

Adventuring the Rainforests of Malaysian Borneo

There are many amazing places to go in Malaysia; soaking up the KL skyline, enjoying spa getaways on Langkawi, chowing down on Cendol in foodie capital of Penang, but, even the fanciest rooftop pools, air-conditioned malls and bustling city markets can start to get a little predictable. The question then is *what's next?*

I found the answer by departing the Malay Peninsula and heading East to the island of Borneo, an island rich in new sights, sounds and experiences. If you're wondering like I was about *the* best places to visit in Malaysia off the beaten track, then look no further. A Malaysian Borneo adventure may seem like a daunting option, packed as it is with dense rainforests, strange critters and ex-head-hunting tribespeople (they don't do that anymore, I promise). If you're prepared to forego the usual poolside Pina Coladas however, in favour of a more rural getaway, you await something truly special.

Biodiversity beyond anything you've ever experienced, lush untouched beaches in coves only accessible by trek, as well as a cultural history defined by tribal life, pirates and British colonialism. A Borneo adventure is like getting an overenthusiastic hug from nature itself; sweaty and sometimes uncomfortable but one of the most memorable experiences you can get. Read on for which national parks to choose; which cities to arrive in and what to expect.

Best of Borneo: Sabah or Sarawak or both!

To experience the best of Borneo you'll want to choose one of the region's two states; Sabah or Sarawak. From there, you'll not only be able to get one of those cocktails you so crave, but you'll also be able to soak up the unique cultures and get insight into the multicultural identity of the locals. Indigenous tribal groups and ethnic Malays mingle seamlessly with Chinese and Indian immigrants, shaping Borneo's open-arm inclusive attitude towards foreigners, an attitude reflected in the toothy grin of my taxi driver.

Sarawak: one of the friendliest places to visit in Malaysia

If you chose Sarawak, like me, the city of Kuching is where you'll want to be. The great thing about Borneo's cities is that adventure is never far from your doorstep. Within just an hour's drive from Kuching's city centre for example, you'll have a choice of nine national parks, including Kubah, Bako and Santubong. But the city itself is more than just a stopover for weary trekkers; Kuching boasts a peaceful riverside location, friendly seafood markets and several nearby cultural experiences. Try living like a local Iban and spend the night in a wooden longhouse, stop off at the Iban Cultural Village to watch a traditional dance or just walk around the city counting the cat statues and eating dim sum.

Start your Borneo adventure in Sabah

If heading to Sabah, the city of Kota Kinabalu has your creature comforts covered. This region is famed for its hiking trails, and those who visit should consider scaling the 4,000 metres to the top of Mount Kinabalu, the country's highest peak. If that's too high for you, the immense surrounding national park is not to be sniffed at. After several days hiking, soak your aching feet along the coast off the Sipadan and Mabul islands, places renowned for their coral reefs and muck diving attractions. Or, take to the Kinabatangan River and experience both wildlife and culture as you float past small rural villages and manoeuvre past basking crocodiles.

Those who don't mind a few days of cold showers might consider camping on the beaches of Tunku Abdul Rahman Marine Park, just a short boat ride from Kota Kinabalu, or take a short trip south to Tanjung Aru for a glimpse of the local beach scene.

Wildlife Trails in Malaysian Borneo's National Parks

Once settled and sufficiently filled with Sarawak Laksa as well as charming local stories in more populated areas, you'll soon want to begin exploring one of the nearby national parks. The term 'park' doesn't do them justice however. These vast jungles overflow with awesome flora and fauna I never could have dreamt up. Mostly however, the set trails are well maintained and it's difficult to get lost. Although, if you'd like to take a night hike, consider visiting Bako National Park and putting your life into the hands of your Iban guide and the dark mysteries of the forest. Here, bearded pigs scurry free, poisonous tree frogs glow in the dark and various types of primate (both thieving and benign) – including the park's star act, the proboscis monkey – recline in the treetops.

And orangutans? While on the brink of extinction, catching a glimpse of orangutans in the wild is still possible in Borneo, particularly along Sabah's Kinabatangan River or in Serawak's Batang Ai preserve, an area so huge it spills over into Indonesia. While there is no guarantee of spotting one, the search will no doubt be part of the thrill of your Borneo adventure. Those who don't get lucky can take a visit to Semenggoh National Reserve just west of Kuching or Sepilok Rehabilitation Center in East Sabah, where semi-wild orangutans frequently come down from the canopy to feast on a daily buffet of fruits served up by the rangers. Not a bad consolation prize really!

Planning your Borneo adventure

To get the best of Borneo you'll have to allow for a number of daytrips and overnight stays, as the most exciting trips tend to be further afield. Inexpensive compared to KL, Grab is a good option to move about the city but to leave the city, hiring a car or booking a tour operator is advised. With so much to see and do, booking us to plan your Borneo adventure can save time, effort and a lot of stress!

For a look at other top places to visit in Malaysia, see our [destination guides](#).