

## Traveldiary Brigitte & Heinz

Borneo: Sarawak & Sabah in Malaysia, to it Brunei; thereto  
Singapore: Thaipusam-Festival, as well as Thailand: Koh Tao



## Chapter 17

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## Borneo: Sarawak & Sabah in Malaysia, to it Brunei; thereto Singapore: Thaipusam-Festival, as well as Thailand: Koh Tao

After our “holiday” in Western Australia , we arrived back in [Singapore](#) on January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2007. Soon thereafter we booked a flight to Kuching with Malaysian Airline (MAS). As we had enrolled in their mileage program upon leaving New Zealand seven months ago, we had already collected enough miles to get this flight as a bonus. We only needed to pay 20 Euros taxes.

### **Thaipusam: an impressive Hindu festival in Singapore**

In the afternoon of our last day in Singapore we found a brochure about the Hindu festival [Thaipusam](#) that was to be held the very next day. Spontaneously we decided to check whether we could move our flight and stay longer in our accommodation. Both were possible, even though we had to pay € 15 to re-issue our airline tickets. Never mind, it was more than worthwhile for this unique occasion!

We tried to get more info about this festival and the tourist office told us, there was no specific time but the devotees would parade between two temples all day Febr. 1<sup>st</sup>.

Almost by coincidence we saw that part of the road was already closed for the traffic when we returned from dinner to our lodging in Little India (on 31<sup>st</sup> of January).



Exactly at midnight the first devotees started their procession after lengthy preparations. For those who took it seriously, it consisted of weeks with strict diet and abstinence and peaked in the hours of final spiritual preparations here at the Hindu Temple. Indian Hindus and a few people of other races too, who wish to ask for a favour or give thanks for a favour received from Lord Murugan a Hindu Goddess, also known as Lord Subramaniam the granter of wishes, participate in the annual festival of Thaipusam. It is believed that the more effort and hardship experienced while walking the 4km pilgrim parade, the more generous the deity will be in fulfilling their devotees wishes. Some promise to participate for 5 or 10 years in a row.

At first there were mainly women and children. All participants were wearing orange or yellow robes and carried offerings of milk in heavy pots called “Paal qudam” mostly on their head. In the beginning, many had some small needles pinned into their forehead. Later many had their cheeks and tongue pierced by metal skewers, which got decorated with some ornamental symbol on each end. The later the night, the more plentiful and extravagant accessories could be seen, drilled into the skin, especially but not exclusively of men.

At around 2 a.m. we went to the temple where they all prepared for the parade. When we asked whether we could enter and watch, we got the reply: “of course you’re allowed in for free, only those who walk the parade have to pay. We only ask you to take your shoes off”. So we entered over a carpet of spilled milk and colourful powders into this huge but very well organized chaos. There was a calm and mysterious atmosphere, where everyone was doing something.

After a ritual bath, the devotees prayed and made offerings to the gods. Each family occupied a spot on a square of newspaper or a mat, where they piled everything they needed for the parade. Here some people got into trance, whilst others were decorating the hooks and arrows which were later drilled into the skin or they mounted feathers and symbols on the frames of the heavy burdens those in trance were going to carry to the other temple. From those we had seen, only a minority was obviously in trance; most pilgrims mastered the walk of faith with their will-power only.

After the ritual bath, which meant that they threw buckets of water over their cloths, we've seen many people dodder. Whereas when we watched them having their cheeks and tongues pierced with long skewers, nobody seemed to suffer pain.



their mobile phone along during the parade they probably would have suffered more... but the gods didn't refuse that, as the holy Hindu script has luckily been written before modern times.

If they would not have been allowed to carry

Otherwise, the ideas how to increase the hardship were unlimited. They did not only pierce the forehead, cheeks and tongue. Some hoped for more favours by connecting several dozens of oranges, lemons or little milk pots with hooks to their chest, back or legs or everything combined everywhere.

A typical feature of the Thaipusam festival is the "kavadi" which is a semicircular metal and sometimes partly wooden frame, carried by men. These shiny frames were decorated with peacock feathers, pictures of deities, flowers or golden symbols. They can weigh between 30kg up to 150kg and usually measure about 2m in diameter but should not exceed 2 m in height according to laws in Singapore. Often, they were supported by up to 200 spits, drilled into the skin. Others were carried by a frame around the hip or shoulders. Those usually had dozens of gold or silver chains that were tangling from the kavadi to hooks in the skin. Those with a very big wish or thankfulness also had a trailer, some kind of religious cart, decorated with a statue of a goddess, in tow. The ropes to tow that were also hooked into the back. Almost all devotees were walking barefoot but we have seen one man wearing shoes with nails hammered into the soles, pointy side up!

Whereas at night there had been an uninterrupted procession of devotees in yellow dresses with mostly women, during the day we saw mainly small groups of mostly men in intervals of 10 minutes, but almost all of them carried a kavadi.

The Thaipusam festival has its origins in Tamil Nadu in India but as India meanwhile prohibits any kind of religious self-torture, it's now officially banned there.

In Malaysia and Singapore however, this is a big event, where thousands if not ten thousands of faithful walk the procession. Here they walk along the road parallel to the traffic and an army of security personnel was trying to keep it under control and make sure that traffic doesn't come to a stand-still.

Even though you can see almost no blood at all, it happens that insufficiently prepared devotees keep doctors busy with skin lacerations or by collapsing after the long strenuous walk in the heat (up to 8 hours) or that their wounds don't heal as quickly as they thought..

However, it was enormously impressive how these people manage to control their spirit mentally, so that it could not be reached by any pain of the body.



Probably the description of this all might sound gruesome to you and we have seen a fair share of tourists watching with horrified expressions on their face. Naturally, pain is indicating when the body has a problem, but the Thaipusam festival proofed that anyone is able to master his mind not to feel pain while experiencing whatever "cruel" happen to the body. It's just important that you are 100% convinced that you want it to happen to you and that you are ready to face the consequence that might result. This is probably the basis to have a wish fulfilled and as with anything else: you first have to believe in yourself that you can do it. So in the end, the Thaipusam festival left us a much deeper impression than just that of a "colourful parade". Those spectators that just shook their head certainly learned nothing of it!

## **Borneo: Malaysian Sarawak and Sabah, (+ Brunei in the middle) between traditional and modern life**

On Febr. 2<sup>nd</sup> 2007 we headed off for [Malaysia](#). The airline MAS offered a convenient airport shuttle that brought us directly from Singapore over the border to Johor Bahru's airport, where we boarded a flight to [Borneo](#).

### **Sarawak: unbelievable modern Borneo**



[Kuching](#), the capital of the semi-autonomous East Malaysian state of [Sarawak](#), was our first destination. To us, it was surprisingly modern and didn't seem to lack behind peninsular Malaysia. It was amazing how many people owned cars, including many young folks in their early twenties. Even street-hawkers that sold fried noodles at Malaysian Ringgit (RM) 3.00 only (€ 0.60), could afford a small car. One told us, that the smallest Malaysian made "Perodua" car sells for about RM 15'000 (€ 3'000) for those who can afford to pay cash. Most drivers however, will choose a loan and pay it off in 7 years after being lured to the deal with the minimum down-payment of RM 50 only!

Kuching is situated scenically by the Sarawak river and there is a nice long quay for pedestrians. As in other parts of Asia, people mostly eat at food-stalls and cheap restaurants rather than cooking at home. As Kuching is one of the wealthier cities of Malaysia, there was also a good selection of reasonably priced gourmet temples that were quite inventive in mixing dishes from various parts of the world. We found 4 restaurants where not only the food of the so called "fusion cuisine" was superbly presented, but also the interior architecture of the locality was a feast for the eyes.

Similar to peninsular Malaysia, different ethnic groups are living together here. There are many ethnic groups (like Iban people) unique to Borneo. Some used to be headhunters in the centuries passed. Among the Malay population, Islam is not the only religion – there are also many Christians. Almost no Indians live in Sarawak and Sabah, but there is a big Chinese community. At least part of the Malay population seems to be quite realistic about them; when we asked in the tourist office, whether there are many Chinese all over Borneo, a Malaysian employee said straight forward: “where would our economy be without Chinese? We would not even have restaurants or shops!”

Kuching is very spread out and also the suburbs were well stocked with shopping centres. For five days we didn't get tired discovering this city and talking to the nice people that spoke better English than those of Singapore (for the general public). But then we wanted to get out and see nature!

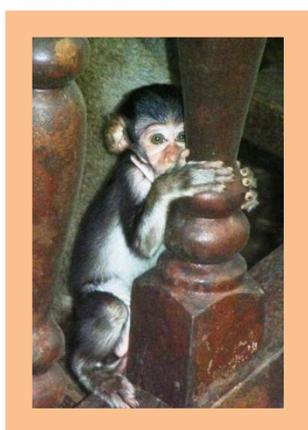
First, we made an attempt to see [Orang Utan's](#) at the **Semenggoh Rehabilitation Centre**, where they try to prepare orphaned apes to live in the jungle again. They were doing this quite successfully, as none of the 23 Orang Utan's living in the area felt the urge to come to the feeding session, now that the forest offered them plenty of fruit. Never mind, we learned quite a bit at the info centre about these impressive big creatures. Males can get very heavy; more than 100kg with an arm-span of up to 3 meters.

The tourist office informed us that a Rafflesia flower had now opened in [Gunung Gading National Park](#). So the next day, we hopped on an express bus to the town of Lundu, 1 ¼ hours away. [Rafflesia](#) is a parasite plant that doesn't have leaves nor stem. Within 9 months a flower develops out of what looks like a coconut. With up to 1 meter in diameter, this is the biggest flower on earth. Once it blooms, the red flower with five petals and a bowl-like middle part with long spikes in its interior only lasts for 4-5 days. Interestingly, the flower that we found, grew right above an old one that had turned completely black but hadn't lost its form. That rare Rafflesia, of which about six different species exist, can be very hard to spot on the forest floor despite its size. We shared the experience to find it, after rough directions from the Park Headquarter with two Dutch girls that hiked with us in the heat, after we had met on the bus.



On the way back we met seven other tourists and found out that they all had seen the Rafflesia flower too and they all stayed at the same Backpacker's place as we did in Kuching. From then on, we kept on bumping into these people again and again.

With two of them: Susanne & Roland from Germany , we set off the next morning by taxi, bus and boat to [Bako National Park](#). It is famous for its variety of vegetation zones, despite being a small headland of 27 km<sup>2</sup> only. Many trails lead through seven distinct eco-systems: beach- and cliff vegetation, mangroves, peat swamp-, mixed dipterocarp- and heath forest, plus grassland. Many plants were very special too, like the small pots of various pitcher plants that trap insects for food. Then, there were interesting palms with spiky stems that looked really dangerous, twisted vines, colourful thorny spiders and a beautiful coastline with freestanding sandstones.



Just before the four of us reached the park headquarters again, we saw the first few monkeys high up in the trees. There was so much to wonder about, we took 5½ hours for the 5 km loop on the Lintang Trail that was meant to be walked in 3 hours.

We had booked two nights accommodation and so we could enjoy the entire next day here as well. We purposely chose not to roam too deep into the forest again, as we had heard that monkeys often stick around the Park's HQ and the mangroves on the beach.

Just after we've had breakfast in the simple National Park restaurant, a [Macaque](#) tried to get into our room. After we chased it away, we saw the rest of his pack playing on the fence and boardwalk surrounding the NP Headquarter. They didn't take much notice of us and we could watch about 25 of the small monkeys, including some tiny cute babies, playing like kitten.

After a while we walked to the beach to explore the spectacular sandstone formations that were exposed now that it was low tide. Later, somebody pointed out, where we could spot a poisonous green viper up in a bush. Suddenly, something came jumping out of a tree behind us. Now one by one, **Silver Leaf Monkeys** which are part of the Langur family, crossed the path on their way to feed on the mangroves. We followed them down to the beach and as we sat quietly, we were finally watching about 30-40 of the silver-black monkeys that might well be 1-1,2 m when standing upright. Funny was, that they have caramel-brown babies and later we read that they turn grey (already) when they are about 30 days old. For us humans, it takes much longer to reach that state! After helping themselves to plenty of green leaves, they held a siesta or were playing with each other.



For us too it was now time for lunch, but when we passed one of the bungalows, we noticed a gang of small Macaques, maybe about 15 of them, exercising on the chairs, tables and staircase to the veranda. We couldn't help but picture some more. Poor tourists were out on strenuous walks in this sweat driving weather, hoping to see some wildlife and here they were; these little Macaques, raiding the bungalows and snapping anything they could get hold of. Even in the restaurant, which was on an open veranda, at least one Macaque was constantly observing whether it would get a chance stealing something from a table. Biscuits and drink cans, which they could even open, were their favourite targets and they even seemed to know the colour of their favourite brands. Quite often a monkey would race up to the restaurant and snatch something of interest. Newly arrived tourists only screamed, as they were taken by surprise.

Now we hoped to get a closer look at the rare **Proboscis** Monkeys, a long-nosed primate we had heard come to feed in the mangroves quite often. They are found on Borneo only and are of considerable size. There is usually one male with a harem of about 3-8 females.



Their fur is light brown, changing into grey toward their hands and feet. Around the stomach and bum it's brighter too and especially the male's fur is very white around his bum. From the back it almost looks as if he was wearing white underwear but the red penis and black-blue testicles make everything clear again.

Their young are grey at first, changing into brown later, contrary to Silver Leaf Monkeys. The male's nose is so long, it wobbles when he's eating his leaves, whereas females only have a small snub nose.

It was impressive to watch these creatures from a short distance. They look very much like humans when they sit in the trees and we were impressed how they moved with ease about and in between the trees. They sit as comfortably and secure on branches as we would sit on a chair. Their faces did clearly express joy, worry or thoughtfulness and they communicated also through various sounds. Even though, genetically wrong, to us Proboscis monkeys resemble a human being much more than apes that have no tail. In fact, Malaysians commonly refer to the Proboscis as "Orang Belanda" which stands for "Dutch Man".

Back in Kuching, we sorted out hundreds of pictures we'd taken in Bako, as each of our "electronic films" is capable of storing 400 high resolution (6MB) photographs. How far would we have gotten with the suddenly old-fashioned 36 exposure film rolls?

For the continuation of our trip, we had found out that it was possible to either follow the coastal road or travel up the rivers 1'000 km through the interior with speed-boats. We decided that the latter was the more interesting route for us and therefore boarded a first express boat a few days later. Between Kuching and Sibul we sailed for a long way, about 200km out and then into a river mouth on each side, and almost 100km along the South China Sea in the middle.

**Sibu** was also a modern city, even though in one suburb the buildings looked a bit run down and rather dirty. This was compensated by other suburbs that were rather posh with luxurious housing developments and upmarket shopping centres, as we didn't expect to find in Borneo. There was a huge covered market with old fashioned goods but with an adjoining 8 storey parking-house!

Previously, the town was known by the name of "New Fuzhou", as it was founded by Chinese immigrants from "old Fuzhou" (that we had seen becoming the real ultra-new Fuzhou). This Chinese community recently built a beautiful new pagoda on the river shore with many impressive artifacts.



Like Perth in Western Australia, Sibu also decided to adopt a swan as its emblem and call itself "the city of swans" with plenty of oversized concrete models around town, but not one living bird to be seen anywhere!

Before we got here, we had met a nice Swiss couple: Andrea & Peter and they arrived here one day later too. As we got along really well, we started to go out for dinner together every night; here and also in the next town; Kapit.



Express-boats are the common means of transport from Sibu further up the river called Batang Rajang that is Sarawak's longest river at 670 navigable kilometers. The speed-boats were long oval shaped tubes, Brigitte felt look like floating submarines. They bring the passengers in air-conditioned comfort and rocket-speed of more than 80 km/h across the water.

Along the river bench, we could see various long-houses that the tribes of this area have been building for hundreds of years and usually housed an entire "village". Today they still build long-houses, however they rather look like an endless row of modern terrace houses with a communal veranda spanning along the side from the first to the last unit.

Although we still had seen the odd topless granny sitting outside with her grand daughters but they wore jeans. Today there is certainly not much traditional life left in these communities. The number of satellite dishes is about equal to the number of units and where there was road access, there were cars parked. We were amused to see modern tribes people coming back from town bringing along such devices as electric stone-grills and raclette stoves. Also dish-washers and washing machines don't seem to be an exception.

Although, all along the river shore there was dense forest, there were many timber processing plants from the logging industry that supply the "west of the world" with "eco-friendly furniture". Those that prefer to replace their plastic garden furniture with wooden pieces, are not realizing that they come from the jungle and those are often marked with an eco label like "clé vert" as we had seen in France.

After a few hours, we reached the small town of **Kapit**, which is home to about 8'000 people. As this place can only be reached by boat, we naively thought, there would be no traffic. However, a sealed road net connected the surrounding villages, less than 20 km around the town. This was enough reason for everybody who felt they could afford a car to have one and thus there were real traffic jams at certain times in the centre. This is Malaysia!

Other surprises waited along the way while we were walking along a small Kampung (village). Next to a moderate house on a hill, we saw a helicopter parked. If the car doesn't make it to the next town, the helicopter seems to be the only solution...

The people were extremely friendly and everyone said hello (selamat). The major came out of his house (he only had 3 cars) and talked to us, as he spoke quite well English. Later on, we came to a narrow swing-bridge that was also used by motorbikes. Right behind it, a big modern glass building of the Federal Government was shining in the last sunlight.



On Febr. 17, 2007 the Chinese Lunar New Year's Eve was celebrated but contrary to our wishful thinking, this was mainly celebrated in the family and among friends. During the following one to two weeks most Chinese run businesses were closed. Here in Malaysia about 20% of the population is of Chinese origin but this resulted in the fact that 90% of shops and restaurants were closed! For us, this had the consequence that we had to feed on "fried rice/fried noodles" only for the next 10 days. It seemed that Malaysian foodstalls tried to make money by cooking with as little effort as possible, whereas Chinese wouldn't shy away from additional effort to create a more imaginative menu and offer more variety. Sometimes we still found an Indian Café that made us some Roti Canai (flat bread) for a change. Even though we were "noodled-out" quite quickly, we shouldn't complain, because without the Malaysians we wouldn't have survived this period.

On New Year's Day it was very quiet on the road. Only in front of the Chinese temple, a few giant incense sticks were burned. One political party had organized a small event in the town square at night. While we watched the Karaoke singers, various members of the committee went around the spectators, offering "lucky" oranges, then some roast lamb and later some peanuts and soft drinks. That's one of the things we love about Asia: however big a festival, there is almost no alcohol around and it's a big exception to see Asians drunk. As all over South East Asia, western tourists and expat's seem to be the only ones who obviously don't know their limit with alcohol.

Around midnight, there were lots of noisy fire-crackers and some colourful fireworks. The government tried to ban private fireworks, but as the country's prisons are way too small to hold all the offenders, i.e. all Chinese and part of other citizens too, they were quite unsuccessful to enforce that ban.



In the mornings the waterway around Kapit harbour was very interesting to watch. An impressive number of boats moved in and out, although the one we needed to travel further up Batang Rajang River was not running for a few days due to Chinese New Year's holiday. The frustrating thing was that nobody seemed to know for sure, when the boat would resume its service.

After three days, Andrea & Peter who had coincidentally chosen to stay at the same guesthouse, didn't want to wait any longer and decided to go back. On the 4<sup>th</sup> morning, we stood on the pier with no boat appearing. On the 5<sup>th</sup> morning, the Chinese controlled boat finally showed up again and brought us within 6 hours in high speed up the river and over the strong Pelagus

Rapids. We learned that the boat cannot pass these rapids if it hadn't rained for more than a week, even now in the wet season, as there are huge stones in the river bed.

In [Belaga](#), we finally reached what we had long hoped for: a small village without much traffic. Even though a small 4WD track led out to the next big town 4½ hours away. When we explored the village, we came across a 50m long narrow wooden bridge. We believed that there would be no more cars behind this point, but we were surprised to find a few small cars parked along the road side or underneath the houses. As in many places of Malaysia, the older houses typically were big timber structures resting on high stilts. As we didn't find an access road, we asked one of the locals, how they bring their cars here. He replied "we just use the bridge, as we also have the right to park in front of our home". When we walked back, we realized that the owners of big 4WD vehicles were in the unlucky situation that their cars were too wide to squeeze through and therefore needed to park on the other side of the bridge.

Only about 1'000 people live in Belaga, but several hundred shops and restaurants are usually serving the people from the surrounding woods. However, due to the "Tahun Baru Cina" (Chinese New Year) most were initially closed. During the three days we stayed there, a few more were re-opening every day.

Of course, in such a small village everybody knows each other and they all gathered in the few open coffee shops. When we sat down, it happened quite often that someone would join us for a chat. Maybe their English was not as good as in the bigger towns but they tried hard and they watch TV. Why else would the old man have said to us upon leaving: "bye bye, I love you"?



In the mornings we could see lots of elder tribes-people that came to the small market. Several had traditional tattoos on their throat, on hands and feet. Some also had these legendary long ear lobes that could hang right down to their shoulders, even though they didn't wear the traditional jewellery on the ear anymore. Unfortunately, the jungle was not accessible, except over the river and of Sarawaks emblem; the rhinoceros hornbill, we've never seen one bird anywhere! Instead, we've seen many giant colourful butterflies and a proud fisherman who caught a big fish out of the muddy water, probably over 1m in length. Overlooking the river below Belaga, were various animist temples with beautiful woodcarved gates on the opposite site of the shore. The indigenous people of this area mainly belong to the tribes of Iban, Kenyan and Kayan. Most of them still follow some of their animist believes but as missionaries have been "quite successful", they also became Christians. In the Malaysian part of Borneo , Christianity is certainly more dominant than Islam, especially in the countryside – maybe less in the cities.

Belaga is the furthest upriver tourists usually can go. From here, you can either return on the river all the way back, take a 4½ hour 4WD ride to the coast or if weather permits, those with no more than 10kg of luggage may take one of two weekly Twinotter flights.

Daniel, a local tour operator, suggested us a 4<sup>th</sup> variation: by express-boat as far upriver as Batang Rajang is navigable, overnight at his brother's house and on a sealed road back to the coastal highway. This sounded adventurous and attractive, because that homestay was situated above the disputed Bakun Dam hydro electric project, which is the Malaysian government's holy cow and normally absolutely off-limits to foreigners.

As we were leaving, 60 years old Daniel, who probably is an influential figure in this community, came onto the boat and wished us farewell and more important: informed the captain that we were going to stay with his brother. So this was apparently our permit to travel further up river.

In this area, the highspeed air-conditioned boat picked quite a lot of people up or dropped them off. Here they never had a pier and people had to jump onto a muddy shore. Heinz was just going to picture under what basic conditions the locals had to embark the boat, when somebody said that this was the final stop and we had to get into this mud as well!



On top of the steep river bank, Leang and two of his almost adult daughters were waiting with their 4WD vehicle. Before reaching their house, we had to pass three security check-points and drove for about 30 minutes through the big [Bakun Dam](#) construction site. We were allowed to keep our eyes open and watch but this didn't apply for the lens of our camera; it was strictly forbidden to take pictures.

We learned that about 5'000 workers had been imported from as far away as Bangladesh, Pakistan, India and China, but also from Indonesia. The cheap laborers had to sleep in dormitories, whereas the engineers were housed in luxurious villas that had been purposely built for them.

Initially, thousands of indigenous people were resettled, in order to flood several huge river valleys. They had received new longhouses before work commenced on the dam 1994. In 1997 the project was stalled for 7 years due to the Asian financial crisis. Because so much money had already been invested, work resumed in 2004. Initially, it was planned that the new power plant should supply peninsular Malaysia where about 85% of the population live, via an undersea cable. Meanwhile this proved very complicated and as Borneo certainly does not need so much electricity, the government is considering to build an aluminium smelting plant to justify the project or to find any other "problem for the solution"...

Most locals we've met were not too happy with the construction of this dam but many hope it would regulate the river and prevent the annual flooding of the Batang Rajang. After an insight into this chapter of the new economic boom of Malaysia , we reached the home on top of the Bakun Hill.

Here, Leang's wife Annie was waiting with the three younger children. In contrary to other indigenous people, who's landrights were not respected, this Kenyan family was in the lucky situation that they could make use of their land and many of their relatives built new houses after they had to move out of their longhouse because of the dam. Together with his brothers, Leang's family has a big logging company, employing up to 40 Indonesians. The family is almost self-sufficient, with their own well, power generator, a big fish pond, some animals and veggies in the garden.

Both parents had grown up in longhouses and Annie's mother is still living in one. The family's biggest and apparently most modern dwelling, are three huge units in a longhouse they inherited from Leang's father. This is equipped with modern dish washer and washing machine but at the moment, they only use it to dry fish. Then they also have a big house in Belaga, where the children live during the school term.



The house here on Bakun Hill was simple without much furniture, but on the other hand it had a TV, bigger than we had ever seen in a private home. Annie told us that she can now follow much easier what's happening on TV, as her eyes are not too good anymore. Furthermore; the next optician is more than four hours away but the TV shop was within one hours reach. The RM 12'000 (€ 2'400) the TV had cost would have bought her quite a few glasses though.

In our honour, they cooked a big meal consisting of various vegetables, rice and wild boar Leang had hunted and stored in the big deep-freezer. This was a big feast and tasted even better as it was our first change after days of fried noodles.

In the evening we sat on the mat in front of the TV and talked a bit more to the older members

of the family and some of their Indonesian employees, who were free to come and watch TV. Normally, more of their workers join in, but due to very heavy rainfall that night, the others didn't feel like exposing themselves to the element, as their dwelling was about 200m away.

We had to get up very early the next morning. Some of the family came along in their 4WD and after passing the construction site and the three security check-points again, we were brought to a pick-up point almost one hour away. Here we said farewell and changed into another 4WD that was some kind of private shared taxi. It brought us over a rattly though sealed road to the mainroad about 100km away. There, we flagged down an express bus to [Miri](#), our last destination in Sarawak.

It was the least charming town we had seen sofar, with no heart and soul. It was modern but most buildings looked like those you would normally expect in an industrial zone. It looked as if most people would live out in the suburbs and no one in the centre – quite unusual and strange for Asia!

## Brunei: Oil & Islam in the Sultans hands

Now we changed into another country: the small sultanate of [Brunei](#) consisting of 5'270 km<sup>2</sup>. The connections to its Malay neighbours; Sarawak to the west and Sabah to the east, were anything else than efficient! At the tourist office in Miri, we were told that we needed to head off before 7 a.m., if we wanted to make it to Brunei's capital the same day. But we were luckier than that! The lady from the Backpacker's place in Miri knew about a "car pool" that matched drivers and passengers for that journey. That way, we were on the road for less than 2 ½ hours and even had door to door service to our chosen hotel in **Bandar Seri Begawan (BSB)**. Somehow, it looked as if the country wanted to isolate itself and offering complicated and bad service to enter and leave certainly helps.



Brunei is very wealthy thanks to huge amounts of oil, which Mother Nature laid at their doorstep: off shore. The 360'000 people therefore do not need to pay taxes and the government subsidises the most important consumer items as for instance cars. The government actually is the sultan himself, who still appoints all members of parliament personally.

In free elections about 20 years before gaining independence from England in 1984, the people voted in favour of a party that aimed at converting their system to a constitutional monarchy. As the father of the present Sultan refused to share power, the people revolted but finally the Brits decided to support the Sultan and helped him to retain his position. Probably with the hope that the people would easily obey him again, he then decided to push Islam as the ruling state religion. Today, Islam is really dominant here; within the first two hours, we had seen more big mosques than we had seen in three and a half weeks in Sarawak, that has many Moslems too.

At prayer times, the chant of the Mullah is not only heard from the loudspeakers of the minarets, it is also transmitted to the modern shopping malls and even to American fast-food outlets. At least traffic didn't come to a stand-still.

All children have to wear Islamic school uniforms, including non-Muslims. Boys wear the black Muslim hat and girls wear long dresses and a white head scarf. In the newspaper we read also about the Islamic religious schools, where children learn to be "guardians" of the Koran. That means they learn to cite the holy book "by heart". In such schools, students are honoured and motivated with 100 B\$ (€ 50) per month for remembering 10 verses, 200 B\$ for 20 verses or even 1'000 B\$ per month if they can recall the entire holy book. In these schools they are not allowed to study any other subject like math's, as this would distract them from their "real duty".



Even though people appeared quite happy, it seemed that there is quite some pressure on Moslems to obey Islam. Somehow it disqualifies itself with the same arguments to be "the truth" as Christian clerics did and sometimes still do. As soon as something needs to be declared superior above anything else and people are being forced to warship, this looks fishy to us!

The coverage about world news in the state controlled press is not that different from the west. On the other hand, whatever regards their own country, is strictly written with Islam in mind. A few examples? "We all know that in a few decades the gift of Allah, our oil, might run out. It should be our aim to find new ways, approved

by Prophet Muhammad – peace be upon him – to boost our economic growth and to please Allah, the true owner of this land”. “Although the Koran and Prophet Muhammad – peace be upon him – would allow Muslims to run their own business, most companies are in fact run by the Chinese minority (15%). Why are our people, Islamic Bruneians, not more initiative?” What they do not consider in our opinion, is that people who obey unconditionally, as it is expected of them, are naturally not the most initiative.

Brunei often likes to compare itself with Singapore that is 8 times smaller but has 10 times more inhabitants. Despite having no natural resources at all, they have achieved so much and their economy is booming! - Driven by 77% diligent Chinese! Their only 14% Malay Muslims are still less innovative than Singapore’s 8% Indians. Sorry Brunei, that’s how we see it!

Although the official languages in Brunei are Malay and English, every business is required to mark its name in Arab writing as well.

Government buildings usually all looked very modern and expensive. Also the uncountable mosques that were often surrounded by large parks represented the wealth of the country. It is said that the Sultan, who was until recently named the richest man in the world, inhabits the largest palace of any monarch. Due to the 23<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the country’s independence which we had missed by 3 days only, almost every tall office tower in the centre of BSB was decorated by a big advertisement. Each showed a huge picture of the sultan and in small letters the name of the company that was congratulating him for leading the country through 23 years of independence!



The houses of the commoners were rather moderate and about 30’000 people live in timber houses on stilts over the water. They called it Kampung Ayer, meaning water village and it stretches over 8km in a big wide “S” in Sungai Brunei, the river that flows through the capital. Today the wooden houses are supported by concrete platforms and there were electricity-, tap water- and sewage systems available. Boardwalks interconnected the houses in the same way footpaths would cross a village on land. There were schools, mosques, shops, a doctors nursery- and police station as well as fire-brigade. Taxi boats constantly ferried people around very cheaply.

Most houses were very big but rather simple. In the evening, thousands of cars were parked along the roadside bordering the rivershore from where people boarded the taxi boats from various piers to Kampung Ayer. For us too, this was the means of transport between our hotel and the centre.

We spent a short, but intense three days in this unique sultanate that has disillusioned Brigittes perception of it as being a perfect fairy-tale place.

## **Borneo: Malaysian Sabah between traditional und modern life**

Now we went back to Malaysia again. As Brunei didn’t feel it was necessary to build a road to the eastern border, we had to get started at 6:30 a.m.. After taking two buses to where the road ends, there was an Express-Boat to [Pulau Labuan](#), which is directly administered by Malaysias Federal government and got the status of a duty-free zone.



To our surprise, there was not only a small settlement on this island, but a full grown town with huge shopping centres, offering everything people might want to buy. As in the rest of Malaysia, there was an abundance of local and western fast-food chains. As a consequence, obesity of children became so much of a problem, the government is now considering to ban TV advertisements for fast-food in programs that focus on youngsters.

Western brands market themselves so successfully that now every Malaysian restaurant glorifies the old fashioned cheap instant noodles as “Mee Maggi” and suddenly the locals are ready to pay almost as much as for a proper noodle dish.

We had three hours on Pulau Labuan before our next boat to [Kota Kinabalu \(KK\)](#) was scheduled. When we got back to the modern ferry terminal, we were impressed to find a big electronic board, indicating all arrivals and departures as on an airport. What delighted us less was the fact that next to our boat a word in red kept flashing, reading "cancelled"! At the ticket counter they apologized and just gave us a refund with no explanation. Only after some insisting they kindly informed us about an alternative whereby we could take a small speed boat (leaving when full) to Menumbok, where there would be a minibus (also leaving when full) to the town of Beaufort . There a big Express bus was waiting to bring us the remaining 100km to KK.



This is the capital of the semi-autonomous Province of [Sabah](#) on the northern tip of [Borneo](#). It is [Malaysia's](#) poorest state with an unemployment rate soaring at 15%. Judging by the many big 4WD's we saw around town, we got the impression that the locals are maybe not that poor, but the many illegal immigrants from Indonesia may cause a problem. We heard that Sabah 's population exploded by abt. 50% during the last few years and nobody seems to know where all these people suddenly come from.

At night, some areas of the town didn't look as trustworthy as it normally does in Malaysia and some corners could be quite smelly. In general, KK that lies on the coast is becoming quite modern at present with many upmarket shopping centres, eateries and apartment building springing up. Even Asia 's biggest ice skating rink is opening here. In various areas of the town, night markets were set up daily and they offered things very cheaply.



Due to the end of the Chinese New Year celebrations, there were lots of red little lanterns hung up on the town square and a banner announced an event on Saturday night. Although at the tourist office they didn't have any clue about it, we decided to come back to see what's up. There was a stage show with several dance groups in colourful costumes performing to 15 days after its beginning, which was on 4.3.2007. After we had watched for 45 minutes from the side, a Chinese lady came up to us and invited us to sit among the official invitees of political and economic importance. Somehow, we felt that refusal would be offensive and accepted to sit down on the armchairs with small tables, puzzled by the honour we got. We were offered some lucky oranges imported from China for the occasion, special New Years cakes and soft drinks. Between performances, a minister and chief of Sabah 's Hotel association, who was sitting next to us, informed us about the meaning of the Chinese dances.

The highlight of the evening represented a lion dance performed by two acrobats that were world champions in that discipline. Under a costume of a lion with a huge head, one artist played the front, another one the back part of the animal. The lion was dancing between 8 stilts of various heights. While one acrobat held on to two stilts with his hands, the other under the costume stood with his feet on two other stilts. Together they managed to jump over to other stilts almost two meters away. That wasn't all! Sometimes one would jump on the other's shoulders, making

the lion stand up on two legs. This was a dramatic show and we really feared the artists would fall down.

After a few days in KK, we drove on by bus. We passed by many hills and the road led past the entrance



to Mount Kinabalu National Park . At 4'101 m this is South-East Asia's highest mountain and it is covered in fog most of the time. Many tourists attempt to conquer it but as there was no indication of "Devon Tea" being served on the peak, we didn't feel the urge to go through that pain!

Instead, we drove for 6 hours to [Sandakan](#). The way out there was literally littered with Christian churches and from about the middle, the forest had been sacrificed to endless palm oil plantations.

Sandakan was not a very exciting place and at night it was really dead! Apparently there was a new part of town, where it was more lively but because it was about 4km away, we didn't get there. A new entertainment and shopping district is currently also being built at the harbour front of Sandakan but so far only a modern covered market and some fancy restaurants were completed.

During the last few days we had been looking around to find a suitable package tour to go on a "safari" and here we booked now a two days stay. Although, or probably because big parts of Sabah are now covered with palm oil plantations, the shores of the **Kinabatangan River**, Sabah's longest at 560km, offers good wildlife

watching opportunities. The area is now protected but except a small belt on the river shores that is still covered in jungle, most land has long been logged and planted with oil palms. This enforces the remaining wildlife to live mainly along the river shore.

A ratty track led to the few small settlements at the end of the road but as lots of palm oil can be harvested, it is

currently being upgraded to a proper road.

Several tourist lodges stood along the river, offering every category; from ramshackle to 5 star luxury. Ours was called "Nature Lodge" run by [Nasalis Larvatus Tours](#). Our bungalow was new but tiny and the lodge geared mainly toward independent and energetic travellers. Our fellow adventurers were two older ladies from France, a young family from Denmark and an Italian couple in our age. Our package included several day- and night walks and two boat cruises at sunset and sunrise each day. Of the animals, monkeys were the most visible with mostly Macaques, a few Silver Leaf monkeys and many Proboscis up in the trees. We saw much more proboscis monkeys here than in Bako National Park but we could never get as close. During the morning cruise of the last day, we've been lucky to see a big Orang Utan male. We were amazed how big this ape was and how gentle it moved between the branches. Orang Utan means "man of the forest" in Malay but with its long arms it looked even bigger than a man!

There were also many birds around, including various species of big hornbills. Finally we saw them here! Giant Kingfisher and black&red Broadbill were very colourful and also birds of prey and storks flew around. We were lucky to spot several giant warans (big lizards) and crocodiles. From far away it was not always possible to tell them apart as they had about the same size here. When our boat approached them too close, the croc's would run into the water and the goanna out.

There must be quite a number of small pigmy elephants around, as we had stumbled across tons of elephant droppings on our walks. But we didn't see one elephant.

Hanging on a branch, there was the peeled off skin of a snake and of another, live one, we had only seen the tip of its tail, as it didn't like our presence and vanished in the grass. During the night walks, our guide loved to get scorpions out of their hiding and play around with it in front of the horrified tourists. As it rained for a while on our second day, leeches greeted tourists even more enthusiastically than on the first night. Even they seem to know which meat is tender and jumped on the Danish boy only on the first night and mostly on the young guide on the second. Thanks to the big rubber boots made available by the lodge, we were quite well protected and didn't mind to walk through the mud – that also meant we didn't need to clean our hiking boots afterwards!



After getting up once more at 05:30 a.m. for the last cruise on the misty river, we had breakfast and then went back by bus to Kota Kinabalu. By coincidence, we bumped into Andrea and Peter once more, just minutes before they left to the airport. That's what we did as well two days later. We boarded a flight to Thailand where we got to write this story about Borneo.

# Thailand-Koh Tao: tropical island-paradise or dive factory

On March 13th 2007, we left Kota Kinabalu on an Air Asia plane to Bangkok. It was certainly not the first budget carrier we used, but for us, it was the first time that the flight also took off from a specially designed "Budget Terminal". It was a modern brand new facility, offering its users only the most important amenities, as a duty-free store with essential items as booze, tobacco and perfume. Like in any other duty-free store, also special „bargains“ could be found, like the Swiss chocolate bars for the unbelievably low duty-free price of only RM 22.50 (€ 4.50) whereas the same item in town would set you back a mere RM 9.--!

As this was a Budget Terminal, the more sophisticated facilities like money changer or letter boxes were non-existent at all! Still, it was not the most basic Budget Terminal. For instance Singapore's new Budget Terminal was built so basic, that except Singapore's own Tiger Air, all other Budget Airlines decided that the S\$ 3.00 (€ 1.50) saving per passenger, was not worth the hassle and so they all still use the "full service terminal"!

We arrived in [Thailand's](#) capital Bangkok at around midnight and after some hanging around the airport, we checked in at 4 o'clock for the first flight with Bangkok-Air to Koh Samui. This airline has a monopoly on this route and as they proclaim themselves to be a "boutique-" and not a "budget airline", we could take advantage of their lounge offering free drinks, snacks and internet access prior to departure.



From Koh Samui we took the ferry to Koh [Phangan's](#) Haadrin beach. Here we assembled our last travel story about Borneo and we also could arrange to meet Angelika and Karsten, whom we know from Costa Natura. Last time we had seen them three years ago, also on Koh Phangan and as they had meanwhile visited many countries in this area, there were lots of travel tales to be exchanged.

As most land in Haadrin had already been covered by new developments, the investors now started to build on steep cliffs and rock faces. They did not only add concrete bungalows but even swimming pools on concrete stilts.

After 13 days in Haadrin, we continued with a speed boat to discover the neighbouring island of [Koh Tao](#). Due to its small size (2x5km) every corner can still be reached by foot. From pictures and some stories of other travellers, we knew how the island looked like about two years ago, when there was only generator power.

It's almost unbelievable through how much (uncoordinated) growth the island had gone since. The arrival of town-power and to a much bigger extent the tsunami in the Andaman Sea (Dec. 2005) had swept literally 100'000's of tourists over to the Gulf of Siam. Here it's considered more "tsunami-safe" and this has meanwhile changed this little island forever. Thanks to an abundance of coral it rapidly became South East Asia's main training centre for divers. There are now about 50! dive operators and many resorts cater for divers only, not accepting other guests. One traveller mentioned: "the island is now a dive factory with lots of fins, lots of bubbles but not that much fish". In Koh Tao a quiet diving day means that there are "only" 15 (fifteen) boats on one dive site!



There are still some real bungalow-bargains left on the island but more and more (western managed) up-market resorts come in, with the most expensive one charging 500 USD a night.

Surely, this made this (lost?) paradise a bit more commercial and nowadays it's almost impossible to walk 50 meters without hearing "Hello Taxi" and western time-share touts are looking like vultures for pray! As on any Thai tourist island except on Koh Phangan, there is also a "girly bar scene". Many prostitutes try to hold onto their clients and tie the knot. From the paper we learned that from several regions in northern Thailand 70% (seventy!) of women are getting married with men from Germany or Switzerland!



Koh Tao stays for Turtle island because turtles used to come to lay their eggs here. As the tourist developments took over the beaches, they had to look for new breeding grounds. Now at high tide, most beaches do not exist anymore at all, as most resorts set their restaurants and bungalows up on terraces above the sandy beach. When we asked a local restaurant owner about the lack of beaches, he just replied: “as most tourists come out here for diving, we do not need big beaches for sunbathing. So it would be a waste of land, if we wouldn’t use it to build our businesses”. However, he complained that in stormy weather, the sea sometimes heaps a lot of sand up to the bar and they needed to clean for many days in a row once the water kept on washing more sand up the “beach” day after day...

Almost along the entire length of the island the paths and roads (where they existed; often there were dirt tracks only) are lined with ATM’s, shops, restaurants, internet-café’s, massage parlours and accommodation.

Surely, in some parts Koh Tao still retains its natural beauty. Like on the beach of Shark Bay or Nang Yuan Island just off the coast, which consists of three islets connected by sand banks. A look-out offered spectacular views and there was superb snorkeling in what they call “Japanese Garden” just off the beach.

Everybody on Koh Tao is a tourist or works for tourists. There is no village – only tourist settlements. As divers are active all day and their dives often start early in the morning, the island got more quiet than we appreciated already at 10 p.m. The nicely located Beach Bar’s were normally the only places which still served something after dinner, at least to those who are flexible enough to drink only alcohol. On one night the first place we tried, informed us friendly but firm, that they sell only beer at this time (10 p.m.). When we tried our luck at the neighbour’s bar, we were told that they only sell alcoholic drinks. A few houses on we finally were successful and could order some shakes.

The good thing about the arrival of mass-tourism is that the island had now a sophisticated scene of reasonably priced gourmet restaurants and bakeries or café’s. On the other hand, if it comes to drinking, only those who are happy with canned and bottled stuff or cocktails, are delighted. If it comes to the delicious old-fashioned fresh fruit shakes and juices, they cost 2-5 times more in the nice dining places, than in the remaining “cheapies” but what you get is normally only crap out of a tetra pack if you are lucky, but sometimes they even only serve syrup! instead of the fresh real thing!

Only Banana-Shakes were always fresh, at least as long as there is no Banana Syrup on the market. Our rule on Koh Tao: a juice or shake for 20-30 Baht (€ 0.45-0.65) is always good and made of fresh fruit but if it costs anything between 40-120 Baht it’s more often than not a waste of money.

By looking around, we observed that in the nice eateries nobody got the guts to order these delicious creations made out of fresh fruit and ice. To us – and especially for Heinz; they are the highlight of any trip to Thailand. We think ice had already been reasonably safe to drink in touristy places all over Asia, and nowadays it’s probably as save as in the west. Both of us ordered shakes already 20 years ago and we never run into a major problem but due to stupid reliability laws, travel guides have to warn tourists about



every minor risk and most people do not realize that the risk they are taking by diving or renting a motorbike on a Thai island, is much higher than the risk of having a fresh fruit shake! Strangely, tourists who dine in the simple and cheap places, which are not always as clean as they could be, order lots of iced shakes and juices and as we, they don't seem to have a problem with it.

After nine days the full moon party we had escaped from on Koh Phangan was over and we went back to that island. Brigitte proposed to go to the beach at Had Yao, as she hoped that we could sunbathe on the sheltered veranda of the bungalow we had stayed at 3 years ago. Heinz was kidding that these bungalows would most probably have been replaced with modern ones and there would be a swimming pool sitting on top of the hill. As soon as we arrived on that beach, we realized that his joke was not far away from reality. In the resort where we stayed last time, each simple bungalow had been replaced by three times that many sophisticated ones, nicely squeezed in between a new swimming pool on top and another one on the bottom of the hill! Never mind, we found another nice bungalow about 100 meters from the beach, which had a sheltered balcony.

Brigitte & Heinz



more pictures on our Homepage

