

Sabah



Topped by the wild granite spires of Mt Kinabalu, Sabah rolls like an undulating green wave from the South China Sea to the Sulu Sea. It offers pristine tropical rainforest, incredible animal and plant life, challenging trekking and mountain climbing, wild jungle rivers, and some of the world's best diving.

The west coast of Sabah is one long beach from north to south, with several beautiful islands offshore, including the islands of Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park and Pulau Mantanani, a tiny gem of a tropical island with blinding white sands. Central Sabah has Maliau Basin, a mountain-fringed sanctuary that was only properly explored in the late 1980s. It's a world of such incredible biodiversity that you may feel like you're walking through some sort of vast open-air zoo. Eastern Sabah offers more natural wonders, including the Sungai Kinabatangan, a river that winds through a corridor of primary jungle. For those who want an even more up-close-and-personal orangutan experience, there's the Sepilok Orang-Utan Rehabilitation Centre.

Of course, some of Sabah's most incredible attractions lie beneath the waves. If you're a diver, you already know about Pulau Sipadan, off the east coast of Sabah in Tun Sakaran Marine Park. This coral-fringed pinnacle rises 600m from the floor of the Celebes Sea and offers some fantastic wall-diving and plenty of large pelagic species. Lesser known are the nearby dive sites of Mabul and Kapalai, both of which offer great muck diving. On the other side of Sabah, some 300 kilometres northwest of Kota Kinabalu, is Layang Layang, which offers seemingly endless wall-diving, gin-clear water and occasional hammerhead sightings.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Enjoy the most attractively-located city in Southeast Asia, **Kota Kinabalu** (p88), which also happens to be the perfect gateway to Borneo
- Climb Borneo's highest mountain, **Mt Kinabalu** (Gunung Kinabalu, p106), and watch the sunrise over Borneo – an unforgettable experience for the adventurous and fit
- Trek into a hidden world of incredible biodiversity – a world unknown to science until the 1980s – at the **Maliau Basin Conservation Area** (p154)
- Spend a little quality time with our red-haired cousins, the orangutans, and do some great jungle walking at **Danum Valley Conservation Area** (p145)
- Descend the walls of the fantastic coral pinnacle that rises from the floor of the Celebes Sea at one of the world's best dive sites, **Tun Sakaran Marine Park** (p150)



■ POPULATION: 3 MILLION

■ AREA: 73,619 SQ KM

HISTORY

After centuries as a pawn in various Indonesian and Southeast Asian power games, Sabah was neatly carved up by enterprising British business in the late 19th century, when it was known as North Borneo and administered by the British North Borneo Company. After WWII Sabah and Sarawak were handed over to the British government, and both decided to merge with the peninsular states to form the new nation of Malaysia in 1963.

However, Sabah's natural wealth attracted other prospectors and its existence as a state was disputed by two powerful neighbours – Indonesia and the Philippines. There are still close cultural ties between the people of Sabah and the Filipinos of the nearby Sulu Archipelago and Mindanao, through not always manifested positively: several small islands to the north of Sabah are disputed by the Philippines, there's a busy smuggling trade, Muslim rebels often retreat down towards Sabah when pursued by government forces, and pirates based in the Sulu Sea continue to raid parts of Sabah's coast.

After independence, Sabah was governed for a time by Tun Mustapha, who ran the state almost as a private fiefdom and was often at odds with the federal government in Kuala Lumpur (KL). Even when the Kadazan-controlled Sabah United Party (Parti Bersatu Sabah; PBS) came into power in 1985 and joined Barisan Nasional (National Front), Malaysia's ruling coalition party, tensions with the federal government were rife. In 1990 the PBS pulled out of the alliance with the National Front just days before the general election. The PBS claimed that the federal government was not equitably returning the wealth that the state generated, and in 1993 it banned the export of logs from Sabah, largely to reinforce this point. The federal government used its powers to overturn the ban, and despite ongoing discussions, to this day nothing has changed – a mere 5% of revenue trickles back into state coffers.

As a result of this imbalance and its bad relations with the federal government, Sabah is the poorest of Malaysia's states, with an unemployment rate that's twice the national average. Although it's rich in natural resources, 16% of the population lives below the poverty line. Part of the problem is a bizarre rotation system that

forces a change of political administration every two years.

Just to compound the economic difficulties, Sabah has experienced an extraordinary population boom over the last couple of decades – in 1970 the total number of inhabitants was under 650,000, whereas today it's a staggering 2.8 million. The government puts the blame squarely on illegal immigrants, claiming there are around 1.5 million foreigners in the state, but whatever the truth, a solution will need to be found in the next few years for Sabah's stretched resources.

CLIMATE

For information on the climate of Sabah, see p13 and p291.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

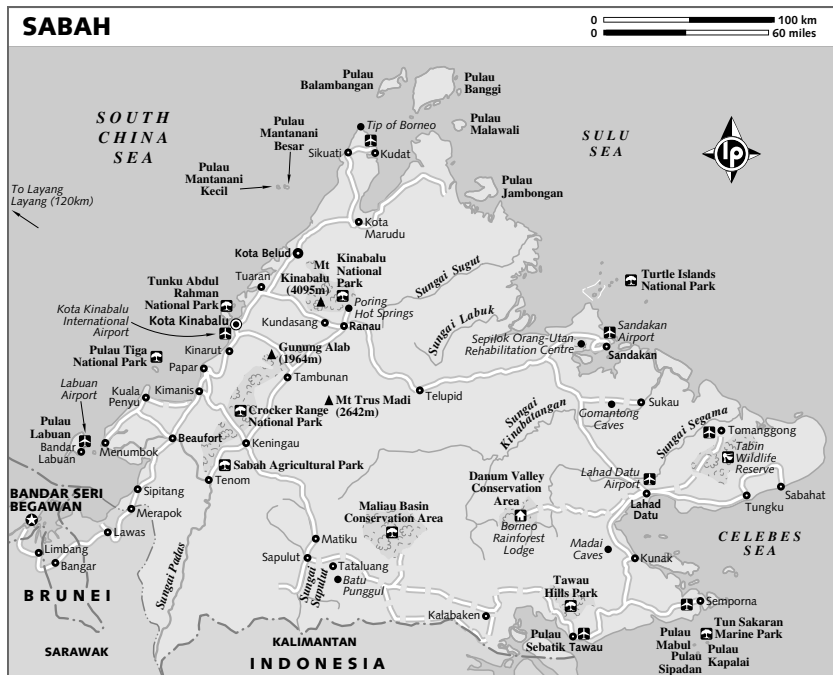
For more information on visas to the region, please see p300.

Air

There are flights between Kota Kinabalu and the following cities: Cebu and Manila (Philippines); Guangzhou, Hong Kong and Macau (China); Kaohsiung and Taipei (Taiwan); Seoul/Incheon (Korea); Singapore; and Tokyo (Japan). There are also flights to/from the following cities in West Malaysia: Kuala Lumpur, Kuala Terengganu, Kuantan, Penang and Johor Bahr (note that it's usually much cheaper to fly to/from Johor Bahr than Kuala Lumpur, so consider taking a bus to/from Johor Bahr). There are also flights to/from the following cities in Borneo: Bandar Seri Begawan (Brunei), Bintulu, Kuching, Miri, and Sib (all in Sarawak). For details, see p100.

Boat

There are boat connections between Kota Kinabalu and Pulau Labuan, where you can get easy connections onward to Muara, the port of Bandar Seri Begawan (Brunei), as well as speedboat connections to/from Lawas and Limbang, both in Sarawak's northern Limbang Division. For details, see p121. There are boats between Tawau, in east Sabah, and Nunukan/Tarakan in Kalimantan (Indonesia). For details, see p153. Finally, there are boats between Sandakan, in east Sabah, and the city of Zamboanga, in the southern Philippines. For details see p138.



Road

There are road connections between Sipitang, in far southwest Sabah, and Lawas, in Sarawak's Limbang Division. For details, see p121.

GETTING AROUND

The west coast of Sabah is traversed by a good network of mostly paved roads, this network extends east over the Crocker Range in three places and one good paved road goes all the way to the east coast, which also has a good road network. Beyond this, most of the roads in the state are logging roads. The main highways in Sabah are serviced by regular bus, minivans and taxi services.

Sabah also has a good air network, serving both major cities and some smaller towns. River travel is possible in a few places, but not nearly to the extent of Sarawak or Kalimantan. Finally, the best way to explore Sabah is on foot and the trekking here is as good as anywhere in Borneo.

For details on getting around Sabah, see the Getting There & Away sections in this chapter and the Transport chapter (p302).

KOTA KINABALU

☎ 088 / pop 300,000

Sandwiched between the Crocker Range and the clear waters of the South China Sea, Sabah's capital city of Kota Kinabalu lays claim to one of the best locations of any city in Southeast Asia. With convenient flights from several nearby Asian countries KK (as the city is universally known) is the logical entry point for most travellers to Borneo.

Those expecting to step off the plane and find some languid tropical backwater are in for a real surprise. Sure, you'll spot a few picturesque 'water villages' on the ride from the airport, but once you get downtown you'll find yourself in a world of crowded shopping malls, big hotels and rising office blocks.

This bustling boomtown is the perfect place to catch your bearings and acclimatise to the tropical heat. The city's most notable feature is its pleasantly varied ethnic mix: Chinese, Malay, Indian and Filipino residents share the sidewalk with crowds of Asian holidaymakers and an increasing population of Western expats. With a population like this, it's no

surprise that KK is a good eating city, and as you plan your Borneo adventure, you can feast on excellent Chinese, Malay, Filipino, Western and Indian food.

If you need to cool off or just want a break from city life, catch a taxi boat to the islands of Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park. You can easily make a half-day trip for some snorkelling or sunbathing and be back in town sipping a cool drink by midafternoon. On the way to the islands, you may catch a glimpse of the mad spires of Mt Kinabalu rising above the clouds behind the city. Even if you don't intend to climb it, you'll probably find yourself drawn to the mountain, and KK is the natural access point to Kinabalu National Park.

Above all, KK is remarkable for its sunsets: the city faces straight west across the South China Sea and each night the low clouds of the tropics come alive with brilliant reds, oranges and purples. In fact, we don't know of any city in the world that enjoys more regular and more spectacular sunsets than KK. All told, it's the perfect gateway to the island of Borneo.

HISTORY

In 1882, the British North Borneo Chartered Company established a base of Pulau Gaya (p102), offshore from Kota Kinabalu. The city was originally known as Jesselton, after Sir Charles Jessel, a chairman of the company. Jesselton grew rich on rubber exports, which were facilitated by the completion of the North Borneo Railway, which reached all the way down to Beaufort (p117). The city was occupied by the Japanese for three years in WWII and was heavily bombed during the later stages of the war. The city was officially named Kota Kinabalu in 1967. At present, KK is undergoing a serious development boom and money is rushing into the city from mainland China, Singapore and Korea.

ORIENTATION

Geography dictates that KK is an easy city to navigate – it's squeezed by the mountains and sea into a fairly narrow corridor that runs southwest to northeast. The airport is on the coast about 5km southwest of town, and it's an easy trip by minivan or taxi (for details on getting to/from the airport, see p101).

Jln Kemajuan marks the southern boundary of the central area and one main street runs right through the centre of town, from

the old Kampung Air ('Water Village') section, through the Sinsuran district, up to Kota Kinabalu Lama ('Old Kota Kinabalu'). Like many streets in Malaysia, this street changes names as it goes, with no fewer than four names in the downtown area alone: Lebu Raya, Jln Pasar Baru, Jln Tun Razak, and Jln Haji Saman. The all-important ferry terminal/jetty (for trips to the offshore islands and Pulau Labuan) is on the foreshore at the northeast end of town.

While there are plenty of shops, restaurants and hotels in Kampung Air, travellers tend to gravitate to Sinsuran and Kota Kinabalu Lama, which are somewhat more atmospheric and within easy walking distance of the jetty and the Night Market, as well as many of the city's best restaurants and shops.

While there are several minivan and taxi stands in the downtown area, the Inanam long-distance bus station is about 8km north of town and is accessible by minivan and taxi from downtown (for more on transport, see the Getting There & Away section p99 and the Getting Around section p101).

Maps

The free *Traveller's Map Sabah*, available at the airport and the Tourism Malaysia office (p91) has a good map of Kota Kinabalu, as well as Tunka Abdul Rahman National Park, Labuan, Tawau and Sandakan. The free *Kota Kinabalu Street Map*, available at the same places, is a decent map of the city centre and outskirts. For something better, pick up a copy of the *Periplus Sabah & Kota Kinabalu* map at any of the bookstores in town (below). It costs around RM20.

INFORMATION

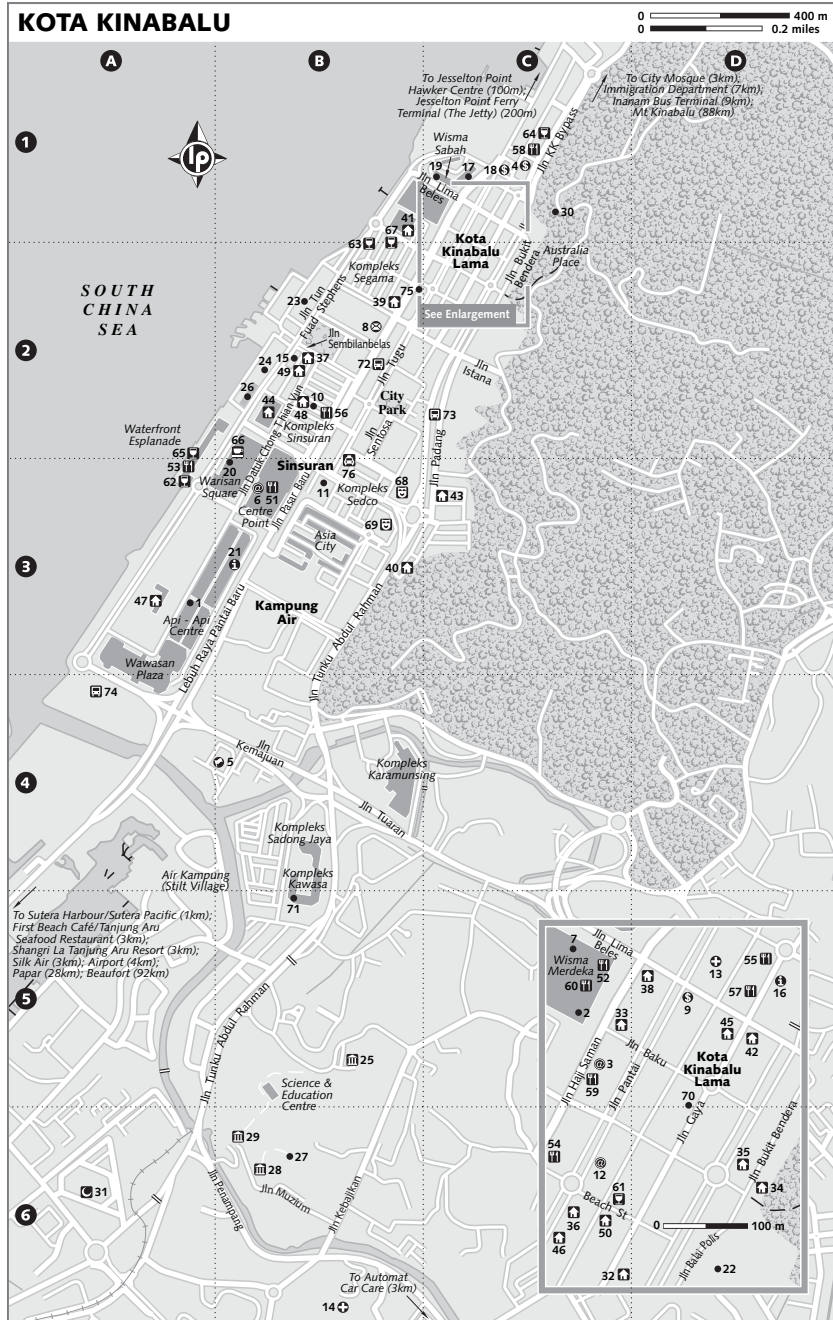
Bookshops

Borneo Books I (☎ 538-077; ground fl, Phase 1, Wisma Merdeka; www.borneobooks.com ☎ 10am-7pm) This is a smaller branch of the following Borneo Books II.

Borneo Books II (☎ 538-077; ground fl, Phase 1, Wisma Merdeka; www.borneobooks.com ☎ 10am-7pm) A brilliant selection of Borneo-related books, maps and a small used-book section. Free internet on the premises.

Iwase Books (☎ 233-757; ground fl, Phase 1, Wisma Merdeka; ☎ 10am-7pm) Iwase has a great selection of new fiction and nonfiction titles as well as lots of Borneo titles.

Times Books & Magazines (☎ 447-020; ground fl, Warisan Sq, Jln Tun Fuad Stephens; ☎ 10am-10pm) This new bookstore has a good variety of English-language titles, including books on Borneo and travel guides.



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Night Market.....26 B2	Kedai Kopi Fatt Kee.....(see 33)		
Sabah Art Gallery.....(see 29)	Kohinoor.....53 A3		
Sabah Museum Heritage Village.....27 B6	Little Italy.....(see 38)		

Consulate

Indonesian Consulate (☎ 218-600; Lg Kemajuan, Karamunsing; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri)

Emergency

Ambulance (☎ 999 or 218-166)

Fire (☎ 994 or 214-822)

Police (☎ 999, 212-092; Jln Dewan)

Internet Access

Borneo Net (Jln Haji Saman; 🕒 9am-midnight; per hour RM3) This popular spot has around 20 terminals (all PCs) with fast connections. Just try to ignore the ear-splitting heavy metal music they tend to play.

IT Point (2nd fl, Centre Point Jln Pasar Baru; 🕒 9.30am-9.30pm; per hour RM3) If you need access while in Centre Point, this is a convenient spot.

Net Access (Jln Pantai; 🕒 9am-2am; per hour RM3) Plenty of connections and less noise than other net places in KK. LAN connections are available for use of your own laptop.

Immigration

Immigration office (☎ 488-700; Kompleks Persekutuan Pentadbiran Kerajaan, Jln UMS; 🕒 8am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Thu, 8-11.30am & 2-5pm Fri)

Laundry

Mega Laundry (Sinsuran ☎ 238-970; Ruang Sinsuran 2; Kampung Air ☎ 231-970; Chinese Chamber of Commerce Building, Jln Laiman Diki; 🕒 8am-8pm daily; per kilo

RM6) This fast and efficient laundry place is one of the few in KK open on Sunday. Ask them not to write your name on your laundry. The Kampung Air branch is the newer of the two.

Medical Services

Permai Polyclinic (☎ 232-100; 4 Jln Pantai) This is a private outpatient clinic.

Queen Elizabeth Hospital (☎ 218-166; Jln Penampang) This is out past the Sabah Museum.

Money

You'll find numerous moneychangers on the ground floors of Centre Point and Wisma Merdeka.

HSBC (☎ 212-622; 56 Jln Gaya; 🕒 9am-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 9am-4pm Fri) 24hr ATM.

Maybank (☎ 254-295; 9 Jln Pantai; 🕒 9am-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 9am-4pm Fri) 24hr ATM.

Standard Chartered Bank (☎ 298-111; 20 Jln Haji Saman; 🕒 9.15am-3.45pm Mon-Fri) 24hr ATM.

Post

Main Post Office (☎ 210-855; Jln Tun Razak; 🕒 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) Western Union cheques and money orders can be cashed here.

Tourist Information

Sabah Parks (☎ 211-881; Lot 1-3, ground fl, Block K, Sinsuran Kompleks, Jln Tun Fuad Stephen; 🕒 8am-1pm & 2-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 8-11.30am & 2-4.30pm Fri, 8am-

12.50pm Sat) Good source of information on the state's parks.

Sabah Tourism Board (☎ 212-121; www.sabahtourism.com; 51 Jln Gaya; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-4pm Sat, 9am-4pm Sun) An excellent source of information on all aspects of Sabah.

Scuba Paradise (☎ 266-695; www.scubaparadiseborneo.com.my; ground fl, Wisma Sabah, Jln Haji Saman; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) This office arranges trip out to Pulau Mantanani (see p129).

Sutera Sanctuary Lodges (☎ 243-629; www.suterasanctuarylodges.com; Lot G15, ground fl, Wisma Sabah, Jln Haji Saman; ☎ 9am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4.30pm Sat, 9am-3pm Sun) Books accommodation in Kinabalu National Park (including Poring Hot Springs and Mesilau) and on Manukan Island in Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park.

Tourism Malaysia (☎ 248-698; www.tourism.gov.my; ground fl, Api-Api Centre, Jln Pasar Baru; ☎ 8am-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 8am-noon & 1.30-4.30pm Fri) This office is of limited use for travellers and seems to specialise in giving out brochures that are long on pictures and short on practical details. Geared more toward travel in other parts of Malaysia.

Travel Agency

Airworld Travel & Tours (☎ 242-996; airworld@tm.net.my; ground fl, block 2 Api-Api Centre, Jln Pasar Baru) This efficient travel agency is the place to go for domestic and international air tickets.

SIGHTS

While most travellers use KK as a staging point for journeys elsewhere in Sabah, there are enough attractions in the city to keep you occupied for a few days. Without a doubt, the Night Market is the city's most interesting attraction. The Central Market and the Filipino Market are also worth a look, particularly if you've got souvenir shopping to do. Of course, the best ways to enjoy KK is to just wander aimlessly, stopping in sidewalk cafe's to watch the world pass by.

Sabah Museum

The **Sabah Museum** (☎ 253-199; Jln Kebajikan; admission RM15; ☎ 9am-5pm Sat-Thu) comprises three museums/galleries and a collection of traditional dwellings on a hill south of the city centre, at the corner of Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman and Jln Penampang. A visit could easily occupy a half day or so and it's a good choice on a rainy day.

The main hall, modelled on a Rungus longhouse, contains a decent collection of tribal

and historical artefacts, including ceramics, and some nicely presented exhibits of flora and fauna. The prehistory gallery even has a replica limestone cave, in case you can't make it to Niah or Mulu.

Down the hill from the main hall, the **Heritage Village** (☎ dawn to dusk) offers the chance to wander round examples of traditional Borneo dwellings, including Kadazan bamboo houses and a Chinese farmhouse, all nicely set on a lily-pad lake. This is probably the highlight of the museum and it shouldn't be missed.

Just north of the main hall, at the end of the parking lot, the **Science & Technology Centre** (☎ 9am-5pm Sat-Thu) has some small exhibits on the petroleum industry. It's quite missable, so head upstairs to the more interesting **Sabah Art Gallery** (☎ 9am-5pm Sat-Thu), which features regular shows and exhibitions by local artists.

A 15-minute walk northeast of the Science & Technology Centre (past a hall used mostly for storage), the **Museum of Islamic Civilisation** (☎ 538-234; admission included in the Sabah Museum ticket; ☎ 9am-5pm Sat-Thu), is devoted to Muslim culture and history. The small collection includes a few illuminated Korans and maps of the spread of Islam throughout the world. Worth a look.

To get to the museum complex, catch a bus (50 sen) along Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman and get off just before the mosque. Bus 1 and 2, among others, stop at the mosque. Bus 13 also goes right round past the hospital and stops near Jln Muzium.

State Mosque

A fine example of contemporary Islamic architecture, the **Sabah State Mosque** (Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman) is set some distance from the heat and noise of central KK. It's south of the city centre past the Kampung Air stilt-village, not far from the Sabah Museum; you'll see the striped minaret and Octopussy-style dome on your way to or from the airport.

Built in 1977, the mosque has since been upstaged by the massive new City Mosque at Likas Bay; nonetheless, it's still an impressive building, accommodating 5000 male worshippers inside and 500 women on the balcony. Non-Muslim visitors are allowed to enter outside of prayer times, but must dress appropriately and remove their shoes before entering.

City Mosque

Heading north out of KK, you can't miss the four minarets and graceful dome of the Kota Kinabalu **City Mosque** (off Jln Tun Fuad Stephens), in Kampung Likas, about 4km north of the city centre. Overlooking the South China Sea, this mosque is more attractive than the State Mosque in terms of setting and design. Completed in 2000, it can hold up to 12,000 worshippers. It can be entered by non-Muslims outside of regular prayer times.

To get there, take bus 5A from Wawasan Plaza going toward UMS (RM1.50). Just ask the conductor to drop you off outside the City Mosque after the Tanjung Lipat round about. Taxis are about RM15 each way.

Central Market

KK's vast **Central Market** (Jln Tun Fuad Stephens; ☎ 6.30am-6pm daily) occupies a long stretch of primer waterfront real estate in the middle of town. While it's not as interesting as the Night Market (see below), it's fun to wander the aisles and watch as locals transact their daily business. The ground floor handles seafood, fruit and vegetables etc, and the first floor has a decent hawk centre, where you can eat breakfast or lunch after perusing the stalls.

Night Market

KK's brilliant **Night Market** (Jln Tun Fuad Stephens; ☎ late afternoon-11pm) is the best market in Borneo and one of the best in all of Southeast Asia. It is a place of delicious contrasts: the market huddles beneath the imposing gaze of the ultramodern Le Meridien Kota Kinabalu hotel, yet most of the goods for sale would have been instantly familiar to the residents of the city a hundred years ago. As jets soar overhead bound for Tokyo, Hong Kong and Singapore, you can bargain for sago palm, *belacan* (fermented prawn paste used as a condiment in Chinese, Malay and Indonesian cuisine), jungle honey, an incredible variety of fruit and an astonishing range of fish pulled from the South China Sea. Clouds of smoke from the many stalls barbequing fish and chicken give the place a decidedly primeval air, and the whole market echoes with heart-warming cries of 'dua ringgit, dua ringgit' (it seems as though everything costs a mere RM2). If you've never seen a proper Southeast Asian market, this place will be a revelation.

The market is divided into two main sections: the southwest end is given over mostly to produce (fruit, vegetables, fish, chicken etc) while the northeast end (the area around the main entrance) is a huge hawk centre, where you can eat your way right through the entire Malay gastronomy: *ais kacang* or ABC (the Southeast Asian shaved-ice treat), *nasi and mee goreng*, fried chicken and fish, *kueh* (Malay cakes), *pisang goreng* (banana fritters) and incredibly colourful arrays of *nasi campur* (tray after tray of Malay curries, veggie dishes etc). Finally, at the northern end, hidden behind the Filipino Market, is the brilliant Filipino Barbeque area (see the boxed text on p98).

Filipino Market

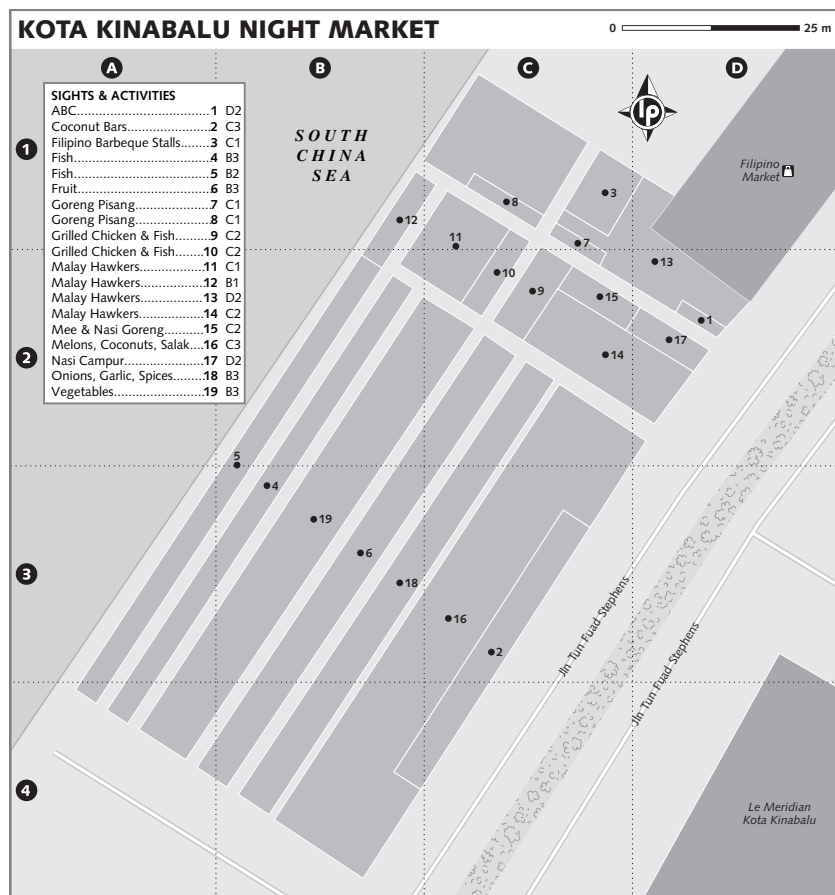
Sandwiched between the Central Market and the Night Market, the **Filipino Market** (Jln Tun Fuad Stephens; ☎ 10am-6pm daily) is a good place to shop for inexpensive souvenirs. Offerings include pearls, textiles, seashell crafts, jewellery and bamboo goods, some from the Philippines, some from Malaysia and some from other parts of Asia. Needless to say, bargaining is possible here and you should be wary of fake pearls etc. Next door, there is a fruit market that stays open until late.

Other Attractions

You can wander up to the UFO-like **Signal Hill Observation Pavilion** (free admission; ☎ dawn to dusk), at the eastern edge of the city centre, to escape the traffic and to get another take on the squatters' stilt village at Pulau Gaya. The view is best as the sun sets over the islands. From the top, it's also possible to hike down to the bird sanctuary on the other side.

The modest timepiece at the foot of the hill is the **Atkinson Clock Tower** (Jln Bukit Bendera), one of the only structures to survive the Allied bombing of Jesselton in 1945. It's a square, 15.7m-high wooden structure that was completed in 1905 and named after the first district officer of the town, FG Atkinson, who died of malaria aged 28. The tower was once visible from the sea, though there's now quite a few buildings in the way!

On Sunday a very lively Chinese street market takes over the entire length of Jln Gaya, with all kinds of food and goods (including some great pancakes) on offer. On Chinese New Year it goes completely crazy – you'll hear the gongs and dances starting around 7am!



ACTIVITIES

Japanese Shiatsu & Reflexology (☎ 258-829; 2nd Floor, Wisma Merdeka, Phase 1; one-hour full-body massage RM50) Nothing feels better than a massage after a climb up Kinabalu or a trek through Maliau Basin. This cramped massage parlour in the Wisma Merdeka shopping mall doesn't look very encouraging at first glance, but the masseuses here are very good indeed.

SLEEPING

Kota Kinabalu has Borneo's best selection of accommodation in all price brackets. For budget travellers there are actually too many choices – the city is currently experiencing a glut of backpacker accommodation, most of it clustered in Sinsuran and Kota Kinabalu

Lama. Midrange choices also abound, with a good variety of clean Chinese cheapies scattered all through the town. Finally, there are several international-class hotels in the city itself and three resort hotels on the coast south of town.

Budget

North Borneo Cabin (☎ 272-800, www.northborneocabin.com; 74 Jln Gaya; d with fan/ac 18/20, private room with fan/ac 50/56; ☑) Right downtown, the Cabin offers large, light-filled rooms, clean showers and toilets and a spacious common area. It also offers free internet and luggage storage for while you're away in the jungle.

Backpacker's Lodge/Lucy's Homestay (☎ 261-495; backpackerkk@yahoo.com; Lot 25 Lg Dewan; dm RM18, r from

RM42) The eponymous Lucy runs a friendly and homey backpacker joint that is fairly unique in offering cooking facilities. It's a little lived-in, but clean enough and has a veranda for chilling out in the evening.

Summer Lodge (☎ 244-499; www.summerlodge.com.my; Lot 120 Jln Gaya; dm RM18, r from RM55; ☑ ☑) The Summer is a large new hotel right on one of the main pedestrian malls of KK. It's got a spacious and pleasant common area and free internet. You can't miss its bright yellow façade as you approach.

Borneo Backpackers (☎ 234-009; www.borneobackpackers.com; 24 Lg Dewan, Australia Pl; dm fan/ac RM20/25; ☑ ☑) This long-running backpackers is a little cramped but still popular. There's free internet but no cooking facilities. It's fairly clean and the location is good.

Akinabalu Youth Hostel (☎ 272-188; akinabaluyh@yahoo.com; Lot 133 Jln Gaya; dm with fan/ac RM20/23, r from RM50) With a big common area, clean showers and friendly staff, the Akinabalu Youth Hostel (it's actually a backpackers), is another decent choice for budget travellers, although there are no cooking facilities.

Step-In Lodge (☎ 233-519; Block L Kompleks Sinsuran; www.stepinlodge.com; dm with fan/ac RM25/35, r with fan/ac from RM60/80; ☑ ☑) The best backpacker place in town, the Step-In, has a large and airy common area, clean rooms and bathrooms and very informative staff. It's a great place to meet other travellers and exchange information.

Midrange

Ang's Hotel (☎ 234-999; 28 Jln Bakau; s/d from RM60/65; ☑) We've got a fondness for clean, well-maintained, simple Chinese hotels and Ang's is a perfect example. The deluxe rooms are light and spacious, if a little spare. The standard windowless rooms are similar but not as appealing. This is a good value midrange choice.

City Park Lodge (☎ 257-752; cplodge@streamyx.com; 49 Jln Pantai, tw/d from RM60; ☑) The brand new City Park Lodge tries hard to please and it does a good job. It's clean and well taken care of. The deluxe doubles (actually twins) are a good value, and if you don't mind being up on the 4th floor or not having a window, you'll get the same type of room for RM5 less.

Pantai Inn (☎ 217-095; 57 Jln Pantai; s/tw/family from RM67/73/88; ☑) There's a lot of competition in this price bracket in KK, but the Pantai still manages to rank near the top. With hot-water

showers, neat and sunny rooms, it's a great value in a convenient spot.

Hotel Holiday (☎ 213-116; www.hotelholiday.com.my; Block F Kompleks Segama; s/d from RM70/80; ☑) The Holiday is a very friendly spot right downtown in the Segama Complex. It's showing its age, and hot water here is an on-again-off-again affair, but the folks at the front desk will make you feel at home.

Seri Borneo Hotel (☎ 280-777; Kompleks Sinsuran; s from RM80, tw/d/tr from RM 90/90/115; ☑) This clean, new hotel has everything you need without frills or fuss. It's an excellent choice in this price range.

King Park Hotel (☎ 270-500; fax 270-600; kpkk@streamyx.com; Jln Masjid Lama; r from 108; ☑) The King Park is a good choice if you want something nicer than a bare-bones midrange room but don't want to top-end prices. It's got large, clean, new rooms with TVs and fridges. There are no bathtubs, but the showers are good and the bathrooms are clean. It's a little far from the centre of town, but still within walking range.

Hotel Capital (☎ 231-999; capitalh@streamyx.com; 23 Jln Haji Saman; s/tw from RM140; ☑) The Capital is a little long in the tooth, but it is well maintained and decent value. There is little to distinguish it from others in this class except its convenient downtown location. Oh, and let's not forget Little Italy, the great Italian restaurant downstairs.

D'Borneo Hotel (☎ 266-999; www.dborneohotel.com; Block L Kompleks Sinsuran; r from RM145; ☑) The pleasant spacious rooms here have TVs, fridges, hot showers and the rate includes breakfast. The deluxe rooms are larger than the standards. Free wi-fi and a good location are bonuses.

Top End

Hotel Shangri La (☎ 212-000; fax 212-078; www.kkshangri.com.my; 75 Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman; s/tw/d including breakfast from RM161/184/184; ☑) The Shangri La (not part of the famous worldwide chain) is a good business hotel for those who want a bit of comfort but don't want to pay international rates. The deluxe rooms (which are actually standard) are spacious and well-appointed and have bathtubs for soaking in after, say, a climb up Kinabalu.

Jesselton Hotel (☎ 233-333; www.jesseltonhotel.com; 69 Jln Gaya; s/d from RM 198/215; ☑) This long-running hotel has a lot to recommend it: clean rooms, nice bathrooms, a great location,

a good Italian restaurant downstairs, and a bit of history. However, even smokers will probably find the smoking rooms too 'fragrant'.

Hyatt Regency Kinabalu (☎ 822-1234; fax 821-8909; <http://kinabalu.regency.hyatt.com>; Jln Datuk Saleh Sulung; r from RM270; 🏨 📺 📺) Perfectly located on the foreshore, the Hyatt Regency is a big international-class hotel with an outdoor swimming pool, several on-site restaurants and comfortable rooms (some with ocean views). A few travellers feel that it's getting a little long in the tooth, but we find it perfectly adequate.

Le Meridien Kota Kinabalu (☎ 322-250; fax 322-223; www.kotakinabalu.lemeridien.com; Jln Tun Fuad Stephens; r from RM290; 🏨 📺 📺) The Meridien has some of the nicest and best-appointed rooms in KK. There are two restaurants on site, and KK's brilliant Night Market is right out the front door. The deluxe rooms offer ocean views, as does the executive lounge. The pool has a great ocean view and the gym has enough machines to keep you in decent trim. There's in-room LAN access and wi-fi in the lobby. On the downside, the service gets mixed reviews.

Promenade Hotel (☎ 265-555; fax 253-9804; reservations@promenade.com.my; Lg Api Api 3; superior/deluxe r from RM345/379; 🏨 📺 📺) Very popular with international tour groups and Malaysian business travellers, this mammoth hotel near the south of the city is right on the foreshore and commands great ocean views. The rooms are fairly spacious, with fridges, TVs, bathtubs, etc. Deluxe rooms have ocean views and superior (read: standard) rooms have city views. There's a small pool and a gym. Promo rates are usually available.

Shangri La Tanjung Aru Resort (☎ 225-8000; fax 217-155; www.shangri-la.com; Tanjung Aru; r from 700; 🏨 📺 📺) The Shangri La is the perfect choice for those who want to combine the attractions of Kota Kinabalu with the features of a tropical resort. It's a sprawling complex which occupies most of the Tanjung Aru point about 3km south of the city centre. The superior rooms here have city/mountain views, while deluxe rooms have ocean views, and all rooms have private balconies. There are seven on-site restaurants and bars; hourly boat service to Manukan Island, two large swimming pools and one small beach. Parents will appreciate the kids club, which has minders who will watch kids all day free of charge. Finally, they're building a new spa on the beach where

you can get massages while peering over the South China Sea.

Sutera Harbour (☎ 318-888; fax 317-777; www.suteraharbour.com; 1 Sutera Harbour Blvd; deluxe garden-view r from RM810, deluxe sea-view r from RM910, packages and discounts available; 🏨 📺 📺) On a point about 1km south of the city centre, this complex with a vast reception hall has well-appointed deluxe rooms with private balconies and sea views (the upper floors have particularly nice views, as you would expect). Rooms have nice bathrooms but the tubs are a little small, two pools (one Olympic-size), three restaurants and kids club (not free minding) make this better than the adjoining **Sutera Pacific**. Expect similar features with somewhat more classically decorated rooms and common areas, as well as two restaurants and a golf course. Prices are similar.

EATING

KK is Borneo's best food city and if you only have to visit one of the city's markets to see why: the city's Chinese, Malay and Indian chefs have some of the world's best ingredients to work with, including an incredible variety of fresh seafood and the full range of tropical fruits, vegetables and spices from the nearby plantations and jungle. You'll be spoilt for choice in KK, so to help you narrow things down a bit, we can recommend the following culinary highlights: 1) a seafood feast in one of the city's giant Chinese dining halls and 2) a stroll through the Night Market followed by dinner at one of the stalls. And for breakfast and lunch, you won't go too far wrong at any of the city's *kedai kopi* (Malaysia's ubiquitous coffee shop/restaurants).

Food Courts & Hawker Centres

Night Market (off Jln Tun Fuad Stephens; meals from RM2; 🍴 dinner; 📍) The night market is the best, cheapest and most interesting place in KK for dinner. For details on the Night Market see the Filipino Barbeque Paradise box p98.

Centre Point Basement Food Court (Basement fl, Centre Point Shopping Centre, Jln Pasar Baru; meals RM2-10; 🍴 lunch & dinner; 📍) Your ringgit will go a long way at this popular and varied basement food-court at Centre Point mall. There are Malay, Chinese and Indian places, as well as drink and dessert specialists.

Wisma Merdeka Food Court (6th fl, Jln Haji Saman, Wisma Merdeka; meals RM3; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Not as

KAREN CHIN ON SABAH FOOD

Sabah, with immigrants from neighbouring countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia, has its own kind of food which is a blend of foreign food with local tastes, thus it is very different cuisine from other states of Malaysia. For example, the barbeque seafood at the Night Market in Sinsuran area is cooked in local Filipino style and served with other condiments such as freshly pickled seaweed.

The typical native dish which is more popular among the locals is *hinava*. *Hinava*, raw fish slices pickled with lime juice, chilli padi, sliced shallot, and grated ginger to get rid of the fishy smell, is usually serve as an appetiser.

Roti canai, flaky pancakes made from flatbread fried on a skillet, is served from the morning till late night at any Indian Muslim *kedai kopi* (coffee shop). A good *roti canai* requires a cook to skilfully flip the dough over and over again before cooking in order to achieve its flaky texture. The flipping of the *roti* is a sight in itself. This dish is served with sauce, usually *dhal* (lentil curry) or another curry made from either fish or chicken. From this simple dough comes variations of *roti* such as *roti tissue*, *roti planta*, *roti telur*, *roti bom*, *martabak* etc. These choices are as mind-boggling as they are tasty.

Locals often have their *roti* with different types of *teh* (tea). One favourite is *teh tarik*, a foamy tea prepared with condensed milk and poured from a higher mug to a lower mug in order to generate a foamy head. Other variations include *teh tarik halia* (tea with ginger) and *teh tarik Madras* (Madras-style tea).

One should not miss the famous *sayur manis*, a 'Sabah Veggie' which has been grown in Sabah since the early days. This vegetable can be stir-fried with *sambal*, a spicy shrimp paste, or with garlic or dried shrimp.

Another innovative dish is *fish noodle* (*udon*-like noodles made from fish) and is often served in soup or fried with seafood.

Even Tom Yam noodle soup has its own Sabah spin, with a rich flavour that comes from the addition of evaporated milk. And one can't miss chicken cooked with *lihing* (a sweet local yellow rice wine).

Dumplings filled with minced pork and served fried or steamed are also an all-time favourite among the non-Muslim locals here. They are served with red-wine vinegar and chopped garlic.

Beside common tropical fruits found in other states, Sabah is also home to rare fruits such as *tarap*, *sukun* and *Luzon* mangoes, but these are seasonal. *Tarap* has fleshy fruit encased in a bristly skin. It has a strong aroma but it's not nearly as pungent as durian. *Sukun* are used for making fritters and taste like sweet potatoes. *Luzon* mangoes are similar to regular mangoes but the skin is green even when ripe.

Finally, there are *kuih cincin*, literally translated as 'ring cookies'. These are made from flour and *gula Melaka* (Melaka sugar), moulded into the shape of blossom flower and then deep-fried. This biscuit is only available in Sabah so take some when you leave the region.

Karen Chin is one of the directors of Step-In Lodge in Kota Kinabalu.

large as the one in Centre Point mall, this simple food court is still a good option for a cheap meal up at the northern end of town.

Jesselton Point Hawker Centre (Jesselton Point Jetty; meals from RM3; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This is a great spot to eat and drink while enjoying one of KK's famous beautiful sunsets. There's a variety of Chinese and Malay stalls here with shared outdoor seating and a couple of proper sit-down air-con restaurants, including Benito's which does a great lunch set including a good Aussie steak for RM17 on weekdays.

Restaurants

Restoran Sempelang (☎ 013-856-9777; Kompleks Sinsuran; 🍴 24hr) Eating outside is a Kota Kinabalu tradition and Restoran Sempelang is a great place to do it – right smack in the middle of the colourful Kompleks Sinsuran. There's a lot to like about this bustling Malay eatery: giant fresh fruit-juices (RM4), English menu, good seafood barbeque (from 6pm nightly), a canopy to keep off the rain, and friendly staff. As with other restaurants in the complex, your meal will be accompanied by the ubiquitous pro-wrestling videos.

Viet Café (Jln Haji Saman; meals RM5; ☺ lunch & dinner) This clean and bright Vietnamese place serves decent *pho* (noodles in soup), good fresh fruit juices, and tasty fried spring rolls.

Kedai Kopi Fatt Kee (28 Jln Bakau; dinner from RM15 per person; ☺ lunch & dinner, closed Sun) The woks are always busy at this popular semi outdoor Chinese place next to Ang's Hotel. Unless you show up early or late for mealtimes, you may have to wait for a table, and even after you order, you may wind up waiting a while for your food – but it's always worth it. *Midin* (jungle fern) cooked in *belacan* (fermented shrimp paste) is a Borneo classic, and salt and pepper prawns are great.

Nishiki (☎ 230-582; 59 Jln Gaya; set meals RM16; ☺ lunch & dinner) Operated by a Japanese expat, this authentic Japanese restaurant takes full advantage of the city's excellent fish markets.

When we were there, the master served up some thick slices of tender yellowjack tuna that were as good as any we've had in Japan. The atmosphere is pleasantly traditional, right down to the sushi counter. There are good-value set meals, sushi sets, and plenty of à la carte choices. You won't find authentic Japanese food for this price anywhere else outside of Japan.

Little Italy (☎ 232-231; Jln Haji Saman; dinner from RM20; ☺ lunch & dinner; (V)) After an ascent of Kinabalu or a long jungle trek, why not reward yourself with a feed at this popular, casual Italian specialist? Choices include surprisingly good salads (RM10) pizzas (small/large RM18/24), and pasta from RM12.

Kohinoor (☎ 235-160; Lot 4 Waterfront Esplanade; dinner about RM50; ☺ 11.30am-2.30pm, 5.30pm-11pm; (V)) There are several excellent restaurants in the

FILIPINO BARBEQUE HEAVEN

The best place to eat dinner in KK has no roof, no cutlery, no menu, no cash register and no dress code. They don't serve coffee or dessert and you can forget about a wine list. What they do serve is some of the best grilled seafood in Southeast Asia, along with a few exotic nibbles such as seaweed and sago palm. If you're up for a little culinary adventure and don't mind getting your hands dirty, the Filipino Barbeque Market is the place for dinner in KK.

It's located at the north end of the KK Night Market, behind the Filipino Market. Enter the Night Market through the main entrance opposite the north end of Le Meridien Kota Kinabalu. Walk through the first ABC/*nasi campur* stalls and turn right when you reach the stalls selling *goreng pisang* (banana fritters). You'll come to several rows of long tables, each sporting an impressive selection of grilled seafood at its end: giant shrimp, crab, tuna steaks, whole small tuna, squid, skate, rows of crispy baby shrimp of skewers etc.

Each table will be staffed by at least one Filipina server who will likely speak a smattering of English, but even if she doesn't you'll have no communication problems: just point at what you want and take a seat. Your server will send your selections away for one more turn on the grill. She'll also ask if you want rice to go with your meal (she may use the Malay word 'nasi'). She'll then bring you a small plate and a cup, as well as a small basin. The cup is for water, which is found in plastic pitchers on the tables. We've drunk this water several times with no ill effects – if you're worried, you can bring in any drink you want except alcohol (this market is operated by Muslims from the Sulu Archipelago and Mindanao in the Philippines). The basin is for washing your hands; use a bit of the drinking water from the pitchers.

The small plate is for preparing your dipping sauce. You'll find a small pitcher on the table containing red chilli sauce; pour some of this into the plate, then, grab the plastic tray of condiments and doctor the chilli sauce with soy sauce, salt etc. Finally grab some of the fresh *limau* (little limes) and squeeze them into the sauce. If you have any questions about how to create the sauce, your neighbours will be more than happy to help. The result will be a truly sublime dipping sauce (just writing about it makes us want to hop the next plane back to Borneo).

By the time you finish making your sauce, your seafood will be ready and it will usually arrive with your rice. Choose a small plate of *agar-agar* (seaweed) or a salad from the prepared dishes in front of you and dig in with your bare hands. A full meal here, including something nice like a tuna steak and some shrimp will usually run around RM15 to RM20. When you're done, stroll back to the main market for a refreshing bowl of ABC, or head to the coconut bars for a fresh coconut. This is the life, KK style.

Waterfront Esplanade, including this Indian place, which offers comfortable indoor seating and breezy outdoor seating. Take advantage of their authentic tandoori oven and order fish tikka or a tasty pile of garlic naan or sample one of their curries such as lamb rogan josh.

Port View Seafood Village (☎ 221-753; Lot 18 Waterfront Esplanade; dinner from RM50; ☺ lunch & dinner) This cavernous Chinese seafood specialist is like an aquarium where you can eat the displays – we've never seen such an extravagant array of live fish to choose from. Even if you don't eat here, it's worth walking into the foyer to check out the tanks.

First Beach Café (☎ 245-158; Aru Drive, Tanjung Aru; beer RM8; ☺ 9am-2am) This restaurant boasts the best sunsets in KK and it's hard to argue: it's right on the beach at Tanjung Aru and you can literally step down from your table onto the sand. This is a good spot for nibbles and beer in the evening. After a few drinks to put you in the mood, you can step to the following spot for a bang-up seafood feast.

Tanjung Aru Seafood Restaurant (☎ 245-158; Aru Drive, Tanjung Aru; dinner from RM50; ☺ 11am-2pm, 5pm-10pm) This giant seaside eatery does great fresh seafood, which they'll prepare for you any number of tempting ways. The wok-baked lobster in butter and milk sauce sounded horrible when the waiter recommended it, but we were pleasantly surprised. There's a good dinner show here on Friday, Saturday and Sunday evenings starting at 7pm and lasting about an hour. We particularly liked the dance over the bamboo sticks. How many bruised ankles went into learning this?

Cafés & Coffee Shops

Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf (ground fl, Wisma Merdeka, Jln Haji Saman; coffee from RM3; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Free wi-fi and proper coffee is the draw at this popular chain. In addition to this branch, there's another in the Waterfront Esplanade complex off of Jalan Tun Fuad Stephens.

Snack (Jln Gaya; drinks from RM3; ☺ 8am-6.30 Mon-Fri, 8am-3pm Sat, closed Sun) This hole-in-the-wall joint offers a tempting line-up of real espresso, fresh fruit juice, simple sandwiches – perfect for a break while exploring this part of KK.

Self-Catering

Self-catering choices include:

7-Eleven (Jln Haji Saman; ☺ 24hrs)

Milimewa Superstore (Jln Haji Saman)

Tong Hing Supermarket (Jln Gaya)

DRINKING

KK has a surprisingly lively nightlife scene. There are two main centres for nightlife: the somewhat upscale Waterfront Esplanade complex, which has a variety of good restaurants and Western-style pubs, and the more backpacker-oriented Beach St, which has at least one good bar with indoor/outdoor seating. Count on spending between RM3 and RM10 per drink. Many places sell 'buckets' of beer on ice. These usually cost around RM22 for a bucket containing four bottles. Needless to say, when it comes to drinking, chic places like Cocoon cost a good bit more than the corner *kedai kopi*. Some of the more reliable venues:

BB Café (Beach St) Pool tables, outdoor seating and a convenient location near many of KK's backpacker lodges make this an obvious place to start your evening.

Bed (Jln Tun Fuad Stephens) This cavernous club has live music most nights of the week. It can be pretty dead early in the evening.

Cocoon (Jln Tun Fuad Stephens) Three separate zones, all of them quite stylish, make this an interesting, if somewhat pricey, spot for a drink or three.

Q Bar (Jln KK Bypass) We like the style and the tunes at this gay-friendly bar at the north end of town.

Shenanigan's (Waterfront Esplanade, Jln Tun Fuad Stephens) This is one of several Western-style pubs in this complex. It's got sports on the tube, imported draft and occasional live music. If it doesn't suit, just walk to the next one.

Starbucks (Jln Tun Fuad Stephens; drinks from RM3; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) We assume you've heard of this place – it's the one with the green sign.

Upperstar (Jln Datuk Saleh Sulong) On the 1st floor opposite the Hilton, this pleasant semi outdoor bar has a good menu of bar food and a cheap beer deal: a bucket with two large bottles of beer for 18RM (it's not on the menu, so you have to ask for it).

ENTERTAINMENT

Cathay Ciniplex (☎ 313-777; Jln Sapuluh; from RM7 per person)

Golden Screen Cinemas (☎ 212-322; Jln Sapuluh; from RM6 per person)

GETTING THERE & AWAY

KK has convenient flights to/from several Asian cities including Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Taipei, Hong Kong, Seoul and Tokyo. There are also two boats a day between KK and Pulau Labuan, which has easy ferry connections with nearby Bandar Seri Begawan in Brunei. This is by far the easiest

KOTA KINABALU INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

Kota Kinabalu International Airport or KKIA (airport code: BKI) is the first stop for most visitors to Borneo. It's an incredibly casual and laid-back place with some of the friendliest immigration officers anywhere. Since the airport's two terminals are some distance apart, it's important to know which airline flies from which terminal when you're departing (see below). Terminal 1 is currently undergoing a massive renovation and it's a bit chaotic. Terminal 2 was recently refurbished and is a clean, well-organised place. There are no good restaurants in either terminal so eat before leaving town or bring food and drinks with you.

Airlines Operating from Terminal 1

- Asiana
- Dragon Air
- Korean Air
- Malaysia Airlines
- Royal Brunei Airlines
- Silk Air

Airlines Operating from Terminal 2

- Air Asia
- Fly Asian Express

For information on getting to/from the airport, see the Getting Around section (opposite).

way to travel between Sabah and Brunei and on to Sarawak, since the land journey is time consuming, expensive and fiddly.

Air

Malaysia Airlines (MAS; ☎ 1-300-883-000, 515-555; www.malaysiaairlines.com; 1st fl, Departure Hall, KKIA; ☎ 5.30am-7.30pm Mon-Sun) Has flights to/from the following international destinations: Bandar Seri Begawan (Brunei); Cebu and Manila (Philippines); Guangzhou and Hong Kong (China); Kaohsiung and Taipei (Taiwan); Seoul/Incheon (Korea); and Tokyo (Japan). MAS flies to/from the following cities in West Malaysia: Kuala Lumpur, Kuala Terengganu, Kuantan, Penang and Johor Bahru (note that it's usually much cheaper to fly to/from Johor Bahru than Kuala Lumpur, so consider taking a bus to/from Johor Bahru). MAS flies to/from the following cities in Borneo: Bintulu, Kuching, Labuan, Miri, Sibiu, Pulau Labuan, Sandakan, and Tawau.

Air Asia (☎ 03-8775-4000 within Malaysia, ☎ 60-3-8660-4343 outside Malaysia; www.airasia.com; Ground fl, Wisma Sabah, Jln Gaya) Flies the following international routes to/from KK: Clark (Manila, Philippines) and Macau (China). Within Malaysia they fly to/from Johor Bahru, Kuala Lumpur and Penang in West Malaysia and Kuching, Miri, Sandakan and Tawau within Borneo. The Air Asia counter at Terminal

2 of KKIA handles all bookings less than 24 hours prior to departure. It's open 8am to 7pm.

Silk Air (☎ 265-770 in KK, ☎ 6223-8888 in Singapore; www.silkair.com; Unit B, 1-2, 1st fl, Block B, Plaza Tanjung Aru, Jln Mat Salleh) Has flights to/from Singapore. Run by Singapore Airlines.

Korean Air (☎ 251-152 in KK, ☎ 1588-2001 in Korea; www.koreanair.com; Lot 2B, Level 2, KKIA) Has flights to/from Seoul (Incheon).

Asiana (☎ 268-677 in KK, ☎ 2669-8000 in Korea; http://flyasiana.com; KKIA) Has flights to/from Seoul (Incheon).

Dragonair (☎ 254-733 in KK, ☎ 3193-3888 in Hong Kong; www.dragonair.com; Lot CG01-05, ground fl, Block C, Bangunan KWSP, Jln Karamuning; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm, 2-5pm Mon-Fri, ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm Sat) Has flights to/from Hong Kong

Royal Brunei Airlines (☎ 242-193 in KK, ☎ 221-2222 in Brunei; www.bruneiair.com; Lot BG-3B, ground fl, Block B, Bangunan KWSP, Jln Karamuning) Has flights to/from Bandar Seri Begawan.

Boat

All ferries, including taxi boats out to Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park, operate from the Jesselton Point Ferry Terminal, commonly referred to as 'the jetty' by locals and taxi drivers.

Passenger ferries (RM31, 3 hours) depart KK for Pulau Labuan (Sabah) Monday to Saturday at 8am and 1.30pm. On Sunday

they sail at 8am and 3pm. In the opposite direction, they depart Labuan for KK Monday to Saturday 8am and 1pm, while on Sunday they depart at 10.30am and 3pm. From Labuan there are onward services to Brunei (see p124).

For information on boats to Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park, see p104.

Note, all passengers must pay an RM3 terminal fee for ferries departing from Kota Kinabalu.

Bus & Minivan

Buses serving eastern Sabah destinations operate from the Inanam long distance bus terminal 9km north of the city. Destinations, times and fares include: Sandakan (7am, 8am, 10am, 12.30pm, 2pm & 8pm, RM40 including a meal, six hours), Tawau (7am & 8am, RM40 including a meal, nine hours), Lahad Datu (7am, 9am & 8pm, RM50 including a meal, 6½ hours) and Semporna (7.30am & 7.30pm, RM50, including a meal, 10 hours).

Buses, minivans and private taxis serving destinations on the west coast and northern Sabah as well as the Inanam long distance bus terminal operate from Merdeka Field Bus Station on Jln Padang (often referred to as the 'old bus station'). Destinations served from this terminal include Ranau (bus 8am, RM10; minivan 7am to 5pm on demand, RM12), Tenom (minivan RM16), Keningau (minivan RM13). Buses and minivans to Ranau will drop passengers at Kinabalu National Park. If you're going to Poring Hot Springs, take a minivan to Ranau and switch to a Poring-bound minivan.

Taxi

Share taxis operate from the Merdeka Field Bus Station on Jln Padang. Several share taxis do a daily run between KK and Ranau, passing the entrance road to the Kinabalu National Park office. The fare to Ranau or Kinabalu National Park is RM20 or you can charter a taxi for RM80 per car (note that a normal city taxi will charge RM150 for a charter).

Train

The section of the North Borneo rail line serving KK was under reconstruction at the time of writing and it's unclear when or if it will reopen.

GETTING AROUND To/from the Airport

Kota Kinabalu International Airport (KKIA) is 7km southwest of the centre. City Bus 1 travels between the city and Terminal 1, while City Bus 2 travels between the city and Terminal 2. Both cost RM1 each way. Minivans cost RM2 for the journey between the city and the airport. Taxis heading from the terminal into town operate on a system of vouchers (RM20), sold at a taxi desk on the terminal's ground floor. In practice, you can usually just board a taxi and pay RM20 in cash.

Minivan

Minivans operate from several stops in KK, including the Merdeka Field Bus Station and the parking lot outside Milimewa Superstore. They also circulate the town looking for passengers. Since most destinations within the city are within walking distance, it's unlikely that you'll need to catch a minivan. If you do catch one, most destinations within the city cost RM1.

Car

The major car rental agencies have counters at KKIA. In addition, there are several rental agencies in town, several of which are located in the Wisma Sabah building.

Automat Car Care (☎ 012-833-6663; www.kkautomat.com; Lot 1, Lg Pelanduk) This company has some of the lowest rates in town and offers 4WD rental and airport transfer in luxury cars. Some of the fleet is a little wonky – inspect carefully on pick-up.

KMT Global Rent a Car (☎ 223-022; www.kmtglobalrentacar.com; ground fl, Wisma Sabah, Jln Lima Belas) This is a reliable and conveniently located agency.

Taxi

Most of KK's numerous taxis have meters, but few drivers will agree to use them. Luckily, most drivers are pretty honest and the rates they quote are pretty close to what you'd get if you forced them to use the meter (Manila this is not). Nonetheless, to avoid any unpleasant surprises, you should negotiate a fare before heading off. There are several hubs where taxis congregate, including outside the Milimewa Superstore in the centre of town. Most trips around town cost RM5 to RM8.

AROUND KOTA KINABALU

TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN NATIONAL PARK

☎ 088

How many cities in the world have a beautiful tropical island less than half an hour from downtown? How many have five of them? KK is blessed with **Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park** (admission RM10), a collection of five islands that lie a stone's throw from the waterfront. The islands have some of Borneo's best beaches, clear water and some fairly healthy coral and tropical fish. Any of the islands – Manukan, Mamutik, Sapi, Gaya and Sulug – can easily be visited as a day trip from KK. The admission fee covers all the islands, so if you plan to visit more than one, save your receipt.

The three most interesting islands for travellers are Manukan, Mamutik and Sapi. Manukan has, arguably, the best beach of the lot, while Mamutik has the best snorkelling, hands down. Tiny Sapi has a good beach and fairly good snorkelling. Note that all three islands are very popular with day-trippers on weekends. At other times, you'll find the islands very quiet and peaceful. You can rent snorkels on Sapi, Manukan and Mamutik or at the KK ferry terminal, but you'll want to bring your own equipment if you're a serious snorkeller.

There are simple resorts on Manukan and Gaya, and camping is possible on Sapi, Mamutik and at Teluk Malohom. Of course, due to their proximity to KK, you can use your hotel room in the city as your base for exploring the islands, although you may look a little funny striding through the lobby with arm floaties and swim fins on.

Pulau Manukan

With a good resort and a long white-sand beach, claw-shaped Manukan is the most popular island in the group. The entire south coast of the island is one long beach and you can work your way down the full 1.5km length of it at low tide. Most of the interior of the island is covered by forest cover, which you can enter via a jogging track that leads to a viewpoint at the west end of the island. The best snorkelling is off the southwest end of the island, though

it's no match for the snorkelling over on Mamutik (see below). The rocky north coast of the island drops sharply into the sea, with minimal coral (don't bother making the long swim around the island to snorkel here).

Manukan Island Resort, managed by **Sutera Sanctuary Lodges** (☎ 088-243-629; www.suterasanctuarylodges.com; Lot G15, Wisma Sabah, Jln Haji Saman, Kota Kinabalu; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat, 8.30am-12.30pm Sun), has the only accommodation on the island, comprising 20 units, a restaurant, swimming pool and tennis courts.

The resort has both beach and hillside units. The beach units include detached **family units** (RM380) that sleep four people in two bedrooms and semidetached **couples units** (RM320) that sleep two people in one bedroom. All have air-con, hot showers and verandas. These are very pleasant and comfortable retreats.

The hillside units include **family units** (RM380) that sleep four people in two bedrooms and also some **couples units** (RM320) that sleep two people in one bedroom. All have air-con, hot showers and verandas. These are somewhat less appealing than the beach units, but some do actually offer good views. Two of these are designated honeymoon suites and have separate showers as well as bathtubs (you should ask when you reserve if they're available).

Pulau Mamutik

A mere 300m from end to end, tiny Mamutik offers the best snorkelling in the group and a nice beach that runs up and down the east coast of the island. There's no resort here, but camping (RM5 per person, payable on arrival) is possible. There's also a small store/restaurant/snorkel rental place, although it's a good idea to bring your own supplies from the mainland.

There's a decent coral garden just beyond the pier on the southeast side of the island, but the best coral gardens are to be found around the back of the island (off the southwest coast of the island). To get there, take the trail that starts just past the toilet block at the south end of the beach, walk to the south end of the island and take a right up the trail that heads uphill away from the point. You'll soon come to a turn-off on the left that heads down to a small shelter. You can climb into the water off the rocks here, but be very careful, as they are pretty treacherous.

TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN NATIONAL PARK

0 2 km
0 1 miles



Pulau Sapi

Dwarfed by nearby Pulau Gaya, humble Pulau Sapi (Cow Island) is another popular and attractive little island that offers snorkelling and good beaches. The island is separated from Gaya by a very shallow 200m channel that you can swim across if you feel up to it. Otherwise, the main activities here include wading, relaxing on the beach around the jetty or exploring the trails through the forest. There's a decent coral garden around the southeast point of the island, but it's no match for the coral garden off Mamutik. There are changing rooms, toilets, barbecue pits and a small snack kiosk. There is also a campsite (RM5 per person) here but you'll need to bring over most of your supplies from the mainland.

Pulau Gaya

With an area of about 15 sq km, Pulau Gaya is by far the largest island in the park, rising to an elevation of 300m in places. It's also the closest to KK and is covered in virtually undisturbed tropical forest. The bays on the east end of the island are filled with bustling water villages, inhabited by Filipino immigrants (legal and otherwise), who live in cramped houses built on stilts in the shallow water, interspersed with mosques, schools and simple shops, also built on stilts. Residents of KK strongly warn against exploring these water villages, saying that incidents of theft and other crimes have occurred.

The other bays of the island are mostly deserted, with the exception of **Teluk Malohom**,

which is home to Gayana Resort. There's also a simple campground (RM5 per person) here but there are no shops or restaurants, so you'll have to bring over all your own supplies.

Police Beach, in a bay on the north coast of the island, is the most popular beach on the island. It's a nice stretch of sand, but the snorkelling offshore is poor. A resort was under construction here at the time of writing. If you are intent on visiting a beach on Gaya, we recommend chartering a boat to take you to one of the secluded private beaches that lie between Teluk Malohom and Police Beach.

Accommodation here is provided by the **Gayana Island Resort** (☎ 301-131; www.gayana-resort.com; units from RM500; 🏠), a luxury development where thatched bungalows sit on stilts over the water. The bungalows here are pleasant, but the resort feels strangely abandoned and it's hard to imagine that the service would be up to much, considering the few guests who visit. Perhaps the lack of a proper beach here is what keeps the resort from catching on. All told, if you want to stay in a resort in these islands, we think you'll do much better at Manukan Island Resort.

Note that the only way to visit Gaya is by chartering a boat (see Getting There & Away on below), as the normal boats don't stop here.

Pulau Sulug

Shaped like a cartoon speech bubble, Sulug has an area of 8.1 hectares and is the least visited of the group, probably because it's the furthest away from KK. It has only one beach, on a spit of land extending from its eastern shore. Unfortunately, the snorkelling is pretty poor around this island. If you want a quiet getaway, Sulug is a decent choice, but you'll have to charter a boat to get here (see Getting There & Away on below), as the normal boats don't stop here. If you want a secluded beach and don't want to lay out for a charter, you'll do better by heading to Manukan and walking down the beach to escape the crowds.

Getting There & Away

Boats to the islands are arranged inside the waiting room at KK's Jesselton Point Ferry Terminal (commonly known as 'the jetty' by locals and taxi drivers). Inquire at the counter

for the next available boat. Sign up for your chosen destination and then take a seat until there are enough passengers (usually eight) to depart. Services run from 7am to 6pm daily but it's best to catch a boat in the morning, as it's much harder to make up boat numbers in the afternoon.

Return fares to Mamutik, Manukan and Sapi are RM17 to RM25, depending on which company you go with. You can also buy two-/three-island passes for RM33/43. The set fee for boat charter to one island is RM204, but you can negotiate a lower price. Try to deal directly with a boatman if you do this – don't deal with the touts who prowl the area. And don't consider paying until you return to the dock. Note that there is an RM3 terminal fee added to all boat journeys.

LOK KAWI WILDLIFE PARK

If you'd like to check out orangutans but won't make it out to Danum or Sepilok, a daytrip from KK out to **Lok Kawi Wildlife Park** (☎ 088-765-710; Jln Penampang, Papar Lama; admission adult/child RM20/10; 🕒 9.30am-5.30pm daily) is highly recommended, especially for those with children in tow.

In addition to the orangutans, whose playful antics make them the star attractions here, the park also plays home to the following: white hornbills, a clouded leopard (in a shamefully small cage), a Malay civet (ditto), tiny rusa deer, barking deer, mouse deer, a Sumatran rhino, a sun bear, an awesome Malayan tiger, proboscis monkeys, otters, gibbons, and some Asian elephants. For kids, there are elephant rides (RM1 per child) and a children's zoo. All animal enclosures have good English explanations, with maps showing the distributions of the animals throughout Borneo and the rest of Asia.

The animal enclosures are laid out along paths that wind through the park. You can easily do a loop of the main path in an hour or two, but be warned that it's hot and sweaty work and you'll be exposed to the tropical sun for most of the way – bring sun hats and sun block.

Don't miss the aviary located at the top of the park. The sign at the entrance to the aviary's main cage is a nice touch: 'Beware of attacking birds'. Also be sure to take a stroll through the botanical garden, which has some great boardwalks through a small section of jungle.

Getting There & Away

The park is in Kampung Patoki. A bus service connecting the park and KK is planned (enquire with your lodgings when you arrive) but for now, the only way to get to the park is to take a minibus south from KK to Donggongon Town, then take another minibus serving Jln Papar Lama and ask to be dropped off in Kampung Patoki (RM2.00) and then a taxi onward to the park (RM40) per way, or simply to hire a taxi all the way to the park from KK, which will run around RM100, including a three-hour wait. Your lodgings may be able to get you a better rate than this.

SOUTH OF KOTA KINABALU

There are a few shallow paddling beaches near the highway south of KK. The nearest is at the plush Shangri La Tanjung Aru Resort, but other accommodation is strung out along the coast between the airport and Papar, especially around the nascent resort of Beringgis. The beaches won't win any awards, but you could pleasantly laze away a day or two before catching a plane.

Activities

Kindawan Riding Centre (☎ 088-225-525; www.kindawan.com; Kampung Laut, Jln Papar, Kinarut) Run by a professional Australian riding-coach, this beachside school has a full stable of noble steeds to hire for lessons or pleasure rides. Rates start at RM150 for a 1½-hour ride along the beach and across to a nearby island. Horses have been bred at the centre and are suitable for beginners or experienced riders alike. There is a weight restriction of 90kg. The centre will arrange transfer from your accommodations.

Sleeping

Seaside Travellers Inn (☎ 088-750-555; www.seaside-travellersinn.com; Kampung Laut, Km 20 Jln Papar, Kinarut; dm RM25, r with shared bathroom RM30-55, r with private bathroom RM60-99; 🏠 📺 📶) This small family-run resort is 20km south of KK on the way to Papar and is a reasonable alternative to the more lavish establishments. It offers plenty of facilities (including a TV room with VCD player) and outdoor activities. The view of the sea from the restaurant veranda is brilliant. The rooms are nice, but some are located next to the kitchen or parking lot and can thus be a little noisy. All prices include

breakfast, and free airport transfers are available on request.

Beringgis Beach Resort (☎ 088-752-333; www.beringgis.com; Kampung Beringgis, Km 26 Jln Papar, Kinarut; r RM190-300; 🏠 📺 📶) This large midrange resort overlooks a decent stretch of shallow beach. There are a wide variety of rooms and facilities spread over the grounds. It's not on par with the Rasa Ria or Nexus resorts north of KK (below), but it's a decent choice if you want to get out of KK for a few days.

Getting There & Away

To get to the beaches south of KK, take a Papar-bound bus or minivan (RM3) from behind Wawasan Plaza. The hotels and other establishments are signed off the main road.

PAPAR

Mainly consisting of long, low shophouses, this little coastal Kadazan town is 38km south of KK. Local produce includes coconut wine and there's a **tamu** (weekly market) on Sunday. **Pantai Mantis** (Mantis Beach) is about 7km out of town. If you're driving, follow the signs for 'Pantai Mantis' and 'JPSM'. It's nothing special, but if you have reason to be in Papar, it will do for a stroll.

In the centre of town, Restoran Anjung Bistari, a little south of the market, has good fried chicken.

Buses and minivans leave for Papar throughout the day from behind Wawasan Plaza in KK (RM3, one hour).

SHANGRI LA RASA RIA RESORT

The sister resort of the Shangri La Tanjung Aru Resort in KK, the **Shangri La Rasa Ria Resort** (☎ 088-792-888; www.shangri-la.com; Pantai Dalit, Tuaran; standard/deluxe r from RM500/600; 🏠 📺 📶) occupies a fine stretch of beach about 15km north of the city. It's a sprawling resort complete with its own 18-hole golf course, several good restaurants (including a fantastic Indian one), a great pool, a spa and fitness centre, and a small nature sanctuary with a few resident orangutans. The rooms are fairly spacious and well-appointed and the suites are very nice indeed. The deluxe seaweed rooms on the upper floors have unparalleled ocean views. This resort gets consistently good reviews from readers. The resort will arrange airport transfer from KKIA when you book, otherwise, it's an RM80 taxi-ride from KK.

NEXUS RESORT KARAMBUNAI

About seven kilometres north of the Rasa Ria Resort, you'll find the **Nexus Resort Karambunai** (☎ 088-411-222; www.nexusresort.com; off Jln Sepangar Bay, Tuaran; r from 500RM; 📶 📺 📶), another international-class beach on Sabah's west coast. Like the Rasa Ria, it's got a great 18-hole golf course, a good stretch of beach, a nice pool, several restaurants and a spa. The standard rooms are getting a little long in the tooth here, so it's better to choose something a step up in price. The resort will arrange airport transfer from KKIA when you book, otherwise, it's an RM80 taxi ride from KK.

KINABALU NATIONAL PARK

☎ 088

Kinabalu National Park is home to Borneo's highest mountain and some of Borneo's best-preserved forest. Most travellers make a beeline for the mountain and the main park headquarters (HQ) area, but there are two other sections of the park worth exploring: Mesilau Nature Resort and Poring Hot Springs. The former offers a less-travelled approach to the mountain and the latter offers a good place to soak your weary bones after an ascent of the peak.

Mt Kinabalu & Park Headquarters Area

Towering 4095m above northern Borneo, **Mt Kinabalu** is the highest mountain between the Himalayas and the island of New Guinea. Known as Gunung Kinabalu in Bahasa Malaysia, the mountain is quite unlike any other on earth, rising almost twice as high as its Crocker Range neighbours and culminating in a crown of wild granite spires. When the summit is visible (usually in the morning, before the clouds close in) the mountain literally demands your attention. It is clearly visible from many parts of Sabah, including Kota Kinabalu and the islands of Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park.

Thousands of people of all ages climb Mt Kinabalu every year, but an ascent of the mountain is not to be taken lightly. It's like spending eight hours climbing a staircase, in gradually thinning air (altitude sickness can strike as low as 3000m or even lower for some people), followed by an equally taxing descent. And it can be close to freezing near the summit.

If the weather is clear on your summit day, you'll be rewarded with an incredible view

that starts with the otherworldly summit plateau and extends across all of northern Borneo and the islands of southern Palawan, in the Philippines.

Even if you decide not to do the climb, the park itself is a beautiful spot, and many visitors come just to escape the heat and humidity of the coast. There are several fine walking trails in the rainforest at the base of the mountain, the climate is agreeably cool and accommodation both inside and outside the park is good.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

Kinabalu Park HQ is 88km by road northeast of KK and set in gardens with a magnificent view of the mountain. At 1588m the climate is refreshingly cool compared to the coast; the average temperature ranges from 20°C in the day to 13°C at night.

Advance bookings through **Sutera Sanctuary Lodges** (☎ 088-243-629; www.suterasanctuarylodges.com; Lot G15, Wisma Sabah, Jln Haji Saman, Kota Kinabalu; 🕒 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat, 8.30am-12.30pm Sun) in KK or online are strongly recommended for accommodation at park HQ and on the mountain at Laban Rata. You won't usually be allowed to climb Mt Kinabalu without a confirmed spot in one of the huts at Laban Rata (those who intend a day climb are sometimes excepted, but you won't be able to see much if you start for the summit after, say, 7am, due to clouds). It is sometimes possible to turn up at the **Sutera Sanctuary Lodges office** (🕒 7am-7pm) at park HQ and ask if there are any openings, but you may be disappointed. Sutera handles bookings for all accommodation around park HQ and at Laban Rata, Mesilau Nature Resort and Poring Hot Springs.

On arrival, pay your entry fee (adult/child RM15/10) at the park gate and check in at the Sutera Sanctuary Lodges office if you're staying overnight. You'll need to present your reservation slip and you'll be allocated your bed or room. Valuables can be deposited in safety boxes at the office and excess baggage can be stored here (per item RM1) until you return from the mountain. Following this, walk to the adjoining **Sabah Parks office** (🕒 7am-7pm) and arrange your permit and guide (see opposite).

All the hostels and resthouses are within walking distance of the park office. The **Kinabalu Conservation Centre** (admission RM3; 🕒 9am-3pm) is also worth visiting, with good

KINABALU: CLIMBING THE MOUNTAIN IS THE EASY PART

As you trudge through the thin air of Mt Kinabalu on summit day, and you may disagree, but the fact is this: climbing the mountain is the easy part. The hard part is jumping through the bureaucratic hurdles to get there.

The problem is that access to the summit is essentially rationed by access to the huts on the mountain at Laban Rata. In order to have any hope of clear weather when you reach the summit, you must arrive around dawn, and the only way to do this is by spending a night in one of the huts at Laban Rata. Yes, Sabah Parks will let you attempt a one-day ascent, starting around 7am, but by the time you get to the summit in midafternoon, it will almost certainly be clouded over or raining. And, just in case you're thinking about it: A) they won't allow a night climb and B) they will not allow an 'unofficial' climb (permits are carefully checked at several points on the mountain).

Unfortunately, many travellers report extreme frustration with booking huts on the mountain – they complain that the booking system is disorganised and inefficient, the huts are often full, or it's difficult to get a confirmed booking. A private company called Sutera Sanctuary Lodges has an exclusive concession for accommodation at park headquarters, Mesilau Nature Resort and on the mountain at Laban Rata. It may be easier to gain access as part of a tour with one of the large-scale tour companies based in KK.

Sutera Sanctuary Lodges has just instituted a policy whereby climbers must book a three-day/two-night accommodation and meal package tour in order to climb the mountain. It's no longer possible to book just one night in a hut at Laban Rata – you've also got to book accommodation around park HQ.

Assuming you are able to secure a reservation for an accommodation package, you still must pay for an expensive climbing permit and hire a guide to climb the mountain, despite the fact that the mountain is no more dangerous than many commonly climbed mountains in other parts of the world.

There is no doubt who gains from this situation. It's also clear who loses: everyone who wants to climb Mt Kinabalu and everyone in Sabah who stands to benefit from this tourist income.

It is a shame that the Sabah government and Sabah Parks cannot institute a system similar to that on Mt Fuji, in Japan, another mountain that involves a two-day climb with a night on the mountain. On Fuji, there is ample hut space that is allocated on a first-come, first-served basis, with the understanding that, in the event on an overflow of climbers, people will just have to plunk down on the floor in common areas or descend without attempting the summit.

All this said, we want to emphasise one thing: it is definitely worth jumping through the hoops to get to the summit of Kinabalu. Once you see that sun start to come up across Borneo, we're sure you'll agree.

displays on the natural and cultural history of the area.

Permits & Guides

A climbing permit, insurance and guide are *compulsory* if you intend to climb Mt Kinabalu. Permits and guides must be arranged at the **Sabah Parks office** (🕒 7am-7pm), which is directly next door to the Sutera Sanctuary Lodges Office, immediately on your right after you pass through the main gate of the park. Pay all fees at park HQ before you climb and don't consider an 'unofficial' climb as permits are scrupulously checked at several points along the climb. Guides are worth the money.

A climbing permit costs RM100 and insurance costs RM7. Guides for the summit trek cost the following: RM70 per group for one to three climbers; RM74 for four to six; and RM80 for seven to eight. Porters can be hired to carry a maximum load of 10kg; for one to three climbers the cost is RM60, for four to six it's RM80, and for seven to eight climbers it's RM90.

You can make a one-day climb, but still need a permit and guide. Sabah Parks has an office adjoining the Sutera Sanctuary Lodges Office where you can make these arrangements. The earliest you can start climbing is 7am. If you have no reservation for a night on the mountain at Laban Rata,

FLORA & FAUNA OF MT KINABALU

Mt Kinabalu is a botanical paradise, designated a Centre of Plant Diversity as well as a UNESCO-listed heritage site. The wide range of habitats supports an ever wider range of natural history, and over half the species growing above 900m are unique to the area.

Among the more spectacular flowers are orchids, rhododendrons, and the insectivorous nepenthes (pitcher plants). Around park HQ, there's dipterocarp forest (rainforest); creepers, ferns and orchids festoon the canopy, while fungi grow on the forest floor. Between 900m and 1800m, there are oaks, laurels and chestnuts, while higher up there's dense, rhododendron forest. On the windswept slopes above Laban Rata, vegetation is stunted, with *sayat-sayat* a common shrub. The mountain's uppermost slopes are bare of plant life.

Deer and monkeys are no longer common around park HQ, but you can see squirrels, including the handsome Prevost's squirrel and mountain ground squirrel. Tree shrews can sometimes be seen raiding rubbish bins. Common birds are Bornean treepies, fantails, bulbuls, sunbirds and laughing thrushes, while birds seen only at higher altitudes are the Kinabalu friendly warbler, the mountain black-eye and the mountain blackbird. Other wildlife includes colourful butterflies and the huge green moon moth.

go to Sutura office and wait for last-minute cancellation; by 5.30pm you will be informed if there is space in one of the huts.

Your guide will be assigned to you on the morning you begin your hike. If you ask, the park staff can try and attach individual travellers to a group so that guide fees can be shared. Couples can expect to be given their own guide.

A good guide should be able to point out pitcher plants and other interesting sights, but as the trails are pretty straightforward they're more safety supervisors than wayfinders, so will generally position themselves behind the slowest member of their group – don't be surprised if you barely see your guide for the duration of the trek!

Equipment & Clothing

Temperatures can dip close to freezing at the summit and it's usually windy and occasionally rainy. You will need good walking shoes, light gloves, a wool or fleece hat, a fleece top, windproof pants, a shell jacket and a knapsack to carry all this. You will also need a headlamp for the predawn summit climb (don't bring a handheld torch because you'll need your hands free to climb the ropes on the summit massif). A water bottle is also recommended, and you can fill this from tanks en route.

HISTORY

The first recorded ascent of the mountain was made in 1851 by Sir Hugh Low, the British colonial secretary on Pulau Labuan.

Kinabalu's highest peak is named after him, as is the mile-deep 'gully' on the other side of the mountain.

In those days the difficulty of climbing Mt Kinabalu lay not in the ascent, but in getting through the jungle to the mountain's base. Finding willing local porters was another tricky matter – the tribesmen who accompanied Low believed the spirits of their dead inhabited the mountain. Low was therefore obliged to protect the party by supplying a large basket of quartz crystals and teeth, as was the custom of the day. In time, the spirit-appeasement ceremonies performed by the guides upon reaching the summit became more and more elaborate, so that by the 1920s they had come to include loud prayers, gunshots, and the sacrifice of seven eggs and seven white chickens. You have to wonder at what point explorers started thinking the locals might be taking the mickey...

These days getting to the foot of the mountain is a piece of cake, but Low's Gully remains a trickier proposition. In 1994 one of the groups in the first expedition to abseil into the gully got stuck and could not be rescued for three weeks.

GEOLOGY

Many visitors to Borneo assume that Mt Kinabalu is a volcano, but the mountain is actually a huge granite dome that rose from the depths below some nine million years ago. In geological terms, Mt Kinabalu is still very young. Little erosion has occurred on the

exposed granite rock faces around the summit, though the effects of glaciers that used to cover much of the mountain can be detected by striations on the rock. There's no longer a snowline and the glaciers have disappeared, but at times ice forms in the rock pools near the summit.

Walks Around Park Headquarters

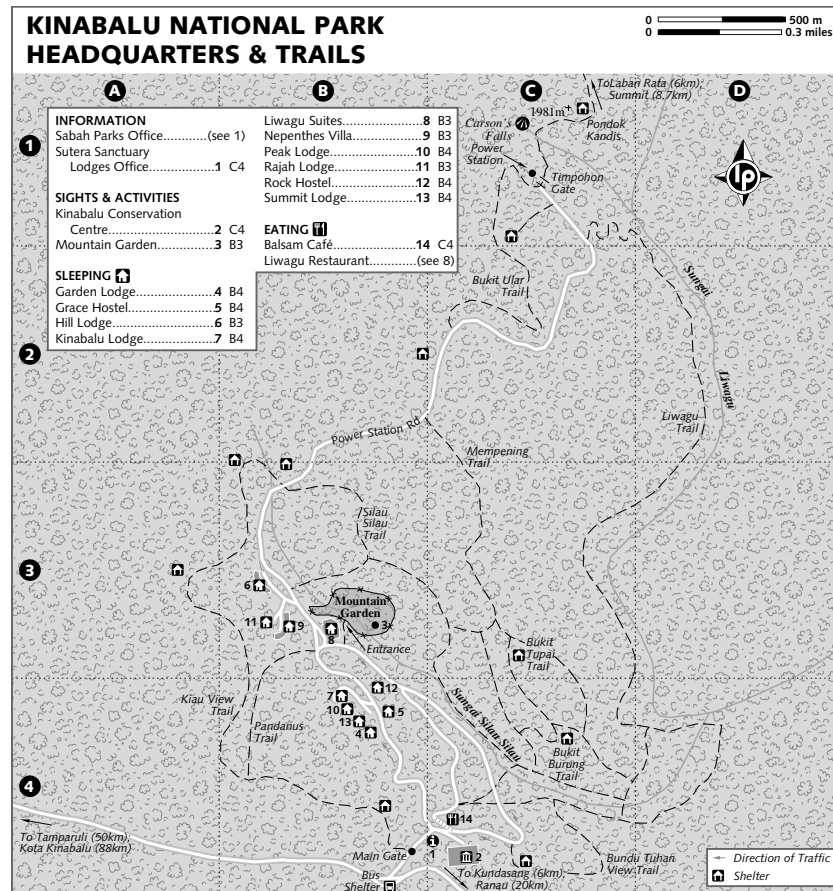
It's well worth spending a day exploring the marked trails around park HQ; if you have time, it may be better to do it before you climb the mountain, as chances are you won't really feel like it afterwards. The various trails and lookouts are shown on the map, p109.

All the trails link up with others at some stage, so you can spend the whole day, or

indeed days, walking at a leisurely pace through the beautiful forest. Some interesting plants, plenty of birds and, if you're lucky, the occasional mammal can be seen. When it rains, watch out for slippery paths and legions of leeches.

At 11am each day a **guided walk** (RM3) starts from the park office and lasts for one to two hours. The knowledgeable guide points out flowers, plants, birds and insects along the way. If you set out from KK early enough, it's possible to arrive at the park in time for the guided walk.

Many of the plants found on the mountain are cultivated in the **Mountain Garden** (admission RM5; ☺ tours 9am, noon & 3pm, garden 9am-5pm) behind the visitors centre.



LIWAGU TRAIL

The 6km **Liwagu Trail**, which follows the Liwagu River, is the most rewarding trail around park HQ, and it's a great option for those who just can't face the trek up Mt Kinabalu. It's a pretty easy walk, but there are few drop-offs which make it unsuitable for children below eight years of age, and those with fear of heights.

The start is 200m before Timpohon Gate (you can catch a minivan from HQ to the starting point). It's very straightforward until the last kilometre or so (just as you get back to the park base area). At one point, you come to a junction where you could go left (downhill) but the trail is closed off. Do not go downhill here. Follow the arrows marked 'Silau Silau Trail' uphill. You will come to some water pipes across the trail after about 100m. Cross these pipes. You will then come to a sign for the Mempoing Trail and Silau Silau Trail. Follow the arrow for the Silau Silau Trail.

You'll soon come to a sign for Silau Silau Trail and Liwagu Trail. Go left here, following the arrow for the Liwagu Trail. Then stay on this trail without deviation, ignoring a bridge on your right and the Bundu Tahan trail on your left. It comes out just below park HQ. Don't worry if you take a wrong turn in this area, as almost all routes lead back to park HQ one way or another.

If starting from park HQ, take a right out of the HQ, walk to the end of the parking lot and down the road. You'll pass the start of the Bundu Tahan Trail (ignore this). Continue down and after about 200m you will see the back of the sign for the Liwagu Trail that reads 'Liwagu Trail/Liwagu River 1500m' (note this is the distance to the river, not the full distance of the trail). This is the start of the trail. It's pretty confusing and more difficult to do the trail from this end, so we recommend heading to the top and walking down.

SILAU SILAU TRAIL

The **Silau Silau Trail** is an easy 940m, 30-minute trail through centre of the HQ area, along Silau Silau creek. It's mostly flat and easy to walk, making it suitable for most people, including children. It's makes a nice before- or after-dinner stroll.

KIAU VIEW TRAIL

The **Kiau View Trail** is a more challenging 2.34km, 80-minute trail along a ridge on the west side of the HQ area. There are a few

ups and downs on this route. You can combine this with the Silau Silau Trail to make a good loop.

Mt Kinabalu Summit Climb

Climbing Mt Kinabalu is a two-day exercise for most people. The usual routine involves starting around 8am on the first day, taking a minivan to Timpohon Gate and walking four to six hours to reach Laban Rata at 3273m where you spend the night. On the following day you rise at around 3am and climb to the summit in time to catch the sunrise over Borneo.

Do not consider an ascent unless you are in good physical shape. The climb is uphill 99% of the way – an unrelentingly steep path up large dirt steps and overpiled rocks. A couple of sections on the summit massif require that you haul yourself up using thick ropes. Every step can be a struggle as you suck oxygen from the thin air, and it is not unusual for people to give up within sight of the summit. If you are not in excellent shape already, we recommend that you do some climbing, walking or running in the weeks before you come to Sabah. Also, be sure to bring the proper equipment and clothing; see the boxed text on below.

KINABALU PACKING LIST

- hiking or running shorts
- synthetic lightweight T-shirt
- running shoes or hiking boots, depending on preference for climbing
- wool socks
- pack cover
- headlamp with spare batteries
- lightweight fleece gloves
- fleece or wool hat
- polypro thermals top and bottom
- fleece jacket
- wind pants
- lightweight shell jacket or rain jacket
- water bottle
- money
- camera
- earplugs for dorms

Your best chance of finding clear weather at the summit is around dawn, but there are plenty of mornings which see the summit wrapped in clouds. If it's raining when you wake at Laban Rata, you should consider abandoning your summit attempt, as the chance of it clearing that day is slim indeed and you'll freeze in the cold, wet weather.

You can also access the trail to Laban Rata from the Mesilau Nature Resort (see p114).

PARK HEADQUARTERS–TIMPOHON GATE (POWER STATION)

The trail officially starts at the Timpohon Gate (1866m), from where it's an 8.72km walk to the summit. Most climbers take a minivan from park HQ to Timpohon Gate (departures approximately every 15 minutes in the morning, RM15 per minivan, 10 minutes). Leave no later than 11am to cover the 6km to Laban Rata (3273m), the first day's stopping point. This section will take between 3½ and six hours depending on your fitness level.

TIMPOHON GATE–LAYANG LAYANG

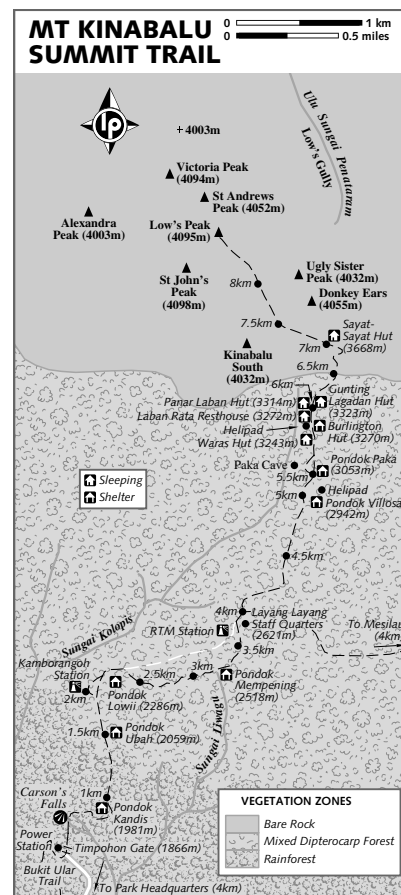
After a short, deceptive descent, the trail leads up steep stairs through magnificent tall forest. There's a small waterfall, **Carson's Falls**, beside the track shortly after the start, and the forest can be alive with birds and squirrels in the morning. Five *pondok* (shelters) are spaced at intervals of 15 to 35 minutes and it's about three hours to Layang Layang (2621m), where there are staff quarters. Near *Pondok Lowii* (2286m) the trail follows an open ridge giving great views over the valleys and up to the peaks.

LAYANG LAYANG–PONDOK PAKA

It's about 1¼ hours on to *Pondok Paka* (3053m), the seventh shelter on the trail and 5.5km from the start. The trail passes through increasingly stunted rhododendron forest, leaving walkers more exposed to the elements. You'll welcome the few flat sections that lie between the seemingly endless steps. This stretch is good for spotting pitcher plants, although you probably won't see any growing by the side of the track – look among the dense vegetation.

PONDOK PAKA–LABAN RATA

This leg takes about 45 minutes to walk. Laban Rata (3273m), right at treeline, is the night's



resting spot for most people attempting the summit. The main resthouse has heating, hot water, comfortable beds and a restaurant with fine views – it's perfectly positioned for sunset, which can be just as scenic as sunrise at the top. There's also a flat area sometimes used as a volleyball court if you're feeling overly energetic! There are three other accommodation units, all with basic cooking facilities and hot showers, but no room heaters (see p113).

LABAN RATA–SAYAT-SAYAT

The next morning, hit the trail at around 3.30am and spend the next 2½ to four hours scaling the 2.7km trail to the summit at Low's Peak, ideally in time for sunrise, which happens around 6am in these parts. Then you

pick your way back down to park HQ the same day.

The initial one-hour climb to Sayat-Sayat hut (3668m) involves crossing the sheer Panar Laban rock face. There is little vegetation, except where overhangs provide some respite from the wind. It is one of the toughest parts of the climb, especially in the cold and dark of the predawn hours.

Thick ropes are used to haul yourself up the granite sheets; it's hard work in places, but somehow it feels good to be using arm muscles instead of legs! Narrow wooden steps and hand rails help in places, but you'll often find yourself using rocks or bushes for support as you gasp for breath.

SAYAT-SAYAT-SUMMIT

The last stretch of the summit ascent is, of course, the steepest and hardest part of the climb. Past Sayat-Sayat, more desolate rock faces and hoisting await the string of climbers stretched out in the dark, trying to keep warm while holding ropes and torches. In the daylight, thick veins of quartz seem like painted lines on the rock face, and in some precarious spots you'll be glad you couldn't see exactly what you were doing as you climbed up!

The summit looks deceptively close and, though it's just over 1km, the last burst can take up to two hours from Sayat-Sayat. Some people are even reduced to crawling on hands and knees up the last few boulders to the small area that is the top of Borneo. Climbers crowd together, perched over the mysterious abyss of Low's Gully, and huddle against the cold, readying their cameras for a shot of the sunrise and the nearby peaks.

It can get very crowded up there; don't be surprised to be sharing your experience with a

hundred or more people, all jockeying for the essential picture with the summit sign. When the sun has risen and the photos are taken, there's a quick exodus down the mountain to Laban Rata, while the savvy late risers make their relaxed way to a far less crowded summit.

The climb down to Timpohon Gate takes about five hours – don't underestimate the descent, and leave plenty of time to get back before nightfall. While easier than the climb up, it can be a lot more jarring on joints and underused muscles. You'll probably leave the summit around 7am and you should aim to leave Laban Rata no later than noon. The weather can close in very quickly and, although you probably won't get lost, the granite is slippery even when it's dry.

Sleeping

All accommodation in the park is handled by **Sutera Sanctuary Lodges** (☎ 088-243-629; www.sutera-sanctuarylodges.com; Lot 615, Wisma Sabah, Jln Haji Saman, Kota Kinabalu; 🕒 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat, 8.30am-12.30pm Sun). Reservations are strongly recommended and are absolutely essential in busy periods.

Park accommodation includes a variety of accommodation around park HQ, five huts on the mountain at Laban Rata, the small Mesilau Nature Resort on the east shoulder of the mountain (see p114), and Poring Hot Springs (see p116). Accommodation is available around park HQ, on the Ranau road between the park turn-off and Kundasang, at Mesilau, at Poring Hot Springs and at Laban Rata on the mountain. Reservations can be made by email, fax or phone, but they will not be confirmed until fully paid for. Note that accommodation at Laban Rata is only available as part of a package (see opposite).

Additional accommodation can be found just on the main road outside park HQ, between the main entrance to the park and the town of Kundasang. These places are handy if the Sutera places are all booked up.

PARK HEADQUARTERS

There is a wide variety of good-value accommodation around park HQ, ranging from simple hostels to deluxe lodges that are perfect for families.

Grace Hostel (20 beds; RM46 per bed) Clean, comfortable 20-bed dorm with fireplace and drink-making area.

Rock Hostel (20 beds; RM46 per bed) Somewhat institutional 20-bed hostel with similar facilities to the Grace Hostel.

Hill Lodge (10 two-person units; RM135 per unit) These semidetached cabins are a good choice for those who can't face a night in the hostels. They're clean and comfortable, with private bathrooms.

Liwagu Suite (four four-person rooms; RM255 per room) These hotel like rooms can be found in the Liwagu Building. While they sleep up to four people, they're best for couples, as they contain only one bedroom and one living room.

Peak Lodge (four four-person units; RM300 per unit) These semidetached units have two bedrooms (one with a bunk bed and one with two twin beds), pleasant sitting rooms, fireplaces and nice views from their verandas.

Summit Lodge (one four-person unit, RM360 per unit) This fine one-storey lodge offers a great view, a cosy living room with a fireplace and two bedrooms (one with a double bed, one with two single beds).

Garden Lodge (one six-person unit; RM380) Under renovation at the time of writing, this two-storey private cabin offers brilliant views of the mountain.

Nepenthes Lodge (eight four-person units, RM380 per unit) These attached two-storey units fall somewhere between hotel rooms and private lodges. They have two bedrooms (one with a twin bed, one with a queen) and verandas which offer limited mountain views.

Kinabalu Lodge (one eight-person unit; RM850) With private parking, a private barbecue area, a great living room with a sunken fireplace, three bedrooms (the master bedroom has its own bathroom), and a TV room for the kids, this attractive one-storey cabin would make a wonderful family retreat.

Rajah Lodge (one six-person unit; RM1500) The grand two-storey Rajah Lodge has three bedrooms, a wrap-around veranda, a private location and a nice fireplace. Frankly, it's not that much nicer than the Kinabalu Lodge, which can be had for half the price.

LABAN RATA

There are four mountain huts at Laban Rata, the 3273m point on Mt Kinabalu where most climbers spend the night en route to the summit. Bedding is provided in all huts. Accommodation at Laban Rata is only available as part of a three-day/two-night full-board package that includes one night on the mountain at Laban Rata and one night either in lodging at park HQ or in Mesilau Nature Resort. The park HQ package starts at RM488 per person for double occupancy and RM588 per person for single occupancy. The Mesilau package starts at RM413 per person for double occupancy and RM518 per person for single occupancy. For the latest details, check the Sutera website.

Laban Rata Resthouse (52 beds) The main resthouse here, this large building has four- and six-bunk dorm rooms

equipped with heaters, and sporadic hot-water showers in common bathrooms, as well as a few private double and quad rooms with similar facilities. The resthouse also has a simple restaurant that serves meals and drinks from 2.30am. You can buy simple snacks at the restaurant.

Gunting Lagadan Hut (60 beds) Simpler than the above, this large hut has unheated dorm rooms and heated showers. There is a cooking area but no restaurant.

Panar Laban Hut (eight beds) This simple unheated hut would be good for small groups. There is a shower and basic cooking area.

Waras Hut (eight beds) Similar to the above, this would also be a good choice for small groups.

OUTSIDE THE PARK

It's generally preferable to stay in the park, mainly because the lodging is reasonable value and it's more convenient for the mountain and walking trails.

However, there are numerous places to stay outside the park, most on the road between the park HQ and Kundasang (6km east of the park's main entrance).

Kinabalu Rose Cabin (☎ 889-233; Km 18, Jln Ranau-Tuaran; r RM70-200) This friendly place has spacious if somewhat rundown rooms with balconies facing Mt Kinabalu. There's a decent on-site restaurant. Rooms usually cost 40% more on weekends. It's about 2km southeast of park HQ; a minivan to/from there will cost RM5.

Kinabalu Pine Resort (☎ 889-388; Kundasang-Ranau Highway; standard/deluxe unit RM105/135) This hillside holiday camp-style place has semidetached units, some of which have nice mountain views. The standard units are rather spartan and it's worth paying extra for the deluxe ones. All units have hot showers. It's about 1km east of Kundasang, on the main road.

D'Villa (☎ 889-282; Km 53, Jln Kinabalu Park; dm RM30, d RM120) Just shy of 1km east of the main entrance to the park on the main road, this is one of the few accommodation options outside the park but within walking distance of the park itself. The dorm is simple and a little grotty. The private rooms are spacious, with verandas that look south over the valley – overpriced but pleasant.

Eating

There are two restaurants at park HQ. Both restaurants are open 6.30am to 11pm daily.

Balsam Café (dishes RM5-10) The cheaper and more popular of the two is this canteen-style spot directly below the park office. The café can little disorganised and chaotic,

SPEED FREAKS

As you limp into Timpohon Gate after a gruelling two-day climb to the summit of Kinabalu, if you really want to add insult to injury, check out the sign that lists the current record times for the Kinabalu International Climbathon. The current men's record is 2 hours and 36 minutes and the women's record is 3 hours and 8 minutes (held by an Italian man and a Czech woman). And, yes, those are the times for the roundtrip – up and down.

particularly when busy; they can't quite seem to decide if it's a buffet-style restaurant or a proper sit-down place. It offers basic but decent Malaysian, Chinese and Western dishes at reasonable prices. There is also a small but well-stocked shop in Balsam selling tinned and dried foods, chocolate, beer, spirits, ciga-ретtes, T-shirts, bread, eggs and margarine.

Liwagu Restaurant (dishes RM10-30) In the Liwagu Building about 15 minutes' walk north of the main entrance, this is more expensive and more elegant than the Balsam, with proper waiter service and a wide range of Asian and Western dishes, as well as beer, wine and mixed drinks.

Getting There & Away

A shuttle bus runs from the Pacific Sutera (9am), the Magellan Sutera (9.10am), and Wisma Sabah (9.20am) to Kinabalu Park HQ, arriving at 11.30am (RM40). In the reverse direction, it leaves Kinabalu Park HQ at 3.30pm. There is also a shuttle bus from Kinabalu Park HQ to Poring Hot Springs at noon (RM25) and another at 3.30pm (RM25) to Mesilau Nature Resort.

Express buses and minivans travelling between KK and Ranau and Sandakan pass the park turn-off, from where it's 100m uphill to the park. Air-con express buses (RM15, three hours) leave from KK's Inanam long distance bus terminal seven times daily, starting at 7.30am.

Share taxis operate from terminal at Merdeka Field on Jalan Padang in Kota Kinabalu. Several share-taxis do a daily run between KK and Ranau, passing the entrance road to the Kinabalu National Park office. The fare to Ranau or Kinabalu National Park is RM20 or you can charter a taxi for RM80 per car (note that a normal city taxi will charge RM150 for a charter). Minivans (RM15) depart the same station.

If you're heading back to KK from the park, minivans pass the park HQ until mid-afternoon (stopping on the main road), but the best time to catch one is between 8am and noon. The park also operates three minivans daily to KK (RM40) and one daily to Poring Hot Springs (RM25).

MESILAU NATURE RESORT

Mesilau Nature Resort, which sits on the south-east shoulder of Mt Kinabalu at an altitude of 1951 metres, is the starting point for an

alternative approach to Mt Kinabalu. This route is favoured by some trekkers as it's more challenging and less crowded than the main route from park HQ. The 5.5km Mesilau route meets up with the main summit trail at Layang Layang (it takes the average climber four hours to walk from Mesilau to Layang Layang). If you intend to climb from here, you can make arrangements for you guide when you book accommodation (see below).

Even if you don't intend to climb the mountain from here, it's worth visiting or staying at Mesilau Nature Resort, as it's a lovely bit of country and the accommodation is quite good. In addition, there are some nice short nature walks in the resort area. The **Kogonon rail** is a quick 30-minute walk through the forest near the resort. It can be done without a permit. It's got a few ups and downs, but it's pretty easy and makes a nice stroll in the early morning or late afternoon. A good warm-up for Kinabalu. The 30-minute **Nepenthes Rajah Trail** takes you past a cave (really a space under a large rock) to an area where you can see a variety of pitcher plants. In order to protect these rare plants, you must buy a permit (RM10) and be accompanied by a guide to do this trail.

The **Sabah Parks office** is on your left as you enter the resort. It's a very casual affair and it is sometimes unmanned. You can get your climbing permit here and must pay an RM10 fee to ascend from here (you will need a guide to proceed beyond the gate). The entrance to the trail up to the summit is barred and they have to unlock it to let you pass.

Sleeping & Eating

Arrange accommodation at Mesilau and on the mountain with **Sutera Sanctuary Lodges** (☎ 088-243-629; www.suterasanctuarylodges.com; Lot G15, Wisma Sabah, Jln Haji Saman, Kota Kinabalu; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat, 8.30am-12.30pm Sun). Accommodation is in the form of lodges and chalets (excellent for families and small groups) and hostels.

Low's Peak Lodge and **St John's Peak Lodge** (RM520 per night) Have six-person chalets with three double bedrooms. They have living rooms, kitchens, room heaters, hot-water showers, decks, barbeque grills and TVs. They are quite nice and comfortable and separated enough from other units for a feeling of privacy. You can do your own cooking in these, so bring supplies from KK if you intend to do so.

Ugly Sister's Peak Lodge and **Donkey's Ear Peak Lodges** (RM450 per night) Four-person chalets with two double bedrooms. They have the same features as the Low's Peak and St John's Peak lodges and are of a similar standard. You can also cook in these.

Witti Range Lodges (RM450 per night) These six-person lodges have three bedrooms, two of which have a pair of single beds in each, and one master bedroom with a queen-size double bed. All have living rooms, room heaters, showers with hot water, but no kitchens. Great for families, but will have to depend on the restaurant for meals. These are very nice and homey. There are four of these.

Crocker Range Lodges (RM450 per night) These six-person lodges are similar to the Witti Range Lodges but one of the bedrooms has a pair of single beds, while other two have queen-size double beds. Otherwise, the features and standard are the same.

Bishops Head Hostels (d RM45) The dorms are what you'd expect; very simple but adequate, with basic kitchens and common areas. They are good enough for a night before or after a climb.

Renanthera Restaurant (dishes RM10-20; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Serves Malay, Chinese and Western meals, and the Malaxi Café serves breakfast, drinks and snacks.

Getting There & Away

Mesilau is 20km from Mt Kinabalu National Park HQ. To get to the resort, follow the main road past Mt Kinabalu Park headquarters for 6km, heading in the direction of Kandangan and Ranau. In a few minutes you will come to the settlement of Kandangan, which is recognisable by the stalls along the highway selling honey, fruit, baskets etc. You can get nice salak, mangosteen, durian and wild jungle honey here. Turn left (north) just past the stalls, following a sign for the Kundasang War Memorial. Otherwise, drive six km and you will come to some painted tires and a sign for Mesilau Nature Resort. Turn here and drive through the Mt Kinabalu Golf Club. It's a very steep four km to the resort from this turning. We thought our Proton might give up the ghost.

There is a shuttle bus from Kinabalu Park HQ to Poring Hot Springs at noon (RM25). Otherwise, a taxi from Kinabalu Park HQ to Mesilau Nature Resort will cost around RM75.

KUNDASANG WAR MEMORIAL

The turn-off for the Mesilau Nature Resort on the KK-Ranau highway is the site of the **Kundasang War Memorial** (Kundasang; admission RM10; ☎ 8am-5.30pm daily). There are English and Anzac gardens here, commemorating the prisoners from these countries who died on the march. In the Anzac Garden you can see a full list of the dead. At the back of the gardens there is a viewpoint which offers a stunning view of Mt Kinabalu. One can imagine how Mt Kinabalu must have seemed an unobtainable goal as the poor soldiers made their way across the hot middle of northern Borneo.

The memorial is in Kundasang, which is 10km east of Kinabalu Park headquarters. You'll know you're in Kundasang when you see the market stalls on either side of the road. Take the turn on the left for Mesilau Nature Resort. The memorial is on the right 150m after the turnoff. Look for the flags and the stone fort-like structure above the road. A bus from Kinabalu Park HQ will cost RM3 and a taxi will cost RM30.

RANAU

☎ 088 / pop 49,800

Ranau is a collection of concrete shop blocks in on the road between KK and Sandakan, or Kinabalu National Park and Poring Hot Springs. There's a busy Saturday **تامو** (night market). While the surrounding valley is quite lovely, the town itself is uninspiring and it's of most interest to travellers as a transport junction between Mt Kinabalu and Poring Hot Springs or other points in Sabah.

Most of the restaurants, hotels and shops are at the upper end of town, while the mini-van stop is at the bottom of town, and the express stops are out on the main highway. You can easily walk from one end of town to the other in 20 minutes or so.

Bank Simpanan Nasional (Jln Kibarambang) has an ATM.

Sleeping & Eating

Rafflesia Inn (☎ 879-359; 1st fl, Block E, Sedco Bldg; r from RM35; ☎) If you'd prefer a budget place, the same owners of Kinabalu View Lodge run this spartan but well-kept place. It's in the centre of town, above Koktas Restaurant.

Kinabalu View Lodge (☎ 879-111; 1st fl, Tokogaya Bldg, Lg Kibarambang; r RM64-79; ☎) This is the best of an uninspiring lot in Ranau. It's a bit threadbare, but the rooms are clean and

there are hot-water showers. If you stand on the back railing, you can catch views of Kinabalu. It's near the top of town – aim for the radio tower.

Restoran Tanjung Putri (Jln Lq Kibarambang; meals from RM3; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Diagonally opposite Kinabalu View Lodge, this simple Malay place does a great *sup ayam* (chicken soup), which really hits the spot after a climb up the mountain.

Restaurant Double Luck (☎ 879-246; Jln Kibarambang; meals RM6-10; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This is not the cheapest eatery in town but has the best food, friendly staff and ice-cold beer. Ask for a filled omelette for breakfast or try the tofu claypot for a veggie treat.

Getting There & Away

Minivans operate from the blue-roofed shelter at the bottom of town, 100m in from the main roundabout on the main road. Destinations include KK (RM15), Mt Kinabalu National Park HQ (RM5) and Poring Hot Springs (RM5). You can charter a whole minivan or taxi to the park headquarters or the hot springs for RM30 if you negotiate.

Express buses to Sandakan (RM20, four hours, departures hourly between 9am and 1pm) stop on the main road, in front of the church (roughly opposite the Shell station), 100m uphill from the main roundabout.

PORING HOT SPRINGS

Poring Hot Springs (admission RM15; ☺ visitors centre 9am-4.30pm) lies within Kinabalu National Park some 43km from park HQ and 19km north of Ranau. If you arrive here directly after climbing Mt Kinabalu, you can use your national park entry ticket to gain admission to Poring (and vice versa).

Most visitors come here to soak in the hot springs, especially after an ascent of Mt Kinabalu, but there is also a decent walking trail here, as well as a canopy walkway, a butterfly garden and a tropical garden.

The Hot Springs

At the hot springs, steaming, sulphurous water is channelled into pools and tubs in which visitors relax their tired muscles after a summit of Mt Kinabalu. The outdoor tubs are free to use but are often either occupied or painfully slow to fill (test the taps before choosing one). Consider renting an indoor

tub (per hour RM15); these fill quickly and give you private soaking time.

It's commonly believed that the Japanese discovered Poring Hot Springs during WWII, but accounts written by Japanese residents at the time indicate that they heard about the springs from locals who used to bathe their sick in the pools. Due to their incredible fondness for hot springs, a group of Japanese set off to find the springs, hoping, perhaps, to develop the springs into a commercial *onsen* (hot-spring bath), after the war.

Anyone who's ever been to a real Japanese *onsen* will wish that the Japanese were still in charge of the place. It's very poorly run these days: there are no coin lockers, no buckets for rinsing your body before entering the baths, no towel rental (they are on sale in the store for RM15), no proper changing room. Be sure to bring your own towel and a bathing suit. A pair of flip-flops/thongs will also come in handy.

You fill the tubs yourself, mixing hot-spring water and cold water to get the right balance. If you use only hot water, you'll achieve the right temperature. Put the stopper in yourself. If you get too hot, there's a cold-water swimming pool to cool off in. Parents, note that the tubs are about twice as deep as they should be, which is dangerous for young children – you'll have to keep a close eye on them.

Despite our quibbles with the place, there is a certain magic here in the morning, as steam rises from the tubs and the rainforest comes alive with the call of thousands of tropical birds.

Other Activities

If you've got some time before or after taking a bath (if you're staying the night, for instance), you might like to sample some of Poring's other attractions.

The **butterfly farm** (admission RM4; ☺ 9am-4pm) above the baths is nice, with lots of flowers and several species of butterflies, including the Raja Brooke's birdwing. First, you enter a display area, which has displays of the butterflies and other insects mounted under glass. You walk through this and then enter the butterfly enclosure. Take your time in the enclosure as new butterflies constantly materialize before your eyes. The nearby **tropical garden** (admission RM3; ☺ 9am-4pm) is also worth a quick look.

There's also a 41m-high **canopy walkway** (admission RM5; ☺ 9am-4pm), a short but sweaty walk

into the forest above the pools. Unfortunately, the walkway was partially closed at the time of writing and it seems likely to remain so.

You can also walk up to **Kipungit falls** and **bat caves**. The start of the trail is just beyond the entrance to the butterfly farm. It's 400m to the falls and 760m to the bat caves. It's a mostly flat stroll through the forest to the falls and it's well worth the journey. There is a small shelter at the falls and it's a nice place to wade and cool off. It's a fairly sweaty uphill slog to the caves, which are actually crevices between giant rocks. If you're going to see proper caves in the rest of Borneo, don't bother. We recommend doing these hikes before you take your bath, unless you fancy stinking out the minivan on the way home.

Finally rafflesia flowers sometimes bloom in the vicinity of the hot springs. Ask at the shops opposite the hot-spring entrance and if any are in bloom, villagers will lead you to them for RM20.

Sleeping & Eating

Reserve accommodation in advance through **Sutera Sanctuary Lodges** (☎ 088-243-629; www.sutera-sanctuarylodges.com.my; Lot G15, ground fl, Wisma Sabah, Jln Haji Saman, Kota Kinabalu). The reception at Poring is on the right as you pass through the building above the parking lot.

The **Serindit Hostel** (dm RM12) is clean enough, with six- and eight-person dorms and cooking facilities for rent (RM100). Otherwise, **Kelicap Lodge** (r RM150) has decent private twin rooms with common bathrooms. A **camping ground** (camp sites RM6) is available for tent-equipped visitors.

The **River Lodge** (per night RM110) sleeps a total of four people in two bedrooms (one with a double bed, the other with two single beds). It's quite nice, with a verandah, and air-con after 5pm, but there are no cooking facilities.

The **Rajawali Lodges** (per night RM380) are similar but sleeps a total of six (in three bedrooms (one with a pair of twin beds, and two with one double bed each)). These are good for families, but, again, there are no cooking facilities.

The **Rainforest Restaurant** (meals RM6-20; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) is a proper sit-down restaurant near the baths. There are also inexpensive eating places opposite the spring's entrance.

Getting There & Away

Poring is 19km north of Ranau along a sealed road and can be reached from Ranau by mini-

van (RM7) or hitching. You can also charter a taxi or minivan from Ranau to Poring for RM30.

Kinabalu National Park has minivan that departs park headquarters at noon for Poring (RM25). In the opposite direction, the minivan departs Poring for park headquarters at 2pm (and continues along to KK).

From outside Poring Hot Springs visitors centre, minivans can be chartered for around RM30 to transport you to Ranau, where you can catch minivans onward to Kinabalu National Park or KK.

SOUTHWEST COAST

The southwest coast of Sabah is a long flat shelf of land between the Crocker Range and the South China Sea. There are shallow beaches for most of its length but none can compete with the beaches found on the islands offshore. About 80km south of KK, the Klias Peninsula extends 30km into the South China Sea. Off the northern tip of this peninsula you'll find Pulau Tiga, forever linked with the American television show *Survivor*, which filmed a series there. Off the southern tip of this peninsula you'll find Pulau Labuan, centre of the region's oil industry and the transfer point for ferries between Brunei and Sabah. The main town in the southwest coastal region is Beaufort, which serves as a transport hub for the region.

BEAUFORT

☎ 087

Despite the rather dandy name, Beaufort is nothing more than a quiet provincial town of a few thousand souls about 90km south of KK. There are a few remaining wooden shophouses on the main street, which have a certain dilapidated charm in the evenings when hundreds of twittering swiftlets pack the telegraph wires like dysfunctional Christmas lights. For most visitors, though, it's little more than a stop-off on the way to Pulau Tiga, Sarawak or Brunei.

There is a **post office** (Jln Masjid) and a branch of **Public Bank** (Jln Lo Chung).

White-water Rafting

White-water rafting is popular through the Padas Gorge south of Beaufort, and is at its best between April and July, when water

levels on Sungai Padas create Grade 2 to 4 conditions. The calmer Sungai Kiulu nearby is also commonly used for first-time rafters. Day trips organised out of KK cost RM160 to RM190 per person, including transfers by charter train, and normally require 24 hours' advance notice.

Riverbug (☎ 088-260-501; www.traversetours.com; Wisma Sabah, Jln Haji Saman, Kota Kinabalu) is one of the main specialist outfits operating here.

Sleeping & Eating

There are only two accommodation choices in Beaufort and neither is very tempting. If you can get yourself back to KK, then consider this option. Otherwise, head on to Sipitang, where there is at least one better option.

Beaufort Hotel (☎ 211-911; 19-20 Lo Chung Park, Jln Lo Chung; s/d RM36/42; 🍽️) Upstairs in the salmon-pink building at the end of its block, the Beaufort is just barely acceptable, with slightly seedy bedrooms and bathrooms.

Mandarin Inn (☎ 211-800; Lg Beaufort Jaya 3; s/d RM35/42; 🍽️) The Mandarin Inn, across the river, is of a similar standard with a somewhat inconvenient location (unless you want to eat in the *kedai kopi* downstairs, you'll have to walk across the bridge into town). The rooms here are pretty cramped and worn.

Zulfia Curry House (Jln Chung; meals from RM3; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Right in the middle of town, this popular local eatery has good *nasi campur* (buffet with rice, RM3.50), *nasi biryani* (RM4) and good rotis.

Brunei Satay House (Jln Chung; meals from RM3; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Next door, this satay specialist has excellent beef and chicken satay at the bargain price of RM3 for five sticks. We could go for some right about now.

There are two **supermarkets** in town and a good **morning market** for fresh produce.

Getting There & Away

Express buses operate from near the old train station at the south end of Jln Masjid (the ticket booth is opposite the station). There are departures at 9am, 1pm, 2.15pm and 5pm for KK. The fare is RM9 and the journey takes 1½ hours. There are departures at 9.10am, 10.30am, 1.45pm and 6.20pm for Sipitang. The fare to Sipitang is RM4.50, 1½ hours. The KK to Lawas express bus passes through Beaufort at around 3pm; the fare from Beaufort to Lawas is RM13, 1¾ hours.

Minivans operate from a stop across from the mosque, which is at the north end of Jln Masjid. There are frequent departures for Papar (RM7, one hour) and KK (RM9, two hours), and less-frequent departures for Sipitang (RM11, 1½ hours), Lawas (RM15, 1¾ hours) and Kuala Penyu (until around 2.30pm, RM6, one hour). To Menumbok (for Labuan) there are plenty of minivans until early afternoon (RM8, one hour).

Taxis from the stand outside the old train station, at the south end of Jln Masjid. Charter rates include: KK (RM60), Kuala Penyu (RM50), Sipitang (RM32), Menumbok (RM50) and Lawas (RM100).

KLIAS PENINSULA

The Klias Peninsula is a square of dead-flat marshland that serves as the access point to Pulau Tiga and Pulau Labuan (note that it is easier and cheaper to get to Labuan by ferry from KK). The **Sungai Klias** runs through the heart of the Klias Wetlands and it is possible to tour the wetlands by boat along this river. In addition, there are acceptable beaches around the fringes of the peninsula and at least one good place to stay on the coast.

Kuala Penyu

Kuala Penyu, at the northern tip of the peninsula, is the jumping-off point for Pulau Tiga. The town is unremarkable, but there are some good **beaches** nearby. The best is around the headland from the estuary, 8km out of town; there are picnic tables and toilets but no other facilities.

From KK minivans leave from behind Wawasan Plaza (RM10, two hours). From Beaufort minivans to Kuala Penyu (RM5) leave throughout the morning, but return services tail off very early in the afternoon, so you may have to negotiate a taxi or local lift back. A minivan from Kuala Penyu to Menumbok costs RM6. The town itself is bisected by a river; a pontoon ferry shuttles back and forth between 6am and 6pm.

Tempurung Seaside Lodge

The **Tempurung Seaside Lodge** (☎ 088-773-066; 3 Putatan Point; info@borneo-authentic.com; r RM110) is a quiet place to unwind for a couple of days. Prices include breakfast, lunch and dinner. It's set in a nice spot up on a hill overlooking a long stretch of beach and the South China Sea. It's a little lonely and doesn't seem to get

many visitors, but the rooms are cosy and homey and it would be a fun place to come with a few friends or for families who want to spend some quality time together. You can walk up into the nearby *kampung* (village) and check out Malay country life.

If you're driving, look for the sign on the right just before Kuala Penyu. The sign says 7km, but that's a conservative estimate, and it will feel like a lot more as you bounce over the gravel/dirt road (just passable in a regular car – keep an eye out for children, piglets and chickens, among other hazards). We suggest you call for direction. A charter taxi from Beaufort will cost about RM50.

Klias River Cruise (Sungai Klias Cruise)

The best way to check out the Klias Wetlands is to join a **Klias River Cruise** (RM75; departs at 5pm, register by 4.30pm). This two-hour cruise includes tea and dinner and takes in a good section of the river/wetlands, where you stand a good chance of seeing proboscis monkeys. The jetty is 20km west of Beaufort. When heading there by driving from Beaufort, look for the sign reading 'Klias Wetland 0.5k', cross the bridge and take an immediate right down the narrow dirt road to the dock (250m). Many tour operators and accommodation owners in KK offer package tours to the wetlands and this is often the easiest and cheapest way to go.

PULAU TIGA NATIONAL PARK

A short distance north of Kuala Penyu on the Klias Peninsula, you will find the three islands of Pulau Tiga (the name means 'Three Islands'), which together form **Pulau Tiga National Park**. **Pulau Tiga** is the largest island; about 1km to the northeast lies tiny **Pulau Kalampunian Damit**; and in between are the remains of the third island, **Pulau Kalampunian Besar**, now only a sandbar eroded by wave action. The islands themselves are recent creations, formed in 1897 by the eruption of mud volcanoes. Continuous volcanic activity has taken place over the last hundred years, and still continues in the form of bubbling mud and escaping methane gas.

In 2001 the main island, Pulau Tiga, was the location for the first season of the US reality TV show *Survivor*, and is heavily marketed now as 'Survivor Island'. It's a little ironic, of course, that the place that those folks struggled just to survive is now a popular tourist

destination where families come to spend their vacations.

While Pulau Tiga is fairly attractive, with good walking trails and decent beaches, it's not as nice as the islands of Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park off of KK (p102), let alone the blinding white-sand beaches of Pulau Mantanani (p129; which is, admittedly, much more difficult to visit).

Sights & Activities

In addition to the obvious pastimes in the park – relaxing on the beach, swimming and snorkelling – there are several ways to spend your time, including walking on the island's trail network and visiting nearby 'Snake Island'.

SNAKE ISLAND

Pulau Kalampunian Damit is little more than a large rock covered in dense vegetation but is famous for the sea snakes that come ashore to mate, hence the island's nickname, **Snake Island**. On any one day up to 150 snakes can be present, curled up under boulders, among roots and in tree hollows. It's a fascinating phenomenon, but it's not the writhing mass of snakes that many visitors imagine based on descriptions given tour operators. If you do come out here, beware of the snakes – they are extremely poisonous. Pulau Tiga Resort runs boat trips to the island (RM20 per person or RM100 per boat, two hours), with a stop en route for snorkelling.

WALKING

A walking trail runs right round the outside of Pulau Tiga and a full circuit of the island would take 8 to 10 hours. We don't recommend undertaking this monumental slog. If you decide to try it, arrange a guide, bring several litres of water per person, and let someone reliable know where you are going and when you expect to return.

It is possible to walk from Pulau Tiga Resort to Survivor Resort and at 2km each way, it's a much more reasonable and enjoyable hike. Starting from Pulau Tiga Resort, follow the signs for Tagi Beach. We did the hike alone and disturbed a troop of macaques who showed their displeasure by attempting to drop a coconut on our heads. We wonder if this was one of the challenges faced on *Survivors*. Be sure to bring plenty of water on this hike.

The most popular walk on the island is the 1.2km (one-way) trip to one of the mud 'volcanos' in the forest north of Pulau Tiga Resort/Sabah Parks accommodation.

Sleeping & Eating

All accommodation is on Pulau Tiga.

Sabah Parks Accommodation (☎ 088-211-881; www.sabahparks.org.my; Lot 1-3, Block K, Kompleks Sinsuran, Jln Tun Fuad Stephens, Kota Kinabalu; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Thu, 8-11.30am & 2-5pm Fri) In the middle of the south coast of the island and snug alongside Pulau Tiga Resort, this is the cheapest place to stay on the island. It is either crowded with Malaysian holidaymakers or utterly deserted. It's got nicely tended open grounds here and a good stretch of beach. If you require very little in terms of service and just want a quiet place to stay on the beach, this might suit.

The **Asrama Murai hostel** (d RM30) here has two four-bunk dorms, a simple kitchen with gas ring and fridge, a sitting room, veranda and fresh-water shower. It's simple but acceptable. **Chalet Selangkir** (per night RM120) here is for those who would like a little more privacy. It has a similar kitchen to the hostel and a bedroom with two single beds and air-con. Note that it's not worth paying more for the chalet if you can get the hostel to yourself (and if you don't require air-con).

Sabah Parks can arrange a boat from Kuala Penyu to Pulau Tiga for a hefty RM350, which makes it advisable to see if you can hop a ride of a Pulau Tiga Resort boat (call ahead to ask).

Borneo Survivor Resort (☎ 088-919-686, 088-230-806; www.borneosurvivor.com.my; longhouse/chalet packages from RM238/338; ☎) The more adventurous option on the island; there is one chalet here with two single beds, a shower and veranda. It's nice enough, but it's a little dark due to its location set back in the forest. The longhouse has simple dorm rooms with fan and showers (a little on the grotty side). This place doesn't get many visitors and you might just have it to yourself. Unfortunately, it's not as appealing as the other spots, although the staff were friendly and cheerful when we were there. Packages include meals, accommodation and transport to/from Kuala Penyu.

Pulau Tiga Resort (☎ 087-885-650; http://pulau-tiga.com; per person from RM175-330; ☎) The main player on the island, this place occupies a fair bit of the foreshore on the south side of the island. Grounds are well-tended and grassy.

Superior bungalows here have big double beds, air-con, fridges, hot-water showers, and are clean and spacious. Longhouse rooms have fan, shower, and three single beds per room. Superior family bungalows here have air-con, fridges, hot showers, sitting rooms, one master bedroom with a double bed and one children's room with two single beds. These are nice enough, but set back a bit far from the beach. The two-person standard bungalows are a little tightly grouped together, with cold showers, verandas. These are quite acceptable. We hear from readers that the service here is inflexible.

Getting There & Away

Pulau Tiga is 12km north of Kuala Penyu on the Klias Peninsular. The boat ride takes about 20 minutes and can be pretty bumpy if there's any wind about. Boats leave from the south side of the river in Kuala Penyu. If you take the northern route from KK, you'll have to cross the river via an interesting chain ferry (free). If for some reason you are on foot, there is a tiny passenger ferry that will take you across on demand for 40 sen.

Most visitors to Pulau Tiga come as part of a package with one of the resorts, in which case transport all the way to the island from KK will be included in the price. Otherwise, you could try just showing up in Kuala Penyu and asking if you can board one of the day's boats out to the island (we don't recommend this option as priority is given to resort guests with bookings).

MENUMBOK

The tiny hamlet of **Menumbok** is where you catch the ferry to Pulau Labuan (where you can catch an onward ferry to Brunei or a speedboat to Sarawak). A charter taxi to/from Beaufort costs RM60. Minivans to/from Beaufort cost RM8. The car ferry to Pulau Labuan departs daily at 10.30am and 4.30pm (RM5/person, RM40/car).

SIPITANG

Sipitang is 44km south of Beaufort, 144km from KK and just 18km from the Sarawak border. Located on a wide, shallow bay, Sipitang is pleasant enough, with a pastel mosque and lots of seafront eating, though you'd probably only stop here if you missed a bus.

Maybank at the southern end of town has an ATM.

Sleeping & Eating

Shangsan Hotel (☎ 087-822-2835; Jln Datuk Haji Mohd Yassin; s/d RM40/55) One of the few places to stay in Sipitang, this small hotel is in the second block of businesses as you enter town from the north, about 50m past the Shell station. Although uninspiring at first glance, the rooms are clean and acceptable, with white tile floors typical of Chinese-Malay hotels.

Restoran Selera Asias (Jln Datuk Haji Mohd Yassin; meals from RM3; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) In the centre of town on the foreshore, this fine little Malay restaurant is just north of the morning market. It has an easily understood Bahasa menu with all the standard *kedai kopi* favourites, including a particularly nice plate of *mee goreng*.

Getting There & Away

The bus stop is on the wonderfully named Lg Durian, which starts opposite Restoran Selera Asian in the centre of town. Walk down this street past *Kedai Kopi* Lian Hong to find the stop. There is a bus to Lawas (RM6.50) that leaves at 10.15am. Buses to KK (RM20) leave at 8am, noon, 1.30pm and 4.30pm.

A taxi to/from Beaufort will cost RM8/32 person/car. Taxis leave from outside the morning market in the centre of town near the foreshore.

Speedboats to Labuan leave from the jetty next to the Shell station at the north roundabout. Boats depart at 7.30am and 1pm, cost RM25 and take 40 minutes.

PULAU LABUAN

☎ 087 / pop 76,000

About 115km southwest of KK and only 50km northeast of Bandar Seri Begawan (Brunei) is the small island of Labuan, which serves as the main transit point between Brunei and Sabah. This is the best way to travel between Sabah and Brunei and onward to Sarawak, as the overland journey is time consuming and arduous. There's not much to detain you on Labuan, but if you get stuck between ferry sailings, you'll find it a pleasant spot to spend an evening.

Labuan was once a coal-mining centre and now has major petroleum gas installations. Politically the 92 sq km group of islands is a federal territory governed directly from KL.

The sultan of Brunei ceded Labuan to the British in 1846 and it remained part of the Empire for 115 years. The only interrup-

tion came during WWII, when the Japanese landed and held the island for three years. Significantly, it was on Labuan that the Japanese forces in North Borneo surrendered at the end of the war, and here that the Japanese officers responsible for the death marches from Sandakan were tried. There's a war cemetery and peace park to mark these horrific events.

Bandar Labuan (Labuan Town) is the main town and the transit point for ferries. The population is a mix of Muslim Malays, native groups such as the Kadazan, Dusun, Bugis and Bajau, and large contingents of Chinese, Indians (including a long-standing Sikh presence) and other foreign nationals.

Information

Arcade Moneychanger (☎ 412-545; 168 Jln OKK Awang Besar) Cash and travellers cheques. Inside Labuan Textile shop.

Bertam Mass Money Changer (Jln Bunga Raya) Cash and travellers cheques. Near ferry terminal.

Harrissons Travel (☎ 412-557; 1 Jln Merdeka) Handy and reputable travel agency.

HSBC (☎ 422-610; 189 Jln Merdeka)

Maybank (☎ 443-888; Financial Park)

Labuan Tourism Action Council (☎ 422-622; ground fl, Labuan International Sea Sports Complex; 8am-1pm & 2pm-5pm Mon-Fri, closed Sat & Sun) Located about 1km west of the town centre, this is the most useful information office in town. They stock the excellent *Fly Drive Labuan Island & Town Map of Labuan*.

Tourist Information Centre (☎ 423-445; www.labuantourism.com.my; cnr Jln Dewan & Jln Berjaya; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat) Tourism Malaysia office. Less useful than Labuan Tourism Action Council.

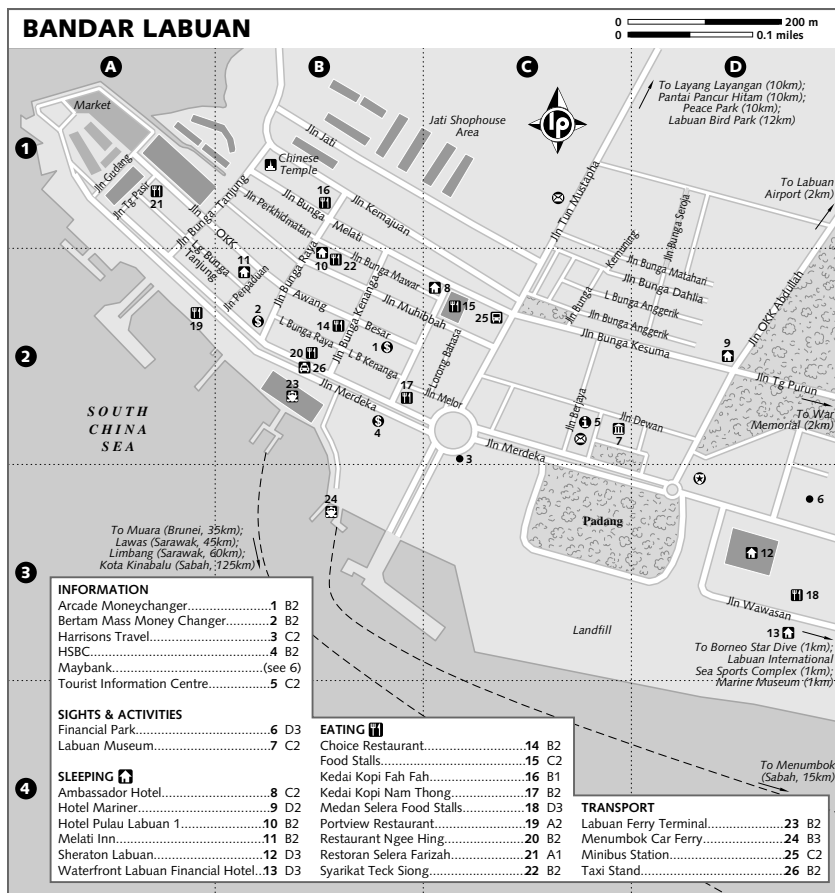
Sights & Activities

BANDAR LABUAN

Labuan's uncharismatic main settlement is light on character but has a couple of passable attractions.

The **Labuan Museum** (☎ 414-135; 364 Jln Dewan; admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm) takes a glossy, if slightly superficial, look at the island's history and culture. The most interesting displays are those on the different ethnic groups here, including a diorama of a traditional Chinese tea ceremony (the participants, however, look strangely Western). There's also an excellent diorama of a water village.

On the coast just east of the centre, the Labuan International Sea Sports Complex houses the **Marine Museum** (☎ 425-927; Jln Tanjung



Purun; admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm). It's a decent little museum with a good shell collection and displays of marine life to be found in the area. Don't forget to head upstairs where you'll find a 42-foot-long skeleton of an Indian fin whale. The real highlight, however, and a guaranteed hit with the kids is the 'touch pool' opposite reception. This has to be the only shark-petting zoo we've ever seen (readers relax: the sharks are less than a metre long).

Tragically, the modern chrome-and-mirrors **Financial Park** (Jln Merdeka; ☎ 10am-10pm) duty-free mall is trumpeted as the town's No 1 'attraction', aiming to seduce shoppers and booze-cruisers into parting with their cash.

AROUND PULAU LABUAN

The **Labuan War Memorial** is an expanse of lawn with row upon row of headstones dedicated to the nearly 4000 Commonwealth servicemen, mostly Australian and British, who lost their lives in Borneo during WWII. The most heartbreaking are the last two rows of memorials on the north end that read merely 'a soldier'. The cemetery is near the golf course, about 2km east of town along Jln Tanjung Purun. A taxi to the memorial will cost around RM10.

A **Peace Park/Surrender Memorial** west of the island at Layang Layangan commemorates the place of Japanese surrender and has a Japanese war memorial. It's in a pleasant garden on the seashore. A taxi here will run around RM25.

Also on the west coast, you'll find **Pantai Pancur Hitam**, a decent shallow beach that has a picnic area for children. Keep your eye out for monitor lizards. Bus 6 runs to the beach from downtown. A taxi from downtown will cost RM25.

Towards the northern tip of the island, **Labuan Bird Park** (☎ 463-544; admission free) offers refuge to a wide range of species in three dome-shaped aviaries connected by tunnels. Some birds are also kept in outlying cages, presumably because they don't play well with others. As you enter, you will be greeted by a pair of hill myna birds who say 'hello' and 'Salaam Aleykum'. When you leave, another pair will bid you goodbye. Bus 6 makes the run to the bird park from downtown. Otherwise, a taxi from downtown will run RM25.

Pulau Kuraman, Pulau Rusukan Kecil and Pulau Rusukan Besar are uninhabited islands lying southwest of Labuan that are now protected as the **Labuan Marine Park**. The beaches are pristine, but dynamite fishing has destroyed much of the coral. There is no regularly scheduled transport to the park.

Labuan has the best **wreck diving** around Borneo, with no fewer than four major wrecks off the coast. The only dive operator in town is **Borneo Star Dive** (☎ 429-279; www.borneostardive.com; ground fl, Labuan International Sea Sports Complex (1km), Marine Museum (1km)), which offers two-/four-day wreck packages from RM750. They can help arrange transport to Labuan Marine Park.

Sleeping

Budget accommodation in Labuan is of poor quality. Midrange hotels are a better option.

Melati Inn (☎ 416-307; Jln Perpaduan; s/d RM45/50; ☎) This is a peach-coloured place with rooms that are a little worse for wear, but it's the only acceptable budget option. Jln Perpaduan runs inland from the waterfront, close to the wharf.

Ambassador Hotel (☎ 423-233; Lot 0142 Jln Bunga Mawar; r from RM79; ☎) The well-run Ambassador is easily the best-value hotel in town, with clean rooms, comfortable beds, nice bathrooms and wi-fi. Jln Bunga Mawar is in the middle of town – follow Jln Bunga Raya inland from the ferry terminal and turn right at Hotel Pulau Labuan.

Hotel Mariner (☎ 418-822; mhlabuan@tm.net.my; 468 Jln Tanjung Purun; r from RM90; ☎) With cramped but clean and well-maintained rooms, the Mariner is a good choice in the midrange

category. Rooms come with fridges, laminate floors and neat, spacious bathrooms.

Hotel Pulau Labuan 1 (☎ 417-288; Jln Muhibbah; s/tw from RM95/108; ☎) The Hotel Pulau Labuan 1 is not as good a value as the Mariner or the Ambassador, but it will do in a pinch. Facilities are similar, but it's a little long in the tooth.

Waterfront Labuan Financial Hotel (☎ 418-111; waterfront@streamyx.com; 1 Jln Wawasan; r from RM198; ☎) Not just for merchant bankers – this is a large, luxurious leisure hotel with full facilities and a small marina attached. The rooms are spacious here and some have great sea views. There's a huge outdoor pool and a restaurant. Wi-fi available. All in all, it's a comfortable place to stay.

Sheraton Labuan (☎ 422-000; www.sheraton.com/labuan; 462 Jln Merdeka; r from RM245; ☎) This has everything you would expect from an international hotel, with spacious and well-appointed rooms, a decent pool, a gym and a restaurant. The wi-fi here is a ridiculously overpriced RM60 per day.

Eating

Kedai Kopi Fah Fah (cnr Jln Bunga Raya & Jln Bunga Melati; meals RM3-10; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) With indoor and outdoor seating, an English menu, tasty fresh juice and cheap beer, this simple Chinese restaurant is a good choice. We particularly liked their *kway teow goreng* (fried flat rice noodles).

Other Chinese *kedai kopi* to choose from in town include **Kedai Kopi Nam Thong** (Jln Merdeka; meals from RM3; ☎ breakfast & lunch only), which has chicken rice and fried noodle stalls, and **Restaurant Ngee Hing** (Jln Merdeka; meals from RM3; ☎ breakfast & lunch only), which has a stall that does a good bowl of laksa (it's directly opposite the ferry terminal and serves as a good place to wait for a ferry).

If you prefer a Muslim *kedai kopi*, you could try **Restoran Selera Farizah** (Lg Bunga Tanjung; meals from RM3; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner), which serves roti, curries, *nasi campur*, accompanied by the inevitable pro-wrestling videos.

Choice Restaurant (☎ 418-086; 104 Jln OKK Awang Besar; dishes RM1.20-10; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Forget false modesty, the Choice simply proclaims 'We are the best', and the authentic Indian meals seem corroboratingly popular with the authentic Indian residents who turn out for roti, fishhead curry and sambal.

Portview Restaurant (☎ 422-999; Jln Merdeka; dishes RM15-30; ☎ lunch & dinner) An outpost of the

successful Chinese seafood franchise in KK, this waterfront restaurant has air-con indoor seating and outdoor seating that affords a nice view over Labuan's busy harbour. It's one of the few proper sit-down restaurants in town (that is, something nicer than a *kedai kopi*). We liked the baby *kailan* (Chinese vegetable) with crab sauce and butter prawns, which had the unusual addition of sesame to the sauce. Beware of a secret hidden charge in the form of 'special napkin' (tell them at the outset that you don't need it). Service can be a little slow and erratic.

In addition, you'll find outdoor **food stalls** at the east end of Jln Bunga Mawar and in the **Medan Selera Complex** near the Sheraton Labuan. Self-caterers can do their grocery shopping at **Syarikat Teck Siong** (Jln Bunga Mawar).

Getting There & Away

Malaysia Airlines (☎ 1-300-883-000; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my) has flights to/from KK (RM177, 45 minutes) and KL (RM359, 2½ hours).

Passenger ferries (RM31, 3 hours) depart KK for Labuan Monday to Saturday at 8am and 1.30pm. On Sunday they sail at 8am and 3pm. In the opposite direction, they depart Labuan for KK Monday to Saturday 8am and 1pm, while on Sunday they depart at 10.30am and 3pm. Note that the air-con on these ferries is always turned up to 'arctic' – bring a fleece.

Numerous express boats go to Muara port in Brunei daily (economy/1st class RM35/40, one hour) between 9am and 4.30pm, returning between 7.30am and 3.30pm. From Brunei the cost is B\$15/18 for economy/1st class, with six departures between 7.30am and 4.40pm.

There are also daily speedboats from Labuan to Limbang in Sarawak (RM28, 2.30pm, two hours) and Lawas, also in Sarawak (RM33, 12.30pm, two hours). There are also daily speedboats to Sipitang, which cost RM25 and take 40min.

Car ferries go to Menumbok (passenger/car RM5/40, two hours, three times daily) from a separate dock to the east. Speedboats (RM10) do the journey in about 30 minutes and leave roughly every hour between 8am and 4pm.

Getting Around

Labuan has a good minibus network, based on a six-zone system. Minibuses leave regularly from the parking lot off Jln Tun Mustapha. Their numbers are clearly painted on the front,

and fares range from 50 sen for a short trip to RM2 for a trip to the top of the island.

Taxis are plentiful and there's a stand opposite the local ferry terminal. The base rate is RM6.60 for short journeys, or RM10 to the airport.

SOUTHWEST INTERIOR

The southwest interior of Sabah is dominated by the **Crocker Range**, which rises near Tenom in the south and runs north to Mt Kinabalu. The range forms a formidable barrier to the interior of the state and dominates the eastern skyline from Kota Kinabalu down to Sipitang. Once across the Crocker Range, you descend into the green valley of the Sungai Pegalan that runs from Keningau in the south and to Ranau in the north. The heart of the **Pegalan Valley** is the small town of **Tambunan**, around which you'll find a few low-key attractions.

While much of the Crocker Range has been gazetted as **Crocker Range National Park**, there are few facilities for visitors. Likewise, the Pegalan Valley has no real must-see attractions. However, the Crocker Range and the Pegalan Valley make a nice jaunt into rural Sabah and are particularly suited for those with rental cars. As you make your way over the range between KK and Tambunan, you'll be treated to brilliant views back to the South China Sea and onward to Mt Trus Madi. The road itself is a lot of fun to drive, and you'll find yourself craving a sports car instead of the Proton rental you're likely to be driving. Of course, with all the trucks on this road, you probably won't have too many opportunities to open it up.

Now that southern road between Keningau and Kumanis is also passable by ordinary cars, a fine loop is possible through the area, starting in KK, crossing the Crocker Range via Sinsuron Pass to Tambunan, working your way down the valley to Keningau, then across the Crocker Range again and back to KK via Kumanis.

TAMBUNAN

☎ 087

Right in the heart of the Pegalan Valley, surrounded by the peaks of the Crocker Range, the small town of Tambunan is a scenic 81km drive from KK. The Pegalan Valley region was the last stronghold of Mat Salleh, who became a folk hero for rebelling

against the British late in the 19th century. Sadly Salleh later blew his reputation by negotiating a truce, which so outraged his own people that he was forced to flee to the Tambunan plain, where he was eventually besieged and killed.

Around Tambunan you'll find lovely Mahua Falls, 2642m Mt Trus Madi (the second-highest peak in Sabah), and Tambunan Rafflesia Reserve, one of the only developed tourist attractions in the Crocker Range (although Rafflesia are rarely in bloom here).

Sights & Activities

TAMBUNAN RAFFLESIA RESERVE

Near the top of the Crocker Range, next to the main highway 20km from Tambunan, is the **Tambunan Rafflesia Reserve** (admission free; ☎ 8am-2pm Mon-Fri, 8am-3.30pm Sat & Sun), devoted to the world's largest flower. The information centre has a few passable displays on the rafflesia. From the centre, eight nature trails lead into the forest where the rafflesias can be found.

Rafflesia bloom irregularly here and the reserve is of limited interest if none are in bloom (unfortunately, there's no reliable phone at the centre, so you can't call in advance to see if any are blooming). A whiteboard out front of the reserve indicates if any are in bloom and staff can give information about their whereabouts.

If you're driving from KK, look out for the reserve about 5km after crossing Sinsuron Pass

MAHUA FALLS

Off the north-south highway that runs between Ranau and Tambunan, you'll find lovely **Mahua Falls** (Air Terjun Mahua), one of the most interesting sights in the valley. When coming from KK, you'll descend into the Pegalan Valley and reach an intersection with the north-south highway where you turn north (you'll see a sign indicating that Mahua Falls are 13km from this intersection). After 7.3km you will come to a sign on the left for Mahua Falls, after which it's 7km down a rough dirt road to the falls.

We really don't recommend that you take an ordinary car down this road (we can still remember the horrible sound of our Proton Wira scraping over the deep ruts and rocks of the road). You'll need either a 4WD vehicle or you can take a regular car some distance down

the road and park it and walk when the going gets too rough (bring plenty of water).

Once at the falls, you'll find a building, from which a trail runs some 500m to the falls. The trail itself is brilliant, leading past several giant dipterocarp trees. The falls themselves are small (about 7m drop) but lovely, falling into a green bowl that might remind you of Hawaii.

There is no public transport to the falls.

MT TRUS MADI

About 20km southeast of Tambunan town is the 2642m peak of **Mt Trus Madi**, Sabah's second-highest peak. It's possible to make an ascent of this peak, but it's more challenging than Mt Kinabalu, and more difficult to arrange. Though Mt Trus Madi is surrounded by logging concessions, the upper slopes and peak are wild and jungle-clad and classified as forest reserve.

The muddy trails to the summit can be treacherous in parts – just the thing for those who find the open expanses of Mt Kinabalu a bit pedestrian. Independent trekkers must be well-equipped and take all their food and water up the mountain. Most climbers take a 4WD vehicle to Kampung Kaingaran then trek for most of the day to arrive at base camp, then summit and descend all the way back to Kampung Kaingaran the next day (often spending that evening in Tambunan before returning to KK).

Before setting off, you are strongly advised to hire a guide or at least get maps and assistance from the **Forestry Department** (Jabatan Perhutanan; ☎ 087-774-691) in Tambunan. The Tambunan Village Resort Centre (see below) can arrange treks; guides cost RM200 per day (up to eight people), and a 4WD will cost RM300 per trip. If you need a porter to carry your gear, it'll cost you another RM150 per day. Tour operators in KK can also arrange trips up the mountain.

Sleeping

Tambunan Village Resort Centre (TVRC; ☎ 774-076; 24 Jln TVRC, Kampung Keranaan; r and chalet RM50-90; 📶) Tambunan's only tourist accommodation is about 2km from the tiny town centre, with several buildings, a small boating lake and grounds that span a river. The bamboo-lined, motel-style rooms above the reception are just acceptable, with fan and outside bath. The regular chalets are a little old, and aren't nearly

as good as the more appealing lakeside chalets. The staff at the centre can help arrange trips up Mt Trus Madi. If you're driving here from KK, the centre is just south of the Shell station on the main road.

Eating

There are a few simple restaurants around the minivan shelter in Tambunan town, including the simple but good **Restoran 99** (Tambunan; meals from RM3; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner), which serves a fine *mee goreng ayam* (friend noodles with chicken; RM3.50). You might also consider the wonderfully named **Kedai Kopi Soon Fatt** (Tambunan; meals from RM3; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner), which, despite the name, serves food that is no more caloric than your typical *kedai kopi*.

Getting There & Away

Regular minivans ply the roads between Tambunan and KK (RM10, 1½ hours), Ranau (RM12, two hours), Keningau (RM7, 1 hour) and Tenom (RM12, two hours). KK–Tenom express buses also pass through, though you may have to ask them to stop. The minivan shelter is in the middle of Tambunan town.

Minivans to KK pass the entrance to the rafflesia reserve; you'll usually be charged for the whole trip to KK.

KENINGAU

☎ 087

Keningau is a busy commercial centre in the southern Pegalan Valley. It's of interest to travellers primarily as a place to catch onward transport, do a bit of shopping, or hit an ATM. For locals, though, it's a different matter: attracted by the prospect of well-paid employment, people have flocked here from neighbouring districts, as well as from Indonesia and the Philippines, and the town's population has more than doubled since the 1960s. As you pass through, you may find yourself marvelling how this relatively small city manages to recreate the traffic conditions of Bangkok in the middle of Borneo.

As far as attractions go, you might check out **Taipak-gung**, a colourful Chinese temple in the middle of town, or the large **tamu** held every Thursday.

Maybank and **Milimewa** supermarket are conveniently located right in the middle of the city, on the west side of the highway.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Tai Wah (☎ 332-2092; 24 Jln Besar; s/d RM25/35; ☺) In the middle of town, visible from the main road, this simple and clean Chinese hotel is a good value, if a little noisy (due to its proximity to the main road).

Hotel Juta (☎ 337-888; www.sabah.com.my/juta; Lg Milimewa 2; standard/superior r from RM85/95; ☺) The midrange Juta towers over central Keningau, and is convenient to transport, banking and shopping options. The standard rooms here are a little cramped but clean. The superior rooms are slightly more spacious. There is a restaurant on the premises.

Hotel Perkasa (☎ 331-045; Jln Kampung Keningau; s/d RM92/115; ☺) One kilometre north of town, just west of the northernmost roundabout, you'll find the large pink edifice of the Hotel Perkasa, which is a small step up in comfort from the Hotel Juta (although it's not as conveniently located and only suitable for those with their own cars). The rooms are fairly spacious with decent bathrooms that have actual bathtubs.

Kedai Kopi Wan Hing (meals from RM3; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This Chinese *kedai kopi* is a good spot for your morning *char siu pau* (steamed bun filled with barbecue pork) and tea. It's opposite Maybank, which is diagonally opposite Hotel Juta.

Getting There & Away

There are seven express buses daily to/from KK (RM13, 2½ hours) and four to/from Tenom (RM7, 1 hour). These buses stop at the Bumiputra Express stop on the main road across from the Shell station.

Minivans and share-taxis operate from several places in town, including a stop just north of the express bus stop. There are services to/from KK (RM25, 2½ hours), Ranau (RM18, three hours) and Tenom (RM7, one hour).

A road also links Keningau to Kimanis (and KK) on the coast, crossing the Crocker Range en route.

TENOM

☎ 087

This sleepy little town at the southern end of Crocker Range and Pegalan Valley has seen better days but still manages to be more attractive than traffic-choked Keningau. Tenom was closely involved in uprisings against the British in 1915, led by the famous Murut chief Ontoros Antonom, and there's a **memorial** to

the tribe's fallen warriors off the main road. The main activity in town is watching the millions of sparrows that gather on the power lines and rooftops downtown each evening. The main reason most people stop in Tenom is to visit the nearby Sabah Agricultural Park (see right).

Sleeping & Eating

There are only three passable hotels here, none of which are up to much. If you demand proper accommodations, you'll have to head north to Keningau.

Hotel Sri Perdana (☎ 734-001; 77 Jln Tun Mustapha; s/d RM30/40; ☺) Despite the narrow single beds and ineffective electric showers, this hotel is good value for a quick overnight. There's a café underneath, and minivans to Keningau stop right opposite. It's diagonally across from the *padang*.

Hotel Sri Jaya (☎ 735-689; Jln Tun Mustapha; s/d RM30/33; ☺) The rooms here are monastic spare, but are clean enough to consider for a night. It's on the main street in the centre of town.

Orchid Hotel (☎ 737-600; Jln Tun Mustapha; s/d RM35/44; ☺) This is arguably the best hotel in town, which isn't saying much. It's got semi-hot showers and reasonably spacious rooms.

Chi Hin Restaurant (off Jln Tun Mustapha; meals from RM3; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) In one of the shopping streets east of Jln Tun Mustapha you'll find this simple Chinese place that does a nice sweet and sour pork (RM6) or a good *mee goreng* (RM4.50). The ice lemon tea is pretty good, too.

Tenom Superstore (Jln Datuk Yassin; ☺ 9am-9pm daily) Self-caterers can stock up here. It's a bit east of the main street, in the centre of town.

Getting There & Away

Minivans operate from in front of the Hotel Sri Perdana. Destinations include Keningau (RM6, one hour) and KK (RM20, three to four hours). There are also regular services to Tambunan (RM12, two hours).

An express bus to KK (RM16, 3½ hours) leaves daily from near the train station at 7am, 8am, noon and 4pm.

Taxis congregate at a rank on the west side of the *padang*. You can charter a whole taxi to Keningau (RM28) or KK (RM120), or, if you show up in the morning, you might be able to wait around and join others going the same way.

SABAH AGRICULTURAL PARK

The **Sabah Agricultural Park** (Taman Pertanian Sabah; ☎ 737-952; www.sabah.net.my/agripark; adult/child RM25/10; ☺ 9am-4.30pm Tue-Sun), about 15km southeast of Tenom, is run by the Department of Agriculture and covers about 1500 acres (610 hectares). The park is the main tourist attraction in this part of the state, and it's a worthwhile destination for plant lovers, although, like a lot of tourist attractions in Borneo, it seems like more energy was put into starting the place than maintaining it.

The park is laid out around three ponds and all the gardens and facilities are connected by a network of paved or dirt paths. Gardens include an orchid garden (none blooming while we were there), mangosteen orchards, and rambutan orchards.

Due to the size of the place, a fair bit of walking in the hot sun is involved (bring sunscreen, sun hats and sufficient clothing). Exploring by bicycle would be a good idea, but the fleet of rental bikes here has just about rusted to the point of immobility. There is a free 'train' (it's actually more like a bus) that does a 1½ hour loop of the park, leaving from outside the reception hourly from 9.30am to 3.30pm.

The park has an on-again/off-again **hostel** (dm RM25), a restaurant, shop and information centre. It's also possible to camp on one of the lake islands for RM10 per person.

To get here, take a minivan from Tenom heading to Lagud Seberang (RM3). Services run throughout the morning, but dry up in the late afternoon. Tell the driver you're going to Taman Pertanian. The park entrance is about 1km off the main road. A roundtrip in a taxi from Tenom, including a two-hour wait while you visit the park, will cost RM50. If you're driving yourself, the park is well-marked from Tenom.

BATU PUNGUL

Not far from the Kalimantan border, Batu Pungul is a jungle-topped limestone outcrop riddled with caves, towering nearly 200m above Sungai Sapulut. This is deep in Murut country and Batu Pungul was one of several sites sacred to these people. Batu Pungul and the adjacent Batu Tinahas are even traditionally believed to be longhouses that gradually transformed into stone. It can be difficult and expensive to get here, and you can safely give the area

a miss if you intend to visit the caves and longhouses of Sarawak.

Batu Punggul is located a 10-minute motorboat ride upstream along the Sungai Sapulut from the Murut longhouse community of Tataluang. It's possible to get to the top of Batu Punggul, which involves a slippery 20-minute climb up a jungle slope followed by a further hour of climbing along a precarious rock face. Those who dare reach the top are rewarded with wonderful views of the densely forested jungle that surrounds the area. Batu Punggul and the area are also home to several caves, including the 1km-long Tinagas Cave.

The only thing approaching accommodation in the area is the Murut longhouse community of Tataluang. Longhouse headman **Lanter Bakayas** speaks English and can arrange accommodation (RM30/day) and guide and arrange trips to Batu Punggul and nearby areas (starting RM150/day).

Note that due to the cost and difficulty of reaching the area, it probably only makes sense to come here if you have other business in the area (say, if you had your own transport and were heading onto Maliau Basin Conservation Area; p154). If you just want to see some caves, consider a trip to Gunung Mulu National Park (p205) or Niah Caves National Park (p197), both in Sarawak.

Getting There & Away

To reach Batu Punggul/Tataluang, from Kota Kinabalu, take one of seven daily buses to Keningau (RM13, 2½ hours). From Keningau there's no formal transport to Tataluang. Simply ask around in the market area near the Chinese temple where a Land Cruiser/Jeep can be chartered for RM200 to 250 for the three-hour trip to Tataluang.

NORTHWEST SABAH

Heading north from KK, the main road parallels the coast, passing a through a few quiet towns such as Tuaran and Kota Belud. Most of the way, however, the scenery is pastoral, with tiny *kampung* scattered amid rice paddies and palm oil plantations and rice paddies. Eventually, it leads toward the so-called 'Tip of Borneo', at the very end of the Kudat Peninsula, before coming

to rest in the town of Kudat. Those who want to continue north from here can carry on by taking a ferry to the seldom visited island of Pulau Banggi.

The real highlights of northwest Sabah lie offshore: the first is Pulau Mantanani, a perfect tropical island lying about 40km northwest of Kota Belud. The second is Layang Layang, a diving Mecca about 300km northwest of KK. It's basically just an airstrip built on a reef way out in the middle of the South China Sea. Famous for great visibility, seemingly endless wall dives and the occasional school of hammerheads, it is among the best dive sites in Southeast Asia.

TUARAN

☎ 088

Tuaran, 33km from KK, is a bustling little town with tree-lined boulevard-style streets and a distinctive nine-storey **Chinese pagoda**. There's little point stopping in the town itself unless you happen to pass through on Sunday (market day). The main attraction around Tuaran is the Penimbawan Water Village.

Penimbawan Water Village

About 5km north of Tuaran (RM1.5 by minivan or RM20 by taxi) is the tiny *kampung* of Surusup, which overlooks a lovely estuary. From here you can charter a small boat (RM40 return) to the picturesque water village of **Penimbawan**. The trip up the estuary takes about 15 minutes, and the boat will wait while you wander the plankwalks of the village. Your boat driver may accompany you into the village or he may just wait for you in the boat. Needless to say, don't part with your cash until you arrive back in Surusup (and don't be surprised if a few villagers tag along for a free ride).

Sleeping & Eating

Orchid Hotel (☎ 793-789; 4 Jln Teo Teck Ong; r from RM80; 🍽️) Given the town's proximity to KK (with heaps of good accommodation options), you probably won't need to stay here. However, if for some reason you need a room, this simple, somewhat overpriced hotel on the main street should suffice. The rooms are clean, if a bit musty.

Tai Fatt Restaurant (7 Jln Teo Teck Ong; meals from RM3.50; 🍽️ 7am-10pm daily) Next door to the Orchid Hotel, this simple Chinese place does

a good plate of *mee goreng* (RM3.50). The owner speaks English.

Getting There & Away

All northbound buses and minivans from KK pass through Tuaran. The minivan station is in the centre of town. Destinations, fares and times include KK (RM4, 30 minutes) and Kota Belud (RM7, 30 minutes).

KOTA BELUD

☎ 088

You might think Kota Belud isn't much to look at, but every Sunday a huge **tamu** takes place on the outskirts of this small, sleepy town. The market is a congested, colourful and dusty melee of vendors, hagglers, browsers, gawpers and hawkers, all brought together by a slew of everyday goods in a bustle that consumes the whole town each and every week. A smaller version takes place on Wednesday.

A *tamu* is not simply a market where villagers gather to sell their farm produce and to buy manufactured goods from traders; it's also a social occasion where news and stories are exchanged. Sadly tourists now often outnumber buffalo, and the fascinating local Bajau horsemen have mostly moved away from the car park, though some do put on a show for visitors.

Visitors looking for tribal handicrafts and traditional clothing will be disappointed, but the market is certainly lively and you can enjoy a good breakfast here after looking around. The hilly views from the *padang* may also tempt you to stay a while and do some walking away from the Sunday crowds.

Sleeping & Eating

Most people visit Kota Belud as a day trip from KK, since you can make it there and back with plenty of time for the market. One reason to stay overnight here is the stunning view of Mt Kinabalu at first light.

Kota Belud Travelers' Lodge (☎ 977-228; 6 Plaza Kong Guan; dm RM25, r RM60-85; 🍽️) This relatively new guesthouse is clean, simple and well-run. The private rooms have en suite toilets. It's about 200m southwest of the mosque in a shopping block (it's well marked, so finding it shouldn't be a problem).

Bismillah Restaurant (opposite Majlis Daerah Kota Belud; meals from RM3; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This simple Muslim restaurant does good *roti canai* and curries, as well as good tea to wash it

down with. It's opposite the city offices in the centre of town, halfway along a block of wooden shophouses.

Getting There & Away

Minivans and share-taxis gather in front of Pasar Besar, the main market. Most of these serve the Kota Belud to KK route, (RM5, two hours) or Kudat (RM10, two hours), departing between 7am and 5pm. The bus station is in the south of town, near the Shell station.

PULAU MANTANANI

Pulau Mantanani Besar (Big Mantanani Island) and **Pulau Mantanani Kecil** (Little Mantanani Island) are two little flecks of land about 25km off the coast northwest Sabah (about 40km northwest of Kota Belud). Fringed by blinding white sand and covered with coconut trees, the islands are among the most beautiful in all of Borneo. There are healthy coral gardens around both islands, particularly off the east end of Mantanani Kecil. While there are no bommies or walls here, the excellent visibility and health of the coral will impress all but the most jaded divers and snorkellers. Dugongs used to live around the island, but locals say they haven't been spotted for over a year.

There is a small fishing village in the middle of Mantanani Besar and a simple resort on its west side.

Borneo Sea Resort

The **Borneo Sea Resort** (☎ 088-230-000; www.bornsea.com/mantanani; three-day/two-night all-inclusive dive packages from RM1900; 🍽️) is the only place to stay on the island. It sits on a nice private beach at the west end of the island. The bungalows here are quite nice, with tile floors, hot-water showers and bathtubs, large double beds, verandas and air-con. Sea kayaks are available for rent and would allow you to explore the area, but be careful as there are strong currents offshore and you could easily get washed out to sea. The management of the place seem a little offhand and the service is probably not up to much, but if you just want a quiet bungalow and don't need much pampering, you'll probably like this spot.

Getting There & Away

If you're not staying at the resort (which will help arrange private transport to the island), the only other way to get to the island is by taking all-inclusive daytrips to the island

from KK with **Scuba Paradise** (☎ 088-266-695 www.scubaparadiseborneo.com.my; ground fl, Wisma Sabah, Kota Kinabalu). Rates for snorkelling trips are RM380 per person (minimum four people). Rates for diving are RM560 per person (includes equipment rental, minimum four people).

LAYANG LAYANG

A look at a satellite image of Layang Layang is enough to get any diver's heart racing: it's a brilliant 7km-long ring of coral set amid a vast expanse of dark-blue ocean. You just know those coral walls are going to be pristine and swarming with fish. Zooming in on the image, you notice that, incredibly, a landing strip perches on the only bit of land that reaches rises above sea level on the reef. This airstrip serves **Layang Layang Island Resort**, which holds the sole concession to this brilliant diving destination.

Layang Layang (also known as Swallow Reef) is part of the disputed Spratley Group, which China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei and Malaysia have been tussling over for years, due to their undersea oil reserves and healthy stocks of fish. Malaysia staked its claim by building a naval base on Layang Layang. The base, which shares the tiny bit of land on the reef with the resort, is strictly off limits to resort guests.

Diving

As you would guess from its location, the reef here is healthy and diverse. Although it may not be quite as colourful as the reef at Sipidan, it's likely to be one of the healthiest reefs most divers have seen. And the best part is that it just goes on and on, with new surprises waiting up and down its length. The visibility here is usually excellent, sometimes extending to 30 metres or more. While hammerheads are occasionally sighted, it might be better to consider them windfalls, and to concentrate on the reef fish, which are abundant and varied. There are also plenty of reef sharks in attendance, along with a healthy population of rays (mostly devil rays, diamond rays and the occasional manta).

The resort runs the dive centre here, which is staffed by a friendly crew of mostly Malaysian dive masters. They are fairly serious about safety procedures, which is appreciated, since the nearest decompression chamber is 330km away by plane.

Layang Layang is best for advanced divers, and the morning dive here is often to a depth of 40 metres. The diving consists mostly of excellent wall dives, with a few small cave-like diversions. The schedule also usually includes a few blue-water dives, which are specifically to look for hammerheads and other large pelagics.

Your dives are included in your accommodation package at the resort. Equipment rental and instruction are available. All in all, it's a great adventure and one worth taking for a keen diver.

Other Activities

If you're still hungry to see coral and fish after two or three dives a day, you can always do a bit of snorkelling off the reef on the far side of the runway, but be warned that the rocks are slippery and dangerous – let someone know where you're going and when you expect to return and don't go alone. And don't even think about it when waves are rolling in. Remember: you're 300km away from land here.

There's also a good little sand beach at the southern end of the runway, which you can also snorkel off of. It's also good for sunbathing and swimming.

The resort has a very nice pool and deck area, which is where many guests chill out between meals and dives.

Otherwise, the only other activity here is walking or jogging on the long runway beside the resort.

Sleeping & Eating

Layang Layang Island Resort (☎ 03-2162-2877; www.layanglayang.com/our_story.asp; layang@pop.jaring.my) is the only game in town here. The resort is well-run and efficient. It's really all about diving here. We like the way the room blocks empty right out to the dive area: when dive time rolls around, the divers spring from their rooms like airmen going out on a raid. The five daily meals – that's right, five – are scheduled around the diving schedule. The food is generous and fairly tasty, with at least one veggie option at each meal, as well as salads and fruit.

The standard rooms are very comfortable, with air-con, TV, private verandas, hot-water showers and so on. Those near the pool can be noisy if the present crop of divers are a partying lot. Six-day/five-night all-inclusive packages (accommodation, food, diving and tank usage) start at US\$1,260 for single occupancy and US\$1,060 for double

occupancy (rates are per-person). Rates for nondivers start at US\$940/740 single occupancy/double occupancy.

The deluxe (VIP) rooms are available and are very comfortable, but not worth the added price unless you want to be away from the other divers in the main room block.

Getting There & Away

The resort operates its own Antanov 26, which flies every Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Sunday between KK and Layang Layang. The flight over from KK in this bare bones Russian prop plane is a big part of the adventure: it feels more like a military transport than a commercial airliner, and you feel like you're on some sort of James Bond mission to some secret destination. There are only four windows (grab one on the right side on the outward journey if you want to get a glimpse of Mt Kinabalu). The return flight costs US\$256, which is not included in the accommodation/food/dive package.

KUDAT

☎ 088

Kudat is a quiet port town in the very north of Sabah, 190km from KK. The surrounding countryside is home to the friendly Rungus people, tribal cousins of the Kadazan and Duzun, but the town itself displays noticeable Filipino influences, as much of the trade here is with Malaysia's northeastern neighbour.

Kudat itself is fairly unremarkable, but it's got a few good beaches nearby and it serves as the jumping-off point for Pulau Banggi, an island that lies between Borneo and the Philippines.

The town is fairly easy to navigate, with the bus station, jetty, the post office, mosque and colourful Fuk Tek Kung Chinese temple on the west side and the Sedco Shopping Complex on the east side (these are two rows of shophouses). The covered market forms the divide between the two. Everything is in easy walking distance of the bus station.

Information

Maybank (☎ 611-146; Kedai Sedco, Jln Melati) This convenient bank is roughly in the middle of the Sedco Shopping Complex.

Sleeping

Hotel Kinabalu (☎ 613-888; 1243 Jln Melor, Sedco Shopping Complex; s/d RM42/56; 📶) At the west end

of the Sedco Shopping Complex, right next to KFC, you will find this simple and friendly hotel. It's a bit threadbare, but the rooms are good enough for the night.

Hotel Dream Garden (☎ 622-633; Jln Cempaka, Sedco Shopping Complex; s/d RM48/59; 📶) In the middle of the Sedco Shopping Complex, this simple but adequate hotel is similar to the Hotel Kinabalu. It's opposite Maybank.

Ria Hotel (☎ 622-794; 3 Jln Marudu; r RM80-98; 📶 📶) If all hotels were like this, we reckon we'd travel a lot more. The Ria hits all the right notes: clean, spacious, well-appointed rooms, nice bathrooms with hot showers, and little balconies (some with nice views). It's one of the best-value hotels we found in Sabah. We just hope it stays that way. It's a short walk southwest of the bus station.

Upper Deck Hotel (☎ 622-272; Jln Lintas; r RM80-100, ste RM160; 📶) Perched atop the Milimewa Superstore, the well-run and friendly Upper Deck has huge, spartan rooms with air-con and hot-water showers. It's a good hotel, but not quite as nice as the Hotel Ria. It's a short walk southwest of the market.

Eating

Restoran Rakyat (Sedco Shopping Complex; dishes RM1-5; 🕒 24hrs) About halfway along the Sedco Shopping Complex, the Rakyat is a 24-hour Muslim café that serves good rotis and curries.

Restoran Prosperous (Sedco Shopping Complex; meals from RM3; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Roughly opposite the KFC, Restoran Prosperous is a Chinese place that attracts a good group of locals both wealthy and otherwise. You can get a nice *char siu pau* (steamed bun filled with barbecue pork) and a cup of tea here in the morning for RM2.70.

Getting There & Away

The bus station is in Kudat Plaza, which is in the western part of town, very close to the Ria Hotel. Bus destinations include KK (RM20, 3 hours) and Kota Belud (RM15, 90 minutes). Minivans also operate from this station and other points in town.

AROUND KUDAT Beaches

You'll find some of Sabah's best beaches around Kudat, where the water is shallow and safe for paddling. **Pantai Bak Bak**, about 5km from Kudat, is the town beach. It's a

decent, if slightly rocky, beach. To get there from Kudat (if you have a rental car), take the main coastal road out of Kudat (you must go inland a bit to get around the airport, but otherwise hug the coast), following signs for the Tip of Borneo – Pantai Bak Bak is clearly marked off the main coastal road.

A better beach can be found by continuing along past Pantai Bak Bak for about 4km, then taking a right at the fork and driving about 500m through a mangrove swamp to reach **Pasir Putih** (White Sand Beach).

A taxi from Kudat to either of these beaches will cost about RM10 each way.

Rungus Longhouses

The indigenous people of the Kudat area are known as the Rungus people, a subgroup of the Kadazan-Dusun people who are found across Sabah. The Rungus inhabit the Kudat Peninsula and the Pitas Peninsula, on the other side of Marudu Bay. The Rungus are famous for their basketry, beadwork and fine longhouses, which house one extended family, rather than several unrelated families, as is the case with other groups in Borneo.

These days, as with many other indigenous people in Borneo, most of the Rungus have abandoned their longhouses in favour of Malay-style wooden or concrete-brick houses. However, the Rungus maintain two fine **longhouses** (Bavanggazo Rungus Longhouse; ☎ 088-621-971; per person from RM70 per night) in Kampung Bavanggazo, 44km south of Kudat on the Kudat Peninsula.

Make no mistake, these longhouses are set up for display purposes and to attract tourists, but a night here would still be interesting and provides a good chance to interact with Rungus people and learn about their culture. The rates include dinner and breakfast and simple cultural entertainment. You will sleep in a traditional room in the longhouse with insect netting above your bed.

Kampung Bavanggazo is 44km south of Kudat on the north-south highway (look for the milepost reading 'Kudat 44km'). There is a sign off the highway that reads 'Kg. Bavanggazo 'Rungus Longhouse''. Follow this road (Jln Tinangol) down the hill for about 1.5km, cross a bridge and go uphill to the left. You will quickly come to the first longhouse, and the second one is at the top of the hill 800m further on. There is no public transport right to the longhouses. All KK-Kudat

buses and minivans will stop at Kampung Bavanggazo if you ask the driver. A taxi from Kudat will cost around RM50.

Tip of Borneo

About 13km off the main highway leading to Kudat, a long stretch of mostly dirt road leads to the 'Tip of Borneo' (Tanjung Simpang Mengayau), Sabah's northernmost headland. Sabah Tourism has done everything they can to promote this as a tourist attraction. Everything, that is, except pave the road that leads there.

The view from the cape is quite attractive, but it's not really worth the bumpy drive to get there, especially if you don't have a 4WD vehicle. Once you get there, you'll find a parking lot, a monument and a plaque, as well as some steps that lead down to a viewing area. Much more appealing is the 1km arch of white-sand beach called **Pantai Kalamunian** just before (and southwest of) the cape, where you could probably guerrilla camp if you had to.

There's no public transport, so you'll need to negotiate for a taxi from Kudat (around RM50, including waiting time) or drive yourself (we suggest washing the dust off the car before returning it to the rental agency).

PULAU BANGGI

Travellers who want to fall off the map, or, at least get off the tourist trail for a few days, might want to visit the remote island of Pulau Banggi, which lies some 40km northeast of Kudat. There's not much in the way of developed attractions here, and the island is a bit scruffy, but the people are lovely and the setting is beautiful. You can pay locals to take you by boat to explore the reefs and beaches of Banggi and the nearby islands (bring your snorkel).

Accommodation is provided by a small government **rest house** (r RM40) and the modest **Banggi Resort** (☎ 671-495, 019-587-8078; r fan/air-con RM35/55; ♿), which can arrange boat trips and other activities. In addition to rooms, the resort also has small huts with kitchens and twin beds (RM70). This place can get fully booked on weekends, so reserve in advance.

Kudat Express (☎ 328-118; Kudat) runs a ferry between Kudat and the main settlement on Pulau Banggi. It departs the pier (near the Shell station) in Kudat daily at 9am. In the reverse direction, it departs Pulau Banggi daily at 3pm. The fare is RM15.

EAST SABAH

Malaysia's government tourism office touts Sabah as a 'solar-powered theme park'. That makes East Sabah Adventure Land. Behind a veil of palm-oil plantations lurk some of Asia's biggest wild game, oldest, deepest and darkest jungles, flightiest birds (with the priciest nests) and most volatile rivers. Beneath the crystal-clear waters of the east coast are rare turtles, garish reef fish, and sharkskin carpet paths to kaleidoscopic clutches of coral.

As in any good theme park, it's fairly easy to move between the attractions and enjoy them without much special skill or expertise beyond a pair of water-resistant boots or a scuba license. In a week, an independent visitor can see orangutans in Sepilok, seek elephants along Sungai Kinabatangan, spelunk Gomantong or Madai Caves, and survey the depths of Tun Sakaran Marine Park. Sites that require arrangements through specified tour operators – Tabin Reserve, Maliau Basin and Danum Valley – richly merit their special status; investing the time and money to visit usually pays off with an extraordinary experience.

SANDAKAN

☎ 089 / pop 450,000

Once boasting the world's greatest concentration of millionaires (it's claimed), Sandakan still holds its own in the league tables thanks to bird's nest, fish and palm oil. The town has riches for tourists, too. It's the gateway to East Sabah's natural treasures and boasts some stellar attractions between its green hills and picturesque bay.

Downtown Sandakan was once dominated by busy docks by day and shuttered shops at night. But the wharves have moved to the outskirts of town, paving the way for waterfront redevelopment, including a new market and a nascent nightlife hub. The hottest action after dark is still in the nearby suburbs, a bus or taxi ride away.

History

Exotic luxury products such as beeswax, birds' nests and pearls put Sandakan on the map with ancient traders from as far away as China, but timber built the foundation for its settlement and prosperity. Logs from Sandakan are found in Beijing's Temple of Heaven.

Once ruled by the southern Philippines' sultan of Sulu, Scottish gunrunner William Clarke Cowie and the British Resident William Pryer brought Sandakan under the sway of the North Borneo Chartered Company from the 1870s. Declared capital of British North Borneo in 1883, Sandakan enjoyed modern developments such as telegraph service to London and paved streets before Hong Kong or Singapore. Allied bombing and Japanese retaliation in 1945 virtually destroyed the town, and in 1946 the capital was moved to the equally devastated Jesselton, now called Kota Kinabalu.

Orientation

Nature and town planners have conspired to make Sandakan easy for visitors to navigate. The centre of town is couple dozen blocks, most of it landfill squashed between the waterfront and a steep escarpment overlooking the bay.

Leave it to the bureaucrats to throw a spanner into this happy circumstance. Streets are numbered Jln Dua (Second Street) and Lebu Tiga (Third Avenue), with the occasional Lorong (Lg, lane) tossed in. Simple enough, but addresses are often based on the street lot, which may be identified with a different street than the one the building fronts. Moreover, no one in town distinguishes between the three categories and calls every road Jln. Fortunately, even if you have to look all over town, it's not a long walk.

Like many Malaysian towns, Sandakan has suburbs and outlying areas extending considerable distances down the main highway, denoted by their distance from the centre, eg Batu 1 (Mile 1). Express buses to Kota Kinabalu and other destinations leave from the long-distance bus station at Batu 2½, 4km north of the town centre.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

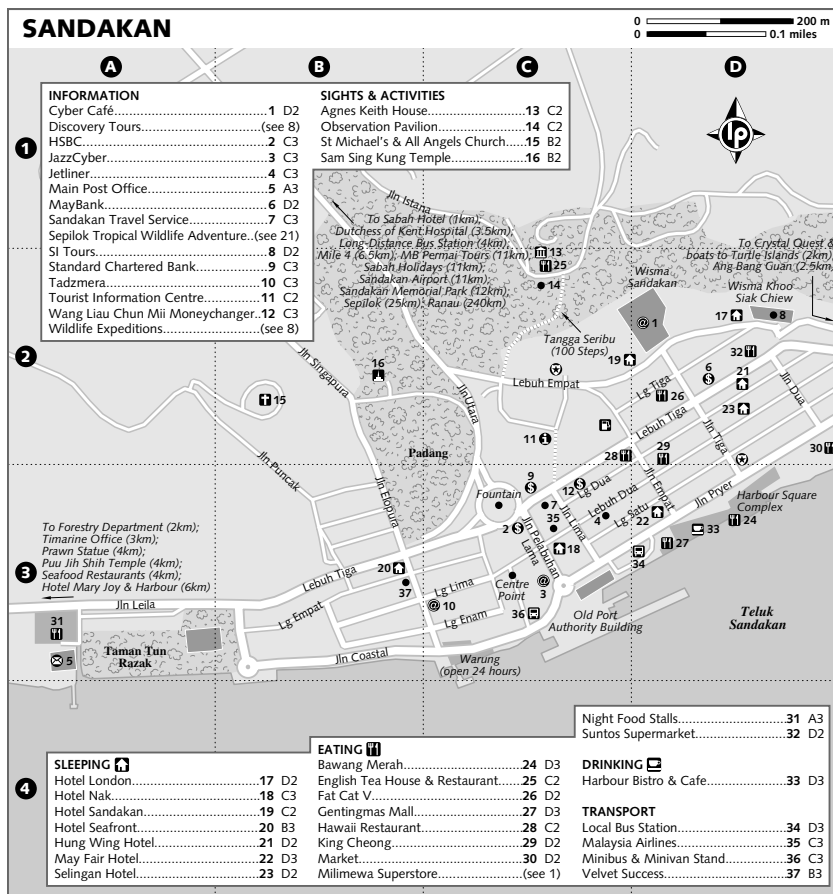
Cyber Café (3rd fl, Wisma Sandakan, Lebu Empat; per hr RM3; ☎ 9am-9pm)

JazzCyber (1st fl, Centre Point, Jln Pelabuhan Lama; per hr RM4; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Sat, 9am-7pm Sun)

Tadzmera (Jln Elopura cnr Lg Lima) Mediocre Malay restaurant with free wi-fi from 2 to 5pm and 9pm to 6am.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Duchess of Kent Hospital (☎ 219-460; Mile 2, Jln Utara)

**MONEY****HSBC** (Lebuh Tiga)**MayBank** (Lebuh Tiga) In addition to full-service bank and ATM, a sidewalk currency-exchange window is open 9am to 5pm daily, changing cash and traveller checks.**Standard Chartered Bank** (Lebuh Tiga)**Wang Liau Chun Mii Moneychanger** (Tung Seng Huat, 23 Lebuh Tiga; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) Cash only.**POST****Main post office** (☎ 210-594; Jln Leila)**TOURIST INFORMATION****Forestry Department** (☎ 213-966; 2nd fl, Jln Leila, next to UMW Toyota, 2km west of main post office) Get permits for the mangrove forest walk to Sepilok Bay (see p140).**Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 229-751; pempt.

j.mps@sabah.gov.my; Wisma Warisan; ☎ 8am-12.30pm & 1.30-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 8-11.30am & 2-4.30pm Friday) Located opposite the municipal offices (known as MPS) and up the stairs from Lebuh Tiga. Dedicated, garrulous staff are extremely helpful, dispensing advice on everything from regional attractions to local restaurants and can also hook up travellers for group excursions.

TRAVEL AGENCIES**Sandakan Travel Service** (☎ 218-112; skantrvl@steamyx.com; Lebuh Tiga, opposite Standard Chartered Bank) Accommodating, English-speaking help for domestic and overseas flights.**Jetliner** (☎ 222-737; Lebuh Dua) Official Air Asia/MAS sales agent.**Sight & Activities**The tourist office's *Sandakan Heritage Trail* brochure maps out a waking tour of significant historical sites.**TEMPLES & CHURCH****Puu Jih Shih Temple**, 4km west of the town centre, is a large Buddhist temple perched on a steep hill overlooking Teluk Sandakan. Take a bus to Tanah Merah and ask for directions. Closer to the centre of town, the **Sam Sing Kung Temple** dates from 1887 and fronts the municipal *padang*. Granite blocks weighing 64kg each for nearby **St Michael's & All Angels Church** (off Jln Puncak) were delivered by prison labour paid a dollar per cubic metre; no surprise this 1888 church is one of the few stone buildings in Borneo.**AGNES KEITH HOUSE**On a hill overlooking town and Sandakan bay, **Agnes Keith House** (Jln Istana; admission RM15; ☎ 9am-5pm) is a trip back to Sandakan's colonial heyday. Keith was an American who came to Sandakan in the 1930s with her British husband, appointed Conservator of Forests (bring him back!), and wrote several books about her experiences, mostly famously *The Land Below the Wind*. The Keiths' two-storey wooden villa was destroyed during World War II and rebuilt identically when they returned in 1946. The house fell into disrepair during the 1990s, but Sabah Museum restored it as a faithful recreation of Keith's original abode.The villa documents Sandakan in all its colonial splendour, with detailed displays on the lives of the Keiths. Most poignant are mementos of Agnes' imprisonment by the Japanese during WWII, caring for her young son under brutal conditions. Her book, *Three Came Home*, recounts those years. The admission price includes entry to the various branches of the Sabah Museum in KK, so keep hold of your ticket.During and after museum hours, **English Tea House & Restaurant** (☎ 222-544; www.englishteahouse.org; 2002 Jln Istana; mains RM17-33; ☎ lunch & dinner) offers recherché colonial atmosphere and elegant food, conveniently ignoring Keith's US background and her complaint that Sandakan was 'too British'. The exquisitely restored restaurant's manicured gardens with rattan furniture and a small croquet lawn overlooking the bay are perfect for afternoon tea (RM17.25) or a gin and tonic sundowner.To reach the museum, follow Jln Singapura and turn right up the hill, or head up the shady Tangga Seribu (translated as 100 Steps, even though *seribu* means 1000) to Jln Residenzi Drive and turn left. Just below the museum garden is an **observation pavilion** built by the local Rotary Club, offering more fine views.**SANDAKAN MEMORIAL PARK**Now just a quiet patch of woods, **Sandakan Memorial Park** (Taman Peringatan; admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm) was the site of a Japanese POW camp and starting point for the infamous 'death marches' to Ranau. Of the 1800 Australian and 600 British troops imprisoned here, the only survivors by July 1945 were six Australian escapees. Sandakan accounted for more Australian deaths, one-eighth of Australia's total casualties in the Pacific, than the more infamous building of the Burma Railway.

Large, rusting machines testify to the camp's forced-labour programme, and a pavilion at the centre of park includes accounts from survivors and photographs from personnel, inmates and liberators. In 2006 the original march route was officially reopened as a memorial trail – see www.sandakan-deathmarch.com for details.

To reach the park, take any Batu 8 or higher bus (RM1.50); get off at the 'Taman Rimba' signpost and walk down Jln Rimba. A taxi from downtown runs about RM15.

Tours

Sandakan has many local and regional tour operators offering packages to Sungai Kinabatangan, Gomantong Caves, Turtle Islands National Park and beyond. Hotels in Sandakan and Sepilok can arrange tours, as can agents in KK. Keep in mind that it's possible to visit many attractions independently, and in some cases, such as Sepilok Orang-Utan Rehabilitation Centre, preferable. Also note that tour prices differ massively, sometimes due to dormitory versus room accommodation, sometimes for no good reason at all, so shop around. (If you need more tour operator names, read guides' polo shirts at Sepilok.) For locations that have designated franchisees, such as Turtle Island and Danum Valley, buying direct will mean the lowest price.

Discovery Tours (☎ 274-106; www.discoverytours.com.my; 9th fl, Wisma Khoo Siak Chiew, Lebuh Empat)

THE SANDAKAN DEATH MARCHES

Sandakan was the site of a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp during WWII, and in September 1944 there were 1800 Australian and 600 British troops interned here. What is probably not widely known is that more Australians died here than during the building of the infamous Burma Railway.

Early in the war, food and conditions were bearable, and the death rate was around three per month. But as the Allies closed in near the end of the war, it became clear to the officers in command that they didn't have enough staff to guard against a rebellion in the camps. They decided to cut the prisoners' rations to weaken them; disease spread and the death rate began to rise.

It was also decided to move the prisoners inland – 250km through the jungle to Ranau. On 28 January 1945, 470 prisoners set off; 313 made it to Ranau. On the second march, 570 started from Sandakan; just 118 reached Ranau. The third march consisted of the last men in the camp and numbered 537. Conditions on the marches were deplorable: many men had no boots, rations were less than minimal and many fell by the wayside; the Japanese disposed of any prisoners who couldn't walk. Once in Ranau, the surviving prisoners were put to work carrying 20kg sacks of rice over hilly country to Paginatan, 40km away. Disease and starvation took a horrendous toll, and by the end of July 1945 there were no prisoners left in Ranau. The only survivors from the 2400 at Sandakan were six Australians who had escaped, either from Ranau or during the marches.

MB Permai Tours (☎ /fax 671-535; 1st fl, Sandakan Airport) Tours and car rental from RM100 per day (4WD from RM350).

Sabah Holidays (☎ 671-718; www.sabahholidays.com; ground fl, Sandakan Airport) Tours, rental cars and minivans, with a branch in KK.

Sepilok Tropical Wildlife Adventure (☎ 271-077; www.stwadventure.com; 13 Lebuhi Tiga) Midpriced tour specialist. Owners of Sepilok Jungle Resort and Bilit Adventure Lodge on Sungai Kinabatangan.

SI Tours (☎ 213-502; www.sitoursborneo.com; 10th fl, Wisma Khoo Siak Chiew, Lebuhi Empat) This full-service agency opened Abai Jungle Resort in December 2006 as a base for Kinabatangan tours. Also has an airport branch.

Wildlife Expeditions (☎ 219-616; www.wildlife-expeditions.com; 9th fl, Wisma Khoo Siak Chiew, Lebuhi Empat) Tour menu includes its Sukau River Lodge on the Kinabatangan. Has a KK office.

Sleeping

BUDGET & MIDRANGE

Sandakan's nascent urban renaissance has prompted a boomlet in hotels straddling the budget-midrange divide around RM60. All rooms quoted have private bathrooms with hot water.

☎ **May Fair Hotel** (☎ 219-855; 24 Jln Pryer; s/d RM40/50; ☎) This budget classic's large, tidy rooms include their own big TV and DVD player with a massive library of movies available free in the lobby, and a comfy chair to watch them from. Gruff but helpful owner Mr Lum knows where to find things and how to get virtually anything done around

town. Call ahead for bookings to avoid getting shut out.

☎ **Selingan Hotel** (☎ 227-733; fax 221-001; 14 Lebuhi Dua; s/d/RM50/60/80; ☎) Best of the other budget choices honeycombed around downtown, Selingan has fresh, well-appointed rooms with attractive bedding. Good alternative if the May Fair is full.

☎ **Hotel Mary Joy** (☎ 617-788; Jln Pelabuhan; RM50; ☎) Has small, clean rooms just outside the harbour gate, above a *kedai kopi*. Suitable for travellers who want to wake up near the morning boat.

☎ **Hotel London** (☎ 219-855; www.hlondon.com.my; 10 Lebuhi Empat; s/d/t incl breakfast 55/65/75; ☎) Renovated up from its shoestrings roots, rooms are bright and comfortable. Guests love the rooftop sitting area overlooking the harbour where breakfast is served.

☎ **Hotel Seafont** (☎ 222-233; www.seafont.com.my; cnr Lg Empat & Jln Elopura; r RM59-95; ☎) Among the newest and absolutely the swishest of budget to midrange options, located west of the Municipal Padang, though some rooms run boxy. There's 24-hour internet in the lobby, and once you're up, a clutch of bars and all-night *warung* (small eating stalls) nearby.

☎ **Hung Wing Hotel** (☎ 218-855; hungwing@yahoo.com.my; Lot 4, 13 Lebuhi Tiga; r incl breakfast RM61-82; ☎) Hung Wing has comfortable decor, big shower-heads, and friendly staff as happy to greet tourists as its usual business traveller clientele. Rooms get smaller and cheaper as

you climb the stairs, if you'd rather spend calories than money.

☎ **Hotel Nak** (☎ 272-988; www.nakhotel.com; Jln Pelabuhan Lama; r incl breakfast RM75-125, ste RM150; ☎) Behind a 1960s kitschy concrete facade, a 2007 renovation has made this downtown stalwart far less nak-ered. Cheapest rooms run small but the upper ranges include sea view, refrigerator and lots of space.

TOP END

☎ **Hotel Sandakan** (☎ 221-122; www.hotelsandakan.com.my; Lebuhi Empat; r incl breakfast RM220-240, ste RM280-330; ☎) A three-star establishment offering comfortable but characterless Western-style rooms. There's a refreshing lack of attitude among staff and expect frequent discounts.

☎ **Sabah Hotel** (☎ 213-299; www.sabahhotel.com.my; Km 1, Jln Utara; r RM253-368, ste from 575; ☎) Set in quiet gardens and brimming with facilities, including a playground for kids and a cruisey pub for grownups, Sabah's a favourite with Sepilok tour groups and Malaysia Airlines crew. Rooms meet or exceed international standards. The only knock is a location that's a tad too far for walking downtown but well-short of the more happening suburbs.

Eating

The new **market** on the waterfront at the eastern edge of the town centre is great for cheap breakfast or lunch. Raw food at ground level includes the only unadulterated ground coffee in town. Upstairs find strictly halal food stalls, with a mix of Chinese and Malay on the next level. A couple of ringgit buys a decent meal plus a view of the bay. Most stalls here close by midafternoon. **Night food stalls** set up outside the post office, and there are **Malay warung** operating 24 hours on Jln Coastal.

Sandakan is renowned for authentic southern Chinese food. Most downtown Chinese *kedai kopi* shut down by late afternoon. You can also get a fix day or night at Mile 4, a hub of two-storey shops with restaurants, bars, karaoke lounges and nightclubs.

Appropriate for one of Malaysia's largest fishing ports, seafood is another Sandakan speciality. Ask around for the latest hot tips, or simply take a Pasir Putih minivan from the Centre Point terminal to the giant prawn statue about 4km west of town. Dishes are usually sold by weight, so go in a group. Expect a fish feast to set you back at least RM30.

☎ **King Cheong** (34 Lebuhi Dua; dishes RM2-12; ☎) breakfast, lunch) The clatter of dim-sum carts and chatter of local merchant diners make it seem like Hong Kong. Menus on the wall are in Chinese, but feel free to point at what you see on other plates, and check the daily specials steaming in the back.

☎ **Fat Cat V** (☎ 216-867; 21 Lebuhi Tiga; dishes RM3-10; ☎) lunch & dinner) This local chain flagship has an air-conditioned dining room with a broad menu of Malay, Chinese and Western food. Stop in its bakery to take home breakfast or a late snack. Fat Cat is surrounded by a nightlife node of fast food places open past 9pm.

☎ **Bawang Merah** (Harbour Sq Complex; dishes RM4.50-5.50; ☎) lunch & dinner) Within weeks of its December 2006 opening, this Malay fast-food joint's tables along the new waterfront promenade were packed. Most of the diners had their backs to the bay, focused on the big-screen TV showing football matches or soap operas, but for Sandakan it's still café society.

☎ **Hawaii Restaurant** (☎ 273-107; City View Hotel, 23 Lebuhi Tiga; dishes RM4.50-25; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) There's nothing Hawaiian about this simple City View Hotel lobby restaurant except its enduring popularity. It packs in Western tourists for its value menu featuring huge Malay and Chinese dishes for RM5, while Asians gravitate towards its pricey steaks and chops.

☎ **Ang Bang Guan** (☎ 213-854; Jln Buli Sim Sim; mains from RM15; ☎) lunch & dinner) Just east of downtown, next to Sandakan's main mosque, Ang Bang Guan is a tasteful and tasty take on Chinese seafood.

Even tourist business types say **Ocean King Seafood Restaurant** (☎ 618111; Batu 2.5, Jln Batu Sapi; dishes RM10-25; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) has gotten too touristy. **Ban Chuan Lee** (☎ 016-826-7989, Batu 2, Jln Batu Sapi; meals RM45; ☎) dinner) in the big wooden house near the prawn statue is a sophisticated alternative.

Self-caterers have some options:

☎ **Gentingmas Mall** (☎ 210-010; 26 Jln Pryer)

☎ **Milimewa Superstore** (☎ 235-021; Centre Point, Jln Pelabuhan Lama)

☎ **Suntos Supermarket** (cnr Lebuhi Tiga & Jln Dua)

Drinking & Entertainment

Sandakan's downtown revival plans include ramping up nightlife. Currently, there are a couple of beer bars along Lebuhi Tiga and a few joints off Jln Elopura. The Harbour Sq development is creating a fresh centre for

evening activities. In addition to fast-food restaurants, **Harbour Bistro & Cafe** (☎ 235-315; Harbour Sq) offers alfresco dining, coffee and drinks, with an air-conditioned upper-level lodge, open after dark to the wee hours.

Most of the evening action is still out at Bandar Indah, commonly known as Mile 4, 6.5km north of town by taxi. This hub of two-storey shops with restaurants, bars, karaoke lounges and nightclubs attracts expats and locals. Bars generally close around 1am or 2am, music venues slightly later.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Malaysia Airlines (☎ 273-966; cnr Jln Pelabuhan Lama & Lebuah Dua) Has several daily flights to KK, including one connecting to KL.

Air Asia (☎ 222-737; Jetliner, Lebuah Dua) flies daily direct to KL and KK, and three times weekly to Johor Bahru, with frequent promotional fares below RM100.

MASwings (☎ 1-300-883000) serves Tawau and KK daily, plus Kudat three times weekly.

BOAT

Two companies each run twice-weekly passenger ferries between Sandakan and Zamboanga in the Philippines. **Velvet Success** (☎ 212-872; New Sabah Hotel, Jln Elopura) has fast ferries (economy/1st class RM250/265; 13 hours) via Bongao and Jolo, departing at 6am. **Timarine** (☎ 224-009; Batu 1.5, Jln Leila, Bandar Ramai-Ramai) has evening boats (tickets RM250 to 360; 22 hours). Take a Pasir Putih bus (RM1) to its office.

Boats leave from the harbour, about 6km west of town. Take a Batu Sapi minivan from the terminal behind Centre Point (RM3), or pay about RM15 by taxi.

BUS

Buses to KK, Lahad Datu, Semporna and Tawau leave from the long-distance bus station in a large parking lot at Batu 2.5, 4km north of town, not a particularly convenient location. Most buses, and all minivans, leave in the morning. Get the latest schedule from hotels or the tourist office. To reach the bus station, catch a local bus (RM1) from the stand at the waterfront. A taxi from the station to town is around RM10.

Bus companies have booths at the station and touts abound. Most express buses to KK (RM40, six hours) leave between 7.30am and 2pm, with a couple of evening departures.

All pass the turn-off to Kinabalu National Park headquarters (RM30).

Buses depart regularly for Lahad Datu (RM20, 2½ hours) and Tawau (RM30, 5½ hours). There's also a bus to Semporna (RM30, 5½ hours) at 8am. If you miss it, head to Lahad Datu, then catch a frequent minivan to Semporna.

Minivans depart throughout the morning from Batu 2.5 for Ranau (RM24, four hours), and Lahad Datu, some continuing to Tawau. Minivans for Sukau (RM15) leave from a lot behind Centre Point Mall in town.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The airport is about 11km from downtown. The Batu 7 Airport bus (RM1.50) stops on the main road about 500m from the terminal. A coupon taxi from the airport to the town centre costs RM22; going the other way, a taxi should cost around RM20.

BUS & MINIVAN

The local bus terminal is on Jln Pryer, in front of Gentingmas Mall. Buses run 6am to about 6pm on the main road to the north, Jln Utara, designated by how far from town they go, ie Batu 8. Fares range from RM1 to RM4.

Local minivans wait behind Centre Point Mall, fares from RM2. Use them for Pasir Putih seafood restaurants and the harbour area.

TAXI

Taxis cruise the town centre, and park near main hotels. Many hotels will steer you toward a preferred driver, not a bad thing. Short journeys around the town centre should cost RM5, and a trip out to Sepilok is RM35.

SEPILOK ORANG-UTAN REHABILITATION CENTRE

☎ 089

With up to 800 visitors daily, Sepilok Orang-Utan Rehabilitation Centre (SORC) is the most popular place on earth to see Asia's great ape in its native habitat, and second only to Mt Kinabalu as Sabah's favourite tourist attraction. Founded in 1964, SORC occupies a 40 sq km corner of the Kabili-Sepilok rainforest reserve about 25km north of Sandakan.

The reason for its popularity is the abundantly endearing orangutan, humankind's closest redheaded cousin. Whether scamping along a rope hand to foot while eating a banana or gazing with moist soulful brown eyes, orangutans are charmers, though humans' affection and interest has proven something of a fatal attraction.

Once ranging across Southeast Asia, orangutans are now found only on the islands of Borneo and Sumatra (see p146). Even here, they are severely endangered due to destruction of their rainforest habitat; the days when an orangutan could swing from tree to tree from one side of Borneo to the other without touching the ground are long gone. They're also coveted as pets and victimised when forests burn. The latest research estimates perhaps as few as 15,000 orangutans are left in the wild, compared with 250,000 a century ago.

Orphaned and injured orangutans, as well as rescued pets, are brought to Sepilok to be rehabilitated for return to forest life. The centre has successfully handled hundreds of apes, and may have about 100 on site at any time in various stages of training. Once they've had medical checks and basic training in climbing and diet in enclosures, the trainees are released into Sepilok's forest.

To keep tabs on them and supplement their diets as needed, rangers feed the orangutans on a platform in the forest, about 10 minutes' walk from the centre. The number of orangutans turning up for feedings varies from a handful to perhaps a dozen. More trees fruiting in the forest means fewer apes looking for handouts. Females returned to the wild often take advantage of the feedings when they're pregnant or nursing. Macaques show up for scraps.

For some visitors, taking the stroll over a wooden walkway into the jungle and seeing an orangutan's precious antics or simply looking one in the eye just a few metres away is the ultimate wildlife encounter. But you don't have to believe it's not a real adventure unless you're neck-deep in mud and mosquitoes after days of bounding over dirt tracks to find Sepilok too civilised. The ease of the journey and sightings suggest a false alarm about the orangutans' critically endangered status. With visitors often outnumbering apes, the constant click of cameras and camera-phones and the suburban location also contribute to feeling that you're not really seeing orangutans in the

wild. But watching these redheaded, soulful acrobats is habit-forming, so let Sepilok be the springboard to further encounters, whether trekking in the reserve (see p140), or travelling to other habitats.

Information

Feedings are usually at 10am and 3pm. Schedules are posted at the **visitor reception centre** (☎ 531-180; soutan@po.jaring.my; admission RM30, camera fee RM10; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-4pm). Tickets are now valid for one day only; in the past, tickets entitled buyers to a pair of feedings, so afternoon arrivals could revisit the next morning on the same ticket. Far more annoying than this (reasonable) change in policy are park staff's angry denials of the change. The feeding platform is short jaunt by over a wooden walkway.

A worthwhile 25-minute video about Sepilok's work is shown five-times daily opposite reception in the **Nature Education Centre** auditorium. The exhibition area there has informative displays on conservation issues threatening Borneo's jungle habitats, orangutans and other wildlife in the reserve including SORC's Sumatran rhino-breeding programme – not open to the public (see www.sosrhino.org). The whole centre closes for lunch from noon (11am on Fridays), though ticket holders can still hike the walking trails.

Use the lockers provided for your valuables – orangutans and macaques have been known to relieve tourists of hats, bags, sunglasses, cameras and even clothing. It's especially important that you don't bring any containers of insect repellent into the reserve, as these are highly toxic to the apes and other wildlife. Spray yourself before entering.

SORC is supported by a UK-based charity, and its orangutan adoption scheme is a particular hit with visitors: for UK£25 a year you can sponsor a ginger bundle of fun and receive updates on its progress. For details, pick up a leaflet or contact **Sepilok Orang-Utan Appeal UK** (www.orangutan-appeal.org.uk). If you're really taken with the place Sepilok has one of the most popular overseas volunteer programmes in Malaysia. Apply through **Travellers Worldwide** (www.travellersworldwide.com).

The **Rainforest Discovery Centre** (RDC; ☎ 533-780; admission RM5; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri; ticket window closed 12.30-2pm Mon-Thu, 11.30am-2pm Fri), about 1.5km from SORC, offers an engaging graduate-level education in tropical flora

and fauna. Outside the exhibit hall, a botanical garden presents samples of every tropical plant you've heard of and dozens more you haven't, with the accompanying descriptions every bit as vibrant as the foliage, plus a 1km lakeside walking-trail. It's perfect for a lunch break between SORC feedings; for now, the food's strictly BYO.

Walks

Sepilok's **walking trails** (☎ 9am-4.15pm) are a reminder that, although SORC is on the outskirts of the city, it's at the edge of the rainforest. Trails range from 250m to 4km, and different paths are open at different times of year. Register at the visitor reception centre to use them. Guided night-walks may be arranged through the centre or some lodges.

There's also a 10km trail through mangrove forest to **Sepilok Bay**. A permit from the **Forestry Department** (☎ 213-966; Jln Leila, Sandakan) is required in advance for this route. The department can also arrange basic overnight accommodations at the bay (RM100) or a boat back to Sandakan (RM150). Some travel or tour agencies can assist with the permit and other arrangements.

As circusy as the SORC feeding platform sometimes appears, don't forget it's a jungle out there. Flying squirrel, green snake, gibbon and dozens more species have been spotted beyond the feeding platform. Orangutans are not usually aggressive, but every creature encountered on the trail is a *wild* animal. Food is likely to attract them, and, when it does, few will take no for an answer.

For any walk, carry plenty of water, and cover as much skin as you can bear in the heat to fend off the opportunistic leeches and mosquitoes.

Sleeping & Eating

There's plenty of accommodation in Sepilok, but none that's a great venue with great value (Several places tick one box.) Unless you're already in Sepilok and going to SORC in the morning, there's no reason to stay over, and even then, Sepilok is easy enough to reach from Sandakan. Aside from restoring the 'two feedings' ticket policy to encourage afternoon arrivals to spend the night, Sepilok desperately needs a night-time attraction. Even the store that sells beer closes at 6pm.

Hotels are scattered along Jln Sepilok, the 2.5km access road to the rehabilitation centre,

and just off it. Rates include breakfast, there's a restaurant on premises at each, and all can arrange transport, local walks and tours to Sungai Kinabatangan and the Turtle Islands.

Sepilok Jungle Resort (☎ 533-031; www.sepilokjungleresort.com; dm RM20, r RM50-130; ☎ ☑) Everyone seems to stay here but it's hard to see why. Standard rooms are musty, and staff are indifferent, except to steering guests to better kept, higher-priced digs. Perhaps some find the concrete-swathed gardens or snarls of 50kg unchained guard dogs beguiling.

Sepilok Resthouse (☎ 534-900; sephse@tm.net.my; dm RM20, r RM50-130; ☎ ☑) Ideally situated right outside the SORC gate, this house is usually full of centre volunteers and staff. Even with vacancies, staff lack enthusiasm for walk-in visitors. If you do stay, you'll get the inside scoop on the centre.

Sepilok B&B (☎ 534-050; www.sepilokbednbreakfast.com; Jln Arboretum; dm RM22, r RM40-85; ☎ ☑) Dorms and budget rooms are recently renovated with pastel decor and bamboo accents at this welcoming inn. The deluxe rooms accommodate up to four people. The drawback is location, about 1km from SORC, but you can rent a bike (per day RM3) and pedal.

Uncle Tan's B&B (☎ 531-639; www.uncletan.com; Mile 16, Jln Gum Gum; dm RM25) Stay in Sepilok or Sandakan? The best answer might just be neither. This Kinabatangan jungle camp operator's simple bed and breakfast, about 5km from SORC, provides transport for feedings and three meals a day. Uncle Tan's family lives here: some visitors relish the collegial, fan-cooled atmosphere while others find it lacks privacy.

Labuk B&B (☎ 533-190; labukbb@tm.net.my; Mile 14, Jln Rambutan; r RM65-78; chalet RM150-500; ☎ ☑) Formerly in a ramshackle house beside the main road, Labuk B&B has been relocated in hillside gardens overlooking a river, repriced and is being rebranded as Sepilok Forest Edge Resort. Rooms – some with shared baths – are ordinary, but all-wood chalets with terraces overlooking greenery and touches such as an antique-style coat rack pack loads of charm.

Sepilok Nature Resort (☎ 535-001; http://sepilok.com; r RM200; ☎ ☑) An oasis of sophistication on the jungle's edge, run by very exclusive Pulau Sipadan Resort and Tours. Rattan-accented chalets are luxuriously furnished and have private verandas overlooking scrumptious gardens. The restaurant boasts Sepilok's finest wine list.

SORC cafeteria (meals from RM4; ☎ 7am-4.30pm) Serves breakfast, sandwiches, noodle and rice dishes, snacks and drinks. Runs out of all when busy. Souvenirs sold adjacent to the seating.

Mah Fung Enterprise, a small store opposite the Sepilok B&B turn-off, sells basic provisions, including beer, and closes promptly at 6pm.

Getting There & Away

To get directly to the rehabilitation centre from Sandakan, look for the blue bus marked 'Sepilok Batu 14' (RM3.50, 30 minutes) from the local bus terminus on Jln Pryer. Minivans also make the trip every hour or so from behind Centre Point. Final return bus for Sandakan leaves at 4.30pm.

Regular buses, Batu 14 or higher, drop passengers at the turn-off to Jln Sepilok, 2.5km from the orangutan centre. Taxis wait to take you to a hotel or SORC (or both) for RM2.

Hotels can arrange transport to/from the long distance bus station and the airport. A taxi should cost around RM30 one way.

LABUK BAY PROBOSCIS MONKEY SANCTUARY

Proboscis monkeys (*Nasalis larvatus*) are an even more exclusive attraction than orangutans. After all, you can see orangutans in Sumatra but the proboscis is found only on Borneo. These reddish-brown primates, one of nine totally protected species in Sabah, can grow to 72cm with a tail almost as long, and they can weigh up 24kg. Named for their long bulbous noses, proboscis monkeys are also pot-bellied with white faces, and the males are constantly, unmistakably, aroused. With the arrival of Europeans, Malays nicknamed the proboscis *monyet belanda* (Dutch monkey).

An ecofriendly plantation owner has created a private **proboscis monkey sanctuary** (☎ 672-133; www.proboscis.cc; admission RM60, camera fee RM10), serving up sugar-free pancakes at 11.30am and 4.30pm to tempt the local *cognose-centi*. Around 70 proboscis monkeys visit the feeding area regularly. These are divided into two family groups and one bachelor troop. The two family groups never get on the same platform, and rangers find it best to feed each at different times. An estimated 300 completely wild monkeys live in the 600-hectare reserve. Animals in the reserve generally steer clear of human contact,

except for macaques, regular scavengers at feedings, and a house otter.

The sanctuary offers package trips. A half-day visit costs RM160, including transfers from Sandakan (RM150 from Sepilok). Overnight trips with meals and a night walk start at RM250. Food and accommodation are provided at the Nipah Lodge, on the edge of the oil-palm plantations that surround the sanctuary. You can arrange to be dropped at Sepilok after the visit. Independent travel here is difficult; it's 15km down a rough dirt track off the main highway. A taxi from Sandakan costs around RM150 return.

TURTLE ISLANDS NATIONAL PARK

This national park, a trio of island within swimming distance of the Philippines and 40km north of Sandakan, protects nesting areas of two endangered species of sea turtles. The green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) and the smaller hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) lay eggs on the islands year-round. For green turtles, peak season runs July to October on Pulau Selingan and Pulau Bakungan Kecil. For the hawksbill, it's February to April on Pulau Gulisan.

The green turtle can live for more than a century and grow to 160kg and are endangered due to their eggs, which are considered a delicacy. Egg theft has already significantly diminished populations. The hunters say their fathers and grandfathers took eggs and the turtles are still here, without realising that the three generations of humans have been taking eggs from a single generation of turtles and eating the next one. The turtles are also hunted for meat, ironic, since the green turtle is the only sea turtle with a strictly vegetarian diet.

The park is part of the conservation effort, turning three key laying sites into protected hatcheries. After an offshore liaison, females come ashore, dig trenches in the sand and lay dozens of eggs, commonly 50 to 80, but sometimes as many as 200. They bury the golf ball-size eggs and return to the water. In the park, the eggs are uncovered and collected by rangers. They're taken to a hatchery to protect them not just from poachers but monitor lizards and other natural predators. In about 60 days, the hatchlings break out of their shells and are herded to the water. More than 100,000 take the plunge every year, and less than 5 percent reach adulthood, according to experts.

Visiting Turtle Islands is by organised overnight tour only. Many agents sell the tour packages, at a wide range of prices, but **Crystal Quest** (☎ 089-212-711; cquest@tm.net.my; Jln Buli Sim Sim, Sandakan) is the franchise operator and will give the best deal. Packages starting from RM240 per person with shared bathroom and RM265 with private bath include meals, air-con chalet accommodation on Pulau Selingan and speedboat transfers. Those prices exclude the RM10 park fee and RM10 camera fee. Places are strictly limited and tour companies often make block reservations, so book ahead. Even if tours are fully booked, it can be worthwhile to show up at the Crystal Quest office ahead of the 9.30am departure for last-minute cancellations.

Turtles don't come ashore until around 8pm, so you'll have plenty of time to enjoy the tropical beach. Bring swimming and snorkelling gear, and a book or two. There's a small **information centre** (☎ 6.30-9pm) to help you get up to speed on turtles as arrival time nears.

You may be thrilled or appalled with the wildlife experience. Some nights there may be just a single turtle on the beach with up to 30 people crowding around. Cameras are allowed but flash photography is prohibited (it disorients turtles and hatchlings, who use moonlight to locate the sea). But there's always someone who can't properly disable their camera's flash. The passing of hatchlings around to visitors by park staff seems even more risky than camera mishaps. The good news is that visits here help finance the turtle conservation programme, and experts say it's working.

Transport to the islands is from the wharf on Jln Buli Sim Sim, a 10-minute walk east of Sandakan's centre. The bumpy trip to Selingan takes about an hour, and seas are roughest during the rainy season, October to February.

GOMANTONG CAVES

If you ate birds-nest soup in a Hong Kong restaurant in the 1890s, chances are the nest came for Gomantong Caves. Today, these limestone caves remain Sabah's most famous source of the swiftlet nests used for birds-nest soup, Chinese medicines, and other luxury products. But other caves producing these coveted clumps of swiftlet saliva are far easier for independent travellers to visit.

The most prized white nests of these small birds can sell for as much as RM2000 per kilogram. That explains why villagers shimmy up bamboo poles or climb rickety rattan scaffolding to the cave roofs for their booty. Unlike Kalimantan, urban swiftlet homes (see p249) are rare in Sabah, so harvests come from caves such as Gomantong. Concerns have grown as populations have shrunk in recent years due to the harvesting of nests before swiftlet young are mature.

The caves are 5km south off the road to Sukau, 20km from the main highway, difficult, but not impossible, for visitors to reach without their own transport. The easiest way to see the caves is via tour from Sandakan; most operators include a visit as part of their standard Sungai Kinabatangan package.

The area around the caves is covered in forest and dense vegetation, concealing plenty of wildlife and some good walks. The most accessible of the caves is a 10-minute walk along the trail near the **information centre** (☎ 089-230-189; www.sabah.gov.my/jhl; adult/child RM30/15; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-4.30pm). Head past the living quarters of the nest collectors to get to the main cave, **Simud Hitam** (Black Cave). You can venture in, though it involves wading through ankle-deep guano alive with cockroaches and other insects.

The left-hand trail from the office leads to the top of the mountain. After a few metres the trail forks again. To the right, a 15-minute walk brings you to a top entrance to the cave, while the left-hand trail continues for 30 minutes and leads high up the mountain to **Simud Putih** (White Cave). This cave contains the more valuable white nests. Both trails are steep and require some sweaty rock climbing.

From Sandakan, minivans go directly to Sukau (RM15). Ask to be dropped at the turn-off for the caves. You can also take a minivan for Lahad Datu, get out at the Sukau junction and take another van to the cave turn-off (each leg costs RM10). Either way, you'll have to walk 5km from the turn-off to the ticket office, unless there's a vehicle going down at the same time. Bring your passport (or a photocopy) for the guard at the gatepost.

If you're spending some time in Borneo, note that the great caves of Gunung Mulu and Niah national parks in Sarawak are more spectacular and easier to reach independently than

Gomantong. Even the Madai Caves (p148) near Lahad Datu are more accessible

SUNGAI KINABATANGAN

☎ 089

Sungai Kinabatangan is Sabah's longest river and, as odd as it seems, a man-made natural wonder. Intensive logging and development of oil-palm plantations nearby have left wild-life trapped on the flood plain along the final third of Sungai Kinabatangan's 560km as it approaches the Sulu Sea. The result is an astonishing array of species in a narrow strip of riverine forest, mainly visible while cruising the river's muddy waters.

Big-name wildlife includes orangutans and proboscis monkeys in trees lining river banks, plus flat-headed cats at night along Sungai Menungal, a Kinabatangan tributary. Inside the forest, look for marbled cats, sambar deer, and giant squirrels. Long-tailed and pig-tailed macaques are rife. The big prize among mammals is the elephant, rare enough to be a treat but with decent odds of spotting success.

Bird-watchers commonly spot all eight varieties of Borneo's hornbills, plus brightly coloured pittas, kingfishers, and, with elephant luck, Storm's stork or the wacky Oriental darter, also known as the snake bird. Reptiles, including crocodiles, also frequent the Kinabatangan, both in riverine forest areas and mangrove estuaries, so keep any limbs you value inside the boat.

Mammals can be seen anytime of year. They move around the area, and groups will sometimes break up to travel around or through plantations. Birds are more numerous and varied during rainy season, October to March, which coincides with northern-hemisphere migrations. Though friendly for birds, the rainy season isn't very accommodating for humans, or for most lodging in the area. Due to local and global factors, heavy rains now continue deep into March and annual flooding has grown more severe. Most camps are shut down for a time during the wet season. On the flip side, wait too long into the dry season to visit and oxbow lakes go dry.

Your success spotting wildlife depends on the vagaries of migrations, but the location you select and the preparation and skill of guides also matter, especially if you stray from the beaten track. Ask lots of questions and be sceptical of vague answers. With the

right help and dollop of luck, you'll enjoy the Kinabatangan for the wonderland it truly is.

Sleeping & Eating

Tour operators in KK or Sandakan can organise a trip, most often nowadays to their own lodges. Alternatively, make arrangements directly with your selected accommodation. Even if you choose to travel independently, lodges often insist on selling you not just their room, but their tour package including wild-life cruises and/or treks, plus transport from Sandakan, which can be convenient. In addition to accommodation details, transport modes can explain package price differences. Boats from Sandakan to camps are more pleasant and offer the bonus of wildlife watching, but usually cost more than riding in a van.

JUNGLE CAMPS

Uncle Tan's Wildlife Camp (☎ 531-639; www.undetan.com) Its folksy website accurately reflects the welcoming atmosphere at hugely popular Uncle Tan's, run by the deceased founder's family. The standard package costs RM320 for a three-day, two-night stay in the forest, including meals, boat safaris, jungle treks and transport from its office/B&B in Gum Gum (see p140). Accommodation here is very basic; rough huts with no doors or windows and a mosquito net. You'll want plenty of mosquito repellent; fortunately, Uncle Tan's sell its own, highly effective brew at the camp. The location is prone to flooding, but remains open as long as possible in the rains. Book early for peak periods.

Kinabatangan Jungle Camp (☎ 019-804-7756; labukbb@yahoo.com) This camp located on the edge of the Lower Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary is more upmarket than Uncle Tan's with facilities that rival most lodges, including hot showers. Packages from Sandakan start from RM330 for an overnight trip.

LODGES

Sukau is the main village on the lower Kinabatangan, 42km off the main highway between Lahad Datu and Sandakan. Lodges operated by tour companies near Sukau offer wildlife experiences and more, often luxuriously. There's not much difference between them – all have comfortable, mosquito-proof rooms with fan and bathroom, meals and bar (drinks extra), and trained guides.

On a twin-share basis, expect to pay RM250 upwards per person per night at a lodge, including transfers and activities. Many tours include Gomantong Caves as part of the package, but you can opt out if you wish. For tours from Sandakan, see p135. Other reliable lodges include:

Sukau Rainforest Lodge (☎ 088-438-300; www.sukau.com) Luxury lodge run by Borneo Eco Tours with overnight packages from RM750.

Nature Lodge Kinabatangan (☎ 088-230-534; www.nasalisarvatoustours.com) Located on high ground near Bilit, the owners say flooding is not an issue. Dorm packages from RM300, chalets from RM335.

OTHER ACCOMMODATION

For a taste of village life, as well as wildlife, try bed and breakfast accommodation, mainly around Sukau. Originally established for independent travel, B&Bs now often market packages – meals, tours and transfers – in addition to, or instead of, rooms only. In Sukau, you can hire a local guide for day trips on the river and its tributaries. A three-hour cruise costs around RM100.

Sukau B&B (☎ 230-269; camping RM5, r ind breakfast per person RM20) Built high on stilts over the river, 1km east of the Sukau village, this friendly guesthouse is one of the last places to flood when the river rises. It's also one of the last places to sell accommodation only. It can arrange boats and transfers on request.

Sambil B&B (☎ 019-8420895; overnight package per person RM145) A new entrant with chalet-style rooms including bath and fan, with electricity to turn it. Bilit location minimises flood risk.

Sukau Tomangong Riverview Lodge (☎ 235-525; nbsafari@streamyx.com; overnight package per person RM230) A convert from selling rooms to tour packages, this pleasant spot by the river features small cabins with attached baths. Its terrace restaurant serves Malay meals and cold beer (not included in your package).

Getting There & Away

Minivans go to Sukau from Sandakan (RM15, two hours), or you can take a minivan to Lahad Datu and get out at the Sukau turn-off. Expect to wait a while for a minivan from here to Sukau (RM10, one to 1½ hours). If you're on a package, transport will be provided. The last 45km to Sukau is along a gravel road that becomes a mud track in rain. Public transport is often suspended when it's wet; 4WD transport is available from

Sandakan or Lahad Datu, or maybe through your accommodation.

If you're heading south from Sukau, ask to be dropped at the highway, where you can catch a minivan to Lahad Datu or possibly a bus to Semporna or Tawau to save repeating the long drive from Sandakan.

LAHAD DATU

☎ 089 / pop156,000

With a small flat area along the bay hemmed in by a large hill, Lahad Datu resembles Sandakan, but its 19th century legacy is pirates, not plutocrats. The nearby village of Tungku was an infamous base for the Lanun brigands, who did a sideline in slave trading. There's still piracy in these waters with speedboats and machine guns rather than schooners and sabres, so stick to land, lubber, and be warned that the waterfront with some ATMs gets deserted after dark.

Modern Lahad Datu is an upstairs-downstairs urban affair. Drivers of boxy Protons honk their horns to offer rides between the two sections for RM3. The lower town has everything tourists need – hotels, restaurants, shopping, buses – except the offices of tour companies, and they're the reason travellers stop in Lahad Datu. Make connections here to Danum Valley and Tabin Wildlife Reserve. **Borneo Nature Tours** (☎ 880-207; www.br.com.my; Block 3, Lot 20, Fajar Centre) and the **Danum Valley Field Centre** (☎ 881-092; Block 3, Fajar Centre) have offices next to each other in the upper part of town.

Around the block, there's the office of **Tabin Wildlife** (☎ 887-620; twrlhd@tm.net.my; Block 2, Lot 17, Fajar Centre), franchisee for Tabin Wildlife Reserve (see p148). If you plan to visit the reserve independently, it's best to contact the **Wildlife Department office** (Pejabat Hidupan Liar; ☎ 884-416), just in case a permit is necessary. It's four blocks south of the Danum Valley Field Centre office. Tour agencies around the Fajar centre service the Sungai Sabahan area between Lahad Datu and Kunak, a getaway mainly for local residents.

Even though travellers come to Lahad Datu to go elsewhere, transport schedules make it difficult not spend a night here at one end of an excursion at least.

Sleeping

Hotels are in lower part of town, and walking from one end to the other is easy.

Tabin Lodge (☎ 889-552; Jln Urus Setia Kecil; r RM20-45; ☎) The building with the red front diagonal from the bus station has a variety of funky but comfy rooms. Cheapest ones have cold shower and a toilet outside, and none have TVs. There are lounges on each level to share soap operas or soccer broadcasts, and they can get loud if your room is close. Staff are fabulously friendly and cooperative, for instance keeping luggage while you're visiting a reserve.

Mido Hotel (☎ 881-800; fax 881487; Jln Teratai; r RM52-92; ☎) A hulking facade, unimpressive lobby and halls hide smart, modern rooms, all including TV, bathtub and hot water. Economy rooms are nearest the first-floor disco, which gets rocking around 10 nightly. It's located at the northwest corner of the lower town's main shopping square.

Executive Hotel (☎ 881-333; 239-240 Jln Teratai; r incl breakfast RM100-150; ☎) The top business hotel in town has plush, elegant rooms. Discounts run about 30 percent on weekends.

Several hotels, mainly in the budget category, are located around Jln Seroja, near the Chinese temple:

Hotel Unimas (☎ 885-511; fax 881-155; Jln Seroja; r RM55-65; ☎) Well-equipped rooms with a fresh feel.

Hotel Perdana (☎ 881-166; fax 881-661; Jln Seroja; r 76.50-93.50; ☎) New business-class contender with wi-fi in its lobby coffee-shop.

Eating

Azura (Jln Tertai; mains RM2-7; ☎) 24hr) This open-air stop on the eastern edge of town has a full range of Malay food plus pick-your-fish barbecue.

Kopi Tiam (Jln Kianbang; mains RM2.50-9; ☎) 24hr) *Kedai kopi* Chinese style, just west of the main shopping block.

Sakura Seafood (☎ 885-623; Block K; Jln Tertai; mains from RM7; ☎) lunch & dinner) The place in lower town for Chinese food features a big grill outside with fish and shellfish on ice. No menu, bring a group and chow down.

Food stalls for basic Malay food open nightly beside the post office parking lot. Self-catering from **Millmewa Shopping Centre (Jln Kastam Lama)** on the west side of the main shopping square.

Getting There & Away

MASwings (☎ 1800-88-3000, 03-7843-3000) currently operates four daily flights to Lahad Datu. The airport is in the upper part of town.

Express buses on the KK–Tawau route stop at the Shell station near the Danum Valley office in the upper part of town. Other buses and minivans leave from a vacant lot near the waterfront in the lower part of town, with a helpful information kiosk on site. There are frequent departures for Sandakan (RM20, 2½ hours), Sukau (RM12, two hours), Semporna (RM15, two hours) and Tawau (RM18, 2½ hours). All transport to Semporna and Tawau pass the Kunak turn-off for Madai Caves (RM10). There are plenty of services to all these places until around 3pm, and share-taxis are also available. Charter vehicles and 4WDs wait in an adjacent lot.

DANUM VALLEY CONSERVATION AREA & BORNEO RAINFOREST LODGE

The **Danum Valley Conservation Area (DVCA)** is part of the Yayasan Sabah Forestry Management Area, a vast tract of land in southeast Sabah under the control of **Yayasan Sabah** (The Sabah Foundation; www.ysnet.org.my), a semigovernmental organisation tasked with both protecting and utilising the forest resources of Sabah. Yayasan Sabah also manages Maliau Basin Conservation Area (see p154). While Maliau Basin is only really suitable for physically fit people who don't mind roughing it, Danum Valley can be comfortably visited by anyone, and it still offers the chance to get right inside primary tropical rainforest.

The 438-square-kilometre Danum Valley Conservation Area was established in 1981 in recognition of the area's incredible biodiversity. **Danum Valley Field Centre** (www.ysnet.org.my/Maliau/Danum/location.htm) gives preference to researchers, but other travellers can spare its collegial, if spartan atmosphere. A more luxurious way to experience Danum Valley is by staying at **Borneo Rainforest Lodge (BRL; www.br.com.my)**, a comfortable resort overlooking the Sungai Danum in the midst of teeming primary jungle. For those who can afford it, BRL combines a real jungle experience with all the comforts of an international-class resort.

Like Maliau Basin, Danum Valley is one of the world's great storehouses of genetic diversity. It is one of the best places in the world to observe wild orangutans in their natural habitat, and visitors who spend a few days at the lodge have at least even odds of making a sighting. Sightings of gibbons, red-leaf monkeys and wild boar are just about guaranteed, and Asian elephants, mouse deer and

THE ORANGUTANS OF DANUM VALLEY *Tomoko Kanamori*

According to Dr Marc Ancrenaz, who is performing a detailed study of orangutans in the Sungai Kinabatangan area, there are about 11,000 orangutans in Sabah. Of these, about 500 are believed to live in the Danum Valley. Since 2004, Japanese primatologists have been studying the orangutans who live around Borneo Rainforest Lodge (BRL), which is located in the Danum Valley Conservation Area. About 16 orangutans live near BRL, and at any one time visitors to the lodge have a reasonable chance of spotting two or three of them.

Many people glamourise the study of orangutans. The reality is quite different. Here is what one famous primatologist, John McKinnon, had to say about it from *The Ape Within Us* (1978):

'When eventually all the pain and effort pay off and the orang-utan is finally found, is the ardent ape-hunter rewarded by witnessing one of nature's great spectaculars? He is not. He finds a shaggy, surly bundle of complete inactivity. Cousin orang turns out to be the most slothful creature, and only by constantly reminding himself how lucky he is to see such a rare and exotic animal on such intimate terms can the primatologist fight off the urge to head straight back home. He must steel himself to remain in mutual contemplation with his subject for the long tedious hours of observation that are necessary to achieve those rare moments of interest and novelty that the orang offers as the only medals for persistence in this game.'

The great bulk of our work consists of waiting for the orangutans as they rest motionless in the shade of leaves high up in 30-metre rainforest trees. Because this work can be so boring, most primatologists do not want to make orangutans the sole subject of their study.

Walking in the forest with a BRL guide there is a relatively good chance of seeing some orangutans. However, since these are wild animals in a protected zone, it's difficult to get really close to them the way you might at a place like Sepilok Orang-Utan Rehabilitation Centre. Also, unfortunately, it is not possible to accompany primate researchers in the field and we do not seek volunteers to help us. If you would like to help with the study of wild orangutans in the field, I recommend that you visit the following website: www.redapeencounters.com.

Tomoko Kanamori is a researcher from Kyoto University in Kyoto, Japan, working with Dr Noko Kuze to study the orangutans of Danum Valley.

barking deer are fairly common. You'll also see a brilliant variety of tree species, moths, butterflies, fungi and flowers. The lodge is also very popular with bird-watchers.

Leeches are also there in abundance and we strongly recommend that you bring a pair of leech socks and a relaxed attitude to the harmless, if revolting, creatures.

Sights & Activities

JUNGLE WALKS

The main activity at BRL is walking on the trails which surround the lodge. While you are permitted to walk alone and the trails are quite easy to follow and well-marked, the lodge provides guides for all the walks as part of your accommodation. We recommend going with a guide for at least one of your walks each day, since they tend to have incredibly keen eyes, ears and noses and they can spot creatures that you'd miss on your own. They can also explain a lot about what's going on in the forest. The trails are all relatively short and can be done in an hour or two, which makes

it possible to do two routes a day, with a nice lunch break in between.

The **Coffindiff Trail** is a good way to start your exploration of the area and get your bearings. It climbs to a cliff in which the remains of some Dusun coffins can be seen (although the provenance of the coffins is unclear). Above this, you climb to a viewpoint which looks over the Sungai Danum and the lodge. You can either return the way you've come or detour around the back of the peak to descend via scenic **Fairy Falls** and **Serpent Falls**, a pair of 15m falls that are good for a cooling dip. Whichever way you go, you'll want to take a plunge in the Jacuzzi Pool near the base of the trail. The whole circuit can be done in a leisurely two hours.

The **Danum Trail**, **Elephant Trail** and **Segama Trails** all follow various sections of the Sungai Danum and are mostly flat and easy trails which allow good chances for wildlife spotting. All can be done in an hour or two. The **Hornbill Trail** and **East Trail** have a few ups and downs but are still relatively easy,

with similarly good chances for wildlife sightings. Finally, if you just need a quick breathe of fresh air after a meal, the **Nature Trail** is a short plankwalk near the lodge that allows you walk into the forest unmolested by leeches.

CANOPY WALKWAY

As you probably know, most of the action in a tropical rainforest happens up in the forest canopy, which can be frustrating for earthbound humans. The lodge's 107m canopy walkway provides a good chance to get up where the action is. It's located on the access road, a 10-minute walk from the lodge. It traverses a nice section of forest, with several fine mengaris and majau trees on either side. Bird-watchers often come here at dawn in hopes of 'bagging' a few species. Even if you're not a keen birder, it's worth rolling out of bed early to see the sun come up over the forest from the canopy walkway – when there's a bit of mist around, the effect is quite magical.

NIGHT DRIVES

The forest around the lodge really comes alive when the 'night shift' comes on. A guided night-walk through the forest is a great way to see the night creatures, but for those who want to do their wildlife spotting in comfort, a night drive is a great way to go. You sit in the back of an open truck with a guide seated above the cab of the truck pointing out animals with a spotlight. Truck leave the lodge after dinner every evening. Sure, it's not the most ecofriendly or aesthetically pleasing way to experience the forest, but it beats walking down a dark trail wondering if that's a log you're stepping over or a hungry python.

You have a decent chance of seeing wild boar, sambar deer, mouse deer and flying squirrels, and if you're really lucky, you might come upon an elephant or two on the road ahead of you. Even more than forest walks, night drives are really hit or miss affairs. Sometimes the truck returns to the lodge with all the passengers chattering excitedly about all the cool creatures they saw. Other times, folks try to make the best of a lone squirrel sighting. The best way to go into it is to think of it as a nice way to take the night air and enjoy the starry sky, with all wildlife sightings mere lucky windfalls.

Things you'll be glad you brought include a light waterproof jacket, camera with flash, binoculars and a powerful torch.

BIRD-WATCHING

Danum Valley is very popular with bird-watchers from around the world, who come here to bag a whole variety of Southeast Asian rainforest species, including the great argus pheasant, crested fireback pheasant, several species of hornbill, blue-headed pitta and Borneo bristlehead, among many others. Some of the guides at the lodge are particularly knowledgeable about birds and attempts are made to match birders up with these guides. The access road and canopy walkway are good for early morning bird sightings and you'll likely make a few worthwhile sightings right from the veranda of your cabin.

Sleeping & Eating

The **Borneo Rainforest Lodge** (BRL; ☎ 088-267-637; www.brl.com.my; standard/deluxe three-day/two-night full-board packages from RM1300/1500) has a total of 31 semidetached and fully-detached cabins connected by wooden walkways with the main building/office/dining room. These cabins contain a mix of standard and deluxe rooms.

Deluxe rooms have nice river/mountain views which you can enjoy from their spacious verandas. These rooms are spacious, comfortable and very pleasant – indeed, you might think you're in an international-class hotel room somewhere else in the world until you look out the window to see the teeming rainforest. Some of the deluxe units have bathtubs and all have hot water and showers. Several of the deluxe cabins are currently under renovation and when they're done, they'll have outdoor bathtubs in which you can soak while enjoying the view of the jungle.

The standard rooms are simpler but perfectly adequate, with hot showers and small porches. Some of these rooms have nice river views, while others have less inspiring views of the nearby forest. Some of these are fully detached, which is nice if you like your privacy. There are very good value indeed.

There is the Royal Chalet, which contains three extradeluxe rooms, although, truth be told, these aren't really much better than the deluxe rooms.

Meals are served in the main dining room in the main building. 'Dining room' is something

of a misnomer as it's open to the jungle on two sides and has a fine dining section on a long veranda overlooking the river and mountain. Meals are of a pretty high standard and there is always at least one vegetarian option. Dinners include both Asian and Western dishes, as well as salad, bread, rice and a good dessert spread. Overall, you're unlikely to eat this well in the middle of the rainforest anywhere else in the world. There's also a bar that serves a variety of alcoholic drinks.

Danum Valley Field Centre (☎ 089-881092; d RM66) Scientists and researchers get priority here, and receptivity to tourists varies with management's moods and relations with BRL. But if you can stay here – in separate male and female dormitories with bunk beds and cold-water showers – your naturalist bunkmates are a bonus, sharing findings on research from butterflies to biodiversity. Communal dining and lounge enhance the collegial atmosphere. To make friends fast, bring a case of beer from Lahad Datu. Though much cheaper than DRL, a stay here including RM60 daily for meals and RM40 for transfer each way from Lahad Datu, still runs into money.

Getting There & Away

Borneo Rainforest Lodge is 81km by dirt road from Lahad Datu. Airport pick-up and drop-off is included in accommodation packages.

TABIN WILDLIFE RESERVE

Palm-oil plantations and logged tracts have captured some of Sabah's rarest animals at **Tabin Wildlife Reserve** (☎ 088-264-071; www.tabinwildlife.com.my). The reserve, 48km east of Lahad Datu down a gravel road, is run by the Forestry & Wildlife Department, though visitor facilities are franchised to a private company.

The 1205-square-kilometer reserve consists mainly of lowland dipterocarp forest with mangrove areas at the northern end. Tabin is not entirely primary forest, but that doesn't seem to trouble the wildlife. The stars here are elephants, with primates – orangutans, proboscis monkeys, red-leaf monkey and macaques – running behind the pachyderms. Bird life is abundant, and there's a herd of the endangered Sumatran rhino, though you're unlikely to see any of these incredibly shy creatures.

Several mud volcanoes, similar to those on Pulau Tiga, dot Tabin. Along with salt-water springs, they are important sources

of minerals for animals and great spots for viewing wildlife.

Intra Travel Service (☎ 088-261-558; www.intra-travel.com.my; lvl 1, no 5, Airport Terminal 2, Jln Old Airport; Kota Kinabalu) in KK and **Tabin Wildlife** (☎ 887-620; twrlhd@tm.net.my; Block 2, Lot 17, Fajar Centre) in Lahad Datu are agents for the officially franchised visitor accommodation. Day trips cost RM168 per person. Overnight packages in Tabin Wildlife Resort's very comfortable chalets, with air-con and hot showers run RM565 for one night, RM840 for two nights, per person.

The rainy season of 2007 at least temporarily washed away the more economical option of 'eco-tented platforms'. Camping is possible, but bring leech socks and plenty of bug spray, as well as your own tents. If you have transport and plan on visiting Tabin independently, contact the **Wildlife Department office** (Pejabat Hidupan Liar; ☎ 089-884-416) in Lahad Datu for details on permit requirements.

MADAI CAVES

Less renowned than Gomantong Caves to the north, these limestone caves prized for birds' nests are within easier reach for travellers. Exploring Madai Caves independently is not an option, however. The caves shelter ancestral tombs – artefacts date back 15,000 years – and entry requires permission from the local villagers. They keep a careful eye on both ancient bones and savoury bird spit. The eyes of a local guide are also essential to exploring the dark, slippery cave interior. Guides wait at the village entrance, and their fees are subject to negotiation; the going rate is around RM30. For best views, bring your own torch.

A sprawling shanty *kampung* of wooden shacks near the cave entrance serves as temporary accommodation for nest collectors. Harvests take place three times a year and are a spectacle, with collectors setting up a maze of bamboo poles, clambering up to the cave roof to capture their prizes.

The caves are 3km off the Lahad Datu–Tawau road, outside the village of Kunak, 69km south of Lahad Datu. All buses and minivans between Lahad Datu and Semporna or Tawau pass the turn-off; you may be able to get a local minivan from there to take you right to the caves. Many long-distance minivans also stop at the station in Kunak, where minivans as well as private 'taxis' (RM3 to 5) provide transport to the caves.

SEMPORNA

☎ 089 / pop 130,000

The best places to stay in Semporna are about an hour out of town – surrounded by clear waters and some of the world's best coral reefs. The islands of **Tun Sakaran Marine Park** (conservation fee RM40) include dive sites that are the highlight of many scuba fans' underwater dives.

If you forego island accommodation, Semporna makes a pleasant base for diving and snorkelling trips. It's a very simple town for visitors. Buses and minivans drop passengers in the centre of town, all half-dozen blocks of it, between the Shell and Esso petrol stations. There's a **Maybank** (☎ 784-852) on Jln Jakarullah. The market, wharfs, dive operators, plus more hotels and restaurants are reached via the southern road at the traffic circle with a concrete sunfish leaping from it.

Diving

Most operators have offices in the Semporna Ocean Tourism Centre (SOTC), a stilt complex over the water off Jln Kastam or next to the market in shophouse blocks along the docks, known as Semporna Seafront (officially 'New Town Centre'). Some of the dive outfits listed, and others, have offices in Tawau (see p151) or KK (see p91). Check the certification of any operator before signing on.

Arung Hayat Resort (☎ 016-8158197; Pulau Mabul) Very basic budget longhouse homestay on Mabul (per person incl meals RM50) with its own dive operation. Also provides accommodation for day-trip operators from Semporna.

Blue Sea Divers (☎ 781-322; mikealan3068@yahoo.com; Semporna Seafront) Day-trip specialist; request chicken curry for lunch.

Borneo Jungle River Island Tours (Uncle Chang; ☎ 781-789; unclechang99@hotmail.com; SOTC) Offers diving and snorkelling day trips, plus stays at its friendly budget lodge on Mabul (per person RM50) and more aspirational resort on Maiga (per person RM60) with discounted dives for guests. Trips often culminate in a boozy dinner back in Semporna with legendary owner Uncle Chang.

Pulau Sipadan Resort & Tours (☎ 761-899; www.sipadan-resort.com; Jln Kastam) Top-end company with resorts on Kapalai and Lankayan, head office in Tawau. Three-night dive packages are US\$590.

Reef (☎ 782-080; www.mataking.com; Jln Kastam) Packages to its resort on Pulau Mataking, one hour from Semporna.

Scuba Junkie (☎ 785-372; www.scuba-junkie.com; 36 Semporna Seafront; s incl breakfast RM60) Very popular operator with international staff, its own hostel (dorm beds for divers incl breakfast RM15) on the wharf, and attached restaurant serving Semporna's best pizza.

Sipidan Mabul Resort (www.sipidan-mabul.com) Range of accommodation from plain bungalows to luxury chalets along Mabul's best stretch of beach. Enjoy sea views from the swimming pool deck and massage tub. Three-night dive packages are US\$749.

Sipidan Scuba (☎ 781-788; www.northborneo.net; SOTC) Veteran, very professional operator formerly known as North Borneo Dive & Sea Sports with offices in Tawau and Semporna. Enjoy *après-dive* cold soft drinks or beer on its waterfront terrace.

Sipidan Water Village (☎ 784-100; www.svwrresort.com; Jln Kastam) Mabul resort featuring elegant bungalows on stilts over water with prices to match. Great for diving honeymoons. Three-night dive packages are US\$940.

Package prices differ enormously, depending on type of accommodation and whether they include transport to Semporna. Reserving a spot at least a day in advance is required for Pulau Sipidan along with an additional RM40 conservation fee (See p150).

If you reach Semporna on your own, a two-/three-day package costs around RM300 per person, including equipment and boat transport (bringing your own gear should earn discounts). Snorkellers pay about half the diver price, and a three-day PADI open-water course costs about RM750. Prices for bookings from KK or abroad may be several times higher. Walk-in rates can be negotiable during low season, and rollercoaster relations between operators can also lead to special deals during periodic feuds.

Sleeping

The advent of budget and midrange accommodation on the islands – at the time of research, several new places were in various stages of development – radically expand options for travellers. But Semporna offers good value at the low end.

Lee's Resthouse & Café (☎ 784-491; suisan@streamyx.com; Jln Shop Block; r RM40-60; ☎ ☎) Near the bus drop in the town centre, this friendly hotel gives good value with very modern, comfortable rooms. Its air-con restaurant is a soothing oasis with Western, Chinese and Malay favourites.

Dragon Inn (☎ 781-088; www.dragoninnfloating.com.my; 1 Jln Kastam; dm RM15, r incl breakfast RM66-300;

☎ ☎) Everyone seems to stay here; as with Sepilok Jungle Resort, it's difficult to suss just why. Dorms are cramped, the all-wood rooms on stilts over the harbour sound better than they perform, and the design of this sprawling harbourside complex makes everything a hike, inside and out.

Seafest Hotel (☎ 782-333; www.seafesthotel.com; Jln Kastam; r incl breakfast RM90-180 plus 10% tax; ☎) Six storeys of bay-view, business-class comfort past SOTC. Affiliated with Seafest fishery, so check the restaurant's catch of the day. More options:

Damai Travellers Lodge (☎ 782-011; Jln Masjid, s/d from RM30/45; ☎) Aging cleanly.

City Inn (☎ 784-733; Jln Bangunan Hing Long; s/d from 40/60; ☎) Newer, but not all rooms have windows.

Eating

The market has good breakfast options from vendors or in its café area. At night, Malay stalls open alongside the market and behind the Tawau minivan area in the town centre. Several Chinese style *kedai kopi* between Lee's Rest House and the main road offer tasty fish and seafood specialities plus cold beer. Beyond Lee's, find Milemewa Superstore for self-catering.

Anjung Paghalian Café (Jln Kastam, meals RM3-5; ☎ dinner) Beside the Tun Sarakan Marine Park entrance sign, this indoor/outdoor place on a pier features fish, prawn, chicken, squid, venison sold by portion (for two or more people) and cooked in your choice of up to 12 different styles. It also has standard Malay hawker stalls and even one which serves burgers.

Mabul Steak House (☎ 781-785; Semporna Seafrost; meals from RM4.90; ☎ lunch & dinner) This easygoing, balcony restaurant's large and glacial 'ice-blended juices' are a soothing antidote for sucking bottled air. For further chilling, there's a leather couch and overstuffed chairs around a huge TV showing movies or sports. The RM4.90 and RM7.90 set meals won't leave you cold – or hungry.

Getting There & Away

Minivans to/from Tawau (RM10, 1½ hours) stop at the edge of the town centre near the main road. Lahad Datu (RM20, 2½ hours) and Sandakan (RM35, 5½ hours) minivans are at the other edge, at the corner of Jln Masjid and Jln PG Jaji. All run from early morning until 4pm.

Morning and night buses to Kota Kinabalu (585km, 10½ hours) leave from a lot just

north of the Lahad Datu minivan area starting around 7am and 7pm. **Dayana Express** (☎ 784-494; Jln Hospital) has the cleanest air-con buses and most professional operation, with a ticket booth and bright cafeteria open all day. The 7.30am and 7.30pm departures to KK (RM58.50) go via Kunak, Lahad Datu, Sandakan Batu 32, and Ranau.

TUN SAKARAN MARINE PARK

Sabah's newest and largest marine park, gazetted in 2004 and also known as **Semporna Islands Marine Park** (conservation fee RM40), covers 325 sq km of tropical waters, including dive sites widely classed among the top 10 in the world. The best dive seasons run April to July/August, with the first three months outstanding and during November to December, but the marine life is breath-taking year round.

Pulau Sipadan, perhaps the most famous island in Borneo, 36km off the southeast coast is a true volcanic atoll, the tip of a limestone pinnacle that rises 600m from the seabed, and rightly attracts divers from all over the world. Since 2005, overnight stays on Sipadan have been prohibited, and the overall number of divers is limited to 120 per day, with a day's advance registration required.

Many of the other islands in and around the park also offer good diving and have been developed for accommodation as well, including **Mabul**, **Lankayan**, **Mataking**, **Maiga** and **Sibuan**, plus a purpose-built rig resort on the **Kapalai** sandbar. New accommodation, budget backpacker dives to splashy resorts, are springing up fast, with **Pulau Pom Pong** a hotbed

The kidnappings of tourists from Sipadan by gunmen from the nearby Philippines in 2000, plus potential threats from Indonesia, which lost its claim to Sipadan in 2002 World Court decision, guarantee a major military and police presence. The patrols also protect against dynamite fishing and illegal hunting of sea turtles and their eggs. In terms of preserving Tun Sakaran's treasures, crime did pay.

Diving

Dives are conducted from early morning until after dark by all operators (no night dives at Sipadan). Most day trips leave Semporna by 8am and return around 3pm. Qualified dive masters must accompany

each group and should brief divers on local conditions. Currents over the reefs can be quite strong.

Sipadan's **near-vertical 'wall'** off its eastern shore is one of the most famous sites in the park, and the world, where colourful tropical fish swim near the surface and huge groupers and wrasse nose about below, green turtles occasionally whizzing by. Throughout the park, there are schools of barracuda and tuna, reef sharks by the dozens on the seabed, occasional whale sharks and friendly hammerheads. Snorkelling is possible at all dive sites, with good visibility and plenty to see.

Boat transfers to your chosen site(s) should be included in any dive package. Hiring a fishing boat for a day trip from Semporna costs around RM250.

TAWAU

☎ 089 / pop 331,000

After seeing its urban core hollow out in recent years, Tawau is making a comeback. This port near Indonesia – with ferry connections across the border to Nunukan and Tarakan – has grown rich shipping timber, rubber, Manila hemp, cocoa, copra, tobacco and palm oil. Now it seems ready to dress the part, with a burgeoning smart restaurant district and a new multiplex cinema (four screens and counting), all designed to lure suburbanites and their money back to the town centre. Website www.etawau.com has a good line on the local buzz.

Despite the progress, desolate pockets remain after dark. Particularly around the local bus terminus, dog packs are big and loud enough to cause distress, and street lighting could use an upgrade. But what's really missing there at night are people.

The lure for travellers is the border: Tawau is the only crossing point with Kalimantan where foreigners can get a visa to enter Indonesia. The (so far) low-profile Indonesian Consulate (see below), about 200m beyond Tawau Hospital, has remained fast and friendly while foreigners have been few. But even the most successful application will likely require staying for at least the night before and after. If you've just come for diving, go directly to Semporna.

Information

Asiatic Travel & Tours (☎ 755-688; myasiatictravel@yahoo.com; 1st fl, TB 3478, Jln Masjid) Managing director

Wing-Kan Nip has a foot in mainland China, another in San Francisco Bay, and a base in Tawau where he uncovers East Sabah's off-the-beaten track attractions.

City Internet Zone (☎ 760-016; 37 Kompleks Fajar, Jln Perbandaran; per hr RM2-3; ☎ 9am-midnight)

HSBC (Jln Perbandaran)

Indonesian consulate (☎ 772-052; 752-969; Jln Tanjung Batu; ☎ 8am-noon, 1-4pm) Efficient one-day service (usually) for visas.

Maybank (☎ 762-333; Jln Dunlop)

PH Moneychanger (☎ 776-389; Kompleks Kojasa) Changes cash in harbour area.

Diving

Roach Reef, halfway between Tawau and Pulau Sipadan, is mainly used for PADI training. It's better to do training in KK or Tun Sakaran Marine Park to avoid lengthy boat rides, or just to enjoy a more attractive dive site.

Most dive operators offer transport to Semporna.

Pro Divers (☎ 778-128; upper fl, Sabindo Plaza) Dive-equipment retailer also offering courses and trips.

Pulau Sipadan Resort & Tours (☎ 765-200; www.sipadan-resort.com; 1st fl, 484 Bandar Sabindo) Bookings for its dive resorts in Kapalai and Lankayan.

Reef Dive Resort & Tours (☎ 770-022; www.mataking.com; Heritage Hotel, Jln Bunga) Diving from its resort on Pulau Mataking.

Sipadan Scuba (☎ 942-788; www.northborneo.net; 3rd fl, 581 Jln Haji Karim, Tacoln Complex, Fajar) Formerly known as North Borneo Dive & Sea Sports, offering dive courses as well as trips to Sipadan, Roach Reef and other islands. Office in Semporna.

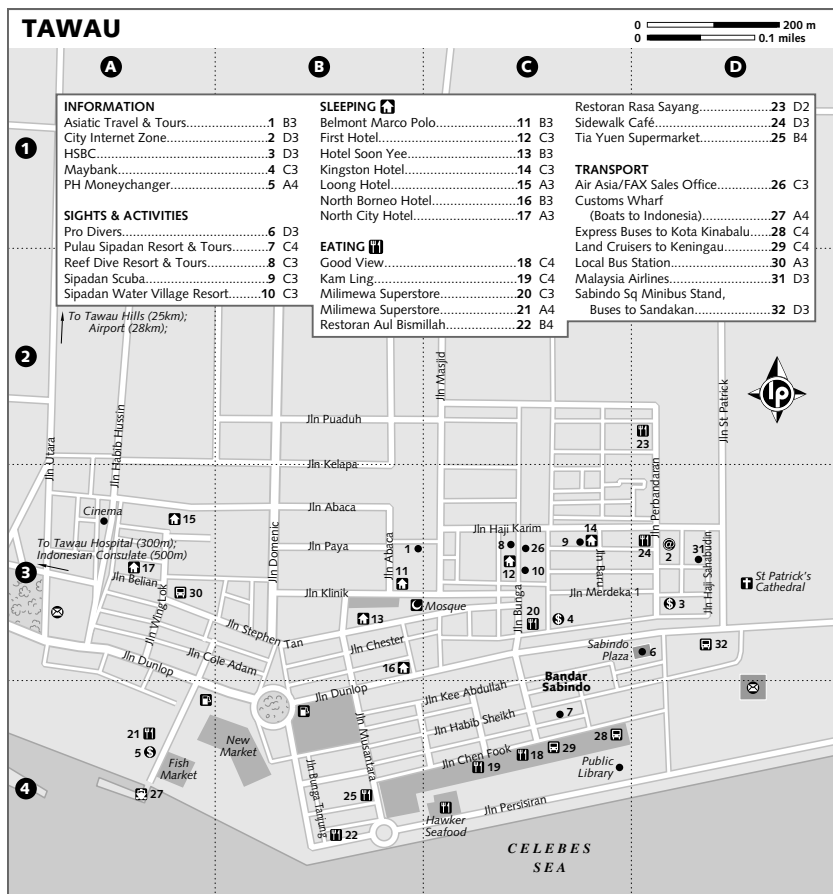
Sipadan Water Village Resort (☎ 752-996; www.swwresort.com; 1st fl, Jln Bunga) Runs the luxurious stilt resort on Pulau Mabul; entrance just south of Air Asia sales office.

Sleeping

There's good selection of midrange hotels, catering to small business travellers. Except as noted, all rooms have telephone and private bath with hot water.

Hotel Soon Yee (☎ 772-447; 1362, Jln Stephen Tan; r RM22-38; ☎) No prostitutes, no phones, no hot water (except in shared bathrooms), no link to Woody Allen, but lots of value and camaraderie in this guesthouse. Cheaper fan-cooled rooms have shared bathrooms.

Loong Hotel (☎ 778-100; 3868 Jln Abaca; r RM45-60; ☎) Very well-kept place with spacious, occasionally boxy rooms and a homely atmosphere in a quiet area north of the bus station. *Kedai kopi* below has good dim sum and noodles



for breakfast, but lots of luck getting anyone there to smile.

North Borneo Hotel (☎ 763-060; fax 773-066; 52-53 Jln Dunlop; r RM50-60; 📶) Strategically placed between the Sabindo and Fajar quarters, this older hotel has large rooms, many with terraces overlooking the street, and surprisingly appealing bathrooms, most with bathtubs. Not fancy, but good value.

North City Hotel (☎ 773-100; fax 757-399; 175-176 Jln Belian; r RM50-60; 📶) Sister property to North Borneo Hotel has marginally smarter rooms but except for a *kedai kopi* and a couple of groceries across the street, it's desolate after dark over here.

First Hotel (☎ 778-989; fax 761-296; 208-209 Jln Bunga; r RM65-80; ☎ 98; 📶) Completed puzzles

hang framed on some room walls, apropos because First Hotel fits the pieces together just right. Budget rates don't buy windows, but every large, bright room has the right furnishings, such as desks and plush chairs, arrayed on spotless marble floors. Amid a clutch of similar and higher priced choices, First is best value.

Kingston Hotel (☎ 702-288; fax 702-688; 4581-4590 Jln Haji Karim cnr Jln Baru; s/d RM66/88; f/stc RM128/166; 📶) In the heart of the Fajar Commercial Centre for daytime business and night-time fun, this new hotel's roomy digs sparkle and shine. Posh but comfortable decor includes hot-water pot and *kain songket* (traditional Malay handwoven fabric with gold threads) bed throws.

Belmont Marco Polo (☎ 777-988; bmph@tm.net.my; Jln Klinik; r RM180-280; 📶) Forestry executives will feel at home with mahogany shutters and other elegant wooden accents at Tawau's luxury leader. For work, there's wi-fi, for play there's transport to the golf course as well as an airport shuttle.

Eating

The burgeoning restaurant district in Fajar Commercial Centre is attractive and delightfully varied – fine dining to fast food. But talk to any local about where to eat and they invariably suggest the longstanding open-air seafood restaurants between the Sabindo district and shorefront highway. **Good View** (Jln Chen Fook; meals from RM40; 🍴 dinner) and **Kam Ling** (Jln Chen Fook; meals from RM40; 🍴 dinner) at two ends are the two most renowned. Around the corner, in an open lot nearer the bay, Malay hawker stalls offer grilled fish meals for RM15.

Between the KK and Sandakan bus stations, several cafeterias serve Malay and/or Indian food catering to office workers, some open 24 hours. A plate of rice and two to three items runs RM3 to 7 with many vegetarian options.

Restoran Aul Bismillah (☎ 764-675; Jln Bunga Tanjung; meals RM2.50-6.50; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This open-air corner place serves good-value Malay standards with complimentary sea breeze.

Restoran Rasa Sayang (☎ 777-042; Jln Haji Karim; dishes from RM5; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Bright, air-con Chinese diner in Fajar has the usual menu with unlisted prices for groups, plus set meals (lunch RM12, dinner RM15) for singles.

Sidewalk Café (☎ 777-227; TB570 Talcoln Complex, Jln Haji Karim; mains RM5.50-16; 🍴 lunch & dinner) No outdoor tables, but a cool, dark-wood interior and bar that would be at home in New York's Soho. There's a daily lunch buffet (RM5) and Friday night crab buffet (RM10), plus menu featuring Chinese and Western.

For self-caterers, there are two large branches of **Milimewa Superstore**: near the fish market and, a bigger one, on Jln Bunga. **Tia Yuen Supermarket** has the largest selection of imported foods, albeit mainly from China.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Malaysia Airlines (☎ 761-293; Jln Haji Sahabudin) has daily flights to both KK and KL. **Air Asia** (☎ 761-946, 749-162; Jln Bunga) has two daily direct flights

to KL and KK, and flies to Johor Bahru near Singapore four times weekly. **MASwings** (☎ 1-300-883000) flies to Sandakan twice daily, the afternoon flight continuing to KK.

BOAT

Boats for Indonesia leave from the customs wharf near the fish market. Fast ferry *Tawindo* or *IndoMaya* to Tarakan (RM75, 3½ hours) leaves every morning except Sunday. Several companies run boats daily to Nunukan (RM40, one hour), an alternative border crossing. Most sailings continue or connect to Tarakan (from RM35), three hours from Nunukan.

BUS

Daily express buses for KK (RM45 to RM55, 10 hours) leave from a lot on Jln Chen Fook in front of the public library. There are frequent departures from 6.45am to 9.30am and a handful of night buses from 6.30pm to 8pm. Land Cruisers from next to the express-bus stand leave mornings for rough hauls to Keningau (RM80, 11 hours) and Sapulut (RM50, eight hours) to visit Batu Punggul, and are also available for charter.

Buses to Sandakan (RM30, five hours), depart hourly 7am to 2pm from the stand in Sabindo Sq, one block on a diagonal from the KK terminus, behind the purple Yassin Curry House sign. That's also the spot for frequent minivans to Semporna (RM8 to RM10, two hours) or Kunak (RM8 to RM10, 1½ hours), Lahad Datu (RM17 to RM20, three hours) and Sandakan (RM32 to RM35, six hours).

Bus ticket booths and touts line the terminus areas. Book ahead if travelling on holidays or weekends.

GETTING AROUND

Tawau's airport is 25km from town, almost halfway to Semporna, on the best stretch of road in East Sabah, also the route to Sandakan. A shuttle bus (RM10) to the local bus station in Tawau's centre leaves six times daily. A coupon taxi costs RM38.

Many dive operators provide transport from Tawau or the airport to Semporna. For travelling independently from the airport to Semporna, a coupon taxi costs RM95 (one hour, 20 minutes), hitching a ride with a waiting tour operator can cost RM30 to RM80; or take the shuttle to Tawau and either get out at the main road, cross to the other side and

wait for a minivan in the other direction, or ride into Tawau and catch a minivan from Sabindo Sq.

TAWAU HILLS PARK

Located 25km northwest of Tawau, this small reserve's forested hills soaring from the plain cut a dramatic figure on a clear day. Gazetted to preserve water catchment areas in 1979, establishment of the **park** (admission RM10) came too late to save most of the rainforest. What's left clings to 1310m Gunung Magdalena and a host of smaller, steep ridges.

Tawau Hills Park headquarters (Taman Bukit Tawau; ☎ 089-753-564; dm RM20, chalet RM200) has accommodation with steep discounts on weekdays. From park headquarters, a north trail leads to

hot springs and a waterfall three hours away. To the south, there's a 30-minute walk to **Bombalai Hill** (530m). A taxi from Tawau to the park costs about RM35.

MALIAU BASIN CONSERVATION AREA

Looking down on Sabah with Google Earth, the eye is inexorably drawn to what looks like the crater of an giant extinct volcano in the middle of the state, about 45km north of the border with Kalimantan. Zooming in, the heart starts to beat with excitement, for you cannot help but notice one thing: there are no roads here, only winding rivers and lush rainforest. This is **Maliau Basin Conservation Area** (MBCA; www.ysnet.org.my/Maliau/maliau/arial.htm), known very appropriately as 'Sabah's Lost World'.

TREKKING IN MALIAU BASIN

Several treks are possible in the basin, ranging from short nature walks around Agathis Camp to the multiday slog to the rim of the basin via Strike Ridge Camp. The vast majority of visitors to the basin undertake a three-day/two-night loop through the southern section of the basin that we'll call the Maliau Loop. This brilliant route takes in most of the main forest types of the forest and four of the basin's waterfalls: Takob Akob Falls, Giluk Falls, Maliau Falls and Ginseng Falls. Make no mistake: this trek is hard work, with some serious gruelling climbs up forest ridges and out of river valleys above the waterfalls. Do not attempt the trek unless you are in excellent shape (in fact, Borneo Nature Tours will require a letter from a doctor testifying to your ability to undertake the trek). Your tour operator will supply a guide and porters to carry your food. Other than a daypack, camera, leech socks, walking clothes and dry kit for the evening, you don't need to bring any special equipment.

THE MALIAU LOOP

This three-day/two-night loop is the best way to experience Maliau Basin and it's the route favoured by most tour operators.

Day 1: Agathis Camp to Camel Trophy Camp and on to Takob Akob Falls (12.5km)

After spending the night at Agathis Camp, you'll rise early and start with a gruelling 3.2km slog up and over the rim of the basin. There are several stages and false summits before you finally attain the rim, with ladders installed on the really steep bits. Once at the rim, the walk levels out and becomes very enjoyable as you pass through mixed dipterocarp and heath forest. The heath forest here is very atmospheric, with lots of moss and a few boggy sections. Keep an eye out for orchids. After traversing the heath forest, the trail gradually descends for 1.5km to Camel Trophy Camp, where you will eat lunch. The camp here takes its name from an endurance race sponsored by Camel, the participants in which built the camp.

After lunch, make the 2.5km trek onward to Takob Akob falls. The walk to the falls from Camel Trophy Camp starts as a pleasant 2km stroll before plummeting the final 50m down a very tricky valley wall to reach Takob Akob Falls. The falls plunge 30 metres into a natural basin with high jungle-clad walls on either side – this is where you'll really get that 'Lost World' feeling. After making the heartbreaking 500m climb out of the valley, most trekkers stop at the lovely seven-step Giluk Falls, a short detour off the trail on the way back to camp. The view of the falls disappearing over the ledge with the jungle as a backdrop is magical – but be careful on the rocks here as they can be slippery.

The total distance for the day is around 12.5km. If you have any energy left after the day (and no fear of heights), you might try climbing the ladder to the canopy lookout behind the hut.

Maliau Basin is the single best place in Borneo to experience the wonders of a primary tropical rainforest. More than that, it is one of the world's great reserves of biodiversity, a dense knot of almost unbelievable genetic richness. As such, it deserves to rank high on the itinerary of anyone interested in the natural world, as well as the strongest protections afforded by the Malaysian government and world environmental bodies. And a visit to the basin is always a poignant affair, as you'll share the road with a parade of logging trucks hauling trees out of the forest at an astonishing rate.

Unbelievably, there is no known record of human beings entering the basin until the early 1980s (although it is possible that indig-

enous peoples entered the basin before that time). It is only recently that the area has been opened up to a limited number of adventurous travellers, and it's still an expensive and time-consuming destination that is practically impossible to visit on your own.

Orientation & Information

Maliau Basin is located in the southern part of central Sabah, just north of the logging road connecting Tawau with Keningau, a minimum of five hours' drive from either of these towns by 4WD vehicle. It is part of the Yayasan Sabah Forest Management Area, a vast swath of forest in southeastern Sabah under the management of **Yayasan Sabah** (www.ysnet.org.my), a semigovernmental body

Day 2: Camel Trophy Camp to Ginseng Camp via Maliau Falls (18km)

After spending the night at Camel Trophy Camp, you'll rise early and backtrack slightly to join the trail across the plateau in the direction of Maliau Falls and Ginseng Camp. Initially, the trail rises gradually as you traverse boggy and mossy heath forest. After about a kilometre, you'll enter the brilliant nepenthes (pitcher plant) garden, which is home to what must be one of the world's best collection of pitcher plants, with a good variety of orchids thrown in for good measure. Next, you will slowly descend and enter a mossy forest, with the trails at time seeming like a moss-lined corridor. You continue to descend and re-enter mixed dipterocarp forest. Finally, after around eight kilometres, you reach a trail junction, where a branch trail heads off in the direction of Maliau Falls. Your porters will likely stash most of their luggage here to pick up on the return.

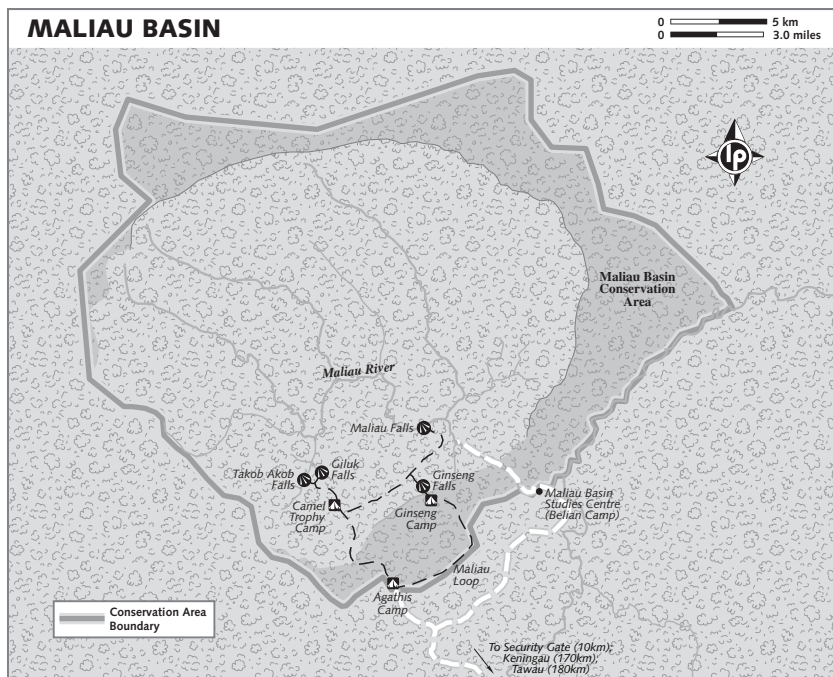
From the junction, the trail crosses a series of gentle ups and downs for about 2.5km before arriving at an abandoned camp (Lobah Camp) and a high knob that provides a brilliant view over the basin. Take a good look and then plunge down the valley wall, negotiating a series of ropes and ladders to reach a flat area and another abandoned camp before making the final vertiginous 700m descent to the falls, which you can hear roaring in the distance.

Maliau Falls are a great natural wonder of Southeast Asia and if the water level is high, you'll be almost blown away by their grandeur. You observe them from a shelf between the upper falls (20m) and lower falls (15m), which also makes a good spot for your lunch picnic. You can swim in the pool below the upper falls, but be very careful not to get caught in the current. Enjoy your lunch, because the climb out is murder. Drink plenty of water here and bring some for the walk (you'll need a filter or sterilisation agent).

The climb back to Lobah Camp is a real test of endurance and you should not rush it. From there, you return to the main trail and limp the final 1km mostly downhill to Ginseng Camp, which is built near lovely Ginseng Falls. Like Agathis Camp, Ginseng Camp is a bunkhouse with showers and a dining area.

Day 3: Ginseng Camp to Agathis Camp (9km)

After spending the night at Ginseng Camp, you'll start the day with a sweaty 1km climb up a ridge, after which the rest of the day is a cakewalk through mixed dipterocarp forest. There are some gradual ups and downs but the general trend is downward, which is welcome after the exertions of the previous day. Note that some of the distance markers on the trail are reversed, which causes a brief disheartening moment for tired hikers. You'll know you're near Agathis Camp when you start to see obvious signs of human activity, including a bit of litter, some numbers spray-painted on trees and, perhaps, the sound of a generator.



tasked with both developing and protecting the natural resources of Sabah. Innoprise Corporation, the commercial arm of Yayasan Sabah, runs tours to the basin through its subsidiary **Borneo Nature Tours** (☎ 088-267-637; www.borneonaturetours.com; Block D, Lot 10, ground fl, Sadong Jaya Complex, Kota Kinabalu), which also runs Borneo Rainforest Lodge (p147). Other tour operators in Sabah can also arrange tours of the park.

The **MCBA security gate** is just off the Tawau-Keningau Road. From the gate, it's a very rough 25km journey to the **Maliau Basin Studies Centre**, for researchers, and about 20km to **Agathis Camp**, the base camp for most visitors to the basin.

Independent visits to the basin are difficult: proficient 4WD drivers could probably get there under their own steam with private vehicles, and you could arrange for guides and porters at the security gate, if none are out with tours at that time, but the overall expense would likely be similar to an organised tour, once vehicle rental costs are taken into account. It is likely that as the Tawau-Keningau road improves (it is slated to be paved) and

interest in the basin increases, independent travel will become easier. Check online for the latest information when you plan your tour.

Accommodation in Maliau Basin is in the form of simple camps, which range from basic bunkhouses such as Agathis Camp to **Camel Trophy Camp**, a wood-frame two-storey hut with private bedrooms. None of the camps are luxurious, but after a day on the trail fighting leeches, they'll seem like paradise.

Geology

The Maliau Basin is a circular basin ranging in diameter from 20 to 25 km, with a total area of 588 sq km. It is surrounded on all sides by a high rim that reaches an altitude of 1700m along its northern edge. The floor of the basin averages around 800m in height, with some of the deep river valleys dropping as low as 200m. Despite its volcanic appearance, the basin is actually composed of alternating layers of sandstone and mudstone. The unique shape of the basin is thought to be the result of a general upthrust of the entire area, followed by accumulation of water in the centre,

which eventually breached the rim along the course of the present day Sungai Maliau. The combination of abundant rainfall and multilayered sedimentary structure of the basin gives rise to an incredible number of distinctive step-like waterfalls along all the watercourses of the basin.

Biology

The lower regions of the basin are mostly covered in lowland dipterocarp forest, the type of rainforest that most people imagine when thinking of tropical jungle. This forest gets its name from the giant dipterocarp trees that tower up to 60 metres over the forest floor. This is among the most diverse forests in the world, with up to 1000 tree species per square kilometre.

As you climb the ridges of the basin, you encounter lower montane rainforest, dominated by conifers such as the agathis tree, interspersed with palms, bamboos and a variety of smaller plants such as pitcher plants. Above 1000m, where the soil is poor and sandy, one encounters heath forest, which is dominated by low trees and mossy areas, as well as an incredible variety of pitcher plants (the plateau that most visitors traverse on the second day of the Maliau Loop traverses several kilometres of this forest). Finally, the upper reaches of the basin rim are covered with montane erinaceous forest (also known as rim forest), characterised by short, twisted trees and an abundance of moss and liverworts.

Researchers estimate that there are at least 1800 plant species in the basin, including over 80 orchid species, at least six types of pitcher plants, and at least two species of rafflesia. Over 230 bird species have been spotted in the basin, including the great argus pheasant, all eight species of hornbill known to occur in Borneo, giant pitta, peregrine falcons, and eight species of kingfishers. As for mammals, over 70 species have been recorded, including the Sumatran rhino, Asian elephants, tembedau (Bornean wild ox), clouded leopards, orangutans, gib-

bons, several species of monkeys, sun bears, wild boars, barking deer and mouse deer.

Unlike other areas of Borneo, where you will read about incredible wildlife but encounter precious little of it, those who trek into Maliau Basin have an excellent chance of spotting wildlife. Hornbills whoosh overhead at regular intervals, gibbons and other monkeys riot in the treetops, boars, deer and tembedau regularly flee the trail ahead of walkers, and the call of the great argus pheasant are a frequent and magical accompaniment to your trek. And if you're lucky, you might even spot a few elephants as you drive from the security gate to Agathis Camp. In short, if you're interested in trees, birds, mammals, butterflies, moths, fungi or flowers, you'll find it hard to make any progress down the trail as you'll be perpetually stopping to examine a new species. The biodiversity is truly mind-boggling.

Oh, and did we mention the leeches? They're there in force, so bring your leech socks and resign yourself to making a few donations.

Organised Tours

Borneo Nature Tours (☎ 088-267-637; www.borneonaturetours.com; Block D, Lot 10, ground fl, Sadong Jaya Complex, Kota Kinabalu) is the main operator here. They offer five-day/four-night all inclusive tours of Maliau Basin starting at RM3350.

Getting There & Away

There is no public transport to the park and your transport will be arranged by your tour operator. Access is by 4WD vehicle from either Tawau or Keningau. Most organised tours operate from Tawau, from which the ride takes about five hours under good conditions. There are frequent delays en route as logging trucks frequently get bogged down in the mud. Once at the security gate to the park, you'll have to take an even narrower dirt track for the final 20 kilometres or so to Agathis Camp.

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