coverage for more information. Malaysia Airways (the umbrella company of MASwings) also flies to Bintulu (RM73), Kota Kinabalu (RM139), Kuching (RM139), Lawas (RM70), Limbang (RM65), Marudi (RM50), Pulau Labuan (RM50) and Sibul (RM138). Book flights to/from Bario and Mulu as far in advance as possible.

AirAsia (☎ 1300-889933; www.airasia.com) has cheap flights between Miri and KL, Kuching, Kota Kinabalu and Johor Bahru.

BUS

Most buses operate from the long-distance bus terminal outside of town. Miri Transport Company bus 33A runs there from the downtown local bus station on Jln Melayu (RM1, 15 minutes). A taxi to the long-distance bus terminal costs around RM20. For travel information to Brunei, see the boxed text, p593.

Main destinations:

Batu Junction Any southbound service can drop you at the Batu Niah turn-off (RM10, 1½ hours).

Bintulu Buses go daily to Bintulu (RM20, 4½ hours), departing roughly hourly between 6am and 6pm.

Kuala Baram The Miri Transport Company bus 1A goes to Kuala Baram (RM4.50, one hour) every two hours between 5.50am and 5.30pm. The bus leaves from the local bus terminal in downtown Miri on Jln Melayu in front of Taman Pelita. From Kuala Baram you can catch an express boat to Marudi.

Kuching The major companies each have a couple of direct buses daily (RM80, 15 to 16 hours), with the morning bus leaving at 8.30am and the night bus at 9pm.

Lambir Hills Frequent north-south buses go past Lambir Hills (RM3, 45 minutes).

Mukah There is one bus from Miri to Mukah (RM40, 12 hours) and Dalat (RM45, 12 hours) at 7.30am.

Sibu There are direct buses from Miri to Sibu (RM40, eight hours) leaving every two hours or so with the earliest at 7am and the last bus at 9pm. All buses to Kuching also stop at Sibu.

Getting Around

Miri's city centre is easily negotiable on foot.

Taxis (☎ 085-432277) from the city to the airport cost RM20; bus fares are RM2. Buses run from 7am to 6pm. There are several taxi stands within arm's reach of the visitor's centre.

NIAH NATIONAL PARK

Near the coast about 115km south of Miri, this small national park (32 sq km) protects one of Borneo's gems, the Niah Caves. Alongside Gunung Mulu National Park, these caves must be the most famous natural attractions in Sarawak – not bad for a bunch of hollowed-out hills. At the heart of the park is the Great Cave, one of the largest caves in the world. Outside, the park is dominated by a 394m-high limestone massif, Gunung Subis, and is covered in dense rainforest.

In 1958 archaeologists discovered evidence of human occupation of the cave area dating back some 40,000 years. Rock paintings were found in what has become known as the Painted Cave, and the discovery of several

small canoe-like coffins (death ships) indicate that this site was once used as a burial ground. Some of the artefacts found here can be seen in the Sarawak Museum in Kuching (p413).

The Niah Caves are an important nesting site for swiftlets, which supply the vital ingredient for the famous birds-nest soup, and also accommodate a staggering number of bats. Traditionally the Penan are custodians and collectors of the nests, while the Iban have the rights to the caves' other commodity, the gritty 'black gold' of bat guano (no prizes for guessing who got first pick). During the harvesting season, nest collectors live in the caves, and their massive bamboo poles can be seen inside, lashed together and wedged against the cave roof above.

Orientation

The bus from Bintulu or Miri will drop you in the centre of Batu Niah town. It's a 3km walk along the river to the park headquarters (follow the path past the red Chinese temple); you can also go by taxi, by longboat (if one is available) or by private car. The road to the headquarters is behind the town centre to the left of the bus stop, and the boat dock is directly to the right.

Information

Upon arrival you must register at **park headquarters** (☎ 085-737454; adult/child RM10/5; ☎ 8am-5pm) to pay the entrance fee and pick up a trail map.

Booking is advisable for accommodation at the park lodges. You can book accommodation at the Sarawak Forestry Corporation at the **Miri visitors information centre** (☎ 085-434184; Lot 452 Jln Melayu; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun) or the **National Parks & Wildlife Centre** (☎ 082-248088; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Haji Openg; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) located next door to the tourist info centre in Kuching. Make sure you get a receipt to present if requested at Niah. If you're staying at the hostel you can usually turn up without a booking, especially during the week. If it's busy and there's no accommodation, the worst you'll have to do is head the 3km back to Batu Niah, where there are three hotels.

Sights**NIAH ARCHAEOLOGY MUSEUM**

A lovely Malay-style building, the **Niah Archaeology Museum** (admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm)

houses interesting displays on the geology, archaeology and ecology of the caves. It's in the park, just across the river from the park headquarters.

NIAH CAVES

To get to the caves from park headquarters first take a boat across the Sungai Niah; the jetty is down the path between the office building and the cafeteria. During the day the ferry costs RM1, and from 5.30pm until 7.30pm it costs RM1.50. After 7.30pm the ferry only operates on request and the price is negotiable; arrange with the boatman in advance if you require a late return.

Once across the river, follow the raised boardwalk to the caves. It's 3.1km to the Great Cave and another 1.4km to the Painted Cave. The boards are loose in places, can get very slippery when wet and make a lot of noise, but if you stop for a while you'll hear lots of birds and may also see macaques. As well as the hundreds of beautiful butterflies, wildlife includes squirrels, flying lizards and a striking emerald-green lizard that sometimes sits on the boardwalk.

Approaching the caves, the trail skirts jagged limestone outcrops that look like ancient ramparts festooned with giant vines and creepers. Just before the cave entrance the boardwalk forks; head to the right for the caves. The left fork goes to the village of **Rumah Patrick Libau**, where there are a couple of longhouses. An informal homestay program is available here, call ☎ 019-8052415 for more information. Villagers sometimes sit at the junction selling drinks and souvenirs. The trail goes under the **Traders' Cave**, a large overhang with stout stalactites. As the name implies, this is where early bird's-nest and guano collectors carried on their business. The trail then rounds a corner to enter the vast **Great Cave**.

This impressive cavern measures 250m across at the mouth and 60m at its greatest height. Since you approach the cave from an angle, its enormous size probably won't strike you straight away. It's usually only after descending the steep stairs into the bowels of the cavern for half an hour or so that visitors pause to look back at where they've come.

At one time, some 470,000 bats and four million swiftlets called Niah home. There are no current figures, but the walls of the caves are no longer thick with bats and there are

fewer bird's nests to harvest. Several species of swiftlet nest on the cave walls; the most common by far is the glossy swiftlet, whose nest contains vegetation and is not harvested. For obvious reasons, the species whose nests are edible are far less abundant and can only be seen in the remotest corners of the cavern. Several species of bat also roost in the cave, but they're not in dense colonies and must be picked out in the gloom among the bird's nests – take a powerful torch.

The best time to see the cave wildlife is at dusk during the 'changeover', when the swiftlets stream back to their nests and the bats come hurtling out for the night's feeding, creating a dark swarm to rival any horror movie. If you do come at this time, remember that you'll need to either arrange a late ferry or hurry back to make the 7.30pm boat to park headquarters.

Inside the cave, the boardwalk continues down to the right, but you'll need a torch to explore any distance. The stairs and handrails are usually covered with dirt or guano, and can get very slippery in places. The rock formations are spectacular and ominous by turns as you slip in and out of the gloom, and when the sun hits certain overhead vents the cave is perforated by the kind of dramatic light beams that ought to herald the voice of God, or at least Charlton Heston.

Allow a good hour to explore the Great Cave; the trail branches around a massive central pillar but both branches finish at the same point and it's impossible to get lost if you stick to the boardwalk. There's no need to hire a guide, although you can hire torches (RM5) from the museum office.

After following the walkway through the Great Cave, a short forest path emerges beyond the larger cavern's opening and leads to the **Painted Cave**. It's easy to walk straight past the small fenced-off area by the cave entrance that protects the (now empty) death ships and the ancient paintings. A set of small travel binoculars are useful to make out the red hematite figures, as many have faded to little more than indistinct scrawls along a narrow 30m-strip at the back of the cave.

Alternative trails from the museum or Batu Niah will take you through the jungle to the summit of **Bukit Kasut** (267m), alongside Gunung Subis. A boardwalk has recently been constructed along this route and should now be open to the public. The park headquarters provides a trail map.

Sleeping & Eating

Niah Caves can be visited as a day trip from Miri or Bintulu, especially if you go by hire car all the way. If you would like to stay at or near the caves, the best choice is the park accommodation. Otherwise, there are a few simple hotels in Batu Niah town, about 3km away.

Niah National Park (☎ 085-737454; camp sites RM5, r from RM45) There are simple and clean hostel rooms and private rooms along with a basic canteen at the park headquarters. Camping is another option.

Niah Cave Hotel (☎ 085-737726; 155 Batu Niah Bazaar; r RM30; 🍽️) Over a cafe in Batu Niah, the simple rooms here with common bathroom are just barely acceptable.

Niah Cave Inn (☎ 085-737333; 621 Batu Niah Bazaar; economy/standard r from RM64/75; 🍽️) Despite the unfortunate connotations of its name, this is the best hotel in Batu Niah. The economy rooms aren't worth the price, but the standard rooms are decent.

There are several *kedai kopi* in town, including the **Friendly Café** (Batu Niah Bazaar; meals from RM3; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner), which serves the usual coffee-shop fare. It's opposite the Niah Cave Inn.

Getting There & Away

Access to Batu Niah, the town nearest the caves, is by road only. At the time of research, bus services to Batu Niah itself were suspended, with no indication of when they might resume. Express buses on the coastal highway make a brief stop at the Batu Niah turn-off (RM10, two hours), 102km south of Miri, but you'll have to make your own way to the town itself, 13km west of the main road, and then get to the park headquarters.

Private cars often hang around the junction offering transport to Batu Niah and the park gate; the going rate is RM10, though it can be harder finding a lift on the way out. For convenience, though, you may be better off organising return-trip transport from Miri, especially if you're only coming for the day. At RM20 each way, unless you're on your own it should be no more expensive and much quicker than doing the journey in stages. Ask at **Highlands** (☎ 085-422327; <http://borneojungles.com>; 1271 Jln Dagang) or the **visitors information centre** (☎ 085-434181; vic-miri@sarawaktourism.com; 452 Jln Melayu; 🕒 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun), both in Miri.

Coming from Bintulu, you can also charter a minivan or private vehicle, but this could cost around RM100 per car each way, which is hardly viable without a group.

Getting Around

Transport to the park headquarters from Batu Niah is usually by taxi or boat. A short but exhilarating journey past jungle-clad limestone cliffs, the boat trip costs RM10, plus RM2 per person for more than five people. Taxis also cost RM10. Boats do most of their business in the morning; in the afternoon it's usually quicker to get a taxi, a few of which are always waiting next to the bus stand.

MARUDI & BATANG BARAM

Marudi is a quiet town some 45km inland from Miri. This sleepy spot sits on the sluggish Batang Baram, which, like the Rejang further south, is a vital artery for Sarawak's interior. After Marudi, the river runs deep into Kayan and Kenyah territory, while its tributary (Batang Dapur) continues right up into the Kelabit Highlands.

The town has a **bank** (☎ 085-756235; 59 Jln Cinema) and plenty of *kedai kopi* around the square and along the main street at the western end of town. Try **Grand Hotel** (☎ 085-755711; Lg Lima; r from RM40-50; 🍽️) if you need to spend the night.

Marudi is accessible by a short flight from Miri on **Malaysia Airlines** (☎ 1300-883 000; Jln Maju; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my), which offers a service five times a week (no flights on Wednesdays and Fridays) starting at around RM30.

Express boats (RM30, 2½ hours) run between Miri Port (also known as Kuala Baram) and Marudi. To get to Miri Port, you can take a taxi for RM25. The last boat leaves about 3pm daily in both directions. For details on continuing upriver to Gunung Mulu National Park by boat, see p458.

GUNUNG MULU NATIONAL PARK

Hey, remember on BBC's *Planet Earth* documentary when that poor cameraman had to wade through thick steaming mounds of bat shit? Well, they filmed that here in Mulu! The park's intricate systems of underground haunted houses are stuffed to the brim with braids of stalactites, armies of alien insects and over two million bats, plus their noxious piles of roach-ridden excrement. Even if you haven't seen the show, we're pretty sure you

can imagine that seething mountain of bat dung – you'll love it, we promise.

It comes has no surprise that the park's yawning caverns had a cameo in this documentary of superlatives – these caves are the biggest on earth. In fact, several years ago a team of local explorers discovered the world's largest chamber, the Sarawak Chamber, reputed to be the size of 16 football fields.

Mulu's most famous attractions, however, are the Pinnacles, a forest of razor-sharp limestone peaks clustered 45m above the rainforest; and the so-called Headhunters Trail, which follows an old tribal warpath through vine-draped jungle. If you're planning on doing any serious trekking in

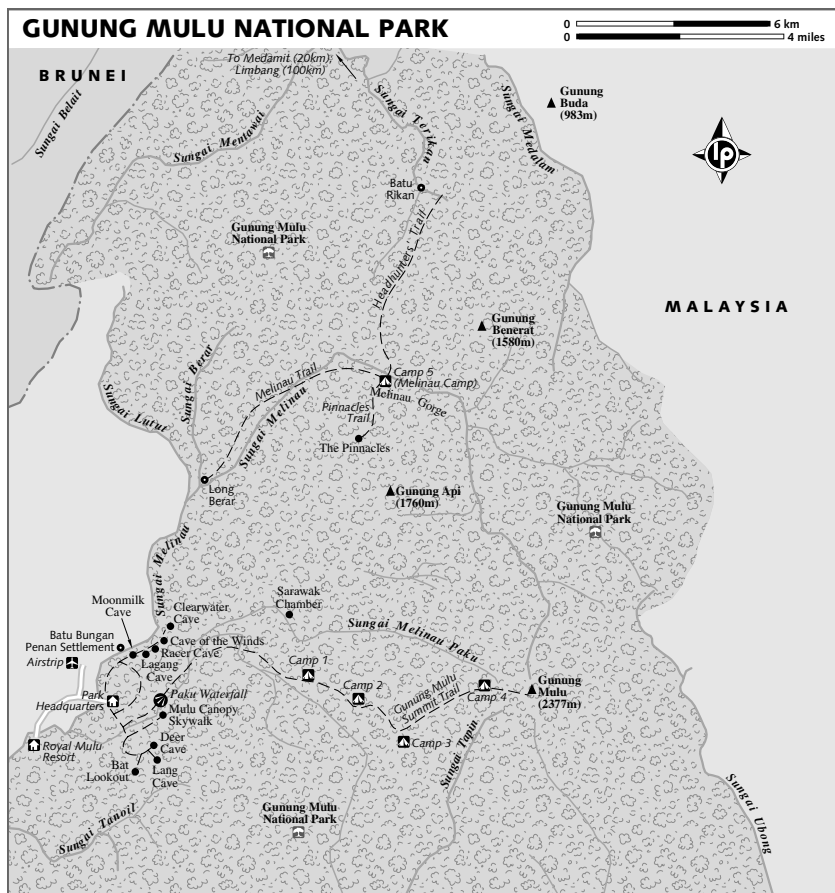
Sarawak, this park should be your first port of call.

Orientation & Information

On arrival, head to the **park headquarters** (HQ; ☎ 085-792300; www.mulupark.com; adult/child RM10/5; 🕒 8am-5pm) to pay the entry fee and receive your room or bed allocation.

Sights & Activities

Gunung Mulu's world-class sights really pack a punch – a one-two punch, in fact: steaming cavern openings reveal a mysterious underworld like a yawning beast, while thick ribbons of rainforest squiggle across the jagged landscape offering trekkers an unexplored Jurassic Park.



CAVES

Mulu's caves are the park's most popular attraction. Five of these are open to all and are easily visited from park HQ: Deer Cave, Lang Cave, Clearwater Cave, Cave of the Winds and Lagang Cave, which was just opening its doors while we were researching. It costs RM10 per day (per person) to 'enter' the park, and an additional RM10 to tour two show caves at a time. The Lagang Cave is viewed on its own for RM55 (which includes boat fare). Bring some tiger balm or put a dab of deodorant on a hanky if you are sensitive to sharp smells.

Deer Cave & Lang Cave

An easy 3km walk along a boardwalk separates Deer Cave and the adjoining Lang Cave from the park headquarters. Both are very safe, with walkways and wooden steps. In March 2009, Deer Cave was eclipsed as the largest cave passage in the world (a bigger one was discovered in Vietnam), but the cave is still the biggest passage on the globe that a traveller can visit.

Lang Cave has countless jagged stalagmites and stalactites and some other strange formations. Water cascades from openings in the roof after heavy rain. You enter the cave on one side of the mountain after a 3km walk (allow 50 minutes) to reach the cave entrance. The tour through the Lang Cave takes about 30 minutes. A strong torch is useful for the darker areas.

The star of the lot is **Deer Cave**, which contains the world's largest cave passage open to tourists – over 2km in length and 174m in height. The Deer Cave is located a mere 100m from Lang Cave, and takes about an hour to navigate. Tours depart park HQ at 1.45pm and 2.30pm (the caves are lit from 2pm to 5pm). Once inside the cave, take a deep breath – stinky! That's the guano of over two million bats you're smelling – they cling to the roof, a seething black mass gearing up for their evening prowl. Hope you brought a hat! (Just kidding – airborne dung isn't a threat.)

After visiting the caves, your guide will take you to the 'bat observatory' viewing area with informal, amphitheatre-like seating facing the gaping mouth of Deer Cave. Between 5pm and 6.30pm an endless stream of bats (which kinda looks like a cartoon swarm of bees) emerges from the cave to search the jungle for tasty insects. This dramatic parade is not to be missed. If it's very overcast or raining, the bats

will not come out, but fear not, the park has set up a hidden camera in the heart of the cave so you can still sneak a couple glances.

Cave of the Winds & Clearwater Cave

Next on the Mulu menu are two more so-called 'show caves': Cave of the Winds and Clearwater Cave. Tours depart at 9.45am and 10.30am from the entrance to the Cave of the Winds. **Cave of the Winds**, first on the tour, contains several chambers filled with phantasmagorical forests of stalactites and stalagmites.

To reach the caves, you'll pass a small settlement along the river called Batu Bungan. These people were settled along the banks of the stream as part of a government effort to discourage the nomadic lifestyle of the Penan. Trinkets and handicrafts are for sale under a canopied area.

Clearwater Cave, another 400m away by river or plankwalk, is said to be the longest cave in Southeast Asia (the tour only visits a tiny segment of the cave near one of its mouths). The real highlight of Clearwater Cave is the underground river that runs through the chambers. Bring a swimsuit: there's a wonderful swimming hole outside the entrance to Clearwater Cave.

If you like, you can walk back from these caves to park HQ via a concrete path and plankwalk that winds through the narrow passage of **Moonmilk Cave**, but be warned that there is a steep climb en route, and you'll need a headlamp for the cave. When you get to the cave, keep an eye out for the jungle creeper that winds its way into the cave – like a giant octopus tentacle exploring the darkness. After a rain, you may encounter clouds of brilliant black and green Brooke's birdwing butterflies. The total distance from Cave of the Winds to park HQ is 3km. A guide is not necessary for Moonmilk Cave or the walk to/from the cave.

Lagang Cave

The brand new tour of the Lagang Cave was all the buzz during our visit to Mulu. This special tour follows a 1500m-long plankwalk while focusing on the origin of the local limestone and the formation of the region's caves. Subterranean wildlife is also a major focus here. Tours (RM55 including return boat fare) last between two and three hours and can accommodate a maximum of 12 individuals.

Adventure Caves

Hungry for more? Mulu's advanced caves will be sure to satisfy. Around 10% of Mulu's visitors dabble in adventure caving before departing and 99% of 'em are glad they did – there's always that one dude who suddenly gets claustrophobic... And speaking of phobias, travellers with confinement issues or a severe dislike for creepy crawlies should probably cap their caving at the show caves.

Caves and routes are graded beginner, intermediate and advanced. If you have no previous spelunking experience, you will be encouraged to try an intermediate cave (usually Racer Cave) before moving on to advanced. Minimum ages for adventure caving are eight years for beginner caving, 12 for intermediate and 16 for advanced.

The park offers guides for adventure caving and it's best to book in advance. Only the guides employed by the park are licensed to lead advanced caving trips. Prices range from RM200 to RM500 for groups of up to five people. The park produces a brochure called *The Adventure*, which details the seven main caving routes, including the **Sarawak Chamber**, a 12-hour voyage to the centre of the earth to see the world's biggest cave chamber.

MULU CANOPY SKYWALK

In between visits to the show caves, why not try the **Mulu Canopy Skywalk**, easily one of Borneo's best. The park requires that you traverse it as part of a guided walk (RM30 per person; tours depart at 7am, 8.30am, 10.30am, 1pm, 2pm and 2.15pm; night walks are also available). Despite the relatively steep cost, we urge you not to skip this attraction – every bit of its 480m length is unforgettable. Climbing to the canopy is really the only way to see what a tropical rainforest is all about, so it's well worth the splurge. Also, it's fun to shake the wobbly bridges when scaredy-cats crawl across – but don't tell the park management we said that...

BIRD-WATCHING

Birders will enjoy the park's newest feature; the 'Tree Top Tower', which has been specifically designed and constructed to give visitors the opportunity to venture 30m up into the canopy and glimpse the surrounding wildlife. Access is free during the day time, although numbers are strictly controlled. A key deposit is refunded upon a timely return to park HQ. Avian enthusiasts can reserve

exclusive access to the tower for a flat rate of RM40 per hour.

TREKKING

If you thought the caves were amazing, wait until you hit the trails! Mulu offers some of the best and most accessible jungle trekking in all of Borneo. The forest here is in excellent condition, and there are trails for every level of fitness and skill, ranging from the easy plankwalks around park HQ to the legendary four-day slog up Gunung Mulu (2377m).

The three main treks in the park are the Headhunters Trail, the Pinnacle Route and the hike to the Gunung Mulu summit. An attempt at any of them will involve some expense, and it's best to go with a group to reduce the cost of both transport and guide. All three trips are multiday affairs. Ask around when you get to the park to see if anyone's interested in sharing costs – it may even be worth trying to scout out travel buddies in Miri. You should not attempt any of these trails without a guide – and you won't be permitted to anyway. Expect rain, leeches, slippery and treacherous conditions, and a very hot workout – carry lots of water. For more general information on trekking see p85.

Guides can be arranged at the park HQ. Although only a fraction of visitors attempt these trails, it's best to book in advance as the park officials cap the number of daily hikers for conservation purposes.

The Headhunters Trail

This back-door route from Gunung Mulu to Limbang can be done in either direction, though most organised trips start in the national park for convenience. The trail is named after the Kayan war parties that apparently marched their way up the Sungai Melinau to the Melinau Gorge, then dragged their canoes overland to the Sungai Terikan to raid the peoples of the Limbang region.

Starting from Mulu's park HQ, hikers first take a boat to **Long Berar** (Kuala Litut), then walk along the **Melinau Trail** to Camp 5 (about four hours) and overnight there at the end of the first day. From here you can delay your trip down the legendary warpath and opt to spend the next day climbing up to the Pinnacles lookout (see p456).

Everyone else will follow a flat but fascinating 11.3km walk through deep jungle to the **Sungai Terikan** (four to five hours), where you

could spend the night at the rangers station (Mentawai) or proceed to an Iban longhouse, **Rumah Bala Lesong**, another three or four hours away by boat. After overnighing in the longhouse, the boat trip continues downriver to **Medamit**, and from there it is possible to travel by minivan to Limbang.

The boat ride from Long Berar (Kuala Litut) from park HQ is RM220 (one to four people; RM55 for each additional passenger). Accommodation at Camp 5 is RM25 per person. The guide fee for the Headhunters route is RM220 per group of one to five people (RM40 more for each additional hiker). The boat from the Kuala Terikan to Medamit costs RM565 for a group of one to four people (a fifth person costs an additional RM100) – groups of six to 10 people must pay RM1055 for two boats. A night at the Iban longhouse costs approximately RM20, and meals (RM15/RM8 for dinner/breakfast) are also on offer. The minivan from Medamit to Limbang Airport costs RM85 (five person maximum) or you can catch the public bus for RM5 per person. Thus, a couple travelling with their own guide (skipping the Pinnacles add-on) should budget around RM610 per person.

Extra costs include food for the stay at Camp 5, gifts for the longhouse and a tip for your guide if you feel it is warranted.

The Pinnacles

Hello trekkers – this is why you came to Borneo. Like bristles on a craggy toothbrush, the Pinnacles are an uncanny collection of sharp limestone spikes that is undoubtedly the world's worst parachute drop zone. These incredible stone towers (some 45m high) protrude from the cloud-swathed forest on the flanks of mysterious Gunung Api, or 'Fire Mountain'.

The trek to the Pinnacles starts with a two- or three-hour boat trip (depending on the level of the river) from park HQ to **Long Berar** (Kuala Litut). From here it is an 8km trek along the Melinau Trail to **Camp 5** (also called 'Melinau Camp') by the Sungai Melinau. Camp 5 has hostel-style accommodation with running water, cold showers, a cooking area, and covered sleeping quarters. You sleep overnight at this picturesque spot before climbing **Gunung Api** (1760m).

The three- to four-hour climb up to the Pinnacles is unrelentingly steep and taxing,

and you may have to unleash your inner gymnast to hobble through the final stage. You'll have to climb the entire distance to see the **Pinnacles** – there's no easy way out. Start early in the morning to ensure that you can make it up and back in one day. If you have not reached a signposted point by 11am, your guide will not allow you to continue to the top (this is for your own safety – if you're having trouble before the signpost, the chances are the final parts of the climb will be too difficult). Camping at the Pinnacles is forbidden. Going downhill takes just as long as coming up and can be twice as wearying.

Although you may hear whispers about forging forward upon returning to Camp 5, the national park has packaged the Pinnacles trek as a three-day/two-night excursion. You'll sleep at Camp 5 for a second evening before finishing the trip, either by heading down the Headhunters Trail, or by returning to Mulu's park HQ. (You may find freelance guides promising to turn the hike into a two-day/one-night combo – hardly a pleasurable experience.)

Guiding fees are RM400 per group (one to five people) for a three-day, two-night trek. The rate for boat hire to Long Berar (Kuala Litut) from park HQ is RM220 each way (one to four people, plus RM55 for each extra person). Accommodation at Camp 5 is RM25 per person each night. So, for a couple travelling with their own guide up to the Pinnacles and back to Mulu's park HQ, the total cost comes out to be roughly RM470 per person. Note that you are also required to bring three days' worth of rations.

Gunung Mulu

The most strenuous of Mulu's extended treks, the climb to Gunung Mulu is normally done as a four-day trek. You must carry enough food for the entire trip, as well as your own cooking utensils and a sleeping bag (it gets quite cold at night). It's not unusual for it to rain every day, so you could find yourself wallowing in mud all the way. Good walking shoes are a must. The guide fees are RM1000 per group.

There are several camps (basic wooden huts) along the trail; Camps 1, 3 and 4 are the ones usually used for overnight stops. The most common schedule involves an easy first day (about three or four hours' walking) and overnighing at **Camp 1** beside a beautiful river. On day two you're faced with a long (four or five hours), hard and extremely steep climb

to **Camp 4**. If it hasn't rained, there won't be any water at Camp 4, so carry some up from Camp 3.

On day three you leave your pack at Camp 4 and climb to the summit of **Gunung Mulu**. On your descent, spend another night at Camp 3 before returning to the park headquarters on day four.

The guide fee for a group of one to five people is a healthy RM1000.

Shorter Trails

If you aren't up for a multiday trekking adventure, there are several easier walks around the park HQ.

The **Moonmilk Cave Trail** leaves from park HQ and parallels the river heading upstream to Moonmilk Cave. It's mostly flat for 1.5km until it reaches the steep steps up to the cave. No guide is required and it's paved with concrete, which means easy walking and no leeches – a very pleasant way to check out the Borneo rainforest. Note that the concrete path is pressure cleaned every three months, so for the few weeks before its scheduled cleaning the path can be very slippery. If you don't feel like the sweaty climb up to the cave, a there-and-back to the base of the steps is a good idea.

About 600m along the Moonmilk Cave Trail, a **plankwalk** branches off on the right and continues through the forest for about 1km, eventually coming out along the main plankwalk to the show caves, near the park accommodation. This is another fun and easy way to experience the jungle.

The **plankwalk** to Deer and Lang caves leaves from just beyond the park accommodation, past the second longhouse block. It's about 1500m to the junction that leads on the left to the Mulu Canopy Skywalk and on the right to Deer and Lang Caves. If you just walked out to this junction and turned around, you'd probably find the time well spent.

Just before this junction, the **Gunung Mulu Summit** branches off (marked Summit Trail) on the left. This is also the **Paku Waterfall Trail**. This flat trail works through the jungle to Paku Waterfalls, an interesting set of three waterfalls that come right out of a limestone cliff face. There's good swimming here. The total distance from park HQ to the falls is about 3km and the return trip takes about three hours at a leisurely pace. Note that the ground can be-

come a swamp after rain. The best advice: don't fight it – just take the plunge and get muddy early on. No guide is required for this route, but let the folks at park HQ know before you set out and when you expect to return.

Sleeping & Eating

Given Mulu's popularity and penchant for tour groups, you must book your accommodation in advance with **Mulu Park** (☎ 085-792300; enquiries@mulupark.com; www.mulupark.com).

Park accommodation takes the form of a 21-bed **hostel** (dm RM40), which is a clean, spacious room sleeping both men and women. Hot showers and lockers are available. Comfortable private rooms are available as well, including simple Rainforest rooms (from RM110) and the charming Deluxe Longhouse rooms (from RM170). Camping is permitted at the park HQ for RM7.50 per night. See the website for images and additional info.

There are no cooking facilities in park accommodation. Simple but tasty meals are served at **Café Mulu** (The Canteen; meals RM10-15; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) – try the Mulu laksa, a staff favourite. There are a couple of low-key eating spots peppered around the main road back to the airport.

You'll see the inviting swimming pool at **Royal Mulu Resort** (☎ 085-792388; www.royalmulu.resort.com; ☺ ☺) from your aeroplane window as you land. If you're staying at the park, you might be initially sad that you didn't splurge, but after exploring this self-proclaimed luxury resort, you'll be happy you didn't. The setting is lovely though – a sprawling campus built around limestone bluffs – but the rooms, stocked with dated furnishings, don't do a good job of fending off the oppressive jungle moistness. Non-guests are welcome at the pleasant spa, which just might be the perfect reward after a Pinnacles trip. It's best to ask about promotional rates (there always seems to be some sort of discount scheme going on) – a three-day/two-night package including four meals and two cave tours is RM1370 per couple.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The most practical way to reach Gunung Mulu is by taking a direct flight between Miri and Mulu. **MASwings** (☎ 1300-883 000;

www.maswings.com.my), a branch of Malaysia Airlines, operates at least two flights per day (usually in the morning). The flight takes around 30 minutes and costs about RM300 round trip.

BOAT

It's possible to travel to Mulu from Miri by river, but it's a long, long journey and it actually costs more than flying.

First, you must take a taxi from Miri to Kuala Beram to catch the 8am river express to Marudi (RM30, 2½ hours). From Marudi, take the noon boat upriver to Long Terawan (the destination plate reads 'Tutoh'; RM20, six hours). Once there, you must charter a boat for the final three-hour journey upriver to the park (RM250). It's best to call ahead to the park to make sure that a boat will be available to take you from Long Terawan to the park. If no boat is available, be prepared to spend the night in Long Terawan unless you want to charter a boat from the park (you will then pay double the price to have a boat sent from the park to pick you up).

OVERLAND

Gunung Mulu National Park can be the finish line of the awesome Headhunters Trail. The overland trekking route begins in Limbang and incorporates several boat rides. See p455 for more information.

Getting Around

The park HQ is a 1km walk from the airport, along the road that leads to the Royal Mulu Resort. Royal Mulu picks up its customers after every flight, and those staying at the national park can grab a ride on one of the circulating vans (RM6 or RM7 depending on the driver's mood).

BARIO & THE KELABIT HIGHLANDS

A land of sacred stones, of muddy long-house pilgrimages, of wispy clouds thumbing thick greens like lazy fingers – the Kelabit Highlands is a faraway land indeed. Snuggled up against the Indonesian border like a sleeping leviathan, this kingdom of earth and sticks rests quietly under the rain as time tiptoes by oh-so slowly.

Bario, a gathering of wooden cabins and quaking rice paddies, is the region's largest community and unofficial capital. You wouldn't



think it now, but this simple village has seen its share of action, during both WWII and the Konfrontasi with Indonesia in the early 1960s.

Today, however, it's the widespread logging that poses the biggest problem. Large swathes of primary forest have been flattened by industry, and acres more lie waiting to be taken. Fortunately, several areas, including Bario's dimpled plateau and the greenbelt around Gunung Murud, are now protected by the cross-border **Pulong Tau National Park**, fully gazetted in 2005.

Orientation & Information

The Kelabit Highlands ride the Indonesian border in the easternmost part of Sarawak. Bario, in the region's centre, is essentially the Highland's capital. The village's collection of humble structures is flung across an emerald valley dotted with juicy rice fields and marshes.

Bario is the best place to base yourself for your trip through the Highlands. The airport in Bario is about a 30-minute walk south of the shophouses. You're bound to be offered a lift on arrival, as seemingly everyone in town turns up to meet the daily flights.

A recently installed communications tower has made it possible for locals to use mobile phones. Only Celcom SIM cards will work in the Highlands (and callers must be relatively close to Bario). There are no bank, ATM or credit-card facilities in the whole Kelabit Highlands. Travellers should bring plenty of small-denomination cash for accommodation, food and guides, plus some extra ringgit in case you get stranded.

Check out www.ebario.com and www.kelabit.com to help prepare for your trip to the region.

Sights & Activities

BARIO

The **Bario Asal longhouse** is one of the oldest in the area, built in the traditional style with a separate fireplace for each family on the wide verandah. Nearby the secondary school has a small collection of rare orchids.

DAY TRIPS

The Kelabit Highlands offer many opportunities for exploration even if you aren't of the intense trekker variety. Short day trips from Bario include **fishing**, **bird-watching**, trekking to **Prayer Mountain** (two hours return) and visits to the nearby villages of **Pa' Umor** and **Pa' Ukat**. You can also hike up to **Bario Gap** (half-day return), a visible notch that was cut in the rainforest on a ridge above town to celebrate the millennium and two thousand years of Christianity. Coordinated by local character and guide Peter Matu, this *kawang* (human-made natural

monument) follows the Kelabit tradition of altering their surroundings to mark important events. The intriguing settlement of **Pa' Tik** lies several kilometres beyond 'the gap'. The local Kelabits warned us that there is a potential threat of malaria among Pa' Tik's migratory Penan, although the high altitude means that mozzies are few and far between.

Those interested in food and agriculture might appreciate a short trip to the local **main tudah** (salt lick). This cemented salt collector is a great place to learn about the local method of salt processing, which is done in giant vats over a roaring fire. The high-iodine salt goes perfectly with local specialties such as deer and wild boar, but the production technique is beginning to die out.

A variety of intriguing tribal **megaliths** is strewn throughout the quiet landscape – many are within a day's reach; see p461. For information on longer treks, see below. Note that portions of the following hikes can be altered for intensive day-trip experiences as well.

Standard guiding fees apply for day trippers (a minimum of RM80), even if you only require a tour leader for a half-day trek. Recommended guides around Bario include (but are not limited to) Joshua, Florence, Stuart, Ridi and Sylvester.

TREKKING

Hikers, gird those loins: this is why you came to Borneo. The temperate, forested highlands around the Indonesian border offer some of the best jungle trekking on the island, taking in

PUN TUMID: THE KELABIT BOGEYMAN

Half-man, half-ghost, Pun Tumid is the jungle spirit of the Kelabit Highlands. His name literally means 'grandfather heel' – a moniker earned because of his oversized paw-like feet and staggered gait (think Sasquatch). Pun Tumid features prominently in Kelabit oral history and many tribal elders claim to have encountered the spectre on their jungle treks. It is believed that he patrols the region, toeing the mountain ridges and punishing those who do not follow the rules of the jungle. There are three faux pas that will incur his wrath:

- Never hang your wet clothes over the fire.
- Never throw your fruit skins in the fire.
- Never put your machete in the fire.

Pun Tumid was not fond of those who didn't obey his requests and would punish dissenters by blowing out their campfires, causing long-lasting insomnia, and moving lit logs to create unwanted flames.

Young Kelabits lived in fear of this Bornean bogeyman until they embraced Christianity. Then the wraith mysteriously disappeared...

farming villages, rugged peaks and supremely remote Kenyah and Kelabit longhouses along the way. While the Highlands are certainly cooler than Borneo's coastal regions, it's still hard work trekking up here and you should be in pretty good shape to consider a multiday trek. See p85 for detailed information about trekking in the tropics.

Guided treks range from overnight excursions to one-week slogs into the wilds of Kalimantan. Bario is a great place to begin your journey – every homestay in town can arrange guides and accommodation, as well as transport to trailheads if necessary. It's certainly possible to just turn up and make arrangements after you arrive, especially if you don't mind waiting a day or two in Bario before the start of your trek. If you're in a hurry though, consider making arrangements in advance by email or (preferably) phone. The region's topography is constantly in flux due to marauding loggers, so consider chatting with a local before choosing your route. At the time of research, treks between Bario and Ba Kelalan were still possible; however, trails from Bario to Long Lellang were closed.

Going rates for guides (and porters, if needed) start at RM80 per day, plus an extra RM20 per night on multiday trips. If you are connecting the dots between rural longhouses, expect to pay RM50 per person for a night's sleep plus three meals (you can opt out of lunch and save RM10). If you are trekking in one direction only (perhaps Bario to Ba Kelalan; see right) you will be asked to continue paying the guiding fee while your guide returns home through the jungle (in this scenario, it would take the guide two days to make the journey back to Bario from Ba Kelalan).

The Kelapang Loop

During your visit to the Highlands, you might hear locals wax nostalgic about the great Bario Loop. Sadly the circuit no longer exists as loggers continue to gobble up the virgin jungle. Today the Kelapang Loop (a three- to five-day trek) is one of the most popular routes in the Highlands, taking in three of the main longhouses south of Bario: Pa' Dalih, Ramadu and Pa' Mada. 'Loop' is something of a misnomer as it's more of an oar-shaped trek – an out-and-back trail with an oblong circuit at the tip. All three longhouses en route are welcoming, friendly places where you'll get a good glimpse into Kelabit life.

One possible itinerary is as follows: day one – Bario to Pa' Mada via deserted Pa' Main (eight hours); day two – Pa' Mada to Pa' Dalih (two hours); day three – Pa' Dalih to Ramadu (three hours); day four – Ramadu to Pa' Mada (three hours); day five – Pa' Mada back to Bario (eight hours). Trekkers can snip a day off the itinerary by combining day two and day three.

Travellers on a tight schedule can do a one- or two-day abridged version of the trip by driving to Pa' Mada along the logging roads (four hours). After lunch (RM10) at the longhouse, hike to Pa' Dalih, then take a boat (RM40 per person) back to Pa' Mada and return to Bario by car. An overnight at Pa' Mada can be easily arranged in order to get the full longhouse experience, and trekkers can walk back to Bario rather than drive (although the route isn't particularly scenic). Figure RM250 (one way) for the car ride between Bario and Pa' Mada (maximum of five people).

Alternatively, you can extend the journey for as long as you'd like by staying at some of the longhouses for a few days or altering your route to include the deserted Pa' Berang on your return trip to Bario, although unsightly logging roads have consumed parts of the trails in this western area. Parts of the Kelapang Loop can also be combined with an invigorating overland hike to Ba Kelalan.

Bario to Ba Kelalan

The three-day trek from Bario to the village of Ba Kelalan is a good route for those who don't want to cover the same ground twice (you can arrange to fly out of Ba Kelalan so that you don't have to return to Bario). It covers a variety of mostly gentle terrain and gives a good overview of the Kelabit Highlands.

The typical itinerary is as follows: day one – Bario to Pa' Lungan (four hours); day two – Pa' Lungan to Pa' Rupai (eight hours); day three – Pa' Rupai to Ba Kelalan (three hours). Note that this route takes you through part of Kalimantan, which is technically illegal, although blurred tribal boundaries mean that the governments usually turn a blind eye. Have a chat with your guide about whether this route is possible at the time you attempt the route.

It is also possible to combine part of the Kelapang Loop with a trek to Ba Kelalan by connecting the dots from Bario through deserted Pa' Main, down to Pa' Mada, over to Pa'

Dalih, then cross the border into Kalimantan, stay at Long Layu, move onto Long Bawan, then loop around to Ba Kelalan. This route takes three to five days depending on how quickly you reach Long Layu.

Note that if you journey in one direction you will be required to pay an additional guiding fee as your guide returns home through the jungle.

Batu Lawi

If you were sitting on the left side of the plane from Miri to Bario, you probably caught a glimpse of the twin granite fingers known as Batu Lawi (the largest rising to 2040m). While an ascent of the higher rock formation (known as the 'male peak' of the mountain) is only for expert technical rock climbers, ascending the lower 'female peak' is possible for fit trekkers without any special technical skills. It's a three-day return trip from Bario and hiring a porter is highly recommended.

Those wanting to loop back to Bario do the following: day one – Bario to Base Camp via Pa' Ukat (eight hours); day two – Base Camp to summit to Base Camp (10 hours); day three – Base Camp to Bario (eight hours).

Gunung Murud

Sarawak's highest mountain (2423m) is just begging to be climbed, but very few visitors make the effort to put the trip together. The mountain can be reached from both Ba Kelalan and Bario; from Bario, the more common starting point, a typical return trip takes six days. This adventure is only for the fittest of the fit, and it's highly recommended that you hire a porter.

The typical itinerary from Bario is as follows: day one – Bario to Pa' Lungan (four hours); day two – Pa' Lungan to Long Rapung (four hours); day three – Long Rapung to Church Camp (eight hours); day four – Church Camp to summit and back to Church Camp (seven hours); day five – Church Camp to Long Rapung (eight hours); day six – Long Rapung to Bario (eight hours).

MEGALITHS

Megaliths play an important part in Kelabit and Kayan culture – stone carvings, *dolmen* (stone burial markers) and runes are hidden throughout the landscape – but if you're expecting Stonehenge you'll be sorely disap-

pointed. At the time of research, local guides were getting ready to signpost some of the more impressive megaliths orbiting Bario. Due to the logging in the southern part of the highlands, megalith enthusiasts should stick to the region's northern region.

There are two interesting day-trip loops from Bario that cover an eclectic collection of stones. From Bario, head to Pa' Umor (1½ hours) passing the Bario 'salt lick' along the way. From Pa' Umor, continue on (15 minutes) to Arur Bilit Farm, which is home to **Batu Navit**, an impressive stone carving featuring a human in the spread-eagled position among its design. This stone was used as a tally for every head taken. It was also used to tally sexual conquests. From the farm, use the log bridge to cross a small river (15 minutes) in order to reach **Batu Ipak**. According to local legend, this stone formation was created when an angry Kelabit hunter pulled out his machete and took a wrathful swing at the rock, cutting it in two. Head back to Pa' Umor for lunch before returning to Bario. This entire excursion will take approximately four or five hours – maybe a tad longer if your guide is a good storyteller.

The other option is to head towards Pa' Lungan from Bario (four hours) stopping halfway at **Batu Arit**, a large stone featuring bird carvings and humanoid figures with heart-shaped faces. From Pa' Lungan it's a two-minute walk to **Batu Ritung**, a seven-foot stone table (probably a burial site), although no one is quite sure as the site was created outside of living memory. Also near Pa' Lungan (15 minutes away) is **Perupun**, a huge pile of stones. This type of rock pile was assembled to bury the valuables of the dead who had no descendants to receive their belongings. Those with a bit more time could consider basing themselves in Pa' Lungan for a day or two to visit additional burial sites, including one with a collection of mysterious jars. There is also a vine-cluttered 'jungle trail' between Pa' Lungan and Bario reserved for those with a bit more stamina and spirit. A scenic (but expensive; prices negotiable) boat ride can be arranged between the two villages for those seeking something more relaxing.

Sleeping & Eating

BARIO

Little Bario is a great place to base oneself during a visit to the Highlands. There are several

IT'S A BIRD... IT'S A PLANE... IT'S TOM HARRISON...?

Whoosh! A loud swishing sound scraped across the sky. A strange contraption hovered high above the lazy clouds in the valley. Suddenly, a small creature emerged, a monkey perhaps, falling towards the earth with an umbrella overhead. Farmers left their rice paddies. Some moved towards the flying object, some slunk back into the jungle shade, others stood motionless, eyes fixed on the dropping mass.

It was a man. And he landed in a marsh with a great thud. Dressed in jungle colours, the young man with fair skin regained his footing and slowly moved towards an inquisitive farmer and his awestruck son. The man from the sky unveiled a small brown item wrapped in foil. He broke off a piece and placed it in his mouth, offering the remaining part to the farmer's son. The child nibbled off a small amount with a slight smile. It was surprisingly sweet. The fair-skinned man promptly fired a gunshot into the clouds signalling for others from the sky to drop down to earth.

The year was 1945, and the man from the sky was Tom Harrison. He came with his cadre of soldiers to warn the locals that the Japanese were quickly approaching. The enemy forces had reached Ba Kelalan on the other side of the ridge, and it was time to turn the Kelabits into crafty guerrilla fighters.

After the British put the kibosh on the Japanese invasion, Tom decided to stick around. He offered the locals special pills that cured malaria, constructed lavatories in an attempt to encourage hygiene, and eventually built a school (without the permission of the British government). The Kelabit people were keen students and embraced his foreign teachings. Tom's mythic debut proved quite telling – he is now remembered and honoured as a demigod throughout the region.

Check out *The Most Offending Soul Alive*, a biography by Judith M Heimann, to learn more about the adventures of this colourful character – he is remembered quite differently in his native England.

cosy options, with most offering bed-and-board services for a flat per-person rate. You don't need to book ahead in Bario – internet connections are limited and tourist traffic isn't exactly bustling. Check out www.ebario.com for more information about accommodation, including a longer list of homestays and an online booking system. If you decide that you are unhappy with your accommodation choice, simply return to the airport around 9am and take a ride to a different homestay after the new batch of tourists lands on the morning flight.

Bariew Backpackers Lodge (☎ 014-892 3431, 019-859 0937; bariewlodge@yahoo.com; r RM20, full board package RM65-70) The quietly affable Raddish runs this excellent family-run guesthouse near the centre of Bario. He knows everyone in town and has an intimate knowledge of the trails and longhouses scattered throughout the highlands – his large collection of hand-drawn maps are regularly updated to reflect the region's changing geography. Rooms are simple but well kept – there's no need for fans as it is pleasantly cool in the evenings. If you aren't booking accommodation ahead of time (and you don't really have to in Bario), someone from the 'lodge' will always be at the

airport to scoop up backpackers after each incoming flight.

Tarawe's Lodge (liantarawe@yahoo.com; r per person RM20) The oldest place to hang your hat in Bario does not pretend to be anything grand, and although this honesty is refreshing, the property is a tad ragtag. The four basic rooms (located on the 2nd floor) have three single beds (orphanage-style) and there's a dusty living room on the ground level with a bumpin' sound system hooked up to an iPod. Guests can cook their own meals in the on-site kitchen.

Labang's Longhouse (ncbario@yahoo.com; r per person RM20, with 2/3 meals RM43/58) A friendly place owned by a retired Sarawak Forestry employee, this longhouse-style establishment offers prim twin-bed rooms and plenty of comfy common space decked with posters, world flags and cowboy hats. It's a great place for large groups.

Gem's Lodge (gems_lodge@yahoo.com; r RM60) Bario itself is hardly a bustling burg, but this welcoming guesthouse, just 6km southeast of town near the longhouse village of Pa' Umor, is tranquillity incarnate. The owner, Jaman, is one of Bario's nicest and most informative guides. He offers a wide array of treks, tours and excursions based on his own formidable

local knowledge. There are four pleasant private rooms and a cosy common area. Email ahead to arrange a pick-up – it's pretty far from the airport.

Jungle Blues Dream (☎ 019-884 9892; junglebluesdream@gmail.com; r & board per person RM60) Owned by local artist Stephen Baya and his lovely Danish wife, this lodge-cum-gallery is a fantastic place to call home during your Highlands visit. Rooms are lofted above the gallery and have subtle touches of Western comfort. Stephen's art hangs on all of the walls and guests are encouraged to leave an artistic message on a wooden plaque before departing. Bathrooms are in outhouse-like stalls on the ground floor. Those who book ahead can arrange an airport pick-up, and mountain bikes are available for rent (RM30 per day). Stephen's grandfather runs the Ngimat Homestay (also RM60) nearby.

HIGHLAND LONGHOUSES

It is not required to bring gifts when staying at the longhouses scattered across the Kelabit Highlands, especially if you are trying to minimise the weight in your rucksack on a week-long trek. If you have time in Miri before your arrival, consider stopping by a supermarket to grab a bag of sugar crystals, noodles, salt, (healthy) biscuits or individually wrapped items that can be passed out by the chief. Expect to pay around RM50 for one night's rest, which includes three meals (you can skip lunch and save RM10 if cash is tight). Handicrafts, like woven rattan baskets, are available for purchase at most longhouses. The longhouse communities that are more *on* the beaten track in the Kelabit region include Pa' Mada, Pa' Umor, Pa' Dalih and Ramadu.

BA KELALAN

Bario is a metropolis when compared with Ba Kelalan. This collection of nine Lun Bawang communities is known throughout Borneo for two things: apple orchards and genuine hospitality. Homestay accommodation is readily available, or trekkers can opt to stay at Apple Lodge, a friendly place at the edge of the airstrip run by the Tagal family. Pre-booking is not a must.

Getting There & Away

The most practical way to reach the Kelabit Highlands is by direct flight between Miri and Bario. **MASwings** (☎ 1300-883 000; www.maswings.com.my), a branch of Malaysia Airlines, operates at least one flight per day (always in the morning) on their Twin Otter aircraft. The flight takes one hour and costs RM98. Four weekly flights connect Miri to Ba Kelalan (RM93, one hour) and Long Lellang (RM94, one hour). Online bookings at the MASwings website can be temperamental (the site may incorrectly announce that a flight is full) so it is best to swing by their office in Miri. Planes are small and demand is high, so it's best to book as far in advance as possible.

It is also possible to reach Bario overland. The trip between Miri and Bario (RM900 per vehicle – four person maximum) takes more than a day, and passes several remote longhouses along the snaking network of logging roads.

Once in Bario it's roughly a 30-minute walk into the central part of the village (turn left at the T-junction), although the chances are high that you'll be greeted like a celeb when you get off the plane. Local lodging operators often swing by to scoop up trekkers when the planes land.

BARIO BITES

Bario is famous throughout Malaysia for two things: rice and pineapple. The town sits in a breezy valley lofted high in the clouds, and this privileged position has fostered the perfect soil conditions for growing flavourful grains and sweeter-than-sweet citrus. The subtle differences in taste might not be obvious to an undiscerning Western palate, but locals are quick to point out that their rice is smaller and more aromatic, and the local pineapple lacks a certain tart zing found in lowland plantations.

The area's coveted produce is markedly more expensive than the crops from other regions – at the markets in Miri, a kilogram of Bario rice costs a whopping RM20 (it's RM6 or RM7 if purchased in Bario).

The Kelabit also collect their own salt deposits, making this far-flung community completely self-reliant.

LIMBANG DIVISION

Limbang

If you've only seen Limbang on the map, you may be in for a surprise when you rock up expecting a backwoods outpost and find a prosperous, bustling river town. Tourism is pretty much an irrelevance in these parts, so there are few reasons to stay over, but trekkers coming from the Headhunters Trail might well appreciate an evening here to relax before hitting the road again.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

The main part of Limbang sits along the east bank of the Sungai Limbang, which loops across a forested plain before emptying into Brunei Bay. The older part of town is only a couple of hundred metres square and is bordered on the riverbank by the two-storey, blue-roofed main market.

Boats to Brunei and Labuan leave from the wharf below the blue-roofed market, and taxis park just outside. Boats to Lawas tie up at the jetty a few hundred metres downstream. Buses leave from a stand a couple of blocks east of the river, behind the old part of town. The airport is about 4km south of town.

SIGHTS

A **tamu** (weekly market) is held on Friday in the car park in front of the main market. Bisayah villagers, many of whom still speak the Brunei Malay dialect, come in from all around the district to attend.

The small but informative **Limbang Regional Museum** (Muzium Wilayah; admission free; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sun) is upstairs in another of Charles Brooke's forts, built in 1897. The collection is well presented and features exhibits on archaeology, culture and crafts of the region. To get here, follow the riverbank upstream (south) past the police station and look for the replica totem pole.

SLEEPING & EATING

Decent places are mostly midrange, air-con hotels, some of which accept credit cards.

Royal Park Hotel (☎ 085-212155; Lot 1089 Jln Buagsiol; r from RM60; 🍷) Much better value than the budget fleabags in the centre of town, this clean, well-run hotel is worth the walk to get to it. From the town centre, walk north (downstream) 400m along the river.

Purnama Hotel (☎ 085-216700; Jln Buagsiol; r RM150; 🍷) A four-star hotel with friendly staff, the

Purnama has large, adequate rooms, a cafe, lounge bar, spa and fitness centre, as well as all the consumerist delights of Limbang Plaza. Discounts make it particularly good value.

There are food stalls on the 1st floor of the waterfront market, at the bus station and along the river. Basic Malay food, roti and *murtabak* are served in halal cafes around the centre.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

For information about Brunei border crossings, see the boxed text, p593.

AIR

MASwings (☎ 1300-883 000; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my) has flights to Miri (RM65) and Kota Kinabalu (KK; RM75). The airport is 4km south of the town centre, a RM10 taxi ride away.

BOAT

The express boat to Pulau Labuan in Sabah leaves at 8.30am daily (RM25, two hours). Speedboats go to Bandar Seri Begawan in Brunei (RM15, 30 minutes) and Lawas in Sarawak (RM25, one hour) when sufficient passengers turn up (you may find yourself waiting quite a while). Boats leave from the jetty outside the immigration hall on the river, just upstream from the large pink building housing the market (Bengunan Tamu Limbang).

BUS

There are buses to Kuala Lurah, at the border with Brunei, that depart at 9.30am, 1pm and 5pm (RM5.50, one hour). There are buses to Medamit (RM5) but none to the Temburong District of Brunei (you'll have to take a taxi). Buses depart from the stand a few blocks east of the river in the centre of town. There is also a daily bus from Limbang across Brunei to Miri (RM40, three hours, departs Limbang at 9am).

CAR

A taxi to Kuala Lurah, at the border with Brunei, will cost RM40. Most taxi drivers will refuse to continue over the border to Bandar Seri Begawan (BSB) due to the time it takes to clear immigration. You can walk across the border and catch another taxi onward to BSB for about B\$10. A taxi from Limbang to the border with the Temburong District of Brunei will cost RM15, and, once again, taxi drivers will usually refuse to cross. Once across, you'll

have to hitch or arrange a private car (which will not be easy). Consider heading to Temburong (Bangar) from BSB or negotiate with a taxi driver from Limbang to take you all the way.

Lawas

Lawas is a transit point in the sliver of Sarawak pinched between Sabah and the Temburong district of Brunei. There is little of interest to travellers. A branch of Maybank can be found in the centre of town.

Hotel Perdana (☎ 085-285888; Lot 365 Jln Punang; r from 46; 🗺️) is the best economy hotel in town, although it's a little frayed round the edges. To get there, start with your back to the main

market (Pasar Baru Lawas) and go left, following the main road out of town. It will be on your right after about 300m.

There are several **Malaysia Airlines** (☎ 1300-883 000; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my) flights each week to/from Miri (RM70). The airport is 2km from town.

A boat to Limbang (RM28, one hour) leaves at 9am every day except Thursday. A boat to Labuan (RM33, two hours) leaves at 7.30am every day except Tuesday and Thursday. Boats leave from the jetty on the west side of town, just downstream from the Shell petrol station. Buses head to Kota Kinabalu in Sabah (RM20) at 7am and 1pm daily.

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