



Sarawak: Land of Mystery and Mystique

Known as the 'Land of Hornbills', Sarawak is Malaysia's largest state – making it one with many treasures that would enthrall the most discerning nature lovers.

If caves and jungles are your thing, do not give Sarawak a miss, as this paradise in Borneo has many hidden secrets that would enthrall you. Tourists can explore the magical Niah Caves and the magnificent Gunung Mulu National Park, where razor-sharp limestone formations tower above the surrounding jungles.

For a little bit of modernity and the necessary trappings, Sarawak is a modern state too, more so in Kuching, the quaint capital that will steal your heart with its charming architecture and friendly potpourri of people from the major races and indigenous ethnic groups.

MAJOR LANDMARKS

Kuching and Southwest Sarawak

Kuching is located on the banks of the Sarawak River. The river divides the capital into two districts; the northern district is mainly marked by government owned-buildings, while the southern district is a commercial spot.

The Jalan Tun Haji Openg Main Bazaar and Lebu Temple roughly demarcate southern district from Kuching's own Chinatown. The river also features an elegant European-styled walkway fondly called Kuching Waterfront. Hire a sampan, a boat or a float boat and you can travel

along the Sarawak River by day or night. The sunset here is also amazing.

Sarawak Museum

The Sarawak Museum is located at Jalan Tun Haji Openg. It was built in 1891. Stored inside and on display are Kayan and Kenyah woodcarvings, Iban war totems, musical instruments, antique Islamic and Chinese ceramics and life-size models of a Penan hut and an Iban longhouse.

Astana

The Astana is situated along the northern bank of the Sarawak River. It was built in 1870 as a gift from Rajah Charles Brooke to his new bride Margaret. Today, it is used as the official residence of the Yang Di-pertuan Negeri of Sarawak, or official head of the state. From the Kuching Waterfront, you can also see Fort Margherita right across. It was Brooke who also built the fort in 1879 and named it after his significant half. It stands at Jalan Sapi and was converted into the Police Museum in 1971.

Colonial District

In the Colonial District, there are many old architectural monuments that survived World War II. The Courthouse, which features ironwood roofs, was built in 1874. In 1833, a clock tower was added, and the Charles Brooke Memorial was constructed in 1924.

Another structure called the Pavilion Building was built in 1907. The Sarawak Steamship Building was built in 1930 and now houses a tourist information centre and souvenir stalls. With its distinct columns and arches, the Round Tower at Jalan Tun Haji Openg was built in 1931. Meanwhile, the Bishop's House was built in 1849 for Borneo's first Anglican Bishop.

Chinatown

Chinatown is a popular place for tourists as well as the local community, especially in the evenings. Take your time to relax and enjoy the beautiful scenery of the waterfront and its beautifully landscaped gardens, and savour the sight of musical fountains and pavilions. The oldest street in the city is also the Main Bazaar. If you are a handcraft lover or if you want to get better acquainted with the local specialities, this is the place to be. The Tua Pek Kong temple here has a history that dates back to the late 1800s. It is located at the eastern end of the Main Bazaar near the Chinese History Museum.

The Cat Statue

If you come across a statue of a cat at the junction of Jalan Pandungan, Jalan Central Timur and Petanak Central Market, then you should pose for a picture here. The statue represents the capital's name, which means 'cat' in Malay. This famous landmark was unveiled in 1988 to celebrate Kuching's declaration of city status.

Petrajaya

Petrajaya boasts of the beautiful Masjid Jamek and Timber Museum. If you are a cat lover, then you must also visit the Cat Museum located on Bukit Siol, because it has more than 2,000 cat artefacts and memorabilia.

Semenggoh Orang Utan Rehabilitation Centre

Sarawak is known as much for its wildlife as it is for its natural beauty. The Semenggoh Orang Utan Rehabilitation Centre is situated 30km south of Kuching. The place is a temporary home for the Orang Utan primates orphaned or rescued from captivity. These highly intelligent animals are trained to live independently at the centre before they are released in the surrounding forest reserves. A permit is required to visit this centre, which can be obtained at no cost from the Visitor's Information Centre near Padang.

Matang Wildlife Centre

The Matang Wildlife Centre is located in the Kubah National Park, 35km from Kuching. It is a home for endangered wildlife with large enclosed areas of rainforest and cages. There is also an Orang Utan training programme here that teaches the primates how to survive in the wild. In addition, the centre provides shelter for other displaced animals like sun bears, sambar deer and civets. It also houses three large bird sanctuaries that are home to sea eagles, hornbills and many other birds found in Sarawak.

If you crave for some adventure, then hit the jungle trails here. They include the Pitcher Trail (two hours), the Sungai Rayu Trail (about three to four hours), the Sungai Senduk Trail (one hour) and the Sungai Buluh Trail (two hours). If you are planning for a picnic or even an overnight stay, you are most welcome as there are picnic spots, accommodation facilities, a car park, a small canteen as well as an information centre located here.

Jong Crocodile Farm

If you have always wanted to see a crocodile up close, step up to the

Jong Crocodile Farm. It is only an hour's drive from the city at Serian Highway and also houses a small zoo.

Tua Pek Kong Temple

This magnificently decorated temple is located at Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman, across the waterfront. It is believed the temple was built in 1843 but according to official records, its existence was only recognised in 1876. The oldest Chinese temple in Kuching, it is most busy during the *Wang Kang* festival each year, which commemorates the deceased.

Damai and Santubong

Damai is Sarawak's premier beach resort area and it is only 40 minutes from Kuching. It features sandy beaches and pristine jungles. There are all kinds of leisure activities provided for different interests such as water sports, jungle trekking and cultural presentations. Damai boasts of a primary rainforest, an Arnold Palmer-designed golf course, delicious food in restaurants perched on stilts along the shore, a 'living museum' and a luxurious beach resort.

The Santubong Peninsula is about 35 minutes by road from Kuching. It is a popular retreat for locals. Visitors can jungle trek to the summit of Mount Santubong (810 metres). There are also two trails leading to the summit of Mount Santubong, which takes about eight hours to get to.

Sarawak Cultural Village

The Sarawak Cultural Village, about 40 minutes by road from Kuching, is also known as the 'Living Museum'. It was set up to preserve Sarawak's cultural heritage at Pantai Damai and Santubong. It is a good place to check out if you want to know more about the different cultures and people that make up the state.

Seven unique traditional houses are scattered over a beautiful 17-acre site where natives demonstrate their traditional activities like processing sago and making handicrafts. They wear their finest costumes and will also perform their traditional dances for you. Indeed, you will be able to experience models that represent every major group, such as the longhouses of the Iban, Bidayuh and Orang Ulu peoples, a Penan hut, a Melanau tall house, a Malay house and a Chinese farmhouse. Every building has members of the various ethnic groups dressed in their traditional costumes and carry out their traditional activities.

The village also has a theatre where you can enjoy multi-cultural dance performances. Restaurants and handicraft shops are also handy if you need to grab a bite or get some souvenirs.

Thinking of having a traditional wedding here? Not a problem as you can choose to marry Iban, Malay, Bidayuh or Oran Ulu style. For more information, please visit <http://sarawakculturalvillage.com>.

DOLPHIN WATCHING

Have you ever seen the rare Irrawaddy dolphin? Damai is one of the best places to watch them, particularly in the Santubong, Salak and Buntal estuaries. Get yourself a good guide and spotter and he will help you catch a glimpse of these shy marine denizens.

BIRD WATCHING

If you are bird lover, you will adore the Santubong Peninsula as it offers a few places for bird watching. Buntal Village is arguably the best place to start because it is an important wintering ground for migratory birds between the months of October and March. The variety includes plovers, sandpipers, egrets and terns while resident birds include the Collared Kingfisher, the White-bellied Sea Eagle and the Brahminy Kite.

Sibu

Sibu is Sarawak's second largest town along the banks of Rajang River and is also a bustling trading spot. The town is also the main staging point for upriver safaris to the longhouses of the Kayan and Kenyah.

The Sibu Civic Centre has an exhibition hall for tribal antique and old photographs of the town. Make a trip to Lembangan Market where there are hundreds of stalls that sell exotic and local products.

Bintulu

Bintulu is a quiet and serene town about 30 minutes from Sibu. It is also a mid-point to the Similajau and Niah National Parks. Voices of people bargaining and hawkers calling out to customers are common at the night market at Jalan Kampung Dagang, also known as Medan Pasar Malam. If you want to know how the traditional huts of the Melanau fishing community look like, the place to go is Kampung Jepak.

Also visit Taman Tumbina – a recreational park – perched atop a hillock that offers a fabulous view of the Tanjung Batu Beach. The beach boasts facilities like campsites, changing rooms, BBQ pits and food stalls. You can also find a variety of fruit trees and orchids on the outskirts of Bintulu at Taman Pertanian Sarawak.

Similajau National Park

Similajau is just 20km northeast of Bintulu and offers a host of activities from trekking to bird watching to coastal and river cruises. With its

emerald waters, tropical rainforest and long, golden sandy beaches, you will be amazed what the place has to offer.

Opened to the public in 1995, the park's wide-open spaces are perfect for seeing some of the 185 species of birds such as hornbills and eagles. There are also more than 20 species of mammals, including wild boars and macaques. Guides will show you where huge estuarine or saltwater crocodiles laze in the sun and where green turtles come ashore to lay their eggs.

Miri and Northeast Sarawak

Miri is the fourth division in Sarawak. It is also known as the 'Oil Town' because there are some 624 oil wells around. The first oil well is called the 'Grand Old Lady' and it is situated atop Canada Hill. If you are interested in what the jungle has to offer, then you should visit Tamu Muhibbah, a market where the Orang Ulu ethnic group sell exotic jungle products.

Some of the most popular national parks are also in Miri. The remarkable Gunung Mulu National Park, the famous Niah Caves National Park and one of the world's most diverse rainforest, the Lambir National Park, are here for those who seek adventure and knowledge.

If you are into waterfalls, the Lambir Hills National Park is only 20km south of Miri. It has sandstone hills and breathtaking waterfalls where you can enjoy the exotic natural flora and fauna. If you are keen on bird watching, there are tree towers that make it easier for you to spot the birds and jungle trails that lead you through the forest.

BEACHES AND ISLANDS

If you are looking for white, sandy beaches and crystal clear waters, Santubong is proud to offer you some of its finest beaches like Damai Beach, Teluk Bandung and Pulau Satang.

Relax and enjoy the fresh air at these places and enjoy the facilities at the Damai Golf & Country Club, Holiday Inn Damai Lagoon and Holiday Inn Resort Damai Beach. Other beaches include Pantai Siar (about 90km from Kuching), Pantai Semantan, Pantai Penyok and Pantai Bandung. These beaches are excellent for swimming, snorkelling and other sea sports and activities. Pulau Satang Besar, located north of Kampung Telaga Air, is a designated turtle sanctuary that protects green turtles. Boats can be hired from the village to the island.

NATIONAL PARKS

Sarawak is a place for nature lovers. It is famous for its numerous and fabulous national parks. You can choose to have a thrilling adventure holiday or a fun-filled but relaxing trek in these parks. Facilities like tents, fully-equipped chalets, rest houses and canteens are available and there are many local tour operators that specialise in such expeditions. There are paths that are already marked out within the parks for your convenience if you decide to explore them.

One of the most popular destinations in this category is the Batang Ai National Park, which covers more than 24,000 ha and is the site of the Batang Ai Hydroelectric Dam. It is also the home to Orang Utan, gibbons and hornbills.

Gunung Gading National Park is about five minutes by road from the town of Lundu in Southwest Sarawak. Its biggest attraction is the world's largest flower, the Rafflesia. This park was opened to the public in mid 1994 and is a conservation zone for the rare bloom.

Gunung Mulu National Park is situated about 100km east of Miri, Spanning 554 square kilometres and covered by a magnificent rainforest, the park was registered as a national park in 1974 and is home to more than 20,000 animal and some 3,500 plant species. This place was also recently gazetted as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Bako National Park

Gazetted as a national park in 1857, Bako is Sarawak oldest national park. It spans about 2,742 ha and is located about 37km from Kuching. Bako is one of the smallest parks in Sarawak but it is known for its extraordinary variety of plant and wildlife species. One of its main attractions is its incredible variety of fauna. Almost every type of vegetation found in Sarawak can be found in Bako.

Here, you will also be able to see long-tailed macaques and silver leaf monkeys. It is also possible that you will see the rare proboscis monkeys, particularly in Telok Paku and Telok Delima. Other wild denizens of Bako include the Oriental Small-clawed Otter, the Hairy Nosed Otter, the Borneo Bearded Pig, the Sun Lizard, the Grass Green Whip Snake, flying lemurs, pangolins and Wagler's Pit Viper. Take a stroll at sunset on Teluk Assam beach near the park headquarters and you will see hundreds of swifts flying around their nests near the rocks. There are also more than 150 species of birds here.

Among the trails here include Telok Paku (0.8km), Tajor (2.75km), Tanjung Rhu (1.8km) and Ulu Serait (2.75km). At certain fixed periods, some of Bako's long distance trails might be closed temporarily to trekkers due to conservation work. This is to ensure that these places are left completely undisturbed. You have to obtain a permit to visit the park at the Visitor's Information Centre in Kuching or obtain a permit upon arrival.

Other national parks are Similajau National Park (7,067 ha), Kubah National Park (2,230 ha), Lambir Hills National Park (6,952 ha), Tanjung Datu National Park (1,379 ha) and Loagan Bunut National Park (10,736 ha).

CAVES

Sarawak is home to a splendid collection of limestone caves, which includes the world famous and largest underground chamber called Sarawak Chamber. The place measures 400 metres in width and 600 metres in length – spacious enough to house London's St. Paul's Cathedral.

Sarawak is also home to Gunung Mulu (2,376 metres) – the state's second highest mountain – as well as Gunung Api (1,750 metres) and Gunung Benarat (1,585 metres).

It is interesting to note that only a few of the 25 caves and passages discovered are open to the public. Some of the unique 'show caves' include Deer Cave, Lang Cave, the Cave of Winds and Clearwater Cave. These grottos are well lit and have sturdy walkways and plank-walks to make it easier for you to enjoy your adventure.

Deer Cave is the largest cave passage in the world. It is over two kilometres in length and is high and wide to hold up 47 jumbo jets. The main chamber is 174 metres wide and 122 metres high. It is also home to millions of wrinkle-lipped bats that leave the cave in search of food at dusk.

Next to Deer Cave is Lang Cave, which should not be missed for its own beauty. The stalactites and stalagmites found in this cave are unique and have their own limestone creations although it is the smallest cave in the park.

However, Clearwater Cave spans over 100km and is the longest cave passage in Southeast Asia. It has a well-shaded river where swimming and picnic activities can be enjoyed. It also has a subterranean river,

which is navigable by boat. You can also see rare species of orchids, pitcher plants and the one-leafed plant, which is only found in Mulu.

There is a walkway that leads from the riverbanks to the entrance of Wind Cave, which is part of the Clearwater Cave system. It also has many impressive stalactites, stalagmites, rock corals and flow rocks.

Niah Caves National Park

Niah Caves is best known for the discovery of prehistoric human remains dating back to 30,000 years ago. It is also one of the birthplaces of civilisation. Hidden in the forests of Miri, the park covers more than 3,140 ha and has a big cave known as the Great Cave as well as some smaller grottos.

Niah Caves National Park is reachable by road from Miri or Bintulu. It takes about two hours to reach Batu Niah from Miri and approximately three hours from Bintulu. The final journey is a short boat ride to the park's headquarters.

Gunung Sabis

Another important archaeological research site is Gunung Sabis, where Palaeolithic and Neolithic tools and human remains were found in 1873. Artefacts of cave dwellers from 40,000 years ago were also found here.

Painted Caves

Painted Caves is the place to go if you would like to get a closer look at prehistoric art on its walls. Even primitive tools used by dwellers to harvest bird nests were found here. While here you can also indulge in exploring the numerous jungle trails, visiting Iban longhouses and mountain climbing.

TREKS

Visitors would be pleased to know that Mulu is not known just for its caves, but also for its numerous adventurous treks. The three most famous treks are Pinnacles, Headhunter's Trail and the Gunung Mulu Summit Trail. The 45-metre high, razor sharp limestone spikes towering above the surrounding vegetation mid-way up the shores of Gunung Api is called Pinnacles. Shaped and carved over millions of years by way of erosion, this trek is extremely popular among visitors who visit the park.

Headhunter's Trail is also a firm favourite. Used by the Kayan tribesmen on headhunting trails to nearby villages, it is also an excellent route to take to or from Gunung Mulu National Park. The trek is a combination of upriver travel, jungle trekking and overnight stay at an Iban longhouse.

The Gunung Mulu Summit Trek is known to be the toughest organised trek in the park. If you are incredibly fit and an experienced trekker, you can complete it in less than four days. Do not forget your good pair of walking shoes, sleeping bag, blankets, food supply, cooking utensils and sufficient water. There are also a number of wooden huts along the path as pit stops on your way.

RESORTS

Borneo Highlands Resort

Borneo Highlands Resort, which is an hour's drive away from Kuching, is one of the most exciting and unique eco-friendly resort developments in the region. The resort sits on the Penrissen Range, 1,000 metres above sea level, and is surrounded by rich vegetation and lush rainforests with a year round spring temperature of 18-28 degrees Celsius. It is an absolute botanical paradise blessed with an astonishing variety of flora and fauna, where one can enjoy fresh air, cool mountain breezes and spectacular highland sceneries. All recreational activities at Borneo Highlands Resort focus on its central theme, 'Back to Nature, Back to Basics'.

EATING OUT

Not only is Sarawak famous for its caves and national parks, it is also famous for its unique and delicious food. Coffee shops, food centres, Chinese, Western, Indian, Indonesian and Japanese restaurants are easily found in most parts, particularly in Kuching and Miri.

Sarawakian specialties include *Umai*, a traditional Melanau dish that is a spicy salad of raw marinated fish, lime and shallots. Some Chinese restaurants also serve good venison (deer meat) dishes. There are two types of crispy jungle fern called *midin* and *paku pakis*. Other common local vegetables are also available in abundance. A popular Iban delicacy is called *Pansoh Manok*, which is bamboo chicken cooked in rice wine. They also use this technique to cook fish.

ENTERTAINMENT

Kuching offers a number of pubs and bars such as *Amigos*, *Casablanca Lounge*, *Cat City*, *The Club*, *Discovery*, *Hornbill's Corner Café*, *Khatulistiwa*, *Latino*, *Margherita Lounge* and *Miami*. They are mostly in and around Taman Sri Sarawak, across Kuching Hilton, Jalan Bukit Mata and the Riverbank Suites.

Karaoke lounges are also popular. Most major hotels have lounges with karaoke facilities. In Miri, check out popular watering holes such as

Balcony, Cherry Berries and Coco, just to name a few, around the Pelita Commercial Centre.

SPORTS AND LEISURE

Like most modern locations, the capital city and other major towns are not without facilities for activities like swimming, bowling, golfing, fishing and mountain biking.

In Kuching, the public swimming pool at Jalan Padungan is a popular haunt while Reservoir Park is a well-liked jogging trail. At Riverside Complex, there is the 24-lane Riverside Superbowl.

GETTING THERE

Malaysia Airlines operates regular flights from (KLIA) in Sepang to Kuching and Miri. Domestic airports or airstrips are also found at Sibul, Bintulu, Kapit, Belaga, Marudi, Limbang, Lawas, Bario, Long Seridan, Ba Kelalan, Long Semado and Long Lellang. AirAsia offers regular flights from KLIA to Kuching, Sibul and Miri.

The national airline also flies direct from Singapore, Hong Kong, Taipei, Seoul, Tokyo, Bandar Seri Bagawan in Brunei and Pontianak in Kalimantan to Kuching. Although there are no direct flights from Europe, Australia or North America, travellers from these places can arrive via Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Brunei or Hong Kong. Express boats are the main means of travel between coastal towns.