

holland herald 



this month's theme
adventure

February 2005 | Deep into Borneo + 4x4s + Sahara on camera + Dutch ice marathon | YOUR COPY TO KEEP

Adventure

Dive into this month's theme

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At home with the

An Iban headman making a net. His tattoos are meant to ward off dangerous animals and attract women



headhunters

Joining the locals in log huts and longhouses, Suzan Crane journeys into the once feared, and still thrilling, heart of Borneo

I am hot and sweaty and I itch like a flea-bitten dog. Sand flies have marked their territory on every inch of me. Slipping down steep muddy slopes, clambering over fallen trees and resisting the aggressive attacks of prickly-skinned bushes, I am venturing into the bowels of Malaysian Borneo's jungle.

"I take you to a hidden paradise," says Jok, my Kayan guide, as we hike further into the rainforest. Then I see them, barely visible in the dense jungle foliage: several huts patched together from ragged tree branches, torn bark, and thin strips of rattan. We have arrived at the Penan camp, and I feel as if we have collided with a parallel universe.

The curious eyes and toothless smiles of the nomadic Penan greet us. This tribe, the most remote of Sarawak's 27 indigenous peoples, belong to the world's vanishing hunter-gatherer population. In their reality, time has little meaning, and people don't know their age. Daily life consists of finding

food and making blowpipes with poison darts to hunt wild boar, monkeys and mouse deer, and crafting bamboo baskets to collect sago.

Upriver odyssey

Grubby-faced toddlers, bead bracelets circling their spindly legs, peer out from behind loincloth-clad men and women in sarongs, while elders puff away at banana leaf-wrapped cigarettes. A cooking fire is burning in one of the open lean-tos; pet monkeys are tethered nearby. According to custom, I present the chief with smoking tobacco, a welcome gift.

I quickly sense that I am in the presence of a dying civilization. Imperilled by globalization and deforestation, the survival of the nomadic Orang Ulu ("upriver people") is tenuous. An estimated 40% of this dwindling tribe has already been resettled in government-sponsored housing.

With more than 45 dialects spoken in Sarawak, communication is limited to smiles and gestures. But ➤

“Dinner that night consisted of vegetables and rice, chicken, deer and python”

I am glad to have made the bumpy 350-kilometre journey over dusty logging roads to meet these elusive wanderers. That night is spent on the floor of a Penan family's one-room wooden hut. We prepare our evening meal on the banks of the river, paddle across it to retrieve fresh spring water, and do our morning ablutions in the privacy of our own bush.

Culture contrasts

My journey through Malaysian Borneo started several weeks earlier in Kuching, the capital of the state of Sarawak. On arrival, visions of Borneo as an untamed frontier quickly evaporate. The island is a study in contrasts, where KFC and Starbucks vie for space with local markets and heritage sites, and vendors wearing Nirvana T-shirts hawk durian and dried fish. Ancestor worship persists, though many Dayak (Iban and Bidayuh) combine their animistic beliefs with Christianity.

Kuching has charm, but I'm eager to head upriver. Nine hours and two boats later, we land in Kapit, the gateway to the upper Rejang and Baleh rivers (the latter providing the backdrop to Redmond O'Hanlon's book, *Into the Heart of Borneo*.) We arrive in this vibrant port town during the annual Kapit festival, and Dayak and Orang Ulu peoples (the Kayan, Kenyah Melanau, Penan, Berawan, Punan, and Kelabit), have gathered here for the celebrations.

Underscoring Sarawak's cultural cacophony, tattooed Iban and Kayan people peddle larvae and homegrown produce in the market, and tribal performances take place in the town square. It is here that we meet Mr Philip, who invites us to his wife's remote Iban longhouse. This is quite literally a long house where a number of families live communally, an entire village under one roof. Longhouses are typical of Borneo's indigenous cultures.

Longhouse life

The road to the longhouse is unfinished and smells of wet tar. It threads through a wooded interior scarred by the Iban's slash and burn *padi* (rice) fields. A year ago, this secluded area was accessible only by longboat, a four to six hours' journey from Kapit. The end of the road feels like the end of the world. Precariously balancing our loaded backpacks, we negotiate a clear shallow stream, the cool water around our knees a welcome reprieve from the incessant tropical heat. Up the rickety wooden stairs, our hosts wait on the veranda, as the perfume of the forest mingles with the strong odour of burning plants.

Ushered inside, we drop our packs in the vast communal living room. Children scurry out from behind closed doors like mice scampering out of their holes, shy smiles on their faces. Small groups of women sit together, weaving and preparing vegetables for sale in the market. Squares of natural rubber dry in the sun, roosters crow from afar. Several elders join our party. Most do not speak English.

Our hostess, Jega Anak Keling, kneels down beside me. "They want to know if you are a man or a woman," she chuckles. "It's because you have a tattoo on your chest." In Iban society, only men tattoo the chest. The women adorn their arms. Using carbon from a kerosene lamp, tattoos – particularly the customary depiction of brinjal flowers on a man's upper torso – are executed by hand with a bamboo tool. Tattoos on the throat (applied when a boy is about 15) and on the back (believed to frighten the animals in the jungle), are the signs of a warrior and the way to lure the ladies. "If a man didn't have tattoos, a woman wouldn't fall in love with him," I am told.

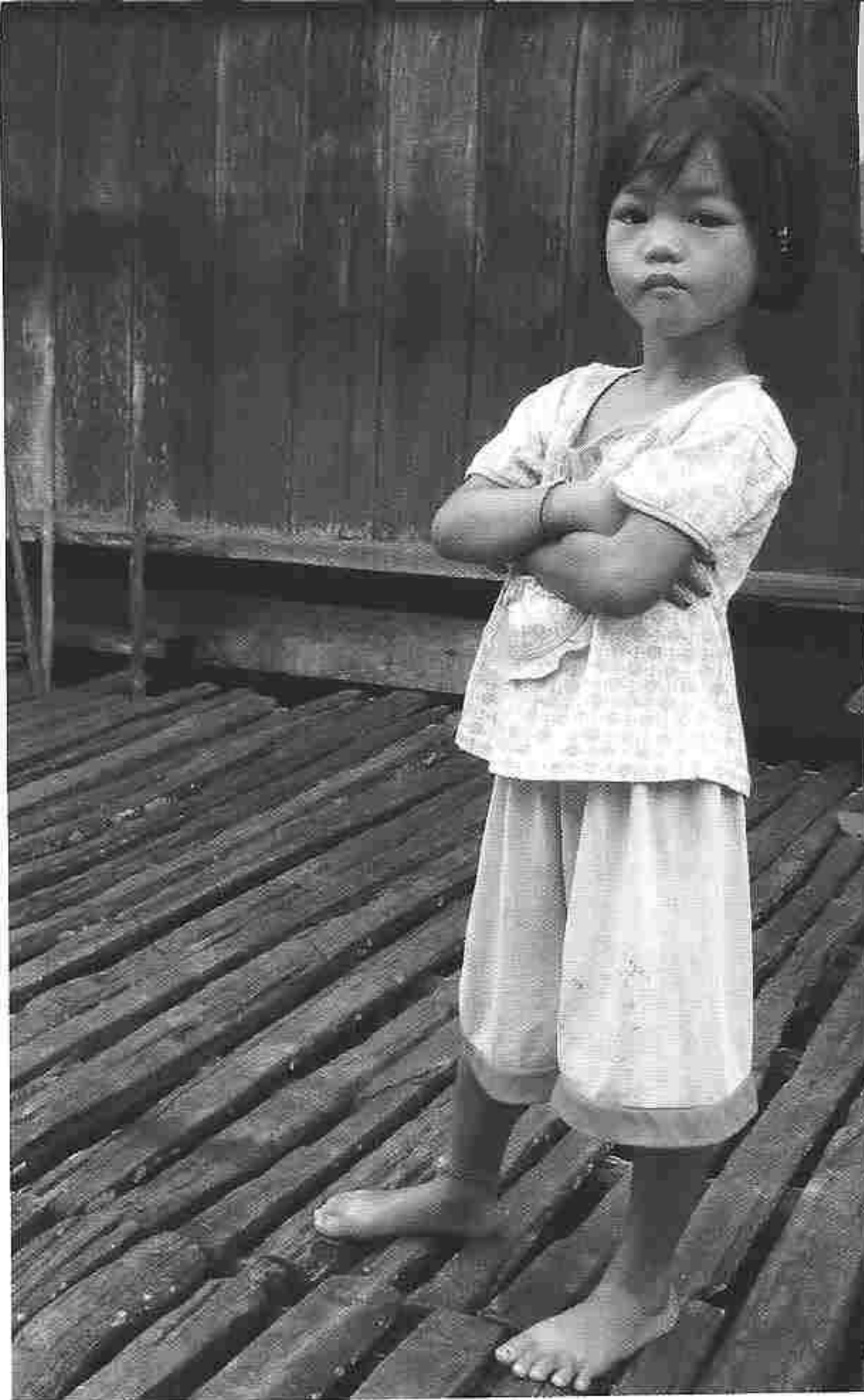
Snake supper

For women, tattoos signify ranking and skill. Only the elders still don conventional designs, as young people prefer contemporary body art. As the old pass away, so does more of a tribe's history. The same holds true for the traditional ear stretching of Kayan and other Orang Ulu clans, where women once used brass weights to lengthen their earlobes. Today, even the elders have surgically cut the lobes back.

After partaking of the customary welcome drink *tuak* (fermented rice wine), we bathe in the translucent river clad in sarongs. Later, we trek through a rocky creek enveloped by thick jungle to harvest vegetables from the small plot of land belonging to the family. Our hostess Ngana picks leafy greens and corn. She then throws a few ears on the fire started to keep the mosquitoes at bay. This is life in all its delicious simplicity. Dinner that night consists of vegetables and rice, chicken, deer and python snake (chewy and surprisingly bony).

After dinner we meander through the 22-family longhouse. Looking skyward, we are greeted by mummified trophies of the community's ancestors: heads in bamboo cages hang in front of the doors. Once a year, the Iban – Sarawak's largest and formerly most feared headhunting tribe – make ritualistic offerings to the heads for good luck.

We sleep swathed in mosquito netting in the front room with our host family. When we awake at



sunrise, most of the residents of the longhouse are already out. Another long journey follows, to Miri, the most northern city of Sarawak, where I engage Tropical Adventures tourist agency to take me deeper into Borneo's interior. An overnight stop at a modern Kayan longhouse in Long Bidian precedes my visit to the Penan. Here, I meet old women who as adolescents stretched their ears and tattooed their arms, hands, legs and feet in the name of beauty.

Kelabit women believe that their tattoos are beacons that "glow like mushrooms in the jungle and lead them to those who died before," as Hendrick Nicholas, a Kelabit artist, explains. From here, it's off to the recently appointed World Heritage site of Mulu National Park – noted for adventure caving and its Headhunter's Trail – and onto Sabah.

Below the wind

Nicknamed "The Land Below The Wind," Sabah was formerly known as North Borneo and passed through many ruling hands before joining the new country of Malaysia in 1963. Its resources have long been exploited by palm oil plantation owners and logging industrialists and parts are still under dispute by neighbouring Indonesia and Philippines. Unlike Sarawak, Sabah's sense of history and culture seems muted. Although 80 dialects are spoken, its indigenous peoples (including the Kadazan-Dusun, Murat, and Bajau) melt inconspicuously into an ethnic pot of Malay, Chinese, Indonesians and Filipinos. ➤

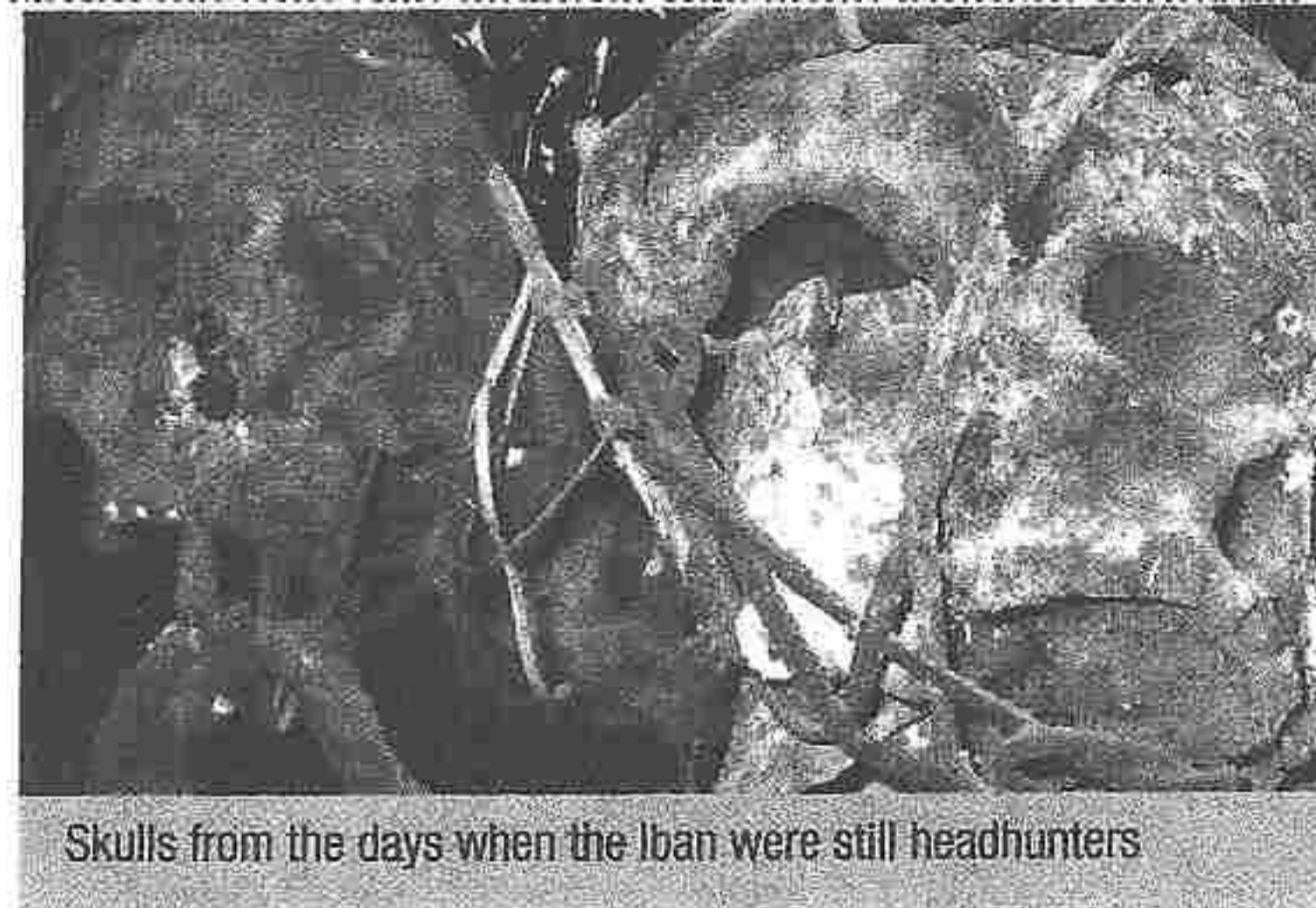
Above right A helmsman manoeuvres a ferry on the Sarawak River

Above left An Iban girl outside a traditional longhouse

Below An Iban longhouse. These can house as many as 25 families



“Several heads in bamboo cages hang in front of the doors”



Skulls from the days when the Iban were still headhunters

A local bus drops me in the little *kampung* (village) of Gum Gum from where we travel to Sepilok Orang-Utan Rehabilitation Centre and the fertile Sungai Kinabatangan floodplain. I spend the next few days at

Borneo to be wild

The world's third biggest island (after Greenland and New Guinea), Borneo straddles the equator in the South China Sea to the north of Java, south-east of the Philippines, and south-west of the Malay peninsula. Borneo's top third is Malaysian, divided into the states of Sarawak (west) and Sabah (east). Tucked in between these is the independent Sultanate of Brunei, while the remainder of the island is the Indonesian state of Kalimantan.

Hot and with high rainfall, Borneo's dense forests contain over 700 species of trees and 11,000 flowering plants, as well as a dwindling population of orang-utans, under threat from illegal logging (they can be most easily seen in centres such as Semenggok in Sarawak and

Sepilok in Sabah). In Sarawak alone, there are ten national parks, including the Mulu World Heritage site, with its vast limestone caves.

The human population of about 11 million consists of dozens of ethnic groups speaking over 100 dialects. Many tour operators work with the tribes to offer stays in longhouses and eco tours – Borneo Adventure has a good reputation.

Headhunting is now extinct, of course, although older tribe members regale visitors with stories about it.

www.sarawaktourism.com

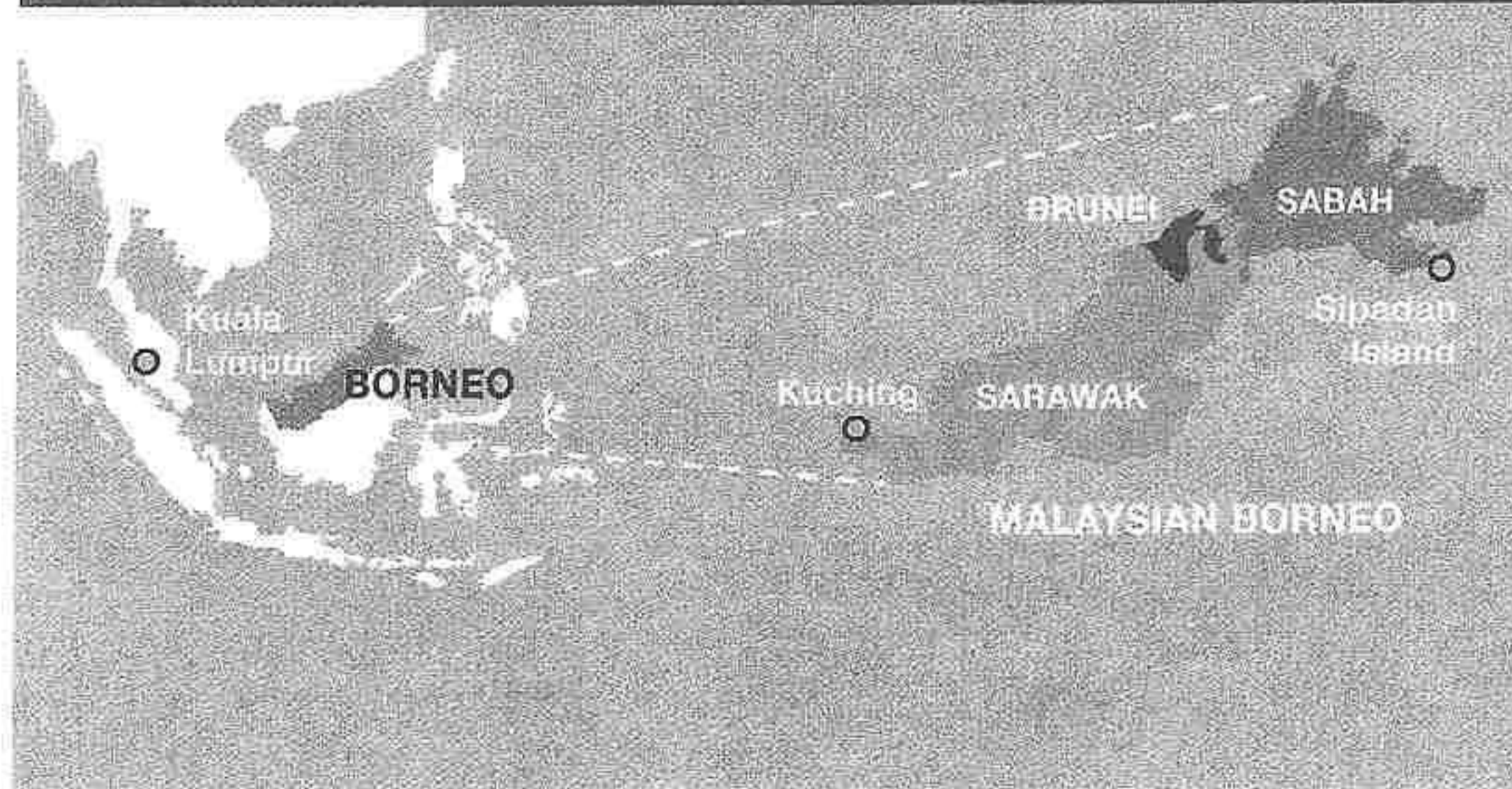
www.sabahtourism.com

www.borneoadventure.com

www.mulupark.com

GETTING THERE

KLM Royal Dutch Airlines operates one direct KLM flight five days a week from Amsterdam Airport Schiphol to Kuala Lumpur and one daily non-stop flight (in conjunction with Malaysian Airlines). From Kuala Lumpur there are connecting flights to Kuching with Malaysian Airlines.



Uncle Tan's wildlife camp, lodging in a rudimentary cabin with a mattress on the floor and the usual reams of mosquito netting.

Uncle Tan's is one of several places in the plain offering wildlife safaris. Lan, the head guide, can spot a camouflaged tree frog with his trained eye as easily as I can find a good sale on shoes. Many people extend the basic three-day package, often staying for weeks on end in the relaxed family atmosphere.

“Help,” I shriek in a tiny voice as I tumble into a ditch. A wild elephant is in hot pursuit, apparently spooked by our close proximity. Trekking through the mangrove-fringed jungle, we have encountered a small band of pygmy elephants that eventually chases us down to the riverbank. Evading them, back at camp we find that stealthy macaque longtail monkeys have absconded with the daypacks from our door-less stilt huts and food from the kitchen.

Night fever

During our night river safaris, the glowing eyes of crocodiles peer up from the inky water that mirrors a brilliant starry sky. Wild cats skulk through the low grass of the wetlands, while owls and kingfishers perch on branches above. Endangered proboscis monkeys swing high atop the trees, otters scurry near the riverbank, and hornbills soar overhead. The nocturnal world of the jungle is a busy one: scorpions, snakes, bats, giant centipedes, luminous butterflies, frogs, and hordes of spiders stir in the peaceful darkness.

Reluctantly, I leave the serenity of Uncle Tan's for Sipadan, a small island renowned for spectacular marine life (and the unfortunate Abu Sayyaff kidnapping incident of 2000). Descending just metres below the turquoise waters of the Celebes Sea, a kaleidoscope of colour, shape and pattern jump-starts the senses. Enormous turtles appear to fly through the underwater universe, as mysterious tropical fish cruise calmly by. Sipadan is amongst the world's best dive spots, but even if you're just snorkelling, the view down below is superb.

Although Malaysian Borneo is no longer the mysterious domain of fierce tribes and unknown species, it has yet to succumb to over-commercialization as a tourist destination. You can still experience travel at its most adventurous and authentic here. And there are its people, ethnically varied but consistently gracious. Malaysian Borneo beckoned me once; I suspect it will call again. ☺