



# Greener than Green

*Travel writer, Juliet Clough, travelled with Audley to Borneo on an assignment for The Times. Juliet kindly agreed to report back on her trip for Audley Traveller.*

'Travelling light?' asked friends, green with envy, as I set off for Sabah recently. Well, not exactly. Like any tourist heading into one of the world's rapidly shrinking rainforest areas, I'd had to pack a number of inconvenient eco-questions along with my jungle boots.

Sabah, the Malaysian state which occupies the island of Borneo's northern tip, is home to some of the most magnificent rainforest on the planet and thus, inevitably, the focus of considerable conservationist anxiety. I knew the argument: the more foreigners wanting to spend good money visiting 'unspoilt' territory, the less the commercial incentives to destroy it. But what about the flip side, the uncomfortable arguments that tourist accommodation diverts scarce resources, including water; displaces people and wildlife; creates litter; and seldom involves the locals, beyond turning them into waiters or photo-opportunities?

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Sabah is making remarkable strides in the field of sustainable tourism. For travellers looking to enjoy themselves in an environmentally responsible manner, preferably one that benefits the local economy, it offers extraordinarily fulfilling experiences.

Support for the Sepilok Orang-utan Rehabilitation Centre, near Sandakan, has boomed since it opened to paying visitors. And not before time. One of man's closest cousins, the critically endangered ape is steadily losing its forest home to the worldwide demand for timber and palm oil.

Visitors can see their conservation fee put to desperately needed use as young orang-utans, many of them brought in by loggers or rescued from illegal captivity, are retrained for life in the wild. Rangers painstakingly teach the orphaned infants to feed themselves, and even to climb. To minimise human contact, this process is shown on video but visitors can watch the more independent teenagers swinging along their ropeway to a feeding station deep in the forest. Guided walks in the forest and night visits to waterholes underline



MALE ORANG-UTAN

Sepilok's growing role in conservation education.

Some of my most magical times in Sabah were spent drifting past the forested banks of the Kinabatangan River where 26000 hectares of some of the best freshwater swamp rainforest in South East Asia have been gazetted as a wildlife sanctuary. As the heat faded, groups of macaques or rare proboscis monkeys came leaping through the trees in search of a last snack. At night, my guide's torch swept the thick creepers overhanging the water to pick out here a sleeping kingfisher, there a coiled snake. As dawn broke, the pearly river reflected a host of fishing birds.

Set back from the river, Sukau River Lodge has been heaped with green garlands including, in 1997, the coveted British Airways Tourism for Tomorrow Award. The lodge is self-sufficient in electricity, and water, and recycles for all it's worth - including the cooking oil, used for the dinner table lamps. The local Orang Sungei people have been involved and consulted from the start: making furniture and jetties; running boat charters, supplying fish. In return, the lodge provides jobs, training and aid projects.

In the Danum Valley, set against a multi-million year old wall of dense and shifting greens, the 24 chalets of the Borneo Rainforest Lodge represent a spin-off from the scientific Field Centre

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downriver. Recalling the sheer scale and lavishness of the undisturbed forest still brings me out in goosebumps: the feathery crowns of the tallest dipterocarps waving up to 60m high, far above the canopy; the strangling figs dropping industrial-strength hawsers to the ground; the Niagara-style deluges which silenced conversation; the smell of vegetable decay; the ceaseless noise of cicadas and the calls of hidden birds. My guide Stephen's grandfather had been a chieftain in these parts, his grandson's inherited knowledge of the medicinal values of hundreds of plants adding human depth to an awesome experience.

My most striking encounter with community-based tourism came

courtesy of the Rungus tribe in Kudat. The Rungus have seized the initiative by building a traditional longhouse - providing a home for 10 families as well as a lunch or overnight stop for visitors; any profits go straight back into the community. Lacking electricity, running water, or furniture, five-star accommodation it ain't. But a five-star experience? Certainly. I felt honoured to join the extended family circle for a meal served off banana leaves on the open-slatted floor; to watch the women weaving, the children doing their homework; the baby rocking in his sarong hammock. Just don't remind me about the monster spider on my sleeping platform.

To return from one of the world's most fragile environments with a load of genuinely green memories: now that's luxury.

### *Travel File*

A two week tailor-made trip to Borneo on a private basis, incorporating stays at the Sukau River Lodge, Borneo Rainforest Lodge and a traditional longhouse, costs from £1,775 per person. For further details please call Isabel or Chris on 01869 276 200.