

Cycle Touring Borneo: A Journey Through Sarawak, Brunei and Sabah



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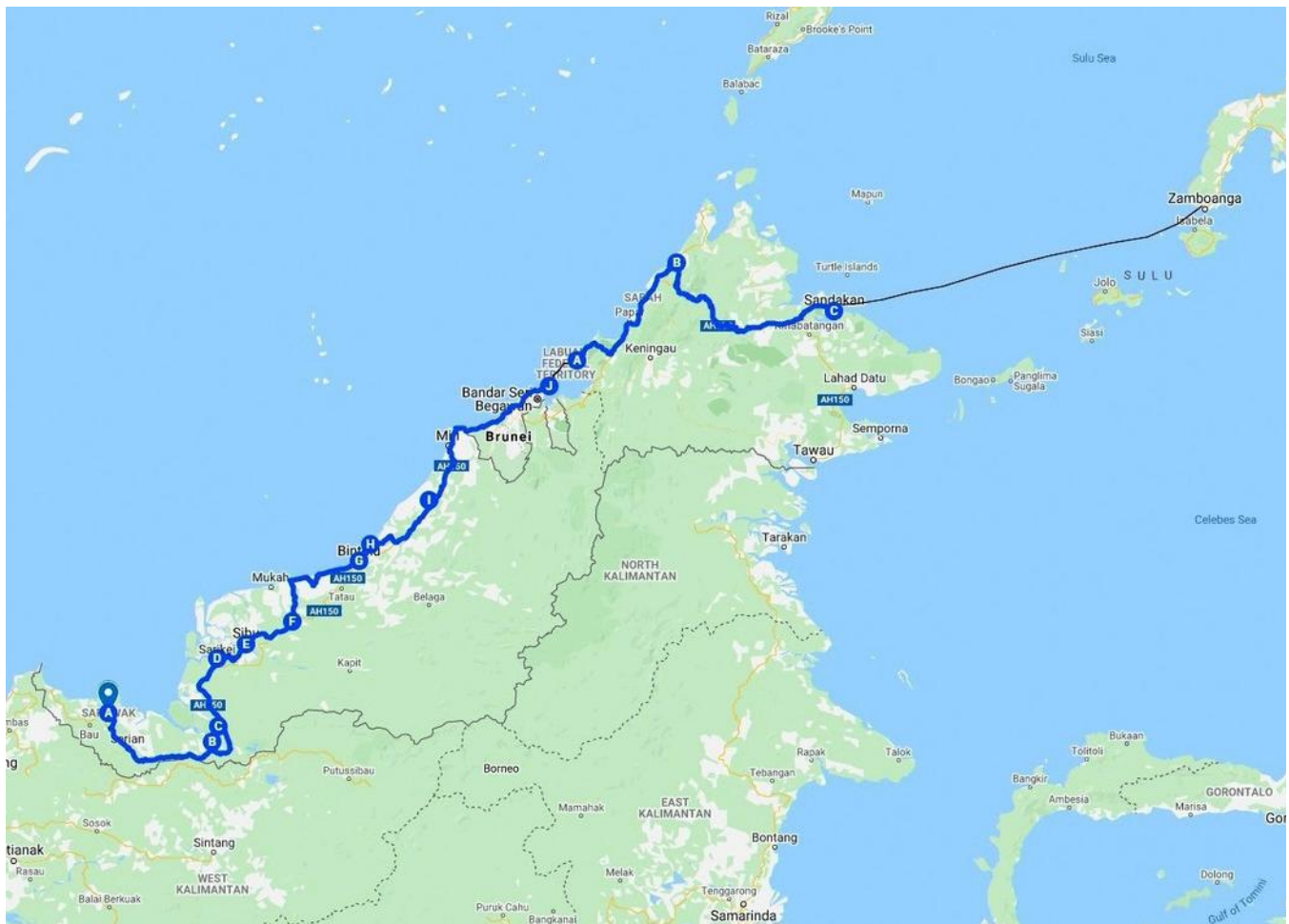
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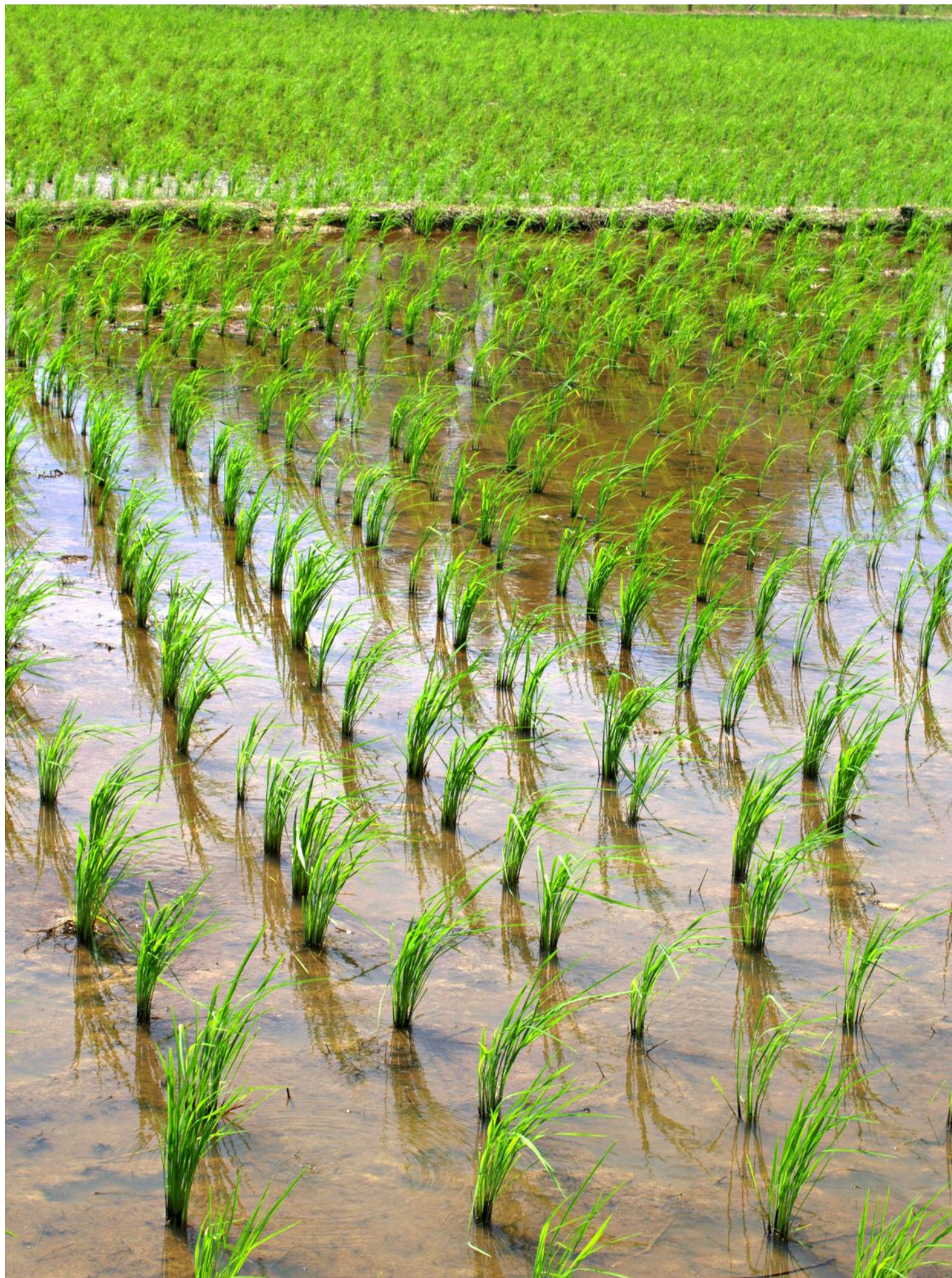




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Thank You!

As I set out on my cycle tour through the captivating landscapes of Borneo, I was once again reminded of the incredible kindness that can be found in the unlikeliest of places. The generosity of strangers left me not just grateful but truly humbled. Their warmth and random acts of kindness coloured my journey in ways I'll forever cherish.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to my sister Amanda, whose unwavering support has been a constant source of strength. Over the years, she has meticulously organised my journal entries and photos, weaving together the tapestry of my travels. Without her dedication, I wouldn't have a single memory preserved to look back upon.

And of course, a massive shoutout to my dear friend Val Abrahamse! While I pedalled my way around the globe, Val took care of everything back home, ensuring my personal and financial matters were in impeccable order. Her conscientious efforts made this adventure not just possible but immensely enjoyable. I couldn't have done it without her!



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PRELUDE

1,794 kilometres. 57 days. *It's remarkable how a journey that felt endless at times can be summarised in two neat numbers. But Borneo was never neat. It was humid, hilly, unpredictable, occasionally bureaucratic, frequently generous, and always—always—hot. I arrived with a bicycle, a vague plan, and the misplaced optimism that the road would behave. It didn't. Instead, it rose sharply, fell suddenly, twisted unexpectedly, and delivered snakes, storms, sugarcane angels, and more oil-palm plantations than any human should witness in a lifetime.*

I met strangers who bought me drinks, waved me into hammocks, guarded my belongings, and stared at me as though I were a visiting exhibit. I slept in hostels, homestays, chalets, hammocks, and one establishment that turned out to be a brothel.

This chapter is the story of those kilometres—long, hot, beautiful, absurd, and unforgettable.



SARAWAK, BORNEO

Leaving the Americas, Entering one of the last Great Wildernesses

Leaving the Americas wasn't exactly part of my grand plan, but life—like airport luggage scales—has a way of surprising you unpleasantly. I returned to South Africa for a handful of personal reasons, one being the long-awaited arrival of my bank cards, which had taken so long I suspected they were being hand-delivered by a tortoise with a union-regulated lunch break.

Erika, my saintly sister, drove me to the airport. At check-in, I discovered my bag was a mere five kilos overweight. Five kilos. A weight so small it could be lost simply by exhaling. Naturally, the airline treated this as a catastrophic violation of aviation physics and charged me a fee so large it should have come with a complimentary shareholding. I was miffed—especially since several passengers waddling around me were clearly carrying at least five kilos more body fat than my luggage, and no one was charging them extra.

To add insult to injury, the staff informed me that my luggage could only be checked through to Kuala Lumpur, because the onward flight to Kuching was operated by a different airline. I understood the logic, but still felt like I was being gently mugged.

Once aboard, I discovered Mark and cousin Marida were on the same flight, en route to Phuket. I imagined we'd bump into each other in Dubai, perhaps share a coffee, maybe complain about airline food together. But Dubai airport is roughly the size of a small European nation, and I never saw them again.



I took the airport train to Terminal 2—because of course the terminal I needed was located somewhere near the Earth’s mantle—and eventually boarded the flight to Kuala Lumpur.

Lost Luggage

Upon arrival in Kuala Lumpur, I dutifully marched to baggage claim, where my luggage was conspicuously absent. After some investigative work (mostly me staring helplessly at conveyor belts), the lost-luggage staff cheerfully informed me that my bag had already been sent to Kuching. This was both reassuring and infuriating, because by then I had missed my flight and had to buy a new ticket. I paid, grumbled, and boarded yet another plane.

At last, I arrived in Kuching—capital of Sarawak, gateway to Borneo, and the place where my luggage had apparently been enjoying a holiday without me.

Borneo, the third-largest island in the world, had always fascinated me. Politically, it’s shared among Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia. Geographically, it straddles the equator. Culturally, it’s a kaleidoscope. Biologically, it’s a jungle fever dream. Logistically, it’s where my luggage had been waiting patiently for hours.

A taxi whisked me into town, and I found a hostel without much trouble. I was exhausted, but thanks to the six-hour time difference, my body insisted it was time to reorganize my backpack, contemplate life choices, and stare at the ceiling instead of sleeping.



Kuching - Chinatown, Chargers & the Great Food Fog

Beds Guesthouse, tucked into Chinatown, was perfectly located—close to a bike shop, food stalls, and the kind of convenience stores that sell everything except the one thing you actually need. The bike shop kindly offered to collect my bicycle from the guesthouse, sparing me the indignity of lugging a boxed bike through the streets like an incompetent furniture thief.

I found a cup-heater for coffee (a lifesaver), a pair of sandals (essential in Southeast Asia, where shoes are treated like biohazards), and discovered I had left my laptop charger behind. Naturally. That problem would have to wait until morning.

Kuching itself was delightful—colourful, walkable, and full of surprises. Chinatown was lively, and the waterfront boardwalk was a perfect place to wander aimlessly while pretending to be productive.

By sheer luck, I arrived on the first day of the annual food fair. More than two hundred stalls were frying, steaming, grilling, and flambéing their way through every imaginable delicacy. Smoke hung over the area like a benevolent fog of deliciousness. There were dumplings, skewers, mysterious fried spheres, things wrapped in leaves, things wrapped in other things, and even hamburgers for those who feared flavour.

Chinese, Malay, Indian—every cuisine was represented. If you couldn't find something to eat, the problem was not the food.



Cats, SIM Cards & Sunset Snacks

My body finally staged a coup against my ambitions and refused to get out of bed until 11h00. Jet lag is a peculiar thing: it doesn't just make you tired; it rearranges your internal wiring so that you wake up feeling like you've been lightly sedated and then rolled down a hill.

Once upright, I wandered into the pedestrian lanes of Chinatown, which were lined with Chinese shophouses from the 1920s and '30s—rows of pastel-coloured, shuttered buildings that looked like they'd been designed by someone who loved symmetry but distrusted architects. From there, I drifted into the Indian quarter, where the alleys were a cheerful riot of textiles, jewellery, and food stalls. Every few metres, something sparkled, steamed, or smelled delicious.

And then there were the cats.

Kuching is famously cat-obsessed. Not mildly fond of cats—obsessed. The town boasts at least four cat-themed roundabouts, each featuring statues of cats in various poses, as though the city planners had been instructed to design traffic infrastructure based on the fever dream of a nine-year-old. There is even a cat museum, which I didn't visit but imagined as a place where one could learn about feline history, admire cat memorabilia, and possibly be judged by actual cats.

My walk yielded a laptop charger, a USB modem, and a SIM card—an unexpectedly productive haul. Feeling triumphant, I returned to the food fair at sunset to continue my noble mission of eating my way through Kuching.



Boats, Bush Pigs & Bako Bliss

I intended to leave Kuching, but the city had other plans. There was still too much to see, and my curiosity is easily bribed by the promise of wildlife.

A bus took me to Bako National Park, and from there a boat ferried visitors to the park headquarters. The boat fare was charged per vessel, not per person, so I teamed up with a couple heading the same way. This made the trip cheaper and provided company—always welcome when venturing into a place where the wildlife has fangs.

The boat skimmed past the legendary Cobra, a rock formation sticking out of the ocean that resembles a snake rearing up to strike.

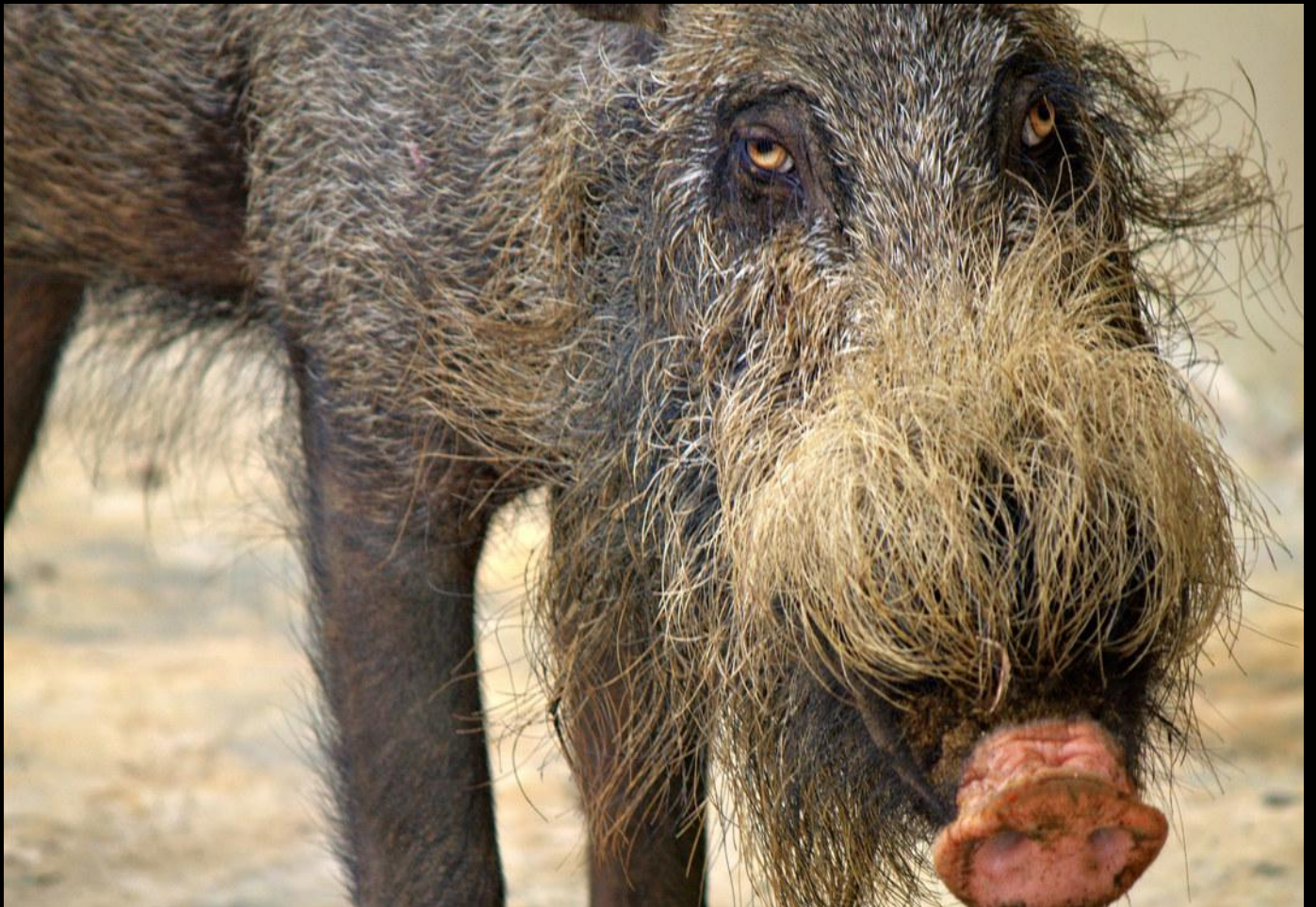
We were dropped at an idyllic beach, the kind that makes you momentarily consider abandoning society to live off coconuts. A path wound from the beach to the park entrance, and the scenery was spectacular—dense jungle, tangled roots, and the occasional rustle that made you wonder if you were being watched by something with opposable thumbs.

We encountered strange-looking monkeys, including proboscis monkeys, which appear to have been designed by a committee that couldn't agree on a nose size. There were also bush pigs snuffling around with the air of creatures who had very important business to attend to.

The boat collected us at 16h00, and I returned to Kuching starving. Naturally, the easiest solution was to revisit the food fair, which by now felt like my second home.







Orangutans & Hostel Air-Con Salvation

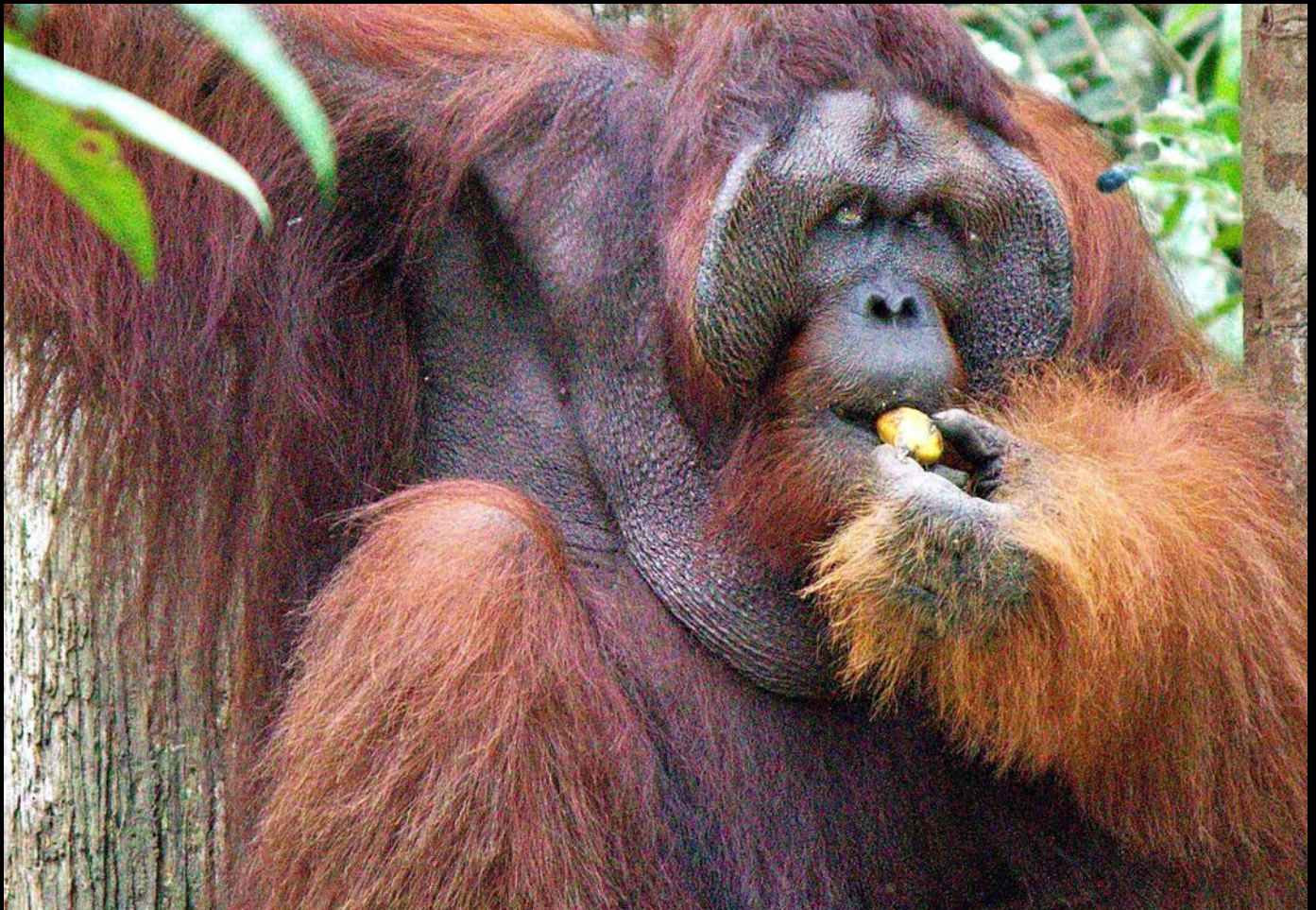
I discovered I needed a visa for Brunei, so I popped into the Brunei Consulate. The staff informed me that a visa would take three days, but travellers could obtain a transit visa at the border. This seemed like a wonderfully casual approach to international travel—"Just get one when you get there"—as though visas were snacks you could pick up at a convenience store.

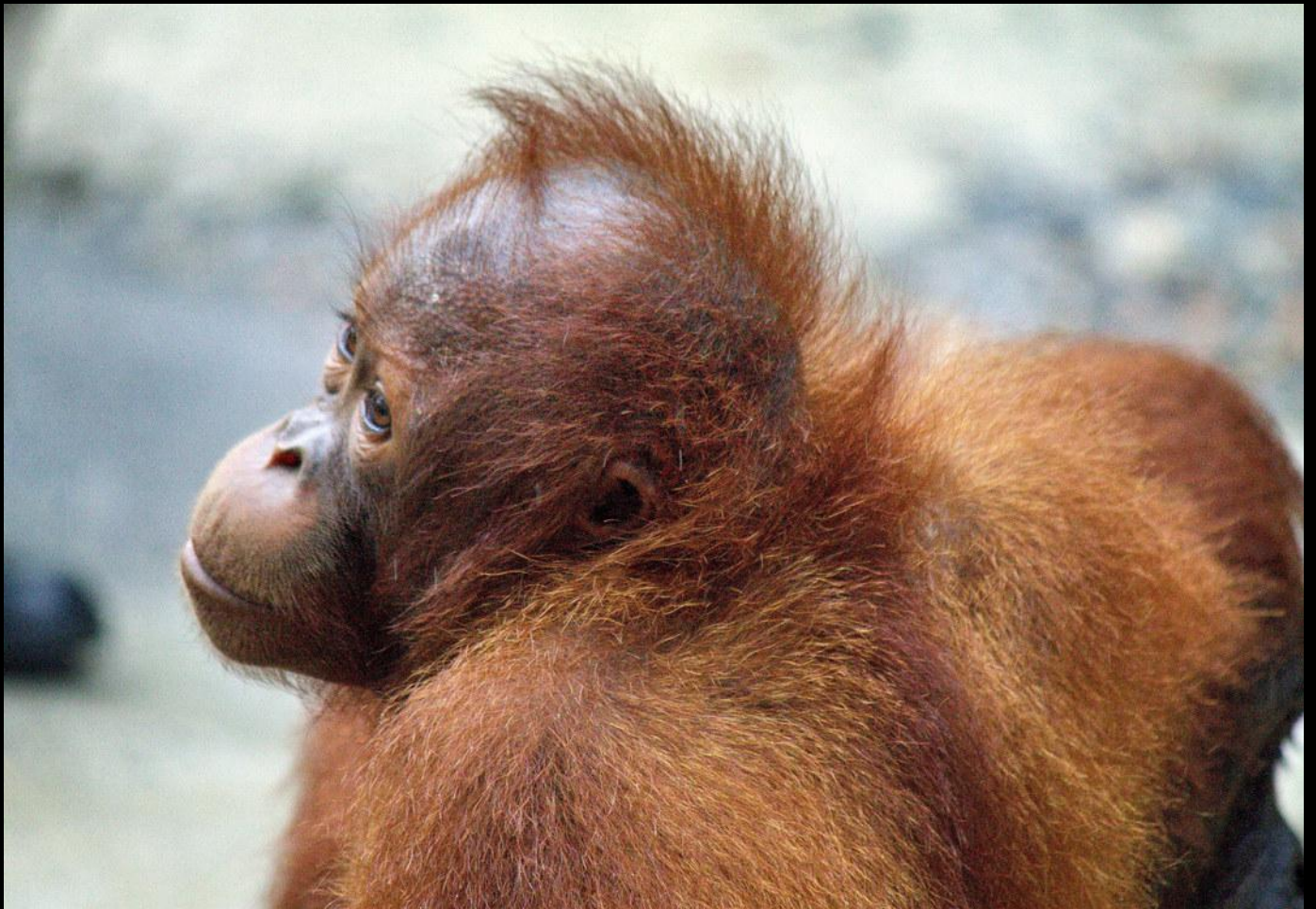
Armed with this information, I hopped on a bus to Semenggoh Nature Reserve, about forty-five minutes out of town. The reserve is home to orangutans, and twenty years ago, eleven individuals were rescued after being orphaned or kept in captivity. The rehabilitation programme was so successful that the surrounding forest now hosts a thriving population of adolescents and young adults living and breeding in the wild.

Watching orangutans is mesmerising. They are immensely human-like—thoughtful, expressive, and occasionally disdainful in a way that suggests they know exactly how ridiculous humans are. I could have watched them for hours.

Back at the hostel, life unfolded in typical hostel fashion: some people watched TV, others cooked, and a few lay around in hammocks contemplating the meaning of life. I chatted with fellow travellers before retreating to my tiny room, grateful for the icy air-conditioning, which was set to a temperature normally reserved for storing frozen peas.







Into the Heat and onto Serian Ranchan Pools (70 km)

This was the day—my grand departure into the wilds of Borneo. I woke up excited, ready to conquer jungles, rivers, and whatever else the island felt like throwing at me. Unfortunately, Borneo woke up equally excited and decided to greet me with the kind of heat normally reserved for industrial furnaces. It was the precise hothouse effect one expects from one of the world's last great wildernesses: a place where plants thrive, animals thrive, and humans melt.

There was one paved coastal road leading all the way to Sabah, but the truly interesting bits lay inland along rivers and waterways. I pedalled past rural settlements, each one a cluster of houses that looked as though they had been dropped there by a distracted giant.

Because traffic drives on the left, I stopped at a motorcycle repair shop to switch my bicycle mirror to the opposite side. The mechanic was wonderfully friendly and seemed delighted to help, possibly because it was the most unusual request he'd had all week.

My next stop was a small shop for water. The lady behind the counter spoke English and was curious about my travels. We chatted for a while, and as I left, she hurried out with a packet of biscuits for me. It was such a sweet gesture that I momentarily forgot how hot it was.

Shortly past Serian, I found a recreational area with a glorious swimming hole. Camping wasn't allowed, but bungalows were available, and I was more than happy to embrace this unexpected luxury. After a day of cycling in tropical conditions, even a mattress felt like a five-star experience.



At around 20h00, I wandered to the nearby restaurant and chatted with the owners. The temperature had dropped to a blissful 28°C—practically arctic by Borneo standards—and it was lovely to sit outside, even with the occasional flying insect attempting to join the conversation. Supper was nasi goreng and tea, simple and perfect.

Then the sky cracked open. Thunder, lightning, and rain came pelting down with the enthusiasm of a weather system trying to prove a point. Thankfully, the restaurant had Wi-Fi, so I stayed put, surfing the net until the storm calmed enough for me to dash back to my chalet without being washed away.





Biscuits for Dinner & Rain for Dessert at Selepong (100 km)

Breakfast was coffee and cereal mixed with Milo. By the time I loaded the bike, it was past 9h30, and I set off into another day of oppressive heat. The sun beat down with merciless determination, as though it had a personal vendetta against cyclists.

The route included a few sharp inclines, one of which forced me to walk the bike up—an undeniable sign of how unfit I had become. Every small shop along the way was visited to top up on water. I drank so much I'm surprised I didn't slosh when I moved.

Realising I wouldn't reach Sri Aman before sunset, I surrendered upon spotting a school with large grounds. I pitched my tent, only to discover I had no food except the biscuits the kind lady had given me the previous day. With no shop nearby, the biscuits became supper. They were surprisingly satisfying, though that may have been the hunger talking.

Mercifully, I still had water, because the taps were dry. All stinky and sweaty, I crawled into my tent. No sooner had I zipped it up than the rain began—proper tropical rain, the kind that arrives with the subtlety of a waterfall. It continued all night, but at least my tent was waterproof. Small mercies indeed.



Sri Aman & the Tidal Bore (30 km)

I woke early, prompted by the arrival of cars dropping off schoolchildren. Packing up a wet tent is never pleasant, but doing so in front of an audience of curious kids adds a certain theatrical flair. I waved goodbye and cycled the short distance to Sri Aman.

There was no practical reason to go there, but the promise of a shower and a plate of mee goreng proved irresistible. Sri Aman sits on the Batang Lupar River and is famous for the benak, or tidal bore—a wave that surges upriver from the river mouth, filling the river in about ten minutes. The crest can reach two or three meters, and surfers gather along the riverbank to catch it. It's one of those natural phenomena that sounds improbable until you see it.

At around six o'clock, the heavens opened again, and I was grateful to be indoors, watching the rain through the window. Once the storm passed, I returned to the riverfront, where stalls served nasi goreng kampung. The portion was enormous—fried rice topped with an egg, a piece of chicken, and tiny dried fish about five centimetres long. It came with a small bowl of soup,



AK OF BATANG LUPAR SRI AMAN

Betong Detour & Ramadan Nights (81 km)

Two more mountains loomed ahead, but the road was blessedly more level than the previous days. Even better, a layer of cloud cover drifted in, turning the ride from “tropical punishment” to “mildly sweaty enjoyment.” It was almost relaxed cycling—something I hadn’t experienced since leaving Kuching.

I hadn’t planned to turn off toward Betong, but ten kilometres past the junction another sign appeared, and my curiosity—always stronger than my common sense—won. I veered off.

Betong turned out to be far more substantial than expected. It had at least three hotels, several shops, and a vast modern sports field that looked like it had been built for a population three times the town’s size. As I wandered around, I received a few curious stares, the kind that suggest foreigners are rare and possibly mythical.

Judging by the food options, Betong had more Muslim residents than Chinese. But because it was Ramadan, virtually all restaurants were closed during the day. The town felt like it was collectively holding its breath until sunset. When the food market finally opened, it burst into life with sweet treats, curry chicken, curry fish, and all the fragrant Malay dishes that make you forget you ever doubted your detour.



Palm Oil and Heatstroke to Sarikei (128 km)

I set off early, sharing the road with trucks hauling loads to palm oil mills. The forest was slowly giving way to palm oil plantations—endless rows of identical trees, like a botanical army standing at attention. Occasionally I heard monkeys calling from the remaining patches of dense forest, though they rarely showed themselves. I suspect they were watching me and judging my cycling technique.

The heat was ferocious. Borneo is not for people who dislike humidity; it is humidity. The road grew hillier as the day progressed, and I had the option to turn off toward Saratok, which I absolutely should have taken. But the map promised a nature park a little further on, and I am easily seduced by the idea of nature parks.

Sebangkoi Nature Park and Resort turned out to be neglected and disappointing, the kind of place where even the trees looked bored. I filled my water bottle and continued toward Sarikei, chastened and very sweaty.

The oppressive heat made the day exhausting, and Sarikei lured me in with its promise of food and accommodation. Even by Malaysian standards, Sarawak has an extraordinary mix of people. The largest ethnic group isn't Chinese (26%) or Malay (21%), but the Iban (29%), famously known as the fiercest head-hunters in Borneo. It's not every day you cycle into a town where the dominant ethnic group once specialised in collecting skulls.

The food was equally varied—Malay, Chinese, Indian, and a wide selection of ethnic dishes. Sarikei leaned more Chinese, judging by the stalls, and supper was a substantial plate of Chinese noodles with a bowl of soup. Exactly what the doctor would have ordered, had he been cycling through Borneo in blistering heat.



Pineapples, Pepper & Riverfront Breezes

I decided to stay even though. Sarikei didn't offer much in the way of attractions; still, it was an intriguing Sarawakian town with many old Chinese shophouses from the 1930s. The area is famous for pineapples and pepper, and the town proudly displays a gigantic pineapple statue—because if you're known for pineapples, you might as well commit fully.

Sarikei sits beside the Rajang River, where the water eventually empties into the South China Sea. Boats operate between Sarikei, Kuching, and Sibu, and the riverfront is the breeziest place in town. Practically everyone gathers there to chat, snack, and enjoy the view. Naturally, I joined them, grabbing something to eat while watching the sunset.

Ships moving upstream were surprisingly large. I hadn't thought the river was deep enough for such vessels, but Borneo is full of surprises—many of them humid, all of them interesting.



Shortcut to Sibu (70 km)

A second look at the map revealed a shortcut to Sibu—one of those rare moments in travel when the universe leans over and whispers, “You don’t actually have to suffer today.” Instead of the expected hundred-odd kilometres, the distance shrank to a pleasant 65 or 70, and the road was surprisingly flat. I arrived early in Sibu feeling almost smug, as though I had outsmarted geography.

Sibu turned out to be a remarkably modern city perched beside the mighty Rajang River. From here, the river runs nearly 560 kilometres into the heart of Sarawak, and it behaves like a watery highway—busy, loud, and full of purpose. Cargo ships loaded and unloaded containers with the enthusiasm of creatures in a feeding frenzy. Passenger boats lay three deep at the terminal, waiting to ferry villagers upriver. Everything moved, hummed, clanked, or shouted.

Sibu also boasts the impressive Tua Pek Kong Chinese temple, a seven-storey pagoda adorned with dragons and murals of the Chinese zodiac. A huge golden bowl overflowed with incense sticks, and outside, massive joss sticks sent smoke curling into the air. Devotees lit candles, placed fruit and flowers, and moved quietly through the space, creating an atmosphere of peace that felt almost miraculous given the chaos of the riverfront.

That evening, the night market provided roti and curry sauce—simple, perfect, and exactly what one wants after a day of cycling and temple admiration.







Markets, Stares & Chinatown Tea

My plan was to take a boat upriver to Kapit, a three-hour ride into the interior. Unfortunately, the bank was offline, and without cash, my grand upriver adventure was postponed. The day drifted by with me going nowhere, which is a surprisingly common travel experience.

Still, Sibu offered plenty to explore. I spent ages wandering through its enormous covered market, where virtually anything that could be sold was being sold. Fish of every shape and size lay in neat piles—catfish, shrimp, and strange shellfish that looked like props from a science-fiction film. Live chickens were wrapped in newspapers like oddly shaped parcels (poor things), and slaughtered ducks lay unceremoniously nearby, which instantly killed my appetite.

I retreated into the zig-zagging lanes of Chinatown, passing hardware shops, motorcycle stores, and—tragically—no bicycle shop. Occasionally, a sidewalk café offered green tea and shade, which felt like a small miracle.

Since leaving Kuching, I hadn't seen a single Westerner and stuck out like a sore thumb. Being taller, lighter-skinned, and curly-haired made me impossible to miss. People watched me with intense curiosity, as though I were a travelling exhibit. I understood their fascination, but the constant attention was exhausting.

Walking through backstreets toward the night market, shop owners peered out of doorways to inspect the foreigner wandering their neighbourhood. Children called, "Hello, how are you?" and then dissolved into giggles. It was charming, bewildering, and slightly overwhelming all at once.







Longhouses & Milo Stops to Selangau (80 km)

Cycling out of Sibu, the river was already alive with activity. Barges headed downstream carrying enormous logs, and longboats ferried people to and from remote riverside villages. My route passed colourful Chinese temples and indigenous settlements where people still lived in longhouses.

Traditionally, longhouses were built entirely of timber, but nowadays wood and brick are used. They're raised on stilts and divided into a communal veranda in front and a row of private single-room quarters behind—each with one door per family. Cooking areas are often separate, and the whole structure feels like a blend of practicality, tradition, and architectural charm. These villages made convenient places to refill water bottles or enjoy a glass of iced Milo, which is practically a religion in Sarawak.

It was a relatively short ride to Selangau, a village along the Pan Borneo Highway. The original settlement was near the estuary of Sungai Selangau, but when the road was completed in the 1960s, everyone moved to the new town beside the highway. As a result, Selangau had a few shops, a gas station, and a market—just enough to feel like civilisation.

The village's remoteness made me feel like a circus act that had unexpectedly arrived in town. People were polite and helpful, eagerly pointing me toward the inn. After a bite to eat, I spent the afternoon luxuriating in my air-conditioned room. In Borneo's heat, air-conditioning feels like a spiritual experience.

At sunset, villagers gathered at the river. Kids swam, adults fished, and the whole scene felt wonderfully timeless. While taking photos, I met the local English teacher, who told me about a similar village eighty kilometres away. This was valuable information, as the next major town—Bintulu—was 145 kilometres from Selangau, a distance that felt heroic in the heat.



Dinner was a local dish from a sidewalk eatery, washed down with sweet tea. I returned to my room at the City Inn, only to discover it was a kind of brothel—complete with sound effects. Travel is full of surprises, but some surprises are louder than others.

Smoke, Snakes & Tatau (85 km)

The next day's ride was equally enjoyable—by Borneo standards, which means the sun was only moderately trying to kill me. A thin cloud cover offered blessed relief, and I pedalled past enormous logging farms and tiny settlements where villagers moved at a pace suggesting they had collectively agreed not to let the heat rush them. Even the dogs looked too lethargic to give chase, which was a small mercy.

Unfortunately, the air was hazy with pollution. Oil palm companies and logging operations have long used fire to clear land, and although it's illegal, several companies still do it. That year's fires were worse due to dry conditions, and the smoke hung over the landscape like a reminder that humans are not always the best stewards of forests.

I dragged my heels, knowing Tatau was barely eighty-five kilometres away. When a storm rolled in, I sheltered at a bus stop—one of those concrete structures that look like they were designed by someone who had never actually seen a bus. Luckily, tropical rain rarely lasts long, and soon I was back on the road.

Tatau initially appeared to be nothing more than a few houses on stilts, but mercifully there was more to the village beyond the river. As I moved further from cities, English became scarce, and Iban was the primary language. Finding food and lodging became a game of charades, pointing, and hopeful smiling.







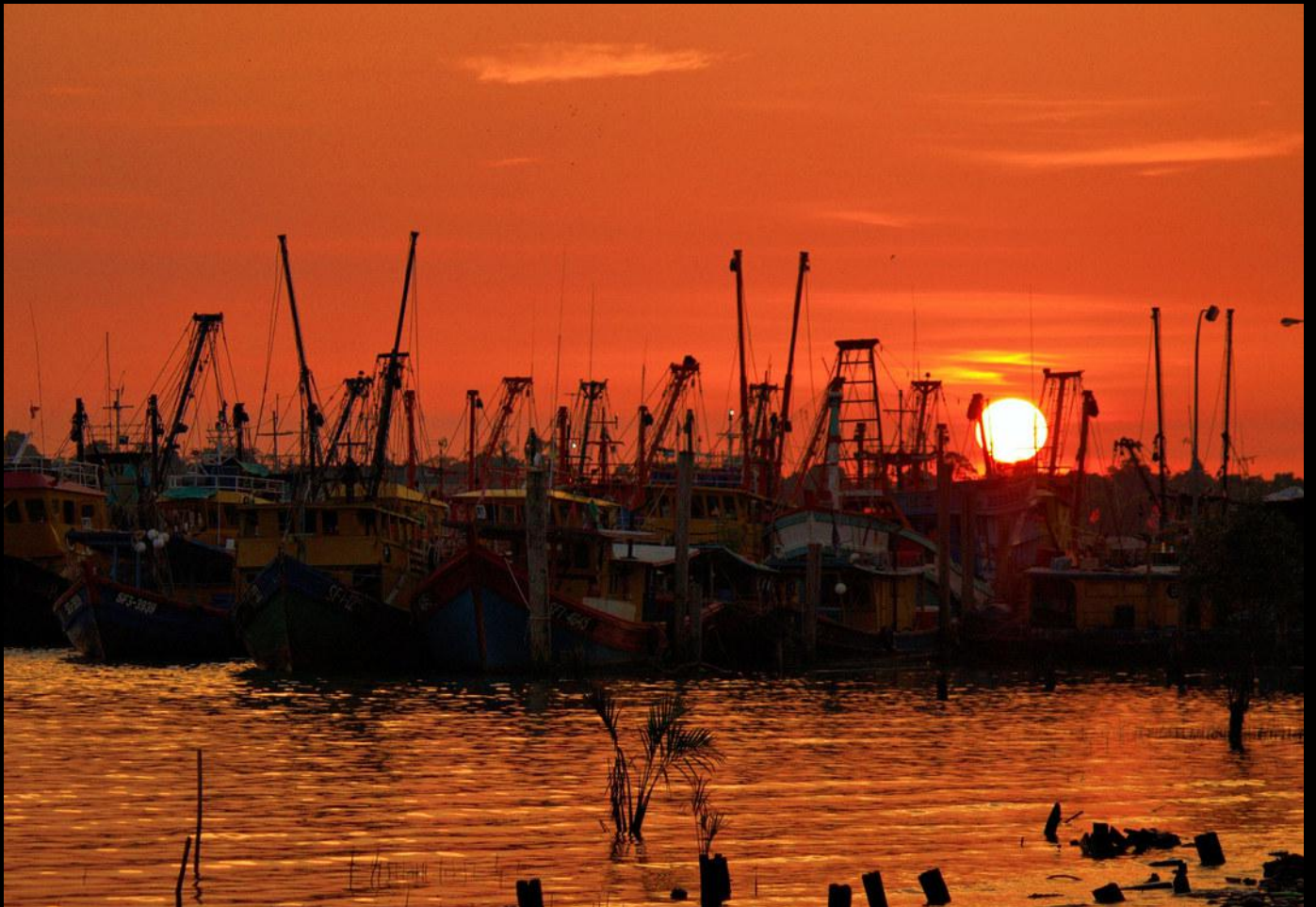
Green Toast & Log Trucks to Bintulu (60 km)

I had a slow start, then headed downstairs for breakfast: eggs and toast. Except the toast was green. Not mouldy—intentionally green, as though someone had decided breakfast needed more whimsy. It came with jam, and the coffee was sweet enough to power a small generator thanks to the condensed milk. No complaints; extra energy is always welcome when cycling.

The road remained hilly, and trucks hauling logs thundered past on their way to Bintulu's harbour. At one point, I saw a man wearing a loincloth—something not often spotted in modern life. It was a reminder that Borneo contains multitudes.

I reached Bintulu and spent some time hunting for accommodation. Prices were slightly higher here, but the Queen's Inn offered a reasonable rate and was conveniently located near the night market and right on the riverfront. After lugging my bicycle and bags up near-vertical stairs, I collapsed into the room. The heat made me nauseous, so I stayed indoors until sunset.

Not feeling hungry, I waited until after eight to wander to the night market. The promenade was the perfect place to watch ships and barges carrying logs downriver. Logging is big business in Borneo, and only when you see millions of logs stacked along the riverbank—waiting to be shipped elsewhere—do you truly grasp the scale of it.



***Kopi*, Markets & Tribal Treasures**

I sat with a *kopi* (as coffee is called) and watched life unfold around me. It was clear I needed another rest day. I spent it doing the usual chores, exploring markets, and searching for a few essentials.

The market was a treasure trove of intriguing items, including a tiny electric pot that could cook small amounts of food. It was cheap, lightweight, and flimsy enough to raise doubts about its lifespan, but I bought it anyway. The market also displayed exotic tropical produce and beautiful tribal clothing.

Sarawak is home to around forty ethnicities, each with its own language and customs, making the markets endlessly fascinating. Malay, Chinese, Indian, and ethnic specialities filled the stalls. I wondered whether I could bring myself to eat sago worms—the larvae of the giant Capricorn beetle—considered a delicacy and high in protein. I suspected the answer was no.

The traditional costume of Iban women was especially impressive. The ngepan Iban includes silver headgear, vibrant beaded collars, woven skirts, belts, corsets, and bangles called tampa (pronounced tempo). I bought a whole set, because when in Borneo, why not acquire ceremonial jewellery?

As the mullah called the faithful to prayer, the heathen (me) set off toward the night market in search of dinner. Walking through a residential area, children called out, “What’s your name, what’s your name?” from dimly lit doorways. Cheating slightly, I replied with any simple name that came to mind and heard them repeating it among themselves, delighted. Too sweet.







Snakes, Nudists & Similajau Solitude (30 km)

The day turned out to be unexpectedly memorable. Instead of following the highway, I took a smaller path that veered toward the coast—always a gamble, occasionally a delight, and sometimes an invitation for strange men to expose themselves. I’ve come to suspect it’s a behavioural quirk found in regions with particularly unhealthy relationships between men and women. Either way, it’s always a shock, and never the good kind.

A sign pointed toward Similajau National Park, barely ten kilometres away. On the way, I almost rode over a snake sunning itself on the tarmac. Fortunately, it saw me first and slithered off with impressive speed. I missed it by centimetres, which is exactly the distance one prefers between oneself and a snake.

The park was wonderfully comfortable, offering chalets and two hostel buildings at reasonable prices. Hardly anyone was around, and I had an entire four-bed dorm to myself. I headed straight for the South China Sea and swam in its lukewarm waters before wandering along a forest trail. The walk was marvellous—no people, just birds chirping and mysterious rustlings in the undergrowth. Few things are more enjoyable than a forest hike: the thick bed of leaves underfoot, the earthy smell of soil, and the sense that the world is quietly getting on with things without you.

Eventually, hunger forced me back to the canteen, where I inhaled a bowl of delicious noodle soup.

Later, I teamed up with three other women and rented a boat to go upriver in search of crocodiles. We didn’t find any, but the river was magical—dead quiet, pitch dark, lit only by fireflies. Life doesn’t get much better than drifting along a silent river in the tropics with fireflies for company.



LIANA

Cissus hypoglauca

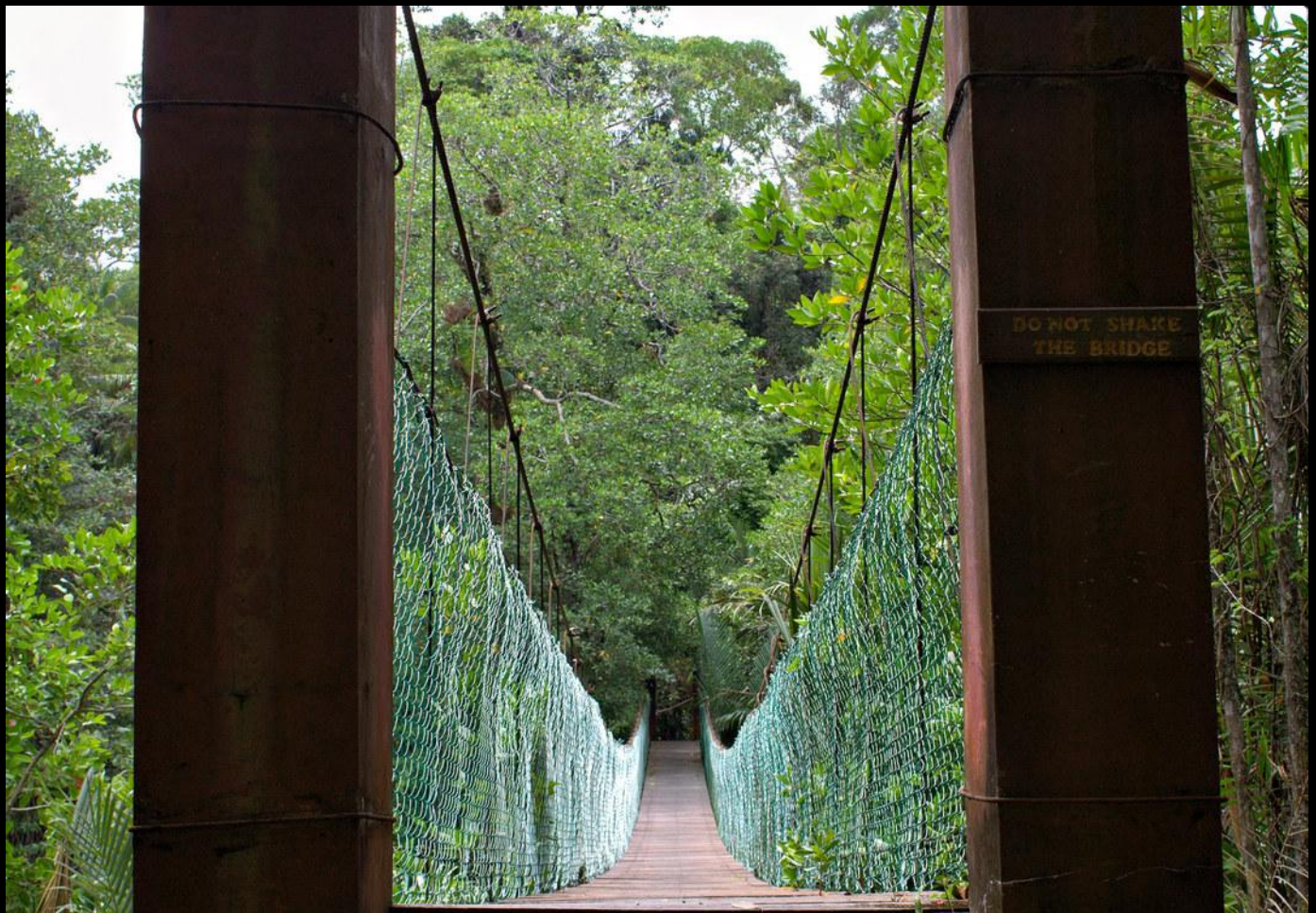
Liana is any woody vine that is rooted in the ground. One grow up to 100 metres long. They form bridges between fore: These provide animals that live on trees with trails across t search of food or shelter.



Do you know?

Large lianas provide good indicator of older trees. They are source of fresh drinking water because they have capilla that carry large volumes of water up the stem.







Oil Palms, Snakes (Again) & Niah National Park (130 km)

I debated staying another day, but waking to a half-overcast sky made the decision easy. The map showed Niah was quite far, with no kampungs in between, so I loaded up with ample water. Breakfast at the canteen with the other ladies delayed my departure until 09h30.

As promised by the map, not much happened along the way—just vast expanses of oil palm plantations. Halfway, a few food stalls appeared, and not far beyond that, another cluster of kiosks where I refilled water bottles. Then the kilometre markers vanished, and without an odometer, I had no idea how far I'd gone. I refrained from asking locals, as islanders tend to measure distance in time—"one hour by moto"—which is useless when you're on a bicycle.

Like the day before, I nearly ran over another snake. I only noticed it when it lifted its head in indignation, clearly offended that I had interrupted its journey. I shrieked, lifted my legs as high as possible, and the snake made a U-turn and slithered away. I also encountered a monitor lizard feasting on roadkill. Tragically, it was so engrossed in its meal that it didn't see a truck coming and ran in the wrong direction. Poor thing.

Toward the end of the day, the road dragged on endlessly. I was relieved to reach Niah—until I discovered the park wasn't where the map indicated but an additional fifteen kilometres down a rural path. There was nothing to do but put my head down and get it over with.

The park looked lovely, but it was too late to explore. I ambled to the canteen and devoured a plate of fried rice.



Deep Skull & Great Cave Wonders

Yesterday's distance was still in my legs, so I had a leisurely start. After breakfast, I crossed the river on foot and followed the four-kilometre forest trail to the Niah cave complex—an enormous system of caves famous for the discovery of the “Deep Skull,” a 42,000-year-old human skull, the oldest modern human found outside Africa.

The first cave was Traders Cave, where nest collectors gather to sell their harvest. Thin poles snaked up from the cave floor to the ceiling, but no one was collecting during my visit.

Next was the aptly named Great Cave, measuring 250 metres across the mouth and 60 metres high. The trail disappeared into pitch darkness, but dramatic beams of light shone through overhead vents whenever the sun shifted. For thousands of years, these caves were used as burial grounds, with bodies placed in boat-shaped coffins.

Bamboo poles and ironwood ladders showed where bird's nest collectors climb to harvest swiftlet nests—made entirely from the birds' salivary secretions. When cleaned and cooked, they become the famous bird's nest soup, prized in Chinese cuisine as highly as caviar in the West.

Collecting nests is dangerous work. Fatalities are not uncommon, but the price—over US\$1000 per kilo for the best quality—makes the risk worthwhile. Unfortunately, such a valuable commodity attracts poachers, and over-harvesting is a constant concern. Park management monitors the caves continuously to deter illegal collectors.







Spider Bites & Bukit Kasut Rainstorms

Laundry was the first order of the morning, which is always a humbling reminder that adventure travel still involves socks. Halfway through rinsing, the camp lost power—meaning no water. Thankfully, an outside tap still sputtered out enough to finish the job. I wrung out my clothes, hung them up, and set off along the Bukit Kasut Trail.

The beginning was lovely. The trail hugged the river and wound through peat swamp forest, making the walk soggy but pleasantly atmospheric. Wild orchids appeared like delicate surprises, and bizarre mushrooms sprouted in shapes that suggested nature occasionally experiments without supervision.

At the foot of Bukit Kasut, a long wooden staircase rose steeply up the mountain. After that came a scramble so vertical it felt like climbing a damp bookshelf. Then the rain arrived—proper tropical rain, the kind that doesn't fall so much as hurl itself at you. The trail turned into a slip-and-slide, and I found myself swinging from branches like a panicked monkey trying not to tumble back down the mountain.

In the process of grabbing for handholds, I was bitten by a spider. Twice. They weren't poisonous, as evidenced by the fact that I'm writing this, but still—being bitten by a spider is never on anyone's list of preferred holiday activities.

Near the top, ladders made the ascent slightly more manageable, and the final stretch came with a rope to cling to. The summit was rumoured to offer beautiful vistas, but with the rain pouring down, visibility was approximately one metre. I turned around and descended mostly on my backside, carefully and quickly, aware that it could be weeks before anyone else visited this trail.



Heat, Tailwinds & Oil-Rich Miri (85 km)

With nearly all the park's activities done, I headed toward Miri. The day began promisingly, but soon the relentless heat returned. A slight tailwind helped during the final stretch along the coast, which felt like cycling through a sauna with scenic views.

Arriving in Miri was a shock. The city was oil-rich, modern, and full of colossal mansions and high-rise buildings—an architectural plot twist after the rest of Sarawak's modest towns. I headed straight for the old part of the city, where things felt more authentic and less like a brochure for offshore drilling wealth.

Shopping Without Success

I spent the morning wandering Miri's streets, searching for a bicycle computer and a lightweight tripod or gorilla pod. By the end of the day, I had purchased several things—none of which were the items I actually needed. This is a special talent of mine.

I debated whether to go to Mulu. The boat upriver was far more expensive than a flight, and I was dithering. Then I bumped into Monica and Silvia—easy to spot, as we all stood head and shoulders above the rest of the population. They invited me to dinner at a seafood restaurant, where we consumed more beer than food. It was another delightful evening with two wonderfully eccentric women.



Mulu Indecision & Ramadan Nights

My indecision about Mulu continued, so I stayed another day. Eventually, I bought a bicycle computer, had my bag sewn at the market, and checked flights to Mulu. Fate intervened: the first available flight was in a week, and I wasn't going to linger in Miri that long.

I resumed the hunt for a gorilla pod, convinced it was the perfect solution. Shops sold excellent lightweight tripods, but the real question was whether I would actually use one—take it out, unfold it, mount the camera, and then take the shot. I suspected the answer was no.

That evening, I sat at a pavement café with a beer and some food, listening to mosques calling people to prayer. Ramadan was nearing its end, and people were shopping with feverish enthusiasm. Once the sun set, fireworks lit the sky and restaurants filled instantly.

As I sat there, someone asked about my trip. After I explained the where, when, and how, he looked me straight in the eye and said, "I don't believe you." I couldn't care less whether he believed me. This wasn't the first time I'd had such a response—apparently I don't look the part.



Visa Chaos & the Long Bus Back to Kuching (60 km + bureaucracy)

I left Miri at 08h00, unsure whether the day would turn into a long slog or a pleasant jaunt. It turned out to be the latter—an effortless thirty kilometres to the Brunei border, past busy rivers and people working fields under conical hats, looking exactly like the Southeast Asian postcards one suspects were staged.

At the border, officials informed me they could not issue transit visas. I would have to return to Kuching to obtain one at the consulate. This was not the information given by the embassy, but arguing with immigration officials is like arguing with a brick wall—except the wall is armed and has a stamp.

Tail between my legs, I cycled back to Miri, found a place to store my bicycle and panniers, and boarded a night bus to Kuching.

The fourteen-hour bus ride was long, potholed, and occasionally airborne. The seats were comfortable, but the road was not, and several times I felt certain I might bounce right out of my seat and into someone's lap.







Kuching - Consulate Success & River Sunset

I must have drifted into a half-sleep, because suddenly I was in Kuching. A taxi whisked me to the Brunei Consulate, where I filled out forms, paid the fee, and was told to collect the visa in two days. Bureaucracy is rarely pleasant, but at least this part went smoothly.

Beds Guesthouse became my home again for two nights. That evening, I took a sunset boat ride along the Sarawak River—peaceful, scenic, and a welcome reminder that travel isn't always about sweating, cycling, and paperwork. Dinner came from one of the many Chinese restaurants, and as expected, it was excellent.

Cultural Village & Lemang Fever

By now, I had seen nearly everything Kuching had to offer. The only remaining attraction was the cultural village, a forty-five-minute shuttle ride away. Cultural villages are usually fake—tourist dioramas with suspiciously cheerful actors—but this one was surprisingly good. The dance show was genuinely enjoyable, and the show longhouses, though empty, were wonderfully cool inside.

Back in town, the markets were buzzing. The next day marked the end of Ramadan, and bazaars overflowed with people buying food, clothes, and gifts. Mobile carts sold lemang—glutinous rice cooked with coconut milk in bamboo over an open fire—an immensely popular treat at this time of year.







Hari Raya Bus Crush - Kuching → Miri (Hari Raya Aidilfitri)

I collected my passport in the morning and boarded the night bus. It was Hari Raya Aidilfitri, one of the most important celebrations for Muslims. Many people return to their hometowns during this period (Balik Kampung), and the bus was understandably crammed. We shook, rattled, and rolled through the night, arriving in Miri at 09h30 the next day.

Backstreets & Boiling Heat

I headed straight to the inn where my bicycle was stored and was relieved to find everything still in place. It was already late, so I stayed one more night. Outside, the weather was boiling, and an air-conditioned room felt like a sanctuary.

A wander through the backstreets revealed an eatery still open, frequented mostly by villagers. It was a fascinating glimpse into local life—quiet, unpretentious, and far more interesting than anything in the glossy part of town.



BRUNEI

Into Tiny, Wealthy Brunei (121 km)

Venturing further east brought me to the Brunei border and into tiny Brunei. I say tiny because the entire distance from the border to the ferry point for Sabah is at most 150 kilometres—practically pocket-sized by country standards.

Brunei is remarkable in several ways. First, it's a Sultanate, and an extremely conservative one. Second, it's wealthy—spectacularly wealthy. The Sultan of Brunei is worth around US\$22 billion, thanks to oil. Education and healthcare are free, houses and cars are subsidised, pilgrimages to Mecca are subsidised, and personal income tax is a mythical concept that doesn't exist.

This all results in a country full of fancy, fast cars. The problem is that not all owners of fast cars are good drivers. Add alcohol to the mix—despite Brunei being officially dry—and cycling becomes a sport requiring nerves of steel. Judging by the number of empty beer cans along the tarmac, not everyone adheres to the no-alcohol rule.

A threatening storm loomed all day but produced only a few drops. Seria, the first town, was a convenient place to draw Brunei dollars, which seemed suspiciously low compared to the US dollar. Back on my mobile home, I pedalled along until reaching Tutong around 16h00, which seemed a sensible place to overnight. The single hotel in town was hellishly expensive—but this was Brunei.

It was the second day of Hari Raya Aidilfitri, and everything was shut except a tiny supermarket. I dug into my emergency food stash, grateful I occasionally plan ahead.



Kampong Ayer & Golden Domes - Bandar Seri Begawan (55 km)

Brunei isn't large, and my path soon spat me out in Bandar Seri Begawan (or simply Bandar), the capital. En route, I stopped for a cold drink. When I tried to pay, the owner waved me off—the drink was already paid for. This kind of spontaneous generosity happens mostly in Muslim countries, and it never fails to warm the heart.

In Bandar, I hopped on a water taxi to Kampong Ayer, the sprawling stilt village across the river. The boats—nicknamed “coffins” due to their shape and alarming speed—zip back and forth between the city and the village. Not long ago, Kampong Ayer was Bandar. Today, it stretches almost eight kilometres along the Brunei River and houses around 30,000 residents. It's a fully functioning floating town with schools, clinics, police stations, fire brigades, and mosques. Walkways and bridges connect everything, and wandering around was enormous fun.

Back on the mainland, I ambled to the Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin Mosque. Built in 1958, it features a golden dome, Italian marble walls, and an elevator. Rumour has it the Sultan uses tunnels beneath the mosque to move around town discreetly. The minaret stands at 44 metres, making it the tallest building in the city. The Islamic Bank of Brunei once tried to outdo it, but when their building exceeded the mosque's height, they were instructed to remove the top storey. One does not out-tower the Sultan.

That evening, I boarded another coffin to glimpse the Sultan's residence. I had hoped to take photos, but photographing anything from a violently vibrating boat in darkness is impossible. The palace is enormous—1,788 rooms, larger than Buckingham Palace or the Vatican. The Sultan also owns two Boeings and 5,000 cars. Yes, five thousand. It's not a typo.







SABAH

Ferries, Motorboats & Survivor Country - Bandar → Muara → Ferry to Pulau Labuan → Kuala Penyu, Sabah (75 km)

A short cycle took me to Muara, where ferries were supposed to run to Lawas. Once there, I learned ferries only went to Pulau Labuan. Fortunately, from Labuan, ferries and motorboats operate to various other locations.

The ferry departed at 13h00. Inside, it resembled a submarine—tubular, enclosed, and claustrophobic. As soon as we were underway, I hoped it had submarine-like stability, because the seas were rough and the boat rolled violently from side to side. Still, it must have been fast, because we docked at Pulau Labuan an hour later.

From Labuan, the mainland was visible, so I took a motorboat to the tiny village of Menumbok. My bicycle was strapped to the roof, and the boat sped across the open sea at breakneck speed. I clung on for dear life, hoping I wouldn't see my bicycle floating away behind us.

Miraculously, we arrived in Menumbok with both me and the bike intact. From there, Kuala Penyu was barely forty kilometres away, reached via a remote part of the country. Few people ever venture there, as the road is a dead-end. It was so remote that I stumbled upon the filming location of the first Survivor series.



Rain-Locked in Kuala Penyu

I woke to pouring rain—the kind that doesn’t merely fall but arrives with the enthusiasm of a marching band. Any plans to explore Tiger Island or the wetland reserve dissolved instantly. Instead, the day became a laundry day and a day of loitering around Kuala Penyu, which is about as thrilling as it sounds.

A stroll to the river revealed a few restaurants serving noodle soup and sweet tea. My arrival caused what can only be described as a small riot. People crowded around, craning their necks to catch a glimpse of the foreign woman in their midst. I kid you not. Eating noodle soup while an entire village watches is an experience that should be listed under “extreme sports.”





Beaufort Floodlands & Railway Dreams (40 km)

I soon reached Beaufort. With such an English-sounding name and a desperate need for an ATM, I pulled in. The village was a typical jungle settlement—except it had a railway station, which felt oddly sophisticated. Beaufort is notorious for annual flooding, so shops and homes are built on stilts. Rows of blue, two-storey wooden shophouses gave the town a rustic charm.

Finding accommodation was easy, and I spent the rest of the day lazing around. Plans to visit the wetland reserve proved impossible, and nothing came of them. The railway intrigued me, and I would've loved to take the train to the end of the line just to see what was there, but no trains were running. Typical.





Valley Roads to Kota Kinabalu (98 km)

None of my plans came to anything, and every inquiry produced a different answer. I eventually gave up and resumed my journey. The road was busy and narrow, which made cycling feel like a game of survival.

Halfway to Kota Kinabalu, a high mountain range loomed ahead, reminding me never to become too blasé. Fortunately, the road followed a valley instead of climbing the mountains, and the ride turned out beautiful—lush green farmlands, hamlets, riverside settlements, and interesting people going about their day.

I finally got into a rhythm: the wheels spun smoothly, making a soft whirring sound, and the kilometres flew by. I pedalled past women carrying baskets strapped to their backs, durian stalls, and scrawny dogs too timid to give chase.

Intriguingly, the route passed custom-built concrete bird's nest factories. Edible bird's nests are among the priciest animal products consumed by humans. Made of interwoven strands of solidified saliva, they're high in calcium, iron, potassium, and magnesium. It's astonishing what people will pay for when told it's good for them.

Eventually, I slinked into the big, modern city of Kota Kinabalu—just KK to its friends.



Windowless KK & Tourist Lane Misery Kota Kinabalu

I had a slow start. The room was windowless (one of my pet hates), but the price was right. With no real plans, I wandered around to see what KK had to offer. The waterfront was the only part that sparked interest—fishing boats, markets, food stalls. The rest was blazing hot and not conducive to walking.

The bank was offline and couldn't dispense money, which was infuriating. By evening, instead of visiting the night market as usual, I sought out the tourist lane—restaurants playing Western music, massive TV screens, beer, pizza. Strangely, most patrons were locals. The foreigners were at the night market, and the locals were at the tourist strip. I endured ear-splitting music, overpriced beer, and lousy food before retreating to my digs, having had my fill of Western culture.





Island Hopping & Wrinkled Fingers

In the morning, I jumped on a boat to the nearby islands. Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park consists of five islands off the coast of KK. The day was barely long enough to explore three of them—and what a blast. I snorkelled until my fingers and toes wrinkled. The water was lukewarm and crystal clear, the fish colourful and plentiful. There are times I genuinely think I'm happiest in the water.

Sadly, the time came too soon to return. If I'd known camping was allowed on the islands, I would've brought my tent.

I spent an additional day in KK. Sadly, World War II bombs destroyed nearly all of the city. Apart from the waterfront markets, the islands were the only real points of interest.





Upside-Down Houses & Sugarcane Mercy to Kota Belud (75 km)

I picked up my laundry, grabbed a Chinese bun and coffee, and pedalled out of Kota Kinabalu. Just outside Tuaran stood an upside-down house—an architectural oddity that demanded investigation. The entire structure was inverted: tables, chairs, beds, lamps, all hanging from the ceiling like a domestic bat colony. Even the car was suspended from the carport roof, as though gravity had taken the day off. It was bizarre, delightful, and a welcome distraction before the suffering began.

Because soon, the road became extremely mountainous. The weather was blisteringly hot, and I crawled up the inclines at a pace that would make a tortoise impatient. Sweat poured off me in sheets.

Then—salvation. A vendor selling ice-cold sugarcane juice. I approached, ready to buy one, but the vendor waved frantically and pointed to a drink already waiting for me. An anonymous traveller had paid for it and instructed the stall owner to flag me down. How wonderful is that? I gulped it down, fuelled by sugar and goodwill, and suddenly felt capable of tackling a few more hills.







The Endless Climb to Poropok View (45 km)

Overnight, I had a change of heart and decided to cycle over the mountains past Mt. Kinabalu National Park. Unfortunately, I had already passed the main turn-off, so I took the secondary route—an innocent-sounding phrase that in reality means “prepare for suffering.”

The hills were nasty. The uphill went on and on, kilometre after kilometre, and I gasped my way up the near-vertical gradient, drenched in perspiration and questioning all my life choices.

Eventually, a kind man stopped and offered me water, informing me that seven kilometres remained to the top. Soon after, another good Samaritan stopped and offered me a ride. I seriously considered it—my legs were staging a mutiny—but in the end, stubbornness prevailed and I continued huffing and puffing up the mountain.

“Top of the hill” turned out to mean the junction with the main road from KK. From there, the going was more manageable—still uphill, still slow, but no longer resembling a punishment devised by medieval monks.

Just when I felt I could go no further, a settlement selling handicrafts and snacks appeared. I asked if I could pitch my tent, and no one seemed remotely surprised. They pointed me to a covered area with electricity, a tap, and nearby toilets. Bliss. It rained all night, and I was immensely grateful for the roof. I learned I wasn’t the first cyclist to camp there—three others had done so before. Misery loves company.







Storms, Homestays & Kinabalu Clouds (16 km)

Local wisdom claimed a seven-kilometre climb remained before the road levelled out. Local wisdom was wrong. The road continued skyward, and I nearly had a humour failure. Eventually, though, I reached the park.

Sadly, the park's accommodation had been handed over to a resort company that had jacked up prices dramatically. Staying outside the park gate at a homestay was far more reasonable, and I was thrilled to be done with the hills.

I enquired about hiking Mt. Kinabalu, but the trek was far too complicated. Instead, I rinsed my sweaty clothes and had a bite to eat at the adjacent restaurant. The weather turned foul, and I was grateful to be indoors rather than halfway up a mountain.

Kinabalu Trails & Lucia's Company

The storm dissipated overnight, and I woke to clear skies and a magnificent view of Mt. Kinabalu rising 4,101 metres above sea level. After the usual noodle soup breakfast, I set out along one of the park's trails. I soon met Lucia—from Spain but living in Mozambique—and we continued together. The route was pleasant, full of unusual plants. Afterwards, we barely had time for lunch before Lucia had to catch her bus back to KK.







Superwoman Downhill & Telupid Triumph (115 km)

I flew downhill the twenty kilometres to Ranau. All I needed was a red cape and I could've been Superwoman—an image that kept me giggling the entire way. I swept past settlements clinging precariously to the mountainside, each house with its patch of land forming a pretty mosaic of lines and colours. The jagged peaks of Mt. Kinabalu slowly faded behind me.

Soon, the road began snaking up yet another mountain, and it continued in that vein for the rest of the day. There's not much one can do except put your head down and get on with it. The weather was sweltering, and water became the biggest challenge. I stopped at every conceivable watering hole to refill my bottles.

For reasons unknown even to myself, I had my eye set on Telupid—almost 120 kilometres from Mt. Kinabalu. Determined, I tackled hill after hill, and the kilometres slowly ticked down. My mood lifted when a signboard announced four kilometres to Telupid. I was nearly there.

At the same moment, a significant climb appeared. Bloody hell. Thankfully, so did a sign for the Golden Star Hotel. I decided instantly that the remaining distance could wait until morning.

The hotel was unusual—relatively new, and everything worked. The air-con was icy cold, the shower warm, the bed firm. Heaven. The downstairs restaurant was popular despite the remote location.

By evening, I sat on the veranda with a beer, watching large trucks battle up the hill in dreadful weather. I had the distinct feeling the staff drew straws to decide who would serve the foreigner. A fair amount of giggling occurred before one shyly emerged, pointing to her mouth to ask what I wanted to eat. I was perfectly content with a massive plate of fried rice.







Later, I giggled again as I crawled into bed, listening to the rain pour down as only tropical rain can.

Heat, Trucks & “Another One Down” (80 km)

I couldn’t pretend to be refreshed as I tackled the first hill of the day. My legs felt like damp rope, and lethargy clung to me like a second skin. No sooner had the road cleared one mountain than it headed straight over another. Up and down it went, past oil palm plantation after oil palm plantation, all under the day’s scorching heat.

The ride was exhausting—not just physically, but mentally. I had to keep my eyes glued to the rear-view mirror to spot trucks barreling up behind me. More than once, I had to fling myself off the tarmac because there simply wasn’t enough space for me and two trucks. The kilometres passed painfully slowly, and each time I saw a signboard, the phrase “another one down, another one down” popped into my head. It drove me absolutely bonkers. No matter how I tried, I couldn’t shake it. “Another one down, another one down.”

Then came the day’s biggest surprise. Ahead, a line of traffic stretched over the hill and into the distance—completely stationary. At first, I assumed it was due to road maintenance, which seemed to be a permanent feature of Sabah. I tried weaving through the jam, but trenches dug alongside the road left barely enough room for two cars, let alone two trucks and one sweaty cyclist.

I pulled off at a street trader, who informed me there had been an accident ahead—and that a guesthouse and restaurant lay just 500 metres further on. How lucky can one be? “Another one down, another one down.”







Traffic Terror & Hammock Heaven (30 km)

The traffic was no better the next day. The ride was physically and mentally draining—I was off the tarmac more than on it. Trucks flew by in both directions, making cycling feel like a dangerous hobby best left to people with better insurance.

Thirty kilometres later, I reached the turn-off to the Sepilok Orang-Utan Centre and felt immense relief to leave the main road behind.

Various accommodation options lay beyond the turn-off, including the popular Uncle Tan's. I needed no second invitation. I off-loaded the bicycle and was soon swinging in a hammock under a colossal mango tree, utterly exhausted. The bungalow was pricey, but the rate included three meals—a blessing, as there were no shops nearby.

The following day, I visited the orangutan centre and spent the rest of the day at leisure. Uncle Tan's was perfect for unwinding, with its jungle setting, open space, and hammocks that practically begged you to stay another day.



Kinabatangan Wildlife Cruise – Orangutans at Last

A boat trip up the Kinabatangan River was a novel way to see Sabah's famous rainforest. The river is the longest in the state, beginning high in the Crocker Range and flowing 560 kilometres to the Sulu Sea. First came a mini-bus ride to the river, then an hour by boat to our jungle camp.

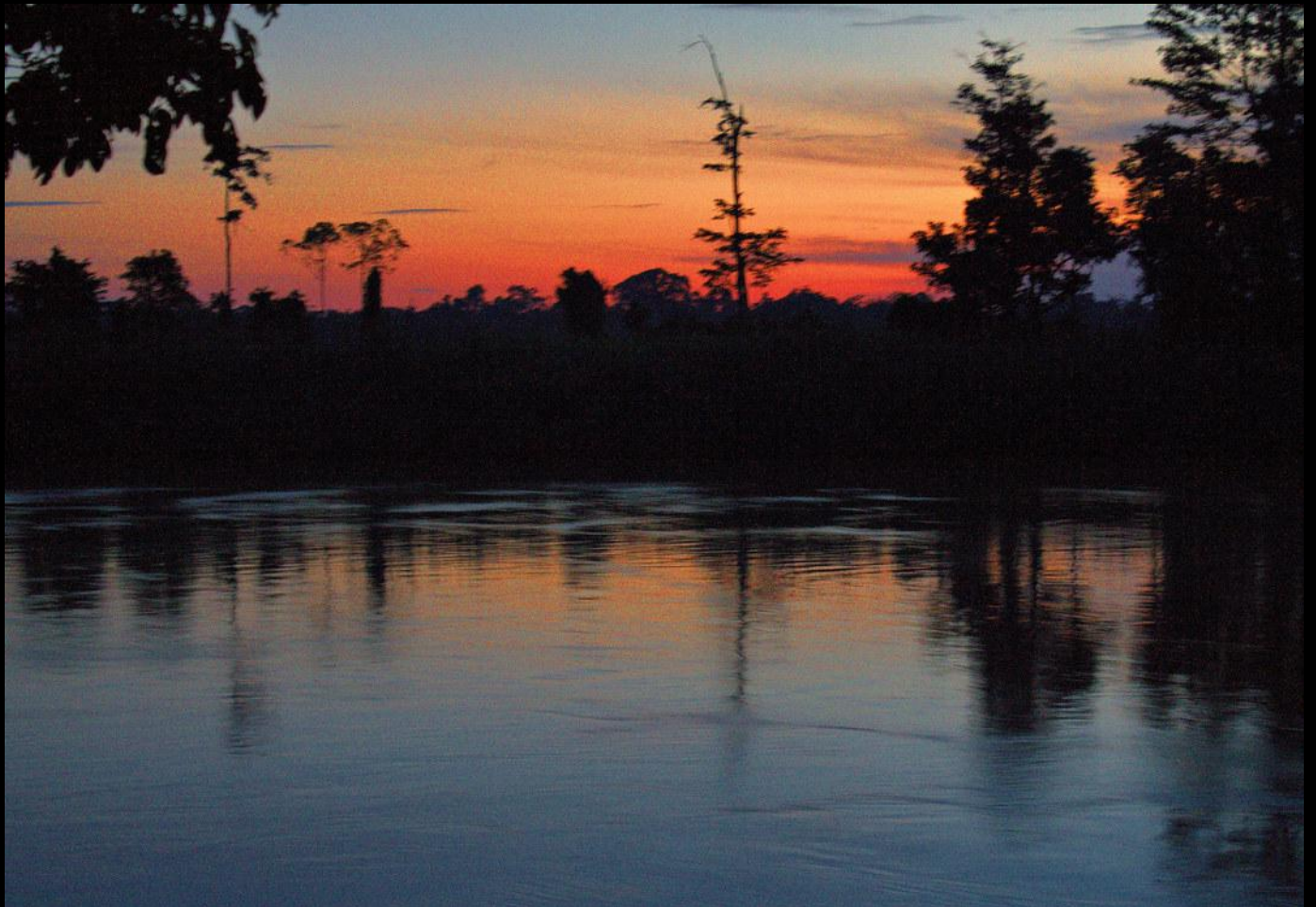
By late afternoon, we were out on the river searching for wildlife. We saw plenty of monkeys settling into treetops for the night, along with crocodiles and monitor lizards. Birdlife was abundant—eagles, owls, hornbills, kingfishers, and many others whose names I didn't know.

The jungle camp consisted of half-open structures with mattresses on the floor and much-needed mosquito nets. The night was noisy—monkeys, frogs, and countless unidentifiable sounds. Toilets were miles away and not somewhere one wanted to visit in the dark.

Early the next morning, we were out again searching for orangutans. We didn't find any, but saw numerous birds, a few crocodiles, and plenty of monkeys. After breakfast, we hiked through the jungle, spotting tiny insects and unusual plants. By evening, we returned to the river. Even though we didn't see much, it remained a pleasant outing. Later, wearing wellies, we ventured into swampy wetlands and uncovered intriguing insects and birds—mostly fast asleep.

On our final day, we took one more boat trip—and finally spotted orangutans calmly going about their business while we stared in awe. Then, sadly, it was time to return to civilisation.

I stayed one more night at Uncle Tan's. It was a highly convenient, swing-another-day-in-a-hammock kind of place.







Water Villages & Sandakan Arrival (35 km)

The busy main road led me toward Sandakan and past the water village of Kampung Buli Sim-Sim. This village was the nucleus around which Sandakan expanded in the nineteenth century. It was a fascinating world, and villagers found me as curious as I found them. “Farang, farang!” the children shouted before running for their lives. (Farang being the Thai word for someone of European ancestry.)

Once in Sandakan, I inquired about the ferry to Zamboanga City on Mindanao Island—the southernmost island of the Philippines. No one could tell me when or from where it sailed.

I suspected the lack of knowledge stemmed from Mindanao’s reputation as one of the Philippines’ most dangerous islands. Kidnappings were not uncommon, and several foreigners had been captured in Zamboanga City. This was not a place where one wanted to be mistaken for a journalist. The island’s Muslim population (the Moros) had long sought autonomy, and since the Maguindanao massacre in 2009—when 57 civilians, including four journalists, were killed—Mindanao ranked second only to Iraq as the deadliest place for journalists. An attack even occurred during my visit, leaving many dead and resulting in a tense hostage crisis—more about that in the next post.

Eventually, I cycled to the ferry port and learned the ferry only sailed on Tuesdays. I wished it were the next day, but there was nothing to do but wait five days. I found a bed at Sandakan Backpackers and wondered how on earth I’d pass the time.



“Merdeka, Merdeka, Merdeka.” The next day was Hari Kemerdekaan, Malaysia’s Independence Day. The town was alive with food stalls, balloons, jumping castles, and parades. The waterfront was packed with people sipping noodle soup and drinking tea. I didn’t feel uncomfortable taking photos—thousands of photos must have been taken of me.

The following day, Independence Day celebrations continued. Having had enough of crowds, I wandered back to Kampung Buli Sim-Sim. The water village was well organised, and it was fun meandering along wooden walkways. Kids ran up wanting their pictures taken. Every so often, I heard “Welcome to Sim-Sim” from inside the houses. I felt oddly at home.

The Sunday market was fascinating—selling everything from clothing to food to pets.

The next day, I bought my ferry ticket—and had to buy a return ticket, as the Philippines required proof of onward travel. It was costly, but less troublesome than flying.



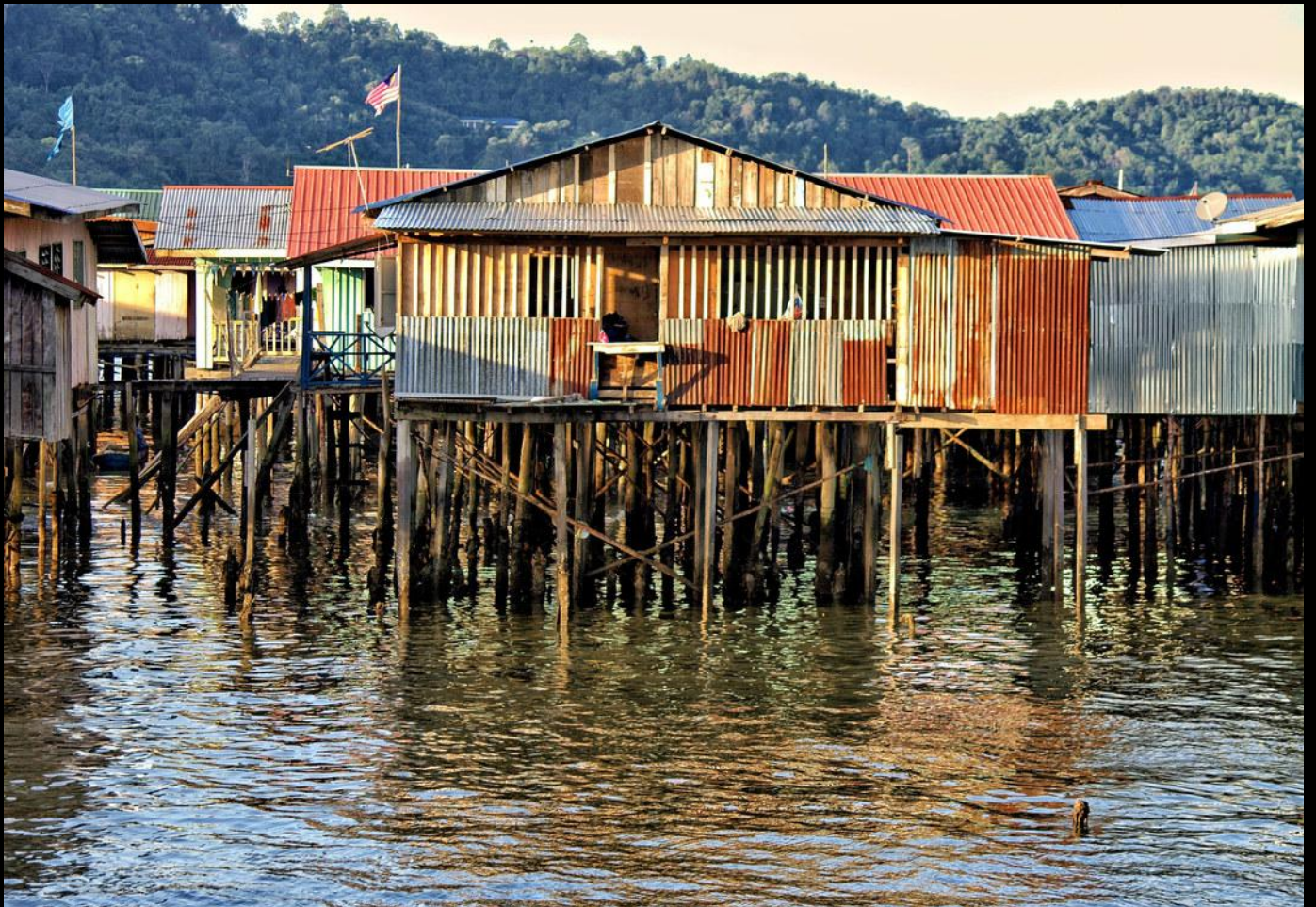


Ferry Chaos & Fluorescent Nights to Zamboanga City

At last, the third arrived. Although the ticket stated a 16h00 departure, we were told to board at 18h00. Shortly before leaving, the rain bucketed down. The last thing I wanted was to cycle eight kilometres to the ferry in pouring rain. Luckily, tropical rain comes hard and fast, and soon cleared.

The port was a madhouse—people, trucks, buses, minivans. Once aboard, I discovered double bunk beds on the deck (better than sleeping on the floor). My bed was No. 317—and that was only on Deck 1. People kept pouring in, and it was common for two or more passengers to have the same bunk number.

We finally departed after 22h00. The tiny canteen was jam-packed and hardly worth the wait. The bunks were crammed together, and the night was noisy—snoring, coughing, burping, farting, all under blazing fluorescent lights. Eventually, I fell asleep.







Zamboanga Arrival & Midnight Hotel Hunt – Zamboanga City, Mindanao, Philippines

I woke to more chattering, coughing, burping, farting, and radios blaring. The vessel crawled along at a snail's pace—engine problems, apparently.

Being the sole foreigner aboard, I attracted plenty of attention. People gathered at the end of my bunk, staring motionlessly. Fortunately, the ladies beside me took it upon themselves to protect me, telling onlookers when it was time to leave. Perfect—someone was always available to watch my belongings.

Hours passed. The sun sank below the horizon. Still no land in sight. I sat on deck watching Muslims perform evening prayers to the soothing sounds of an impromptu mullah—calming and peaceful against the vibrant sunset.

We docked around 21h00, but didn't disembark until after 23h00. Everyone wanted off first. Passengers then had to wait for transportation to immigration. Meanwhile, kids hopped aboard, scavenging for anything—unattended luggage, leftover food. They moved like monkeys, scaling the ferry's sides with astonishing speed. Security had no chance of catching them.

Immigration was chaos. The queue snaked across the building. People pushed and shoved, though it achieved nothing. The room was stuffy and hot, sweat pouring down faces. People fanned themselves with passports—uselessly.

By the time I was done, it was far too late to search for accommodation—especially given the island's reputation. I followed deserted streets by headlamp, passing only a few homeless people. The first two hotels were full, the third too expensive. The fourth was perfect. I closed the door at 1h30 a.m., utterly spent.







EPILOGUE

Borneo was a long, hot, hilly lesson in human generosity and geographical mischief. It gave me rivers at dusk, jungle trails at dawn, strangers who waved me onward, and landscapes that made every kilometre feel earned. I left sunburnt, bitten, stared at, occasionally bewildered—and grateful.

The kilometres were long. The days were hot. The journey was unforgettable.







About this Chapter

Welcome to my ride through Borneo! This chapter captures the spirit of my cycle ride as I made my way toward the beautiful Philippines. While there are countless routes to explore, the path I've described is just one of the many adventures you could embark on. If you're looking to use this book as your cycling guide, here are a few important considerations to keep in mind:

Distances

The daily distances I documented may not always reflect a straight line from point A to B; I often found myself veering off course, following curiosity and hidden trails. However, the kilometres logged were precise, thanks to my trusty odometer.

Time of Year and Date

I explored Borneo between July and September 2013, and oh, what a ride it was! Keep in mind that things can change dramatically over time—roads might have improved, or maybe they've become more rugged. As for the accommodations, some places I enjoyed might have changed or disappeared altogether. And those hills? They felt like mountains to me back then; your experience could easily vary!

Insurance

Before you hit the road, don't forget to get travel insurance. It's your safety net for theft, loss, and those unexpected medical issues. Just a heads-up: some policies may omit coverage for "dangerous activities." While cycling isn't typically classified as dangerous, it's wise to read the fine print!

Clothing

Get ready to spend long hours in the saddle! Invest in quality padded cycling shorts—you'll thank me later. As for footwear, I cycle in comfy sandals, but choose whatever feels good to you. Borneo is a hot and humid paradise year-round, so warm clothing won't be necessary unless you're tackling the heights of Mount Kinabalu. Pack insect repellent and anti-chafe cream to keep those pesky bugs and discomfort at bay. And please, wear a cycling helmet for your safety!

The Bicycle

Choose a bike that feels right for you—comfort is key! I recommend equipping your ride with Tubus bicycle racks, which most shops can install for you. While panniers can be a bit pricey, they're vital for your gear, and Ortlieb panniers are highly regarded for their durability. For tyres, I swear by Schwalbe; they may cost a bit more, but you'll be grateful when you rarely get a flat. Make sure you know how to fix a punctured tube; it can save a ride! I also find that having a phone holder on my handlebars is super helpful for navigation. I often rely on Maps.ME or Google Maps to stay on track. Lastly, a handlebar bag is fantastic for stashing your camera and other essentials during your daily explorations.

Are you ready to pedal through this incredible landscape? Let's get started!



Discovering Malaysian Borneo: A Tropical Paradise Awaits!

Capital City

Step into the vibrant world of Malaysian Borneo, which includes the stunning states of Sabah and Sarawak. While the bustling capital of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, dazzles with its modern skyline and high-tech amenities, Borneo has its own capitals that bring unique flavours to the table. In Sabah, experience the laid-back charm of Kota Kinabalu, where beautiful beaches meet majestic mountains. Meanwhile, Kuching, the capital of Sarawak, offers a rich tapestry of culture and history along the banks of the Sarawak River.

Currency

When you're ready to explore, you'll find that the currency of choice is the Malaysian Ringgit (MYR), with an exchange rate around 0.25 USD to 1 RM (though it's always good to check for the latest rates). Look for the symbol RM as you indulge in local feasts and shop for unique handicrafts!

Language

Language is the key to unlocking the heart of a place, and in Borneo, you'll hear Bahasa Malaysia as the official tongue. But don't stop there! You'll also encounter a tapestry of tongues — from various Chinese dialects like Cantonese and Mandarin to Tamil and English. Plus, with numerous indigenous tribes, every corner of this island breathes its own linguistic life.

Religion

Religion in Borneo adds another vibrant layer to its culture. While Islam holds a significant place, you'll find a mix of beliefs here: about 60% are Muslims, followed by 19% Buddhists, 9% Christians, and 6% Hindus. This diversity contributes to the rich cultural tapestry that you'll experience throughout your travels.

Location and Size

Geographically, Borneo is a marvel, nestled to the north of Java, west of Sulawesi, and east of Sumatra. This magnificent island stands out as the only one in the world governed by three nations: Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia. Did you know that approximately 73% of Borneo belongs to Indonesia? The idyllic east Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak take up about 26%, while the charming Brunei holds about 1% of the island's land area. Half of Borneo stretches across the Northern Hemisphere, while the Indonesian territory spans both hemispheres!

Population

With a lively population of about 21.3 million (as of 2014), Borneo is home to a wonderfully diverse mix of people, with a population density of just 29 per square kilometre. Most residents inhabit coastal cities, where urban life pulses vibrantly, while small communities along the rivers in the hinterland retain a quiet charm that reflects the island's pastoral beauty.

Internet Coverage

Lastly, if you're tech-savvy or simply want to stay connected while exploring, you'll be pleased to find that internet services are widely available along the coast, especially in towns. Whether sharing your adventure or staying in touch with loved ones back home, you won't be completely disconnected from the digital world.

Embark on a journey to Malaysian Borneo and immerse yourself in its stunning landscapes, rich cultures, and the warmth of its people. Adventure awaits around every corner!



About the Author

Hailing from the city of Cape Town, South Africa, Leana's journey into the world of cycling began not with years of training but with a single bold decision. In 2005, driven by curiosity and a spirit of adventure, she entered the Tour D'Afrique—a legendary mountain bike race stretching from Cairo to Cape Town. With little cycling experience, Leana purchased a bicycle, flew to Cairo, and set out on a route that would take her the entire distance from Cairo to Cape Town.

Returning home, Leana found that the rhythms of ordinary life could not compare to the freedom of the open road. The call of adventure proved irresistible, and in March 2007, she and her companion, Ernest Markwood, embarked on a journey that would evolve into a round-the-world cycling odyssey. Though they began together, the road eventually led them to discover their own unique directions—both in travel and in life.

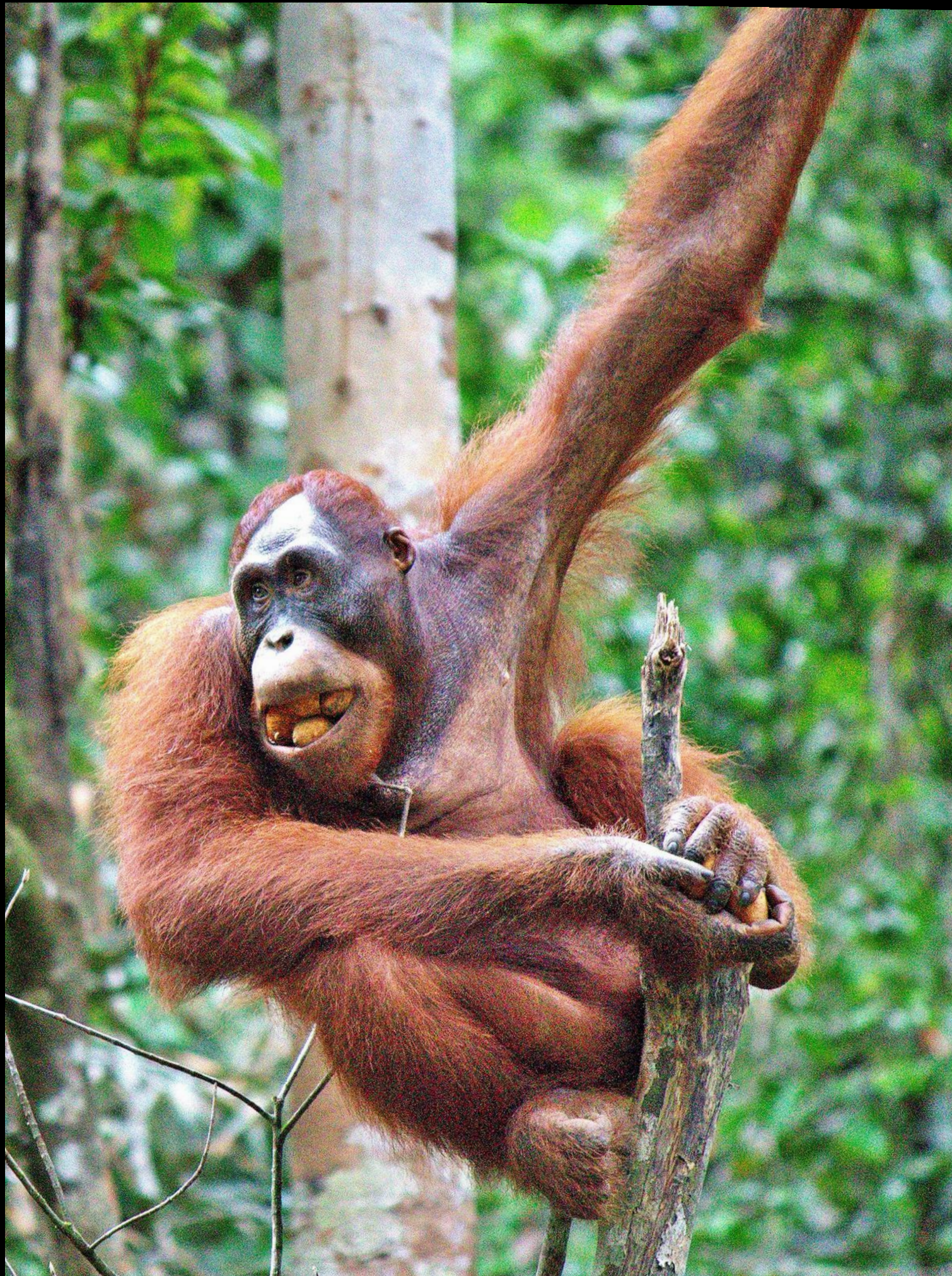
Leana's travels have taken her across Africa twice, through the Middle East, Europe, the United Kingdom, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, the Indian subcontinent, China, Southeast Asia, and Australia. Her wanderlust then carried her to Ushuaia, Argentina, from where she cycled the length of South, Central, and North America over several years. Along the way, she explored many of the world's larger islands, including Cuba, Jamaica, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan.

Today, Leana continues her adventures in Southeast Asia, ever inspired by the promise of new horizons and the enduring joy of life on two wheels.









It is the unknown around the corner that turns my wheels.



A 57-day, 1,794-kilometre ride across Borneo—through heat, hills, wildlife, chaos, and unexpected kindness. A funny, vivid, and unforgettable journey into the tropical heart of Southeast Asia.

