

# Sarawak



If you've spent years dreaming of Borneo – of longboat trips down murky rivers, of jungle trails green in tooth and claw, of smoky longhouses and drunken dances, of strange creatures and hidden caverns, of blowpipes and head-hunters – rest easy: you've just found what you're looking for. Sarawak is 'classic' Borneo *par excellence*, and few other places will reward a little adventurous spirit so grandly.

The beauty of Sarawak is its blend of tribal tradition and unfettered nature: everything from the scattered valley farms of the Kelabit Highlands to the bird's-nest trading communities of the Niah Caves and the nomadic jungle Penan have their place. Of course, plenty has changed here since the first intrepid explorers started charting the tree-strangled hills, and the grim realities of modern capitalism have put paid to many of Sarawak's treasures, particularly in the receding rainforest, where relentless logging continues to take its toll.

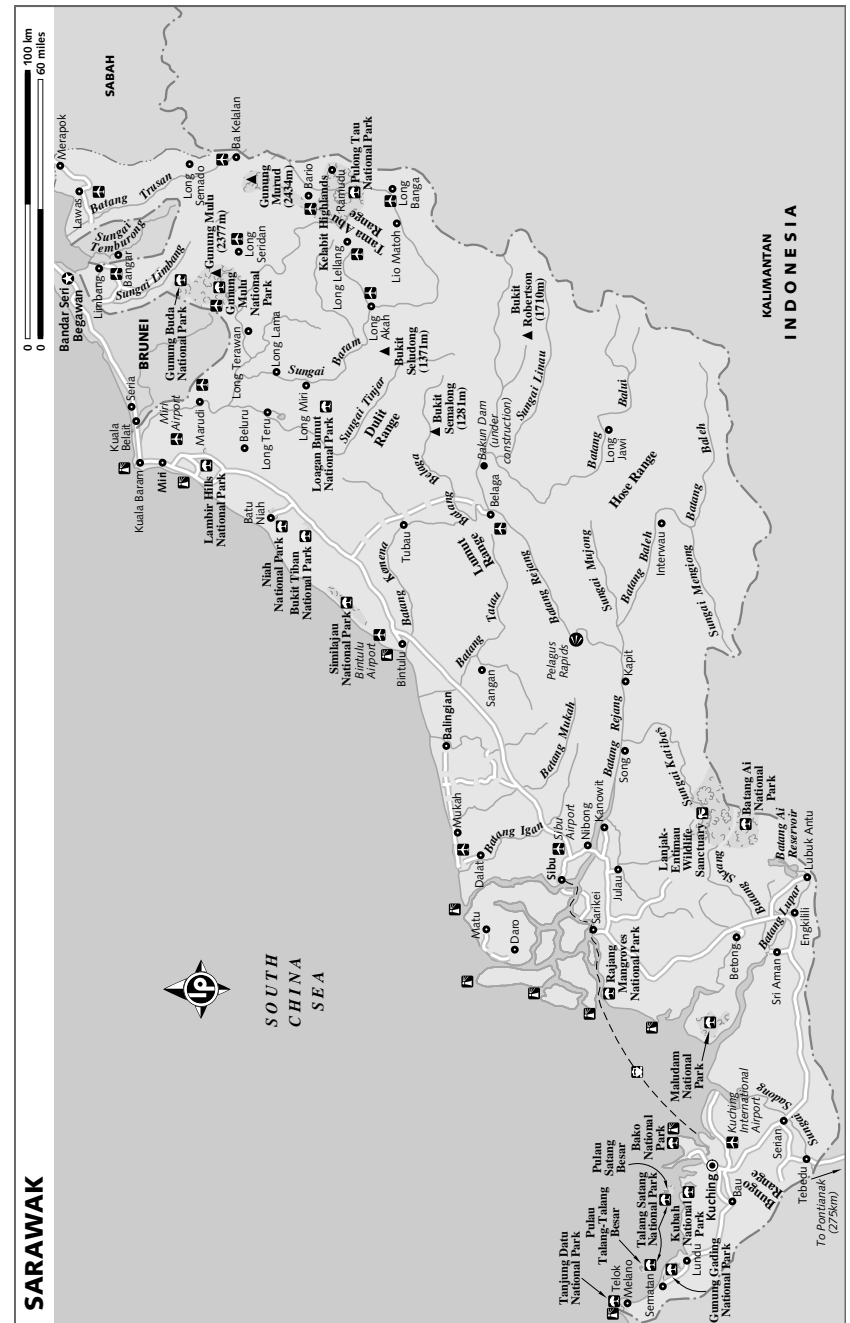
However, the essential flavour of the region continues to saturate most aspects of life here, and it's still possible to find untouched corners of wilderness where it feels like the last 100 years never happened. The longhouses may have satellite dishes, the cities may have tower blocks and the jungles may have airstrips, but at the end of the day Sarawak is unlike anywhere else on earth. Whatever your dreams, Sarawak is everything you imagined Borneo would be, and once you're here all you can do is dive straight in and live out the fantasy.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Prowling round the riverbank area and sharpening your shopping claws in the cat city of **Kuching** (p339)
- Breathing in clear mountain air, soaking up jungle views and feeding leeches in the **Kelabit Highlands** (p414)
- Hauling yourself up the Pinnacles and pushing yourself down the Headhunters' Trail in **Gunung Mulu National Park** (p405)
- Searching out bulky rafflesia blooms in **Gunung Gading National Park** (p377)
- Following the isolated longhouse communities along the mighty **Batang Rejang** (p380)
- Hiking jungle trails and spotting floppy-conked proboscis monkeys at **Bako National Park** (p368)
- Chowing down on local pineapple, pork and pumpkin in the Kelabit highland town of **Bario** (p415)



■ TELEPHONE CODES: 082, 083, 084, 085, 086	■ POPULATION: 2.01 MILLION	■ AREA: 124,449 SQ KM
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## History

Archaeological evidence suggests early man 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 30% 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, invalidated 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 right up 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 anticolonialist 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 a major company *didn't* have some link to the chief minister's 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 seventh term) has described his unchanged cabinet as 'transitional', but exactly what transitions are involved remains to be seen.

## Climate

Sarawak has a hot and humid climate, with temperatures generally between 27°C and 32°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 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.

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 offices in Kuching (p341) and in Miri (p399).

If you plan to visit any of the longhouses above Kapit on the Rejang or Baleh Rivers, you will need a free permit, which can be easily obtained in Kapit (p384). Permits are also required from the district office in Miri (p399) or Marudi (p404) for travel to the Sungai Baram.

The Indonesian Consulate (☎ 082-241734; 111 Jln Tun Haji Openg; 11 8.30am-noon & 2-4pm Mon-Fri) in Kuching is south of the city centre. Most

nationalities require visas to enter Indonesia, which is accessible from Sarawak by air at Pontianak or by land at Entikong. Two-month Indonesian visas cost around US\$60 and require three photographs. Visas may take up to a day to process.

## National Parks

The Malaysian jungles contain some of the world's oldest undisturbed areas of rainforest. It's estimated they've existed for about 100 million years, as they were largely unaffected by the far-reaching climatic changes brought on elsewhere by the Ice Age.

Fortunately, quite large areas of some of the best and most spectacular of these rainforests have been made into national parks, in which all commercial activities are banned.

The parks closest to Kuching are probably the best overall: Bako for beaches and wildlife, Kubah for unspoiled nature and Gunung Gading for a chance to view rarely blooming rafflesia. Always take along your passport, as you need to register at the park.

Most parks have at least some facilities for visitors, but Bukit Tiban, Gunung Buda, Maludan, Rajang and Pulong Tau are still being developed and may not be open to visitors.

Sarawak's national parks:

**Bako National Park** (p368) This 27-sq-km park has trails and beaches to explore. It's about two hours north of Kuching.

**Batang Ai National Park** (p379) 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 park (80 sq km) is 50km northeast of Bintulu.

**Gunung Buda National Park** This park (62 sq km) juts 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** (p377) On Sarawak's extreme western tip near Sematan, a major attraction at this 54-sq-km park is the rafflesia.

**Gunung Mulu National Park** (p405) Sarawak's most popular national park (529 sq km), located east of Marudi near the Brunei border.

**Kubah National Park** (p372) This 22-sq-km park has hiking trails in a pristine rainforest and clear rivers to swim in. It's 20km west of Kuching.

**Lambir Hills National Park** (p396) Famous for its diverse plant species, this 69-sq-km park is 32km south of Miri.

**Loagan Bunut National Park** (p404) This park (10.7 sq km) includes Sarawak's largest freshwater lake; it's in the Miri hinterland.

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

**Niah National Park** (p393) This park (32 sq km) 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** (p414) Sarawak's newest park (598 sq km), 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** (p392) A coastal park (75 sq km) with hiking trails, beaches and rivers – known for saltwater crocodiles – northeast of Bintulu.

**Talang-Satang National Park** (p378) A large marine park (194 sq km) protecting sea turtles. It includes the *pulau* (islands) of Talang-Talang Besar, Talang-Talang Kecil and Satang Besar, off the coast between Santubong and Sematan.

**Tanjung Datu National Park** (p378) This small national park (13.8 sq km) has beautiful beaches, clear rivers and coral reefs.

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

Entry passes costing RM10 for adults and RM5 for children are issued at park entrances. A permit is required to visit Talang-Satang; it's available at Kuching's **visitors information centre** (☎ 082-410944; www.sarawaktourism.com; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg; 7am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun) or from the **Forest Department** (☎ 082-348001; www.sarawakforestry.com; Hock Lee Center, Jln Datuk Abang Abdul Rahim). The penalty for visiting national parks without a permit is a fine of RM1000 and six months in prison, so always check in at the park headquarters.

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. There's a 10% nonrefundable reservation charge. In other

words, if you book a room in a chalet for one night at RM120, you'll end up spending RM132. Note also that if you're the only person in a dorm, you will often be charged for the whole room (RM40) rather than just one bed.

It's recommended that you book accommodation in advance either through a tourist information centre or a **National Parks & Wildlife office** (Kuching ☎ 082-248088; Miri ☎ 085-434184). 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 for special interests, such as photography, natural history and textiles or crafts. Kuching has by far the highest number of companies, but if you're interested in the Batang Rejang and its tributaries, you may find better deals with local operators.

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 Oran-utang Rehabilitation Centre and Bako National Park. One- to three-night trips to the Bidayuh longhouses south of Kuching are also big sellers.

As well as trekking tours, there are 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 around Miri. Almost any itinerary can be tailored to include a longhouse visit or local home stay, which often include cultural performances or communal activities such as hunting and harvesting.

Most tours are priced for a minimum of at least two people (and often five or six); if you're on your own, expect to pay from RM500 to RM1200 for a few days upriver. 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

## TREKKING IN SARAWAK

Sarawak offers a range of jungle-trekking options for the fit and adventurous, as well as gentle ambles for those who don't aspire to superhuman status. Hiking through rainforest in hot, humid and sometimes wet conditions can be exhausting; it's permanently sweaty however fit you are, and you'll probably have leeches for company. After all, the jungle is a hostile environment, and extended trekking may not suit everybody. The rewards are priceless though – you'll see superb rainforest and alpine plateaus in the Kelabit Highlands, stone needles and jagged peaks in Gunung Mulu National Park, and waterfalls and wildlife nearly everywhere. You'll also have the opportunity to visit some fascinating backwoods longhouses.

Many of the treks mentioned require a guide. A good guide is able to gauge your abilities and have the confidence to push you a little, rather than taking the easiest way as a matter of course. Many people find that they get stronger the longer they stay in the jungle, and if you've done a night walk in the rainforest (highly recommended!), trails that previously seemed treacherous will be that much easier. When crossing those slippery log bridges, try taking off your shoes and doing it in socks – you'll get a much better grip (bare feet are as slippery as shoes).

## When to Go

Although the wettest months in Sarawak are from November to January, the timing of monsoon seasons has been less consistent in recent years. Sarawak has high rainfall year-round and you should be prepared for heavy rain on one or more days of your stay. Flights in and out of Gunung Mulu and Bario are frequently cancelled if the weather is poor, so be prepared to be stranded for a couple of days on the return trip.

## What to Bring

There are no special equipment requirements to enjoy walking in the region, but it can get cold at night and rain for days on end – take a waterproof jacket. Good running shoes are preferable to stiff, heavy walking boots, and a pair of thongs is useful for going in and out of longhouses. Wear light cotton clothing and carry a light pullover and trousers for the evenings. If you're camping or staying in a longhouse, you will need a sleeping bag.

If you're sleeping in the jungle, a camping poncho is a definite asset. This is a lightweight sheet of tough material that is large enough for you to cocoon yourself in at night yet still breathe. It's perfect for keeping the creepy-crawlies (especially leeches) out. A basic poncho costs about RM9 and should be available at camping-supply shops in Miri and Kuching.

Most of your load's weight will be water, to replace the fluids lost by constant sweating. It's generally safe to drink water from streams (upstream from the longhouse, of course); ask your guide for advice. A good torch is a must at night; insect repellent and sunscreen will also be useful. Leeches will accompany you on many walks. For other tips on getting prepared, see p486.

## Responsible Trekking

Remember the golden rule of rubbish: if you carried it in, you should carry it out. Don't overlook easily forgotten or inconvenient items, such as silver paper, plastic wrapping, water bottles, sanitary napkins and so forth. Never bury your rubbish – it may be out of sight, but it won't be out of reach of animals.

Where there's a toilet, please use it. Where there isn't one, bury your waste. Dig a small hole 15cm deep and at least 100m from any watercourse. Consider carrying a lightweight trowel for this purpose. Cover the waste with soil and a rock. Use toilet paper sparingly and bury it as well. If the area is inhabited, ask locals if they have any concerns about your chosen toilet site.

While your guide may happily hack his way through the undergrowth if necessary, you should always stick to the marked trails, however indistinct they may be. Carving your own path through the jungle can disrupt local people, as well as plants and wildlife.

The indigenous Penan people are allowed to hunt in Gunung Mulu; otherwise, hunting is illegal for everyone in national parks and reserves. Be aware of any tribal issues concerning the land you're trekking through – Gunung Mulu National Park in particular is involved in an ongoing dispute over land rights (see p411). Taking a local guide is the best way to make sure you're in touch with local customs and concerns.

looking for a group to join, you can leave a contact number with tour operators or the local tourist information centre. See p345 for a list of operators in Kuching.

### Getting There & Away

There are regular flights from Kuching to Kuala Lumpur (KL), Johor Bahru and Singapore, as well as internal flights to other centres such as Miri and Sibü.

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

Malaysia Airlines' comprehensive but unprofitable network of domestic flights, including its rural air service, was completely overhauled in 2006, and the majority of routes have been transferred to Air Asia or its new subsidiary Fly Asian Xpress (FAX) – fares will doubtless fluctuate as the new operators find their feet, and it remains to be seen which legs will survive in the long term.

Unlike in the rest of Malaysia, flying is often the only practical means of reaching certain areas in Sarawak, most notably the Kelabit Highlands. In the wet season continuous rain can cause prolonged cancellations, so make sure you allow for delays.

During school holidays (mid-May to mid-June and late October to early December) it is virtually impossible to get a seat on any small-scale internal flight at short notice. You could turn up at the airport in the hope of a cancellation.

Flights to Mulu and Bario suffer from overbooking year-round. Hornbill Skyways operates scheduled charter flights as an alternative to the national carrier. Check at visitors information centres for the latest fares and routes or phone % 082-455737 in Kuching.

#### 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. Powered by turbocharged V12 diesel engines (up to 1000 horsepower), they can travel up to 60km/h, scattering motorised canoes in their wake.

The air-conditioning on express boats can be far more extreme than seems justified by the outside temperature, so have a warm jacket or fleece to hand. You can ride outside on the roof, but watch out for sunburn (and hold on to your hat). Video movies of varying randomness are usually a feature of the trip.

Where and when the express boats can't go, river travel is still mainly by longboat, though these are now motorised. Longboats are a great way to get around, though you'll need watch your balance getting in and out, especially with heavy gear. In shallower spots you may have to hop in and out of the boat regularly to help the craft over rocks and rapids.

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.

#### CAR & BUS

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 Sarawakian drivers.

There are plenty of buses per day travelling between Sibü, Bintulu and Miri – an estimated 70 companies operate on these routes. Sibü to Bintulu takes 3½ hours, Bintulu to Niah National Park takes two hours, Niah National Park to Miri is two hours and Miri to Kuala Baram (on the Brunei border) is one hour. For locals, the road between Kuching and Sibü (seven hours) has all but replaced express boats as the preferred route between the two cities. There are also buses heading west from Kuching to Bau, Lundu and Sematan, and north to Bako Bazaar (for Bako National Park). The

tourist information centres in Kuching, Miri and Sibü have current information on bus schedules and fares.

Hitchhiking is possible in Sarawak, although traffic can be light. However, hitching is never entirely safe and travellers who decide to hitch should understand that they are taking a small but potentially serious risk. People who do choose to hitch will be safer if they travel in pairs and let someone know where they're planning to go.

### KUCHING

% 082 / pop 500,000

Sprawled lazily along the bank of the Sungai Sarawak, state capital Kuching has a leisurely charm all its own, cultivating a sophisticated but relaxed atmosphere where high-rises tower over traditional river ferries and souvenir shops rub shoulders with bird's-nest traders. The name means 'cat' in Malay, and a distinct feline langour characterises Kuching life, as if the city might at any moment stretch, stir and slink off on its own mysterious business.

Built principally on the south bank of the Sungai Sarawak, Kuching was known as Sarawak in the 19th century. Before James Brooke settled here, the capital had been variously at Lidah Tanah and Santubong. Kuching was given its name in 1872 by Charles Brooke.

Unlike some of the other large towns in Malaysian Borneo, Kuching's historic buildings escaped damage during WWII, and many have been tastefully renovated. Like the state it represents, modern Kuching enjoys an admirable level of racial, religious and social tolerance, partly thanks to a long custom of intermarriage. Even the local branch of KFC only employs speech- and hearing-impaired staff.

Although Kuching is quite a large city, the centre is compact and isolated from the suburbs by the river. Landscaped parks and gardens along the river promenade provide territory for strolling and atmospheric views of the Bungo mountains looming out of the morning mist. Combined with the city's cultural attractions and the lively eating and drinking scene, it's small wonder that no-one ever complains about spending a few extra days here. Once you do get around to leaving, Kuching is the best base from which to start exploring the state.

### 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; the Ministerial Complex is the drab multistorey building in the background.

Almost all attractions are within easy walking distance of each other; public buses or taxis are only really needed to reach the Cat Museum (north of the river), the airport (about 12km away), the Jln Penrissen express bus terminal (5km) and the Pending wharf for the boat to Sibü (6km).

#### MAPS

Periplus produces *Sarawak & Kuching* as part of its Malaysia Regional Maps series. It also has maps of Kuching, Bintulu, Miri, Sibü, Kapit and Gunung Mulu National Park, usually available in bookshops in Kuching. The visitor information centre (% 410944; www.sarawaktourism.com; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg; 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun) also has a good map of Sarawak, which includes a detailed map of Kuching, and the handy *Kuching Tourist Map*, which includes bus timetables and other useful information.

For good, if outdated, topographic maps, try the Lands & Survey Department (Jabatan Ukur & Pemetaan; % 420763; 7th fl, state government offices, Jln Simpang Tiga), in the state government offices, 3km south of town.

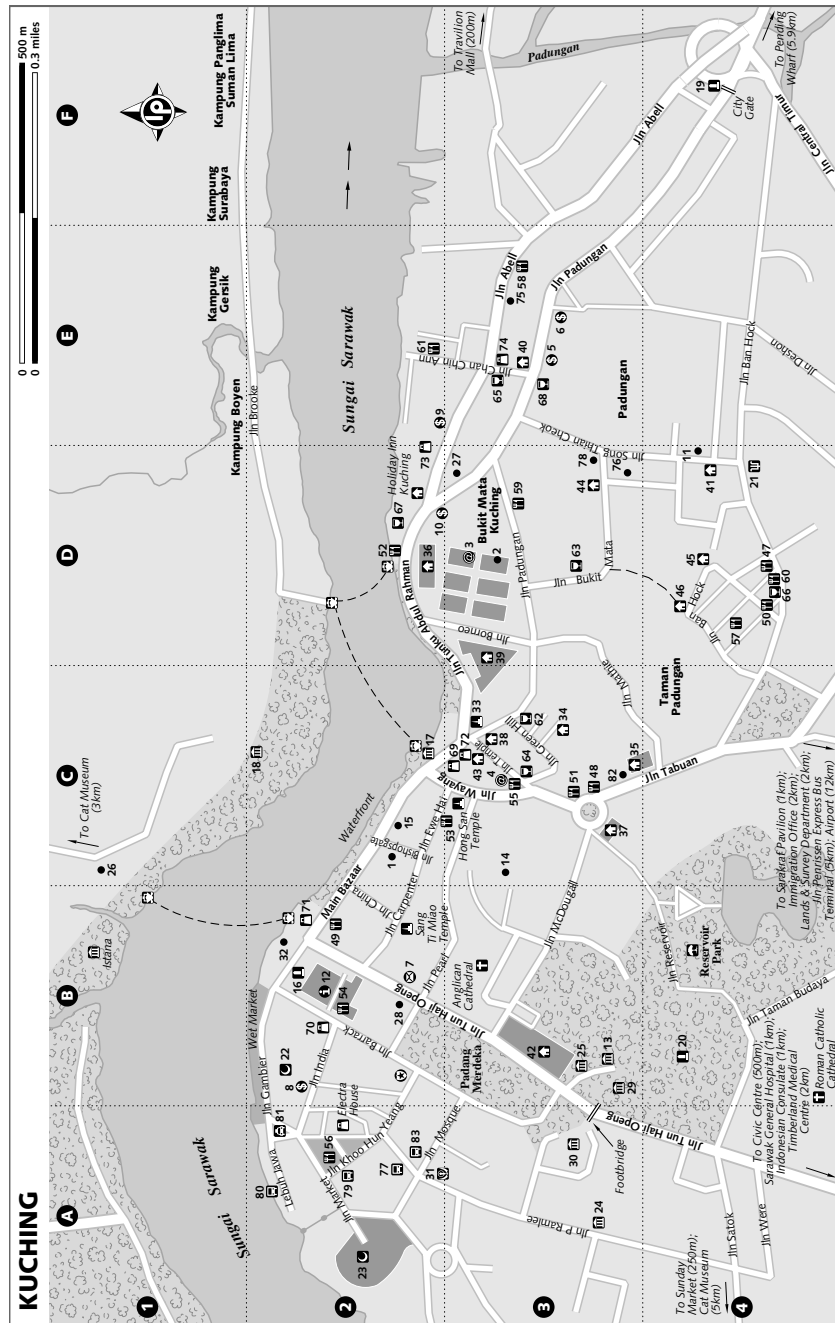
### Information

#### BOOKSHOPS

**Mohamed Yahia & Sons** (% 416928; lower ground fl, Sarawak Plaza, Jln Abell) Has the best range of books on Borneo and Malaysia.

**Popular Book Co** (% 417218; Wisma Tun Jugah, Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman)

**Premier Bookshop** (% 411378; 2nd fl, Sarawak Plaza, Jln Abell) Good range of titles and maps.



<b>INFORMATION</b>	Police Museum.....(see 18)	Sun Delight..... <b>58</b> E3
Borneo Inbound Tours & Travel (Jln Bishopsgate)..... <b>1</b> C2	Popular Book Co..... <b>27</b> D3	Top Spot Food Court..... <b>59</b> D3
Borneo Inbound Tours & Travel (Jln Temple).....(see 43)	Sarawak Handicraft Centre..... <b>28</b> B2	Tsui Hua Lau..... <b>60</b> D4
City Laundry..... <b>2</b> D3	Sarawak Museum (Old Wing)..... <b>29</b> B3	Zhun San Yen
Cyber City..... <b>3</b> D3	Sarawak Museum	Vegetarian Food Centre..... <b>61</b> E2
Cyber Corner..... <b>4</b> C3	(Tun Abdul Razak Hall)..... <b>30</b> A3	<b>DRINKING ☑</b>
Everrise Moneychanger..... <b>5</b> E3	Sikh Temple..... <b>31</b> A2	99..... <b>62</b> C3
HSBC..... <b>6</b> E3	Square Tower..... <b>32</b> B2	Cottage..... <b>63</b> D3
Main Post Office..... <b>7</b> B2	Tua Pek Kong Temple..... <b>33</b> C3	Green Hill Corner..... <b>64</b> C3
Majid & Sons..... <b>8</b> B2	<b>SLEEPING ☑</b>	Mojo..... <b>65</b> E3
Maybank..... <b>9</b> E2	Borneo B&B..... <b>34</b> C3	Oasis Café..... <b>66</b> D4
Mohamed Yahia & Sons.....(see 73)	Borneo Hotel..... <b>35</b> C3	Riverbank Suites..... <b>67</b> D2
Mr Clean.....(see 34)	Crowne Plaza Riverside	Soho..... <b>68</b> E3
Premier Bookshop.....(see 73)	Kuching..... <b>36</b> D2	<b>SHOPPING ☑</b>
Standard Chartered Bank..... <b>10</b> D2	Fata Hotel..... <b>37</b> C3	ARTrageously Ramsey Ong..... <b>69</b> C3
Tourism Malaysia..... <b>11</b> D4	Harbour View Hotel..... <b>38</b> C3	Empress Studio..... <b>70</b> B2
Tourism Malaysia.....(see 67)	Hilton Hotel..... <b>39</b> D3	Kuching Waterfront
Visitors Information Centre..... <b>12</b> B2	Kapit Hotel..... <b>40</b> E3	Bazaar..... <b>71</b> B2
<b>SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES</b>	Liwah Hotel..... <b>41</b> D4	Main Bazaar..... <b>72</b> C3
Art Museum..... <b>13</b> B3	Merdeka Palace Hotel..... <b>42</b> B3	Peng Guan Distillers.....(see 72)
Bishop's House..... <b>14</b> C3	Singhansana Lodge..... <b>43</b> C3	Sarakraf.....(see 73)
Borneo Adventure..... <b>15</b> C2	Somerset Gateway	Sarawak Plaza..... <b>73</b> D2
Borneo Inbound Tours & Travel.....(see 1)	Kuching..... <b>44</b> D3	Siong Sports Trading..... <b>74</b> E3
Brooke Memorial..... <b>16</b> B2	Supreme Hotel..... <b>45</b> D4	<b>TRANSPORT</b>
Chinese History Museum..... <b>17</b> C2	Telang Usan Hotel..... <b>46</b> D4	Air Asia..... <b>75</b> E3
Courthouse.....(see 12)	<b>EATING ☑</b>	Batavia Air..... <b>76</b> D3
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**IMMIGRATION OFFICES**

**Immigration office** (☎ 245661; Jln Simpang Tiga) This is the place if you're looking for a visa extension. The immigration office is located on the 2nd floor of the state government offices, which are about 3km south of the city centre, heading towards the airport. To get there, catch blue-and-white CLL bus 6, 11, 14A or 14B from near the Kuching Mosque (RM1).

**INTERNET ACCESS**

**Cyber City** (☎ 243549; 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.  
**Cyber Corner** (Medan Pelita Mall, Jln Temple; per hr RM4; 10am-10pm)

**LAUNDRY**

**City Laundry** (☎ 462906; C51, 1st fl, Taman Sri Sarawak Mall)  
**Mr Clean** (☎ 246424; Jln Green Hill; 8am-6pm Mon-Sat, 8am-4pm Sun)

**MEDICAL SERVICES**

**Sarawak General Hospital** (☎ 257555; Jln Ong Kee Hui) Suitable for major emergencies only.  
**Timberland Medical Centre** (☎ 234991; Mile 3, Jln Rock) Private hospital with highly qualified staff.

**MONEY**

There's an exchange counter and ATMs at the airport. Banking hours are Monday to Friday 9.30am to 3.30pm and Saturday 9.30am to 11.30am. Banks will change travellers cheques but can be very slow. Moneychangers are far quicker, and some change travellers cheques as well as cash. They also have more convenient hours than the banks, as they stay open evenings and Sundays.  
**Everrise Moneychanger** (☎ 233200; 199 Jln Padungan) Cash only.  
**HSBC** (☎ 427999; Jln Padungan)  
**Majid & Sons** (☎ 422402; 45 Jln India) Cash only.  
**Maybank** (☎ 245964; 251 Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman)

**Mohamed Yahia & Sons** (☎ 416928; lower ground fl, Sarawak Plaza, Jln Abell) Changes travellers cheques at a slightly lower rate than cash.

**Standard Chartered Bank** (☎ 252233; Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman)

## POST

**Main post office** (Jln Tun Haji Openg; 𠄎 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-6.30pm Sat, 9am-4pm Sun) In the centre of town.

## TOURIST INFORMATION

The excellent **visitors information centre** (☎ 410944; www.sarawaktourism.com; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Haji Openg; 𠄎 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, there are enough brochures to paper your living room, and large boards display transport schedules, national park listings and other information. The **National Parks & Wildlife desk** (☎ 248088) is in the same office and arranges accommodation at national parks, while the Sarawak Tourism Complex puts on cultural shows for tourists on Friday evenings.

The free *Official Kuching Guide* is a fantastic publication produced locally by Travelcom Asia. The guide has a wealth of information on Kuching and nearby sights, and is usually available in the arrivals hall at the airport, at tourist offices and at some hotel desks, though you may have to ask for it. To view the guide on the internet check out www.borneotravel.com.

**Tourism Malaysia** (☎ 246575; mtpbkch@tourism.gov.my; 𠄎 8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat; Padungan Jln Song Thian Cheok; Riverbank Suites Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman) has two small offices, but these mainly just distribute brochures on other areas of Malaysia.

## Sights

### SARAWAK MUSEUM

Sarawak's well-run state **museum** (☎ 244232; www.museum.sarawak.gov.my; Jln Tun Haji Openg; admission free; 𠄎 9am-5.30pm) consists of two sections, connected by a footbridge over Jln Tun Haji Openg. Both sections are well worth visiting.

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 and the infamous *palang* (horizontal rod piercing the penis; see Tribal Body Art, opposite). The traditional Kenyah patterns painted on the walls upstairs form a pleasing counterpoint to the colonial building's original stucco reliefs.

Just downhill from the old wing are the new **Natural Science Museum and Art Museum**, which were yet to open at time of research. Once they are operational you can expect a general revamp and redistribution of exhibits between the three museums. The grounds around the old wing consist of pleasant gardens, pavilions and the **Heroes' Monument**, dedicated to the fallen heroes of past military conflicts.

Over the bridge, the newer, air-conditioned **Tun Abdul Razak Hall** features a variety of temporary exhibitions, often using a more modern, interactive approach to the subject matter; recent displays have covered Islam's relationship with technology, traditional pottery and local insect life. There's a shop and a small café on the site.

### MUZIUUM ISLAM SARAWAK

Islam is much less widespread in Borneo than in the rest of Malaysia, but this excellent **museum** (☎ 244232; Jln P Ramlee; admission free; 𠄎 9am-6pm Sat-Thu) demonstrates a surprising level of engagement with the national religion. Housed in a beautifully restored building are seven galleries exhibiting aspects of the Malay Islamic heritage. Among the various exhibits are ceramics, costumes and jewellery, weaponry, science and technology displays, and Islamic art.

### CHINESE HISTORY MUSEUM

This small **museum** (☎ 231520; Main Bazaar; admission free; 𠄎 9am-6pm Sat-Thu) is lodged in one of the few original waterfront buildings to survive the redevelopment of Kuching. It began as the Chinese courthouse in 1912. Inside, historical notes and photos document the Chinese migration to Sarawak and the formation of trading associations. Examples of traditional furniture, musical instruments and costumes are also on display.

### TRIBAL BODY ART

That guy down at your local tattoo parlour may think he invented body art, but you don't have to spend long in Sarawak to see that permanent self-decoration has been a way of life here for generations longer than Western youths have been gettin' ink done.

In Sarawak tribes, particularly the Iban, tattoos have a profound social and spiritual significance – commemorating events, offering protection or demonstrating respect for the gods. Some customs will only allow the use of certain designs on particular parts of the body, and getting the appropriate tattoo can even be a prerequisite for certain activities, such as making the long journey from the jungle to the coast. Borneo's traditional people will often laugh at the triviality of foreigners' designs, which seem frivolous and pointless in their purely decorative nature.

Not all tribes stop at tattooing, either. The *palang* is another long-standing tradition – it's a horizontal rod of metal or bone piercing the penis, believed to mimic the natural genitalia of the Sumatran rhino. With modernity this type of procedure is becoming less common, but many villages will still have their appointed piercer, who uses the traditional technique of a bamboo vice in a cold river. The real macho men can go for some seriously extreme adornments, from multiple *palang* to deliberate scarification of the penis. Most bizarrely, some men even have surgery and sew beads into their foreskins to make their nether regions resemble the giant rafflesia flower.

Unusually, these self-inflicted artworks are not so much favoured for personal decoration as demanded in order to enhance a woman's pleasure, a good indicator of the strong sense of mutual responsibility that ties most Borneo tribes together. Among some communities these radical procedures were traditionally just as much a requirement for marriage as taking a head was!

### FORT MARGHERITA

Built by Charles Brooke in 1879 and named after his wife, Rani Margaret, Fort Margherita guarded Kuching against pirates. Sitting on a knoll opposite the waterfront, this little white fort, complete with battlements, offers fine views along the river. The fort now houses the **Police Museum** (Muzium Polis; ☎ 440811 ext 225; admission free; 𠄎 10am-6pm Tue-Sun), which has some interesting exhibits on the history of policing and unlawful activity in Sarawak. A short walk west of the fort through the police barracks is the **orchid garden** (☎ 444789; admission free), which has over 100 orchid species on display.

To get to the fort, take a *tambang* (river ferry) from the waterfront.

### CAT MUSEUM

Kuching's kitsch one-of-a-kind **Cat Museum** (☎ 446688; Bukit Sial, Jln Semariang; admission free; 𠄎 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) 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 Petra Jaya bus 2B (60 sen).

### SARAKRAF PAVILION

This **handicrafts centre** (☎ 258771; www.sarakraf.com.my; 78 Jln Tabuan; admission free; 𠄎 9am-12.30pm & 2-4.30pm Sat-Thu, 9-11.45am & 2.30-4.30pm Fri) is the place to go if you have any interest in Sarawak's traditional arts and crafts, or even if you just plan to do some souvenir shopping. Five separate workshops give daily demonstrations of skills like woodcarving, weaving and beadwork, and visitors can take courses in anything from batik colouring to Chinese calligraphy and traditional dance. The complex occupies a large colonial house and grounds about 1km from the city centre on the airport road.

### COURTHOUSE & BROOKE MEMORIAL

Opened in 1874, this **courthouse** (Jln Tun Haji Openg) was the third to be built on the site. State magistrate councils were held in the courthouse until 1973, when the government complex opened. The clock tower at the front was added in 1883, and there's a small granite memorial to Charles Brooke facing the river. At the time of writing, the block was being redeveloped as a new tourist information, cultural and retail centre.

### WATERFRONT

The south bank of the Sungai Sarawak between the Khatulistiwa Café and the markets

at the western end has been tastefully developed with a paved walkway, lawns and flowerbeds, a children's playground, cafés 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.

Motorised *tambang* ferry passengers back and forth across the river all day until late. The river crossing costs 30 sen, or RM1 after 10pm. Leave the exact change on the prow as you disembark. Hiring a *tambang* for a river cruise costs RM25 to RM30 for up to an hour – agree on the fare before you take the ride.

#### KUCHING ARCHITECTURE

There are many historic *godown* (river warehouses), Chinese shophouses and other buildings of note in the blocks around the waterfront and markets. Many have been beautifully restored or are in the process of being renovated.

The small **Square Tower**, on the waterfront opposite the *istana*, was built in 1879 as a prison. The **main post office** (Jln Tun Haji Openg) is a grandiose structure fronted by Corinthian columns.

Near the Anglican cathedral, the **bishop's house** is officially the oldest dwelling in the state, built in 1849 for the first Anglican bishop of Borneo. Rivaling it for age is the **Tua Pek Kong Temple** (Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman), dedicated to the patron saint of overseas Chinese. Officially it's dated from 1876, but written sources mention it as long ago as 1846, which would make it the oldest building in Kuching.

Another colourful religious building is the **Hindu temple** (Jln Ban Hock); visitors are welcome to wander inside the compound, but note you should take your shoes off before stepping on the tiles. There's a **Sikh temple** off Jln Mosque, and an **Indian mosque** (Jln India) dating back to the 1850s; it's down a passageway between Nos 37 and 39 on Jln India.

Completed in 1968, the **Kuching Mosque** looks faded but impressive, particularly from across the river, and the domed ceiling is worth a cricked neck. There's no admission for non-Muslims Thursday 3pm to Friday 3pm, Saturday 4pm to 6pm and Sunday 2pm to 5pm.

#### CAT STATUES

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 Holiday Inn Kuching 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 near the top.

#### SUNDAY MARKET

Kuching's best market is the Sunday market along Jln Satok. It's sometimes very busy and can be well worth the walk. The market actually 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.

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. Fresh fish and seafood take up one section, while elsewhere butchered wild boars and goats hang with turtles and other free-range meat. Turtles are endangered (p63) so we hope you wouldn't buy this meat! Other stalls sell beautiful orchids, live fish hanging in plastic bags of water, birds in cages, pets – you name it, it's for sale. There are also plastic toys, clothes and other odds and ends. Food stalls set up near the pedestrian overpass.

To reach the Sunday market from the museum, walk south along Jln Tun Haji Openg and turn right at Jln Satok; the market is on your left, about 500m along the road.

#### CIVIC CENTRE

About 1km south of the city centre, along Jln Tun Haji Openg, a white tower looking like an upside-down, half-furled umbrella on stilts dominates the skyline. This is Kuching's **Civic Centre** (☎ 415806; Jln Taman Budaya; admission RM2), which offers great panoramic views on clear days. If you'd rather study the stars, the centre also contains the city **planetarium** (admission RM2).

To get to the Civic Centre, walk down Jln Tun Haji Openg and turn left at Jln Budaya; most buses travelling past the main post office go there.

#### RESERVOIR PARK

This small, landscaped park south of the centre is a peaceful oasis that not many travellers get down to; it's a pleasant place for a picnic, a stroll or a jog. After a few days of museums and handicraft shops, parents with young children will be grateful it exists.

To get to the park, follow the road just past the Fata Hotel (there's a small sign for the park) and take the second lane to your left to the car park.

#### RIVERSIDE KAMPUNG

Across the river from the waterfront are four *kampung* (villages) where you'll see traditional Malay houses and mosques stretching away to the east. It's a world away from the commerce and tourism of central Kuching. Take a *tambang* across the river and wander around.

#### Activities

Several specialist companies based in Kuching offer adventure-type activities in the city and surrounding area. **Kuching Kayak** (☎ 253005; www.kuchingkayak.com; 269 Jln Padungan) runs river, sea and rainforest canoe trips (RM50 to RM160 per person), while **Challenge Borneo** (☎ 012-882 1921; www.challengeborneo.com) gets the adrenaline going with caving, tubing and other semiextreme sports.

Several companies on the waterfront offer afternoon and evening cruises along the Sungai Sarawak, often with dinner options available. A 90-minute sunset cruise costs RM45.

#### Tours

Along with Miri, Kuching is the main hub of Sarawak's tourist economy. Half-day city tours are around RM40; day trips to longhouses at Annah Rais are around RM80 per person, and you can expect to pay RM400 per person for a two-day (one-night) longhouse trip for a minimum of two people on the Lemanak. Longer trips to more remote longhouses around Batang Ai will cost more. 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.

Well-established operators: **Borneo Adventure** (☎ 245175; www.borneoadventure.com; 55 Main Bazaar) Award-winning company that sets the standard for travel experiences that also benefit

Sarawak's indigenous people. The staff are well informed, and the company also offers speciality tours.

**Borneo Inbound Tours & Travel** (inboundtravel@po.jaring.my) Jln Temple (☎ 641741; 1st fl, 98 Main Bazaar); Jln Bishopsgate (☎ 237287; 1st fl, 40 Main Bazaar) Arranges home-stay trips to Telok Melano on the Sarawak coast, as well as tours throughout Sarawak.

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

**Insight Holiday** (☎ 230333; www.insightholiday.com; Travilion Mall, Jln Petanak) Has 4WD hire and adventure activities around Sarawak, particularly in Gunung Mulu National Park.

#### Festivals & Events

There's always a lot going on in Kuching; for the most current schedule of activities, contact the **visitors information centre** (☎ 410944; www.sarawaktourism.com; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Haji Openg; 7 8am–6pm Mon–Fri, 9am–3pm Sat & Sun).

**Rainforest World Music Festival** (☎ 423600; www.rainforestmusic-borneo.com) Held annually either in July or August for three days at the Sarawak Cultural Village (p371), this is another great reason to visit Kuching. Features musicians from around the world and highlights indigenous music from Borneo.

**Sarawak Regatta** Lively event held on the river in September. Participants compete in mock war-canoe races. Races are also held between speedboats and jet skis, and the waterfront turns into one big party.

#### Sleeping

##### BUDGET

Kuching is gradually starting to cotton on to the backpacker market, and a couple of very good-value places are setting the standard for budget accommodation. Most rates here include some kind of breakfast.

**Borneo B&B** (☎ 231200; borneobedbreakfast@yahoo.com; 3 Jln Green Hill; dm RM16-18, r RM25-60; a i ) Garnering plenty of traveller recommendations, this Iban family guesthouse is a relaxed, friendly backpackers' haven. You get a choice of fan or air-con, and shared or private bathroom. The budget longhouse tours (RM380 for three days) also get good reviews.

**Singgahsana Lodge** (☎ 429277; www.singgahsana.com; 1 Jln Temple; dm RM30, r RM80-135; a i ) Displaying enviable instincts for what travellers want, this excellent new family-run place has nailed it right from the

off, comparing favourably to just about any hostel in Borneo. It's hardly ultrabudget, but the pristine dorms and traditional-style private rooms (sleeping one to four people) should appeal to all tastes. There's information and services galore, it's small enough to be sociable, and both staff and owners are happy to share their accumulated local knowledge, preferably over a beer. Highly recommended.

**Kapit Hotel** (☎ 418516; 59 Jln Padungan; s/d RM45/50; a ) You may have trouble getting the staff off the phone, and there's little to recommend it in itself, but this is virtually the only budget hotel on the funky east side of town; it's a perfect crash pad for big nights out. Breakfast not included.

**Fata Hotel** (☎ 248111; fatahotel@hotmail.com; Jln McDougall; r RM61-79; a ) A slight step up in comfort, with cosy rooms, a lift and its own restaurant and (fairly cheesy) nightclub. Rear-view balconies look out over lovely parkland, rather than the daily traffic-jam views out the front.

#### MIDRANGE

Kuching has plenty of midrange hotels competing for business, and discounts are often available. All these places have TV, IDD (international direct dial) phones and air-con, most include breakfast and payment by credit card is accepted.

**Liwah Hotel** (☎ 429222; 187 Jln Song Thian Cheok; r RM75-169, ste RM150-188; a ) Checking in to the Liwah is a bit of a lucky dip; some rooms are tiled, some carpeted, some have windows, some don't, some have views, some don't. Luckily they're all fine for the price you pay. Try to resist the temptation to ring the doorbells and run away.

**Supreme Hotel** (☎ 255155; Jln Ban Hock; r RM76-95, ste RM126; a ) A large, worn tower block with high town views but low maintenance standards. The colourful suites are better than the standard rooms, and there's a coffee house and karaoke lounge.

**Borneo Hotel** (☎ 244122; 30C-F Jln Tabuan; s/d/tr RM85/95/105; a ) Kuching's longest-running hotel has spruced itself up lately and looks like a proper business hotel, complete with piano lounge and live Filipino bands. The musical theme continues with the discreet strains piped into the good-sized rooms.

**Harbour View Hotel** (☎ 274666; www.harbourview.com.my; Jln Temple; r RM98-148; a i ) If it's

modern comforts you're after, this is one of Kuching's best bargains – it offers full Western facilities for a thoroughly South-east Asian price. The tall white building does indeed furnish good river vistas, and the buffet breakfast (RM10) is as lavish as you could wish for. The hotel also has an on-call doctor and its own bar-lounge (hopefully not related).

**Telang Usan Hotel** (☎ 415588; www.telangusan.com; Jln Ban Hock; s RM100, d RM120-200; a i ) Claiming to be the world's first hotel run by Sarawak's upriver Orang Ulu people, the Telang Usan doesn't show much of its heritage in the rooms but does serve some good Dayak food in its coffee house and overgrown tribal-style beer garden. Breakfast is RM20.

#### TOP END

It's a fair step up from midrange prices to top-end rack rates, but discounts of up to 50% often apply and you'll rarely have to pay full whack.

**Somerset Gateway Kuching** (☎ 250958; www.the-scott.com; 9 Jln Bukit Mata; apt RM280-600; a i s ) These serviced apartments provide all the comforts of home, assuming you live in a stylish luxury flat with a spotless kitchen and a maid. The low-end options are essentially just like hotel rooms, but the three-bedroom deluxe is a generous 1130 sq ft. Breakfast is included and monthly rates are available.

**Hilton Hotel** (☎ 248200; www.kuching.hilton.com; Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman; r RM282-443; a i s ) Dominating the waterfront even from across the street, the Hilton has the full complement of services and arguably the finest rooms in its class. The three executive floors even come with their own fleet of butlers and maids! It's the highest-profile hotel in town and bookings are advised.

**Crowne Plaza Riverside Kuching** (☎ 247777; www.crowneplaza.com; Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman; r RM293-414; a i s ) Not only does the stylish Crowne Plaza have the usual spectrum of eating, business and sports amenities, it's also attached to the Riverside shopping complex, which provides an extra flurry of outlets plus a cinema and bowling alley. Rooms are suitably smart, though the Riverbank Suites block the view.

**Merdeka Palace Hotel** (☎ 258000; www.merdeka-palace.com; Jln Tun Haji Openg; s RM368-470, d RM391-495; a i s ) The grand marble lobby doesn't

quite set the tone for the underwhelming standard rooms here, but you can't sniff at the facilities – apart from maybe inhaling the fug at the classy cigar bar. Other plus points include a wine bar, English pub, Italian restaurant, spa, boat-shaped pool bar and two coffee houses.

#### Eating

Kuching has the best selection of food in Borneo, boasting over a thousand choices, ranging from hawker-stall fare through good seafood to first-class Italian. Cafés 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.

#### BREAKFAST

This is indeed the most important meal of the day in Kuching, where it seems nearly everyone converges on their favourite hang-out in the morning to savour a bowl of cheap *congee* (Chinese porridge) or *laksa* (noodles in a spicy coconut soup with bean sprouts, quail eggs, prawns, shredded chicked and dried bean curd). Plenty of places also serve Western-style breakfasts. Any *kedai kopi* (coffee shop) can cook an egg and toast to go with your coffee or tea.

#### MALAY & CHINESE

**Briyani Café** (☎ 413327; 16 Main Bazaar; dishes RM2.50-6; h breakfast & lunch) Perfectly placed for a rest after shopping on Main Bazaar, the misspelt Briyani has good Indian curries and delicious roti canai (roti eaten dipped in dhal or curry).

**Tsui Hua Lau** (☎ 414560; 320-4 Jln Ban Hock; dishes RM3.50-20; h breakfast, lunch & dinner) This smart restaurant, also known as M, occupies the upper end of the Chinese scale, with popular dim sum, and Cantonese and Shanghai flavours.

**My Kampung.com** (☎ 252686; 12 Medan Pelita, Jln Wayang; dishes RM4-10; h 24hr) You know the internet age has arrived when businesses start sounding like domain names, but luckily My Kampung doesn't play with its food, sticking instead to old-school Malay standards. Live musicians perform on the patio in the evening, and there's a kiosk outlet on the waterfront.

**Khatulistiwa Café** (☎ 248896; Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman; dishes RM8-20; h 24hr) Mind your head – this thatched waterfront bar-club-restaurant is modelled on traditional Bidayuh skull houses! Watching the *tambang* lights drift by in the evening is a perfect accompaniment to the mixed menu. It's often busiest around 1am or 2am, when the dance floor upstairs kicks out.

**Hornbill's Corner Café** (☎ 252670; 85 Jln Ban Hock; steamboat adult/child RM16/8; h dinner) A popular steamboat restaurant where you select seafood, meats and vegetables, then cook them on a cast-iron contraption at your table. You should only take what you are going to eat, though – as elsewhere, you'll be charged for leftovers (RM5 per 100g).

#### SEAFOOD

As well as the many dishes on offer in normal restaurants, Kuching has plenty of evening food centres specialising in fresh seafood. Pricing is mostly by weight – you can expect a substantial fish dinner to set you back RM40 or so with drinks.

**Top Spot Food Court** (Jln Padungan) A frequented food centre above a multistorey car park. Look for the stall with the most customers – Bukit Mata at No 25 seems reliably popular.

See **Good Food Centre** (☎ 251397; 53 Jln Ban Hock) 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).

#### VEGETARIAN

**Zhun San Yen Vegetarian Food Centre** (☎ 230068; 165 Jln Chan Chin Ann; buffet per 100g RM1.10; h breakfast, lunch & dinner) Strictly no meat allowed, but there's still loads to choose from at this great-value vegetarian buffet restaurant. Rice costs 50 sen.

**Life Café** (☎ 411754; 108 Jln Ewe Hai; dishes RM2.50-6; h lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Adjacent to the Hong San Temple, this discreetly tasteful tea shop caters well for veggies and meaties alike, serving delicious dumplings, noodles and rice dishes at tables with poetic names like 'white tiger'. There's also an excellent range of Chinese teas and other drinks.

#### WESTERN

**a-ha Café** (☎ 414104; 326 Jln Ban Hock; mains RM6-28; h breakfast, lunch & dinner) Knowing me, knowing food: a-ha is one of a sudden rush



of trendy places breathing new life into the Ban Hock area. It 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.

**Little Lebanon** (☎ 247523; Japanese Bldg, Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Haji Openg; mains RM8-15; 𠄎 lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) OK, calling a Middle Eastern eatery 'Western' is pushing it a little, but this may be the only Arabic restaurant in Borneo; if you can sort out your sense of direction it's worth a taste. Set menus cost RM25 and you can puff on a *sheesha* (water pipe) after your meal.

**Bla Bla Bla** (☎ 233944; Jln Tabuan; mains RM18-32; 𠄎 dinner Wed-Mon) As fusion cuisine slowly percolates into the Malaysian consciousness, this is one of its first forays into Borneo, so far with surprisingly credible results. The changing dishes are anything but 'blah', and the beanbags are pretty cool too.

**Junk** (☎ 259450; 80 Jln Wayang; mains RM20-42; 𠄎 dinner Wed-Mon) A long-time favourite with visitors and Malaysian celebrities – whose signed pictures line the staircase – Junk offers superb sophisticated Western food with an Italian bias amid a collection of endearingly eccentric, well, junk. Don't set your watch by any of the wall clocks.

#### QUICK EATS

**Open-air market** (Jln Market) This covered 'open-air' market near the taxi stand is one of the largest and most popular food centres. One section serves mainly halal food and the other has mostly Chinese.

**Sun Delight** (☎ 238986; 53 Jln Abell; dishes RM3-6; 𠄎 breakfast, lunch & dinner) A small music café with a covered outdoor seating area that's several times the size of the café building. Asian and Western dishes feature on the bright pictorial menu.

**Deli Café** (☎ 232788; 88 Main Bazaar; dishes RM3-10; 𠄎 breakfast & lunch) Air-con deli-style comfort underneath an art gallery and jewellery store, with a good selection of cakes, pies and snacks. Wi-fi internet available.

#### Drinking & Entertainment

Unlike elsewhere on the peninsula, alcohol is very rarely frowned on in Borneo, and Kuching has some of the liveliest nightlife on the island, rivalled only by Kota Kinabalu (KK) in Sabah. The *Official Kuching Guide* has comprehensive listings to get you started.

Bars not attached to restaurants generally open between 4.30pm and 5.30pm; however, the real action may not kick off until quite late. Most normal bars close around 1am, while anywhere with music may stick it out until 4am or later at weekends.

Prices are reasonable in pubs, with beer costing around RM7 to RM10; music venues and hotel bars are usually more expensive. Everywhere has happy hours, and you can get a good deal by buying a jug of cocktail or beer instead of individual drinks.

**Green Hill Corner** (10-11 Jln Temple) This bustling *kedai kopi* stays open late and sells what must be the cheapest beer in town – it costs from RM9 for three small cans.

**99** (☎ 423799; 98-99 Jln Green Hill) A roomy red-brick pub that pumps up the volume for big nights, when it's not pumping out the soccer on big screens.

**Cottage** (☎ 412679; 16 Jln Bukit Mata) Fitted out along the lines of an English pub (albeit one with no walls), proceedings start gently here with lunch-time and evening meals, leading into live music six nights a week.

**Oasis Café** (Ban Hock Complex) Part of the flash new Ban Hock development, Oasis has a touch of slick lounge style about it, kept down-to-earth by a light touch and friendly atmosphere.

**Soho** (☎ 247069; 64 Jln Padungan) This is arguably the hippest bar in the centre – even the name oozes London cool. Jazz, Latin and dance music dominate the play list; the atmosphere starts out relaxed but can definitely build up some heat under the red lights as the night draws on! If you want to start early, the restaurant section has a good fusion menu (mains RM12.50 to RM24.50).

**Mojo** (☎ 410598; 244 Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman) 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.

(Continued from page 348)

There are dense concentrations of bars are along Jln Padungan, on Jln Bukit Mata and in the up-and-coming Jln Ban Hock area, and several venues inside the **Riverbank Suites** (Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman) and **Travilion Mall** (Jln Petanak). Most major hotels also have their own bars or karaoke lounges.

#### Shopping

##### HANDICRAFTS & SOUVENIRS

Kuching is the handicraft centre of Borneo, and if you're looking for authentic tribal artefacts you'd be well advised to save your money until you get here. There are dozens of tourist shops and serious galleries scattered around the city, particularly on the Main Bazaar, where very few stores *don't* sell souvenirs.

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 very common, so be sure to spend some time browsing to familiarise yourself with prices and range before committing yourself to a purchase. The **Sarakraf Pavilion** (p343) is a good place to start.

**Sarawak Handicraft Centre** (☎ 245652; www.sarawakhandicraft.com; 32 Jln Tun Haji Openg; 𠄎 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-12.30pm Sat & Sun) Run by the Sarawak Craft Council, this has daily demonstrations and displays authentic crafts.

**Sarakraf** (☎ 232771; Sarawak Plaza, Jln Abell) High-end arts and crafts from around the state, many produced in the Sarakraf Pavilion or

other local workshops. There are other outlets at the airport, in Damai and in KL.

**ARTrageously Ramsey Ong** (☎ 424346; 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. It's run by the owners of Singgahsana Lodge, themselves talented photographers.

**Kuching Waterfront Bazaar** (Main Bazaar; 𠄎 9.30am-10.30pm) The former Sarawak Steamship Building is now a small complex of handicraft and gift stalls, with some unusual fashion and statuary on offer.

#### OTHER STORES

For camera supplies, accessories and repairs, **Empress Studio** (☎ 241009; 1B Jln India) is one of the best all-round photo shops in town, with full support for digital equipment.

If you need to stock up on gear before heading out on a trek, try **Siong Sports Trading** (☎ 414609; 294 Jln Abell). Also sells gas cylinders for outdoor stoves.

When all the souvenir shopping gets too much, you could nip into **Peng Guan Distillers** (☎ 242642; Main Bazaar), a bulk-buy booze outlet where you can sample various brands of arak (Malay local alcohol) before you buy. 'Light' refreshment it ain't!

#### Getting There & Away

##### AIR

**Malaysia Airlines** (MAS; ☎ 244144; 215 Jln Song Thian Cheok) has at least eight flights daily between KL international airport and Kuching, three

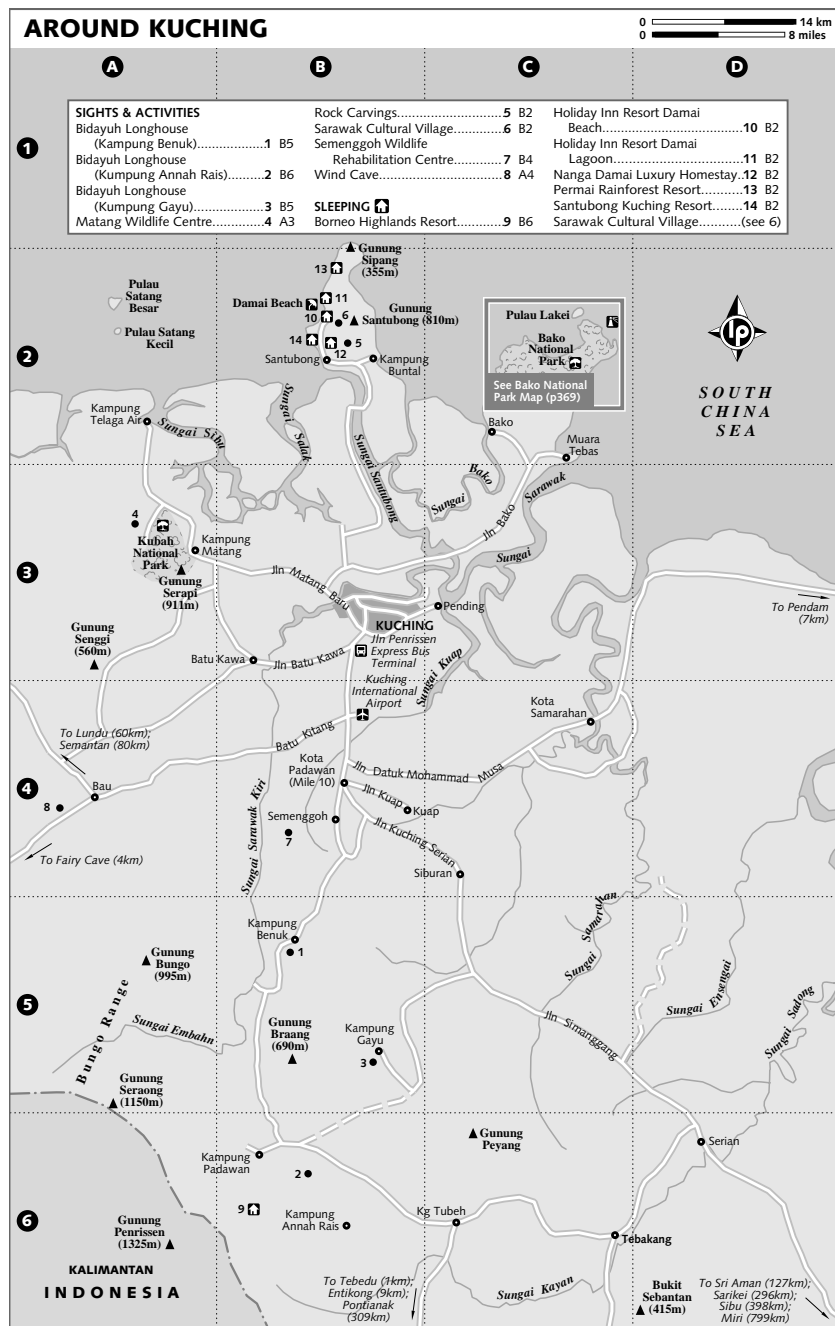
#### EXPORT RESTRICTIONS

When buying antiques and other souvenirs, 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.

The hornbill is a totally protected bird, so even though hornbill parts are sometimes sold under the counter, if you're caught trying to take them out of the state you're in a whole lot of trouble. Forget about bear and leopard teeth, too – sale of any parts of these animals is prohibited. Deer are protected but not restricted, so it is possible to apply for a licence to export deer horn. Likewise, it is illegal to export any plants or seeds without a permit from the Department of Agriculture.

Some countries restrict the importation of weapons as souvenirs. For example, Australian customs officials seem worried about the safety of suburban cats if blowpipes get in (they may have a point). The legendary *parang*, once the head-hunting tool of choice, is another trinket you may have trouble explaining to the postal worker or baggage inspector back home.

(Continued on page 365)



daily to Johor Bahru and at least one to Singapore. After the great reshuffle, MAS internal flights now only serve Sibü and Miri, plus Kota Kinabalu in Sabah.

Low-cost carrier **Air Asia** (% 283222; Wisma Ho Ho Lim, 291 Jln Abell) has seven flights a day to KL and two to Johor Bahru, with fares starting as low as RM80 if you book early enough, and also serves Sibü, Bintulu and Miri daily. **Fly Asian Xpress** (FAX; www.flyasianxpress.com) flies to Mukah and on to Miri once or twice daily.

**Silk Air** (% 256772; 7th fl, Somerset Gateway Kuching Bldg, 9 Jln Bukit Mata), Singapore Airlines' regional wing, flies to Singapore at least twice daily.

All Malaysia Airlines flights to Pontianak in Indonesia have been withdrawn, but **Batavia Air** (% 244299; 1 Padungan Arcade, Jln Song Thian Cheok) still flies there daily en route to Jakarta. You will need to arrange your visa in advance (p335).

#### BOAT

Express boats to Sibü (RM40, 4½ hours) depart daily at 8.30am from the wharf in the suburb of Pending, about 6km east of the city centre. To get there, catch CLL bus 17 or 19 (RM1.20) from the main post office, or Regas bus 1C (90 sen) from the stop next to the Riverbank Suites. The trip takes about 20 minutes. Taxis cost RM15.

Check at the visitors information centre (% 410944; www.sarawaktourism.com; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Haji Openg; 11 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun) for the latest on booking and schedule changes, and get to the dock an hour before sailing to be on the safe side.

#### BUS

Long-distance buses leave from the regional express bus terminal on Jln Penrissen at Mile 2.5, about 5km southeast of the city centre. Around 18 city buses pass by the express bus terminal between 6am and 6pm, and a few buses operate until 9.30pm. Buses to the terminal stop in front of the main post office (60 sen); allow at least 20 minutes for the trip.

Except on weekends and public holidays, there's usually no need to book seats on long-distance buses – just arrive, buy a ticket and hop on. Most of the long-distance bus companies have ticket offices at or near the Petra Jaya bus station (Jln Khoo

Hun Yeang). Check the daily papers for times and fares, or ask at the visitors information centre (% 410944; www.sarawaktourism.com; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Haji Openg; 11 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun) to see if there are changes to the schedules. Long-distance buses are modern, with air-conditioning and dodgy movies.

The main long-distance companies: **Biaramas Ekspres** (% 452139; Jln Khoo Hun Yeang) **Borneo Interland** (% 413595; 63 Main Bazaar) **Langang Road Bus Company** (% 462887) Head office in Sibü. **SJS** (% 455155) **Vital Focus** (% 619689; Jln P Ramlee) Borneo Highway, PB Ekspres and Suria buses.

Services to Sibü (RM40, eight hours) leave from 6.30am until around 11pm; overnight buses are a popular option.

Buses go to Bintulu (RM60, 10 hours, four daily) between 6.30am and 10pm. You can also take an express bus all the way to Miri (RM80, 16 hours), with departures from 6.30am to 9.30pm, though flying is much quicker and doing the trip in stages is more pleasant. There are four daily departures to Mukah (RM56, 11 hours). All buses on these routes go via Sarikei (RM32, six hours).

Several companies have daily buses to Pontianak (RM45, around nine hours) in Kalimantan; some have more-comfortable services for RM70, including meals. Buses cross at the Tebedu-Entikong border. Most nationalities now need to get a visa in advance – check with the Indonesian consulate in Kuching before leaving, as it's a long way to come back if you're turned away! It's a slow haul from Serian to Tebedu on the Sarawak side, but there's a good highway from Entikong to Pontianak.

#### Getting Around

##### TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The green-and-cream STC bus 12A does a loop that takes in the airport (RM1, 45 minutes, seven daily), running between 7am and 3pm. The blue-and-white CLL bus 8A (RM1.40) does a direct run between the airport and city every 1¼ hours between 6.45am and 6.30pm. Airport taxis run on a coupon system and cost RM17.50 for a trip to the city centre. Taxis from the city centre to the airport should be RM15.

**BOAT**

Small boats and express boats ply the Sungai Sarawak, connecting the small villages around Kuching. For information on river crossings, see p344.

**BUS**

Most points of interest around the city and nearby towns are serviced by a good local bus network. At first the system may seem chaotic because there's no central terminal, but the five local companies congregate near the market at the western end of the waterfront. Bus stops are located at the western end of the Main Bazaar, in front of the post office and on the other side of the food stalls in front of Electra House shopping mall.

The *Kuching City Map*, available free at the visitors information centre (☎ 410944; www.sarawaktourism.com; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Haji Openg; 17 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun), has the latest information on local buses, times and fares. The *Official Kuching Guide* also has excellent bus information.

Kuching operates a free sightseeing bus (dressed up to look like a tram) that does a loop around the city, starting from *Khatulistiwa Café* (Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman) and stopping at various places where passengers can hop on or off. The visitors information centre has a map of the route.

**CAR & MOTORCYCLE**

Car rental in Sarawak starts at around RM80 per day; the visitors information centre (☎ 410944; www.sarawaktourism.com; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Haji Openg; 17 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun) and upmarket hotels can help arrange car hire, and many tour operators also rent out their vehicles. At around RM1.22 per litre, petrol is cheap by Western standards, even after recent price hikes.

**Mayflower Car Hire** (☎ 575233) is a good local operator with a counter at the airport. **Teck Hua Motor** (☎ 417068; 31 Jln Tabuan) rents motorcycles for RM25 per day with a RM100 deposit.

**TAXI**

Most of Kuching's taxis have meters, but using them is another matter. Short trips around town should cost between RM6 and RM10. Taxis can be found waiting at the market, at the Jln Penrissen express bus terminal and outside major hotels. There's

usually no problem flagging one down on main streets, even late at night. You can call a **radio taxi** (☎ 343343) at any time.

**WESTERN SARAWAK**  
**Bako National Park**

Bako is Sarawak's oldest national park, protecting 27 sq km of an unspoiled promontory between the mouths of the Sarawak and Bako rivers. It's a beautiful spot, where mangroves fringe the coasts and the rocky headlands are indented with clean beaches. The park features seven of the state's main vegetation types, including rainforest and *kerangas*, the distinctive sandstone habitat that forms the geological backbone of the plateau. Botanically, Bako is a fascinating place where you can see four species of pitcher plant within an hour's walk from park headquarters. It's an easy day trip from Kuching, though it's worth staying longer if you can – even getting here can seem like a mini adventure.

Bako is most famous for its wildlife, and it's the best place in Sarawak to see the rare proboscis monkey. Macaque monkeys are common, and they're fun to watch as they forage along the beach in the evening.

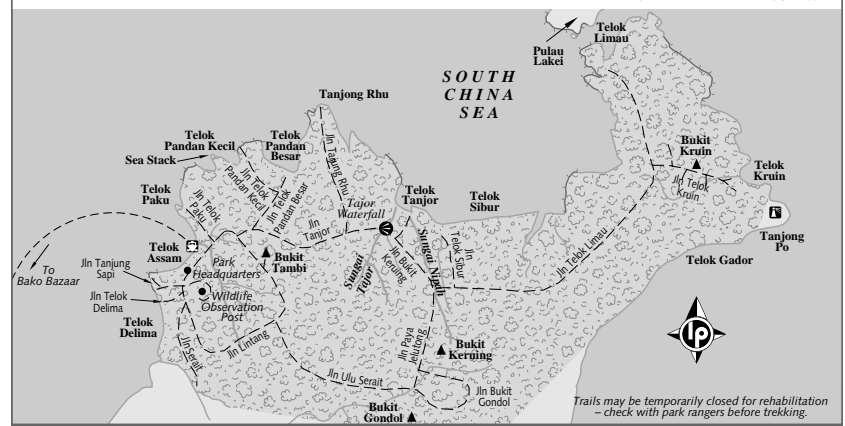
**ORIENTATION & INFORMATION**

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** (☎ 011-225049; Telok Assam), where you'll find accommodation, a cafeteria and the park office. The office is about 100m along the shore from the boat dock. Staff will show you to your quarters and can answer any questions 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 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 more than 30km of well-marked trails, ranging from short walks around park headquarters to strenuous day treks to the end of the peninsula. Guides are available (RM20 per hour), but it's easy to find your

**BAKO NATIONAL PARK**

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, 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 *Jalan Lintang* circuit. 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 *Jalan Telok Limau*, a 10km walk that's impossible to do as a return trip in one day. You will need to carry camping equipment or else be collected by boat. Arrange a pick-up with the park warden, but expect to be charged about RM100. See p370 for the park's main trails; the times given are those recommended by the national park.

Take adequate water on all hikes; it gets particularly hot in the *kerangas* and there's no shade for long stretches.

**Wildlife**

Walking trails pass through peat swamp, rainforest and, on the low sandstone plateau behind Telok Assam, *kerangas*. The latter is a fascinating ecosystem where pitcher

plants are common, especially near the intersection of the *Jalan Lintang* and *Jalan Ulu Serait* trails.

Common animals include long-tailed macaques, silver leaf monkeys, large monitor lizards, palm squirrels and, at night, mouse deer, civets and *culago* (flying lemur). The best places to look for the proboscis monkey are along the Telok Paku and Telok Delima walking trails. Walk very quietly and listen for them crashing through the trees – they will see you long before you see them. You've also got a good chance of seeing them feeding around the mangrove boardwalk just before the park jetty.

Bird-watching is best near the park headquarters, especially in and around the mangroves at Telok Assam. Although there are about 150 species on the park list, many of these are migrants that are only present during the wet season.

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 quiet, attractive beach at Telok Pandan Besar is only accessible by boat from park headquarters. If you're thinking of hitching a boat ride to or from a beach, it's probably only cost effective for a group. Boats to beaches near park headquarters will cost around RM25 (one way or return), but to beaches further away it is quite expensive

## BAKO WALKING TRAILS

Trail name	Destination	Distance	Time
Jln Bukit Keruing/Jln Bukit Gondol	mountain path	7.7km	7hr
Jln Lintang	circular path	5.25km	3-4hr
Jln Serait	park boundary	4.8km	1½hr
Jln Tajor	waterfalls	3.5km	2hr
Jln Tanjung Rhu	cliffs, viewpoint	4.2km	2½hr
Jln Tanjung Sapi	cliffs, viewpoint	0.8km	30min
Jln Telok Delima	mangroves	1km	45min
Jln Telok Paku	Cove Beach	1.2km	¾hr
Jln Telok Pandan Kecil	Cove Beach	2.5km	1½hr
Jln Ulu Serait/Jln Telok Limau	Pulau Lakei	10km	8hr

(eg RM80 to Telok Sibur). Pulau Lakei, on the park's northeastern tip, is accessible by boat (RM120).

## SLEEPING &amp; EATING

There is plenty of accommodation at Bako National Park, including two- and three-room chalets, as well as hostels and a muddy camp ground. You can book accommodation through the visitors information centre (☎ 082-410944; www.sarawaktourism.com; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Haji Openg; 𠄎 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun) in Kuching. Phone bookings are accepted, but must be confirmed and paid for at least three days before your intended arrival.

The hostel (dm/r RM15/40) has four beds with shared kitchen and bathroom. Various sized chalets (r RM50-100) are also available. Bookings are essential for the chalets and advisable for the hostel rooms, though you should be able to get a bed if you arrive on a weekday. Note that 5% tax is added to all these rates.

Camping costs RM5 per person, but the camp ground is a swamp for much of the year. There's a shower block and lockers can be hired for RM5 per day. Bring your own utensils, sheets and sleeping bags. The monkeys are a particular nuisance near the camp ground and will steal anything that is not firmly secured.

The cafeteria at park headquarters is open from 8am to 9pm. It 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 and vegetables are not always available.

## GETTING THERE &amp; AWAY

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 market in Kuching every 40 minutes (approximately) from 7am to 6pm (RM1.50, 45 minutes). The last bus back to Kuching leaves Kampung Bako at 5pm.

A boat from Bako Bazaar to the park headquarters costs RM40 each way for up to five people, or RM8 per person for larger groups. The chances are that someone on the bus will be looking to share a boat, especially on a weekend; tourists sometimes wait at the boat dock for the same reason.

Take note of the boat's 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.

It's a pleasant 20-minute boat trip past coastal scenery and fishing boats. From November to February the sea is often rough, adding a real touch of excitement to the ride, and at times it may not be possible for boats to approach or leave Telok Assam. If you're planning a day trip, be aware that boatmen may insist on an early-afternoon return time to beat the tides. Take a waterproof jacket to protect against spray in the open boats.

## Santubong &amp; Damai

☎ 082

The Santubong Peninsula is an exclusive tourist area 32km north of Kuching, near the mouth of the Sungai Santubong. It's a

picturesque place with some modest jungle trekking on nearby Gunung Santubong and good seafood at two small fishing villages, Santubong and Kampung Buntal. The peninsula has the nearest pleasure beach to Kuching, and is very popular with local people on weekends. You can see primitive rock carvings at Sungai Jaong, about 1.5km upriver from the coast, and the peninsula also has the Sarawak Cultural Village – a photogenic ethnic theme park that's the site of the annual Rainforest World Music Festival (p345).

## SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES

## Sarawak Cultural Village

Surrounding an artificial lake at the foot of Gunung Santubong, the Sarawak Cultural Village (☎ 846411; www.scv.com.my; adult/child RM45/22.50; 𠄎 9am-5.15pm) is an excellent living museum. It has examples of traditional dwellings built by different peoples of Sarawak – in this case 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. Even travellers who have ventured to the Borneo interior are generally impressed by this unique opportunity to see the original styles of the now modernised longhouses. Many of the participants speak English well and can offer a wealth of information about Sarawak.

There's also a twice-daily performance showcasing the traditional dances of the various tribes, 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.

All the tribespeople are paid to take part in the daily activities, and they sell their own products for additional income. Great pains are taken to make the village authentic – just to prove the point, the nomadic Penan occasionally go AWOL.

Hotels and travel agencies in Kuching have packages that include admission, lunch and transport ranging in price from RM60 to RM90. 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.

There's no public transport to the village, but a shuttle bus leaves the Holiday Inn 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 (810m), a 3.4km trail that takes around five hours.

An easy to moderate circular walk (2km, one to two hours) starts near the Holiday Inn Resort and ends near the cultural village, passing a pretty waterfall on the way. There's a café at the beginning where you can pick up a map, but the trail is well marked so you shouldn't get lost. If you really wish to put in the hours there's a campsite 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

## WARNING: 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 persist in 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 verandas. 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 probably be happy not to mess with them. If you get cornered, yell for the park staff. Monkeys are not a problem after dark.

interest in archaeology. There's said to be nearly 40 of these artefacts, 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 iron making have also been found here, making it one of Sarawak's most important archaeological sites.

The petroglyphs are at the end of a gravel road south off the main road going into Santubong, about 2km after the turn-off for Kampung Buntal. There's a bus stop by the gravel road, but you may have to ask some local people to help point you in the right direction.

#### SLEEPING & EATING

**Sarawak Cultural Village** (☎ 846411; www.scv.com.my) The staff can arrange home stays in the village's Iban and Orang Ulu longhouses – email psw@scv.com.my for details.

**Permai Rainforest Resort** (☎ 846487; www.permalinkrainforest.com; Damai Beach, Santubong; camp site/dm RM10/20, cabins RM180-220, treehouse RM188; a i s ) 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. Perfect for active kids (and adults).

**Nanga Damai Luxury Homestay** (☎ 016-887 1017; www.nangadamai.com; Jln Sultan Tengah, Santubong; r RM70-120; a s ) If you're expecting a mattress on a longhouse veranda you might be surprised – this lovely family-run guesthouse isn't kidding when it says 'luxury', and the beautiful garden setting makes it easy to meet the two-night minimum stay. Breakfast is included and there's even a private jungle trail, but children under 12 are not permitted.

**Santubong Kuching Resort** (☎ 846888; skresort@pojaring.my; Jln Sultan Tengah, Santubong; r RM152-333; a s ) This home-grown al-

ternative to the big resorts has an equally good range of facilities, plus activities such as tennis, basketball, water sports, golf and mountain biking. The beach is a five-minute walk away and discount packages are usually available.

**Holiday Inn Resort Damai Lagoon** (☎ 846991; www.holidayinn-sarawak.com; Teluk Penyuk, Santubong; r RM280-380; a s ) Set on Puteri Lagoon, the HI's flagship Malaysian resort has a nice sand beach, a sparkling pool with waterfalls, and spacious bright rooms. It's five minutes' walk from the Sarawak Cultural Village, near the stunning Damai Golf & Country Club. Guest services include tour information and shuttle service to and from Kuching, as well as excellent restaurants and pubs. Discounted rooms can go as low as RM160.

**Holiday Inn Resort Damai Beach** (☎ 846999; www.hirdb.com; Teluk Bandung, Santubong; r RM300-380; a i s ) A massive seafront resort with a touch of traditional design in its beach, pool and hillside suites. It's also close to Sarawak Cultural Village and has the same services and facilities as Damai Lagoon.

There are numerous seafood restaurants around Santubong and Buntal.

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

To reach Buntal and Santubong, take Petra Jaya bus 2D from near Kuching's open-air market (RM1.50). The last return bus leaves for Kuching at 6pm; if you want to stay for a meal the only option is to take a taxi back to Kuching (around RM20 to R25, 45 minutes).

There's no bus to the resorts, but there are frequent shuttle buses from the Holiday Inn in Kuching to both Holiday Inn Damai resorts (RM10 one way). You may be able to flag down a minivan (RM10).

A taxi to the resorts costs RM25 to RM30; if you want to be picked up after dinner expect to pay RM60 for the return trip. Taxis can also be hired for a trip from the resorts out to Buntal and Santubong.

#### Kubah National Park

While Bako has the edge for wildlife and popularity, Kubah National Park is the nearest national park to Kuching and makes another easy and rewarding day-trip option. Just 20km west of the city, the park's 22 sq km protect a range of forested

sandstone hills that rise dramatically from the surrounding plain to a height of 450m. There are waterfalls, rainforest walking trails and lookouts, and the beautiful rainforest is home to a wide variety of palms and orchids.

Walking trails include the paved entrance road, which runs right up to the summit of Kubah's highest peak, Gunung Serapi; it's a two- to three-hour walk. The peak is often shrouded in mist but there are lookouts along the way. You can probably grab a lift up then walk down. Most of the other trails run off the entrance road. The Ulu Rayu Trail links Kubah with the Matang Wildlife Centre, 5km from the turn-off, and takes about three hours to walk. The Waterfall Trail takes about 45 minutes from the turn-off and ends at a natural swimming pool.

Entrance to the park costs RM10, and trail maps are available at the park office (☎ 011-225003). Accommodation can be booked through the Kuching visitors information centre (☎ 082-410944; www.sarawaktourism.com; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Haji Openg; 11 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun).

The Kubah park headquarters offers hostel, resthouse and double-storey chalet accommodation. In the comfortable, clean hostel (dm/r RM15/40), rooms are fan-cooled and have shared bathrooms. There's no restaurant, but a kitchen is supplied with all facilities, including a fridge and utensils.

Forest lodges (r RM120-225; a ) with full facilities sleep eight to 10 people each. Kubah is entirely self-catering; if you have transport you can get supplies in the local *kampung* or even dine back in Kuching, but otherwise you'll have to bring all your own food.

Matang Transport Co bus 11 leaves Kuching for Kubah at regular intervals (RM1.60, 40 minutes); there's no set timetable, but services should run roughly hourly in the morning. The bus will drop you at Sungai Cina, from where it's a 300m uphill walk to the park entrance.

A taxi from town will cost at least RM60 return; arrange with the driver a time to be picked up. Another option is to drive, but the park is not well signposted. Follow the signs to Matang then turn left at the crossroads 200m past Red Bridge; the park entrance is about 3.5km further on.

#### Matang Wildlife Centre

Adjacent to Kubah National Park, the Matang Wildlife Centre (☎ 011-225012; admission RM10) was set up as a rehabilitation centre for endangered species released from captivity, particularly Borneo's larger mammals, and aims to recreate the natural jungle environment as closely as possible.

The centre is popular with locals who come to swim in the nearby river on weekends. There's accommodation, a cafeteria and a very good information centre here. There are twice-daily feeding programs for orang-utans, hornbills, sambar deer and crocodiles, as well as rainforest walking trails, including the Sungai Rayu Trail, which links up with Kubah National Park (three to four hours).

Matang has a hostel (dm/r RM15/40) with four-bed rooms, two forest lodges (RM150) sleeping eight and a camp site (per person RM5). Book accommodation at Kuching visitors information centre (☎ 082-410944; www.sarawaktourism.com; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Haji Openg; 11 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun).

The only practical options for getting here from Kuching are by taxi (about RM35 one way) or with a tour (around RM180, including Kubah). You can take a bus as far as the Kubah National Park turn-off, but it's a further 12km to Matang. Try waving down a local minibus, or you can also try hitching.

#### Semenggoh Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre

If you want to see orang-utans but won't get a chance to visit the excellent Sepilok sanctuary in Sabah, Semenggoh (sometimes spelled Semenggok) is Sarawak's equivalent. It's much less visited than its northern counterpart and lacks the range of facilities, but visitor numbers have increased dramatically since 2003 thanks to greater publicity, and the centre's new annual carnival in November should bring in even more curious visitors. It's an easy and worthwhile morning or afternoon out from Kuching.

The centre (☎ 082-442180; adult/child RM3/1.50; 11 8am-12.45pm & 2-4.15pm) attempts to rehabilitate orang-utans, monkeys, honey bears and other unfortunate creatures that have been orphaned or illegally caged. You're not guaranteed to see orang-utans, because they're set free and only return when

they're hungry (usually outside the forest's fruiting season).

The semiwild orang-utans are fed at 8.30am to 9am and again at 3pm to 3.15pm, so it's best to time your visit to coincide with one of these sessions. It's not uncommon for orang-utans to turn up at the centre itself rather than the feeding platforms, so don't rush off straight away if everything seems quiet. Even if the ginger apes are a no-show, other animals such as brightly coloured squirrels often put in an appearance to sneak a nibble at the buckets of fruit.

Semenggoh is 32km south of Kuching. To get there, take STC bus 6, 6A, 6B or

6C from Kuching (RM2.60, 40 minutes, seven daily). 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 2.30pm, but you should be able to flag down a private van (RM3) or a bus from the main road. A taxi to the centre costs RM30.

### Bidayuh Longhouses

The most interesting and unspoilt longhouses in Sarawak are those furthest from large settlements, particularly along the upper reaches of the Rejang, Baleh, Belaga, Balui and Baram rivers. If you're not planning

on going that far, or if you would like a preview, the Bidayuh longhouses are the closest to Kuching. All have been on the tour operators' circuit for years and the communities are accustomed to tourists.

Kampung Annah Rais is one of the best-known 'tourist' longhouses. It's an impressive structure with more than 100 doors, and has preserved its traditional look, apart from metal roofs and satellite dishes. The villagers also keep the tour operators informed of any special festivities taking place in the village. Kampung Benuk and Kampung Gayu are also regularly visited by tour groups, and there are many others in this

area. Standard price for admission to these longhouses is RM5 per person (RM15 with refreshments), or RM1500 per person for the full *gawai* (harvest festival) experience.

STC bus 9A goes to Annah Rais between 9am and noon (RM6, 1 hour). For Kampung Benuk take STC bus 6 (RM2) and ask the driver to let you off at the village. Travel agencies also have tours starting from around RM80 for a day trip.

### Gunung Penrisen

Gunung Penrisen is a 1329m-high mountain just over the border in Kalimantan, Indonesia. Experienced, well-equipped

#### LONGHOUSE VISITS

Longhouses are the most distinctive feature of tribal life in Borneo, and many of the communities living on Sarawak's rivers still occupy these traditional dwellings, which are gigantic wooden structures on stilts, where the entire population lives under one roof, with separate rooms leading on to one long communal veranda.

Tourism has had a big impact on the way longhouses operate. Traditionally, the longhouse has always been open to passing travellers and traders, but with many tour companies simply depositing customers on longhouse verandas, this legendary hospitality is changing. At worst, particularly along the Batang Skrang southeast of Kuching, you may be handed a token glass of *tuak* (rice wine) with one hand while the other hand is held out for RM10.

Some of the more conscientious tour operators have made provisions for a limited number of guests with certain longhouses, which lay on cultural shows, craft markets and other activities. In these cases, the longhouse communities have accepted tourism, but on their own terms: other communities have chosen to stay out of the tourism economy altogether.

You can, of course, head upriver on your own, but you'll still need to find someone to take you to a longhouse. Without an introduction local people are not going to invite you into their homes. An invitation is essential, and turning up unannounced is not just bad manners – in some circumstances it can be a major cultural faux pas with potentially serious consequences, particularly if there has been a recent death or certain rituals are in force.

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.

Of course, interacting spontaneously with locals isn't always easy, as the younger people are often off working the fields or out on other business. Travellers often find the elders don't speak English, and given the cultural differences there can be frustratingly little to talk about. To avoid this, ask who will be around before you go, then try to organise shared activities that will give you and your hosts some common ground. For example, a jungle walk or river trip can be a real education if you've got a good guide, and many travellers have had unforgettable experiences by sharing in the cooking, helping out in the fields or gathering fruit and herbs.

If you're taking a tour, ask what you're in for – plenty of operators offer pretty minimal itineraries. Also be clear on the lodging arrangements if you're staying overnight. Often you'll stay at purpose-built guesthouses nearby rather than in the longhouse itself; some travellers prefer this, as there's more privacy and the facilities may be cleaner and more modern.

Gifts are another area where misunderstandings can occur. Longhouse communities do not traditionally require gifts from guests, so rather than buying T-shirts, sweets for the kids (tooth decay is rampant) or coffee mugs, ask your tour company or guide what each specific longhouse needs – for instance, school books or fishing line.

If visiting independently, it's polite to bring a small gift for the family of the person who invites you. If gifts aren't your thing (some people find handing out treats demeaning to locals), you can contribute to the longhouse economy by taking a local longboat trip and buying longhouse handicrafts.

However you approach it, a longhouse visit is going to cost money. Tours are not cheap, and if you go on your own you'll still need to pay for a boat and/or Land Cruiser, plus maybe a guide fee along the way. If you have any interest in seeing the real Borneo though, you'll make room in your budget for a trip: the Kelabit Highlands and the Belaga area on the Batang Rejang are the best places to combine jungle and river trips with a longhouse visit.

#### Longhouse Etiquette

Most importantly, never enter a longhouse without permission; always wait to be invited in. If there is a *pemali* (ritual prohibition) in force (usually after a death or some misfortune), indicated by a bunch of branches tied to the rail at the bottom of the ladder or by a white flag near the entrance, you won't be invited in.

On arrival at the longhouse, your guide will take you to see the *tuai rumah* (chief). You'll then usually be offered a place to stay for the night and be invited to join them for a meal. Always remove your shoes. Chances are you'll be given a welcome drink of *tuak*; drink it, or at least some of it. Accept food and drinks with both hands rather than with just one.

Meals are usually taken with the *tuai rumah*; they are eaten while seated on the floor, and you use both hands. Don't point your feet at anyone when sitting on the mat, and don't spit or blow your nose during a meal. The food may be very simple but eat some of it, or at the very, very least touch the food and then touch your mouth.

Food is plentiful and vegetarians are well catered for, but note that the Iban in particular honour their guests by serving meat for special occasions. You can always take along some food of your own to throw into the communal pot.

When washing or bathing in the river, men are expected to wear at least underpants, and women should stay covered with a sarong. Nudity is definitely not on.

In the evenings there'll probably be a lot of *tuak* drinking, and you may well be expected to sing and dance. Join in and don't be afraid to make an idiot of yourself – the locals will love it! *Tuak* may taste mild but it is pretty potent stuff, and you can expect a stunning hangover the next day. The accepted way to drink it is from the glass in a single shot.

climbers can climb the mountain, which can be done in a one-day burn or as a two-to three-day overnight trek.

The easiest way to do the trek is to ask a tour operator in Kuching to put together a custom trip for you, as few offer set packages. It's cheaper for a group to attempt the climb because, apart from transport costs, guides (RM50 to RM100 per day) need to be hired in Kampung Annah Rais or Kampung Padawan. The Borneo Highlands Resort (below) runs daily treks to the summit, a six- to seven-hour round trip, from its elevated position on the plateau.

The **Borneo Highlands Resort** (☎ 790800; www.borneohighlands.com.my; Jln Borneo Heights, Padawan; r RM513), apparently Southeast Asia's largest hill resort, is a massive development sitting on Gunung Penrissen Plateau, an hour's drive from Kuching. It's practically a village in itself, consisting of a golf course, three chalet complexes, spa facilities and gardens (which provide the fresh produce for all meals). Considerable discounts are usually available through travel agencies.

### Wind Cave & Fairy Cave

Much of Borneo is riddled with cave systems, and you don't have to be a serious spelunker to explore some of the most spectacular examples. Here, the jutting limestone hills around the old gold-mining town of Bau conceal two very different caverns, which together provide an unhurried day trip from Kuching. Take a picnic lunch, drinks and a good torch (these 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; 11 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 chittering 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! You can take a jungle trail through the surrounding nature reserve or walk right through the caves to the river, where there are barbecues, food stalls and change rooms (for swimming).

About 5km further south, **Fairy Cave** is an extraordinary elevated chamber 30m above the ground in the side of a cliff. You can fol-

low 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 bus 2 to Bau (RM4.40, 45 minutes) 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; a handful of buses run to Lundu (RM7.60) daily.

To get to the caves, take a bus towards Krokong from Bau bazaar (80 sen) and ask the driver to let you off. The Wind Cave is 700m, the Fairy Cave 1.3km from their respective turn-offs. You could walk to the Wind Cave from Bau in about an hour, but the Fairy Cave is much further (8km) and you may have to hitch if there's no bus. A taxi costs RM20.

### Lundu

☎ 082

No relation to Lund in Sweden, this quiet little town sits between the forested bulk of Gunung Gading National Park and the Sungai Kayan. To most travellers it's simply the transport node for the national park, but people here are friendly and there are far worse places to get stranded.

Lundu has a fish market along the riverfront and a hawker centre at the western end of town. The town centre is a square bounded by old *godown*, and brightly painted houses line the quiet country lanes. In tribute to the area's main attraction, there's an oversized *rafflesia* monument near the bus station.

The road north out of town leads to the beaches at Pandan (10km) and Siar (8.5km). They're OK, but are often littered with debris.

### SLEEPING & EATING

**Cheng Hak Boarding House** (☎ 735018; 22 Lundu Bazaar; r RM25-35; ☰ ) This budget place has very plain rooms with shared squat toilet and shower. Cheaper rooms only have fans (with two speeds – gale and orbit). Check-in is at the Goh Joo Hok shop, a few doors down from the Lundu Gading Hotel.

**Lundu Gading Hotel** (☎ 735199; 174 Lundu Bazaar, Jln Stunggang; r RM58; ☰ ) Offering a little more comfort, this central establishment has decent rooms with horrible plastic curtains.

Chinese *kedai kopi* line the town square and the hawker centre cranks up in the evening. **Happy Seafood Centre** (Jln Blacksmith; dishes from RM2.20), opposite the bus station, serves a variety of Malay and Chinese fare and also sells basic provisions.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

STC bus EP7 leaves from Kuching for Lundu (RM8.30, 1¼ hours) four times daily. If you want to stop by the caves on your way back to Kuching, STC bus 2A goes to Bau (RM7.60). STC bus 2B (RM1.50, every hour) from the bus station goes by the beaches at Pandan (30 minutes) and Siar.

### Gunung Gading National Park

The jungle-covered Gunung Gading is an attractive peak, but the chief draw at this park (☎ 082-735714; adult/child RM10/5; 11 8am-12.30pm & 2-5pm) is the rare *rafflesia*. These massive flowers 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 Kuching visitors information centre (☎ 082-410944; www.sarawaktourism.com; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Haji Openg; 11 8am-6pm 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. If a plant is far away from the main boardwalk, a park ranger may be able to guide you. Guiding fees are RM20 per hour (per group). November to January are 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. Trails to the two viewpoints take about one hour and 1½ hours respectively. Trekking up Gunung Gading (906m high; three to four hours one way) or Gunung Perigi (five hours one way) requires a bit more effort. These treks are best as overnight trips, but camping anywhere other than at park headquarters is not encouraged, though a forest hut at the summit of Gunung Gading was being planned at time of writing.

There's a popular **natural swimming pool** a few minutes from the office. The information centre at the park has good photos and

displays on *rafflesia*, wildlife and the local culture. Staff may offer you a cup of tea if they're not busy, but there's no shop or canteen, so you'll have to bring your own supplies or stroll the 2km to Lundu for an evening meal.

The **hostel** (dm/r RM15/40) has fan rooms with shared bathroom and fully equipped kitchen. Two three-bedroom lodges (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 EP7 from Kuching to Lundu (RM8.30, 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 or private car for RM5.

### Sematan

☎ 082

Lying on a picturesque bay 107km north-west of Kuching, Sematan is a small coastal village near the Indonesian border. 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 is clean, deserted and lined with coconut palms, but the water is very shallow. You can supposedly walk all the way to Indonesia on the sand, though we wouldn't recommend testing this theory!

Sematan is popular with weekending Kuching residents, and its importance for tourists may increase when facilities at Tanjung Datu National Park are improved. The tourist board has also introduced an annual carnival to promote tourism. At the moment, though, the town is quite undeveloped and offers some good opportunities to experience local life.

One of the best reasons to visit Sematan is the growing local ecotourism industry. The Malay village of Telok Melano is about 45 minutes away from Sematan along Sarawak's southernmost coast and 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 home-stay accommodation (RM50 per person) with villagers can be arranged through the Fisheries Development Authority (☎ 711358; undpsematan@hotmail.com) or **Borneo Inbound Tours & Travel** (inboundtravel@po.jaring.my; Jln Temple ☎ 082-641741; 1st fl, 98 Main Bazaar; Jln Bishopsgate ☎ 082-237287; 1st fl, 40 Main Bazaar) in Kuching. Tour prices start around RM280 for two days, depending on group size.

**Sematan Hotel** (☎ 711162; 162 Sematan Bazaar; r RM25-50; a ) is a friendly place with simple tiled rooms and shared bathrooms. It's on the left-hand side of the road just before entering Sematan. Staff can help arrange transport to Tanjung Datu and Talang Satang National Parks.

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

To get to Sematan from Kuching, take STC bus EP7 to Lundu (RM8.30, 1¼ hours, four daily), then catch STC bus 17 to Sematan (RM3.70). There are only three buses a day, so if you miss one, take a taxi or private car (RM4).

Getting to Telok Melano on your own is more complicated. Speedboats can be hired for about RM250, or you could try and get a ride on a fishing boat, though this could take a while. Try asking at the Sematan Hotel and on the wharf.

### Tanjung Datu National Park

Located in the far west of the state, and abutting the border with Kalimantan, the 14-sq-km Tanjung Datu National Park protects rainforest, unpolluted rivers and near-pristine beaches, on which endangered turtles lay their eggs. Travel here is not recommended between October and March, as the sea can get very rough.

There are currently no facilities for visitors, though the Telok Melano home stays (p377) provide a convenient base. Access is only possible by boat from Sematan; prices start around RM300 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. **Borneo Inbound Tours & Travel** (inboundtravel@po.jaring.my; Jln Temple ☎ 082-641741; 1st fl, 98 Main Bazaar; Jln Bishopsgate ☎ 082-237287; 1st fl, 40 Main Bazaar) in Kuching is the official operator for home-stay trips here.

### Talang-Satang National Park

The first marine park in Sarawak, Talang-Satang was established in 1999 for the purpose of marine turtle conservation. Two islands, Pulau Satang Besar and Pulau Satang Kecil, form the Satang section (9894 hectares), part of which is open for visitors. Permits from Kuching's visitors information centre (☎ 082-410944; www.sarawaktourism.com; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Haji Openg; 11 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun) or the **Forest Department** (☎ 082-348001; www.sarawakforestry.com; Hock Lee Center, Jln Datuk Abang Abdul Rahim) are required and you'll be under the supervision of park staff. The Talang-Talang section (9520 hectares) is also made up of two islands, Pulau Talang-Talang Besar and Pulau Talang-Talang Kecil, which are off limits to visitors due to their small size and the sensitivity of the marine turtles. Local villagers and fishermen have retained their right to access the park and continue traditional practices in conjunction with developing Pulau Satang Besar into a tourist destination.

The **Sematan Hotel** (☎ 082-711162; 162 Sematan Bazaar) can help arrange transport to the park – boats cost around RM200. **Borneo Inbound Tours & Travel** (inboundtravel@po.jaring.my; Jln Temple ☎ 082-641741; 1st fl, 98 Main Bazaar; Jln Bishopsgate ☎ 082-237287; 1st fl, 40 Main Bazaar) in Kuching and **CPH Tours & Travel** (☎ 082-243708; www.cphtravel.com.my) run the only tours to the area.

### Serian

☎ 082  
Serian is a tiny Bidayuh town 65km south-east of Kuching. Tour groups often stop here to pick up gifts on the way to the longhouses located along nearby rivers such as the Lemanak. 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.

If you are going to Sri Aman, you could stop off at the **De Chalet Ranchan Recreational Park**, a popular leisure facility with waterfalls, bridges and accommodation. It's just off the main road, and on weekends there's lots of traffic, so hitching is possible; buses 12 and 14 run every half hour from Serian (RM1).

STC buses 3 and 3A run between Kuching and Serian (RM5, one hour) every hour between 6am and 5.20pm. The bus station is in the centre of Serian, near the market.

### Sri Aman

☎ 083  
Originally known as Simangangg, Sri Aman is a quiet town on the muddy 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 many of the tours organised from Kuching bring groups to the longhouses along these tributaries. See p374 for more on longhouse visits. There isn't a lot of river traffic at Sri Aman itself, and most boats to the Lemanak and Ai rivers leave from Engkilili, or outside town where the highway crosses the Batang Lupar.

### Batang Ai National Park

Batang Ai, the only reserve in Sarawak where the local community is directly involved in park management, covers 240 sq km and protects the catchment area of the Batang Ai reservoir, which is formed by a hydroelectric scheme 250km east of Kuching. The park's rainforest features wildlife such as orang-utans, gibbons and hornbills, and there are four walking trails. There's no visitors centre here and no accommodation in the park itself. Independent access is possible by chartering a boat through the local cooperative in Batang Ai, but this isn't cheap, and until more facilities are developed, the park is best visited as part of a longhouse tour from Kuching.

**Hilton Batang Ai Longhouse Resort** (☎ 083-584338; www.batang.hilton.com; r RM250; a s ) is remote exclusivity *par excellence*: the backwoods location, attentive service and quality excursions make this a premier top-end

#### IBAN WORDS & PHRASES

As with other local peoples in Sarawak, the Iban use Malay for some of the more common phrases and words:

**Good morning.**  
**Good afternoon.**  
**Good night.**  
**Goodbye.**  
**Thank you.**

*Salamat pagi.*  
*Salamat tengah-hari.*  
*Salamat malam.*  
*Salamat tinggal.*  
*Terima kasih.*

Some Iban words and phrases:

**How are you?**  
**Pleased to meet you.**  
**See you again.**  
**What's your name?**  
**Where do we bathe/wash?**  
**Can I take a photograph of you?**  
**I'm sorry.**  
**Where?**  
**What?**  
**I**  
**you**  
**today**  
**tomorrow**  
**day**  
**night**  
**good**  
**not good**  
**eat**  
**drink**  
**go**

*Gerai nuan?*  
*Rindu amat betemu enggau nuan.*  
*Arap ke betemu baru.*  
*Sapa nama nuan?*  
*Dini endor kitai mandi?*  
*Tau aku ngambi gambar nuan?*  
*Aku minta ampun.*  
*Dini?*  
*Nama?*  
*aku*  
*nuan*  
*saharitu*  
*pegilah*  
*hari*  
*malam*  
*manah*  
*jai also enda manah*  
*makai*  
*ngirup*  
*bejalai*



option. The indigenous-timber 'longhouses' bear little practical resemblance to their local cousins, but score much higher in the comfort stakes. Visits to genuine longhouses, jungle treks and team-building activities can also be arranged. Transfers from Kuching (RM110) take four to five hours, followed by a short boat ride. Discounts are often available; check with travel agencies or the office at the Kuching Hilton Hotel (☎ 082-248200; www.kuching.hilton.com; Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman).

## BATANG REJANG

Carrying the mystic resonance of the exotic interior, the mighty Batang Rejang is Borneo's jugular, the main trade artery for all of central and southern Sarawak. Express boats, longboats and all kinds of other craft ply its 640km length, ferrying people, goods and animals between coastal towns, upriver settlements and logging camps. Above all, the Rejang is noted for the tribal longhouses scattered along its banks and those of its tributaries, the Baleh, Belaga and Balui rivers.

Staying at a longhouse is one of the highlights of a trip to Sarawak. However, as with everything in Borneo, you have to pick your spot and know what to look for. If you only go as far as Kapit, the Rejang will appear to be little more than 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.

Then there's 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.

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* (rice wine) and arak.

Along the river, the only hotel accommodation available is in Song, Kanowit, Kapit and Belaga.

## Rejang Longhouses

There are longhouses all the way along the Batang Rejang. Most visitors head for Kapit and Belaga, but there are plenty of longhouses around Kanowit and Song. Those further upriver will not necessarily be more traditional; most are made from modern building materials. In fact, many communities are moving towards individual houses, which fare much better in the event of fire (even a small blaze can destroy a longhouse in as little as 30 minutes).

Kapit is the last big settlement on the river, where the longhouse people come for supplies. Further upriver, Belaga is smaller and more laid-back; it's a regular meeting place for friends and relatives from far-flung communities. In either town, the best strategy for finding someone to take you to a longhouse is to make yourself known around town – sit in the cafés and get talking to people. If you don't have a lot of time, it's best to take a tour. See p374 for more on visiting longhouses.

Apart from a trip to the Pelagus Resort, travel beyond Kapit requires a permit (p384). The permit is merely a formality, and you'll probably never be asked for it.

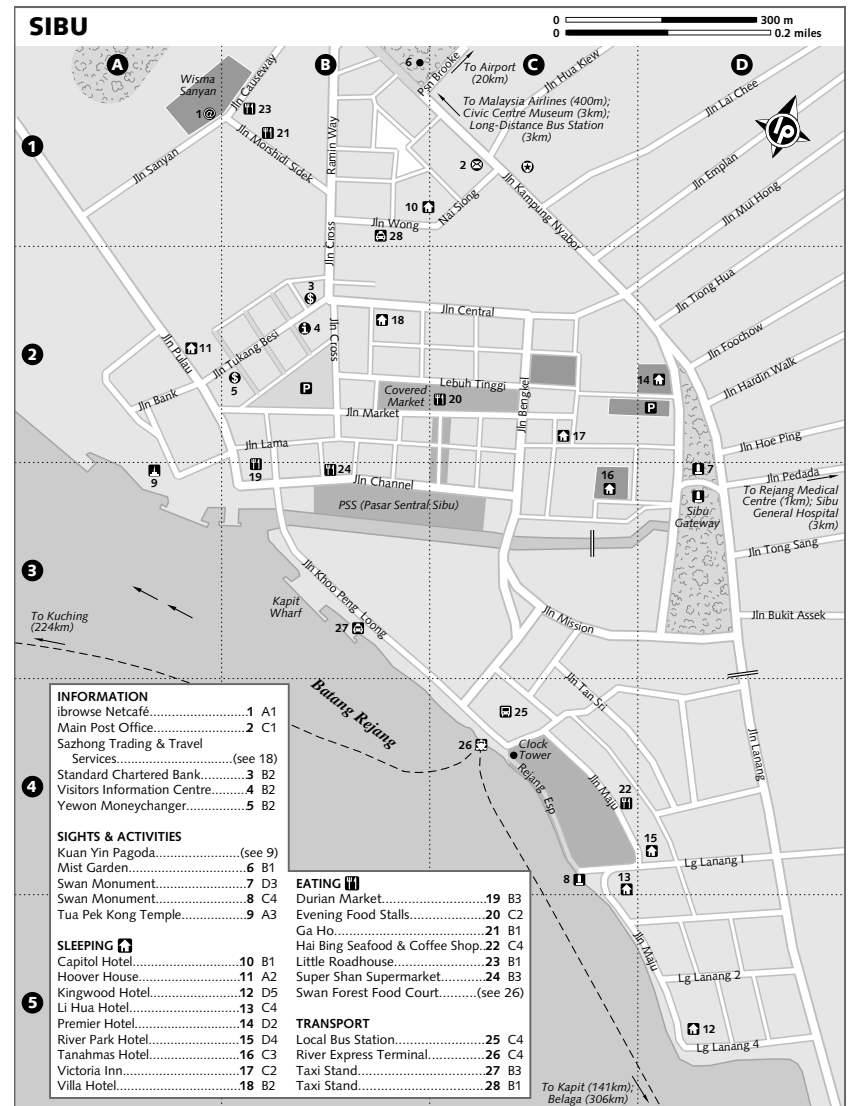
## Sibu

☎ 084 / pop 200,000

Where Kuching takes the cat as its symbol, Sibu sees itself as a swan, and there's a certain aptness to the comparison – thriving on its watery location, it's unmistakably a town with character, but you can't help feeling a little threatened sometimes! Luckily this ugly duckling of a town usually plays nice with visitors, and has all the amenities you'll need before you head upriver.

Sibu was once known as New Fochow, named for the Chinese migrants who came from Fochow (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.

Sibu 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 Sibu's capitalists manage the extraction of upriver wealth. Situated 60km upstream from the sea, Sibu is where the interior's raw materials are brought for transshipment 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, Sibu 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

Sibu 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 Sibu (PSS; Sibu 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

**ibrowse Netcafé** (☎ 310717; 4th fl, Wisma Sanyan, 1

Jln Sukan; per hr RM3; 𠄎 8am-10pm) Internet access.

**Main post office** (☎ 332312; Jln Kampung Nyabor; 𠄎

8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-3pm Sat)

**Rejang Medical Centre** (☎ 330733; www.rejang.com

.my; 29 Jln Pedada) A group of private specialist clinics

with 24-hour emergency services.

**Sazhong Trading & Travel Services** (☎ 336017;

www.geocities.com/sazhong; 4 Jln Central) Airline tickets,

accommodation, tours and local information.

**Sibu General Hospital** (☎ 343333; Jln Abdul Tunk

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** (☎ 340980; www.sibu

.com.my; 32 Jln Tukang Besi; 𠄎 8am-5pm Mon-Fri,

8am-12.50pm Sat, closed 1st & 3rd Sat of every month) Has

friendly and informative staff 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** (☎ 330577; 8 Jln Tukang Besi)

South of the visitors centre; only changes cash.

#### SIGHTS

Most of Sibu is unedifyingly modern, but the 100-year-old **Tua Pek Kong Temple** on the waterfront is an exotic exception, its scarlet interior guarded by gilt lions and a host of writhing dragons. 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 swiftlets buzz the tower at eye level.

North of the city centre, the **Civic Centre Museum** (☎ 333411; Jln Suarah; admission free; 𠄎 10.30am-5.30pm 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, Sibu council does its bit for civic spirit with a number of borderline kitsch **swan monuments**.

#### FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The lively **Borneo Cultural Festival**, held in early July, is one of the few good reasons to stick around in Sibu. It features dancing and musical performances from the region's various indigenous groups.

#### SLEEPING

##### Budget

There are hordes of budget hotels around the local bus station, but many of the cheapest operate as brothels.

**Hoover House** (☎ 330405; Jln Pulau; s/d/tr RM20/30/45; a ) You don't have to be Methodist to stay at this small church guest-house, easily the most reliable place you'll find for these kinds of prices. There are only six rooms so book ahead if you can.

**Villa Hotel** (☎ 337833; 2-4 Jln Central; r RM35-50; a ) This simple hotel is little more than acceptable internally, but benefits from a handy side-street location near the visitor information centre.

**Capitol Hotel** (☎ 336444; 19 Jln Wong Nai Song; r RM42-80; a ) Occupying four storeys above a KFC, this place is better value than you might expect given standards elsewhere; perks include fridges and a lift. The Hide-away Pub on the 1st floor can make things a bit noisy, but you could always just join in.

**Li Hua Hotel** (☎ 324000; 1 Lg Lanang I; r RM45-80, ste RM150; a ) Another surprisingly well-run budget option, in the 'karaoke zone' near the river and the local bus station. The lift's a startling shade of green, in contrast to the brown river views, white-tiled rooms and light, bright house cafeteria.

**Victoria Inn** (☎ 320099; 80 Jln Market; r RM55-100, ste RM150; a ) Even if you're not offered the cheaper promotional rates, this is a decent option in the thick of the action, marrying clean, tiled rooms with cheery bright linen.

**River Park Hotel** (☎ 316688; 51-53 Jln Maju; r RM65-80; a ) The price puts it just in the budget category but the spacious, comfortable rooms and esplanade location sneak the River Park up a class in terms of value, even if little things like TVs and light bulbs aren't always the most reliable.

#### Midrange & Top End

Sibu's better hotels offer top-end facilities at prices still within midrange parameters, with discounts creating some proper bargains. All have air-con rooms (usually carpeted) with phone, TV and attached bathroom.

**Premier Hotel** (☎ 323222; www.premierh.com.my; Jln Kampung Nyabor; s RM195-242, d RM224-270, ste RM310-1000; a i ) While the rooms meet decent international standards of size and comfort, the real bonus here is the strong emphasis on leisure and entertainment; the hotel has its own shopping complex, a karaoke bar with nightly live bands, and a 1000-seat cinema. Even the lifts and corridors have Supertramp playing. Rates include breakfast, and 20% discounts are common.

**Kingwood Hotel** (☎ 335888; kingwood@tm.net.my; 12 Lg Lanang 4; r RM195-288, ste RM575-1380; a i s ) Popular with airline crews, the Kingwood offers four-star class, from its rooftop pool and waterfront views to its limousine service and private speedboat charter. Discounts of 10% to 40% are available – not bad considering rack rates are still the same as they were in 1995.

**Tanahmas Hotel** (☎ 333188; www.tanahmas.com.my; 277 Jln Kampung Nyabor; s RM207-230, d RM236-259, ste RM432-1150; a i s ) The square white block isn't the most attractive building in town, but you can't argue with the facilities at this award-winning hotel heavyweight by the Sibu Gateway monument. Go for a pool-side view rather than a town panorama.

#### EATING

**PSS** (Jln Channel) In the late afternoon, a host of food stalls set up near this massive market, selling delicious snacks such as *pau* (steamed rolls), barbecued chicken wings and all manner of sweets. This is a fun way to sample local fare and the food is usually very fresh.

**Ga Ho** (Jln Morshidi Sidek; dishes RM1.50-3.50; 𠄎 breakfast, lunch & dinner) A popular spot in the row of shops and cafés near Wisma Sanyan.

The fresh fruit juices (RM2.50) go down particularly well, and the different choices are handily illustrated on the wall in case the language barrier proves problematic.

**Swan Forest Food Court** (River Express terminal, Jln Khoo Peng Loong; dishes RM1.50-10; 𠄎 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Whether you're catching a boat or just like the blast of air horns in the morning, the food court upstairs at the boat terminal provides ample choice and hectic wharf views.

**Hai Bing Seafood & Coffee Shop** (☎ 321491; 31 Jln Maju; mains RM4-15; 𠄎 lunch & dinner) Two outlets for the price of one: go café-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.

**Little Roadhouse** (☎ 319384; Jln Causeway; dishes RM4-10; 𠄎 lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Unlike much of Sibu's nightlife, which leans towards karaoke and underclad young ladies, this balcony restaurant and 'fun pub' is good for a quiet beer, wine or steak.

For self-catering and snacks, browse the markets or head to the **Super Shan supermarket** (Jln Channel). There's a whole separate **durian market** (Jln Lama) when the spiky stink bombs are in season.

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

##### Air

**Malaysia Airlines** (☎ 321055; 61 Jln Tuanku Osman) flies to Sibu from a number of locations, including KL (two daily) and Kuching (eight daily).

**Air Asia** (☎ 1300-889933) has flights to KL (three daily) and Kuching (two daily) and **FAX** (☎ 03-8775 4000) flies to Bintulu (three daily) and twice to Miri and Kota Kinabalu, plus Twin Otter services to Mukah (six weekly).

##### Boat

Passenger express boats travel between Sibu and Kuching, and up the Rejang to Kanowit, Song and Kapit. Express boats leave from the new River Express terminal at the western end of the Rejang Esplanade, opposite the local bus terminal. Departures to Kuching (RM40, 4½ hours) leave Sibu at 11.30am, though schedules can change.

If you can take the 80km/h pace, riding the roof of the express boats is a good

way to see towns and longhouse villages along the Batang Rejang, though you may be asked to go inside for the most exciting stretches around the Pelagus Rapids. Make sure you have sun protection.

From Sibu, Kapit is the first stop on the journey up the Batang Rejang. Half a dozen companies do the 130km journey (economy RM17 to RM20, 1st class RM25 to RM30), departing between 5.45am and 4.45pm. Just go down to the terminal and ask which boat is next to leave. People are very helpful and the boats usually have a 'clock' showing the next departure time.

All boats to Kapit pass Kanowit and Song, and may stop at smaller settlements and logging camps en route; if you want to be dropped at any of these places, ask when you board. There are also a few scheduled services to Song (RM10, two hours).

Boats from Sibu only go beyond Kapit during the rainy season, when the water levels are high enough to go all the way to Belaga. At other times you'll have to switch to a speedboat in Kapit. If you're travelling to Belaga from Sibu, you should expect an overnight stay in Kapit, as the first express boat from Sibu doesn't always connect with the last regular service to Belaga.

## Bus

Sibu can be accessed by bus from all major and most smaller cities and towns in Sarawak. The main bus lines have ticket stalls at the long-distance bus station, northwest of town at Sungai Antu, as well as around the local bus station on the waterfront. Schedules change often – check for the most recent schedule. The visitors' information centre can also help with routes and timetables. There should be no problem getting a seat if you arrive 15 minutes before departure, but book ahead for weekends and school holidays.

Major destinations:

**Bintulu** All Miri services stop at Bintulu (RM20, 3½ hours).

**Kanowit** Lanang Road buses leave 12 times daily (RM6, 1½ hours).

**Kuching** Express buses leave for Kuching (RM40, eight hours) between 6.30am and 11.30pm.

**Miri** Buses leave roughly every hour (RM40, 7½ hours) from 6am until 10pm.

**Mukah** Eight services daily (RM15.30, 3½ hours).

**Sarikei** Buses run regularly to Sarikei (RM7.60, 1½ hours) between 6am and 4pm.

Some buses arriving at the long-distance bus station continue on to the new River Express terminal in Sibu. Ask before you disembark, as this will save you taking a taxi or local bus.

## GETTING AROUND

Sibu's airport is 24km 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 Road bus 21 (90 sen) from the local bus station. It leaves roughly hourly between 6.30am and 5.30pm. A taxi costs RM10.

## Kapit

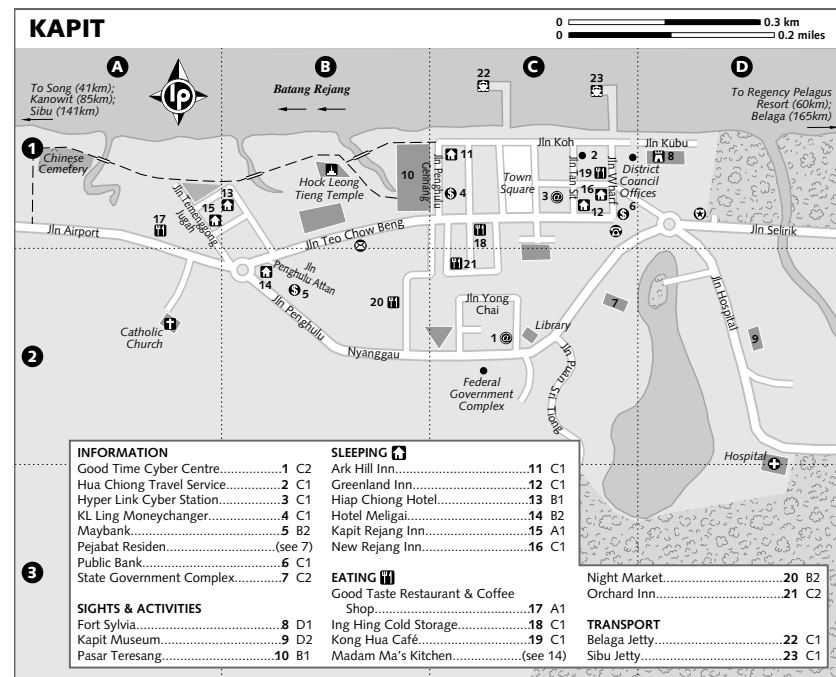
☎ 084 / pop 8000

Kapit is another Rejang river town dating from the days of the white raja – historic Fort Sylvia still stands on the riverbank. The startling new pastel-and-green-glass District Council Offices, greeting passengers off the express boats, show the continuing importance of Kapit's administrative role in the area. The town is also where upriver people come to buy, sell and exchange goods, and to sample the diversions of urban life. The riverbank at Kapit is steep, but compared to many river landings it is quite attractive, with manicured grass, trees and plants spread between paths leading to docking areas for the many different longboats that ply the river. Kapit is a small place and everything is within an easy stroll. There's nothing much to do here, but the town offers some good accommodation.

Fans of Redmond O'Hanlon's *Into the Heart of Borneo* should 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 ask.

## INFORMATION

Technically, a permit is required for foreign visitors to travel upriver past the Pelagus Resort to Belaga or anywhere up the Baleh River system, though it's highly unlikely you'll be asked to show it anywhere. These



are obtained from the **Pejabat Residen** (Resident's Office; ☎ 796230; www.kapitro.sarawak.gov.my; 1st fl, State Government Complex, Jln Penghulu Nyanggau; 7 8am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Thu, 8-11.45am & 2.15-5pm Fri). The procedure takes about 10 minutes and the permit, which is free, is valid for one week.

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

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

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

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

**Maybank** (☎ 790122; 73C Jln Penghulu Atan)

**Public Bank** (☎ 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; 7 10am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Sun) was built as Fort Kapit in 1880 to keep 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. At the top of the stairs to the 1st floor is a brilliant mural of a hornbill surrounded by depictions of early Iban life.

The civic centre (Dewan Suarab) houses the **Kapit Museum** (Jln Hospital; admission free; 7 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

The easiest way to visit a longhouse if you're pressed for time is to take a tour, and there are plenty of settlements around Kapit that are quite accustomed to this kind of visit. Rates are generally negotiable depending on group size; for two people (usually the minimum), asking prices are around RM180 per person for a half-day trip and RM295 for an overnight stay. The *New Rejang Hotel* (☎ 796600; 104 Jln Teo Chow Beng) is probably the best place to start – the resident guides have even run Heart of Borneo treks in the past, trying to retrace those famous Fenton/O'Hanlon footsteps.

## 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 (☎ 796230) or the tourist office in Sibu 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

### Budget

**Kapit Rejang Hotel** (☎ 796709; 28 Jln Temenggong Jugah; r RM20-40; a ) If you're saving your pennies, this scrappy option has the lowest prices (and standards) in the centre.

**Hiap Chiong Hotel** (☎ 796314; 33 Jln Temenggong Jugah; r RM35; a ) Speaking English occasionally proves a problem at reception, but fear not: the Hiap Chiong is popular with young

local teachers, who jump at the chance to practise their language skills. All in all it's a fine place to stay.

**Ark Hill Inn** (☎ 796168; 451 Jln Penghulu Gerinang; r RM35-70; a ) Right opposite the market, you trade off a bit of space here for the 'luxury' of two shower heads per bathroom. A bit of noise does seep through but it's bearable.

**New Rejang Inn** (☎ 796600; 104 Jln Teo Chow Beng; r RM60-75; a ) Clean, tiled rooms with TV, phone and fridge, and a location a mere stone's chuck away from the boat wharf make this the best-value accommodation in town. Staff are keen to please and have good local knowledge, as well as information about guides and tours.

## Midrange

**Greenland Inn** (☎ 796388; 463-464 Jln Teo Chow Beng; s/d RM80/90; a ) 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.

**Hotel Meligai** (☎ 796611; aswee@tm.net.my; 334 Jln Airport; r RM94.50-105; a ) It's hard to believe this crumbling concrete block ever counted as a luxury hotel, yet the Meligai still hovers at the upper end of the price scale. You get plenty of space and a lift for your money, though the bathrooms have seen better days (if not years).

## Top End

**Regency Pelagus Resort** (☎ 799051; www.the-regencyhotel.com.my/Pelagus; full board s RM368-391, d RM460-506; a s ) Inaccessible by road, Pelagus Resort is a unique longhouse-style ecoresort 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 retains some very nontribal features such as minibars and a helipad. Four packages for three days and two nights are RM655.50 per person (single supplement RM138), including full board, longhouse tour, rapids cruise, guided nocturnal walk and jungle trek. Transfers from Sibu airport cost RM195 per person, and various walks and excursions are available from RM46. If all that sounds a bit tame, try the 'physically challenging' jungle adventure (RM316), a two-day expedition for a minimum of four people.

## EATING

**Kong Hua Café** (☎ 796459; 1B Jln Wharf; dishes RM3-8; h breakfast & lunch) The corner location right by the wharf must be prime real estate in Kapit terms, and makes this handy café the best place for breakfast on your way to or from the express boat.

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

**Orchard Inn** (☎ 796325; 64 Jln Airport; mains RM5-12; h lunch & dinner) This popular sit-down Chinese restaurant is crammed most evenings with families and groups tucking into mountains of special-occasion-quality food.

**Madam Ma's Kitchen** (☎ 796119; Hotel Meligai, 334 Jln Airport; mains RM5-15; h breakfast, lunch & dinner) Kapit's only halal restaurant is also one of its smartest food outlets. It's fully air-conditioned with changing menus and special offers.

Kapit is packed with small restaurants and *kedai kopi*, but the best place to eat in the evening has to be the busy night market (dishes 50 sen-RM3.50) between the two main streets, near the centre of town. The food stalls here knock up Chinese, Malay and Dayak dishes, offering everything from satay to *rojak* (salad with a shrimp-paste and peanut-sauce dressing). Some places have TVs so you can catch bewildering snatches of bad B-grade movies as you eat.

As well as the markets, self-caterers could try **Ing Hing Cold Storage** (☎ 796411; 31 Jln Teo Chow Beng), a small grocery store that sells fresh fish and produce from stalls outside in the evening.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Express boats leave for Sibu between 6.30am and 2.30pm. Times are posted on the wharf. Boats from Sibu begin at 5.45am and the last one is at 4.45pm. The trip takes 2½ to three hours and tickets are RM17 to RM20 for economy, or RM25 to RM30 first class.

Boats depart for Belaga (RM30, 4½ 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.

## Belaga

☎ 084

Belaga is a small bazaar town and administrative centre located where the Rejang divides into the Belaga and Balui rivers. Its friendly population makes it an excellent base from which to explore the interior, and there are many Kayan and Kenyah longhouses along the rivers nearby. If you speak with a local on the way upriver, you may end up being invited to stay at their longhouse – it's polite to bring a small gift for the family of the person who invited you. Otherwise, it shouldn't take long to find someone in Belaga with a suggestion of a longhouse to visit or an offer to guide you. See p374 for more information about longhouses.

Boats will drop you at the bottom of a steep set of concrete steps leading up to the small town centre; all the town's facilities are found here, in the handful of blocks across from the small park. There is no bank here, but the Teck Hua Chan supermarket will change cash.

## TOURS

While visiting a longhouse independently can be great, there's a limit to what you can arrange on your own, and the highlight for most visitors in Belaga is taking a longhouse tour. A good package should include jungle trekking, visits to a number of communities, night walks and seasonal activities such as hunting, cooking, land clearing and fruit harvesting. Local operators charge around RM150 to RM180 for a three-day trip, making the tours easily the best value in Borneo.

**Daniel's Corner** (☎ 461997, 013-848 6351; Jln Teh Ah Kiong) is commonly tipped by travellers as the best place to arrange local guides and tours out of Belaga; a couple of other freelance guides pick up passing tourist trade, but may not be as reliable. Either way, make sure you get what you pay for, and insist that the local communities you visit receive their fair share.

## SLEEPING & EATING

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

**Hotel Belaga** (☎ 461244; 14 Main Bazaar; r RM20-35; a ) A perfect location facing the water

makes up for less-than-perfect standards at Belaga's principal dosshouse. There's a good coffee shop downstairs.

**Hotel Sing Soon Huat** (☎ 461307; 26-27 New Bazaar; r RM35-45; ☪ ) The bright yellow building behind the Hotel Belaga holds this slightly crummy establishment, which is fine for a snooze before an early boat, plane or car. Upstairs rooms are marginally better (well, they have toilet seats at least).

**Daniel's Corner** (☎ 461997, 013-848 6351; Jln Teh Ah Kiong) While the food here fills a hole, you'll primarily want to pop in to meet the eponymous proprietor, who can organise home stays, longhouse visits, treks, fishing, hunting etc. The advantage here is that Daniel doesn't try and take you himself but sets you up with a suitable local guide. The café is one block back from the Main Bazaar, off the street leading past the post office and clinic.

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

##### Air

Two FAX flights a week currently connect Belaga's tiny airstrip, 20 minutes downriver, with Bintulu.

##### Boat

Boats leave Kapit for Belaga (RM30, 4½ hours) at 9am. When the river is low you'll need to take a speedboat instead; fares start at RM50. Returning, express boats leave Belaga early (between 6am and 6.30am) to hook up with the boats from Kapit to Sibul. The fare is the same but the trip downstream can be faster. 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.

##### Land

Instead of backtracking all the way to Sibul, you can cut across country via a scenic but muddy set of logging roads to connect with the main north-south coastal highway. A handful of 4WD pick-ups head to Bintulu (RM50, 4½ hours) daily, mostly in the morning – check the handwritten signs in Belaga cafés 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

Since work commenced on the Bakun Dam hydroelectric project in 1996, the landscape beyond Belaga has changed forever. The forest around the dam site was razed long ago for a quick profit, and a massive reservoir will soon inundate all that remains. Longhouses along the lower Sungai Balui have been evacuated, and an estimated 11,000 people have been resettled in concrete villages around the Sungai Asap, north of the Rejang. Insufficient compensation, endemic unemployment and poor transport have left people here in a sorry state.

The whole history of the Bakun Dam reads like political satire. When the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98 began to bite, the dam, like other grandiose development schemes, was scaled down. However, in 2001 the government decided to resume the original plan, ostensibly because so much money had already been invested. A Malaysian-Chinese firm is now charged with finishing the huge 2400 megawatt facility, though with ongoing delays and budget overruns it now looks like nothing will be operational until at least 2009.

It remains unclear what purpose the project serves – Sarawak doesn't need the electrical power, and with planned under-sea cables proving impractical, there's no way of exporting it efficiently. In what looks like a desperate attempt to justify the dam's existence, the government is considering proposals to build a massive aluminium smelting plant nearby to use the excess energy, provoking further protests from environmentalists and accusations of cronyism with multinational companies. As one blogger remarked, the whole fiasco seems like 'finding a problem for the solution'.

With a permit from Kapit, you can travel up towards the dam to visit nearby longhouses; boat drivers will refuse to take you further than you're permitted to travel. The nearest longhouses to Belaga, such as Uma Aging and Uma Kahei, are mostly Kayan, but Uma Neh is a Kejaman longhouse and Long Semiang is a Lahanan longhouse within a 30-minute boat ride. Boats will not turn up unannounced, so you'll need an invitation from someone in town.

A paved road to Bakun was recently completed, linking it to the Bintulu-Miri highway.

#### LOGGING FOR LIFE

The devastated forest around the Bakun area may seem bad, but it's a small part of a much bigger picture: Sarawak is the world's largest exporter of tropical timber, and the US\$2 billion-a-year logging industry is consuming woodland faster than ever.

While Malaysia still has forest cover of around 63%, only 18% of this is untouched primary rainforest, and the current deforestation rate is 0.65% of total cover per year, double the Southeast Asian average.

A study in 1990 estimated the maximum sustainable yield to be 6.3 million cubic metres per year. At its height, the timber industry in Sarawak was turning out 16 million cubic metres, and even with strict quotas, the state still produces nine to 12 million cubic metres of timber a year. This is compounded by the sheer inefficiency of indiscriminate logging practices – tractor felling leaves around five broken trees for every tree sold, effectively inflicting five times more damage than necessary.

After decades of protest and international pressure, there are finally signs that the Sarawak government is taking steps to address the issue and adopt more sustainable methods. Besides enforcing yield restrictions and penalising offenders, reduced-impact techniques include tree tagging, selective harvesting and detailed silviculture plans for individual species. The new Malaysian Timber Certification Council (MTCC) has also been set up to accredit companies practising sustainable forestry.

This may seem like a promising start, but the MTCC has already faced controversy over its licensing decisions, yield quotas are still relatively generous and illegal logging remains a constant problem. However good the intentions, Sarawak's forests are far from out of the woods.

#### NORTHEAST SARAWAK Mukah

☎ 084

Lapped by waves at the palm-fringed mouth of the Batang Mukah, this small fishing town north of Sibul doesn't often make it onto travellers' radar, but it's a delightful spot to relax for a day or two amid the colourful boats and busy markets.

Most of the local people are Melanau, and the area's major attraction is the Kaul Festival, currently held on the second Sunday in April. Pesta Kaul, as it is called locally, is a lively beach celebration that includes enchanting enactments of Melanau rituals and games to honour the spirits of the sea.

#### SIGHTS

In Kampung Tellian, a pleasant water village just beyond the centre of town, you'll find **Lamin Dana** (☎ 871543; [www.lamindana.com](http://www.lamindana.com); adult/child RM3/1; h 9am-5pm), a superb cultural enterprise and living museum in a traditional-style Melanau tallhouse. Run by six generations of the same family, the emphasis here is primarily on local education and youth development, but tourism forms a key source of income and all kinds of activities are available in season. Among the possibilities are traditional massage by the

village midwife, river tours to a sago farm and old-style sago bakehouse, and tastings of Melanau delicacies such as *umai* (raw fish marinated in lime and onions), smoked fish and sago shoots. Cultural shows can also be arranged.

Contact the centre in advance if you intend to visit, and bear in mind that during Chinese New Year, the fourth week of December and the Kaul Festival, accommodation is usually full. The family have ambitious plans for the next five years, including potentially starting a residential volunteer scheme – contact Diana (☎ 019-849 5952) if you're interested in getting involved.

To reach Lamin Dana from Mukah, take a Tellian bus (80 sen) and tell the conductor where you want to go. Lamin Dana can also arrange longboat transport (RM3 per person) to or from the water village – an enjoyable way to reach the town centre. A taxi will cost RM5; walking takes about 45 minutes.

#### SLEEPING & EATING

**Lamin Dana** (☎ 871543; [www.lamindana.com](http://www.lamindana.com); Kampung Tellian; r RM50-100) The rooms at the cultural centre are simply furnished and the toilets and showers are clean. A Melanau-style breakfast is included in the price. The

house only has nine rooms (eight standard and one family), so booking is a good idea, especially if you want to take part in activities. The centre also offers three-day packages (RM330).

**King Ing Hotel** (☎ 871403; 1-2 Jln Boyan; r RM50-88; a ) Mukah's smartest central hotel is really nothing amazing, but it's rare to find even these modest standards in such a small town. The river views and modern fixtures are what sell the place.

Perfectly located right on the river, the small cafés comprising the food centre (Jln Pasar; dishes RM2-6) are the best spots in town to have lunch or sip a beer and watch life drift, cruise or amble by.

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Mukah's airstrip is just outside town; a van will drop you in the centre for RM5. FAX Twin Otters currently fly from Mukah to Kuching, Miri and Sibul once or twice daily, plus two weekly services to Bintulu.

Various companies run buses between Mukah and Sibul (RM15.30, 3½ hours), starting at 6.30am and finishing around 6pm. Two buses leave Mukah for Bintulu (RM20, four hours) daily, with one continuing on to Miri (RM40, 7½ hours). You can also book through tickets to Kuching (RM56, 11 hours) via Sibul.

#### Bintulu

☎ 086 / pop 110,000

At the mouth of the Batang Kemena, Bintulu is an undistinguished commercial centre servicing offshore oil and gas installations and upriver logging. Bintulu came under James Brooke's sway in 1861, and a simple memorial near the town centre commemorates Sarawak's first Council Negeri (State Council), formed in 1867. There's a colourful Chinese temple near the waterfront, a bathing beach north of town and plenty of lively bars and karaoke joints, but Bintulu is really only a transit stop for most travellers.

Travellers heading north to Similajau National Park, Niah National Park and Miri, or south to Sibul, Batang Rejang and Kuching may need to use Bintulu's bus station as a staging post or stay overnight for a connection. If you're coming from or heading to Belaga you'll almost certainly have to stop over here.

#### 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 27km west of the centre.

#### INFORMATION

**Hong Leong Bank** (☎ 332393; 1-2 Jln Court)  
**Hospital** (☎ 255899; Jln Nyabau)  
**HSBC** (☎ 951160; Jln Law Gek Soon)  
**Relayan Jaya Moneychanger** (☎ 337891; Tingkat Bawah, Jln Main Bazaar)  
**Star Internet** (☎ 312209; Jln Law Gek Soon; per hr RM3)

#### SLEEPING

##### Budget

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

**My House Inn** (☎ 336399; 161 Jln Masjid; s/d RM35/40; a ) 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.

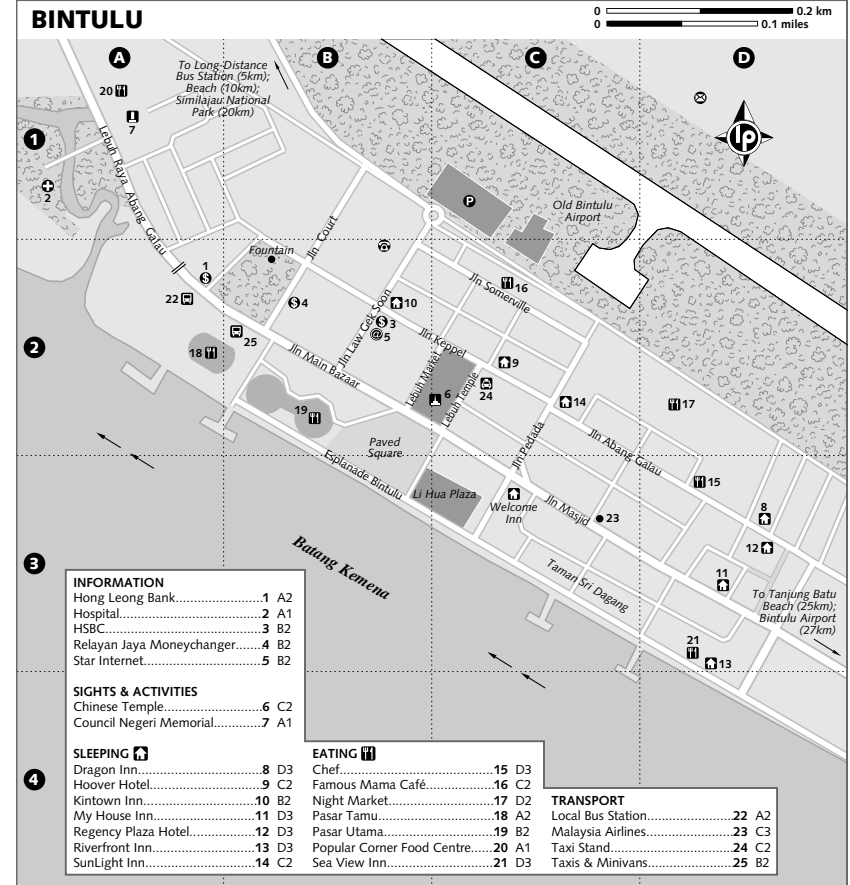
**Dragon Inn** (Eden Inn; ☎ 326861; 1 New Commercial Centre; s/d RM40/45; a ) You can rent rooms here by the hour for RM15, which begs a few questions about the kind of guests they're expecting. Still, plenty of travellers stay here without incident.

**Sea View Inn** (☎ 339118; 254 Taman Sri Dagang; r RM40-45; a ) Simple, clean accommodation in a good waterfront location: if you're going to sleep cheap, this should be your first choice. Be sure to grab a room with river views.

##### Midrange

Most of the hotels in Bintulu are in this category; they're generally fairly new and have TV, IDD phone and attached bathrooms.

**SunLight Inn** (☎ 332577; 7 Jln Pedada; r RM60-78; a ) Once you get past the self-contradicting push/pull signs on the front doors, you'll find the SunLight a noticeable step up from the budget category for such a small extra outlay. The parquet floors make a change from musty carpets and cracked tiles.



**Hoover Hotel** (☎ 337166; 92 Jln Keppel; s/d RM69/75; a ) The Western-style rooms here conform to a decent standard, and the in-house restaurant makes the whole package even more palatable.

**Kintown Inn** (☎ 333666; 93 Jln Keppel; r RM69-80.50; a ) 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** (☎ 333111; riverf@tm.net.my; 256 Taman Sri Dagang; r RM69-103.50; a ) 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.

**Regency Plaza Hotel** (☎ 335111; rihbtu@tm.net.my; 116 Jln Abang Galau; r RM148-200, a i s ) If it wasn't for the rooftop swimming pool you might think twice about paying these prices, but even if you don't have time for a dip you can take advantage of the inclusive breakfast. Weekend promotions drop the price to a more reasonable RM115.

#### EATING

**Chef** (☎ 312964; 92 Jln Abang Galau; cakes from 90 sen; h breakfast, lunch & dinner) You won't find any chocolate salty balls here: this drool-inducing bakery-café can satisfy most sweet and savoury cravings, from local cakes and pastries to a good rendition of tiramisù (RM4.50).

**Famous Mama Café** (☎ 336541; 10 Jln Somerville; dishes RM1.50-3.50) A good place for quick and tasty halal Indian food. Keep an eye out for the restaurant's celebrity namesake – asking any likely ladies if they're her should elicit a laugh or two.

**Popular Corner Food Centre** (☎ 334388; 50 BDA Shahida Commercial Centre; dishes from RM2; ₮ lunch & dinner) A gaudy restaurant and seafood centre draped in twinkling lights and neon at the northern end of town. If the local dishes and tanks of live fish don't grab you, you could always plump for a whole roasted pig, just RM250!

The top floor of the Pasar Utama (New Market) has dozens of food stalls where you can sit and look out over the river. The stalls at the Pasar Tamu (Main Market), near the local bus station, and the night market, off Jln Abang Galau, are good for takeaway satay, grilled chicken and fish.

There are dozens of Chinese *kedai kopi* along Jln Masjid offering very similar fare.

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

##### Air

**Malaysia Airlines** (☎ 331554; Jln Masjid) and **Air Asia** each have one daily flight to Kuala Lumpur; Air Asia also has twice daily services to Kuching. **FAX** flies to Miri (four daily), Sibü (three daily) and Kota Kinabalu (twice daily), plus two weekly Twin Otters to Mukah and Belaga.

##### Bus

It's easy to travel to Bintulu by bus as there are daily services from most major cities, leaving anywhere from every half-hour to every two hours. Routes include Kuching (RM60, nine daily), Miri (RM20, 15 daily) and Sibü (RM20, 18 daily). Take a local bus from the station near the covered markets, departing hourly from 7am to 8.30pm (RM1). A taxi costs RM10.

Various bus companies occupy the ticket booths at the long-distance bus station and display departure times and fares. Usually you can just buy a ticket and get on the next bus. Note that the posted bus services aren't always running, so it's best to ask ahead.

The main companies are **Biaramas Ekspres** (☎ 339821), **Borneo Express** (☎ 314460), **Lanang Road Bus Company** (☎ 338518), **Suria** (☎ 335489) and **PB Ekspres** (☎ 314355). Several other companies service small towns in the area.

#### Car & Taxi

Taxis, private cars and minivans congregate in front of the markets. Early morning is the best time to leave Bintulu. Prices start around RM15 for Tanjung Batu beach, going up to RM80 for Similajau National Park. Charges are per vehicle so it's cheaper if you're part of a group.

Transport from Belaga (RM50, 4½ hours) is by 4WD; passengers wait in front of the Welcome Inn to load up for the return trip. After 1½ hours on the main road you veer off through farmland and then onto a rough, muddy road through forest and some extensively logged areas. Some of the views along the way are definitely worth stretching your legs for.

#### GETTING AROUND

Taxis (official and unofficial) congregate at the Chinese 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 RM10, the airport is RM25, and the fare to Similajau National Park is RM35.

#### Similajau National Park

A 45-minute drive northeast of Bintulu, this park's deserted, sandy beaches, 'where the rapids meet the sea', are among the best in Sarawak. Similajau does not have the habitat variety of Bako National Park but it's perfect if you want a quiet, relaxing natural getaway. It's easy to spend a day or two walking in the coastal rainforest or lazing on the beach. Permits for the park can be obtained on arrival; if the gatehouse is abandoned just sign your name and go on in. The gatekeeper will find you later to give you the permit and collect fees. Access to the park is by car or taxi only.

Similajau occupies a narrow coastal strip 30km long but only a few kilometres wide, flanked by logged forest. Its hemmed-in position makes the park a haven for wildlife; 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. The river crossing is a bit Tarzanesque – saltwater croc-

odiles occasionally lurk around the mouth of the river, especially in the early morning and evening. Swimming in the river is not recommended as crocodiles killed three locals in 2002. A warning sign is posted.

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 mammals or even crocodiles. Dolphins can occasionally be spotted out at sea, and marine turtles lay their eggs at certain points along the beach.

There are pavilions along the casuarina-lined beach, as well as decent accommodation and an information centre at the **park headquarters** (☎ 086-391284; admission RM10; ₮ 8am-noon & 2-5pm). Accommodation for the park can be booked through the park headquarters or the **National Parks & Wildlife Office** (☎ 085-434184) in Miri.

#### 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 (per boat about RM75, 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 to tackle the trails you'll need to stay overnight. Comfortable accommo-

dation is provided in the air-conditioned lodges (RM79-158), each with two rooms sleeping up to four people. The two hostels (dm/r RM15.75/42) 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 kitchen facilities and cooking is not allowed in the rooms.

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Access to Similajau is off the road that leads to Bintulu's fairly impressive port. The first 2km is on the coastal highway linking Bintulu and Miri. SBBS buses can drop you at the turn-off (RM18), but it's another 9km from there to the gate, and you can't enter on foot anyway. A taxi or private car will cost RM40 each way, and you'll have to arrange a time to be picked up. Boat operators might do a trip from Bintulu, but it's expensive (from RM200) and probably only economical for a group.

#### 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 (p342).

The Niah Caves are an important nesting site for swiftlets, which supply the vital ingredient for the famous birds-nest soup (p471), 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 long-boat (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; 7 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 **Miri visitors information centre** (☎ 085-434181; vic-miri@sarawaktourism.com; 452 Jln Melayu; 7 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun) or the **Kuching visitors information centre** (☎ 082-410944; www.sarawaktourism.com; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Haji Openg; 7 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun), but 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; 7 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 Chang, where there are a couple of longhouses. 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 National Park

**Rumah Chang Niah Homestay Program** (☎ 085-434181; stb@po.jaring.my; from RM50) Staying in the Rumah Chang longhouse on the Sungai Tangap, you'll be rubbing shoulders with

bird's-nest collectors from the Niah Caves. It's a good base for visiting the caves, just 15 minutes' walk away, as well as for exploring the park's other features. Visits to pepper gardens, jungle treks, and fishing trips are also available. Reservations can be made through Niah park headquarters or Miri visitors information centre (p399).

Accommodation at the park headquarters is next to the Sungai Niah, about 3km from Batu Niah. The **hostel** (r RM42) has comfortable four-bed dorms with fan. The six **lodges** (r RM158-237; a ) have two four-bed rooms each, and there's a **VIP chalet** (r RM525) with three special suite rooms. Bedding is provided, as well as utensils if you want to cook. **Camping** (per person RM15) is also possible. The park has a canteen with quite a good range of noodle and rice meals, and provisions are on sale here. In the dry season the rainwater tanks may dry out, so the water is drawn from the river and must be boiled before drinking.

##### Batu Niah

If you arrive outside the park office hours, or don't want to stay at the park, you can **hop up in Batu Niah**.

**Niah Cave Hotel** (☎ 085-737726; s/d RM22/30; a ) This friendly place has nice wooden floors and the rooms are simple and clean, with shared bathrooms. It's back from the town square along the river. The bar downstairs sometimes serves food, but there are plenty of other eateries around the small town.

**Niah Cave Inn** (☎ 085-737333; 621 Batu Niah Bazar; s/d RM52/58; a ) This is the big hotel on the corner as you arrive in Batu Niah. It's the best hotel (and the best pun) in town, with TV, fridge and IDD phones.

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Access to Batu Niah, the town nearest the caves, is by road only. At 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 round-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](mailto: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, 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.

### Lambir Hills National Park

As much a weekend retreat as a conservation area, Lambir Hills National Park is only 30km from Miri by road and is primarily popular with city residents, who come by the carload to visit the pretty waterfalls, natural swimming pool and riverside picnic shelters. For the more active traveller, the park has a number of pleasant walking trails through its unusually diverse dipterocarp rainforest.

Lambir Hills makes an easy and enjoyable day trip from Miri, though you can always stay longer. While it doesn't have the spectacular scenery of Niah and Gunung Mulu National Parks, or the diversity of Bako National Park, the park is excellent for short jungle walks and a bit of leisurely time out.

The national park covers 69 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 and one 50-hectare plot alone still contains an amazing 1100 tree species. There's also a good range of wildlife present.

Officially, the trails are open 8am to 4pm Monday to Friday and 8am to 5pm on weekends, but if you are seriously interested in wildlife-watching you will have to get an earlier start. Fauna here 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.

### INFORMATION

Located next to the highway, the **park headquarters** (☎ 085-491030; [adult/child](mailto:adult/child) RM10/5; 8am-5pm) is 32km from Miri. Here you'll find the park office and information centre, a canteen and accommodation.

### ACTIVITIES

Lambir Hills has 13 marked walking trails branching off four primary routes. However, severe flooding here in 2006 caused considerable damage, closing the entire park down for several months, and not all trails may be open when you visit – check with the **Miri visitors information centre** (☎ 085-434181; [vic-miri@sarawaktourism.com](mailto:vic-miri@sarawaktourism.com); 452 Jln Melayu; 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun) before setting out.

Walking times given here are those posted at park headquarters; halve them if you are fit. The most popular walk is to **Latak Waterfall**, an easy 15-minute stroll from headquarters. The trail passes two minor falls before reaching the main waterfall, where there are picnic shelters, a changing shed and a large, clear pool, ideal for swimming. This walk is much quieter on weekdays.

From **Latak Waterfall** the main trail heads off to **Bukit Pantu** (about 1½ hours), the nearest peak to the headquarters, and **Bukit Lambir**. Just above the falls, at the start of the trail, is a 40m-high tree tower. The view of the forest canopy is magnificent, though the tower sways a bit in the breeze.

The main trail goes all the way to **Bukit Lambir** (3½ hours), where there are fine views. Off the main trail there are many worthwhile waterfall detours: **Nibong** (about two hours), **Pantu** (just over one hour), **Pancur** (2½ hours), **Dinding** (about 2½ hours) and **Tengkorong** (2 hours). The trail is steep and slippery in places, but the walks are not overly strenuous. **Bukit Pantu**

is a straightforward climb, but the stretch to **Bukit Lambir** can be tiring. From the headquarters, the **Inoue Trail** (30 minutes) is a short cut that links up to the **Pantu trail**.

Register your name at the trailhead booth before you start out. It is possible to arrive at the park in the morning, walk to **Bukit Lambir** and back, then be on your way to **Miri** or **Niah National Park**, but this doesn't leave much time to appreciate the forest or its wildlife.

### SLEEPING & EATING

Accommodation at the park is comfortable, but it's only a few hundred metres from the main highway so you won't feel like you're in the middle of the jungle. Book at the **Miri visitors information centre** (☎ 085-434181; [vic-miri@sarawaktourism.com](mailto:vic-miri@sarawaktourism.com); 452 Jln Melayu; 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun) in advance, particularly on weekends, though you are unlikely to be turned away if you don't have a reservation.

The **three-bed lodges** (r RM50-100, lodge RM75-150; a ) each have three rooms sleeping up to nine people per lodge; most have shared bathrooms. There's no hostel but **camping** (per person RM5) is possible.

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.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

**Lambir Hills National Park** is on the main north-south highway and is easily accessible on any nonexpress bus from **Miri** (RM3, 40 minutes) or **Bintulu** (RM15, four hours).

From the park you must stand out the front and hail a bus; park staff can tell you when they pass. Heading south, the last buses to **Bintulu** pass at around 3pm. Heading north to **Miri**, the last services leave at around 4.30pm. A taxi here will cost around RM30.

### Miri

☎ 085 / pop 270,000

Unlike catty Kuching and swanlike Sibul, Miri is sadly lacking in animal analogies, perhaps because it's just too casually urban for any to spring to mind. After all, the

rapid growth of this former fishing village was founded on industry and services, particularly after the discovery of oil here in 1910. Timber, palm oil, pepper, rubber, and coconut oil have all also played a part in the economy, barely leaving nature a look-in. Surprisingly for a Shell town, however, Miri is actually an engaging place to spend a few days, and most travellers find it preferable to **Sibu** or **Bintulu** as a short-term stopover.

Miri was granted city status in 2005, the first nonstate capital to be accorded the privilege. Locals are justifiably proud of their home town's achievements, but it's a sensitive subject elsewhere in Malaysia – Penang residents in particular were outraged when their state capital **Georgetown**, still technically a town, was overlooked. You can expect a lively debate if you bring the issue up at the pub!

Today Miri is investing a lot in tourism, and while most visitors still use the city primarily as a transport hub and base for the nearby national parks, there's actually plenty to keep you entertained here, including parks and beaches outside town, an abundance of shops, good restaurants, several nightlife areas and friendly people. Don't be afraid to hang around and explore here before heading off on an excursion or to spend some time and unwind when you return.

### 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.

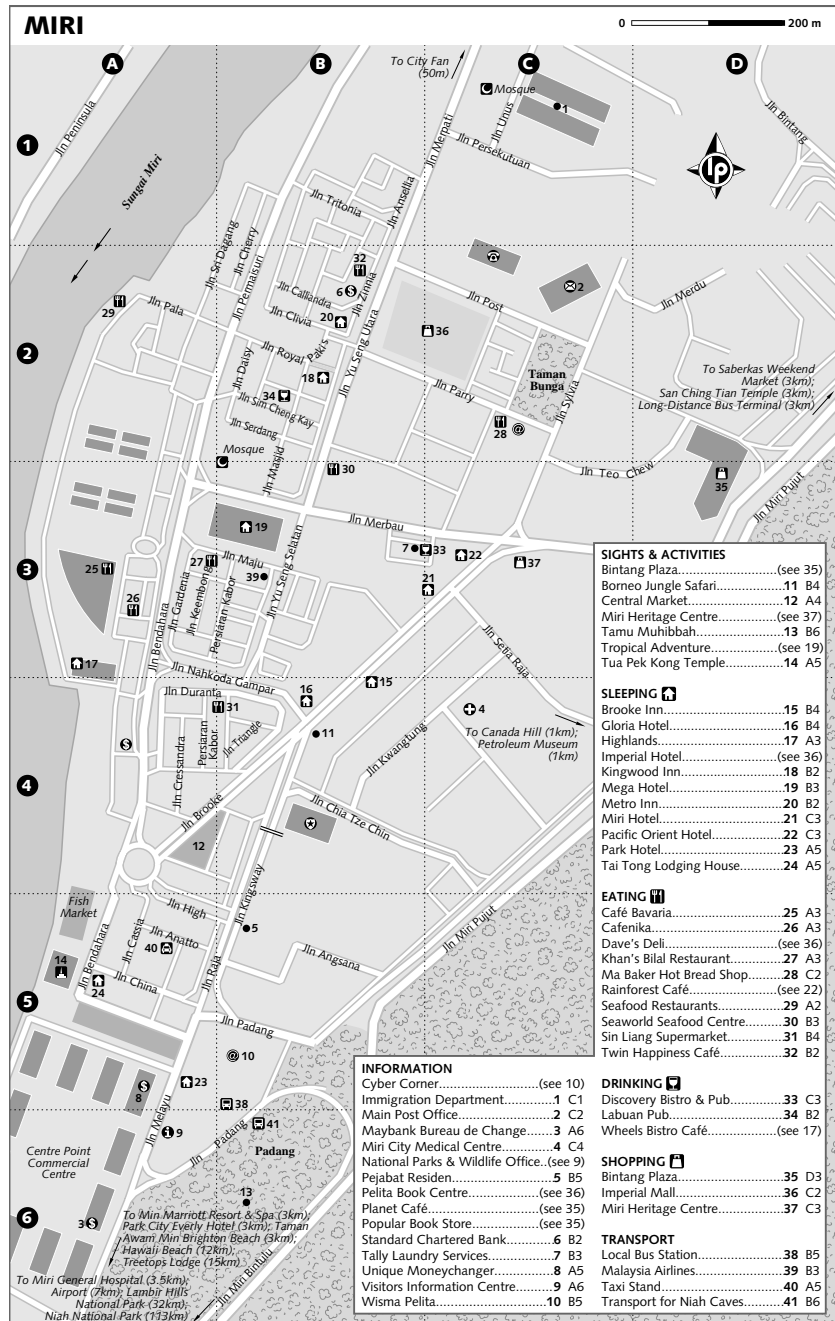
Travellers will need a bus or taxi to get to the long-distance bus station and the airport.

### INFORMATION

#### Bookshops

**Pelita Book Centre** (☎ 414116, 3rd fl, Imperial Mall, Jln Yu Seng Utara) Has a small range of Borneo-related books and maps.

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



## Internet Access

**Cyber Corner** (% 437016; 1st fl, Wisma Pelita, Jln Padang; per hr RM3)

**Planet Café** (% 412260; 1st fl, Bintang Plaza, 1264 Jln Miri Pujut; per hr RM3)

## Immigration Offices

**Immigration Department** (% 442112; Wisma Persekutuan, Jln Persekutuan) In a complex of government buildings.

## Laundry

**Tally Laundry Services** (% 430322; Jln Merbau; 8am-6pm)

## Medical Services

**Miri City Medical Centre** (% 426622; 918 Jln Hock-ien) Private medical centre.

**Miri General Hospital** (% 420033; Jln Cayaha) South of town, off the Miri bypass.

## Money

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

**Maybank Bureau de Change** (% 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.

**Standard Chartered Bank** (% 434944; Jln Calliandra) Changes travellers cheques at RM20 per transaction and 15 sen per cheque.

**Unique Moneychanger** (% 425757; 1328 Centre Point Commercial Centre; 7am-9pm) Cash only.

## Permits

You'll need a travel permit to visit longhouses upriver from Marudi or trek across the Indonesian border in the Kelabit Highlands.

Present your passport at the **Pejabat Residen** (% 433205; Jln Kingsway; 8am-12.30pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat). Fill in a form with details of your intended visit (keep it simple), including your expected length of stay – there's currently no time limit. Your passport will be photocopied, then the Resident will sign the permit, which is free of charge.

## Post

**Main post office** (% 441222; Jln Post)

## Tourist Information

The **visitors information centre** (% 434181; vic-miri@sarawaktourism.com; 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, and also produces the useful free *Visitors' Guide to Miri*. You can book accommodation with the **National Parks & Wildlife office** (% 436637) here for Gunung Mulu, Niah Caves, 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](http://www.miri.net.my).

## SIGHTS

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 Dayak come to sell their vegetables. 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, which crams the crowds 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 new **Petroleum Museum** opposite should be open by the time you read this – when we visited, the only items on display were the builders' underpants! 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.

As a self-proclaimed 'resort city', Miri is cultivating a reputation for its recreational areas, and the whole urban landscape is studded with greenery and amenities. Nearest to the centre is the City Fan, an expanse of themed gardens that boasts the largest open-air amphitheatre in Malaysia. It's popular with joggers, and also has a public swimming pool, indoor stadium and public library. It's just north of the local government offices.

On the other side of town, 3km down the airport road, the Taman Awam Miri (Miri Public Park) is a large landscaped park traversed by a long elevated walkway. It has more of an adventure feel, and there's a botanical garden, viewing platform, children's playground and a handful of sports facilities.

Also 3km south of town, Miri has a passable beach and recreation park at Brighton Beach, where the open-air Taman Selera (food centre) juts out into the sea for perfect sunset dining. Further on, Hawaii Beach is a clean, palm-lined stretch of sand about 15 minutes outside town by bus. To get to either of the beaches, take bus 11 or 13 (RM1.50) from the local bus station.

To complete the recreational picture, the city council has ambitious plans for the new Miri Marina Park, a reclamation project started in 1996. Apartments, museums, aquariums, a yacht club and a water park are all in the pipeline.

## ACTIVITIES

Aside from the islands of Talang-Talang near Kuching, Miri is about the only area in Sarawak where diving is possible. A short boat trip away are several small shoals (45 minutes) and a reef (two hours). A Japanese WWII wreck, the *Atago-maru*, lies off the long jetty south of town, and there's also the purpose-built Kenyalang artificial reef, created in 2004. Outside of the rainy season visibility can be up to 20m, though there's less to see here than at Sabah's better dive spots. Various tour companies in Miri and elsewhere in Sarawak can organise dives.

Some tour companies offer white-water rafting on the upper Baram, near Long San. Back on dry land, mountain biking in the hill country east of Miri can be organised through the **Miri Mountain Bike Club** (☎ 423589).

For those who prefer the more leisurely pace of indoor sports, **Bintang Plaza** (☎ 419399;

1264 Jln Miri Pujut) has facilities for tenpin bowling and indoor archery.

## TOURS

Numerous tour operators organise trips to Gunung Mulu and Niah National Parks, as well as to other places around Miri and Sarawak – the **visitors information centre** (☎ 434181; [vic-miri@sarawaktourism.com](mailto:vic-miri@sarawaktourism.com); 452 Jln Melayu; 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun) has plenty of brochures. Visiting the caves in Mulu is easy as an independent traveller, but if you want to trek to the Pinnacles or along the Headhunters' Trail, you should compare package prices.

A half-day city tour costs around RM50 per person, and a full-day tour to Niah National Park should be about RM80 to RM100. Prices for Mulu trekking vary depending on the accommodation and food arrangements.

Established tour operators:

**Borneo Jungle Safari** (☎ 435736; [www.borneojungle.com](http://www.borneojungle.com); 174A Jln Brooke) Run by local Lun Bawang people, this company has caving, climbing and adventure tours complementing the standard packages. Also runs a home stay in the Kelabit Highlands.

**Seridan Mulu** (☎ 414300; [www.seridanmulu.com](http://www.seridanmulu.com); 1 Lobby Arcade, Park City Everly Hotel, Jln Temenggong Datuk Oyong Lawai) This high-end outfit does trips to Gunung Mulu National Park.

**Tropical Adventure** (☎ 419337; [www.asiabudgetholidays.com](http://www.asiabudgetholidays.com); Mega Hotel, 907 Jln Merbau) Award-winning trips throughout Sarawak and Sabah, including adventure caving in Gunung Mulu, hiking the Headhunters' Trail and trekking in the Kelabit Highlands.

**Tropical Dives** (☎ 415582; [www.tropical-dives.com](http://www.tropical-dives.com); Park City Everly Hotel, Jln Temenggong Datuk Oyong Lawai) Seridan Mulu's dive division.

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

**Miri International Jazz Festival** ([www.mirijazzfestival.com](http://www.mirijazzfestival.com); the Pavilion, Park City 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.

**Miri Cultural Heritage Week** (Miri Heritage Centre) A week-long festival of cultural activities, handicrafts and performances, held in September.

## SLEEPING Budget

Miri has plenty of dirt-cheap accommodation around the markets, but much of it is scraping barrels you never even knew

existed. Trading up by a few bucks will do you no end of good.

**Tai Tong Lodging House** (☎ 411498; 26 Jln China; dm RM12, r RM28-46; a ) The cheapest option in town but, amazingly, not the worst – quite. The (male-only) dorm is just three rows of bunk beds in the hallway, but the actual rooms are passable for a quick stop.

**Treetops Lodge** (☎ 482449; [www.treetops-borneo.com](http://www.treetops-borneo.com); Lot 210, Siwa Jaya; per person dm RM25, r RM30-45; s ) After a period of erratic business, this superb family ecoguesthouse should now be open full time again, soothing city-frazzled visitors with its beautiful ocean setting and gentle local excursions. Rates include breakfast and airport transfers, but a minimum stay of three nights usually applies.

**Highlands** (☎ 422327; <http://borneojungles.com>; 1271 Jln Sri Dagang; dm/s/d RM25/40/50; a i ) The only proper backpacker-style option for miles, Highlands styles itself a 'budget tourist and travel information centre', and scores a bull's-eye on all counts. As well as providing an immaculate but friendly environment for guests, this small, personal hostel has vast amounts of information about travel and attractions throughout Borneo and Brunei, and is also developing a network of freelance guides, whose services it helps market. Look out for the affable owner, a Twin Otter pilot from New Zealand, and Willie, the expert resident guide-campaigner.

**Brooke Inn** (☎ 412881; [brookeinn@hotmail.com](mailto:brookeinn@hotmail.com); 14 Jln Brooke; s/d/tr RM43/48/53; a ) While it stops short of midrange quality, the carpeted Brooke is certainly better than most of the real fleapits, and has one of the few foosball tables in Borneo.

## Midrange

Miri has plenty of midrange choices, though few offer spectacular bargains. All have attached bathrooms, air-con and carpet, and most provide a TV and IDD phone.

**Metro Inn** (☎ 411663; 592 Jln Merpati; r RM58-73; a ) Right on the cusp of the budget category, the better upper-floor rooms in this Chinese-run hotel do just enough to warrant a midrange rating. There's a good *kedai kopi* below.

**Park Hotel** (☎ 414555; Jln Raja; r RM60-100; a ) A large tower-block hotel with a great location right by the information centre and the bus station. Decent-sized rooms make it a comfortable and convenient place to stay.

**Miri Hotel** (☎ 421212; 47 Jln Brooke; r RM69-115, ste RM158.70; a ) A tempting display of cakes welcomes you to this central choice, which is well run if not exactly exciting. Deluxe and suite rooms include breakfast, which should stop you gazing too longingly at the food court opposite.

**Kingwood Inn** (☎ 415888; 826 Jln Yu Seng Utara; r RM80-90; a ) The carpets niff a bit in places, but otherwise the Kingwood delivers the goods perfectly adequately, with a dedicated calling-card phone at reception and its own herbalist for those minor ailments.

**Pacific Orient Hotel** (☎ 413333; [pohotel@streamyx.com](mailto:pohotel@streamyx.com); 49 Jln Brooke; r RM85-105, ste RM109-129; a i ) This is one of the better deals in town – staying here gets you inclusive breakfast, wi-fi internet, a pool table, two restaurants, and town views from the nicer deluxe rooms. Change money elsewhere though – the exchange rates at reception are distinctly under par. Incidentally, the hotel is also home to the Miri Big Bikers Club, surely the only biker group in the world whose watchword is 'courtesy'.

**Gloria Hotel** (☎ 416699; 27 Jln Brooke; r RM110-168; a ) With marble effect and a touch of Chinese style, the Gloria looks great through its big glass windows and provides decent comfort levels where it counts. Cheaper promotional rates often apply.

## Top End

**Miri Marriott Resort & Spa** (☎ 421121; [www.marriott.com/my/mymc](http://www.marriott.com/my/mymc); Jln Temenggong Datuk Oyong Lawai; r from RM242; a i s ) Formerly the Rihga, Miri's only five-star hotel is on the beach about 4km south of the town centre, virtually next door to its nearest rival, the Park City Everly. The 20-acre grounds encompass a gym, business centre, restaurants, coffee shops and the very enticing Mandara Spa.

**Imperial Hotel** (☎ 431133; [imperialhotelmiri@yahoo.com](mailto:imperialhotelmiri@yahoo.com); Imperial Mall, Jln Post; r RM299-644, apt RM345-759; a i ) No-one could accuse the Imperial management of a lack of ambition – Miri's latest luxury establishment occupies 23 floors of the Imperial Mall tower, and even the bellboys get lost in the quiet, colourfully soft-lit corridors. Guests can choose between impressively smart hotel rooms or practical kitchenette apartment suites; facilities include restaurant, gym, ballroom, sauna and, of course, the huge shopping centre underneath.

**Mega Hotel** (☎ 432432; www.megahotel.net; 907 Jln Merbau; s RM322-414, d RM368-460, ste RM644-4600; a i s ) This bulky blue-themed hotel in the town centre dominates Miri's skyline, with views all the way to the sea. Service is excellent, and the Chatterbox Coffee House is a popular local meeting place. It's popular with tour groups and visiting business-people. Substantial walk-in discounts are often available.

## EATING

There are plenty of good places to eat in Miri, especially in the blocks between Jln Brooke and the waterfront.

**Ma Baker Hot Bread Shop** (☎ 413307; Jln Parry; dishes 50 sen-RM6; 𠄎 breakfast & lunch Tue-Sun) This small bakery chain serves lunches and juices as well as baked goods.

**Khan's Bilal Restaurant** (☎ 418440; 229 Jln Maju; dishes 90 sen-RM6.50; 𠄎 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This simple canteen is one of Miri's better Indian eateries, whipping up tasty treats such as tandoori chicken and *aloo gobi* (Indian potato-and-cauliflower dish), as well as the usual roti canai and a damn fine biryani (rice baked with spices and meat, seafood or vegetables).

**Twin Happiness Cafe** (☎ 421868; 747 Jln Merpati; dishes RM2.50-7; 𠄎 breakfast & lunch) We all take our happiness where we can find it, and the dual 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'?

**Rainforest Café** (☎ 413333; Pacific Orient Hotel, 49 Jln Brooke; dishes RM3-8; 𠄎 lunch & dinner) This terraced hotel café can stand quite happily on its own two feet, beguiling fussy eaters with organic produce, good mixed menus and a wide selection of teas, frappés and other fancy drinks.

**Dave's Deli** (1st fl, Imperial Mall; dishes RM2.50-24; 𠄎 breakfast, lunch & dinner) A Western-style sandwich bar and cafeteria with branches throughout Malaysia, Dave's offers a full menu of familiar favourites. Oh, and a foot-long chicken sausage.

**Cafenika** (☎ 424600; 437 Jln Bendahara; dishes RM3-26; 𠄎 breakfast, lunch & dinner) It's hard to miss the huge red sign at night, but even during the day this halal cafeteria has no problem packing out half the street in front of it. The broad menu covers Chinese, Malay, Western and even some Japanese dishes, rang-

ing from basic noodles to seafood, *babur* (rice porridge) and 'family packs' (RM7 to RM22) that feed up to 10 people.

**Café Bavaria** (☎ 429495; 1150 Jln Sri Dagang; mains RM10-26; 𠄎 dinner) Of all the things you might not expect to see in Borneo, an authentic South German restaurant probably ranks quite highly, but whaddya know? That's exactly what this is, and a fine dose of Black Forest nostalgia it is too, from the grilled fish to the inevitable schnitzel. Homesick Teutons can peruse some familiar photos or console themselves at the rustic produce cart.

**Seaworld Seafood Centre** (☎ 413388; 8 Jln Yu Seng Selatan; meals from RM10; 𠄎 lunch & dinner) Even if you have no intention of eating seafood, the massed tanks of live aquatic creatures here can make a visit to Seaworld Miri as educational as a visit to Seaworld Florida. Hard-core gastronomic adventurers could have a crack at the large, gormless frogs (RM5 per 100g) – according to the owner they simply taste 'smooth'.

The newly developed waterfront area is also great for sunset fish dinners, with a string of seafood restaurants setting out tables right on the riverbank in the evening. Expect to pay RM25 and up for seafood dishes.

For self-catering, the **Sin Liang Supermarket** (☎ 413762; Jln Duranta; 𠄎 8.30am-9pm) is centrally located and well stocked.

## DRINKING

Karaoke dominates Miri as it does most of Malaysia, but there's still plenty of places to get a drink, most closing around 2am on weekends.

**Labuan Pub** (☎ 417353; Jln Sim Cheng Kay; 𠄎 1pm-2am) One of Miri's oldest pubs, this is decked out with souvenirs and football memorabilia from around the world. It can get rowdy at times, but there are plenty of nearby options to flee to.

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

**Discovery Bistro & Pub** (513-514 Jln Merbau; 𠄎 from 4pm) On the smarter side of the pub spectrum, this is another food-'n'-booze parlour in the lively corner behind the Pacific Orient Hotel. Wireless internet available.

All of Miri's top-end hotels have at least one bar or lounge, often with live music. The Pavilion at the Park City Everly Hotel is

one of the more high-profile venues, hosting regular special events.

## SHOPPING

**Miri Heritage Centre** (☎ 410280; Jln Merbau) Owned by the Miri municipal council, the centre was set up for various ethnic groups including Iban, Orang Ulu, Malay and Chinese to sell handicrafts such as beadwork, baskets, musical instruments, jewellery and curios. There's a small café, and cultural dances are sometimes performed, which you may be coerced into joining.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

**Malaysia Airlines** (☎ 417315; 239 Beautiful Jade Centre, Jln Maju) has two direct daily flights to Kuala Lumpur and four to Kuching.

Miri is the major hub for rural air services, and FAX (☎ 03-8775 4000) runs several daily Fokkers to Bintulu, Mulu, Sibul, Limbang and Labuan, plus frequent Twin Otters to Marudi, Lawas, Limbang and Bario, and weekly services to Long Banga, Long Akah and Long Seridan. Flights in and out of Bario and Mulu sell out quickly, so book as far in advance as possible. If flights are full, try your luck at the airport.

**Air Asia** (☎ 438022) flies to KL (three daily), Kota Kinabalu (twice daily), Johor Bahru (daily) and Kuching (daily).

**Hornbill Skyways** (☎ 614220) operates two daily flights to Mulu (RM86), plus less regular services to Mukah and Kuching, and air charters elsewhere in Sarawak, but a minimum of 10 people are required before these services will run.

### Bus

For the latest bus schedules, check the English-language newspapers or ask at the **visitors information centre** (☎ 434181; vic-miri@sarawaktourism.com; 452 Jln Melayu; 𠄎 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun). The long-distance bus station is about 4km north of the centre, along Jln Miri Pujut. Taxis and private cars for Niah National Park (RM10 to RM20) wait for customers across the road from the local bus station.

Buses to Kuala Baram and the Brunei border depart from the local bus station at the southern end of the town centre.

Major bus companies serving Miri include **Suria** (☎ 434317), **PB Ekspres** (☎ 435816),

**Biaramas Ekspres** (☎ 434319), **Lanang Road** (☎ 433116), and **Miri Belait** (☎ 419129).

### Main destinations:

**Bintulu** Express buses go daily to Bintulu (RM20, 4½ hours), departing roughly hourly between 6am and 8.30pm.

**Batu Niah** Any southbound service can drop you at the Batu Niah turn-off (RM10, 1½ hours), 13km from town.

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

**Kuala Baram** The Belait Transport Company has buses to Kuala Baram (RM2.50, one hour) every 20 minutes between 5.30am and 9pm. From here 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 last one at around 10pm.

**Mukah** There are one or two daily buses from Miri to Mukah and Dalat (RM50, 12 hours), leaving and returning in the morning.

**Sibu** As well as the frequent direct services, all buses to Kuching stop at Sibu (RM40, eight hours).

If you're headed to Brunei, it's a convoluted bus journey from Miri to Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei's capital.

The Belait Transport Company plies the route between Miri and Kuala Belait, the first leg of the trip, and has its office at the local bus station. Five services daily run to Kuala Belait between 7am and 3.30pm (RM13.50, two hours).

After clearing immigration at Sungai Tujoh, near Kuala Baram, you reboard the bus for the two-minute ride to the Brunei immigration checkpoint. Here you must take all your belongings with you through passport control and customs.

A Brunei bus will then take you to the Sungai Belait, where driver and passengers leave the bus on one side, cross on the ferry (free), then board another bus on the other side of the river for Kuala Belait.

At Kuala Belait bus station you can change to a connecting bus to Seria (BS1, 30 minutes), then onto a further service for Bandar Seri Begawan (BS6, two hours). Start your journey early unless you want to spend the night in Kuala Belait or Seria.

## GETTING AROUND

The **Miri visitors information centre** (☎ 434181; vic-miri@sarawaktourism.com; 452 Jln Melayu; 𠄎 8am-6pm

Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun) has up-to-date bus information and timetables.

For the long-distance bus station, bus 33 leaves regularly from the local bus station (RM1.40). Buses 28 and 30 run frequently between the local bus station and the airport (RM1.80, 20 minutes) from 6am to 7pm.

Taxis from the airport run on a zoned coupon system; a cab to a central hotel costs RM18.50. Other destinations are by negotiation – the long-distance bus station is around RM10, and a taxi between Miri and Kuala Baram should cost RM20.

### Loagan Bunut National Park

Now you see it, now you don't – at 650 hectares Loagan Bunut is the largest natural freshwater lake in Sarawak, but once or twice a year it disappears entirely. This vanishing act occurs when water levels in the three rivers feeding it drop during the dry season, usually in February and/or May to June, and can last for two to three weeks, allowing visitors to walk over the cracked mud of the lake bed.

The little-visited park (☎ 085-779410; adult/child RM10/5) protecting this elusive body of water covers 10.7 sq km, and the surrounding forest hosts breeding colonies of water birds such as darters, herons and egrets. Local Berawans practise *selambau*, a unique form of migration-based fishing that has enabled them to keep the lake stocked with fish even during the annual drought periods.

For keen wildlife-watchers and those trying to get off the tourist trail, the park makes an interesting trip, particularly if you can visit twice to compare and contrast high and low water levels. There's a hostel (dm RM15), a small canteen with treated water and a private two-room VIP chalet (r RM225).

Loagan Bunut is 130km from Miri, and most travellers visit the park on a day tour. To visit independently, a taxi will cost around RM20, or you can take a bus to Lapok (RM11, 2½ hours) and charter a car or 4WD to the park (RM30, up to five people). Note that the last bus back to Miri leaves Lapok at 9am! A boat onto the lake itself costs RM60 for up to four people, plus RM10 for each additional person. Contact the **National Parks & Wildlife office** (☎ 085-434184; visitors information centre, 452 Jln Melayu) in Miri for

the most current information on transport to the park.

### Marudi

☎ 085

Marudi is a quiet river town situated inland from Miri, similar in size to Kapit though nowhere near as busy. Its main attraction is yet another of the Brooke outposts, the beige wooden **Fort Hose** (admission free; 10am-6pm Tue-Sun), built in 1901 and named after Charles Hose, who became administrator of the district in 1891. The site became the Baram District Museum in 1997 and features some interesting historical displays. The surrounding **Taman Tasik** recreation park is a nice hilltop spot with a suspended walkway and river views.

Marudi sits on the north bank of the Batang Baram, and the main street, Jln Cinema, runs east-west right through town. Most places to stay and eat are within a block or two of the centre. An ornamental square with a longboat monument spans from Jln Cinema down to Jln Merdeka, the riverfront drag, and all boats moor at the adjacent jetty.

Although the forest between Marudi and Kuala Baram on the South China Sea has long since been devastated, travel beyond Marudi to upriver longhouses can still be rewarding, at least once you get to Long Lama. Locals in Marudi can help arrange a visit, and the longhouses are welcoming if you're expected. The **district office** (☎ 085-755211) can help arrange permits.

There is a reasonable road network around Marudi, giving access to longhouses at Long Selaban and Long Moh. You can also travel much further afield, though you'll have to arrange a lift locally. A road linking Marudi and Miri has been in the pipeline for years, but as yet only a few rough logging tracks exist.

### INFORMATION

**Public Bank** (☎ 756235; 59 Jln Cinema)

**Skynet Internet** (☎ 756693; 99 Jln Perpaduan; per hr RM2)

### SLEEPING & EATING

Marudi has several inexpensive hotels but it's doubtful anyone would spend much time here unless they're en route to Gunung Mulu National Park.

The neat, Chinese-run **Grand Hotel** (☎ 755711; Lg Lima; r RM38-63, ste RM105-126; a ) is the best place to stay in town, with its own supermarket and bakery. There's plenty of space all round, and the big two-room VIP suite could be considered a real bargain. It's two blocks north of Jln Cinema.

There are plenty of *kedai kopi* around the square and along the main street at the western end of town. You could also try the big **Pasar Rakyat** (Jln Merpati) food centre.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

#### Air

FAX Twin Otter flights go to Miri up to five times daily, and also serve Bario, Long Banga, Long Lellang, Long Akah and Long Seridan. Flights are often full, especially to Bario, and it's advisable to book ahead, but you can always turn up in the hope of a cancellation. The airport is a 10-minute (1km) walk east of the centre.

#### Boat

Express boats between Marudi and Kuala Baram (RM20, three hours) operate regularly until 3pm. If you miss the last bus from Kuala Baram to Miri, you'll have to get a taxi (RM30).

When the water's high enough, express boats head from Marudi to Long Terawan and Long Lama (RM20, four hours). Boats leave when there's enough passengers, usually around 11am. If you're heading into Gunung Mulu National Park from Long Terawan, you'll need to charter a boat; see p412 for details.

### Batang Baram

Like the Rejang to the south, the huge, sluggish Batang Baram is a vital artery for Sarawak's interior; it runs from Marudi deep into Kayan and Kenyah territory, while its Dapur tributary continues right up into the Kelabit Highlands around Bario. Its upper reaches are home to the Penan, seminomadic hunter-gatherers who are seen even by other indigenous groups as the last true guardians of a disappearing way of life. The Baram region is one of the major remaining areas of primary forest in Borneo, and also one of the most heavily logged. The northeast has long been the centre of dispute between the government, logging companies and local tribes.

Logging roads in the Baram catchment have been blockaded many times in the past, and activists, including tribespeople, have been arrested, beaten up or worse – the famous Swiss campaigner Bruno Manser, who lived with the Penan and helped coordinate protests, disappeared in Sarawak in 2000, and is widely believed to be dead. These days, though, court orders are more common than barricades; in fact, the main problems for travellers and locals alike come from the illegal logging operators, who are not always happy to see strangers. You may be turned back from certain routes, especially where fresh logging roads are being cut.

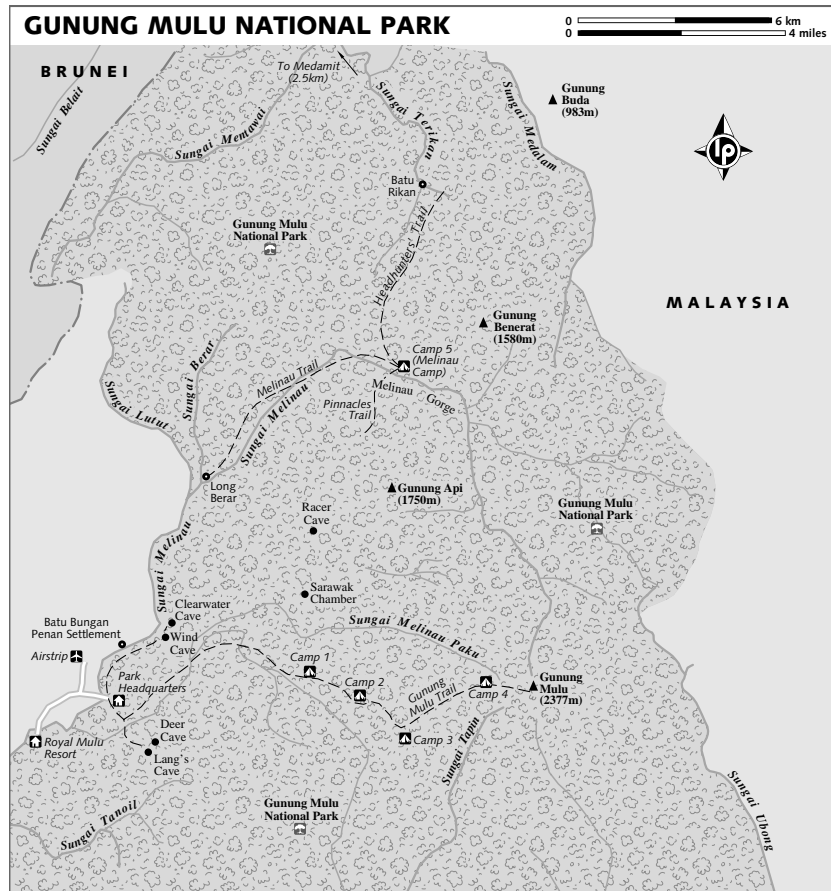
A permit is required to travel upriver from Marudi. They're available at the Pejabat Residen in Miri (p399). If you want to experience a remote longhouse, exploring this region can be worthwhile. Travel agents in Miri can arrange tours along the Baram. However, be warned: much of the forest has been devastated and it's not a pleasant sight.

Going independently is not particularly easy or cheap. Express boats travel from Marudi as far as Long Lama, and from there it's possible to go by regular boat to Long Miri. From Long Miri, travel is by smaller longboat, which must be chartered (at least RM150 per day, plus fuel). It's a full day's travel by boat to Long Akah, and then a day or more to Long Matoh.

The alternative is by road, which involves expensive 4WD hire. From the main highway south of Miri it is possible to go by a good logging road to Long Miri and all the way to Long Akah. This road is being pushed further into the jungle towards Long Lellang and beyond.

### Gunung Mulu National Park

A Unesco-listed site widely regarded as Sarawak's top attraction, Gunung Mulu is the most heavily promoted of the state's national parks and one of the most popular destinations in Borneo. The park is an unspoilt wilderness offering caving, trekking and wildlife-viewing. It can be enjoyed simply for its beauty, or tackled as a challenge that even experienced outdoors enthusiasts will relish. However, as a privately managed park, Mulu is also the source of considerable controversy with regard to political profiteering and native land rights (p411).



Among the remarkable features in this 529-sq-km park are the two mountain ranges, one of sandstone and one of limestone, that abut within its boundaries. The sandstone peak of Gunung Mulu is 2377m, and the limestone Gunung Api reaches 1750m. In between are more rugged mountains, deep gorges with clear rivers, and a unique mosaic of habitats supporting fascinating and diverse species of wildlife. Mulu's most famous attractions, though, 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 war path (see *Trekking in Gunung Mulu National Park*, p408). If you're planning on doing

any serious trekking in Sarawak, this park should be your first port of call.

As if that wasn't enough, further charms lie below the surface of Mulu's forested crags; numerous spectacular caves are open to visitors, and a network of underground passages stretches over 300km underneath the park itself.

A few years ago cave explorers here discovered the largest chamber in the world, the Sarawak Chamber, reputed to be the size of 16 football fields.

Access to the park is either a long trip by boat from Marudi or a 40-minute flight. Expect to wait several days to a week to be confirmed on one flight. You can probably get to Mulu easily enough on stand-by,

but getting back this way might mean a few extra days at the park.

Transport hassles are one reason many travellers resort to tours, even though Mulu is easily explored without a prearranged package. The other reason is cost. Trekking on your own can be expensive; guide fees and boat hire can seem unreasonably high because the rates are based on groups. Once you get to the park, though, it's also possible to get together with other visitors and hire freelance guides.

#### INFORMATION

On arrival, head to the park office (☎ 085-432561; www.mulupark.com; adult/child RM10/5; ⌚ 8am-5pm) to pay the entry fee and receive your room or bed allocation.

#### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

##### Show Caves

The Deer, Lang, Clearwater and Wind Caves are collectively known as the Show Caves, and are easily accessible to visitors with a park tour (RM5 per person) or by private guide. Other caves are closed to the public because they are inaccessible or considered dangerous, while others contain fragile formations that park authorities want to protect from further deterioration.

Due to the availability of power for lighting, the Clearwater and Wind Caves are officially open only in the morning (tours 9.30am and 10.30am), and the Deer and Lang Caves only in the afternoon (tours 1.30pm and 2.30pm). If you want to visit both pairs, you'll have to take two tours. Power failures are not uncommon, but natural light illuminates much of the caves to some extent, particularly the Clearwater and Wind Caves.

##### Deer Cave & Lang's Cave

An easy 3km walk along a boardwalk, Deer Cave and the adjoining Lang's Cave are the closest caves to the park headquarters. At 2160m long and 220m deep, they form the world's largest cave corridor. Both are very safe, with walkways and wooden steps.

Lang's 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 and exit from the other; it takes about 30 minutes

to walk the entire length. A strong torch is useful for the darker areas.

Deer Cave is a gaping cavern in the mountainside, huge beyond comprehension. It doesn't have the attractive formations of Lang's Cave and there's the added stink of ammonia from the piles of guano on the floor. Look up and you'll see the cause – some two million free-tailed bats cling to a roof so distant that they appear as a seething black mass. The bats emerge from the cave entrance between 5pm and 7pm each night in a vast chattering stream that can last for half an hour. They can be seen from quite a distance, and a 'bat observatory' has been built; there are also picnic tables from where you can get a great view. The swarm is a sight not to be missed and is one of the wildlife highlights of Mulu.

##### Clearwater Cave & Wind Cave

Wind Cave is part of the Clearwater Cave system and the starting point for some of the longest tunnels. It opens out in a cliff above the Sungai Melinau and has a boardwalk and stair system that does a loop around some impressive caverns and beautiful limestone formations.

It's not marked on park maps, but to get to the Wind Cave you first have to pass through the small Moon Milk Cave, located at the top of a steep set of stone steps. A good torch and caution are essential – roots snake around your feet, rock formations hang at head height and parts of the boardwalk are rotten.

The Clearwater Cave is 51km long (the longest cave passage in Southeast Asia) and 355m deep. It takes its name from an underground river that spills through a natural grate to form a crystal-clear swimming pool near the cave entrance. A bridge over the river is reached by the path on the left of the cave entrance. The path on the right passes some of the cave's finer features. Access to the cave is via steep concrete steps up a hillside then along a walkway, which can be slippery in places.

There's a pleasant but slippery trail from the park headquarters to the Wind and Clearwater Caves; it takes about an hour to walk, following the Sungai Melinau for part of the way. The walk from the Wind Cave to the Clearwater Cave takes about 15 minutes.

## TREKKING IN GUNUNG MULU NATIONAL PARK

Gunung Mulu National Park offers some of the best jungle trekking in Sarawak. There are three main treks here: the Gunung Mulu Trail, the Pinnacles Trail and the Headhunters' Trail. An attempt at any of them will involve some expense, and it's best to go with a group to reduce guide and transport costs. You can ask around when you get to park headquarters to see if anyone's interested in sharing costs, though outside high season it may be better not to count on finding enough people in the park itself.

Like most activities in the park, the following trails may not be attempted without a guide. Expect rain, leeches, sweat bees, slippery and treacherous conditions, and a very hot work-out – carry lots of water. Your guide should let you go at your own pace. Many who attempt the Pinnacles or Gunung Mulu don't make it to the top – but better that than not making it back down again! Guides can be arranged at the park headquarters.

### The Pinnacles

Located halfway up the side of Gunung Api, the Pinnacles is an incredible forest of sharp limestone spikes, their razorlike edges often shrouded by drifting mist. It's a tough day's climb to see them, but worth it for the sense of achievement as well as the views.

The trek to the Pinnacles starts with a two- or three-hour boat trip (depending on the level of the river) from park headquarters to Long Berar. From here it is a tough 8km trek along Melinau Trail to Camp 5 (Melinau Camp) by the Sungai Melinau. Camp 5 has open-sided hostel-style accommodation with running water, cold showers, a cooking area, flush toilets, vinyl sleeping mats and perfect views. Mosquito nets may be available on request. Sleep overnight here before climbing Gunung Api.

You'll have to climb the whole distance to see the Pinnacles – there's no easy way out. The three- to four-hour ascent is very steep and slippery in parts, especially towards the top, where the ladders, ropes and handholds virtually require free-climbing skills. It's best to start early in the morning, when it's a lot cooler and you're more likely to see wildlife. If you haven't reached a marked point by 11am your guide will not allow you to continue to the top.

The ultimate destination is a small viewpoint looking out over the Pinnacles. It is possible to camp here, but most trekkers return directly to Camp 5. Going downhill takes just as long as coming up, and can be twice as wearing; you'll need to leave the viewpoint by about noon to get back to the camp before dark. Start at dawn and you could make it back to park headquarters the same day.

Guides' fees are RM400 per group for a three-day, two-night trek; each extra day costs RM20 plus a RM10 allowance per night. The rate for boat hire to Long Berar from park headquarters is RM350 return for one to four people, plus RM85 for every extra person (up to a maximum of eight).

### Adventure Caving

There are plenty of other caves in the park, and new caves are regularly discovered. It's estimated that the number already explored represents only about 40% of the total number of caves in Gunung Mulu National Park.

It's possible to explore the nooks and crannies of the Show Caves away from the pedestrian boardwalks, for instance by exiting the Clearwater Cave via the Turtle Cave river route (RM20), and a few other caves are open to experienced cavers, allowing you to crawl, climb and swim your way through some of Mulu's labyrinthine passages.

The park offers guides for adventure caving, though advance reservation and some proof of experience are required. Prices range from RM200 to RM300 for groups of up to five people, depending on the cave – hardcore spelunkers can even visit the Sarawak Chamber (RM500), a trip that's a 10- to 15-hour claustrophobe's nightmare. Most tour companies in Miri and Kuching can also offer caving expeditions.

If you do not have the necessary experience, you can always try out the intermediate Racer Cave first in order to let your guide assess whether you are fit for an advanced excursion.

### Gunung Mulu Trail

The climb to the summit 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 overnighting 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 leave your pack at Camp 4 and climb to the summit of Gunung Mulu. You can either sleep at Camp 3 another night and return to park headquarters on day four, or descend the mountain in one day. The latter is quite tough on the legs, but you can cool down in the river along the way.

### 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. This trail is named after the Kayan war parties that used to make their way up the Sungai Melinau to the Melinau Gorge, then drag their canoes overland to the Sungai Terikan to raid the peoples of the Limbang region. A 3m-wide road lined with poles was used to move the canoes, and a canal was dug around Batu Rikan. Skulls and burial sites can still be found concealed around this area.

For today's less warlike trekkers, the usual procedure is to take a boat to Long Berar (RM250), walk along Melinau Trail to Camp 5 (about four hours) and overnight there (RM20 per person) on the first day. Day two involves a flat but fascinating 11.3km walk through deep jungle to the Sungai Terikan (four or five hours), where you can spend the night at the Mentawai rangers' station (RM20) or head straight to a very well-equipped Iban longhouse, a scenic three or four hours' cruise downriver. After overnighting in the longhouse, it's on to Medamit, from where you can catch a bus (RM4) or private minivan (RM60) to Limbang.

The boat from the Sungai Terikan to Medamit should cost about RM400 to RM450, guide fees will come to about RM400 per group, and food and lodging at the longhouse will be around RM30 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.

You could do the Pinnacles trek, return to Camp 5 then set off on the Headhunters' Trail the following day. This trip is equally possible in the opposite direction – take a bus to Medamit, where a boat can be arranged to either the longhouse or the ranger's station at Mentawai.

### Other Activities

Nonguests can hire kayaks and mountain bikes (RM25 per hour) from the **Royal Mulu Resort** (% 085-790100; www.royalmuluresort.com). There are some good biking trails near the resort, as well as rock climbing (RM36 per hour) on the premises.

As much of the jungle wildlife here lives overhead, it's well worth heading up to the canopy skywalk, a long series of walkways 15m to 20m above the rainforest floor. At 480m it's the longest in the world, and offers a great chance to see the park quite literally from a bird's-eye perspective. Tours leave the park headquarters daily, and cost

RM30 per person (maximum seven people); book in advance.

If you're not up to or keen on the full treks, there are various less demanding trails around the park that can be done independently, as well as a variety of guided walks, including night walks (RM7.50).

### Wildlife

Gunung Mulu National Park features eight types of forest, including peat swamp, tall dipterocarp and, at the summits of the higher peaks, stunted moss forest. Thousands of species of plants have been recorded here, and each new scientific

expedition finds new species. Among the finds are over 170 species of orchid and 10 species of pitcher plant.

A staggering 275 species of birds have been recorded at Mulu, as well as 75 species of mammals, 74 of frogs, 281 of butterflies and 458 of ants. Mulu is part of traditional Penan hunting grounds and the tribe is still allowed to hunt in the park. Don't worry about encountering the business end of a blowpipe on your travels – tourism has made larger birds and mammals scarce near trails, and the Penan themselves are almost as shy as the animals.

Around the park headquarters you'll see a few common species of birds, such as bulbuls and sunbirds, but look out for the white-fronted falconet, the world's smallest bird of prey, which is only slightly larger than a sparrow. The walks to the Show Caves can be very good for spotting birds, particularly in the early morning. At the caves themselves you'll see plenty of swiftlets nesting on the cave walls, as well as a selection of birds of prey that pick off the bats as they come pouring out in the evenings. Along the rivers you can see the stork-billed kingfisher, with its massive red bill, and the amazing black-and-red broadbill, a clownish-looking bird with a fat blue bill.

With the exception of bats, most of Mulu's mammals are shy and difficult to see, although you'll probably encounter squirrels along the trails. Look out for the pygmy squirrel along the boardwalks, and the striking Prevost's squirrel in the trees.

If it's not raining you'll see an incredible variety of butterflies along the trails. When it's raining you can expect lots of leeches to appear as if by magic.

#### Batu Bungan Penan Settlement

The Gunung Mulu region is mainly home to the Berawan people, but the government has settled a Penan group on the banks of the Sungai Melinau as part of its campaign to change the nomadic lifestyle of these people, as logging and development have increasingly threatened their traditional way of living.

Sadly, instead of being a model settlement, Batu Bungan is a stark reminder of the consequences of modernisation for people who never wanted it in the first place. Boats carrying tour groups drop by

the small market where people set up on the riverbank at around 9am. There's some fine rattan weaving on sale, but the rest of the village is private housing.

The Penan are highly regarded by Borneo tribes as the true 'people of the forest'. They are a shy people, even when dealing with other tribes, so if you visit the market, speak softly, move slowly and avoid large, sudden gestures. Hardly any English is spoken here, but there will probably be a tour guide around in the mornings to help with translations.

#### TOURS

The park office handles all bookings and fees for park guides, and can also arrange transport. On arrival, some boat operators will offer to arrange a cave tour for you on the spot. Avoid them if you are looking for a group to join – transport and a guide can be arranged at any time at the park office.

The cost for trekking guides depends on the distance covered and the number of people trekking – the park office has the full list. For example, for a group of five trekking to the Pinnacles over three days and two nights, a guide will cost RM400; to the summit of Gunung Mulu, RM1000. There's an additional fee of RM20 per night at Camps 3, 4 and 5. Bigger groups bring down the cost for each individual, but if a group is too large you'll see less wildlife along the way.

Boat costs are relatively high, for example RM25 per person for the Wind Cave and RM350 return (per boat; up to four people) to Long Berar for the Pinnacles trek. If you want to visit all the caves and do a lot of trekking, an organised tour starts to look cost-effective. Most travel agents charge around RM1000 for four days and three nights at the park. This includes a visit to all the caves, one of the main treks, all transfers and midrange accommodation. Prices go down the more people you can find to share.

#### SLEEPING & EATING

Given Mulu's popularity and the general preference for tour groups, it can sometimes be difficult to book a place to stay. Accommodation bookings can be made at the **visitors information centre** (☎ 085-34181; [vic-miri@sarawaktourism.com](mailto:vic-miri@sarawaktourism.com); 452 Jln Melayu;

#### THE BERAWAN LAND STRUGGLE

The construction of the Royal Mulu Resort back in 1991 provoked outrage among local Berawan people, who claim they were not consulted at any stage. Even the original owner of the land was apparently told it was needed for the new park headquarters, not for a commercial luxury hotel, and received just RM1400 for his property. Subsequent plans to occupy even more land, including space for a golf course, stirred things up still further, driving locals to mount protests and erect barricades to voice their grievances.

Of course, the real issues go much deeper than the resort. In leasing the extra land, the government had essentially decided it belonged to the state, with no attempt to determine whether Native Customary Rights applied, and this refusal to acknowledge the Berawan's rights in the area persists today. Arrests, beatings and dubious dealings seemed to be the only response to the protests, and so far the land situation remains unchanged.

Worse still, the problems have carried over into the running of the national park itself – Borsamu, the company that operates the Royal Mulu Resort, is also responsible for the management of the park facilities, and locals claim park policy favours 'official' interests, effectively denying the Berawan access to their fair share of tourist revenue. Independent guides even have to pay their own park fees when bringing tourists into the park, unheard of anywhere else. So far the government has apparently failed to investigate accusations of mismanagement, perhaps because of the close ties between Borsamu and some of Sarawak's most prominent political figures. Ask any local for the full family tree...

Rather than boycotting the park, which would be counterproductive in conservation terms, visitors wishing to make a positive contribution should be sure to use local freelance guides wherever possible for activities in and around Gunung Mulu. If you feel particularly strongly about the issues, you can also write to the prime minister or the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia to voice your concern.

☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun) in Miri. You can simply turn up at the park office and book, but you run the risk of finding all the accommodation booked out. There's accommodation outside the park but this can also fill up at busy times. Note that there are no cooking facilities at the park.

Accommodation at the park headquarters is along the same lines as at Sarawak's other national parks. There's a roomy 21-bed **hostel** (dm RM18), some **rainforest rooms** (tw/tr/q RM50/70/90) with fan, and good spacious rooms in the **longhouse** (tw/tr/q RM80/100/120; a s ). **Camping** (per person RM5) is only permitted at park headquarters, where there are a token three spots accommodating a maximum of six people.

The luxury **Royal Mulu Resort** (☎ 085-790100; [www.royalmuluresort.com](http://www.royalmuluresort.com); rfrom RM290; a s ), about 3km from the park entrance, is tastefully built around limestone bluffs overlooking the river. Rooms are nicely appointed and the garden is full of flowers, butterflies and birds. Nonguests can participate in most of the activities on offer, which range from nature walks and spa treatments to quad biking and chariot races. Some very good discounts are available.

Top-end appeal aside, however, the resort is at the heart of ongoing disputes with the local Berawan tribespeople (see above), and travellers may find the ethical question marks off-putting.

**Café Mulu** (☎ 7.30am-9pm), inside the park just along from the hostel, serves simple meals, snacks and drinks. There is also a basic canteen across the river from the park headquarters, at the end of the suspension bridge.

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

The only practical way in and out of this popular park is currently via Miri, and the vast majority of travellers make the trip by air. Book as far in advance as possible. If you arrive at Mulu overland and plan to leave by air, make a booking as soon as you arrive.

#### Air

FAX currently runs just two daily flights between Mulu and Miri, plus three weekly services from Kota Kinabalu (though cancellations due to weather are not uncommon). Hornbill Skyways operates two daily



flights from Miri to Mulu (RM86), but a minimum of ten people are required.

### Bus & Boat

If you're up for the time and effort, the road-'n'-river route to Mulu is a unique experience and a great alternative to flying. From Miri, take a local bus to Kuala Baram (RM2.50, one hour). Buses leave regularly, but if you want to get to the park in one day, set out around 6am.

From Kuala Baram there are express boats to Marudi (RM20, three hours), leaving between 7am and 3pm. Launches go from Marudi to Long Terawan when there are enough passengers (RM20). If the water is high enough they go all the way through; if not, change boats at Long Apoh.

Travel from Long Terawan to the national park is by charter boat. Try to prearrange this in Marudi before you set off, or if you arrive early enough in Long Terawan you can probably find someone there. The boat will cost at least RM250, or RM55 per person for larger groups (journey takes about two hours).

It's easier to arrange a Long Terawan boat from Mulu (ask at park headquarters or at the canteens) and it's easier to fly into Mulu than back out, so it makes sense to do the river trip on the way out of the park. You need to be up at 4am to get the boat to Long Terawan in time to connect with the express boat to Marudi. The Mulu-Miri run will take eight to 10 hours.

### GETTING AROUND

The park headquarters is a 3km walk from the airport, along the road to the Royal Mulu Resort. Minivans run between the airport and headquarters, but there's no regular service. Taxis are usually available (to/from airport RM3/5), or you could try catching a lift with one of the resort vans.

### Limbang

☎ 085

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 here, 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. A range of low hills further east marks the border with Brunei's Temburong district.

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. The massive complex looming over the wharf area is the Purnama Hotel and its attendant shopping mall, Limbang Plaza. The centre is largely comprised of concrete shophouses containing hotels, cafés, karaoke bars and snooker halls.

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.

There are several moneychangers on Jln Kuba and a Maybank on Jln Bank.

### 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.

Down the road from the museum and up a steep drive is a pretty park with an artificial lake backed by forest. It's a pleasant place to pass some time if you're waiting for a flight.

### SLEEPING & EATING

Being a port town, most of Limbang's cheaper places are ever so slightly sleazy, and hourly rates are common. The decent places are mostly midrange, air-conditioned hotels, some of which accept credit cards.

**Mariner Inn** (☎ 212922; 1371-1373 Jln Buangsiol; s/d/tr RM50/53/63; Ⓜ ) One of several hotels in the shophouse complex opposite the Lawas boat wharf, Mariner Inn offers plenty of space and river views on two sides. Reception staff can be a bit nudge-nudge wink-wink with lone male travellers.

**Purnama Hotel** (☎ 216700; Jln Buangsiol; r RM150; Ⓜ ) A four-star hotel with friendly staff, the Purnama has large, adequate rooms, café, 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 cafés around the centre. If you're heading to the interior, the covered market here is a good place to stock up on cheap booze – a litre of imported Smirnoff can go for a bargain RM28.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

#### Air

FAX currently serves Miri (once or twice daily) and Lawas (twice weekly). The airport is 4km south of the town centre. A taxi costs RM5 per person with a full load, or RM10 to RM15 for smaller groups.

#### Boat

Speedboats make mostly morning runs between Limbang and Bandar Seri Begawan (RM15, about 30 minutes). The boats go when they have a full load of 12 passengers, so you may have a bit of a wait after 9am. The last boat in each direction leaves at around 4.30pm.

An express boat goes to Lawas every morning at 7.30am (RM20, 30 minutes). The express boat to Labuan in Sabah leaves at 7.30am and 8.30am (RM20, two hours). From Labuan to Limbang the boat leaves at 12.30pm and 2.30pm. Buy your ticket at the wharf.

#### Bus

It's possible to travel by road between the two halves of Brunei via Limbang. For connections to Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei's capital, there's a scheduled bus from Limbang to Kuala Lurah on the Brunei border (RM5, 12 daily) between 5.30am and 5.30pm.

There's no bus service to the nearby eastern Brunei border, but taxis regularly make the trip for about RM20, and all the way to Bangar by negotiation. Make sure you call at the Brunei immigration checkpoint on the road into Bangar; it's open daily from 6am to 10pm. From Bangar it's possible to go overland to Lawas and on to Sabah, but this involves an expensive taxi ride (see below).

If you're planning to follow the Headhunters' Trail into Gunung Mulu National Park, the bus for Medamit leaves irregularly between 5.30am and 4.30pm and costs RM4.

### Lawas

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Lawas is a busy little town on the banks of the Batang Lawas. Like Limbang, it's more a transit point than a stopover, and you may find yourself here en route to/from Miri, Brunei or Sabah. It's impossible to get lost here: the bus station is in the middle of town, and if you need somewhere to stay and eat, there are options in the surrounding shophouses.

Travellers looking for an out-of-the-way stopover could track down the Southern Comfort Lodge, a riverside guesthouse recommended by readers; it's outside of town.

FAX Twin Otters fly to Miri (up to six daily), Ba Kelalan (three weekly) and Limbang (twice weekly).

All boats leave from the riverside wharf east of the town centre. An express boat goes to Limbang (RM23, 30 minutes) around 9am; check the current schedule at the wharf. If you're heading to Brunei, the only boat leaves at 7.30am daily (RM23), returning at 1.30pm. Boats to Labuan (RM23, two hours) leave at 7.30am five days a week, but this schedule changes often.

If you happen to miss the boat to Brunei, you could travel by taxi to Bangar, in Temburong, and from there take a boat to Bandar Seri Begawan. You'll first need to clear Malaysian immigration at Lawas wharf, then get the taxi to take you to the Brunei immigration office (a few kilometres past Bangar) before bringing you back to the Bangar wharf. All up, this should take about 40 minutes and the taxi should cost around RM180. Boats for Bandar Seri Begawan leave regularly from Bangar until about 5pm (BS6).

It may be possible to reach Ba Kelalan in the Kelabit Highlands overland from Lawas or vice versa by 4WD. With eight people squeezed in, the price is around RM50 per person. The trip takes five to six hours.

There are daily buses to KK (RM20, four hours) and the towns en route; the last express service leaves at 1.30pm. If you miss it, there are direct minibuses to Beaufort (RM13).

## KELABIT HIGHLANDS

Trekkers, gird those loins: this is what you came to Borneo for. The temperate, forested highlands around the Indonesian border offer some of the best jungle trekking on the island, taking in farming villages, rugged

peaks and supremely remote Kenyah and Kelabit longhouses along the way. Whether you just fancy a day's stroll around the valley town of Bario or want to pretend you're Eric Hansen on an extended camping trip, you should under no circumstances miss out on coming here.

Illegal logging is widespread, but large areas of primary forest remain here, and the hills around Bario, including the spectacular Gunung Murud, are now protected as the cross-border Pulong Tau National Park, fully gazetted in 2005. The park has no facilities but many existing walking trails pass through it.

There are no bank, ATM or credit-card facilities in the whole Kelabit Highlands, and only a few basic shops in Bario and Ba Kelalan. Travellers should bring all their own supplies and plenty of small-denomination cash for accommodation, food and guides, plus some extra in case you get stranded.

### ACTIVITIES

For trekkers, the possibilities here are endless – get hold of a map, sit down with a guide and work out where you want to go based on time, cost and what simply looks interesting. January to August is the best time to light out into the jungle, unless you like it tough, in which case the wet season could really float your boat.

The many jungle trails can take you through superb rainforest and on to alpine plateaus or across the Indonesian border and back, camping or sleeping at longhouses en route. You are strongly advised to hire a guide for anything beyond a short day walk – trails are sometimes indistinct, terrain can be rugged, and it may be wet and slippery. Visitors do occasionally get lost and you should seek local information before setting out. Guestbooks in the lodges and longhouses can also be a good source of tips.

Guide fees are generally RM50 per day for one-day trips, and RM65 per day for overnight treks; add RM50 per day if a porter/cook is required. Longhouses in the area normally expect RM30 to RM50 for an overnight stay, including meals.

### Trekking Routes

Most walkers start out from either Bario or Ba Kelalan. The trip between the two (p417)

is a great excursion, and the southern Bario Loop (p418) is another well-established trail.

From Bario, you can also head to Long Lellang, a four- to six-day trek which can be timed to catch the weekly flights to Marudi or Miri (assuming they're still running by the time you read this).

For the adventurous, the Kalimantan loop takes you well away from any kind of beaten track, and also offers a good chance of wildlife sightings. A three-day itinerary could take you from Pa Umor, one hour outside Bario, to Long Bawan, the main Indonesian border town. For a longer trek with some jungle camping, look at heading to Long Bawan via Tang Paya and returning by the Long Medang route. You'll need a border permit from the immigration office in Bario.

If wildlife is your thing, you can organise a trip into genuinely undisturbed jungle, tracking wildlife and staying in jungle camps along the way. Wild boars, barking deer, hornbills and the endangered *wawa* (black monkey) are among the indigenous mammals. The Pulong Tau National Park protects rafflesia flowers and 181 orchid species, and may even conceal the rare Sumatran rhino, though it would be a miracle if you ever saw one.

### Gunung Murud

Sarawak's highest mountain (2623m) is just begging to be climbed, but very few visitors go to the trouble required to put together a trip. Ba Kelalan is the most convenient base; guides should cost around RM80 per day and the trek would take about a week, with a number of nights camping in the jungle.

### Penan Treks

The highlands are one of the last remaining outposts of the nomadic Penan, who still lead their traditional peripatetic lifestyle in the dense jungle here. Tribespeople often come to Bario for supplies, and also have a small settlement at Pa Tik, 7km west. Local guides can arrange for you to go on extended Penan hunting trips – challenging excursions involving long days of dawn-to-dusk trekking through inhospitable terrain. Allow at least a week for this exceptional experience.

## Bario

☞ 085

The 'capital' of the highlands, Bario is a small settlement spread over a beautiful valley 1500m above sea level, close to the Indonesian border. You wouldn't think it now, but the sleepy village has seen its share of action, during both WWII and the Konfrontasi with Indonesia in the early 1960s. It was also rated among the top seven most intelligent communities by the World Teleport Association in 2001 – no, we don't know quite what that means either, but it definitely sounds good.

Bario's appeal lies in its clear mountain air and splendid isolation (access is by air only). The delicious Bario rice is renowned Asia-wide, as are the sweet, juicy local pineapples. The nearby hills are covered in largely untouched forest with abundant wildlife, and in the *kerangas* are pitcher plants, rhododendrons and orchids.

Above all, though, it's the unforced hospitality of the Kelabit people that will quickly win you over, and an amazing number of travellers find themselves extending their stays in Bario by days, weeks or even years. Do yourself a favour and get stuck here for a while!

### ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

Bario is essentially a wide valley dotted with houses, paddies, a church or two and a couple of rough dirt roads. There's a row of tiny blue-roofed shops selling expensive necessities, which might be considered the centre of town. The immigration office is near the junction of the airport road and the main village road.

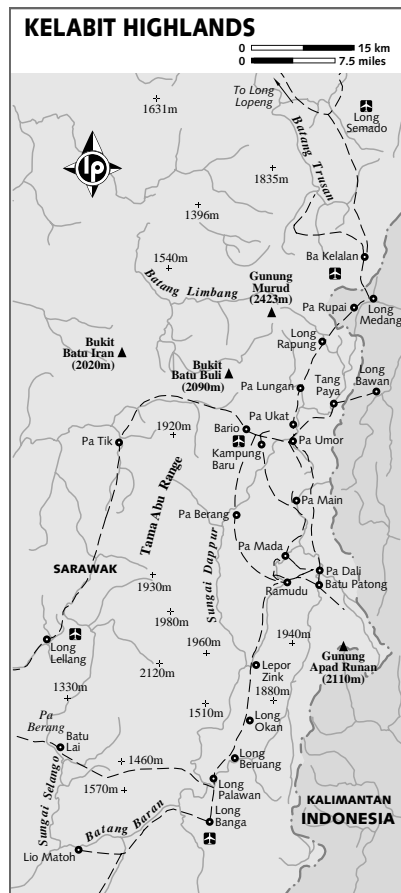
The airport is about a 30-minute walk south of the shophouses. You're bound to be offered a lift on arrival, as seemingly everyone in town turns out to meet the daily flights.

There are public telephones by the shophouses; internet access is available at the Telecentre (per hr RM10; 10am-4pm Mon-Sat). As the whole town is solar-powered during the day, these services are not 100% reliable.

To plan your trip and get more information about the Kelabit Highlands, check out [www.ebario.com](http://www.ebario.com) and [www.kelabit.net](http://www.kelabit.net).

### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

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 veranda. You may be able to arrange accommodation here.

If your back can take it, you can help out with the annual rice harvest, when locals flock to the fields to pluck Bario's number-one cash crop. Invest in a pair of 'Bario Reeboks', the cheap plastic shoes that everyone wears here, for maximum mobility in the waterlogged paddies.

For a little light sport, the community hall has three badminton courts (bring your own racket).

Any of the lodges here can organise a wide variety of short walks and longer treks. Of the longhouses close to Bario, the easiest to visit are Pa Umor, which is about one hour southeast, and nearby Pa Ukut. Another day walk is to Pa Berang, which is a Penan settlement approximately 15km from Bario. Keep an eye out for the *dolmen* (stone burial markers) dotted throughout the highlands; new ones are sometimes found when a trail is blazed through the forest.

You can also trek up to the Bario Gap, a visible notch cut in the rainforest on a ridge above town to celebrate the millennium. Coordinated by local character and guide Peter Matu, this *kawang* (manmade natural monument) follows the Kelabit tradition of changing their surroundings to mark important events.

A day trip to the main tudah (salt lick) is fascinating. You'll learn the local method of salt processing, which is done in giant vats over a roaring fire; the high-iodine salt goes perfectly with local specialities such as deer and wild boar, but the production technique is beginning to die out.

#### SLEEPING & EATING

While some Kelabit communities remain ambivalent about tourism, Bario has embraced the visitor economy wholeheartedly, and there is a range of excellent accommodation on offer. There may be more to come, too – in 2006, seven home-stay operators applied for Ministry of Tourism certification here.

**Tarawe's Lodge** (jtarawe@bario.com; r per person RM15) Simple two- and three-bed accommodation in a small house on the main road. Meals are available if ordered in advance, and there are also 'musical instruments for jamming'.

**JK View Lodge** (rose\_sabot@hotmail.com; r per person RM15) Rose's place is a neat little cabin with just four rooms, 500m west of Bario near the shophouses. Meals, treks and tours are available.

**Bariew Backpackers Lodge** (% 791038; bariew.lodge@yahoo.com; r per person RM15-20, with meals RM45-55) Perfectly placed in Bario town, and only a short walk from the shops past the old airstrip, this is an excellent family-run guesthouse which is frequented by sociable locals as well as visitors. The proprietor, Reddish, knows everyone in town and has close ties with the Highlands hostel in Miri. Along with basic fan rooms, tasty meals and evening barbecues, the Bariew Backpacker's Lodge can arrange guides and activities, and hires out bicycles (RM20 per day) and scooters (RM65). The hand-painted lounge and porch are the work of local guide Stephen, who apparently used to work as interior decorator for the Kuching Hilton!

**Gem's Lodge** (% 019-815 5779; gems\_lodge@yahoo.com; r per person RM20) Bario itself is hardly a bustling metropolis, but this welcoming guesthouse, just 6km southeast of town near the longhouse village of Pa Umor, is tranquility incarnate. Owner Jaman is one of Bario's best and most informative guides, offering a wide array of treks, tours and excursions based on his own formidable local knowledge. We've heard good things about the food here too.

**Labang's Longhouse** (% 016-895 2102; liantara.we@yahoo.com; r per person RM20, with meals RM55) A longhouse-style establishment 1km east of Bario, Labang's has simple twin-bed rooms and is good for large groups. Having spent many years campaigning for nature conservation in Malaysian Borneo, owner David Labang is very knowledgeable about environmental issues.

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

The only way into Bario (apart from walking) is by air, though there are plans for a road from Miri – which will be welcomed by locals sick of paying for air-imported goods.

FAX has two daily Twin Otter flights to Miri, one travelling via Marudi. Flights out of Bario have to be booked at the airport. Flights are dependent on the weather and cancellations are not uncommon, so make

sure your schedule isn't too tight. Booking one to two weeks in advance is advisable.

When demand is sufficient, Hornbill Skyways flies twice weekly to Bario; check with the **Miri visitors information centre** (% 085-34181; vic-miri@sarawaktourism.com; 452 Jln Melayu; h 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun) or **Kuching visitors information centre** (% 082-410944; www.sarawaktourism.com; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Haji Openg; h 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun).

#### Ba Kelalan

% 085

Ba Kelalan, known for its apples and organic vegetables, is the other main centre in the highlands, though it's even smaller than Bario. Trekking to or from Bario is a good option, as you can catch a flight there or back to avoid covering the same stretch twice. The round trip should take three to four days, passing through Pa Lungan and Long Rapung. Walks in this area are difficult – you'll

#### KELABIT WORDS & PHRASES

The Kelabit use Bahasa Malaysia for some common phrases:

**Good morning/afternoon.**

*Salamat pagi.*

**Good night.**

*Salamat malam.*

**Goodbye.**

*Salamat tingga.*

**Thank you.**

*Terima kasih.*

Kelabit phrases and words:

**How are you?**

*Kan doo tah iko?*

**Pleased to meet you.**

*Mawang niat petulu nganuih.*

**See you again.**

*Petulu baru.*

**What's your name?**

*Anun ngadan nuidih?*

**Where do we bathe/wash?**

*Ngapah inan diu?*

**I'm sorry.**

*Mutuh doo iuh.*

**Where?**

*Ngapah?*

**What?**

*Anun?*

**I**

*u-ih*

**you**

*iko*

**today**

*adto kinih*

**tomorrow**

*adto riak*

**day**

*adto*

**night**

*dadtan*

**good**

*doo*

**not good**

*da'at*

**eat**

*kuman*

**drink**

*mirup*

**go**

*ame*

**go for a walk**

*ame nalan-nalan*

**sleep**

*rudap*

**lodge**

*rumah tumpang*

**longhouse**

*rumah kadang*

**jungle**

*pulung*

**leech**

*lamatak*

**wild boar**

*baka*

**bucking deer**

*tela'o*

Kelabit forms of address:

**grandmother/grandfather**

*tapu*

**older man**

*tamah*

**older woman**

*sinah*

**chief**

*tua kampung*

### THE BARIO LOOP

One of the most popular treks in this region is the Bario Loop, a flexible 31km circuit that takes in plenty of primary rainforest and some ungrudgingly friendly longhouses south of Bario.

The loop is usually offered as a five-day trek, though it can be done in three. Start by taking the 15km trail to **Pa Berang**; from there you head 12km due south to **Ramudu**, a riverside longhouse community. For the longer version, take the 7km detour to quiet **Pa Dali**, where you can stay in a stilt house or continue 5.5km to **Pa Mada**. Also known as Long Danau, this longhouse settlement is one of the nicest stops on the loop, with an English-speaking chief and some fantastic food (smoked wild boar and coconut pumpkin definitely does it for us). From Pa Mada you can cover the whole 18km back to Bario in about eight hours, passing through **Kampung Baru**, or you can stop off halfway to camp at the **Pa Main** hunting shelter.

This itinerary can be shortened by taking a boat to Pa Berang and a 4WD to Ramudu (RM100 per person). Alternatively, you can extend it for as long as you like; the area around Pa Dali is well worth a day or two's exploration, and if you really have a taste for adventure you could attempt to organise an ascent of **Gunung Apad Runan** (2110m), on the Indonesian border.

need to have your own food and shelter, and be prepared for some hard slogging. If you're well enough equipped you could even attempt the Gunung Murud summit climb along the way. A border permit is also required from the immigration office in Bario, as the route takes you into Kalimantan via Pa Rupai and Long Medang, with an optional detour to Long Bawan.

The best accommodation in Ba Kelalan is the Apple Lodge, run by **Borneo Jungle Safari** (☎ 085-435736; www.borneojunglesafari.com; 174A Jln Brooke) in Miri.

FAX currently flies to Ba Kelalan from Bario twice a week, though note flights are often cancelled.

Flights and 4WD transport to Lawas are also available (p413).