

BORNEO and SINGAPORE - AUGUST 2008

We had always promised an elderly family member that we would all go to Singapore. Three or four days in Singapore seemed to be enough but it was a long way to go for such a short time. It was decided to add Borneo and make it a two week trip. Lots of flights and hotels to book but it was well worth it.

We choose the following itinerary:

2 nights in Sandakan. We figured that we needed a relatively quiet first day after the long journey.

1 night turtle Island

4 nights at Sukau , to explore the Kinabatangan river

2 nights Kota Kinabalu (1 night more than we would have liked but that's how the flights worked out!)

4 nights in Singapore.

Air Asia had a lot of cheap flights but just did not go where we wanted at the right time. We therefore used Singapore airlines between Heathrow and Singapore, and MASwings locally.

16th /17th August – We were booked on the Singapore Airlines flight from Heathrow to Singapore, departing at 11.55 on 16th August. We had decided to fly in and out of Singapore so that we could book a return flight from there. However, that did mean a long first day! The flight was excellent and we arrived at Changi Airport at 7.45 the next morning. We then had to catch a MASwings flight to Kuala Lumpur, then onto Kota Kinabalu, and finally to Sandakan. All flights were more or less on time and perfectly satisfactory. It was dark by the time we reached the Hotel Sandakan.

18th August – Sandakan is not a particularly attractive town but there are enough interesting places to visit for a day. We took a short walk along the seafront in the morning and walked the “Sandakan Heritage Trail” in the afternoon, visiting Agnes Keith's house, a wonderful little church, and a Chinese temple

19th August – An early morning to stock up on a few supplies before starting our trip with Borneo Eco Tours. They picked us up by coach at 8.30 for the short journey to the local jetty, where we boarded the boat for Selingan (Turtle Island). Accommodation on the island is rather basic but as most people are only here for one night it's okay. After a brief introductory talk we found our rooms, changed and headed for the beach for the afternoon. An area of the sea is set aside for snorkeling. Dinner was served at 5.00, after which you just have to wait for the turtles to show up. The opportunity was taken to see a wonderful sunset. A Monitor lizard was seen lurking in the undergrowth. The guests were split into two groups. We were in the second group, but, luckily, the first turtle spotted was on the far side of the island, so off the first group went. The next turtle emerged just a few minutes later, from the sea quite close to the dining area so it was only a short walk for us. The Green Turtles soon dig a hole and start to lay their eggs. Flash photography is forbidden but the wardens provide good torchlight so photos are possible. The wardens remove the eggs from the nest and take them to a permanent hatchery site nearby. The turtle returns to the sea in the darkness. By this time, several hatchlings have emerged from their nests in the hatchery. These are collected by the wardens and released on the beach in front of dining room.

20th August – Returned by boat to Sandakan, where another Monitor lizard was seen in the water by the jetty. We boarded the coach for the short journey to Sepilok, an Orang Utan rehabilitation sanctuary. The Orang Utans are allowed to wander as they please but are fed twice a day so that they can be seen by the public. It was very busy! Three or four Orangs were seen on the feeding platform. After being fed a young ORANG UTAN appeared immediately behind where we had been standing to give us some good close views. A large male was seen by some, but not by us!

PIG (SHORT) TAILED and LONG TAILED MACAQUES also appeared at the feeding session, taking advantage of the free food on offer.

After Sepilok it was time to return by coach to the jetty in Sandakan for the boat trip across Sandakan bay and along the Kinabatangan River to the Sukau Rainforest Lodge. Our first view of the endemic PROBOSCIS MONKEY was had on the trip. Our first late afternoon wildlife watching trip along the river gave us good views of Proboscis Monkeys, a river crocodile, a monitor lizard and several Little Egrets

21st August – Our first full day in the Rainforest in Borneo. The morning trip on the river included a brief walk around the rainforest. No mammals were seen but this was the chance to see the smaller creatures such as millipedes and leeches. A Blue Eared Kingfisher, Storm Stork, and several Swallows were the avian highlights of the boat trip. Another Monitor lizard, and a few Proboscis monkeys were also seen. A walk around the lodge in the early afternoon produced no mammals but a few birds including a Trogon and several beautiful butterflies.

The late afternoon boat was more productive than the morning. Bird highlights were Oriental Darters, Oriental Pied Hornbills, Purple Heron and a Crested Serpent Eagle. Mammals seen were all primates – Proboscis monkeys, Pig tailed Macaques, Long Tailed Macaques and SILVER LANGURS. This was to be the only view of Silver Langurs, although the other three primates became regulars.

Today we had the chance of an evening boat trip, which we took. Wonderful close views were had of two Kingfishers – Stork Billed and Collared. The Kingfishers become like statues at night and allow very close attention without moving. Mammal highlights were a PALM CIVET and FLYING FOXES. Whilst we had good views of these, photographing them was not really possible. It was dark, there was a slight breeze and we were in a boat jostling for the best position.

22nd August – A standard day today with morning and late afternoon boat trips. A Yellow ringed Cat Snake was the highlight. It looked just as though the snake was plastic and had been placed in the tree! Several birds were seen; the only new one being a Dollar Bird. Pig tailed Macaques were present as usual

A walk around the Lodge during the day produced a BLACK SQUIRREL (Not sure of actual name but NOT a Black Banded) and two birds – Blue Flycatcher and Pacific Swallow. Several wonderfully coloured butterflies and a small Gecko were also seen.

A good mix of animal species was seen during the late afternoon trip – Crocodile, Dollar Bird, Green Pigeon, White Bellied Sea Eagle and Long tailed Macaques. However, this trip was dominated by PALM OIL! Heavily laden barges and Palm oil plantations were seen. The Palm oil trees are taking over the Rainforest. In places only very narrow corridors, one or two trees width, are left between the plantations and the river. If these corridors disappear, routes taken by the wildlife are gone.

23rd August – This was to be a day that we would not forget. It started well enough with many birds – Oriental Darters, Great Egrets, Pied Hornbills, Storm Storks, Brahminy Kite, Crested Serpent Eagle, Lesser Coucal and Purple Heron. However, the only mammals were Long tailed Macaques and Proboscis monkeys which we had seen many times during the past few days. Our guide realised that seeing these primates was not enough for us and told us to be ready for the afternoon trip one hour earlier than normal. He knew that the elephants were nearby.

A Buff Breasted woodpecker and another (or the same one!) black squirrel were seen during the day.

The time for our late afternoon trip arrived, and it was absolutely pouring with rain! (Hence the name – rainforest!) The rain cleared through in about half an hour. A Storm Stork was seen en-route. After travelling for about one and a half hours, suddenly, around a bend, there they were. A herd of about fifty BORNEO ELEPHANTS! What a wonderful sight and undoubtedly the highlight of the holiday. We stayed with the elephants for about half an hour before it was time to

return to the Lodge. A flock of 27 Rhinoceros Hornbills flew across the river just a few minutes after leaving the elephants. Our guide said that he had never seen so many together at one time. We stopped to have a closer look as they roosted in the trees near the river, despite the fact that it was starting to get dark. It was very dark by the time that we arrived back.

24th August – Our last breakfast in the rainforest. No more mammal watching from now on. We boarded the motor boat for the return journey to Sandakan, where we found the coach waiting to take us to the Airport for the flight to Kota Kinabalu (KK). Flight times to get to Singapore meant a two night stay in KK. The first afternoon was spent wandering around the sea front and the Central Market, before returning to the Kinabalu Daya Hotel .

25th August – A day in KK. We walked up to the Signal Hill Observatory in the morning for views across the city and the sea. The afternoon was spent shopping (Much cheaper than Singapore!) The evening was spent at the night market. We only visited KK because of the flight times but we wish that we could have stayed for an extra day or two.

26th August –Morning flight from KK to Singapore. We booked into the Pan Pacific Hotel before setting out for a short walk around the City to get our bearings.

27th August – After yesterday's recce around the city we decided that a Singapore Pass, which allows free travel on the underground system and buses around town, was required. This was a good investment. We visited Bugis Street before making our way to Little India, where we saw several Common Mynah birds. The afternoon was spent on Orchard Road, the main shopping area in town. We looked but did not buy. A huge snail was the wildlife highlight. We visited Clarke Quay for our dinner, walking back to our hotel via the statue of Sir Stamford Raffles and the Fullerton Hotel.

28th August –A short train journey and a decent walk took us to the Botanical Gardens. The main aim was to visit the National Orchid Gardens. This was essentially for the ladies in the party but was enjoyed by all. The Gardens are worth a visit and we would have liked much more time there. There are many birds to be seen in the Botanical Gardens and in the short time that we were there we saw Spotted Turtle Dove, Common Kingfisher, Mute Swan and Asian Glossy Starlings. Turtles were also seen in the lakes.

Tonight we visited the Night Safari. It took a bit of organizing to get there using trains and buses but we managed okay. The Night Safari is basically a zoo but there are no cages. Most of the animals can only be seen from a tram ride so there is a feeling of seeing the animals in the wild.

29th August – Our final day in Singapore. It was Sentosa Island in the morning flowed by a quick visit to Chinatown. There was really only one more place to visit. A quick shower and change and off we went to Raffles Hotel. A short visit to the actual hotel to see the affluence, was followed by a trip to the Long Bar and a Singapore Sling! (Well, you cannot go all the way to Singapore and not have one, can you?) Lovely peanuts!

30th August-Going to the wrong terminal made booking in a bit hectic! However, we arrived safely back at Heathrow.

A great trip. We saw 9 different mammals, with the large herd of Elephants being the undoubted highlight. There were also a few other animals such as crocodile and Cat snake, and many different birds including Storm Storks, Purple Herons and Rhinoceros Hornbills.

The contrast between the Rainforest of Borneo and Singapore could not have been greater. We only wish that we had more time, but don't we always!

