

Welcome TO THE Jungle

With its ancient rainforests, rare wildlife, stunning beaches and family-friendly vibe, the island of Borneo is the perfect place to get back to nature

Words by Yi-Hwa Hanna



The urban city lifestyle we enjoy in the Gulf often leaves us craving a little action and adventure, and there's no better place to satisfy that desire than Malaysian Borneo. The third largest island in the world, Borneo is divided among three countries: Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei, and a trip to its Malaysian side offers a plethora of family-friendly activities that will ensure the kids never get bored. With its romantic sunsets, bustling night markets, stunning beaches, exciting and diverse cuisine, great shopping, rich history and some of the oldest rainforests in the world—and all in a wallet-friendly environment—there's truly something for everyone to enjoy.

UNIQUE WILDLIFE

Borneo's rainforests are home to hundreds of species of birds and mammals, exotic flora, and endangered species such as the big-nosed Proboscis monkey (unique to Borneo), the tiny Pygmy elephant, and perhaps most famously, the Orang Utan. Meaning "Man of the Forest", these intelligent apes can only be found in the rainforests of Borneo and the Indonesian island of Sumatra. You'll have the chance to get up close and personal at one of the region's many Orang Utan rehabilitation centres—we recommend the family-friendly Nature Conservation Reserve at the Shangri La's Rasa Ria Resort.

Here you'll have the chance to learn about the apes, and your kids can even

"Get up close and personal with an Orang Utan, while your kids spend a day learning about the rainforest with a certified ranger"

spend a day with a certified ranger learning about the rainforest in a safe, hands-on experience they'll never forget. Next, you can join them on an easy hike into the lush reserve until you reach the feeding stations, where you'll be able to watch the apes swing down to dine. If you're lucky, you might even catch one of the fluffy baby Orang Utans while they roam around on their morning antics.

Venture just a half-hour north to see Proboscis monkeys and Pygmy elephants in the Lok Kawi Wildlife Park, where you can marvel at everything from King Cobra snakes to Malayan tigers and lemurs: little ones can even ride an elephant and feed the monkeys. Daring types will also be thrilled at the chance to visit the Tuaran Crocodile Farm, where you can see more



Heliconia flowers

than a thousand freshwater and saltwater crocodiles (all from a safe distance of course!)—the farm is designed not to intimidate children and boasts a fishing pond, (non-croc) animal-feeding area, performance area and a restaurant where you can even try crocodile soup.

MOUNTAINS AND RAINFORESTS

No trip to Borneo would be complete without a trip to the rainforest, and Kinabalu National Park is an ideal place to start. The 754-square kilometre park—Malaysia's first UNESCO World Heritage Site—sits along the base of beautiful Mount Kinabalu. Hire a guide from one of the region's many tour groups (usually arranged through your hotel) and head



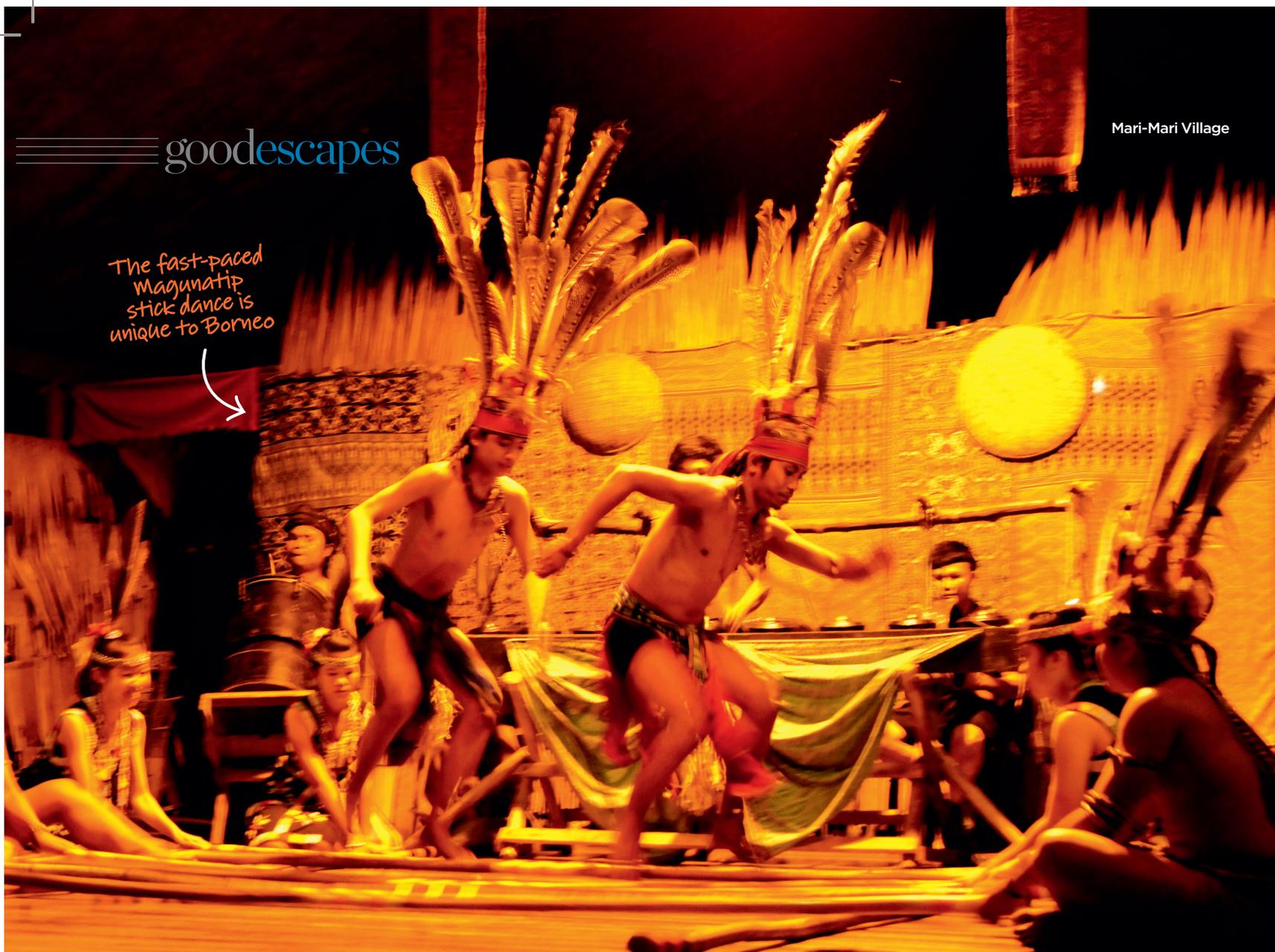
The night markets

out for a full-day excursion. You'll begin with a gentle hike up into the rainforest until you've reached the Canopy Walkway. While this isn't for the faint-hearted, it's perfectly safe and as you tread across the bridges made of strong wood, net and rope suspended 50 metres high in the treetops, you'll be able to enjoy a jaw-dropping view of the rainforest below.

After you've worked up a sweat, reward yourself with a swim in the cool, rushing waters of the park's Kipungit or Langanan waterfalls, or just soak in the mineral-rich Poring Hot Springs. Before lunch—ask your guide to take you to one of the many mountain view restaurants, where you can watch the mist rise while you tuck into delicious local dishes—stop by the nearby plant nursery to see if you've got a chance to see a Rafflesia flower first. The extremely rare plant boasts the largest flower on Earth (growing to a diameter of a metre and weighing up to 10 kilos), only blooms for four to eight days per year, and can only be found in Borneo and Sumatra.

After lunch, stop by the Kinabalu Botanical Gardens on your way back to your hotel. The serene hideaway is filled with curious, bright pink berries, trees with coiled spiralling branches, and the →

The fast-paced Magunatip stick dance is unique to Borneo



FAST FACTS

- **Getting there:** Emirates Airlines and Etihad Airways fly to Kota Kinabalu International Airport via Kuala Lumpur from Dhs5,000 and it takes approximately nine and a half hours, not inclusive of layover.
- **When to go:** The best time of the year to visit is during Borneo's dry season, which runs from around March to October each year.
- **Visas and vaccinations:** Nationals of the GCC, along with Australia, South Africa, the UK and the USA, are among those who don't require a visa for a stay not exceeding three months. For full details on visa entry requirements for Malaysia (which applies to Malaysian Borneo), please visit www.kln.gov.my/web/guest/requirement-for-foreigner. Vaccinations for Typhoid, Hepatitis A & B, and Tetanus are recommended, and while Malaria tablets are not always required, we suggest bringing plenty of insect repellent with you.

“Visit ancient tribe dwellings where you can try a traditional dance, and the kids can help you cook and eat local foods”

native Nepenthes—carnivorous pitcher plants that lure and trap insects with the promise of sweet, colourful nectar.

TRIBES AND HEADHUNTERS

With the oldest rainforests in the world comes forest-dwellers, and the whole family will love learning about the region's history at the Mari-Mari or Monsopiad Cultural Villages where you'll have the chance to see how the different regional tribes lived in ancient times. Peek into the longhouses, admire the creative architecture, and learn how they hunted, dressed and slept. You'll also have the chance to learn how to shoot a tribal

blowpipe, while the kids can join you in cooking and eating local foods such as Jalau cake and Pandan juice. You can even try your hand (or feet) at Magunatip, a traditional bamboo-stick dance.

BUSTLING MARKETS

With rich seas teeming with marine life, Borneo is a haven for seafood-lovers, while the cultural diversity of its many ethnic groups means it's a veritable foodie utopia. From spicy curries, rich biryanis, and fish stews to flavourful noodles, juicy grills and exotic fruits, there's something to please everyone's palate. While there are numerous excellent restaurants in the capital, Kota Kinabalu, we insist on a trip to the Night Market. Located along the waterfront on Jalan Tun Fuad Stephens street in the heart of the city, it's one of the most lusted-after open air food courts around the globe. Choose from steaming hot satays, fresh seafood cleaned and cooked right in front of your eyes, local favourite Nasi Goreng and popular noodle dishes like Tuaran Mee and Mee Goreng,

Photography: Yi-Hwa Hanna, Iain Seaton, Shutterstock

or simply munch on melt-in-your-mouth barbecued corn as you wander the aisles searching for the perfect dessert. The riot of colours makes for an exciting photo, and the kids will love sampling the delicious contrasting flavours on offer.

If that's not enough, next door to this bustling gastronomic bazaar you'll find the fish and fruit markets, where you can see swordfish and giant tuna hauled in as fresh catch, and hawkers shouting out an endless stream of prices for their spices, dewy watermelon, pungent durian and fiery chillies until the calls of "Ringgit!" blend together like a song. On the other side, you'll find the Pasar Kraftangan Handicraft Market: a must-visit for souvenirs, you'll want to prepare lots of small change before you haggle for woven seashell and bamboo crafts, colourful painted wooden tribal masks and jewellery made with freshwater pearls.

STUNNING SEAS

After all that activity, you're bound to want a little rest and fortunately Borneo's amazing landscape is more than just rainforests and villages—its seas and rivers are also exceptionally beautiful and an ideal place to rest your weary limbs.

Hire a traditional Lepa-Lepa boat for a river cruise and spend an afternoon sailing down the tranquil, mangrove-flanked Mengkabong River. As you relax, take a peek into a Sea Gypsy house along the way, or attempt to catch a crab using a net-and-bait method (don't worry, you can set your bounty free at a local fish farm). After dusk, take your trusty Lepa-Lepa

out into the mangroves to settle down and watch for fireflies—the sight of hundreds of them glittering against the black velvet canopy of the night sky will be a magical, unforgettable experience.

Water-lovers should take advantage of the exciting snorkelling and diving in the region—the atolls come alive with vibrant marine life and beg to be explored. When you're not busy playing sailor or deep sea explorer, kick off your shoes and recline on one of the pristine white-sand beaches: with many a secluded cove and miles of untouched sand, they make the perfect viewing point for one of Borneo's famous sunsets. As you lie back and drink in the breathtaking colours, the sky will be set ablaze in shades of pink, red, orange and crimson as the water turns to liquid gold. ■



The canopy walk



Crystal clear seas

WHERE TO STAY

The gorgeous Shangri-La's Rasa Ria resort is a convenient 30-minute ride from Kota Kinabalu, a 2-hour drive to Mt. Kinabalu

(a shorter trip than from town), 20 minutes from the Lok Kawi Wildlife Park and 10 minutes from Tuaran Crocodile Farm. There's even a Nature Reserve on its grounds, which plays host to Orang Utans.

● **PLENTY TO DO** Watch the apes play in the trees and even meet one of the babies, or try the Nocturnal Animal Excursion where you might catch a glimpse of a deer or tapir. If you just want an amazing view, opt for the Canopy Walk instead, where you can view the lush foliage from 30 feet high. Swim in one of the resort's three pools, drink in the fab beach view, or try one of the many water-based activities from jet-skis to kayaking and fishing. On lazy days, take a cooking class, learn how to wear a sarong, or take a whack at the adjacent golf course.

● **CHILD-FRIENDLY** There's a host of things for children to do, including pony rides, pottery making, Batik painting, kite-making, leaf-weaving, sandcastle-building, scavenger hunts, origami classes, dance classes and beach sports games. Nature-loving kids will especially love the Ranger For A Day Programme, where they can learn about the animals and plants in the reserve with a certified guide. The exceptional staff will go out of their way to help you, and are wonderful with children to boot.

● **LUXURIOUS COMFORT** Eight restaurants serve up everything from seafood to teppanyaki to curries and pastas. We especially love Tepi Laut Makan Street, with its live-cooking stalls bursting with stir-fries, rotis, seafood, curries and a dazzling array of desserts. By the time you retreat to your luxurious room (boasting modern amenities including Wi-Fi and, in the brand-new Ocean Wing, a private outdoor Jacuzzi), you'll never want to leave. Rates start from Dhs880 per night. For more info, visit www.shangri-la.com/kotakinabalu/rasariaresort

