

# Sarawak



The east Malaysian state of Sarawak sprawls along the northwest coast of the island of Borneo – a vast expanse of secondary forest and oil palm that gradually gives rise to jungle-clad mountains along the border with Indonesian Kalimantan. Just the name Sarawak is enough to evoke a cascade of romantic images: white rajas presiding over kingdoms of head-hunters and Sea Gypsies; longhouses sitting amid steamy jungle clearings; explorers venturing up nameless jungle rivers in search of undiscovered tribes.

While modern-day Sarawak is considerably more prosaic, you can still catch intriguing flashes of the old magic in various corners of the state. For starters, there's the capital city of Kuching – easily the island's most culturally rich city.

Then, there are the incredible natural attractions of Sarawak, several of which are world-class. Topping the list are Sarawak's incredible caves: the huge chambers of the Niah Caves National Park would be the state's most impressive natural highlight if they weren't overshadowed by those of Mulu National Park. Of course, Mulu is far more than just caves – it's got brilliant primary rainforest to trek through, high mountains to climb, wild geological formations to see and wild rivers to navigate. It is, without a doubt, one of the finest parks in Southeast Asia.

Then there are the rivers: the mighty Batang Rejang is rightly called the Amazon of Borneo, and a trip upriver is the quintessential Borneo experience. Similar trips are possible on Sungai Baram, and this is an interesting way to get to Mulu.

Finally, in northeast Sarawak, right up against the border with Kalimantan you'll find Borneo's very own Shangri La: the Kelabit Highlands, where you can trek through thick jungle, stopping each night in longhouses to savour traditional Kelabit hospitality.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Stroll the riverside promenade of **Kuching** (p162), Borneo's most culturally rich city
- Watch the oil palms and jungle slide by as you make your way into the very heart of Borneo along the **Batang Rejang** (p189)
- Take a Jules Verne-like adventure into the underground world of the **Niah Caves National Park** (p197)
- Climb to the Pinnacles – a forest of giant limestone arrowheads – in Borneo's best nature park, **Gunung Mulu National Park** (p205)
- Get back to the simple life in a longhouse high up in the cool **Kelabit Highlands** (p212)



■ POPULATION: 2.01 MILLION

■ AREA: 124,449 SQ KM

## HISTORY

Archaeological evidence suggests early man lived in Sarawak as long as 40,000 years ago, 30,000 years earlier than on the Malay peninsula. The Chinese started arriving around the 7th century, along with other Eastern traders, and from the 11th century Sarawak came under the control of various Indonesian factions. Many of today's indigenous tribes migrated from Kalimantan, including the Iban, who came here around the end of the 15th century and now make up around 30% of the state's population.

From the 15th until the early 19th century Sarawak was under the loose control of the sultanate of Brunei. It was only with the arrival of Sir James Brooke, the first of three so-called white raja, that it became a separate political region.

Brooke, invalidated from the British East India Company after being wounded in Burma, eschewed an easy retirement and set off on a voyage of discovery, aided by a sizable inheritance and a well-armed ship. He arrived in Sarawak in 1839, just in time to find the local viceroy under siege, providing the perfect opportunity to ingratiate himself with the ruling class. Brooke duly suppressed the rebellion, and by way of reward the sultan of Brunei installed him as raja of Sarawak in 1842.

When James Brooke died in 1868 he was succeeded by his nephew, Charles Brooke. Through a policy of divide and rule and the ruthless punishment of those who challenged his authority, Brooke junior extended his control and the borders of his kingdom during his long reign, which lasted until his death in 1917.

The third and last white raja was Charles Vyner Brooke, the second son of Charles Brooke, whose rule was rudely interrupted by the arrival of the Japanese in WWII. After the Japanese surrender in August 1945, Sarawak was placed under Australian military administration until Brooke, who had fled to Sydney, decided to cede his 'kingdom' to the British in 1946. On 1 July Sarawak officially became a British Crown colony, thus putting Britain in the curious position of acquiring a new colonial possession at a time when it was shedding others.

Cession was followed by a brief but bloody anticecessionist movement supported chiefly by Anthony Brooke, Vyner Brooke's nephew and heir apparent. About 300 government officers

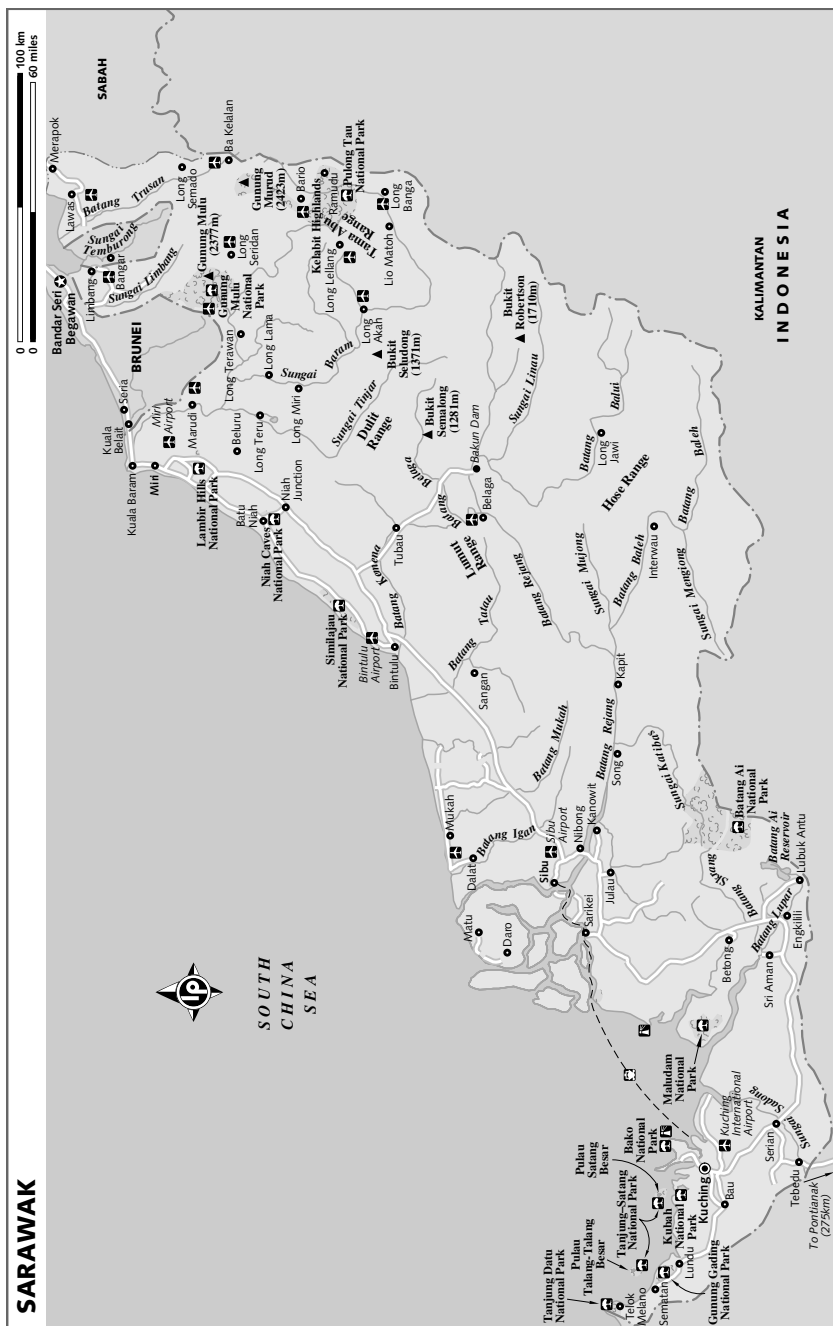
resigned in protest at being excluded from the political process, and the conflict climaxed in late 1949 when the governor of Sarawak was murdered by a Malay student. By 1951, however, the movement had lost its momentum and Brooke urged supporters to give it up.

Along with Sabah (then North Borneo) and Brunei, Sarawak remained under British control when Malaya gained its independence in 1957. In 1962 the British proposed including the Borneo territories into the Federation of Malaya. At the last minute Brunei pulled out, as the sultan (and, one suspects, Shell Oil) didn't want to see the revenue from its vast oil reserves channelled to the peninsula. At the same time, Malaya also had to convince the UN that Philippine claims to North Borneo were unfounded, as was Indonesia's argument that the formation of Malaysia was a British neocolonialist plot. The agreement was finally hammered out in July 1963, and in September of the same year the Federation of Malaysia was born.

This was also when the Indonesian Konfrontasi (Confrontation) erupted, initiated by then Indonesian president Achmed Soekarno, who hoped to destabilise the fledgling state. Paramilitary raids and army attacks across Kalimantan's border with Sarawak and Sabah continued until 1966. At the conflict's height 50,000 British, Australian and New Zealand troops were deployed in the border area, where some horrific confrontations occurred.

Internally, Sarawak also faced conflict during the early 1960s. The state's large population of impoverished Chinese peasant farmers and labourers were courted by the North Kalimantan Communist Party, which supported guerrilla activity. After the collapse of the Indonesian Communist Party in 1965, however, Indonesians and Malaysians combined forces to drive the rebels out of their bases in Sarawak.

Today Sarawak is the most multicultural state in Malaysia, with no outright ethnic majority. Economically it has avoided the pitfalls of unemployment and federal discord that plague its neighbour, Sabah, but the state budget deficit has grown steadily over the last five years and revenue still depends heavily on the much criticised timber industry. Accusations of corruption and cronyism are virtually a daily occurrence, and most people would be surprised to find out if a major



## VISAS

Sarawak is semiautonomous and treated in some ways like a separate country. If you travel from Peninsular Malaysia or Sabah into Sarawak, your passport will be checked on arrival in Sarawak and a new stay permit issued, either for 30 days or for the same period as your original Malaysia entry visa. If you are travelling directly to Sarawak, you will usually be given a 30-day entry stamp on arrival. When you leave Sarawak, your passport will be checked and a departure stamp put in your passport. When you travel from Sarawak to Peninsular Malaysia or into Sabah, you do not start a new entry period, so your 30-day (or longer) permit from Sarawak remains valid.

company didn't have some link to a government office. Despite the strongest showing for opposition parties since 1987, state elections in mid-2006 once again confirmed the ruling government amid widespread rumours of dubious tactics. Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud (now in his seventh term) has described his unchanged cabinet as 'transitional', but exactly what transitions are involved remains to be seen.

## CLIMATE

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

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Sarawak can be reached by air from Sabah, Brunei and Kalimantan (all within Borneo) and from Singapore and Peninsula Malaysia. It can be reached by road from Brunei, Sabah and Kalimantan. The Limbang Division of Sarawak can also be reached by boat from Bandar Seri Begawan (Brunei) and Pulau Labuan (Sabah).

### Air

**Malaysia Airlines** (MAS; ☎ 1-300-883-000, 03-7843-3000; www.malaysiaairlines.com) has connections between Kota Kinabalu (KK, Sabah) and Kuching, Sibul, Bintulu and Miri, as well as Gunung Mulu National National Park. They also fly between Kuala Lumpur and Kuching, Sibul, Bintulu and Miri.

**Air Asia** (☎ within Malaysia 03-8775-4000, outside Malaysia 60-3-8660-4343; www.airasia.com) has flights

between Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Johor Bahru (all in Peninsular Malaysia) and Kuching. Within Borneo, they fly between Kuching and Kota Kinabalu.

**Silk Air** (☎ in KK 265-770, in Singapore 6223-8888; www.silkair.com) has flights between Singapore and Kuching.

**Royal Brunei Airlines** (☎ in Brunei 221-2222; www.bruneiair.com) has flights between Bandar Seri Begawan (Brunei) and Kuching.

**Batavia Air** (☎ in Jakarta 386-4308, in Pontianak 721-560, in Kuching 628-166; www.batavia-air.co.id) has flights between Jakarta (Java, Indonesia) and Pontianak (Kalimantan, Indonesia) and Kuching.

For more details, see the Getting There & Away sections of the relevant destinations.

## Boat

There are speedboats between Bandar Seri Begawan and Limbang in far northern Sarawak; for details see p227. There are also speedboats between Pulau Labuan (Sabah) and Limbang and Lawas (also in far northern Sarawak); for details see p124.

## Bus

There are daily express buses between Kuching and Pontianak in Kalimantan (see p171). There are buses between Miri and Kuala Belait (Brunei), where you can get onward connections to Bandar Seri Begawan (see p232). There are bus connections between Lawas, in far northern Sarawak, and Kota Kinabalu (see p217).

## GETTING AROUND

Coastal Sarawak is traversed by a decent network of mostly paved roads, along which you can travel by bus, taxi and private car. A web of logging roads is being built at a furious rate into the interior and you can now reach destinations right up against the Kalimantan border by 4WD vehicle in some parts of the state. Malaysian Airlines flies between the major cities of the coast and also services some of the interior villages. Finally, river boats service some of the major rivers of the state, and this is one of the most interesting ways to get around. For details on getting around Sarawak, see the Getting There & Away sections above and the Transport chapter (p302).

## KUCHING

☎ 082 / pop 496,000

Raja Brooke's former capital city of Kuching is sure to surprise you – for who would expect to find such a stylish, hip and progressive city perched on this corner of Borneo? It's easy to see why Brooke chose this spot for his capital: overlooking the languid Sungai Sarawak, it seems the perfect gateway to both jungle and sea. With a long riverfront esplanade for evening strolls and some refreshing bits of greenery scattered about, the city has a pleasantly relaxed feeling. And hidden among the modern new buildings are some intriguing reminders of the city's past.

Without a doubt, the most attractive part of the city is the old Chinatown area, which stretches the length of Jln Carpenter. This is Borneo's most charming neighbourhood and the lanes are punctuated with excellent little restaurants, craft shops and markets. The east side of the city is more modern, but not without its attractions, including Jln Padugan, a strip of cool restaurants that wouldn't be out of place in Melbourne, London or San Francisco.

Additional attractions include a brilliant weekend market, some fine museums and a couple of well-preserved relics from the time of Brooke. All told, Kuching is one of the more character-filled cities in Southeast Asia and if you find yourself staying a bit longer than expected, you won't be the first.

### HISTORY

Built principally on the south bank of the Sungai Sarawak, Kuching was known as Sarawak in the 19th century. Before James Brooke settled here, the capital had been variously at Lidah Tanah and Santubong. Kuching was given its name in 1872 by Charles Brooke.

Unlike some of the other large towns in Malaysian Borneo, Kuching's historic buildings escaped damage during WWII, and many have been tastefully renovated.

### ORIENTATION

The main sights – and most of the city – are on the south bank of the Sungai Sarawak. The western end of the city is overlooked by the Kuching Mosque, and is home to markets, local bus stations and museums. The most useful hotels, places to eat, banks and offices

are between the mosque and the Great Cat of Kuching, 2km east. The waterfront is a busy thoroughfare between the eastern and western parts of town.

Across the river from the wet market is the Astana (Palace). Nearby, Fort Margherita is on a low hill and visible from most points along the waterfront; the new State Assembly Building is currently rising between the Astana and Fort Margherita and should be just about finished by the time this book is published.

Almost all attractions are within easy walking distance of each other; public buses or taxis are only really needed to reach the airport (about 12km away), the Jalan Penrissen express bus terminal (5km) and the Pending wharf for the boat to Sibul (6km).

### Maps

The free *Kuching Tourist Map*, available at the Visitors' Information Centre (opposite), has a good map of Kuching, lots of useful transport info and inset maps of Sarawak, Damai and Matang. The *Periplus Sarawak* map, which you can buy for around RM20 at Mohamed Yahia & Sons (below), has a decent map of Kuching and other parts of Sarawak (for downtown Kuching, the free map is better).

### INFORMATION

#### Bookshops

**Mohamed Yahia & Sons** (☎ 416-928; Basement, Sarawak Plaza, Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman; ☎ 9am-5pm) Has English-language fiction and books on Borneo, plus Sarawak maps.

**Popular Book Co** (☎ 411-378; Level 3, Tun Jugah Shopping Centre, 18 Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman; ☎ 9am-7pm) This is a more modern and spacious bookshop with a good selection of international titles but fewer local interest books, however.

#### Emergency

**Ambulance** (☎ 999)

**Fire** (☎ 994)

**Police** (☎ 999)

#### Internet Access

Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf in Sarawak Plaza offers free wi-fi to their customers (see p170).

**Cyber City** (☎ 243-680; off Jln Borneo; per hr RM4; ☎ 10am-11pm Mon-Sat, 11am-11pm Sun) This is easily the best internet café in town.

### Laundry

**City Laundry** (off Jln Borneo; 2kg load RM20; ☎ 7.45am-5pm Mon-Fri, 7.45am-12.30pm Sat, closed Sun) Overpriced compared to Mr Clean.

**Mr Clean** (Jln Green Hill; per kg RM6; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat, 8am-4pm Sun) Reliable and economical; next to the Mandarin Hotel.

### Medical Services

**Normah Medical Specialist Centre** (☎ 440-055; www.normah.com.my; Jln Tun Abdul Rahman) A private hospital with good facilities and staff. It's favoured by many residents and expats.

**Sarawak General Hospital** (☎ 257-555; Jln Ong Kee) For emergencies and major ailments only.

**Timberland Medical Centre** (☎ 234-991; Mile 3, Jln Rock) Private hospital with highly qualified staff.

### Money

**Everrise Money Changer** (☎ 233-200; 199 Jln Padugan; ☎ 9am-5pm) Cash only.

**Majid & Sons** (☎ 422-402; 45 Jln India) A licensed moneychanger dealing in cash only.

**Maybank** (☎ 416-889; Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman; ☎ 9.15am-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 9.15am-4pm Fri, ATM 6am-midnight daily)

**Mohamed Yahia & Sons** (☎ 416-928; Basement, Sarawak Plaza, Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman; ☎ 9am-5pm) Inside the bookshop here.

**Standard Chartered Bank** (☎ 252-233; Jln Padugan; ☎ 9.15am-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 9.15am-4pm Fri)

### Post

**Main post office** (Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg; ☎ 8am-4.30pm Mon-Sat)

### Tourist Information

**Visitors' Information Centre** (☎ 410-944; www.sarawaktourism.com; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat, Sun & holidays) Located in the old courthouse and with extremely helpful staff. Pick up the free *Kuching Tourist Map*.

### Visas

**Immigration office** (☎ 245-661; 2nd fl, Sultan Iskandar Bldg, Jln Simpang Tiga; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Visa extensions 3km south of town centre. From in front of the mosque, take CLL bus 11 or 14A/B/C. Get off at Simpang Tiga.

### SIGHTS

Like many cities, Kuching is much more than the sum of its parts. While it's got some great museums and a few historical attractions to keep you occupied, the main attraction of Kuching is the city itself. Leave plenty of time

to wander aimlessly and soak up the relaxed vibe and pleasant cityscapes of Chinatown, the waterfront and Jalan Padugan.

### Waterfront

Kuching's lovely paved waterfront makes for a fine stroll, especially when a cool evening breeze blows off the river. At night the promenade is ablaze with colourful lights and is busy with people buying cheap dinners or snacks from the permanent food stalls (the best of which can be found in front of the Hilton Hotel). While you're strolling, be sure to have a look at the **Brooke Memorial**, in front of the Visitors' Information Centre.

### Chinatown

Kuching's **Chinatown** is centred on Jln Carpenter and runs roughly from Jln Wayang to Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg. It's a collection of beautiful colonial-era shophouses and Chinese temples that is conducive to strolling (if you can take the heat). At the western end you'll find **Harmony Arch**, an ornate arch that marks the official entrance to the district. Continuing east along Jln Carpenter, you'll see **Sang Ti Miao** on your right. Take some time to enter the spotless main hall of this temple to soak up the gaudy brilliance (across the way you'll find a good Chinese hawkler centre in case you need to fuel up).

At the very eastern end of Chinatown you'll find the **Hong San Temple**, which is easily Kuching's finest Chinese temple. Thought to date back to around 1840, this Hokkien Chinese temple was fully restored in 2003. The new stone carvings, done by stonemasons brought in from mainland China, are superb, as is the Buddhist altar.

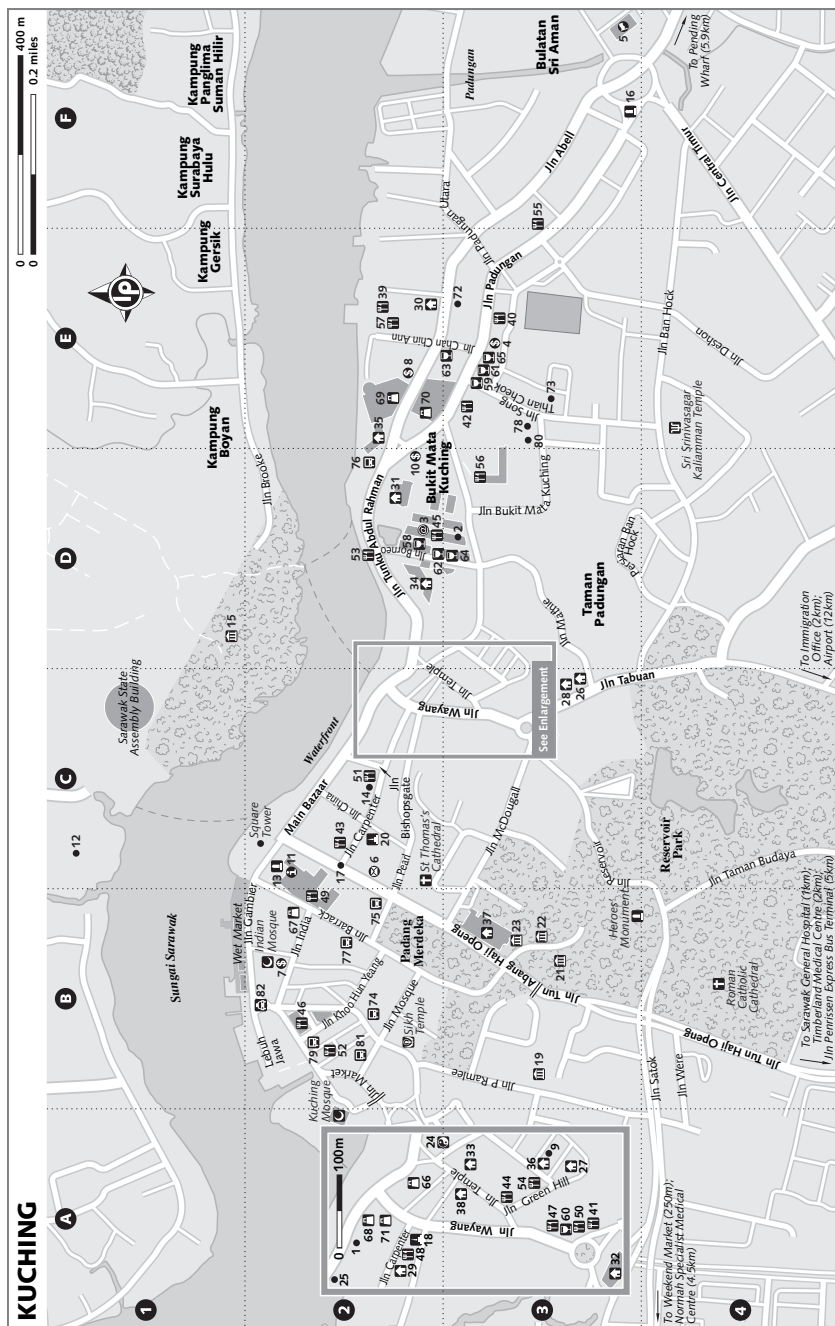
There is a big celebration at this temple in April, with a long procession of floats, lion and dragon dancers and other groups winding their way through town following the altar of Kong Teck Choon Ong (the diety at the temple).

Finally, be sure to have a look at **Tua Pek Kong**, the temple on the red wedding-layer-cake structure on Jln Padugan at the end of Main Bazaar. It's the most popular temple in town for local Chinese residents.

### Museums

#### SARAWAK MUSEUM

Established in 1891, the **Sarawak Museum** (☎ 244-232; www.museum.sarawak.gov.my; Jln Tun Abang



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Haji Openg; admission free; ☎ 9am-6pm) has a fascinating collection of cultural artefacts and is a must-visit for anyone who wants to learn more about the region's indigenous peoples and natural environment. It consists of two wings connected by an ornate footbridge.

The **Old Wing** houses the main ethnology and natural-history exhibits. There's an excellent Borneo shell collection and a decent stuffed bird collection, including interesting examples of art created with hornbill 'ivory'. The highlight, however, is the reptile area, which has some great stuffed snakes and some giant crocodile skulls. Here, observant visitors will find a display of a hairball taken from the stomach of a man-eating crocodile with the following legend: 'human dental plate found attached to hairball'. It seems the unfortunate victim wore dentures (Redmond O'Hanlon mentions this exhibit in *Into the Heart of Borneo*). And if this isn't enough to put you off from wading in the mangrove swamps, the 'watch found inside stomach' surely will.

Upstairs in the Old Wing you'll find a recreated traditional longhouse display that you can enter and explore. Nearby, there are

good wooden models of the different types of longhouse found in Sarawak. In the basketry section you'll find a beautiful Bidayu door charm, which was used to keep evil spirits out of the longhouse.

Across the footbridge, the **New Wing** (Tun Abdul Razak Hall) has temporary exhibits and is of less interest – check what's on before walking over.

While you're at the Sarawak Museum, be sure to have a look at the its **Art Museum** and **Natural Science Museum**, both of which are just down the hill from the museum's Old Wing. The former houses both permanent and temporary exhibits, some of which are very good. The latter was not open at the time of writing, but it is expected to open soon.

## ISLAMIC MUSEUM

Over the hill from the Sarawak Museum, the **Islamic Museum** (Muzium Islam Sarawak; ☎ 244-232; Jln P Ramlee; admission free; ☎ 9am-6pm) is well worth the walk. It's divided into seven thematically-based rooms: weapons; decorative arts and domestic utensils; Korans; Islamic architecture; science, technology, economy and literature;

music and costumes; and the coming of Islam to the Malay Archipelago. Of particular note are the fantastic wooden and metal boxes in the decorative-arts section and the fine carved panels in the architecture section.

### Astana

Built by Charles Brooke in 1869, the **Astana** (Bahasa Sarawak for 'palace') still serves as the home of the governor of Sarawak. It's not usually open to the public and it's not really worth the trip across the river to see it, since the view is actually better from the south bank of the Sungai Sarawak. If you want a closer look, you can take a *tambang* (river ferry) from the jetty in front of the courthouse for 80 sen.

### Fort Margherita

Built by Charles Brooke in 1879 and named after his wife, Rani Margaret, **Fort Margherita** (ad-

mission free; ☎ dawn-dusk) guarded Kuching against pirates. Sitting on a knoll opposite the waterfront, this little white fort, complete with battlements, offers fine views along the river. The impressive whitewashed building has been left to rot under the Borneo sun. It seems that the city fathers have decided that there's no point in maintaining the place, which is a shame, considering its historical significance. Now, all you can do is wander the weed-strewn grounds and look at the building from the outside. To get there, take a *tambang* (80 sen) from the pier on the waterfront, opposite the Hilton, walk up through the *kampung* (village), bearing left, past the school, through the parking lot and into the grounds.

### COURSES

**Bumbu Cooking School** (☎ 380-050; bumbucookingclass@hotmail.com; 57 Jln Carpenter; per person RM70)

### WEEKEND MARKET *Jeremy Tan*

The **Weekend Market** (Jln Satok; ☎ late afternoon Sat, 5am-noon Sun), locally known in Malay as 'Pasar Minggu', is a Kuching institution that dates back several decades. Every weekend, traders and farmers from around the city and the surrounding villages and longhouses converge on a compact area in the Satok neighbourhood, setting up wooden stalls and colourful tarpaulin rain covers, and sell their products, ranging from fresh fish to wild jungle ferns, power tools to herbal cure-alls. It's a garrulous gathering and a large proportion of the neighbourhood's residents, and some from further away, show up to do their grocery shopping for the week. It is also a boon for self-catering travellers. The market starts on Saturdays at 1pm in the afternoon, rain or shine, and ends on Sunday at the same time. Most stall owners will start closing up on Saturday evening at around 10pm at night, and some of them sleep there, waking up before dawn when everything starts up again on Sunday.

To get to the market from downtown, walk the kilometre or so from downtown along Jln Tun Ahmad Zaidi Adruce, and turn right onto the westbound lanes of Jln Satok after you have crossed under the Satok overpass. The markets are liveliest in the late afternoons and evenings on Saturday, and mid-Sunday morning. If the weekend coincides with a major holiday, however, then some of the stalls will not be open, for instance, the Dayak-owned stalls on Gawai. A good place to start exploring the market is from the pedestrian overpass. The first section, directly south, has stalls selling a wide range of goods from hardware to souvenirs to clothing. This is a good place to pick up a bargain on batiks and cheesy Sarawak T-shirts. From here, head towards the fresh-plants section, where you can stop to admire delicate bonsai, pick up a bunch of local flowers for your dearly beloved, or see what a durian sapling looks like.

Walking south from here, you will enter the general produce section, which sprawls around and takes up space wherever it can, with stalls selling eggs, vegetables and fruits, sprinkled with various others hawking drinks and snacks. The fruits section sells in-season popular tropical fruits such as watermelon and mango, and at the far end is a stall selling *cakoi*, which is deep-fried bread dough, a popular snack item. Going back up, stalls selling *kueh* (small Malaysian cakes) jostle with others selling Malay food and Chinese pastries. Definitely try *apam balik*, a Malaysian pancake folded over and stuffed with butter and peanuts, or *kueh salat*, a small cake made from salty glutinous rice and pandan-flavoured jelly.

Malay rice and noodle staples such as *nasi lemak* and *mee goreng* can also be found here, as well as some imports from the mainland, such as *nasi dagang* and *nasi kerabu* (blue rice!) from

Courses here are a great way to learn how to cook some of the dishes you've enjoyed in local restaurants. You start with a shopping trip to a local market, then you cook four dishes and sit down to enjoy them.

**Kak Rosnah's Kitchen** (kakrosnah@gmail.com; RM100 per person for groups of 2 to 4) Another great way to learn some local Malay and Bidayuh cooking. Classes are held in an old Malay *kampung* so in addition to cooking, you get a look at traditional Malay life. Classes are only held on Sunday.

### ACTIVITIES

**Y.C.Y. Massage** (☎ 013-816-9891; 1st fl, 42 Main Bazaar; one-hour massage RM35; ☎ 9.30am-9.30pm daily) A nice spot for a massage after a day of sightseeing or hiking. The blind masseurs and masseuses here are a friendly bunch and some are good sources of information about the city.

Kelantan. Close by is a large aquarium supplies stall selling exotic tropical goldfish. You can pick up *kampung*-style grilled fish just before heading into the fresh seafood section, featuring fresh catch such as pomfret, Spanish mackerel, skate and local shellfish. This section lies next to Pasar Tamu DBKU, the covered market that operates on weekdays when the weekend market is closed. Halal (food prepared according to Muslim dietary laws) beef and lamb is sold by butchers next to the seafood section. From here, the produce in the stalls start giving way to more local vegetables and spices and stall-owners here are more likely to be Bidayuh from the surrounding longhouses. Keep an eye out for local vegetables such as *kangkong* (water spinach) or *paku* (jungle ferns found only in Sarawak), fruits such as *salak* (a sweet and acidic fruit with skin resembling that of a snake's) or *dabai* (an olive-like fruit from the Sibuan area). If in doubt, ask the vendor as to the identity of what you are looking at, and how to eat it. Those taking Malaysian cooking lessons will find this a great place to buy some *serai* (lemongrass), *lengkuas* (galangal) or *kunyit* (turmeric) as well as *kerisik* (ground coconut, look for stalls with a grinding machine). Other items of interest to foodies are fresh *tempeh* (Javanese-style fermented soy beans), *belacan* (shrimp paste) and *cincalot* (fermented krill dip) while the more adventurous might want to try live sago grubs, which are available from time to time.

Pasar Tani Mega, which is a farmers' market organisation, is a new addition to the market, and features stalls selling strictly local produce, great for 100-mile foodies.

Finally, Chinese butchers set up their stalls in an isolated section, selling pork and other non-halal meats. If you are here during the durian fruiting season (November to February), check out the durian stalls that are set up at the intersection of Jln Rubber and Jln Rubber Lorong to smell and taste what the fuss is all about. Just don't bring them back to your hotel.

If you are looking for a meal to complement your market shopping experience, you can try Fu Xiang Café, where the laksa, only available in the mornings, is especially good; Kueh Fah Café in spite of its Chinese name, is a popular Malay *kedai kopi* (coffee shop); Buhari, an Indian café, has great *nasi biryani* (saffron rice flavoured with spices and garnished with cashew nuts, almonds and raisins); while Hiong Mon Low is another bustling Chinese *kopitiam* (coffee shop). If you are here on Saturday evenings, by all means head to the Malay hawker's area, which starts at 5pm, and where you can pick up some great *satay* and *nasi goreng*.

*Kuching resident Jeremy Tan is a photographer with an interest in Asian culture and development issues. You can visit his website at www.jeremytanphotography.com.*

and the top-end places located right in the centre of town along the river. Midrange places are scattered all about, with several located in the Jln Greenhill area.

## Budget

**B & B Inn** (☎ 237-366; bnbbswk@streamyx.com; Jln Tabuan; dm RM16, s/d RM25/35; 🍳 📺 📺) Simple but clean rooms, a rooftop patio and a fairly convenient location make this a very good choice in the budget bracket.

**Borneo B&B** (☎ 231-200; borneobedbreakfast@yahoo.com; 3 Jln Green Hill; dm RM17, s RM28-32, d RM34-36; 🍳 📺 📺) This homey place is popular with backpackers, although it's a little rundown and can be hot.

**Mandarin Hotel** (☎ 418-269; 6 Jln Green Hill; r from RM50; 🍳) This fine budget hotel is head and shoulders above the similarly priced joints nearby. It's simple, clean and good value.

**Carpenter Guesthouse** (☎ 256-050; www.carpenterguesthouse.com; 94 Jln Carpenter; dm RM28, r from 60; 🍳) Located in an old Chinese shophouse, this brand new guesthouse has a great atmosphere and helpful owners. Rooms are on the small side and quite spartan, but it's clean and well run, and it's got a great location. Wi-fi is available.

**Singgahsana Lodge** (☎ 429-277; www.singgahsana.com; 1 Jln Temple; dm RM30, r from RM80; 🍳 📺 📺) This stylish and well-run guesthouse has an unbeatable location and nice common areas. It's a bit overpriced, but very popular with Western backpackers.

**City Inn Hotel** (☎ 414-866; 276 Jln Abell; r RM46-70; 🍳) This compact hotel on the east side of town is better than most comparably priced places in Kuching. It's got fairly neat carpeted rooms and reasonably clean bathrooms.

## Midrange

**Fata Hotel** (☎ 248-111; fatahotel@hotmail.com; Jln McDougall; r RM52-80; 🍳) A slight step up in comfort from the budget hotels, this simple hotel has cosy rooms, a lift and its own restaurant. Rear-view balconies look out over lovely parkland, rather than the daily traffic-jam views out the front.

**Borneo Hotel** (☎ 244-122; 30 Jln Tabuan; s/tw/tr RM110/125/145; 🍳) With fairly clean and spacious rooms and a convenient restaurant in the lobby, this is one of Kuching's more reasonably priced midrange options. It's just up the street from some of the city's best dining options, and within easy striking distance of the Jln Carpenter Chinatown district.

**Harbour View Hotel** (☎ 274-666; www.harbourview.com.my; Jln Temple; r from RM115; 🍳 📺 📺) This large hotel is good value, with small but neat rooms, some of which have decent views over the city or river. It's very convenient to Chinatown and the waterfront.

## Top End

**Merdeka Palace Hotel** (☎ 258-000; www.merdekapalace.com; Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg; standard r from RM180, deluxe r from RM260; 🍳 📺 📺) The grand marble lobby and the great location overlooking the Padang Merdeka heighten expectations, but the service and rooms here are decidedly underwhelming. Some of the standard rooms here offer inside views of the parking garage and the food odours in the hallways don't improve matters.

**Hilton Hotel** (☎ 248-200; www.kuching.hilton.com; Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman; r RM200; 🍳 📺 📺) Dominating the waterfront even from across the street, the Hilton offers spacious, clean rooms, some of which have ripping views over the river (and desks to sit at while you enjoy the view). The rooms are otherwise similar to the other contenders in this price range.

**Holiday Inn Kuching** (☎ 423-111; www.holiday-inn.com/kuchingmys; Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman; r including 2 breakfasts from RM270; 🍳 📺 📺) Kuching's sprawling Holiday Inn occupies a fine piece of real estate right on the river smack dab in the middle of town. While the service is a little uneven, the rooms are of good quality and well-kept and the pool is welcome after a day of sightseeing. The views from some of the rooms are as good as any in town.

**Crowne Plaza Riverside Kuching** (☎ 247-777; www.crowneplaza.com; Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman; r from RM325; 🍳 📺 📺) Not only does the stylish Crowne Plaza have the usual spectrum of eating, business and sports amenities, it's also attached to the Riverside shopping complex, which provides an extra flurry of shopping plus a cinema and bowling alley. The rooms here are slightly nicer than those of the nearby Hilton, though the Riverbank Suites block the view of the river.

## EATING

Kuching is a good place to work your way through the entire range of Sarawakian Malay and Chinese cooking. There are plenty of good hawker centres around town where you can pick and choose from a variety of stalls, each specialising in a particular cuisine or

dish. For proper sit-down meals with wait-service, you'll find several stylish restaurants near the roundabout at the junction of Jln Tabuan and Jln Wayang. You'll find several more modern choices along Jln Padungan, which is currently undergoing a major restaurant, café and bar boom.

## Hawker Centres

**Chinese food stalls** (Jln Carpenter; meals from RM3; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) There are some brilliant Chinese hawker stalls in the small covered courtyard across from Sang Ti Miao. At the front on the right side there is a stall that does a sublime bowl of laksa (RM4, morning until lunchtime only). At the back to the left there is a stall that does a great ginger chicken in the evenings. Note that Chinese locals refer to this hawker centre as Lau Ya Keng in Hokkien.

**Hawker Centre** (Jln Khoo Hun Yeang; meals from RM3; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) One of the best hawker centres in town, with both Malay and Chinese sections, is in the west end of town near Kuching Mosque (locals sometimes refer to this as the 'open-air market'). On the eastern side are stalls selling hawker food; good dishes to try include: beef noodle soup (Chinese-style *mee sapi*) from Ah Mui (evenings until late); red *kolo mee* (noodles with sweet barbecue sauce) at the noodle stall right at the front entrance (this stall has no name but is open all day); shaved ice desserts from Lock Ann (open lunchtime until late; ask for 'ABC' – the Southeast Asian Italian ice); and tomato *kway teow* (another fried rice-noodle dish) from Teck Huat (open all day). This section is usually closed on Sunday. In the other section, on Jln Market, are stalls serving Chinese food. The steamed fish at It Hng is particularly good; other stalls offer steamboat, a Chinese version of the Japanese *shabu shabu* dish.

There's another, less interesting **hawker centre** (off Jln Borneo; meals from RM3; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) in the shopping complex opposite the Hilton.

**Green Hill Corner** (Jln Temple; meals RM3-4; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Several stalls here crank out a variety of noodle and rice dishes, including a brilliant plate of *kway teow goreng* (fried rice noodles). Problem is, the chef who makes this dish only shows up when he damn well feels like it.

**Riverside Food & Drink Stalls** (Waterfront Promenade, opposite the Hilton Hotel; meals from RM5; 🍳 dinner) What could be better than an evening constitutional

along the river followed by a fresh fruit juice and a few sticks of *satay*?

**Top Spot Food Court** (Jln Padungan; meals RM4-35; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) An excellent rooftop plaza with acres of tables and a good variety of stalls. Order anything from abalone to banana prawns or numerous varieties of fish, and chase it down with a cold bottle of Tiger. To get here, climb the stairs leading from Jln Padungan to Tapanga restaurant, and keep heading upstairs from there.

## Restaurants

**Oriental Park** (off Jln Mosque; noodles RM2.40; 🍳 5am-11.30am) Many Kuching Chinese start their day with a bowl of *mee sup* (ramen-style egg noodles in soup). This friendly little place does a brilliant version of this dish, complete with savoury bits of pork in a wonderfully rich soup. You can order this as *jooi mee* in Hokkien.

**Chin Sa Barbeque Specialist** (Jln Padungan; chicken rice from RM3; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Eat in or take away at this popular Jln Padungan barbecue joint, where savoury chicken or pork slices over rice are the speciality of the house.

**Min Jua** (Jln Carpenter; noodles with entrails RM6.50; 🍳 7am-noon) The signature dish – noodles with pork entrails – at this cramped, popular Chinatown noodle house won't be to everyone's liking. We tried it and found it surprisingly tasty and rich. Just ask for *mee sup*.

**Little Lebanon** (☎ 247-523; Sarawak Tourism Complex; mains from RM8; 🍳 lunch & dinner, closed Mon) This simple restaurant is a pleasant spot for a drink or a snack while exploring the Chinatown-Little India area.

**Zhun San Yen Vegetarian Food Centre** (Jln Chan Chin Ann; meals from RM10; 🍳 lunch & dinner; 🍴) If you find yourself at the east end of town in need of simple vegetarian food, this buffet-style restaurant is a decent choice.

**Tao** (175 Jln Padungan; meals from RM15; 🍳 10am-midnight daily) Tao rivals the following three restaurants as Kuching's most stylish spot. It serves a variety of Malaysian and pan-Asian fare in a setting that seems more Bali than Borneo.

**Bla Bla Bla** (☎ 233-944; 27 Jln Tabuan; mains from RM25; 🍳 dinner) One of Borneo's most stylish restaurants. Expect tasty fusion food in a cool, indoor dining area that you access by traversing stepping stones across a carp pool under the watchful eye of a Buddha.

**Junk** (☎ 259-450; 80 Jln Wayang; mains from RM25; 🍳 dinner Wed-Mon) Bla Bla Bla's sister restaurant, Junk is like a funky antique store that happens

to serve whopping portions of Western comfort food. If you're ready for a break from *mee goreng*, this is a fascinating choice.

**Living Room** (☎ 233-944; Jln Wayang; mains from RM25; ☎ dinner) The same management as Junk also runs the impossibly cool Living Room, where you can drink and dine in outdoor *salas* (living rooms) while soaking up the soothing ambience. You will no doubt find yourself wondering where you are: is this Borneo, Bali or Barcelona?

**Benson Seafood** (Jln Chan Chin Ann; meals from RM30; ☎ dinner) Ignore the aircraft hangar ambience and concentrate on the wonderful fresh Chinese seafood at this giant riverside eatery. The oyster omelettes are enough to make us want to hop on the next plane back to Kuching and the *midin* (jungle fern) stir fried with *belacan* (shrimp paste) is a Sarawak classic.

## Café's & Coffee Shops

**Life Café** (Jln Carpenter; drinks from RM2, meals from RM5; ☎ lunch & dinner) This atmospheric little tea house and Chinese eatery offers a wide range of mostly Chinese dishes, including several good vegetarian choices.

**Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf** (ground fl, Sarawak Plaza; drinks from RM3; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This popular chain coffee shop offers free wi-fi and air-con surroundings.

**Bing** (☎ 421-880; 84 Jln Padungan; drinks from RM4; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Bing is a stylish, dimly lit café in the heart of the Jln Padungan night-life zone. It's equally good for an afternoon cuppa or an evening tippie. There's wi-fi on premises.

**Gallery Café** (☎ 232-788; 88 Main Bazaar; drinks from RM4; ☎ 9am-6pm, closed Mon) What's not to like about a place that serves proper coffee in cool air-con surroundings, along with simple sandwiches and a good selection of desserts, with free wi-fi thrown in for good measure?

**Sin Mei Café** (Jln Green Hill; meals from RM5; ☎ breakfast & lunch) If you're staying in one of the Chinese cheapies nearby, you'll find this friendly little *kedai kopi* to be a great spot for your morning congee, noodles or toast and eggs.

## DRINKING

The shopping complex across from the Hilton Hotel on Jln Borneo has a collection of bars and nightclubs that make for an easy pub crawl – if one isn't happening, just walk to

the next one along. The bars and clubs along this strip are pretty casual and some can get a little rowdy at times. The main players here are **Cat City**, **Miami** and **Rainforest**.

Jln Padungan is a more upscale and civilised affair, with a selection of cool nightspots that would be equally at home in New York. Some likely spots to check here are **Mojo**, a wine shop and bar where you can buy wine and drink it on the premises; **Grappa**, a chilled-out spot with a long wooden bar under a sky of disco balls; **Ipanema**, a chic, spartan bar that also serves tapas; and **Soho**, a popular club where people dance to DJ-spun international pop on weekends.

Finally, there is an intriguing collection of restaurants-bars on Jln Tabuan, just south of the Jln Tabuan–Jln Wayang roundabout, including **Bla, Bla, Bla**, **Living Room** and **Junk** (see p169). You'll also find **Havana Café** here, which is more of a straight-up bar.

## SHOPPING

If it's traditional Borneo arts and crafts you want, you've come to the right place. The aptly named **Main Bazaar** is one long strip of souvenir shops from Jln Wayang all the way to Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg. There are several standouts:

**Fabriko** (☎ 422-233; 56 Main Bazaar; ☎ 8.30am-5pm, closed Sun) This fine little shop has a well-chosen selection of traditional and imported fabrics and clothes made from them.

**Unika Sarawak** (☎ 235-012; 70 Main Bazaar; ☎ 10am-5.30pm) We love the cluttered interior of this handicraft and wood-carving shop. If you're after something in wood, this is a good place to look.

**ARTrageously Ramsey Ong** (☎ 424-346; 94 Main Bazaar) Moving away from customary handicrafts, this private gallery exhibits and sells mainly contemporary paintings, and champions local artists, including Mr Ramsey Ong himself.

There are two main shopping centres in the downtown area, located almost directly across from one another:

**Sarawak Plaza** (Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman; ☎ 9am-9pm daily, shops from 10am) A little long in the tooth, but home to a few useful shops.

**Tun Jugah Shopping Centre** (Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman; ☎ 9am-9pm daily, shops from 10am) A new place with modern shops and a good bookshop.

For camera supplies and repairs, as well as digital services such as CD burning, **Empress**

**Studio** (☎ 241-009; 1B Jln India) is one of the best all-round photo shops in town.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

**Air Asia** (☎ within Malaysia 03-8775-4000, outside Malaysia 60-3-8660-4343; www.airasia.com; ground fl, Wisma Ho Ho Lim, 291 Jln Abell) has numerous daily flights to/from Kuala Lumpur at bargain-basement prices. They also fly to/from Penang and Johor Bahru. Within Borneo, they fly to/from Bintulu, Kota Kinabalu, Miri and Sibul. Check for prices as they constantly change.

**Batavia Air** (☎ in Jakarta 386-4308, in Pontianak 721-560, in Kuching 628-166; www.batavia-air.co.id; no. 1, ground fl, Padungan Arcade Garden, Jln Song Thian Cheok) has flights to/from Jakarta (Java) and Pontianak (Kalimantan) for around US\$50 one way.

**Malaysia Airlines** (MAS; ☎ anywhere in Malaysia 1-300-883-000, 03-7843-3000, in Kuching 220-618; www.malaysiaairlines.com; 215 Jln Song Thian Cheok) offers flights between Kuching and Kuala Lumpur (RM259) and Johor Bahru (RM199). They also fly between Kuching and Hong Kong and Guangzhou. Within Borneo, MAS flies to/from Bintulu (RM139), Kota Kinabalu (RM229), Miri (RM139) and Sibul (RM89).

**Silk Air** (☎ in Kuching 256-772, in Singapore 6223-8888; www.silkair.com; 7th fl, Gateway Building, Jln Bukit Mata) has flights to/from Singapore.

Finally, **Royal Brunei Airlines** (☎ in Brunei 221-2222; www.bruneiair.com) is reported to be planning to start a Kuching to Bandar Seri Begawan route (check online to see if it's in operation). For information on getting to/from the airport, see the Getting Around section (right).

## Boat

**Express Bahagia** (☎ 410-076) has boats running to and from Sibul (RM36, 4½ hours), departing from the express boat wharf in Pending at 8.30am daily. Note that this is an easier and faster trip to Sibul than the bus, which takes eight hours.

The express-boat wharf is 6.5km east of town in the suburb of Pending. Chin Lian Long (CLL) bus 1 (RM1.50, 40 minutes) connects the wharf with Kuching. It operates from the STC-CLL bus stand near Kuching Mosque and stops on Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman just west of the Holiday Inn. Taxis from town cost RM20.

Finally, note that there is talk that the Pending Wharf may be moved but this is, as

yet, unconfirmed. Ask at your lodgings before setting out.

## Bus

Long-distance buses depart from the **Express Bus Terminal** (Jln Penrissen), 5km southeast of the centre. There are regular services to Sibul (RM40, eight hours, 10 departures daily between 6.30am and 10pm), Bintulu (RM60, 10 hours, nine departures daily between 6.30am and 10pm), and Miri (RM80, 14 hours, eight departures daily between 6.30am and 10pm).

Numerous Sarawak Transport Co (STC) buses run between the terminal and city for 90 sen. The buses are 3A, 4B and 6 and leave from either in front of the mosque or on Jln Barrack behind the courthouse. A taxi costs RM15.

## TO/FROM INDONESIA

From the Express Bus Terminal, there are services to Pontianak (Damri, SJS and BH bus companies; RM45, nine hours, four departures daily between 8am and 1pm) in Kalimantan. Buses cross at the Tebedu–Entikong crossing. You must apply for a visa at the Indonesia Consulate in Kuching before setting out. If you want to travel in a bit more comfort, SJS runs a 'deluxe' bus at 11am, which has nicer seats and costs RM70.

## Border Crossings

The closest border crossing from Kuching into the Indonesian state of Kalimantan is located at Tebedu, near Serian. Travellers making land crossings into Kalimantan are required to obtain a visa beforehand from the **Indonesian Consulate** (☎ 421-734; 6th fl, Bangunan Binamas, Jln Padungan; ☎ 9am-1pm Mon–Thu, 9am-noon Fri) as the border posts at the Kalimantan border does not issue visas on arrival. Fees and requirements differ from country to country; contact the consulate for more information.

## GETTING AROUND

**To/From the Airport**  
Kuching International Airport (KCH) is 12km south of the city centre. STC's green-and-cream bus 12A does a circuit that takes in the airport (RM1.60), while CLL's blue-and-white bus 8A does a direct airport-to-city run (RM1.40). In Kuching, these services operate from near Kuching Mosque and stop on Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg, near the Padang Merdeka (note that 8A sometimes





range of vegetation and climbs the sandstone escarpment up to the *kerangas*, where you'll find many pitcher plants as well as some grand views over the nearby island plateaus.

The longest trail is the Telok Limau, a 12km walk that's impossible to do as a return trip in one day. You will need to carry camping equipment or else arrange to be dropped off by boat in the morning and walk back to park headquarters (expect to be charged about RM200; and be sure to let someone know of your plans). See below for the park's main trails; the times given are those recommended by the national park.

Take adequate water or purification tabs and be prepared for intense sun with sun hats and sunscreen as it gets particularly hot in

the *kerangas* and there's no shade for long stretches (sun-sensitive folks might consider lightweight long-sleeve shirts and trousers).

In the evening, park rangers may offer a guided night trek, if there is enough interest from guests. This is an opportunity not to be missed, as the wildlife present at night is entirely different from that seen during the day. The rangers are also particularly good at spotting things that an ordinary traveller would miss. Inquire at the welcome desk to see if there is a trek on that night. The trek lasts between 1½ to two hours and costs about RM10 per person.

#### WILDLIFE

Bako is a storehouse of incredible natural diversity: biologists estimate that the park is

#### BAKO TREKKING & WALKING TRAILS

The following is a selection of the park's main hiking trails. Note that times are estimates and muddy conditions and fallen trees can increase walking times significantly. And, as usual, keep in mind that hiking in the tropics is much harder than in temperate zones. A good rule of thumb is that one kilometre in the tropics is equivalent to two in temperate zones. A note on trail names: *tanjung* means point, *telok* means bay, *bukit* means hill, and *ulu* means upriver or interior.

**Tanjung Sapi Trail** (cliffs, viewpoint, 0.8km, 30 minutes) This short, steep trail leads to a point, which affords good views over Telok Assam, Gunung Santubong and the South China Sea. Proboscis monkey sightings are possible in the evening.

**Telok Delima Trail** (mangroves, 1km, 45 minutes) This walk leads to Telok Delima, the next bay south of Telok Assam. It's a good chance to see mangrove swamp and all the creatures that live there. The last part can only be done at low tide (during low tide, you can walk along the beach all the way to/from Telok Assam).

**Telok Paku Trail** (Cove Beach, 1.2km, 45 minutes) This trail follows the plank walk and then diverts along rocky cliffs before arriving at rocky Telok Paku beach and bay. More proboscis sightings are possible here.

**Telok Pandan Kecil Trail** (Cove Beach, 2.5km, 1½ hours) This trail initially follows the Lintang Trail across the plateau before branching off to Pandan Besar and then Pandan Kecil, one of the park's loveliest bays and beaches.

**Ulu Serait Trail** (park boundary, 4.8km, 1½ hours) This inland route parallels the park boundary and it can be combined with the Bukit Kruing Trail to form one very long (seven hour) and very tiring loop. The trail passes through some fairly open country, so be prepared for intense sun.

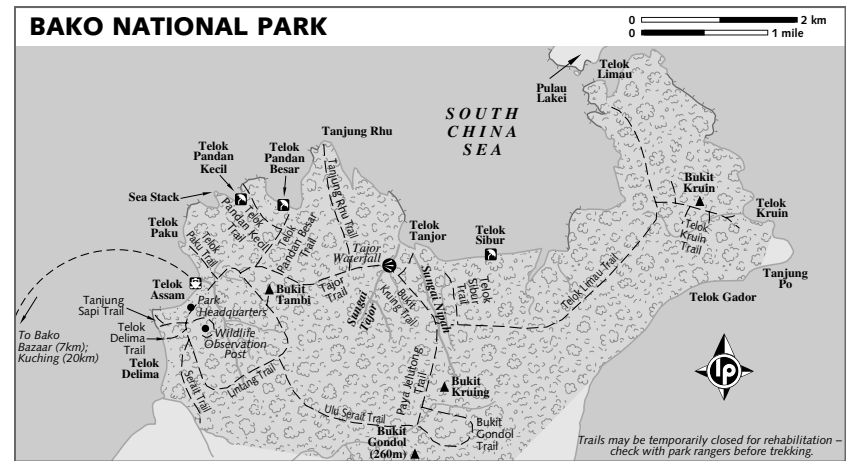
**Tajor Trail** (waterfalls, 3.5km, 2½ hours) This trail takes the Lintang/Pandan Kecil route before continuing east across the plateau to arrive at the Tajor Waterfall, a nice spot for a swim or picnic. A path leads from the stream to Telok Tajor.

**Tanjung Rhu Trail** (cliffs, viewpoint, 4.2km, 2½ hours) Largely the same as the above Tajor route, this trail branches off shortly before the waterfall and heads north to the Tanjung Rhu promontory.

**Lintang Trail** (circular path, 5.25km, 4 to 5 hours) This varied and challenging trail provides an excellent sample of the main geological formations and vegetation types in the park. Parts are exposed and can be hot. Steps and plankwalks ease your way through some of the tougher sections. The detour up Bukit Tambi is worth it for the views of Gunung Santubong.

**Bukit Kruing/Jln Bukit Gondol Trail** (mountain path, 7.7km, 7 hours) This challenging route is only for the fit and adventurous. Bring plenty of water, wear a hat and consider a long-sleeve shirt. There are two variations, one of which involves climbing Bukit Gondol (which is obviously more strenuous).

**Ulu Serait/Jln Telok Limau Trail** (Pulau Lakei, 12km, up to 10 hours) This marathon trail leads over varied terrain and through various types of vegetation all the way out to Telok Limau, at the northeast end of the park. You'll need to arrive at a water filter or purification tabs or iodine since carrying sufficient water would be feasible only for lowland sherpas. It's best to arrange to take a boat out to Telok Limau and then walk back, but the reverse is also possible. Make sure someone at the park knows of your plans when attempting this hike.



home to 37 species of mammals, 24 reptile species and 184 bird species (some of which are migrant species).

Walking trails pass through peat swamp, rainforest and, on the low sandstone plateau behind Telok Assam, *kerangas*. The latter, especially near the intersection of the Lintang and Ulu Serait trails, is a fascinating ecosystem where pitcher plants are common.

Animals include long-tailed macaques, silver-leaf monkeys, monitor lizards, palm squirrels and, at night, mouse deer, civets and culago (flying lemur). The best place to look for the proboscis monkey are along the beach at the end of the Telok Paku trail, where they forage around the trees lining the cliff. Walk very quietly and listen for them crashing through the trees – they will see you long before you see them. Telok Delima trail offers a more close-up experience: listen for grunts and crashing vegetation and follow the sound with your eyes. You've also got a good chance of seeing them feeding around the mangrove boardwalk just before the park jetty in the late morning.

Bird-watching is best near the park headquarters, especially in and around the mangroves at Telok Assam.

The large bearded pig that hangs around near the cafeteria is a minor celebrity in the park and a big hit with kids. It often ambles by in the afternoons.

#### BEACHES

The beach at **Telok Pandan Kecil**, surrounded by spectacular sandstone rock formations, is gor-

geous. Around the point is the famous Bako Sea Stack, which you have no doubt already seen on countless postcards; to get close to it for a photo, however, you'll have to hire a boat.

The quiet, attractive beach at **Telok Pandan Besar** is only accessible by boat from the park headquarters as the final descent from the cliff top of the trail is closed. The beach at **Telok Sibur** is accessible by foot but hard to reach as the descent is steep, and you have to negotiate through a mangrove swamp, but it is worthwhile as others rarely make it down here.

If you're thinking of hitching a boat ride to or from a beach, boats to beaches near park headquarters will cost around RM25 (one way or return), but to beaches further away it is quite expensive (eg RM80 to Telok Sibur). **Pulau Lakei**, on the park's northeastern tip, is accessible by boat (RM120).

#### Sleeping & Eating

There is plenty of accommodation at Bako National Park, including two- and three-room chalets, as well as hostels and a muddy campground. You can book accommodation through the **visitors' information centre** (☎ 082-410-944; www.sarawaktourism.com; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat, Sun & holidays) in Kuching. Phone bookings are accepted, but must be confirmed and paid for at least three days before your intended arrival.

The **hostel** (dm/r RM15/40) has four beds with a shared kitchen and bathroom. Various sized **chalets** (r RM50-100) are also available. Bookings are essential for the chalets and advisable for

the hostel rooms, though you should be able to get a bed if you arrive on a weekday. Note that 5% tax is added to all these rates.

Camping costs RM5 per person, but the campground is a swamp for much of the year. There's a shower block and lockers can be hired for RM5 per day. Bring your own utensils, sheets and sleeping bags. The monkeys are a particular nuisance near the campground and will steal anything that is not firmly secured.

The **cafeteria** (☎ 8am-9pm) sells cheap buffet noodle and rice meals. The adjoining shop sells a good variety of reasonably priced tinned and dried food, chocolate, biscuits, film and toiletries, although fresh bread, produce and vegetables are not always available.

### Getting There & Away

To get to Bako in Kuching, first take a bus to Bako Bazaar in Kampung Bako, then charter a boat to the park. Petra Jaya bus 6 leaves from near the hawkker centre (open-air market) near Kuching Mosque in Kuching every hour (approximately) from 7.20am to 6pm (RM2.50, 45 minutes). The last bus back to Kuching leaves Kampung Bako at 5pm. You can also go by taxi all the way from Kuching (RM35, 30 minutes).

A boat from Bako Bazaar to the park headquarters costs RM40 each way for up to five people, or RM8 per person for larger groups. The chances are that someone on the bus will be looking to share a boat, especially on a weekend; tourists sometimes wait at the boat dock for the same reason.

Take note of the boat's number and be sincere when you agree to a pick-up time. If you do want to share a different boat back, tell park headquarters your boat number – staff are happy to call and cancel your original boat.

It's a pleasant 20-minute boat trip past coastal scenery and fishing boats. From November to February the sea is often rough, adding a real touch of excitement to the ride, and at times it may not be possible for boats to approach or leave Telok Assam. If you're planning a day trip, be aware that boatmen may insist on an early-afternoon return time to beat the tides. Take a waterproof jacket to protect against spray in the open boats.

### SANTUBONG PENINSULA

☎ 082

Like Bako National Park, the Santubong Peninsula (also known as Damai) is a spit

of land jutting out into the South China Sea some 20km north of the city of Kuching. It's a popular getaway for wealthy Kuching residents and it makes a good day or overnight trip out of the city. The main drawcards are the beaches, a golf course, modest jungle trekking and a clutch of seafood restaurants in the small fishing village of Kampung Buntal, at the base of the peninsula. The peninsula is also known for a collection of primitive rock carvings about 1.5km inland from the coast. The peninsula also has the Sarawak Cultural Village, a photogenic ethnic theme park that's the site of the annual Rainforest World Music Festival (p167).

### Sights & Activities

#### SARAWAK CULTURAL VILLAGE

Surrounding an artificial lake at the foot of Gunung Santubong, the **Sarawak Cultural Village** (☎ 846-411; www.scv.com.my; adult/child RM60/30; ☎ 9am-5.15pm) is an excellent living museum. It has examples of traditional dwellings built by different peoples of Sarawak – in this case Orang Ulu, Bidayuh, Iban and Melanau – as well as Malay and Chinese houses.

There are six buildings in all, plus a games centre and a shelter of the type used by the nomadic Penan in the jungle. The dwellings are staffed by tribespeople who demonstrate local arts and crafts, including basketry and weaving, blowpipe shooting, sago processing and bird's nest-goods production. Even travellers who have ventured to the Borneo interior are generally impressed by this unique opportunity to see the original styles of the now modernised longhouses. Many of the participants speak English well and can offer a wealth of information about Sarawak.

There's also a twice-daily performance showcasing the traditional dances of the various tribes, which include spectacular physical feats such as the Melanau funeral pole dance. The audience is usually invited onstage to dance at some point, but don't be put off by this breaking of the fourth wall, as dancing with your hosts is considered the thing to do in Malay and Dayak culture. It's all quite touristy, of course, but tastefully done and sincere in intent.

All the tribespeople are paid to take part in the daily activities, and they sell their own products for additional income. Great pains are taken to make the village authentic – just to prove the point, the nomadic Penan occasionally go AWOL.

Hotels and travel agencies in Kuching have packages that include admission, lunch and transport ranging in price from RM80 to RM100. An extra RM30 will net you dinner at a seafood restaurant in Kampung Buntal. If you're planning to get married in Sarawak, you can choose to tie the knot in style here according to Iban, Bidayuh, Orang Ulu or Malay ceremonies.

There's no public transport to the village, but a shuttle bus leaves the Holiday Inn Kuching at 9am and 12.30pm, returning at 1.45pm and 5.30pm (RM10 each way).

#### JUNGLE WALKING

The Santubong Peninsula offers good jungle walking within easy reach of Kuching, and more adventurous walkers can attempt the ascent of **Gunung Santubong** (810m), a 3.4km trail that takes around five hours one way.

An easy to moderate circular walk (2km, one to two hours) starts near the Holiday Inn Resort and ends near the cultural village, passing a pretty **waterfall** on the way. Both trails start at the **Green Paradise Café**, where you register and pay a RM1 fee. The trails are well marked so you shouldn't get lost. If you really wish to put in the hours, there's a camp site near the café, but if you want to make an overnight trek you'd be better off investigating somewhere more adventurous like Bako National Park.

#### ROCK CARVINGS

Although they're a little difficult to find, the Santubong rock carvings on Sungai Jaong are worth seeking out, if you have an interest in archaeology. There's said to be nearly 40 of these artefacts, mostly carvings on boulders (including a distinct human figure), though it's unlikely you'll be able to find that many without spending quite a bit of time looking around. An accurate dating of the site hasn't been made yet, but it's thought to be at least a thousand years old. Chinese ceramic pieces from the Tang dynasty and evidence of iron-making have also been found here, making it one of Sarawak's most important archaeological sites.

To reach the petroglyphs, turn into a gravel road south off the main road going into Santubong, about 3km after the turn-off for Kampung Buntal and near the 6km marker on the road to Damai. The gravel road will take you to two houses and a walking trail to

the rock is behind them. You will more than likely need to ask a local for directions. The site is called Batu Gambar in Malay, but don't be surprised if the first local you ask does not know about it – keep trying and you'll find someone who does.

#### WILDLIFE TOURS

The Santubong area is home to a wide variety of wildlife, and guided wildlife tours are beginning to catch on here. Commonly spotted species include endangered Irrawaddy dolphins, known locally as *pesut*, estuarine monkeys, crocodiles and all manner of birds

**CPH Travel** (☎ 242-289; www.cphtravel.com.my; per person RM150, minimum 2 persons), based in Santubong, runs wildlife tours to the area. If you are already in the Santubong-Buntal area, consider going with local Buntal boatman, **Mr Ehwah bin Ibrahim** (☎ 019-826-5680), who offers a selection of tours of the area. Expect to pay around RM450 for a four-person boat for a dolphin-and-mangrove tour, and be sure to book three or four days in advance. **Camp Permai** (☎ 846-847) offers guided kayaking tours for about RM60 per person.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Sarawak Cultural Village** (☎ 846-411; psw@scv.com.my; food & lodging packages per person per night from RM60) Theme village stays can be arranged with packages of varying lengths in the dwelling of your choice. Prices vary according to group size and length of stay.

**Permai Rainforest Resort** (☎ 846-487; www.permairainforest.com; Damai Beach, Santubong; camp site RM10, longhouses RM120, treehouses RM198, cabins RM208-228; ♿) This excellent ecofriendly nature retreat offers a choice of longhouse dorms, six- to eight-person cabins and luxury treehouse rooms (which include breakfast and minibar), as well as space for camping. Even better, the adjoining Camp Permai training centre (day entry RM5) is the best spot on the peninsula for leisure and adventure activities, with a high-ropes course, rock climbing, kayaking, boat cruises, obstacle course and abseiling to name but a few. This place is good for those travelling with children.

**Nanga Damai Luxury Homestay** (☎ 019-887-1017; www.nangadamai.com; Jln Sultan Tengah, Santubong; r RM80-120; ♿ ♿) If you're expecting a mattress on a longhouse veranda you might be surprised – this lovely family-run guesthouse isn't kidding when it says 'luxury', and the beautiful

garden setting makes it easy to meet the two-night minimum stay. Breakfast is included and there's even a private jungle trail, but children under 12 are not permitted.

**Santubong Kuching Resort** (☎ 846-888; skresort@po.jaring.my; Jln Sultan Tengah, Santubong; weekend r RM138-380, slightly cheaper on weekdays; 🏠 🚶) This home-grown alternative to the big resorts has an equally good range of facilities, plus activities such as tennis, basketball, water sports, golf and mountain biking. The beach is a five-minute walk and discount packages are usually available.

**Holiday Inn Resort Damai Beach** (☎ 846-999; www.holiday-inn.com/damaiibeach; Teluk Bandung, Santubong; r RM460-640; 🏠 🚶 🚗) A massive seafont resort with a touch of traditional design in its beach, pool and hillside suites. It's also close to Sarawak Cultural Village and has a nice beach, a spa, a pool and other resort-style amenities.

There are several restaurants around the resorts in the peninsula. Kampung Buntal, a few kilometres away, boasts a large collection of seafood restaurants with attractive patios on stilts over the beach, all very popular with Kuching locals, the favourite being Lim Hok Ann near the end of the restaurant strip.

### Getting There & Away

To reach Kampung Buntal from Kuching, take Petra Jaya bus 2D from the intersection of Jln Khoo Hun Yeang and Jln Market (RM2, one hour, leaves every 90 minutes from 6am). For Santubong, take a taxi from Kampung Buntal (around RM10, 15 minutes). The last return bus for Kuching leaves at 6.40pm; if you want to stay for a meal the only option is to take a taxi back to Kuching (around RM25, 45 minutes).

A taxi to the resorts costs RM25 to RM30 from Kuching; if you want to be picked up after dinner, expect to pay RM60 for the return trip. A taxi from Kampung Buntal to any of the resorts should cost around RM10. Taxis can also be hired for a trip from the resorts out to Kampung Buntal and Santubong.

### KUBAH NATIONAL PARK

Only 15km from downtown Kuching, **Kubah National Park** (☎ 011-225-003; admission RM10/5 adult/child) is yet another good natural retreat within easy striking distance of the city. While Bako has the edge for wildlife, Kubah offers good trekking and the trails are more shaded, which

is a plus for the sun-averse. The 22-sq-km park consists of a range of forested sandstone hills that rise dramatically from the surrounding plain to a height of 450m. There are waterfalls, walking trails and lookouts, and the beautiful rainforest is home to a wide variety of palms and orchids. Kubah National Park has also played host to two Hollywood productions, *Farewell to the King*, starring Nick Nolte and the more recent *The Sleeping Dictionary*, with Jessica Alba.

Walking trails include the paved entrance road, which runs right up to the summit of Kubah's highest peak, 911m **Gunung Serapi**; it's a two- to three-hour walk. The peak is often shrouded in mist but there are lookouts along the way. You can probably hitch a lift up then walk down. Most of the other trails run off the entrance road. The **Rayu Trail** links Kubah with the Matang Wildlife Centre, 5km from the turn-off, and takes about three hours to walk.

The **Waterfall Trail**, which ends at a natural swimming pool, takes about 1½ hours from the park headquarters, while an alternate starting point from the main summit road takes about 45 minutes from the turn-off.

A moderately easy trail, the **Belian Trail**, showcases its namesake tree, otherwise known as 'ironwood', a tropical hardwood traditionally used in longhouse construction and blow-pipe barrels. Bintangor trees are common in the park as well; the sap of these trees is currently being researched as it contains chemicals that may be useful in AIDS treatment.

### Sleeping

Park accommodation can be booked through the Kuching **visitors' information centre** (☎ 082-410-944; www.sarawaktourism.com; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg; 🕒 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat, Sun & holidays).

The Kubah park headquarters offers hostel, resthouse and double-storey chalet accommodation. In the comfortable, clean **hostel** (dm/r RM15/40), rooms are fan-cooled and have shared bathrooms. There's no restaurant, but a kitchen is supplied with all facilities, including a fridge and utensils.

**Forest lodges** (r RM120-225; 🏠) with full facilities sleep eight to 10 people each. Kubah is entirely self-catering; if you have transport, you can get supplies in the local *kampung* or even dine back in Kuching, but otherwise you'll have to bring all your own food.

### Getting There & Away

Matang Transport bus 11 leaves Kuching (from the stand near Kuching Mosque) for Red Bridge, near the turn-off for Kubah, at regular intervals (RM2, 40 minutes); there's no set timetable, but services run roughly every 90 minutes in the morning. The bus will drop you off at Red Bridge, near the Jublee Mas Recreation Park, from where it's a 4km walk to the park entrance, quite a lot of it uphill. Follow the signs for Matang Family Park, as the signposts for Kubah at the moment look like they're about to fall off. A taxi from town will cost at least RM70 return; arrange with the driver a time to be picked up. You can also try to get a ride on a private van (RM5 per person or RM35 for the whole van one-way, leaving near Saujana Car Park).

Another option is to drive, but the park is not well signposted. From downtown Kuching go west on Jln Satok, which will take you across Sungai Sarawak. At the first roundabout, take the first exit (Matang) and at the end of the road, take a right at the T-junction (not signposted). Follow the road until the roundabout and take the second exit (the exit itself is not signposted but there is a large sign before you enter the roundabout from this direction indicating the exit). You are now on Jln Matang Baru. Red Bridge is a bridge crossing a stream with metal railings painted red; before reaching it, you will pass Jublee Mas Recreation Park on your right. The junction has the sign for Matang Family Park.

### MATANG WILDLIFE CENTRE

A short drive beyond Kubah National Park, the **Matang Wildlife Centre** (☎ 011-225-012; admission RM10; 🕒 8am-5.30pm daily) was set up as a rehabilitation centre for endangered species released from captivity, particularly Borneo's larger mammals. Although it's supposed to recreate natural conditions as closely as possible, there's no denying that it's better described as a zoo located in the jungle.

The centre is popular with locals who come to swim at the **Matang Family Park** on weekends. There's accommodation, a cafeteria and a very good information centre here. There are twice-daily feeding programmes for orangutans, hornbills, sambar deer and crocodiles, as well as rainforest walking trails, including the **Rayu Trail**, which links up with Kubah National Park (three to four hours).

The animals are kept in enclosures, or sometimes even cages, and people who don't like zoos may find it depressing. It is important to remember, however, that the centre is part of an active rehabilitation program and that many of these animals will find themselves being re-released into the wild in the future.

Matang has a **hostel** (dm/r RM15/40) with four-bed rooms, two **forest lodges** (RM150; 🏠) sleeping eight, and a **camp site** (per person RM5). Book accommodation at Kuching **visitors' information centre** (☎ 082-410-944; www.sarawaktourism.com; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg; 🕒 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat, Sun & holidays).

The only practical options for getting here from Kuching are by taxi (about RM35 one way) or with a tour (around RM130 for an overnight stay). Walking from Red Bridge is not an option as the entrance is a further 12km from the entrance to Kubah National Park. Try waving down a local private van or hitching.

### SEMENGGOH WILDLIFE REHABILITATION CENTRE

**Semenggoh Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre** (☎ 082-442-180; adult/child RM3/1.50; 🕒 8am-12.45pm & 2-4.15pm) is a good place to see Borneo's famous great ape in fairly natural conditions. There isn't sufficient natural forest in the surrounding area to make actual reintroduction into the wild possible, but it's still a good chance to see orangutans in fairly natural surroundings. Semenggoh is less touristy than the much better known Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre in Sabah and it makes an easy day trip out of Kuching. Note that you're not guaranteed any orangutan sightings, because the apes are free to come and go as they please (sightings are least likely when surrounding trees are fruiting, usually between December and May).

The semiwild orangutans are fed from 9am to 10am and again from 3pm to 3.30pm, so it's best to time your visit to coincide with one of these sessions. It's not uncommon for orangutans to turn up at the centre itself rather than the feeding platforms, so don't rush off straight away if everything seems quiet. Even if the orangs are a no-show, other animals such as brightly coloured squirrels often put in an appearance to sneak a nibble at the buckets of fruit.

Semenggoh is 32km south of Kuching. To get there, take STC bus 6 from Kuching (RM2.50, 40 minutes, seven daily). Get off at the Forest Department Nursery, then walk 1.3km down the paved road to the centre. The last return bus passes Semenggoh at 2.20pm, but you should be able to flag down a private van (RM3) or a bus from the main road. A taxi from Kuching to the centre costs around RM40.

Four companies also operate guided day trips out to the centre for RM50 per person. Note that some tours don't leave sufficient time to explore the gardens and arboretum at the centre (ask before you sign up).

## BIDAYUH LONGHOUSES

A visit to a longhouse is a good chance to see how Borneo's indigenous peoples live, but don't expect a scene out of *National Geographic*: these folks are just as keen as the rest of us to enjoy the comforts of modern life and many of the longhouses near Kuching have been on the tour-operators' circuit for years.

**Kampung Annah Rais** is one of the most commonly visited longhouses. It's an impressive structure with more than 100 doors, and has preserved its traditional look, apart from metal roofs and satellite dishes that is. The villagers also keep the tour operators informed of any special festivities taking place in the village. **Kampung Benuk** is also regularly visited by tour groups, and there are many others in this area. Standard price for admission to these longhouses is RM8/4 per adult/child, which includes a guided tour of the cottage industries in the longhouse. There are quite a few homestay options averaging RM280 for a 2-day 1-night stay per person, including food and activities, and tourists can be accommodated even if they show up unannounced.

To get to Annah Rais, take STC bus 6 or 3A (RM2, one hour) from Kuching to Kota Padawan and try to find a shared van from the parking lot near the hornbill statues at the end of the main street (RM6 and up if there are sufficient passengers to share the ride; it costs RM35 to charter the van).

For Kampung Benuk take STC bus 6 (RM4, 1½ hours, seven daily) and ask the driver to let you off at the village. Travel agencies also have tours starting from around RM80 per person for a day trip, while a taxi will cost RM80 each way.

## GUNUNG PENRISSEN

Although it's actually located in Kalimantan, Indonesia, 1329m **Gunung Penrisen** is usually approached from the Sarawak side. Because of its location, it was a military hot spot during the Konfrontasi period, and was the site of a few border skirmishes. Ironically, the military outpost near the peak now serves as a scenic lookout with spectacular views into Kalimantan as well as back into Sarawak. Experienced, well-equipped climbers can climb the mountain, which can be done in a one-day burn or as a two- to three-day overnight trek. It's rough going, and a local guide is essential.

The most practical way to do the trek is to ask a tour operator in Kuching to put together a custom trip for you, as few offer set packages. It's cheaper for a group to attempt the climb to offset the costs of transportation and the hiring of the guide. An alternative arrangement is to ask the tourism office at Kampung Annah Rais to arrange a trek as part of your visit; cost for a guide is around RM50 to RM100 per day, depending on whether you wish to overnight at the summit. The Borneo Highlands Resort runs daily treks to the summit, a six- to seven-hour round trip, from its elevated position on the plateau.

The **Borneo Highlands Resort** (☎ 019-829-0790; www.borneohighlands.com.my; Jln Borneo Heights, Padawan; 3-day 2-night packages from RM688) is a massive development sitting on Gunung Penrisen Plateau, an hour's drive from Kuching. It's practically a village in itself, comprising a golf course, three chalet complexes, spa facilities and gardens. Considerable discounts are usually available through travel agencies. Transport to and from the resort can be arranged with pickups at the airport or hotels in Kuching, costing RM80 per person for a return trip.

## WIND CAVE & FAIRY CAVE

About 26km southwest of Kuching, the little town of Bau is the access point to two interesting cave systems, typical of the caves found all across the island of Borneo. There isn't much to detain you in the town itself, but the limestone caves make for an interesting trip out of Kuching, particularly if you won't have the chance to visit the grander caves at Mulu or Niah Caves National Parks. Take a picnic lunch, drinks and a good torch (these can also be hired at the entrance to each cave).

About 3km southwest of Bau, the **Wind Cave** (☎ 082-765490; adult/child RM3/1.50; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) is a network of underground streams on the banks of the Batang Kayan. Slippery, unlit boardwalks run through the caves, allowing you to wander along three main passages with chattering bats swooping over your head. Don't be tempted to leave the boardwalk if you see steps in the rock – this is the entry to a subterranean adventure-caving trail. While the cave system is fairly small, flash floods have been known to occur and you could easily be trapped or worse (there have been two recent deaths in the caves, so please don't take them lightly).

You can take a jungle trail through the surrounding nature reserve as well. About 300m from the entrance to the caves is the river where you can cool off with a refreshing swim. There are also barbecue pits, food stalls and change rooms. Feeble flashlights are available for rent (RM3) at the entrance so do bring your own.

About 5km further south, **Fairy Cave** is an extraordinary elevated chamber 30m above the ground in the side of a cliff. Fanciful mossy rock formations and ferns give the cavern an otherworldly aspect, and many have been designated as fairies with makeshift altars placed in front of them. As with other Chinese shrines, pilgrims will come on the morning of the 1st and the 15th of each lunar month to burn incense and place offerings. A new concrete staircase has been constructed recently to replace the old vertigo-inducing way up. The cavern is quite large and you could spend an hour exploring it.

From Kuching, STC or BTC bus 2 to Bau (RM4, one hour) departs every half-hour between 6.20am and 6pm. You can also take a detour here on your way to or from Gunung Gading National Park; two STC buses 2A, run to Lundu (RM7.80) daily.

To get to Wind Cave, take BTC bus 3 or 3A (RM1, one bus every 90 minutes or so) from Baru and walk the 700m to the entrance. For the Fairy Cave, take BTC bus 3 (RM1.40) and walk the 1.3km from the main road. The last bus back passes through at around 5.30pm. A taxi will cost around RM12 one way.

## LUNDU

☎ 082

About 55km west of Kuching, the quiet town of Lundu is the gateway to Gunung Gading

National Park. While most travellers use the town as merely a jumping-off point to the park, it's a pleasant place to get stuck for a day or two.

Lundu has a fish and vegetable market along the riverfront and a hawker centre at the western end of town. The town centre is a square bounded by old Chinese shophouses while brightly painted houses line the quiet country lanes. South of the square behind a row of shops is the bus station, which at this point is nothing more than a ramshackle building with few seats outside while a larger terminal building is being built. Beside it, a compact but very ornate Chinese temple is being constructed. In tribute to the area's main attraction, there's an oversized **rafflesia monument** next to the bus station.

The road north out of town leads to the beaches at **Pandan** (10km) and **Siar** (8.5km), but these beaches are often littered with flotsam and jetsam and you'll do better on the Santubong Peninsula (p176) or Bako National Park (p172).

## Sleeping & Eating

**Cheng Hak Boarding House** (☎ 735-018; 22 Lundu Bazaar; r RM25-35; ☎) This budget place has very plain rooms with a shared squat toilet and shower. Cheaper rooms only have fans. Check-in is at the Goh Joo Hok shop, a few doors down from the Lundu Gading Hotel.

**Lundu Gading Hotel** (☎ 735-199; 174 Lundu Bazaar, Jln Stunggang; r RM58; ☎) Offering a little more comfort, this central establishment has decent rooms and is a better choice.

**Ocean Beach Resort** (☎ 082-452254; oceanresort79@hotmail.com; chalets weekday/weekend RM180/250) Best among the series of bungalow resorts lining the coast north of Lundu, and offering wooden chalets that can sleep up to six, barbecue pits and other amenities.

Chinese *kopitiam* line the town square, and the hawker centre cranks up in the evening. **Happy Seafood Centre** (Jln Blacksmith; dishes from RM2.20), opposite the bus station, serves a variety of Malay and Chinese fare and also sells basic provisions.

## Getting There & Away

STC bus EP07 leaves from Jln Penrisen Express Bus Terminal for Lundu (RM10, 75 minutes) four times daily. If you want to stop by the Wind and Fairy Caves on your way

back to Kuching, STC bus 2A goes to Bau (RM7.80) twice daily. STC bus 2B (RM1.60, every hour) from the bus station goes by the beaches at Pandan (30 minutes) and Siar.

## GUNUNG GADING NATIONAL PARK

There is some good walking in this pleasant little park (☎ 082-735-714; adult/child RM10/5; 🕒 8am-12.30pm & 2-5pm), but most visitors come to see the rare *Rafflesia tuanmudae*. These massive flowers, blessed with a spectacular bouquet of rotting flesh, appear year-round, but at unpredictable times and in varying locations. Check whether any are in bloom before heading to the park by ringing the park headquarters or the Kuching **visitors' information centre** (☎ 082-410-944; www.sarawaktourism.com; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg; 🕒 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat, Sun & holidays); the flowers only last for a few days, so get here as soon as you can if one is in bloom.

The park features a plankwalk built around the area that the flowers are found. If unaccompanied by a ranger, do not step off the plankwalk as the rafflesia flower buds are small, difficult to spot, and can easily be crushed underfoot. If a plant is far away from the main boardwalk, a park ranger may be able to guide you. Do not stray from where he walks and follow his ranger's instructions. Guiding fees are RM20 per hour (per group). November to January are said to be the peak blooming months.

Few visitors take much time to explore beyond the rafflesia, which is a shame as there are some well-marked **walking trails**. Trails to the two viewpoints take about one hour and 1½ hours, passing by some pleasant waterfalls which make for refreshing bathing stops. Trekking up **Gunung Gading** (906m high; three to four hours one way) or **Batu Berkubu** on **Gunung Perigi** (five hours one way) requires a bit more effort. These treks are best as overnight trips, but camping anywhere other than at park headquarters is not allowed, so the only option is to have an early start and make it down by nightfall. A forest hut at the summit of Gunung Gading was being planned at the time of writing. At the top of Gunung Gading are the ruins of a British army camp used during the communist insurgency.

There's a popular **natural swimming pool** a few minutes from the office. The information centre at the park has good photos and displays on the rafflesia, wildlife and local culture. Staff

may offer you a cup of tea if they're not busy, but there's no shop or canteen, so you'll have to bring your own supplies or stroll the 2km to Lundu for an evening meal.

The **hostel** (dm/r RM15/40) has fan rooms with shared bathroom and fully equipped kitchen. Two three-bedroom **lodges** (r RM150; 🍴) with cooking facilities sleep up to six people. Camping, where permitted, costs RM5 per person. Weekdays are the least busy times.

To get to Gunung Gading, first take STC bus EP07 from the Jln Penrissen Express Bus Terminal to Lundu (RM10, 1¼ hours, four daily). The park entrance is 2km north of Lundu, on the road to Pantai Pandan; you can either walk there or take a taxi (RM15) from the Lundu bus station. Vans also operate on this route (RM2), but they only leave when full.

## SEMATAN

☎ 082

Sematan, 107km northwest of Kuching by road, is a pleasant fishing village on the coast facing the South China Sea. An attractive promenade lines the waterfront, and a long concrete pier affords wonderful washed-out early morning views as mist shrouds the hills and the surf pounds away in the distance. The northern end of the promenade leads to some colourful stilt houses and a park commemorating the early Malay fishermen of the area. The **beach** here is clean, deserted and lined with coconut palms, but the water is very shallow. In the direction away from town, you can encounter bucolic picture-book *kampung* scenery set against the dramatic Gunung Gading range, perfect for a hike or a bicycle ride.

Sematan is popular with weekending Kuching residents, and its importance for tourists may increase when facilities at Tanjung Datu National Park are improved. The tourist board has also introduced an annual carnival to promote tourism here. At the moment, though, the town is quite undeveloped and offers some good opportunities to experience local life.

Other attractions around the area are a crab farm run by the **Fisheries Development Authority** (☎ 711-358; undpsematan@hotmail.com) and the **Zuhrang Pelangi Silk Farm** (☎ 320-130; www.sematisilk.com; adult/child RM5/2.50), where silk is still produced using manual techniques. It may not always be possible to view silkworms at all times so call ahead.

## Sleeping & Eating

Jln Seacom heading west out of town leads to a few beach resorts, usually packed during the weekends, but you'll have the place to yourself on a weekday.

**Sematan Hotel** (☎ 711-162; 162 Sematan Bazaar; r RM25-50; 🍴) is a friendly place with simple tiled rooms and shared bathrooms. It's on the left-hand side of the road just before entering Sematan.

**Sematan Palm Beach Resort** (☎ 712-388, 295 Jln Seacom; www.sematanresort.com; weekday/weekend r/chalets for 2 people RM153/180; 🍴) The best of the bunch on Jln Seacom, with cheerfully painted chalets and a restaurant. It also rents out bicycles and sea kayaks. From the beach, you can walk all the way back to town, fording a small stream near its outskirts. Staff at both Sematan Hotel or Palm Beach Resort can help arrange transport to Tanjung Datu and Talang-Satang National Parks.

**Kampung Pueh** (☎ 013-827-4967; 2-day 1-night stays RM105, 3-days 2-night stays RM180) This Bidayah Salako village about 9km outside of town has a longhouse homestay program. Activities include a trek up Gunung Gading as well as visits to local industries. Contact Mr Jehim Milos.

Sematan has a couple of Chinese *kopitiam* facing the waterfront and some Malay food stalls near the wharf.

## Getting There & Away

To get to Sematan from Kuching, take STC bus EP07 to Lundu (RM10, 1¼ hours, four daily), then try to find a private hired van from the area around the Lundu bus station. A full van will cost around RM5 per person, but if you can't find any other fellow travellers, you'll end up paying between RM20 to RM30 for the whole vehicle.

## TELOK MELANO

The Malay village of **Telok Melano** is about 30km down the coast from Sematan (if you're driving, hug the coast in a north westerly direction). It offers pristine beaches and clear blue water against the backdrop of Gunung Melano. Activities such as nature walks, camping, boat trips and fishing are offered, and homestay accommodation (averaging RM230 to RM300 a night, inclusive of meals, national park entrance, boat rental and other activities) with villagers can be arranged. Contact Mr Hashim at the **Fisheries Development Authority** (☎ 013-8246785).

Getting to Telok Melano can be tricky. Speedboats for a day trip to Telok Melano can be hired for about RM250. Either the Sematan Hotel or Palm Beach Resort (see left) can arrange for transport. You can also ask independently at the wharf, but be prepared to be turned down if you have not made arrangements in advance, especially on weekends. There is usually a daily boat that runs from Telok Melano to Sematan and back, leaving Sematan wharf at around noon (around RM25 per person, although negotiable; locals will pay less); ask around the wharf or in the market, and with some patience, someone will direct you. Boats operating out of Telok Melano however cannot drop you off for a homestay.

## TANJUNG DATU NATIONAL PARK

Located in the far west of the state, abutting the border with Kalimantan, this 14-sq-km park protects rainforest, unpolluted rivers and near-pristine beaches, on which endangered turtles lay their eggs. The park boasts four trails, which include the **Telok Melano Trail** from Telok Melano village and the **Belian Trail**, which makes a steep climb up to the summit of Gunung Melano. The turtle hatchery on the beach is fenced off and strictly off-limits.

For park information and permits, inquire at the Kuching **Visitors' Information Centre** (☎ 082-410-944; www.sarawaktourism.com; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg; 🕒 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat, Sun & holidays).

Travel here is not recommended between October and March as the sea can get very rough. Snorkelling and scuba diving are allowed in certain areas; divers must be accompanied by an approved guide.

The only accommodation in the park is in the form of a **camp site** (camping per person RM5), for which you can make arrangements at the Kuching Visitors' Information Centre. If tenting is not your cup of tea, the Telok Melano homestays (left) provide a convenient base.

Access for day trips is only possible by boat from Sematan; prices start at around RM450 for up to 10 people. If you visit Gunung Gading on the way, someone at the park office may be able to organise a boat for you, otherwise try the Sematan Hotel or Sematan Palm Beach Resort (see left).

## TALANG-SATANG NATIONAL PARK

Talang-Satang National Park consists of two pairs of islands: Pulau Satang Besar and Pulau

Satang Kechil (Big and Small Satang Islands) and Pulau Talang-Talang Besar and Pulau Talang-Talang Kecil (Big and Small Talang-Talang Islands). Together, these islands comprise Sarawak's first marine park, established in 1999 to protect sea turtle egg-laying habitat.

Pulau Satang Besar and Pulau Satang Kecil form the Satang section (9894 hectares), part of which is open to visitors, who must visit under park warden supervision. Permits from Kuching's **Visitors' Information Centre** (☎ 082-410-944; www.sarawaktourism.com; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg; 🕒 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat, Sun & holidays) or the **Forestry Department** (☎ 082-348-001; www.sarawakforestry.com; Hock Lee Center, Jln Datuk Abang Abdul Rahim). On Pulau Satang Besar visitors can watch fragile eggs being moved from the beach to a hatchery and if especially lucky, witness baby turtles being released into the wild. Snorkelling and diving are permitted but only within certain designated areas, and divers must be accompanied by an approved guide.

A Sea Turtle Volunteer Programme has just been launched, where volunteers can help man beach patrols and other programmes over a four-day stay between May and September at the Turtle Conservation Station on Pulau Talang-Talang Besar. Inquire with Sarawak Forestry Department.

The Talang-Talang section (9520 hectares) is off limits to visitors due to the islands' small size and the sensitivity of the marine turtles. Local villagers and fishermen have retained their right to access the park and continue their traditional activities.

The Sematan Hotel or Palm Beach Resort (see p183) can help arrange transport to the park; boats cost around RM250. **CPH Tours & Travel** (☎ 082-243-708; www.cphtravel.com.my) run tours to the area. **Mr Ehwan of Buntal** (☎ 019-826-5680), can also run trips here from Buntal for about RM500.

## SERIAN

☎ 082

Serian is a tiny town 65km southeast of Kuching, and dominated by Bidayuh and Hakka Chinese. Tour groups often stop here to pick up gifts on the way to the longhouses, such as the Lemanak, located along nearby rivers. Serian boasts a bustling **market**, where people from nearby longhouses come to sell jungle fruits and herbs, snake meat, sago grubs and other unusual produce.

If you are going to Sri Aman, you could stop off at the **Ranchan Recreational Park**, a popular leisure facility with waterfalls, bridges and accommodation. It's just off the main road, and on weekends there's lots of traffic, so hitching is possible; buses 12 and 14 run every half-hour from Serian (RM1). Ask to be let off at the junction for Ranchan, which is about a kilometre outside the park.

STC bus 3A runs between Kuching and Serian (one-way/return, RM6/4, one hour) every half-hour between 6.15am and 6.45pm. The bus station is in the centre of Serian, near the market.

## SRI AMAN

☎ 083

Originally known as Simanggang, Sri Aman was renamed in 1974 to commemorate the signing of the peace treaty that signified the end of the communist insurgency in this area. A quiet town on the muddy Batang Lupar, halfway between Kuching and Sarikei, Sri Aman's main claim to fame is the *benak*, a tidal wave that periodically sweeps up the river all the way to Engkilili, scattering all craft in its path. It nearly took the life of writer Somerset Maugham, an event he recorded in a short story called 'The Yellow Streak'. The *benak* actually occurs every day but it's usually too small to be noticed. The really large ones only occur once or twice a year; a schedule for the next few tidal bores is posted at the wharf.

There is an annual festival, called **Pesta Benak**, to help promote Sri Aman as a tourist destination. Currently, there are plans to alternate the site of Pesta Benak to the other tributaries in the future. James Brooke's **Fort Alice**, a large wooden fortress overlooking the river, was built in 1864 and is a prominent although sadly rundown landmark.

The Skrang, Lemanak and Ai rivers flow into the Lupar, and many of the tours organised from Kuching bring groups to the longhouses along these tributaries. There isn't a lot of river traffic at Sri Aman itself, and most boats to the Lemanak and Ai Rivers leave from Engkilili, or outside town where the highway crosses the Batang Lupar.

There are a few hotels in town. **Mega Inn** (☎ 326-998; 1704-06, Jln Durian; r RM55; 🏠) has clean, comfortable rooms, while the budget-conscious can look for **Taiwan Hotel** (☎ 322-493; 123 Jln Council; r RM25-35; 🏠), which has spar-

tan fan rooms or slightly more expensive air-conditioned ones.

To get to Sri Aman, take STC bus EP09 from the Kuching Regional Bus Terminal (19RM, 3½ hours, five times daily).

## BATANG AI REGION

About 170km southeast of Kuching, tucked right up against the border with Kalimantan, Batang Ai is, despite its name (which means River Ai), actually a 240-sq-km reservoir. It's the only nature reserve in Borneo directly managed by indigenous people and it makes an interesting and adventurous, if difficult, trip. The region's rainforest features wildlife such as orangutans, gibbons and hornbills, and there are four walking trails.

The Batang Ai region is one of the few places where one can spot orangutans and hornbills in the wild. It is also possible to join local Ibans on fishing expeditions on the river, or on a hunt, although these days, the real business of hunting is usually carried out using a shotgun instead of a blow-pipe. If you don't have the time to make excursions into Kapit or Belaga, Batang Ai makes for more than an adequate Iban longhouse experience.

There's no visitors centre here and no accommodation on the reservoir itself. Transport, lodging and guiding are all provided by a cooperative of local Ibans and most visitors to the park come here through a tour operator from Kuching. Independent access is possible by chartering a boat through the cooperative, but this isn't cheap, and until more facilities are developed, the park is best visited as part of a longhouse tour. Longhouse tours here usually take at least 3 days and 2 nights, and some of the itineraries will offer treks into the park. There are five trails in all, three of them wandering through ancient Iban burial grounds, and the longest of the five summits Bukit Sium Ukap.

The **Hilton Batang Ai Longhouse Resort** (☎ 083-584-338; www.batang.hilton.com; r RM250; 🏠) is remote luxury par excellence. The indigenous-timber 'longhouses' bear little practical resemblance to their local cousins, but score much higher in the comfort stakes. Visits to genuine longhouses, jungle treks and other activities can be arranged. The Batang Ai reservoir is a two-hour boat ride away (the resort can arrange transport). Transfers from Kuching (RM110) take four

to five hours, followed by a short boat ride. Discounts are often available; check with travel agencies or the office at the Kuching **Hilton Hotel** (☎ 082-248-200; www.kuching.hilton.com; Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman).

# CENTRAL SARAWAK

## SIBU

☎ 084 / pop 229,000

Sibu is the gateway to Batang Rejang, making it a major transit point for travellers and a busy centre for trade between the coast and the upriver hinterland. It's a somewhat chaotic jumble of concrete buildings, with several large markets and a bustling Chinatown on the banks of the Rejang. While it's no rival for Kuching in terms of charm, it's certainly not a bad spot to spend a day before or after a trip upriver.

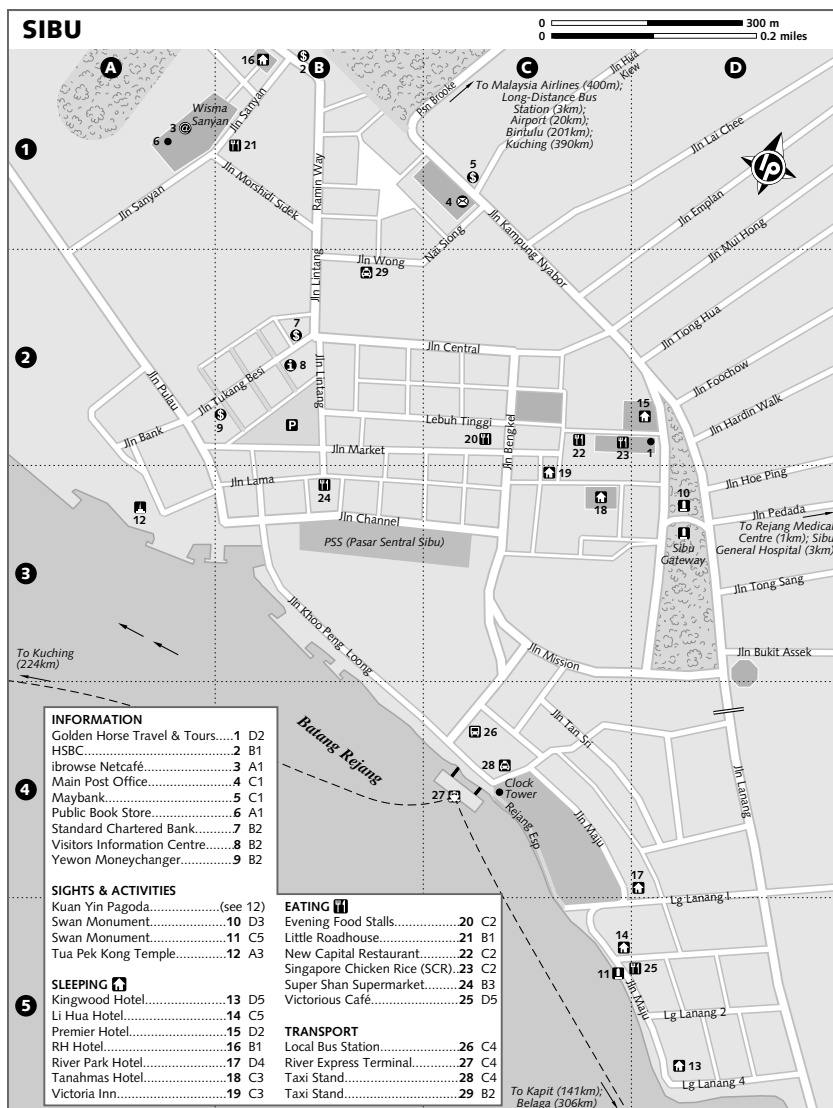
As well as its hectic waterlife and slightly dodgy nightlife, Sibu is known for a handful of superlatives, boasting Sarawak's tallest building (Wisma Sanyan) and longest bridge (the newly opened 1.22km-long Batang Rejang bridge), as well as the biggest town square in Malaysia.

## History

The earliest inhabitants of Sibu were the Melanau people, who were followed by Ibans and Malays. The Brooke administration used the town as an administrative and trading centre in the middle of the 19th century, although nothing remains of the fort they built in 1862. In the late 19th and early 20th century, Chinese immigrants moved to the area from Foochow (Fujian) province in China and the area was briefly known as 'New Foochow'. Batang Rejang reminded these immigrants of the Swan River in Fuzhou, China, and the swan remains the symbol of the city, a fact celebrated with two enormous swan statues – one by the river and one in the middle of town.

## Orientation

Sibu lies on the north bank of the Rejang, near the river's confluence with Batang Igan. A graceful seven-storey Chinese pagoda marks the western edge of the waterfront and a small clock tower marks the eastern; between the two, the concrete Pasar Sentral Sibu (PSS; Sibu



Central Market) building dominates the view over Jln Channel.

The express boat wharf is at the River Express Terminal on the western end of the Rejang Esplanade. Also on the waterfront is the local bus station; the long-distance bus terminal is at Sungai Antu, 3km west of town. The airport is 20km east of the town centre.

## Information

**Emergency** (☎ 999)

**Golden Horse Travel & Tours** (☎ 323-288; 62 Jln Kampung Nyabor; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Sat, 8am-noon Sun) This competent travel agency near Premier Hotel is the place to go for planet tickets etc.

**HSBC** (☎ 332-177; 131 Jln Kampung Nyabor; ☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Fri) There's an ATM at this bank.

**ibrowse Netcafé** (☎ 310-717; 4th fl, Wisma Sanyan, 1 Jln Sanyan; per hr RM3; ☎ 9.30am-9.30pm) Internet access near the western escalator bank on the 4th floor. There are also several other internet cafés on the same floor.

**Main post office** (☎ 332-312; Jln Kampung Nyabor; ☎ 8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-3pm Sat) This is one of the most reliable places in town to get cash.

**Public Book Store** (4th fl, Wisma Sanyan, 1 Jln Sanyan; ☎ 9am-9pm daily) Near ibrowse, this is the best bookstore in town, with a small selection of English books.

**Rejang Medical Centre** (☎ 330-733; www.rejang.com.my; 29 Jln Pedada) A group of private specialist clinics with 24-hour emergency services.

**Sibu General Hospital** (☎ 343-333; Jln Abdul Tunk Rahman)

**Standard Chartered Bank** (Jln Tukang Besi) Opposite the visitors information centre; changes travellers cheques and has an ATM. Be prepared to wait for the cheques to go through.

**Visitors Information Centre** (☎ 340-980; www.sibu.com.my; 32 Jln Tukang Besi; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-12.50pm Sat, closed 1st & 3rd Sat of every month) This office provides information about upriver trips out of Song, Kapit and Belaga.

**Yewon moneychanger** (☎ 330-577; 8 Jln Tukang Besi; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, noon-3pm Sun) South of the visitors centre; only changes cash.

## Sights

**Tua Pek Kong Temple** (Jln Temple; admission free; ☎ dawn-dusk) An interesting riverside Chinese temple where, if you're lucky, you'll find Mr Tan Teck Chiang in attendance. Mr Tan will give you a tour of the temple and explain (in lavish detail) his interpretation of Taoism and Buddhism. You can also scale the seven-storey pagoda to get a brilliant view over the town and the muddy Batang Rejang as it makes its way seaward.

## Sleeping

Most of the budget lodging in Sibu is of a very low standard and this is a city where even budget travellers should opt for a midrange option if at all possible.

## MIDRANGE

**Li Hua Hotel** (☎ 324-000; Lg Lanang 1; r RM45-80; ☎) On the riverfront, about 100m south (upriver) of the Swan Statue, you will find Sibu's best-value hotel, with spotless tile-floor rooms and good views from the upper floors. Highly recommended.

**Victoria Inn** (☎ 320-099; 80 Jln Market; r RM50-85; ☎) If the River Park and the Li Hua are

full, this centrally located budget hotel is a good choice. It's a tightly packed warren of rooms about a block away from the high-rise Tanahmas Hotel.

**River Park Hotel** (☎ 316-688; 51-53 Jln Maju; r RM55-80; ☎) The River Park is a fairly typical and well-run midrange hotel with friendly staff and a pleasant riverside location. Some of the rooms are a little old and noisy.

## TOP END

**Kingwood Hotel** (☎ 335-888; kingwood@tm.net.my; 12 Lg Lanang 4; r from RM170; ☎) A big hotel on the waterfront, the Kingwood has large, well-appointed rooms, many with good views of the muddy expanse of the Rejang. There is a rooftop pool atop the annexe.

**Premier Hotel** (☎ 323-222; www.premierh.com.my; Jln Kampung Nyabor; r from 195; ☎) The Premier has a good location but it's getting a bit long in the tooth. Rooms are about what you'd expect for this price and there's wi-fi in the lobby. A change of carpets would solve a lot of problems here.

**Tanahmas Hotel** (☎ 333-188; www.tanahmas.com.my; 277 Jln Kampung Nyabor; r from RM190; ☎) The square white block isn't the most attractive building in town, but the hotel is centrally located, rooms are clean and spacious and the staff are competent. There's a café in the lounge. Go for a poolside view rather than a town panorama. Rates include breakfast.

**RH Hotel** (☎ 365-888; www.rhotels.com; Jln Kampung Nyabor; r from RM260; ☎) Easily the best hotel in town, the RH has stylish new rooms with clean lines and good light. The bathrooms are spacious, there's a rooftop pool and it's connected to the Wisma Sanyan by a skybridge. Wi-fi is available.

## Eating

You'll find the usual selection of Chinese and Malay *kedai kopi* in town, along with a few proper sit-down restaurants and a few markets scattered around for self-caterers.

**Victorious Cafe** (Jln Maju; meals RM3-8; ☎) breakfast, lunch & early dinner) Dine under the gaze of the Sibu Swan at this popular mostly Chinese *kedai kopi* across the street from the Li Hua Hotel. There's a stall here that makes a smoky and wonderful plate of *kway teow*, which you can wash down with a nice iced lemon tea.

**Singapore Chicken Rice (SCR)** (Jln Kampong Nyabor; meals from RM3; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) The

name says it all and this simple dish draws a big lunch and dinner crowd at this popular chain. Not much on ambience, but it's tasty and cheap.

**Little Roadhouse** (☎ 319-384; Jln Sanyan; dishes RM4-10; ☺ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Unlike much of Sibu's nightlife, which leans towards karaoke and underclad young ladies, this balcony restaurant and 'fun pub' is good for a quiet beer, wine or steak.

**New Capital Restaurant** (☎ 326-066; Jln Kampong Nyabor; meals around RM25 per person; ☺ lunch & dinner) If you feel like a splurge, this brilliant Chinese eatery is sure to satisfy, with excellent fresh fish, meat and vegetable dishes. We recommend the butter prawns and stir-fried *midin* washed down with a fresh fruit juice.

For Chinese and Malay snacks, try the evening food stalls that set up in the late afternoon along Jln Market. You'll also find several stalls on the 1st floor of PSS (Pasar Sentral Sibu).

For self-catering and snacks, browse the markets or head to the **Super Shan supermarket** (Jln Channel).

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Malaysia Airlines** (☎ 1-300-883-000; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my; 61 Jln Tuanku Osman) Has several flights daily from Sibu to Kuching (RM89), Miri (RM138), Kota Kinabalu (RM210) and Kuala Lumpur (RM319). **Air Asia** (☎ 1-300-889-933; www.airasia.com; Jl Keranjil) has dirt-cheap flights between Sibu and both Kuala Lumpur and Johor Bahru.

### BOAT

Boats leave from the River Express Terminal at the western end of Jln Bengkel (which is at the southwestern end of town). At least two companies run express boats to Kuching (RM40, 4½ hours, departures 7.30am and 12.45pm daily). Tickets booths are inside the terminal.

Getting to Kapit is the first leg of the journey up Batang Rejang. Several boats motor the 140km from Sibu to Kapit (RM17 to RM30, three hours, departures between 5.30am and 1pm). Some boats continue up to Belaga, but most terminate in Kapit. All boat companies have booths at the terminal and they display their next departure times with large clocks outside their booths, making choosing your boat a snap.

### BUS

Bus companies have ticket stalls at the long-distance bus station (Sungai Antu) and around the local bus station on the waterfront. Buses run between the long-distance bus station and Sibu's downtown all day for RM1. A taxi to/from town will cost RM10.

Buses run between Sibu and Kuching (RM40, eight hours, regular departures between 6.30am and 10pm), Miri (RM40, 7½ hours, roughly hourly from 6am to 10pm) and Bintulu (RM20, 3½ hours, roughly hourly from 5.30am to 6pm).

## Getting Around

Sibu's airport is 24km east of town. Bus 3A runs to and from town every 1½ hours from 6.30am to 6pm (RM2.50, about 30 minutes). You could also try flagging down any rural bus that passes by. The coupon taxi fare into town is RM28.

The local bus station is on the waterfront. To get to the long-distance bus station, take Lanang Road bus 21 (90 sen) from the local bus station. It leaves roughly hourly between 6.30am and 5.30pm. A taxi costs RM10.

## MUKAH

☎ 084

At the mouth of the Sungai Mukah, the small village of Mukah is a quiet coastal town in a sparsely populated part of Sarawak far from the main north-south highway. There's not much to do here, but it's a nice spot to relax for a day or two en route between Miri and Kuching. The main attraction is Kampung Tellian, a quaint *kampung* laced with waterways and plankwalks along the river. It's a short taxi ride from the town of Mukah.

Mukah is accessed by a road that branches off the main north-south highway roughly halfway between Sibu and Bintulu. Once you leave the main highway, the road gets pretty rough. Your backside may complain as you bounce along the potholed road, but the views of the many longhouses en route will take your mind of your sufferings.

Most of the local people are Melanau, and the area's major attraction is the **Kaul Festival**, currently held on the second Sunday in April. *Pesta Kaul*, as it is called locally, is a lively beach celebration that includes enchanting enactments of Melanau rituals and games to honour the spirits of the sea.

Mukah is divided into an old and new section. The bus station is in the new section,

while most of the hotels, markets and restaurants are in the old section, along the river, a short walk away.

## Sights

In Kampung Tellian, you'll find **Lamin Dana** (☎ 871-543; www.lamindana.com; adult/child RM3/1; ☺ 9am-5pm), a superb cultural enterprise and living museum in a semitransitional Melanau house overlooking a river. Among the activities here are traditional massage by the village midwife, river tours to a sago farm and old-style sago bakehouse, and tastings of Melanau delicacies such as *umai* (raw fish marinated in lime and onions), smoked fish and sago shoots. Cultural shows can also be arranged.

Contact the centre in advance if you intend to visit, and bear in mind that during Chinese New Year, the fourth week of December and the Kaul Festival, accommodation is usually full.

To reach Lamin Dana from Mukah, take a Tellian bus (80 sen) and tell the conductor where you want to go. Lamin Dana can also arrange longboat transport (RM3 per person) to and from the water village – an enjoyable way to reach the town centre. A taxi will cost RM6; walking takes about 45 minutes.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Lamin Dana** (☎ 871-543, 019-849-5962; www.lamindana.com; Kampung Tellian; standard/deluxe r RM75/150) The rooms at the cultural centre in Kampung Tellian are simply furnished and the toilets and showers are clean. A Melanau-style breakfast is included in the price. The house has only nine rooms (eight standard and one family), so booking is a good idea, especially if you want to take part in activities. Lamin Dana can arrange private transport to/from Mukah.

**King Ing Hotel** (☎ 871-403; 1-2 Jln Boyan; standard/deluxe r RM50-65; ☺) The King Ing is the best hotel in town, with simple but neat carpeted rooms. It's not worth paying extra for the deluxe rooms here.

You'll find two other hotels in the centre of the old section of town that aren't quite up to the standards at the King Ing.

Perfectly located right on the river, the small stalls comprising the **riverside hawkers centre** (Jln Pasar; dishes RM2-6) are the best spots in town to have lunch or sip a beer and watch life drift, cruise or amble by. The **market** (Jln Pasar) near the Shell station nearby is the best place to buy fruit etc.

## Getting There & Away

Mukah's airstrip is just outside town; a van will drop you in the centre for RM5. **MASwings** (www.maswings.com.my; ☎ 1800-88-3000, 03-7843-3000) currently flies from Mukah to Kuching, Miri and Sibu once or twice daily, plus two weekly services to Bintulu. Prices vary.

Mukah is accessible by bus from Sibu (RM15, 3½ hours) and Bintulu (RM20, four hours, four daily).

## BATANG REJANG

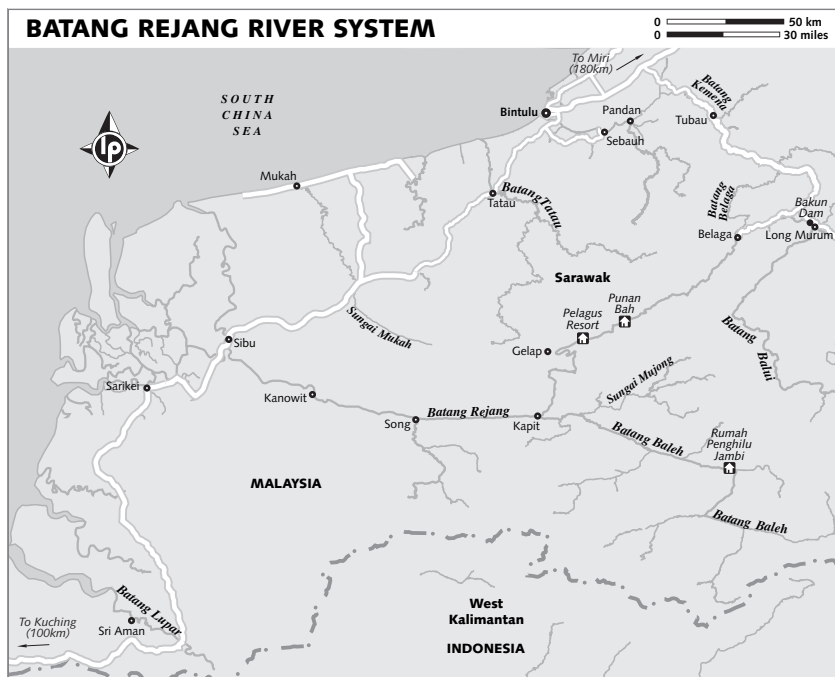
The 640km Batang Rejang has been called the Amazon of Borneo. Until the advent of 4WD roads and jungle airstrips, the river served as the main highway into the interior of Sarawak. Even now, it sees a daily parade of express boats and barges moving people and goods along its muddy length. Though it's not the jungle-lined wilderness that many travellers imagine, it still retains hints of its wild and romantic nature.

The Rejang drains a huge region of central Borneo, much of which used to be covered with pristine tropical rainforest. Sadly, huge swathes of this forest were felled in the last few decades and replaced by secondary forest, palm-oil plantations or open land. Indeed, a look at recent satellite photos of the upper Rejang show the river and its tributaries surrounded by a network of logging roads that seems to expand with each passing day. Adding to this tragedy was the construction of the Bakun Dam about 40km upriver of Belaga (see p193). If you want to see primary rainforest, you'll do better in Gunung Mulu National Park (see p205), parts of the Kelabit Highlands (see p212), Danum Valley (see p145) or Maliau Basin (see p154).

Many of the indigenous people of the Batang Rejang area still live in communal dwellings known as longhouses. While most longhouses aren't nearly as traditional as most travellers expect, a visit to one scattered along the Rejang's banks and tributaries is a great chance to interact with some of Borneo's indigenous people and to learn something of their culture. For more on longhouses, see the boxed text on p32.

Kapit is the last big settlement on the river, and it's where the longhouse people come for supplies. Further upriver, Belaga is smaller and more laid-back; it's a regular meeting place for friends and relatives from far-flung communities. In either town, the best strategy for finding someone to take you to a longhouse is





to make yourself known around town – sit in the cafés and get talking to people. If you don't have a lot of time, it's best to take a tour.

The best time for a trip up the Rejang is in late May/early June. This is the Gawai Dayak harvest festival, when Iban longhouses are busy with feasts and traditional dancing, and visitors are welcome (note that Iban are more prevalent along the lower reaches of the Rejang).

Along the river, the only hotel accommodation available is in Song, Kanowit, Kapit and Belaga.

**Kapit**

☎ 084 / pop 13,610

The main upriver settlement on the Rejang, Kapit is a bustling trading and transport centre that dates back to the days of the white rajahs. The main activity here is wandering the docks and market stalls to see what upriver people are buying and selling. Apart from this, you can visit Fort Sylvia, which dates back to 1880. Although Belaga is further upstream and seems to promise more authentic longhouse experiences, Kapit is in some ways better for this as it offers a wider choice of river

systems and several interesting longhouses within easy reach by river or road.

Fans of Redmond O'Hanlon's *Into the Heart of Borneo* know Kapit as the starting point of the author's jungle adventures, and if you want to head off up the Batang Baleh to emulate them, this is the place to make arrangements.

**INFORMATION**

**Good Time Cyber Centre** (☎ 746-303; 354 Jln Yong Chai; per hr RM3) Internet access.

**Hua Chiong Travel Service** (☎ 796-681; Jln Koh) Airline tickets and local travel services.

**Hyper Link Cyber Station** (17 Jln Tan Sit; per hr RM3) Internet access.

**KL Ling Moneychanger** (☎ 796-488; Jln Penghulu Gerinang) Changes cash and travellers cheques.

**Lee Cyber Centre** (Jln Tan Sit; per hr RM3) Internet access.

**Maybank** (☎ 790-122; 73C Jln Penghulu Atan)

**Public Bank** (☎ 790-106; 64 Jln Wharf) Changes cash and travellers cheques.

**SIGHTS**

A wooden fortification marking the white rajah's progress up the Rejang, **Fort Sylvia** (☎ 799-171; Jln

Kubu; admission free; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Sun) was built as Fort Kapit in 1880 to keep the peace and gain control of the upper Rejang. In 1925 the fort was renamed to honour Rancee Sylvia, wife of the third raja, Charles Vyner Brooke. The *belian* (ironwood) timbers have lasted well, even after massive flooding in 1934 almost reached the top of the doorway! In 1997 the fort was declared a historical building, and the Tun Jugah Foundation now runs it as a museum and a training centre for artisans, weavers and artists in the Kapit District. At the top of the stairs to the 1st floor is a brilliant mural of a hornbill surrounded by depictions of early Iban life.

The civic centre (Dewan Suarrah) houses the **Kapit Museum** (Jln Hospital; admission free; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat, closed 11.45am-2.15pm Fri). It has a couple of cultural displays and there's a relief map showing all the longhouses in the area, perfect for picking at random if you like a bit of spontaneity. Just opposite the centre is a lake with a network of small pagodas and wooden walkways, good for a stroll or a picnic.

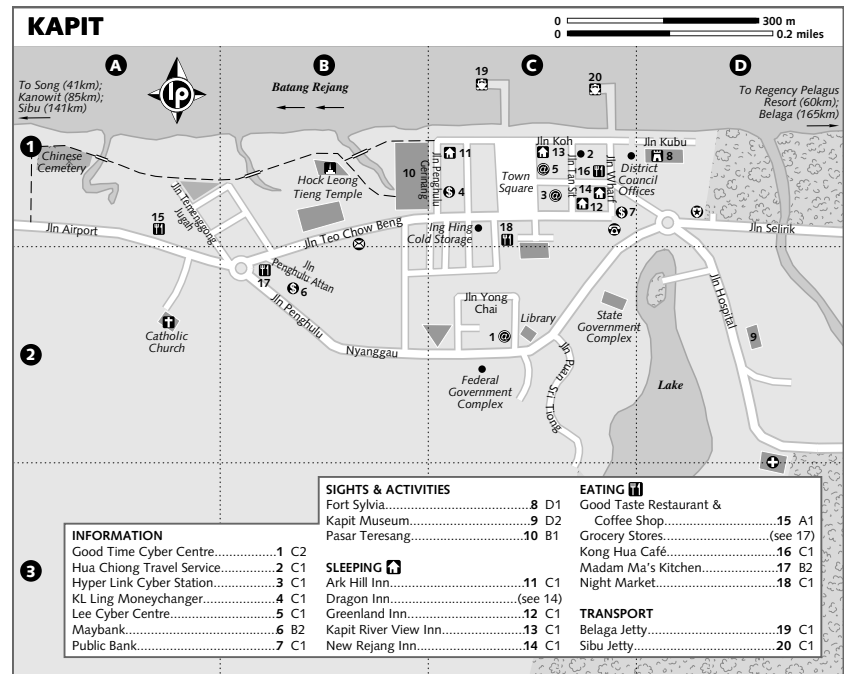
The focus of activity in Kapit is invariably the **waterfront**, which is packed with ferries, barges and longboats, all swarming with peo-

ple. It's fascinating to watch the activity on the water and to see people shouldering (or sometimes 'heading') impossibly heavy loads up the steep steps from the wharf.

Some of these goods will end up in Kapit's colourful daily **Pasar Teresang** (Wet Market). It's a chatty, noisy hive of grass-roots commerce, and the friendly vendors have a lot of fun trying to explain to tourists how to prepare and eat a galaxy of unfamiliar items.

**TOURS**

Kapit is a good base from which to explore the Batang Baleh, a river basin that is in many ways more traditional and less deforested than the upper Batang Rejang. **Joshua Muda** (☎ 019-467-6004; joshuamuda@hotmail.com), an Iban guide based out of the **New Rejang Inn** (☎ 796-600; 104 Jln Teo Chow Beng) leads a variety of trips to traditional Iban longhouses along the Sungai Mujong, a tributary north of the Batang Baleh. Joshua is a knowledgeable and experienced guide, and has even led more ambitious expeditions to the Kalimantan border. Three day, two-night tours start at RM380 per person (minimum of two).



Although in general a visit to a longhouse should be facilitated by a guide, there are a few settlements around Kapit that are quite accustomed to independent visits. Punan Bah, a traditional Iban longhouse, is located two hours north of Kapit along the Batang Rejang, and can be reached by express boat.

Rumah Penghilu Jambi, an Iban longhouse, is located at the final express boat stop along the Batang Boleh; simply ask around at the pier for departure times.

There are also some longhouses that can be reached by road, including Rumah Bundong (10km), an Iban longhouse quite used to day-trippers. **Maaruf Bin Abdullah** (☎ 013-895-5081), a locally based licensed guide, owns a van and can arrange transportation. Alternatively, ask around and negotiate with the van drivers near the morning market.

#### FESTIVALS & EVENTS

**Baleh-Kapit Raft Safari** A challenging two-day race recreating the experience of Iban and Orang Ulu people rafting downstream with their jungle produce to Kapit. Teams of eight head 50km down the Balleh and Rejang rivers on homemade rafts, overnighing in Iban longhouses. It's usually held on the last weekend in April. Check with the Kapit Resident's Office (☎ 796-230) or the tourist office in Sibul for dates and entrance fees.

**Gawai Dayak** Beginning on 1 June, Gawai Dayak celebrates the end of the harvest season in Sarawak. This is the best time to visit the region's longhouses, as the Iban people cut loose in a mania of feasting, dancing and *tuak*-drenched celebrations.

#### SLEEPING

**Ark Hill Inn** (☎ 796-168; 451 Jln Penghulu Gerinang; s from RM38, d RM63; ♿) This is about as close as you can get to riverfront accommodation in Kapit, although unfortunately the rooms don't have any riverfront views. Right opposite the market, you trade off a bit of space here for the 'luxury' of two shower heads per bathroom. A bit of noise does seep through but it's bearable.

**Dragon Inn** (☎ 797-435; 457 Jln Teo Chow Beng; d RM55; ♿) Sharing the same building as the much nicer New Rejang Inn, the Dragon Inn features frighteningly stark fan-cooled, shared-bathroom rooms on its fifth floor, and much pleasanter but bare air-con rooms on the third and fourth floors. Reception takes the form of a desk in the sporting goods store at ground level.

**Kapit River View Inn** (☎ 796-310; krvin@tm.net.my; 10 Jln Tan Sit Leong; s & d RM55-60; ♿) Small window-

less, but clean rooms, located directly on the town square and near the boat pier.

**New Rejang Inn** (☎ 796-600; 457 Jln Teo Chow Beng; r RM65-75; ♿) Clean, tiled rooms with TV, phone and fridge, and a location a mere stone's throw away from the boat wharf make this the best-value accommodation in town. The in-room cable TV is nice, as long as you're happy watching the same program as the hotel staff in the lobby!

**Greenland Inn** (☎ 796-388; 463-464 Jln Teo Chow Beng; s/d RM80/90; ♿) Kapit has about as much in common with Greenland as Kuching does with Greenwich, but if you can ignore the geographical misnomer, this is a respectable step up from the budget class.

**Regency Pelagus Resort** (☎ 799-051; www.theregencyhotel.com.my/Pelagus; full board s RM320-340, d RM400-440; ♿) Inaccessible by road, Pelagus Resort is a unique longhouse-style resort that's a 45-minute boat ride from Kapit, within earshot of the roaring Pelagus Rapids. The two-tiered wooden design blends beautifully into the jungle, but retains some very nontribal features such as minibars and a helipad. Transport to the resort is arranged by the resort when bookings are made.

#### EATING

**Syarikat Morshidi (Restaurant and Coffee Shop)** (cnr Jln Teo Chow Beng and Putena Jaya; dishes RM2-6; ☺ breakfast) If the thought of yet another breakfast of coffee and a sweet snack in a Chinese café makes your teeth hurt, stop by this tiny roadside café that serves a variety of Muslim breakfast specialties, including *masi lemak* (rice boiled in coconut milk and served with sides) and milky tea.

**Kong Hua Café** (☎ 796-459; 1B Jln Wharf; dishes RM3-8; ☺ breakfast & lunch) A fine example of the type of old-school Chinese coffee shop that Malaysia does so well. Breakfast here is not much more than sugary snacks though.

**Good Taste Restaurant & Coffee Shop** (☎ 798-658; Wisma Ngieng Ping Toh, Jln Teo Chow Beng; dishes RM6-12; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Diner-style mixed cuisine with a loyal following among the office workers in the building above.

**Madam Ma's Kitchen** (☎ 796-119; Hotel Meligai, 334 Jln Airport; mains RM5-15; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Ma's is one of the only places in town with air-con, making it a refuge on a hot day (which is every day). The staff are friendly and speak some English, and the chicken curry is pretty tasty. Expect changing menus and special offers.

Kapit is packed with small restaurants and *kedai kopi*, but the best place to eat in the evening has to be the busy **night market** (dishes RM0.50-3.50), which is near the centre of town, roughly behind Ing Hing Cold Storage. In contrast to the rest of Kapit's dining scene, which is overwhelmingly Chinese, this market is almost exclusively Malay-Muslim. As such the emphasis is on *satay* and other halal dishes.

As well as the markets, self-caterers could visit the well-stocked grocery stores located along Penghulu Nyaunggau, opposite the Hotel Meligai.

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Express boats leave for Sibul between 6.30am and 2.30pm (for information on boats from Sibul, see p188). The trip takes 2½ to three hours and tickets are RM17 to RM20 for economy, or RM25 to RM30 first class. Times are not posted on the wharf, and the best bet is simply to ask around, particularly at the hotels.

Boats depart for Belaga (RM30, 4½ hours) at 9am. When the river is low, express boats can't get past the Pelagus Rapids, and smaller speedboats are used instead. Fares for these boats start at RM50. If you want to do a day trip to Pelagus, ask around the wharf or at your hotel, as the express boats don't stop there.

Express boats bound for the Batang Boleh depart before noon and go as far as Rumah Penghilu Jambi (RM30, four to five hours), an Iban longhouse. The last boat from back to Kapit departs Rumah Penghilu Jambi at 12.30pm.

#### Belaga

☎ 086 / pop 2500

By the time you pull into Belaga after the long journey up the Rejang, you may feel like you've arrived at the very heart of Borneo – in reality you're only about 100km from the coastal city of Bintulu (as the crow flies). Despite this, Belaga certainly feels remote. It's the main bazaar and administrative centre along the upper Rejang.

Belaga is a friendly little town and it's a good place to arrange longhouse visits – there are many Kayan and Kenyah longhouses along the rivers nearby. Otherwise, it shouldn't take long to find someone in Belaga with a suggestion of a longhouse to visit or an offer to guide you. See the boxed text on p32 for more information about longhouses.

Boats will drop you at the bottom of a steep set of concrete steps leading up to the small town centre; all the town's facilities are found here, in the handful of blocks across from the small park. There is no bank here, but the Teck Hua Chan supermarket will change cash.

#### INFORMATION

**Belaga District Office** (☎ 461-339) Can arrange permits and guides. Behind Hotel Sing Soon Huat  
**Hasbee Enterprises** (☎ 461-240; 4 Belaga Bazaar) Airline tickets, local travel services and internet.

#### TOURS

While visiting a longhouse independently can be great, there's a limit to what you can arrange on your own, and the highlight for most visitors in Belaga is taking a longhouse tour. A good package should include jungle trekking, visits to a number of communities, night walks and seasonal activities such as hunting, cooking, land clearing and fruit harvesting.

The most prominent guide operating out of Belaga these days is Daniel Levoh at **Daniel's Corner** (☎ 461-997, 013-848 6351; daniellevoh@hotmail.com; Jln Teh Ah Kiong). A Kayan former teacher, Daniel is friendly and knowledgeable and gets good reviews from travellers. He has good connections with several Kayan-Kenyah longhouses between Belaga and the Bakun Dam, as well as the newly settled area near Asap, and can also arrange other activities such as jungle walks and visits to a waterfall up the Belaga River. Longhouse visits typically last three days and two nights, and start at RM200 (minimum two people).

Mark, a licensed guide based out of **Hasbee Enterprises** (☎ 461-240; 4 Belaga Bazaar), can also arrange longhouse visits, and **Belaga's District Office** (☎ 461-339) behind Hotel Sing Soon Huat can also help arrange guides.

#### SLEEPING & EATING

Belaga's accommodation is of the cheap and cheerful variety, but if you're doing the longhouse circuit you shouldn't really need to sleep here for more than a night or two.

**Hotel Belaga** (☎ 461-244; 14 Main Bazaar; r RM30-60; ♿) A convenient location makes up for less than perfect standards at Belaga's principal dosshouse. The cheap beds here are on the verge of collapse, but the place is clean and the fellow running the place is helpful enough.

There's a decent Chinese *kopitiam* downstairs that serves mediocre but filling food.

**Hotel Sing Soon Huat** (☎ 461-307; 26-27 New Bazaar; r RM35-45; 🍴) The bright yellow building behind the Hotel Belaga holds this slightly less appealing establishment.

**Jea Corner** (off Jln Ului Lian; dishes from RM3; 🍴 dinner) This tiny stall is literally the only place in Belaga still serving food after 6pm. It serves up a small variety of decent Malaysian rice-based dishes. The friendly proprietor, Albert, will probably find you before you find him. He has a wealth of information about the surrounding area and its people and culture – just don't get him started on politics! It's near the District Office.

**Kafetaria Mesra Murni** (Jln Temengong Mat; dishes RM3-5; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This family-run Muslim restaurant can lay claim to having the only real riverfront dining in Belaga. Try the decent *mee goreng* or the exceptionally refreshing *limau ais* (iced lime juice). It's past the park and playground.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

At the time of writing, there were no flights to/from Belaga.

### Boat

Boats leave Kapit for Belaga (RM30, 4½ hours) at 9am. When the river is low you'll need to take a speedboat instead; fares start at RM50. Returning to Kapit from Belaga, express boats leave Belaga early (between 6am and 6.30am), from where you can catch onward boats down-river to Sibul. Boats go upriver from Belaga as far as the Bakun Dam area near Rumah Apan (RM10, one hour), from where you can explore the resettled river country north of the Rejang. It's possible to do a loop back to Bintulu this way along a recently paved road.

### Land

There is a very good paved road from Bakun to Bintulu/Miri highway (two to three hours to the junction with the coastal highway). The only problem is that there's no public transport, so you'll have to make private arrangements either in Belaga or Miri/Bintulu.

## Upriver from Belaga

About 40km upstream from Belaga, the Rejang divides into several rivers, including the mighty Batang Balui, which winds almost all the way to the Kalimantan border. Sadly, just below

this junction is the site of the controversial Bakun Dam project, which was started in 1996 and is near completion. In order to build the dam, the surrounding forest was logged and an estimated 11,000 people were forcibly resettled. Once the reservoir above the dam starts to fill, it will flood a huge stretch of the Balui valley and several other tributaries of the Rejang.

Because of the difficulty of getting boats above the dam, it's now very difficult to travel upriver on the Balui, which is a shame, because the upper reaches promise some of the most exciting river trips in Sarawak.

## BINTULU

☎ 086 / pop 110,000

Bintulu is a busy little town on the north bank of the Batang Kemena, roughly midway between Sibul and Miri. The town came under James Brooke's sway in 1861, and the simple **Council Negeri Memorial** (Jln Lebu Raya Abang Galau) north of the town centre commemorates Sarawak's first Council Negeri (State Council), formed in 1867. In the centre of town overlooking the river, you'll find the **Tamu Bintulu** (Bintulu Market; Jln Main Bazaar; 🍴 dawn-late afternoon), as well as **Tua Pek Kong** (Jln Main Bazaar; admission free; 🍴 dawn-dusk), a Chinese temple, about a block away. If you want a break from the city, hire a taxi (about RM10) for the 10km trip to **Tanjung Batu Beach**.

Travellers heading north to Similajau National Park, Niah Caves National Park or Miri, or south to Sibul, the Batang Rejang and Kuching may need to use Bintulu as a staging post or stay overnight for a connection. It's not the most exciting city in Sarawak, but if you are looking for a place to spend the night in this part of the world, it's got an edge over larger and more chaotic Sibul.

## Orientation

Bintulu lies along the north bank of Batang Kemena. All the places to stay and eat, banks and other services are situated in the riverside district south of the old airport. The waterfront just north of the shopping area along Jln Masjid has several busy markets. The long-distance bus station is 5km north of town at Medan Jaya, and the airport is 27km west of the centre.

## Information

**Bintulu Hospital** (☎ 331-455; off Jln Lebu Raya Abang Galau).

**Standard Chartered Bank** (☎ 334-166; 89 Jln Keppel; 🍴 9am-3pm Mon-Fri) Another useful bank with an ATM.

**HSBC** (☎ 315-928; 25 Jln Law Gek Soon; 🍴 9am-3pm Mon-Fri) Best bank in Bintulu. There's an ATM here.

**Star Internet** (Jln Law Gek Soon; per hr RM3; 🍴 9am-11pm) Internet access. Noisy with slow machines.

## Sleeping

### BUDGET

**Bakun Inn** (☎ 311-111; 7 Jln Law Gek Soon; r RM45-60; 🍴) This simple hotel on the corner of Jln Law Gek Soon and Jln Keppel is arguably the best budget deal in town. The entrance is in back, near the parking lot.

### MIDRANGE

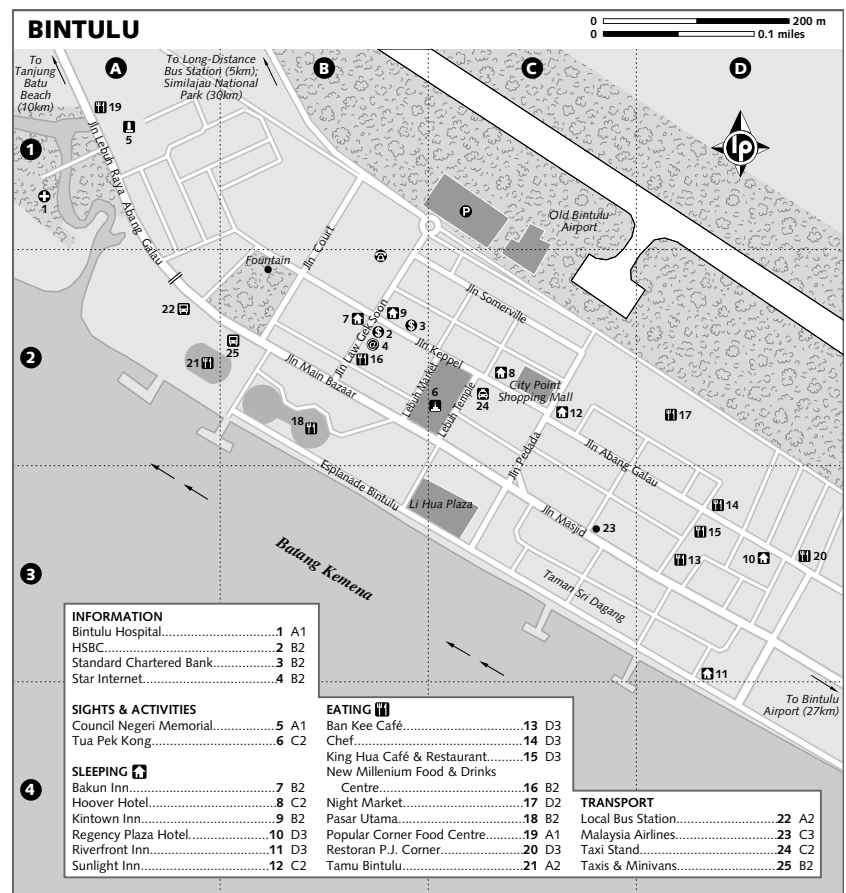
**Hoover Hotel** (☎ 337-166; 92 Jln Keppel; s/d RM65/86; 🍴) Not quite as nice as the Kintown, the acceptable Hoover Hotel has a good down-

town location and quite decent, reasonably spacious rooms.

**Sunlight Inn** (☎ 332-577; 7 Jln Pedada; r RM68-78; 🍴) Free wi-fi and a fairly central location make this clean and well-run hotel a good second choice if the Kintown Inn is full.

**Kintown Inn** (☎ 333-666; 93 Jln Keppel; r RM69-80.50; 🍴) The Kintown Inn delivers the best value for money in Bintulu. Rooms are clean and well-appointed, with nice hot showers and good views from the upper floors. And there's one internet terminal in the lobby. It's on the corner of Jln Law Gek Soon and Jln Keppel.

**Riverfront Inn** (☎ 333-111; riverf@tm.net.my; 256 Taman Sri Dagang; r from RM90; 🍴) A long-standing favourite with business and leisure visitors



alike, the Riverfront is low-key but still classy. It's well worth paying top whack to get a room overlooking the river – the view is pure Borneo. There's a decent café on the ground floor and wi-fi in the lobby.

#### TOP END

**Regency Plaza Hotel** (☎ 335-111; rihbtu@tm.net.my; 116 Jln Abang Galau; r from RM170; 📶 📺 📺) The service can be a little uneven, but the rooms are spacious and clean, and some have good views at Bintulu's best hotel. The pool was under renovation at the time of writing but should be open again soon. Wi-fi sweetens the deal here.

#### Eating

**Restoran P.J. Corner** (Jln Abang Galau; meals from RM3; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This friendly Malay place serves good fresh fruit juice, rotis, *nasi campur* and a nice plate of *mee goreng*. It's on the eastern end of Jln Abang Galau, roughly opposite the Regency Plaza Hotel.

**Chef** (92 Jln Abang Galau; cakes from RM0.90; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) No chocolate salty balls here: this drool-inducing bakery-café can satisfy most sweet and savoury cravings, from local cakes and pastries to a good rendition of tiramisu (RM4.50).

**New Millenium Food & Drinks Centre** (Jln Law Gek Soon; meals from RM3; 🍳 breakfast & dinner) This *kedai kopi* is a good spot for breakfast as they serve toast and eggs in addition to the usual Chinese rice and noodle dishes, as well as decent coffee and tea.

**Ban Kee Café** (off Jln Abang Galau; meals from RM10; 🍳 lunch & dinner) Run, don't walk, to this brilliant indoor-outdoor Chinese seafood specialist. It doesn't look like much, but the food here is enough to make us want to head back to Bintulu as soon as possible. Try the butter prawns or the baby *kailan* (a Chinese vegetable similar to baby choy). The food is fresh as can be.

**King Hua Café & Restaurant** (Jln Abang Galau; meals from RM10; 🍳 lunch & dinner) Next door to the Ban Kee Café, this is a similar, if slightly less appealing Chinese seafood place. There's an English menu.

**Popular Corner Food Centre** (☎ 334-388; 50 BDA Shahida Commercial Centre; meals from RM20; 🍳 lunch & dinner) A gaudy restaurant and seafood centre draped in twinkling lights and neon at the northern end of town. The Hong Kong-style prawns are expensive but tasty. Overall, however, we prefer Ban Kee.

Every evening, a busy **night market** (off Jln Abang Galau; meals from RM1; 🍳 nightly from 5.30pm) sets up in a lot off a backstreet between the old airport and Jln Abang Galau. It's a good place to snack track for Malay dishes and fresh fruit.

Finally, there are several food stalls on the upper floor of the **Pasar Utama** (New Market; Jln Main Bazaar; meals RM2-5; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & early dinner). The stalls at the neighbouring **Tamu Bintulu** (Bintulu Market; meals RM2-5; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & early dinner) sell fresh fruit and jungle produce.

#### Getting There & Away

##### AIR

Bintulu airport is 24km west of the centre. A taxi there costs RM25.

**Malaysia Airlines** (☎ 1-300-883-000, 331-554; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my; Jln Masjid) flies between Bintulu and Kota Kinabalu (RM148), Kuching (RM139), Miri (RM73) and Sibul (RM81), as well as Kuala Lumpur (RM339).

##### BUS

The long-distance bus station is 5km north of town. Travel between the two by local bus or taxi (RM8).

There are frequent daily services between Bintulu and Kuching (RM60, 10 hours), Miri (RM20, 4½ hours) and Sibul (RM20, 3½ hours).

##### VAN & LONG-DISTANCE TAXI

Taxis and vans congregate in front of the markets and alongside the Tua Pek Kong temple. The round-trip taxi fare to Similajau National Park is RM80 per car.

#### Getting Around

Taxis (official and unofficial) congregate alongside Tua Pek Kong temple and at the big taxi stand near the markets. Most taxi fares around town are RM5. The trip to the long-distance bus station costs RM8; the airport is RM25. If you'd like to arrange a taxi in advance, call **Mr Frankie See** (☎ 016-852-4359).

#### SIMILAJAU NATIONAL PARK

About 30km northeast of Bintulu, **Similajau National Park** (☎ 086-391-284; admission RM10; 🍳 8am-noon & 2-5pm) is a fine little coastal park with nice white-sand beaches, good walking trails and simple accommodation. While the park does not have the habitat variety of Bako National Park, it's perfect if you want a quiet, relaxing

natural getaway as you work your way along the coast of Sarawak.

Similajau occupies a narrow 30km coastal strip between the South China Sea and the typical logged-out secondary forest of Sarawak. As such, it's one of the only havens for wildlife in this part of the state and a recent survey recorded 230 bird species, making it one of the most diversely inhabited areas in Sarawak. The forest is also home to 24 species of mammal.

The park headquarters occupies the south bank of the mouth of the Sungai Likau, though most of it lies north of the river, and is accessed by a suspension bridge.

You might be able to arrange a boat up the mangrove-lined Sungai Likau for RM50 per hour (one hour should be enough). If you go in the early morning, you'll see a range of birds, including hornbills, and maybe even some gibbons or macaques. Dolphins can occasionally be spotted out at sea, and marine turtles lay their eggs at certain points along the beach.

Note that saltwater crocodiles are found in the rivers of the park and around river mouths. *Do not* swim or wade in the park's rivers or near river mouths, and be careful when walking near the rivers early or late in the day. Three locals were killed by crocodiles in the area in 2002, so this is not a warning to be taken lightly.

#### Walking

Other than just relaxing on the beach, the main highlight of Similajau are its walking trails. All the trails start just north of park headquarters, on the far side of the Likau River. Trails are clear and a guide isn't necessary; a simple trail map is available from park headquarters. Be sure to bring plenty of water as there is no drinking water en route and keep in mind that distances seem much greater in the tropics than they do back home.

As soon as you cross the bridge over the Likau, you'll see a plankwalk off to your right, following the river upstream. This 600m **Education Trail** leads straight through the riverside mangroves and it's brilliant – if you've never been inside a mangrove forest, this is your chance. The mangroves stand atop their branching roots like otherworldly spiders stuck in the Borneo mud.

The main walking trail at Similajau is the **Coastal Trail**, a gently undulating track through mixed dipterocarp and *kerangas* (heath) forest. After crossing the river from headquarters, head left off the boardwalk towards the head-

land. The end point of the trail is **Golden Beach**, a hot and sweaty 9.8km from park headquarters. En route, 7km from headquarters, you'll pass **Turtle Beach 1** and 8km from headquarters you'll pass **Turtle Beach 2**.

The **Selensur Trail** branches off the Coastal Trail at the 5km point and heads inland along the Kenyau River to the **Selensur Rapids** (the total distance from headquarters is 7.8km).

Another option is **Sebubong Pool**, a natural pool fed by the Sebubong river, which can only be accessed by boat from park headquarters (about RM75 per boat, minimum five people). The trip takes 30 minutes and the pool is a 15-minute walk from the boat drop-off point. If you take the boat, you could also be dropped off at one of the other beaches along the way and walk back.

#### Sleeping & Eating

Similajau can be visited as a day trip from Bintulu, but if you want to enjoy the beach, go for a nightwalk or do the entire length of the coastal trail, you should stay a night or two. Accommodation for the park can be booked through the park headquarters or the **National Parks & Wildlife Office** (☎ 085-434-184) in Miri.

Comfortable accommodation is provided in the air-conditioned **Drive-In Chalets** (RM75), each with two rooms sleeping up to four people. The two **hostels** (dm/r RM15/40) can accommodate 16 and 72 people respectively, all in four-bed bunk rooms. There's also a **camp site** (per person RM5).

The park **cafeteria** (🍳 9.30am-6pm) has decent food and sundry items for sale. There are no stoves in the chalets or hostels, but there are refrigerators.

#### Getting There & Away

Bintulu is the gateway to Similajau National Park. There is no regularly scheduled bus or van transport to the park. A taxi or private car will cost RM40 each way from Bintulu – be sure to arrange a pick-up time when you get dropped off.

## NORTHERN COASTAL SARAWAK

### NIAH CAVES NATIONAL PARK

☎ 085

The vast caverns of **Niah Caves National Park** (☎ 737-454; admission RM10; 🍳 park office 8am-5pm)

are among Borneo's most incredible natural attractions. Located in some limestone hills about 3km north of Batu Niah town, the caves contain some of the oldest evidence of human habitation in southeast Asia: rock art and small canoe-like coffins (death ships) within the greenish walls of the **Painted Cave** indicate that it was once a burial ground, and carbon dating puts the oldest relics back 40,000 years. Of course, the caves themselves are the real attraction here – a bizarre fantasy world hidden inside the Borneo earth. And the boardwalk through the jungle alone is worth the trip from Miri.

### Information

Upon arrival you must register at **park headquarters** (☎ 737-454; ☎ 8am-5pm) to pay the entrance fee, pick up a trail map and book accommodation (if you haven't already).

Advance booking is advisable for accommodation at the park lodges. You can book directly with park headquarters or at the **Miri visitors information centre** (☎ 085-434-181; vic-miri@sarawaktourism.com; 452 Jln Melayu; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat, Sun & holidays) or the **Kuching visitors information centre** (☎ 082-410-944; www.sarawaktourism.com; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat, Sun & holidays), but make sure you get a receipt to present if requested at Niah. If you're staying at the hostel you can usually turn up without a booking, especially during the week. If it's busy and there's no accommodation, the worst you'll have to do is head the 3km back to Batu Niah, where there are three hotels.

### The Caves

The caves are 3.5km away from park headquarters and you should allow at least four hours for a full exploration of the caves (including the walk there and back). First, walk from the headquarters to the jetty on the Sungai Niah, then cross the river in a small boat (RM1, departs on demand), before climbing to a small **visitors centre and museum** (admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm daily), which has some interesting exhibits on the geology and archaeology of the caves. You can (and should) rent a torch (flashlight) here for RM5 (check it before setting out – you'll need it if you want to go any distance into the caves).

From the visitors centre you walk to the caves along a wonderful plankwalk through swampy old-growth rainforest (there are two

branches of this plankwalk, take the right branch). Once you get to the limestone outcrop that contains the caves, it's a little unclear which way to go; at the junction just past the place where locals sell souvenirs, go through the gate and climb up to the caves.

You'll pass under a limestone overhang before entering the aptly named **Great Cave**. This impressive cavern measures 250m across at the mouth and 60m at its greatest height. Ascend up to your left here and make your way to the back of the cave. The trail disappears down into the castellated gloom at the back of the cave, and you may find yourself thinking of Jules Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* or the city of Zion in the *Matrix* films. The stairs and handrails are usually covered with dirt or guano, and can get very slippery in places. The rock formations are spectacular and ominous by turns as you slip in and out of the gloom, and when the sun hits certain overhead vents the cave is perforated by the kind of dramatic light beams that ought to herald the voice of God.

You then make your way through a dark passage known as the **Gan Kira** (Moon Cave). It's not narrow enough to induce claustrophobia (unless you're severely affected), but it will certainly make you wonder what would happen if your torch suddenly died. When you're halfway along, try turning off your flashlight to enjoy the experience of pure, soupy blackness.

After passing through Gan Kira, you then emerge into the forest and traverse another section of boardwalk before arriving at the **Painted Cave**. It's easy to walk straight past the small fenced-off area by the cave entrance that protects the (now empty) death ships and the ancient paintings. A set of small travel binoculars are useful to make out the red hematite figures, as many have faded to little more than indistinct scrawls along a narrow 30m-strip at the back of the cave. To return, retrace your steps (taking the steps up to your left to close the loop in the Great Cave).

Once back on the plank walk, consider taking the other branch of the plank walk on the way back to headquarters, as this will allow you to see another part of the forest.

### Sleeping & Eating

Niah Caves can be visited as a day trip from Miri or Bintulu, especially if you go by hire car all the way. If you would like to stay at or near

the caves, the best choice is the park accommodation. Otherwise, there are a few simple hotels in Batu Niah town, about 3km away.

**Niah Cave Hotel** (☎ 737-726; 155 Batu Niah Bazaar; r RM30; ☎) Over a café in Batu Niah, the simple rooms here with common bathroom are just barely acceptable.

**Niah Caves National Park** (☎ 737-454; campsites RM5, r from RM45) There are simple and clean hostel rooms and private rooms along with a basic canteen at the park headquarters. Camping is another option.

**Niah Cave Inn** (☎ 737-333; 621 Batu Niah Bazaar; economy/standard r from RM64/75; ☎) Despite the unfortunate connotations of its name, this is the best hotel in Batu Niah. The economy rooms aren't worth the price, but the standard rooms are decent.

There are several *kedai kopi* in town, including the **Friendly Café** (Batu Niah Bazaar; meals from RM3; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner), which serves the usual coffee-shop fare. It's opposite the Niah Cave Inn.

### Getting There & Away

Batu Niah, the gateway to the park, is 11km west of Niah Junction on the Miri-Bintulu highway. Some express buses travelling between Miri (RM10, 1¼ hours) and Bintulu (RM11, two hours) stop at Niah Junction. When you buy your bus ticket in Miri or Bintulu, check that the bus stops in Niah Junction, as there are two highways between these two towns, and some buses do not go via Niah Junction.

From Niah Junction, you will have to hire a private car to Batu Niah town (RM10) or direct to the park (RM15). The latter is the better option unless you intend to spend the night at Batu Niah. From Batu Niah, you can walk to park headquarters by taking the path that starts behind the town near the Chinese temple and following the river. If you are not staying at the park, make prior arrangements with a car to pick you up and return you to Batu Niah or Niah Junction when you're done visiting the caves.

If you have a group, it can be economical and easy to hire a private car or taxi all the way from Miri.

### LAMBIR HILLS NATIONAL PARK

Although **Lambir Hills National Park** (☎ 085-491-030; admission RM10; ☎ park office 8am-5pm) doesn't have the spectacular scenery of Niah and Mulu, it is the closest primary rainforest to

Miri and it makes a pleasant day or overnight trip out of the city. The park is only 30km from Miri by road and is primarily popular with city residents, who come by the carload to visit the pretty waterfalls, natural swimming pool and riverside picnic shelters. For the more active traveller, the park has a number of pleasant walking trails through its dipterocarp rainforest.

The national park covers 69 sq km and protects a range of low sandstone hills that reach a height of 465m at Bukit Lambir. Much of the forest was logged before the park was declared, but the secondary forest is beautiful in its own right and one 50-hectare plot alone still contains an amazing 1100 tree species. There's also a good range of wildlife present.

Officially, the trails are open 8am to 4pm Monday to Friday and 8am to 5pm on weekends, but if you are seriously interested in wildlife-watching you will have to get an earlier start. Fauna here includes gibbons, tarsiers, pangolins and barking deer, though you are unlikely to see any of these close to the park headquarters. Lambir Hills is also home to many species of birds.

### Activities

Lambir Hills has 13 marked walking trails branching off four primary routes. The main trail here follows a small river (Sungai Liam) past two attractive waterfalls to **Latuk Waterfall**, which has a picnic area and is suitable for swimming. It takes no more than 25 minutes to walk the 835m from park headquarters to Latuk Waterfall.

A path branches off just before the second falls and runs to **Tengkorong Waterfall**, which is a somewhat strenuous 2.6km walk (one-way) from park headquarters. Past Tengkorong Waterfall, another trail goes all the way to **Bukit Lambir** (a total of four hours from headquarters), where there are fine views.

Register your name at the trailhead booth before you start out. It is possible to arrive at the park in the morning, do a bit of walking and then be on your way back to Miri or Niah National Park, but this doesn't leave much time to appreciate the forest or its wildlife so try to plan for a longer stay.

### Sleeping & Eating

Accommodation at the park is comfortable, but it's only a few hundred metres from the

main highway so you won't feel like you're in the middle of the jungle. Book at the **Miri visitors information centre** (☎ 085-434-181; vic-miri@sarawaktourism.com; 452 Jln Melayu; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat, Sun & holidays) in advance, particularly on weekends, though you are unlikely to be turned away if you don't have a reservation.

The park's fan-cooled **chalets** (r RM75) have two bedrooms, each with two beds. Air-conditioned **chalets** (r RM100) also have two rooms, equipped with either three single beds or one single and one double bed. There's also **camping** (per person RM5).

There is a simple canteen here as well. There are no cooking facilities at the park, but a canteen sells rice and noodle dishes, drinks and basic provisions. Opening hours depend on demand, but are generally from 8am to about 7pm.

### Getting There & Away

The park office, canteen and accommodation are situated beside the highway 30km south of Miri. From Miri, any bus (RM3, 35 minutes) bound for Bekenu or Niah Junction can drop you here. A taxi from Miri costs RM40.

### MIRI

☎ 085 / pop 280,000

An oil-rich boomtown at the northern end of Sarawak, Miri is a major transport hub for those heading to/from Brunei, the Kelabit Highlands and three of Sarawak's national parks: Mulu, Niah Caves and Lambir Hills. The town itself is a somewhat poorly laid-out jumble of big hotels, shops, restaurants and a surprising number of bars. While it's not the most prepossessing town in Borneo, it's not a bad place to lay over for a day or two en route to or from the jungle.

### Orientation

Miri lies on a narrow plain between the east bank of the Sungai Miri and low hills that were once covered in oil derricks. Most places to stay and eat are within walking distance of each other, spread out between the Centre Point Commercial Centre, local bus station and visitors information centre to the south and the main post office and immigration office to the north. You'll need a bus or taxi to get to the long-distance bus station and airport.

## Information

### TOURIST INFORMATION

The **visitors information centre** (☎ 434-181; 452 Jln Melayu; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun) is at the southern end of the town centre. The helpful staff can provide city maps, transport schedules and information on accommodation and tours, and also produces the useful free *Visitors' Guide to Miri*. You can book accommodation with the **National Parks & Wildlife office** (☎ 436-637) here for Gunung Mulu, Niah Caves, Lambir Hills and Similajau National Parks.

**Cyber Corner** (1st fl, Wisma Pelita, Jln Padang; per hr RM3)

**HSBC** (Lot 1268, ground fl, Miri Commercial Centre, Jln Melayu) There's an ATM here.

**Main post office** (☎ 441-222; Jln Post)

**Maybank** (☎ 412-282; Lot 112, Jln Bendahara; ☎ 9.15am-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 9.15-4pm Fri)

**Maybank Bureau de Change** (☎ 438-467; 1271 Centre Point Commercial Centre; ☎ 9am-5pm) Dedicated exchange and cash-advance facilities.

**Miri City Medical Centre** (☎ 426-622; 918 Jln Hokkien) Private medical centre.

**Miri General Hospital** (☎ 420-033; Jln Cayaha) South of town, off the Miri bypass.

**Planet Café** (1st fl, Bintang Plaza, 1264 Jln Miri Pujut; per hr RM4) Internet access.

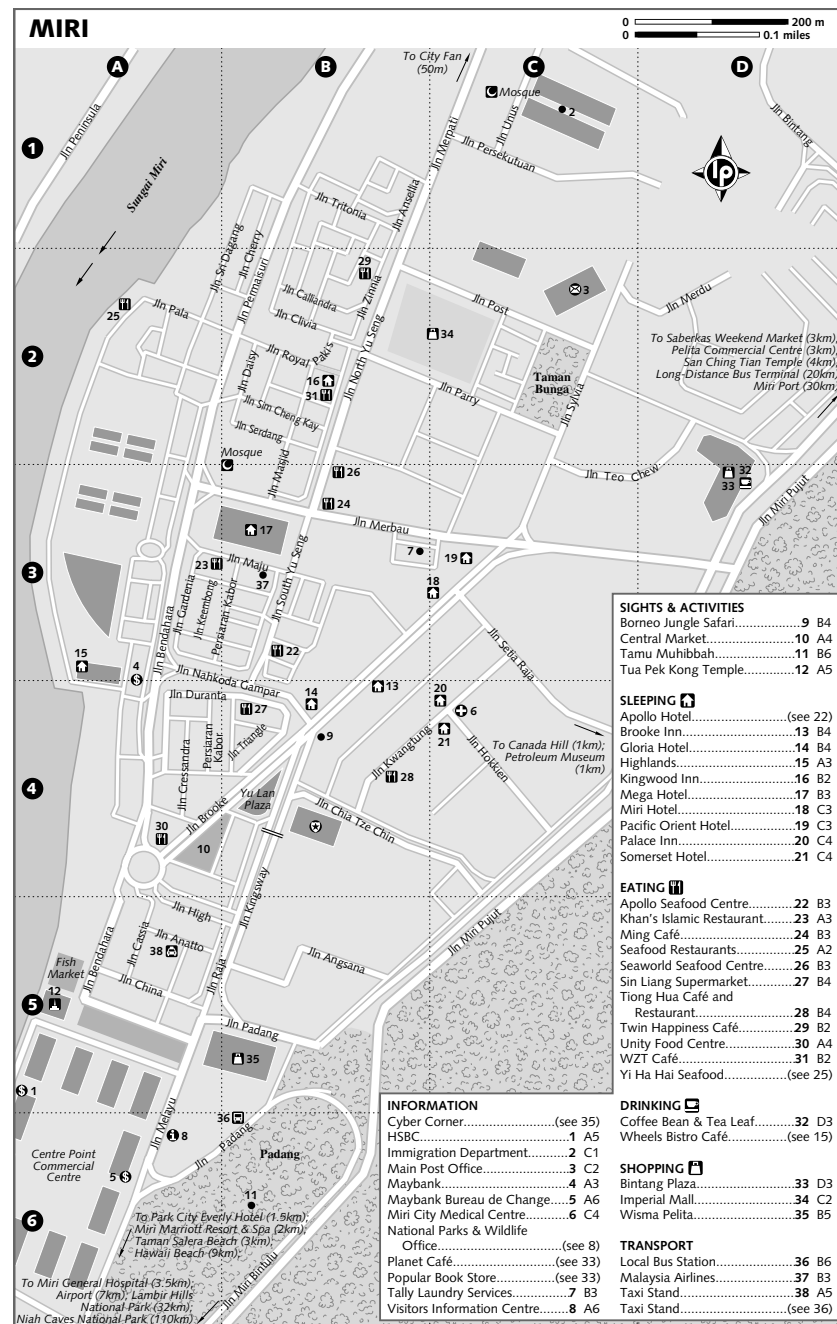
**Popular Book Store** (☎ 439-052; 2nd fl, Bintang Plaza, 1264 Jln Miri Pujut)

**Tally Laundry Services** (☎ 430-322; Jln Merbau; per kg RM7; ☎ 8am-6pm)

### Sights

The atmospheric old part of town begins around the southern end of Jln Brooke; this is the area most worth exploring. There's plenty of lively commerce around the Chinese shophouse blocks, the **Central Market** and the **Tamu Muhibbah**, where local Dayak come to sell their vegetables. The wide courtyard of the **Tua Pek Kong temple**, near the fish market, is a good spot to watch the river traffic float by. During Chinese New Year, virtually the whole of this area is taken over by a lively street fair and the crowds cram in under red lanterns and gold foil.

**Canada Hill**, on the low ridge behind the town centre, is the site of Malaysia's first oil well, the Grand Old Lady. Bored in 1910, the well produced around seven barrels a day until it was abandoned in 1972. The new **Petroleum Museum** (☎ 635-516; Jln Canada Hill; admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm, last admission 4.30pm, closed Mon) has a few interesting



displays on the source of the city's wealth. The hill itself is a popular exercise spot with a handful of refreshment kiosks, and it's worth walking up here at sunset just for the views across Miri to the South China Sea.

If you land in Miri on a weekend, don't miss the **Saberkas Weekend Market**, which takes place from Friday evening to midday Sunday, about 3km northeast of Bintang Plaza. It's one of the most colourful and friendly markets in Sarawak and vendors are more than happy to answer questions about the various products displayed.

Not far from the market site, in the suburb of Krokop, the **San Ching Tian temple** is the largest Taoist temple in Southeast Asia. Built in 2000, the design features intricate dragon reliefs brought all the way over from China.

As a self-proclaimed 'resort city', Miri is cultivating a reputation for its recreational areas, and the whole urban landscape is studied with greenery and amenities. Nearest to the centre is the **City Fan**, an expanse of themed gardens that boasts the largest open-air amphitheatre in Malaysia. It's popular with joggers, and also has a public swimming pool, indoor stadium and public library. It's just north of the local government offices.

About 3km south of town, Miri has a passable beach and recreation park at **Taman Selera Beach** (where there's also a food centre). The food centre juts out into the sea for perfect sunset dining. Further on, **Hawaii Beach** is a clean, palm-lined stretch of sand about 15 minutes outside town by bus. To get to either of the beaches, take bus 11 or 13 (RM1.50) from the local bus station.

## Sleeping BUDGET

**Highlands** (☎ 422-327; www.borneojungles.com; 1271 Jln Sri Dagang; dm RM25, r from RM40; 📶 🚶) The only proper backpacker-style option for miles, Highlands is a clean and popular place with dorms and private rooms. This is a great place to meet other travellers and the staff are informative about travel in Sarawak. It's on the top floor of a block of shops on the west side of town beside the Sungai Miri, above Wheels Bistro Café. Look for the five-storey car park.

**Brooke Inn** (☎ 412-881; brookeinn@hotmail.com; 14 Jln Brooke; s/d/tr RM43/48/53; 📶 🚶) While it stops short of midrange quality, the Brooke Inn is better than most of its competitors. It's a little noisy,

but a decent value. It's on Jln Brooke, smack dab in the middle of town.

## MIDRANGE

**Apollo Hotel** (☎ 433-077; 4 Jln South Yu Seng; r from RM55; 📶 🚶) For good midrange value, give us a well-maintained Chinese cheapie any time. It's simple, clean and centrally located. Best of all, you can enjoy some of Miri's best seafood at the adjoining restaurant. The reception is in the back of the building, off of the street.

**Palace Inn** (☎ 421-999; siewpoh@pc.jaring.my; Lot 192 Jln Kwangtung; s/d from RM70/75; 📶 🚶) The Palace is significantly more comfortable and better run than most others in this price range and free wi-fi sweetens the deal. The tiled floors are a good move in this swampy Borneo weather. It's roughly in the centre of town, opposite the much larger Somerset Hotel.

**Miri Hotel** (☎ 421-212; 47 Jln Brooke; r from RM76; 📶 🚶) Like the Pacific Orient, this place is not up to the standards of other hotels in this price range in Miri and should only be considered if better options are full. The rooms are perhaps a bit nicer than the Pacific Orient, but the hotel makes one almost unforgivable mistake by piping annoying muzak into the halls.

**Kingwood Inn** (☎ 415-888; 826 Jln North Yu Seng; r RM85; 📶 🚶) The carpets are a little worn, but otherwise the Kingwood delivers the goods perfectly adequately. It's a decent midrange value.

**Pacific Orient Hotel** (☎ 413-333; pohotel@streamyx.com; 49 Jln Brooke; r from RM89; 📶 🚶) A little past its prime, the centrally located Pacific Orient is not on par with the Palace or the Somerset and should only be considered if those are full. On the plus side, rooms are fairly spacious.

**Gloria Hotel** (☎ 416-699; 27 Jln Brooke; r from RM92; 📶 🚶) With marble effect and a touch of Chinese style, the Gloria looks great through its big glass windows and provides decent comfort levels where it counts. Cheaper promotional rates often apply.

**Somerset Hotel** (☎ 422-777; 12 Jln Kwangtung; somerhot@streamyx.com; r from RM99; 📶 🚶) The Somerset is an excellent value, with spacious, clean and comfortable rooms, wi-fi and a very central location. When you look at what other hotels in this city offer for the same price, you'll wonder why anyone bothers with them. There's a small bar downstairs.

## TOP END

**Park City Everly Hotel** (☎ 440-288; www.vhotels.com; Jln Temenggong Datuk Oyong Lawai; r from RM166; 📶 🚶)

The Park City Everly is a large resort-style hotel on the beach about 2km south of Miri city, very close to the Miri Marriott. The sea-view rooms have nice views and the swimming pool is excellent. There's wi-fi on the executive floor and in the lobby. Service can be a bit uneven, but if you can get a good rate here, it's worth considering for those who don't want to stay downtown.

**Mega Hotel** (☎ 432-432; www.megahotel.com.my; 907 Jln Merbau; r from RM190; 📶 🚶 🚶) The aptly named Mega Hotel dominates central Miri with its imposing bulk. Things improve once you get past the busy and somewhat confused reception area. Rooms are clean and well maintained and there's 24-hour room service, a convenience store as well as wi-fi on the premises.

**Miri Marriott Resort & Spa** (☎ 421-121; www.marriott.com/myymc; Jln Temenggong Datuk Oyong Lawai; r from RM327; 📶 🚶 🚶) Next door to the Park City Everly, the Marriott is the nicest place to stay in Miri. It's a large resort with a spa, a swimming pool, several restaurants and nice common areas. Rooms are spacious with large bathrooms and balconies. Wi-fi is available on premises.

## Eating

**Central Market** (Jln Brooke; meals from RM2; 📶) breakfast, lunch & dinner) The lively Central Market has a large hawkers centre that covers all the bases of Malay, Indian and Chinese food. This is easily the cheapest and best place to eat in Miri. Across the street, you'll find still more choices at the similar Unity Food Centre. It's not far from Yu Lan Plaza, the high building in the centre of town.

**Khan's Islamic Restaurant** (229 Jln Maju; meals from RM3; 📶) breakfast, lunch & dinner) This simple canteen is one of Miri's better Indian eateries, whipping up tasty treats such as tandoori chicken and *aloo gobi* (Indian potato-and-cauliflower dish), as well as the usual *roti canai* and a good *nasi biryani*. It's opposite Mega Hotel.

**Twin Happiness Café** (747 Jln Merpati; dishes RM3-7; 📶) breakfast & lunch) We all take our happiness where we can find it, and the dual joys of good Chinese food and cheap prices make this particular pleasure zone worth seeking out. Besides, how can you not love a place that serves 'drunken prawn'?

**WZT Café** (Jln Merpati; dishes from RM3; 📶) breakfast & lunch) This popular coffee shop and eatery is a good spot for breakfast and you can choose

from toast served any number of ways. At lunch, the noodle dishes are a good choice.

**Ming Café** (cnr Jln North Yu Seng & Jln Merbau; dishes from RM3; 📶) lunch & dinner) Take your pick of Malay, Chinese, Indian and Western food at this corner eating emporium. If you can't face the chaos downtown at the Central Market, this is a kinder, gentler hawkers centre. There's a good drink counter that serves fresh juices.

**Tiong Hua Café and Restaurant** (Jln Kwangtung; meals from RM3; 📶) breakfast & lunch) If you're just after a quick cuppa or some fried noodles, this standard-issue Chinese *kedai kopi* is a good call. It's unremarkable but very convenient if you're staying at one of the hotels on Jln Kwangtung.

**Seaworld Seafood Centre** (8 Jln North Yu Seng; meals from RM20; 📶) lunch & dinner) Not as good as the nearby Apollo Seafood Centre and with somewhat less efficient service, the Seaworld Seafood Centre still draws a crowd. Even if you have no intention of eating seafood, the massed tanks of live aquatic creatures here can make a visit to Seaworld Miri as educational as a visit to Seaworld Florida. If you've never tried frog, this is your chance.

**Apollo Seafood Centre** (4 Jln South Yu Seng; meals from RM30; 📶) lunch & dinner) This deservedly popular Chinese seafood restaurant is the best place for a great meal in Miri. Just about anything you order will be delicious, and we recommend the crabs and the fried *midin* with *belacan*. If you are a big spender, you could always go for some lobsters straight from the tank.

If you want a little atmosphere with your meal, you might try some of the outdoor Chinese seafood specialists that set up each evening along the Sungai Miri. While they're no better than the excellent Apollo Seafood Centre, they do offer a cool breeze and a bit of a view to go with your food. Options here include Sea Village Seafood Restaurant and Yi Ha Hai Seafood. Meals at either of these places will cost about RM30 per head.

Finally, for self-catering, the **Sin Liang Supermarket** (☎ 413-762; Jln Duranta; 📶) 8.30am-9pm) is centrally located and well stocked.

## Drinking

**Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf** (ground fl, Bintang Plaza, Jln Miri Pujut; drinks from RM3; 📶) breakfast, lunch & dinner) This international coffee chain out at the

mall allows you to recreate the experience of being in suburban America right in the middle of Borneo. The coffee is good here, as are the cakes, and wi-fi clinches the deal for computerised travellers.

**Pelita Commercial Centre** (cnr Jln Miri Pujut & Jln Sehat) Those keen on a pub crawl might consider catching a taxi to this warren of small bar-lined streets 3km north of the centre (about RM8). Anyone with an aversion to disco glitterballs, karaoke and expats need not apply for the experience.

**Wheels Bistro Café** (☎ 419-859; 1271 Jln Dagang) Underneath the Highlands hostel, this bistro-pub often has live music and is a favourite hang-out for Miri's expat community.

## Shopping

There are two main shopping malls in Miri. **Bintang Plaza** (Jln Miri Pujut; ☎ 9am-9pm daily) The modern Bintang Plaza has a few internet cafés, a decent bookshop and several restaurants.

**Wisma Pelita** (Jln Melayu; ☎ 9am-9pm daily) This downtown shopping mall is a little long in the tooth. There are two internet places here.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

Miri is well served by **Malaysia Airlines** (☎ 1-300-883-000; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my; Jln Maju), which has flights to/from Bario (RM70), Bintulu (RM73), Gunung Mulu National Park (RM84), Kota Kinabalu (RM139), Kuching (RM139), Lawas (RM70), Limbang (RM65), Marudi (RM50), Pulau Labuan (RM50), Sibul (RM138). Book flights to/from Bario and Mulu as far in advance as possible.

**Air Asia** (☎ 1-300-889-933; www.airasia.com) has cheap flights between Miri and both KL and Johor Bahru.

### BUS

Most buses operate from the long-distance bus terminal outside of town. Miri Transport Company bus 33 runs there from the downtown bus terminal on Jln Melayu (RM1, 15 minutes). A taxi to the long-distance bus terminal costs around RM20. Note that the long-distance bus terminal is slated to be moved, so ask at your accommodation before setting out.

Main destinations:

**Bintulu** Buses go daily to Bintulu (RM20, 4½ hours), departing roughly hourly between 6am and 6pm.

**Batu Junction** Any southbound service can drop you at the Batu Niah turn-off (RM10, 1½ hours).

**Kuala Baram** The Miri Transport Company bus 1A goes to Kuala Baram (RM4.50, one hour) every two hours between 5.50am and 5.30pm. The bus leaves from the local bus terminal in downtown Miri on Jln Melayu in front of Taman Pelita. From Kuala Baram you can catch an express boat to Marudi.

**Kuching** The major companies each have a couple of direct buses daily (RM80, 15 to 16 hours), with the morning bus leaving at 8.30am and the night bus at 9pm.

**Lambir Hills** Frequent north-south buses go past Lambir Hills (RM3, 45 minutes).

**Mukah** There is one bus from Miri to Mukah (RM40, 12 hours) and Dalat (RM45, 12 hours) at 7.30am.

**Sibu** There are direct buses from Miri to Sibu (RM40, eight hours) leaving every two hours or so with the earliest at 7am and the last bus at 9pm. All buses to Kuching also stop at Sibu.

If you're headed to Brunei, it's a convoluted bus journey from Miri to Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei's capital. Four services daily run to Kuala Belait between 7am and 3.30pm (RM13.50, two hours).

At Kuala Belait bus station you can change to a connecting bus to Seria (B\$1, 30 minutes), then onto a further service for Bandar Seri Begawan (B\$6, two hours). Start your journey early unless you want to spend the night in Kuala Belait or Seria.

Due to the difficulty of getting to Bandar Seri Begawan by public transport, many travellers opt to take private vans organised by guesthouses in Miri. This is a good and usually cheap option, so be sure to ask at the place you're staying at.

## Getting Around

At the time of writing, a new long-distance bus terminal was under construction and it's not certain which local bus will make the run between the city and the long-distance bus terminal. Ask on arrival for the local bus.

Taxis from the airport to the city centre run on a coupon system (RM14).

# NORTHERN INTERIOR SARAWAK

## BATANG BARAM

Like the Rejang to the south, sluggish Sungai Baram is a vital artery for Sarawak's interior; it runs from Miri along the Brunei border before turning south and winding

deep into the mountains along the border with Indonesian Kalimantan. It's possible to travel upstream as far as Long Lama on regularly scheduled riverboats. Most travellers, however, take riverboats as far as Marudi, then switch to another riverboat that turns into the Sungai Tutoh and stops at Long Terawan before taking private transport as far as Gunung Mulu National Park. For details on this trip, see p212.

## Marudi

☎ 085

Marudi is a quiet town on the banks of the Bintang Baram some 45km inland from Miri. It's of interest to travellers mainly as the place to switch boats en route upriver to Gunung Mulu National Park. The main attraction here is another Brooke outpost, the beige wooden **Fort Hose** (admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun), built in 1901 and named after Charles Hose, who became administrator of the district in 1891. The site became the Baram District Museum in 1997 and features some interesting historical displays. The surrounding **Taman Tasik** recreation park is a nice hilltop spot with a suspended walkway and river views.

Marudi sits on the north bank of the Batang Baram. It's built around a town square that is about a 100m walk from the jetty. Most places to stay and eat are within a few blocks of the square, as are the restaurants and shops.

There is a reasonable road network around Marudi, giving access to longhouses at Long Selaban and Long Moh. You can also travel much further afield, though you'll have to arrange a lift locally. A road linking Marudi and Miri has been in the pipeline for years, but as yet only a few rough logging tracks exist.

## INFORMATION

**Public Bank** (☎ 756-235; 59 Jln Cinema) It's up the street from the town square, visible from the inland edge of the square.

**Skynet Internet** (☎ 756-693; 99 Jln Perpaduan; per hr RM2) To get there, walk to the town square from the jetty; take a right on the road leading inland from the town square; take your first left and look for it on your left. It's about 400m from the jetty.

## SLEEPING & EATING

Marudi has a few inexpensive hotels but it's unlikely you'll have to spend a night here unless you miss a boat connection.

**Grand Hotel** (☎ 755-711; Lg Lima; r from RM40; ☎) The Grand Hotel is a little scruffy but serviceable and friendly. It's roughly behind the Public Bank.

There are plenty of *kedai kopi* around the square and along the main street at the western end of town. The best of these is Shanghai Café, which has good steamed buns, fried noodles and big mugs of tea. You could also try the big **Pasar Rakyat** (Jln Merpati) food centre.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

Marudi is served by **Malaysia Airlines** (☎ 1-300-883-000; Jln Maju; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my), which has flights to/from Miri (RM50) and occasional flights to/from Gunung Mulu National Park and Bario.

### Boat

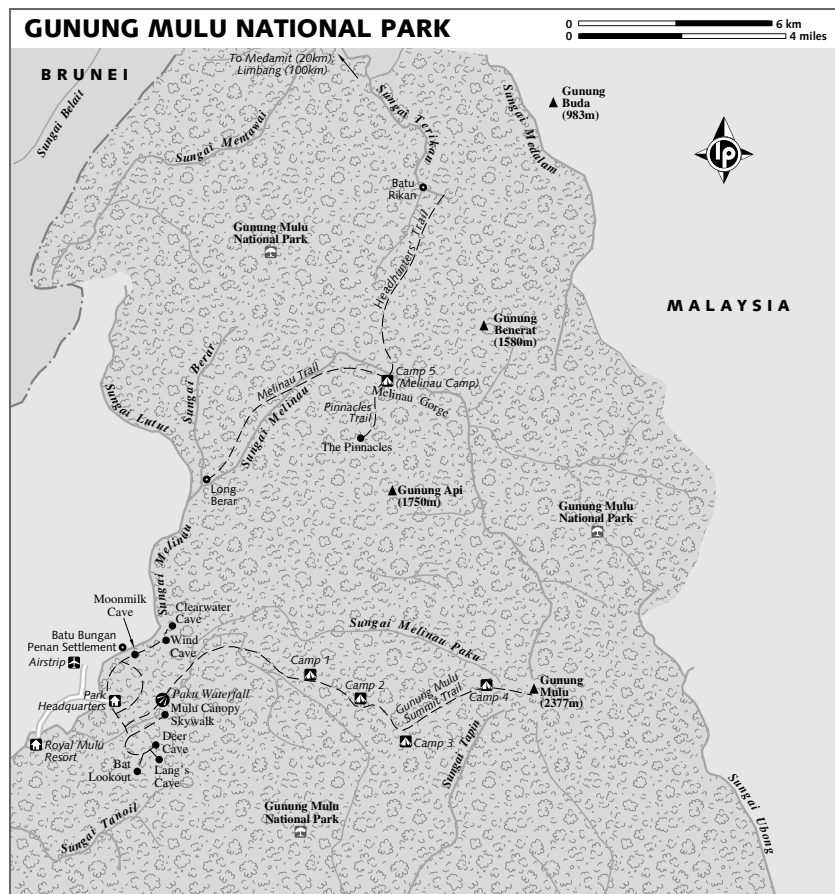
Express boats (RM30, 2½ hours) run between Miri Port (also known as Kuala Baram) and Marudi. To get to Miri Port, you can take a taxi for RM25. The last boat leaves about 3pm daily in both directions. For details on continuing upriver to Gunung Mulu National Park by boat see p212.

## GUNUNG MULU NATIONAL PARK

The **Gunung Mulu National Park** (☎ 085-433-561; www.mulupark.com; admission RM10; ☎ park headquarters 8am-5pm) may well be the single most impressive destination in all of Borneo. There are few parks in the world that pack so many natural marvels into such a small space. From some of the world's most incredible (and accessible) caves, to brilliant old-growth tropical rainforest, to some natural oddities such as the Pinnacles formation on Mt Api, this is truly one of the world's great wonders. It belongs at or near the top of any Borneo itinerary.

Among the remarkable features in this 529-sq-km park are its two main mountain peaks: Gunung Mulu (2377m) and Gunung Api (1750m). In between are more rugged mountains, deep gorges with clear rivers, and a unique mosaic of habitats supporting fascinating and diverse species of wildlife. Mulu's most famous attractions, though, are the Pinnacles, a forest of razor-sharp limestone peaks clustered 45m above the rainforest, and the so-called Headhunters' Trail, which follows an old tribal war path. If you're planning on doing any serious trekking in Sarawak, this park should be your first port of call.





As if that weren't enough, further charms lie below the surface of Mulu's forested crags; numerous spectacular caves are open to visitors, and a network of underground passages stretches over 300km underneath the park itself. A few years ago cave explorers here discovered the largest chamber in the world, the Sarawak Chamber, reputed to be the size of 16 football fields.

Note that Mulu is only accessible by plane or an all-day river journey. Bring plenty of cash as there are no ATMs or credit-card facilities.

## Sights & Activities

### SHOW CAVES

Mulu's caves are its most popular attractions, and for good reason: they are awe-

some. Four of these are open to all and are easily visited from park headquarters (HQ): Deer Cave, Lang's Cave, Clearwater Cave and Wind Cave.

### Deer Cave & Lang's Cave

The star of the lot is **Deer Cave**, which contains the world's largest cave passage – over 2km in length and 174m in height. The cave is reached from park HQ by a fascinating 3km plankwalk. In an unfortunate bit of bureaucratic overkill, the park requires that you join a guided tour to the cave (RM10 per person; tours depart park HQ at 1.45pm and 2.30pm). Once inside the cave, take your time and don't be afraid to hang back and savour the grandeur in the silence. If it's

rained recently, you'll notice a thin waterfall descending from the cave roof – when caught in the sunlight from outside the cave, the effect is magical.

After visiting Deer Cave, your guide will take you to the adjoining **Lang's Cave**, which is smaller but has some fascinating limestone formations.

If you've joined the 2.30pm tour, after visiting Deer and Lang's Caves, your guide may take you to a viewing area where you can observe the giant mouth of Deer Cave, from which millions of bats issue forth in the late afternoon to feed on jungle insects. Problem is, this is not a daily occurrence, and like as not, you'll find yourself spending an hour or more peering hopefully at the cave entrance only for the sun to go down and your guide to have to lead you back to park HQ along the plankwalk in near total darkness (actually, we kind of liked that part).

### Wind Cave & Clearwater Cave

Next on the Mulu menu are two more so-called 'show caves': **Wind Cave** and **Clearwater Cave**. Like Deer and Lang's Caves, the park requires that you join a guided tour to visit these caves (RM10 per person; tours depart park HQ at 9.45am and 10.30am). However, in this case it's worth it, and the fee includes a great boat trip up Sungai Melinau. Wind Cave, first on the tour, contains several chambers filled with phantasmagorical forests of stalactites and stalagmites.

Clearwater Cave, another 400m away by river or plankwalk, is said to be the longest cave in Southeast Asia (the tour only visits a tiny segment of the cave near one of its mouths). The real highlight of Clearwater Cave is the underground river that runs through the chambers – it's straight out of *King Solomon's Mines*. Bring a swimsuit, because there's a wonderful swimming hole outside the entrance to Clearwater Cave.

If you like, you can walk back from these caves to park HQ via a concrete path and plankwalk that winds through the narrow passage of **Moonmilk Cave**. This is a highly recommended variation, but be warned that there is a steep climb en route, and you'll need a headlamp for the cave. When you get to the cave, keep an eye out for the jungle creeper that winds its way into the cave – like a giant octopus tentacle exploring the darkness. After a rain, you may encounter clouds of brilliant

black and green Brooke's birdwing butterflies. The total distance from Wind Cave to park HQ is 3km. You can also do the walk in reverse, from park HQ to the cave, which is around 2km. A guide is not necessary for Moonmilk Cave or the walk to/from the cave.

### ADVENTURE CAVES

If Mulu's show caves leave you hungry for more, then you might want to consider doing some adventure caving. There are eight well-established adventure caves or cave routes in the park and guides are compulsory and arranged through park HQ.

Caves and routes are graded beginner, intermediate and advanced. If you have no previous spelunking experience, you must first do **Racer Cave** (two hours, RM200 guide fee for groups of one to five people), where your ability will be assessed. If you have no problems there, you can do other beginner or intermediate caves. In order to do an advanced cave, you will have to do an intermediate cave like Racer Cave, have proof of previous caving experience and be able to show current membership of an internationally recognised caving organisation. Minimum ages for adventure caving are eight years for beginner caving, 12 years for intermediate and 16 years for advanced.

Keep in mind that adventure caving is not for everyone, and halfway into a cave passage is not the best time to discover that you suffer from claustrophobia, fear of the dark or simply don't like slithering in the mud with all sorts of unknown creepy crawlies.

### HIKING & CLIMBING

Gunung Mulu National Park offers some of the best and most accessible jungle trekking in Borneo. The forest here is in excellent condition and there are trails for every level of fitness and skill, ranging from the easy plankwalks around park HQ to the legendary four-day slog up Gunung Mulu.

Apart from the easy day walks around park HQ and the Mulu Canopy Skywalk, the main trails in the park are the Gunung Mulu Summit Trail, the Pinnacles Route and the Headhunters' Trail. An attempt at any of them will involve some expense and it's best to go with a group to reduce the cost of both transport and guide. Ask around when you get to the park to see if anyone's interested in sharing costs. You should not

## THE ADVENTURE CAVES OF MULU

The limestone peaks of Mulu are riddled with some of the world's most incredible caves and the park is one of the best places in the world to try the sport of adventure caving. The park's eight main caves and caving routes are described here. The park produces a brochure called *The Adventure*, which provides additional details on these routes. Contact park headquarters (HQ) for more details or to arrange a guide. Prices here are per person for groups of one to five people unless otherwise indicated.

**Turtle Cave** (beginner, 45 minutes, RM20, daily at noon) This quick jaunt along the river near the entrance to Clearwater Cave is the perfect introduction to adventure caving. It leaves daily at noon from park HQ.

**Lagangs Cave/Beginner Route** (beginner, three to four hours, RM200, by arrangement) The beginner route through Lagangs Cave is good for families and groups. The walk to and from the cave takes around three hours, and the cave portion takes about an hour.

**Lagangs Cave/Intermediate Route** (intermediate, five to six hours, RM200, by arrangement) Similar to the above, but with an extra hour in the cave spent climbing a 150m slope to the cave's exit. Includes a river swim after exiting and a visit to Paku Falls.

**Drunken Forest** (intermediate, eight hours, RM300, by arrangement) This section of Clearwater Cave is accessed from the Mulu Summit Trail. The entrance is about three hours' walk from park HQ. This section of the cave is famous for a forest of white stalagmites.

**Racer Cave** (intermediate, four hours, RM200, by arrangement) About 30 minutes' walk from park HQ, this two-hour route requires a bit of upper-body strength.

**Stonehorse** (advanced, four to five hours, RM200, by arrangement) Start with a 2km walk through the jungle then spend around three hours travelling through large passages with up to 35m ceilings.

**Clearwater Connection** (advanced, six to eight hours, RM300, by arrangement) A 4.8km trip that starts at Wind Cave and heads into the wild chambers of the famous Clearwater Cave. There is a good bit of scrambling and the route includes a 1.5km river section.

**Sarawak Chamber** (advanced, 10 to 15 hours, RM500, by arrangement) Considered the largest cave chamber (as opposed to passage) in the world, the Sarawak Chamber is 700m long, 400m wide and 70m high. It is often said that the chamber could hold 10 747s parked nose to tail, but getting them in there would be no mean feat, and just getting yourself in there is no cakewalk: start with a three-hour walk on the Summit Trail, then you enter Good Luck Cave, traverse an 800m river section and perform a 200m traverse before entering the Sarawak Chamber. Ordinary lights are no match for the black ocean of space in the cave, which opens in front of you.

attempt any of these trails without a guide – and you won't be permitted to anyway. Expect rain, leeches, slippery and treacherous conditions, and a very hot workout – carry lots of water. Guides can be arranged at the park HQ. Guides are worth every dollar.

## Mulu Canopy Skywalk

One of the real highlights of the park is its brilliant new **Mulu Canopy Skywalk**, easily the best in Southeast Asia. Once again, the park requires that you traverse it as part of a guided walk (RM30 per person; walks depart at 7am, 8.30am, 10.30am, 1pm, 2pm and 2.15pm). Despite the relatively steep cost, we urge you not to skip this attraction – every bit of its 480m length is unforgettable. Climbing to the canopy is really the only way to see what a tropical rainforest is all about, since most of the action happens in the canopy, not on the ground.

## The Pinnacles

Best described as the world's worst parachute landing zone (ouch!), the Pinnacles is an incredible formation of 45m stone towers protruding from the forest on the flanks of Gunung Api. Getting to the Pinnacles involves travel by boat and a tough three-day trek.

The trek to the Pinnacles starts with a two- or three-hour boat trip (depending on the level of the river) from park HQ to Long Berar. From here it is an 8km trek to Camp 5 by the Sungai Melinau. Camp 5 has hostel-style accommodation with running water, cold showers, a cooking area, and covered sleeping quarters. You sleep overnight at this picturesque spot before climbing Gunung Api.

The three- to four-hour climb up to the Pinnacles is unrelentingly steep and taxing, and the final section before the Pinnacles involves some serious clambering and a bit of

gymnastic ability. You have to start before dawn to have a chance of making it up to the Pinnacles and back in one day, and your guide will turn you back if you haven't reached a specific point in time. You cannot camp at the Pinnacles. The way back down is just as taxing as the way up and once you stagger back into Camp 5, the river will be looking pretty enticing.

Guide and boat fees are RM400 for a three-day two-night trek (one to five people).

## Gunung Mulu

If you're very fit and want a real adventure, the climb to the 2376m summit of **Gunung Mulu** is a classic Borneo adventure. The four-day, three-night excursion will test anyone's stamina. You must carry enough food for the entire trip, as well as your own cooking utensils and a sleeping bag (or you can hire porters for RM70 per day). It's not unusual for it to rain every day, in which case you could find yourself wallowing in mud along the way.

There are several camps (basic wooden huts) along the trail; Camps 1, 3 and 4 are the ones usually used for overnight stops. The most common schedule involves an easy first day (about three or four hours' walking) and overnight at Camp 1 beside a beautiful river. On day two you're faced with a long (four or five hours) hard and extremely steep climb to Camp 4. If it hasn't rained, there won't be any water at Camp 4, so carry some up from Camp 3.

On day three leave your pack at Camp 4 and climb to the summit of Gunung Mulu. You can either sleep at Camp 3 for another night and return to the park HQ on day four, or descend the mountain in one day. The latter is quite tough on the legs, but you can cool down in the river along the way.

The guide fee for a group of one to five people is a healthy RM1000.

## The Headhunters' Trail

The Headhunters' Trail is a backdoor route from Gunung Mulu National Park to Limbang and can be done in either direction, although most people start at the park. This trail is named after the Kayan war parties that used to make their way up the Sungai Melinau from the Baram area to the Melinau Gorge, then dragged their canoes overland to the Sungai Terikan to raid the peoples of the Limbang

region. A 3m-wide road lined with poles was used to move the canoes, and a canal was dug around Batu Rikan.

Starting from park HQ, you must first take a boat to Long Berar, then walk to Camp 5 (about four hours) and overnight there on the first day. From here, if you're really keen, you can do the climb up to the Pinnacles on the following day (see opposite). The following day involves an 11km walk to the Sungai Terikan (four or five hours), where you could spend the night at the rangers station (Mentawai) or proceed to an Iban longhouse, Rumah Bala Lesong, another three or four hours away. After overnighting in the longhouse, the boat trip continues downriver to Medamit, from where it is possible to travel by minivan to Limbang.

The guide fee for the route is RM200. The boat from the Sungai Terikan to Medamit should cost about RM500. These fees are for one to five people. A suitable payment for food and lodging at the longhouse could be about RM20; and the minivan from Medamit to Limbang costs RM5. Extra costs would include food for the stay at Camp 5, gifts for the longhouse and a tip for your guide if you feel it is warranted.

## Other Trails

There are several easy walks around park HQ. The **Moonmilk Cave Trail** leaves from beside park HQ and parallels the river heading upstream to Moonmilk Cave. It's mostly flat for 1.5km until it reaches the steep steps up to the cave. No guide is required and it's paved with concrete, which means easy walking and no leeches – making it a very pleasant way to check out the Borneo rainforest. If you don't feel like the sweaty climb up to the cave, a there-and-back to the base of the steps is a good idea.

About 400m along the **Moonmilk Cave Trail**, a plankwalk branches off on the right and continues through the forest for about 1km, eventually coming out along the main plankwalk to the show caves, near the park accommodation. This is another fun and easy way to experience the jungle.

The plank walk to Deer and Lang's caves leaves from just beyond the park accommodation, past the second longhouse block. It's about 800m to the junction that leads on the left to the Mulu Canopy Skywalk and on the right to Deer and Lang's Caves. If you just

**NEW YEAR'S EVE IN BORNEO** *Chris Rowthorn*

In December of 1996 I travelled with two friends, Anthony and Denise, to Sarawak's Gunung Mulu National Park. After exploring the park, we decided to try the Headhunters' Trail. Our guide for the trip was a young Iban named Mr Larry. After leading us for three days through the jungle, we were met at the river by Mr Larry's father, Mr Siga, who bundled us into a riverboat for the trip down to his longhouse where we planned to stay the night. As we made our way downriver, it dawned on us that it was New Year's Eve.

The first sign of what was to come came in the form of a dull roar emanating from the longhouse, which was as yet invisible beyond the riverbank. Mr Larry and his father ushered us up the steps of the longhouse and into Mr Siga's 'apartment'.

As soon as we sat down, Mr Larry produced a plastic bottle containing a murky white fluid. 'This,' he said proudly, 'is *tuak*, the drink of the Iban people.' Cups were filled and, after a welcoming toast by the chief, we took our first sip. As we drank, the bigwigs of the longhouse filtered in one by one, eager to meet the exotic visitors from abroad. Many of them spoke surprisingly good English, including one man who introduced himself as Alfred. Soon after sitting down, he embarked on a long and somewhat convoluted speech in praise of Bill Clinton. Being a Democrat, I told him that I agreed with everything he had to say. With that, Alfred turned to me and with a great smile on his face announced, 'You and me, we drink together!'

Soon we were ushered into the dining room. Mrs Siga served up a wonderful meal of river fish, rice, local vegetables and, of course, huge pitchers of *tuak*. As we ate, we were repeatedly urged to 'Take rice. Take rice.' I would later come to regret not having taken enough rice. After dinner, as we sat around the table, we were asked to sing a song. We looked at each other in horror – did we know even one complete song between us? After a brief discussion, we settled on the inevitable and launched into dimly remembered Beatles classics' such as 'Yesterday' and 'Yellow Submarine'. Our hosts took this as well as could be expected, given our wretched singing voices and poor grasp of the lyrics.

Meanwhile, the *tuak* kept flowing. While Anthony and Denise begged off for a postdinner nap, Alfred dragged me to another house, which doubled as the longhouse bar. He barked something to the old man who ran the place and moments later a great jug of *tuak* appeared before us. Even though we were literally hurling down glass after glass, Alfred explained that this was just a warm-up. After midnight the real party would begin, and we would traverse the whole length of the longhouse, stopping for a glass of *tuak* at every single door. 'How many doors are there?' I enquired grimly. 'Only forty-five!' Alfred announced with a big smile on his face.

At around 10pm, Anthony and Denise found us. They looked sober and refreshed. I, on the other hand, was extremely drunk. We left the longhouse bar to join the party on the veranda. Up and down its length, knots of people were gathered in furious *tuak*-drinking sessions. Being the only outsiders, we were in great demand at these gatherings and people were literally fighting each other for the honour of our presence. Alfred clearly enjoyed the prestige that came from being the chaperone of these exotic foreign visitors.

By 11pm the party had reached fever pitch. People clustered round us, madly trying to engage us in conversation. One man wanted to talk about durians. Another wanted to introduce us to his dog. Still others simply wanted to offer us *tuak*. Presiding over this mad talk-fest was Alfred, who was clearly in his element. Caught up in the drinking and talking, I lost all track of time. Suddenly, the revellers struck up a rather alarming chant: 'Get the gun! Get the gun!' Before I knew it, Alfred had dragged me to the railing of the veranda and placed a particularly

walked out to this junction and turned around, you'd probably find the time well spent.

Just before this junction, the Gunung Mulu Summit Branches off (marked Summit Trail) on the left. This is also the **Paku Waterfall Trail**. This flat trail works through the jungle to Paku Waterfalls, an interesting set of three waterfalls

that come right out of a limestone cliff face. There's good swimming here. The total distance from park HQ to the falls is about 1.5km and the return trip takes about three hours at a leisurely pace. Note that the ground can become a swamp after rain. The best advice: don't fight it – just take the plunge and get muddy

fearsome-looking shotgun in the hands of the drunkest man in Southeast Asia. After a brief argument about whose watch told the correct time the countdown began, and as the hour struck midnight, I pulled the trigger.

Now that we had properly rung in the New Year, Alfred announced that it was time to start drinking in earnest. I could hardly believe my ears. What did the man think I had been doing up until that point? Renewed supplies of *tuak* were brought forth and two men appeared with a miniature electronic organ and a couple of drums. As soon as they started playing, all but the oldest Iban jumped up to dance.

Before long, I was a sweaty mess. I begged off dancing for a while and wandered down the veranda to join another group of people busily consuming *tuak*. I was soon besieged by offers of 'the local wine', and was growing increasingly drunk by the minute. I was swimming in a sea of *tuak* that seemed to know no end. However, the Iban clearly believed that you could never be too drunk.

The whole longhouse was slowly spinning round me and I felt a horrible nausea coming on. I knew that if I didn't get out of there fast, I was going to make a nasty mess of the veranda floor. I made my way down the longhouse steps and followed a plankwalk that disappeared into a swamp next to the longhouse. Here, I busily set about vomiting up everything I had eaten and drunk in the last six hours. As I was retching, I felt the plankwalk start to shake. I looked up and to my horror there he stood: Alfred. He had found me. The fact that I was being violently ill didn't seem to register with him. 'Come, we go drink *tuak*!' he bellowed. Luckily, Anthony appeared just a few moments later and somehow managed to drag Alfred back to the longhouse. As they disappeared into the darkness, Alfred shouted over his shoulder, 'Chris, I am waiting for you. When you come back, we drink more *tuak*!'

I was not tempted to join Alfred. In a thick drunken haze, I made my way back to the longhouse, peered down the veranda to make sure that no-one was looking, then made a quick dash for the chief's house. I stumbled into the empty house and crawled onto a mattress. The whole longhouse seemed to spiral about me. There was so much alcohol in my bloodstream that unconsciousness quickly took precedence over nausea.

Just as I teetered on the brink of oblivion, something large grabbed my arm and hauled me halfway off the mattress. I opened my eyes to see Alfred staring down at me expectantly. 'Come,' he said. 'Now, we go to forty-five doors!' Even in my wretched drunken state I had to laugh. Was this man serious? Here I was, on the verge of going out like Keith Moon or Jimi Hendrix, and he was suggesting a nightcap of forty-five glasses of *tuak*! Needless to say, I did not take him up on his offer. As I sank back into unconsciousness, I had a grim vision of the Iban carrying my prostrate form down the length of the longhouse, stopping at each door to pour a glass of *tuak* down my unprotesting throat.

The next morning at 7am, the sound of loud music woke me from a tortured sleep. 'It can't be,' I thought, 'they're not still at it.' But they were. The Iban had partied straight through the night. As for me, I was suffering from an apocalyptic hangover. Even the slightest movement caused rays of pain to shoot through my head. A quick New Year's resolution was in order. I vowed to myself, 'I shall not, as long as I live, consume another drop of alcohol. It is the bane of my existence. It is the root of all evil. It is the ink with which the fool signs his soul over to the devil. GET THEE BEHIND ME SATAN!' Unfortunately, of course, Satan was right in front of me. When I opened the door of the chief's house, an Iban man rushed forward with a glass of *tuak* in his outstretched hand and said, 'The local wine!' I took the cup, and I drank it. In a lifetime of short-lived New Year's resolutions, this was the shortest.

early on. No guide is required for this route, but let the folks at park HQ know before you set out and when you expect to return.

**Sleeping & Eating**

Due to the park's popularity it's best to pre-book your accommodation in advance with

**Mulu Park** (☎ 085-792-300; enquiries@mulupark.com; www.mulupark.com). You can also make bookings through National Parks & Wildlife agents in Kuching (p163) or Miri (p200).

Park accommodation is in the form of a 21-bed **hostel** (dm RM25), which has clean, spacious rooms with hot showers and lockers.



## TREKKING IN THE KELABIT HIGHLANDS

The Kelabit Highlands are, arguably, the best place in Borneo for extended treks. Most trails are gently undulating and traverse a variety of primary and secondary forest, as well as cleared areas. While the Highlands are certainly cooler than Borneo's coastal regions, it's still hard work trekking up here and you should be in pretty good shape to consider a multiday trek in the Highlands. You'll also want a good pair of leech socks, comfortable trekking clothes and walking shoes; see the boxed text on p65.

Guided treks range from overnight excursions to five-day slogs as far as distant villages such as Ba Kelalan. Every guesthouse and longhouse in Bario can arrange guides and accommodation, as well as transport to trailheads, if necessary. It's certainly possible to just turn up and make arrangements after you arrive, especially if you don't mind waiting a day or two in Bario before the start of your trek. If you're in a hurry, it makes sense to make arrangements by email or phone before you arrive.

Note that the Highlands are laced with rivers and an increasing number of logging roads. It's possible to combine treks with river trips in the rainy season and following rains, and the experience of travelling through the Highlands by river is pure magic. You can also shorten certain treks by doing one or two legs by 4WD trucks. Boat and road travel increases the cost of a trip, but it may be the only option for those with limited time or those who cannot face the rigors of an all-walking trip. Your lodge owner can consult with you about this and make arrangements.

Going rates for guides (and porters if you need them) start at RM80 per day. To stay overnight in a longhouse, expect to pay RM40 per person (including food). Some treks involve either river trips (highly recommended if the water is high enough) or 4WD trips, which, naturally, significantly increase the cost of the trek.

Finally, keep in mind that it is extremely easy to get lost in the Kelabit Highlands. *Never* attempt to trek for even a short distance without a local guide.

## TREKKING ROUTES

The following are the most popular routes in the Kelabit Highlands. These are intended just as a starting point. With some many trails in the area, there is ample scope for custom routes and creative route planning.

### Kelapang Loop

Formerly known as the Bario Loop, this three- to five-day trek is the most popular route in the Highlands, taking in three of the main longhouses south of Bario: Pa Dali, Ramadu and Pa Mada (sometimes called Long Dano). The term loop is something of a misnomer: it's more of an out-and-back trek with a small loop at one end. Portions of this can be done by 4WD or river boat.

by sociable locals as well as visitors. The proprietor, Reddish, knows everyone in town and has close ties with the longhouses on the treks around the highlands. As well as basic fan rooms, tasty meals and evening barbecues, the lodge can arrange guides and activities.

**De Plateau Lodge** ([deplateau@gmail.com](mailto:deplateau@gmail.com); bed/full-board package RM20/60) This is another good choice, with comfortable rooms and nice common areas. The owner here can arrange treks, bird-watching and other activities. It's located in a white-timber house surrounded by a lovely garden, 2km east of Bario; stick left when the road forks.

**Bario Asal Longhouse** (☎ 791-065; [paranmaku@yahoo.com](mailto:paranmaku@yahoo.com); bed/full-board package RM20/RM80) A short walk from 'downtown' Bario, this longhouse is a friendly spot with pictures of the longhouse residents (past and present) hung on the wall. Not too many families live here any more, so it's relatively quiet.

**JK View Lodge** ([rose\\_sabot@hotmail.com](mailto:rose_sabot@hotmail.com); r per person RM15) Rose's place is a neat little cabin with just four rooms, 500m west of Bario near the shophouses. Meals, treks and tours are available.

**Tarawe's Lodge** ([jtarawe@bario.com](mailto:jtarawe@bario.com); r per person RM20) Simple two- and three-bed accommodation

All three longhouses en route are welcoming, friendly places where you'll get a good glimpse into Kelabit life.

The typical itinerary is as follows: day one – Bario to Pa Mada (eight hours); day two – Pa Mada to Pa Dali (two hours); day three – Pa Dali to Ramadu (three hours); day four – Ramadu to Pa Mada (three hours); day five – Pa Mada to Bario (eight hours). This itinerary can be shortened by taking a boat to Pa Berang and a 4WD to Ramadu (RM100 per person), or by covering multiple stages in one day. Alternatively, you can extend it for as long as you like; the area around Pa Dali is well worth a day or two's exploration, and if you really have a taste for adventure you could attempt to organise an ascent of Gunung Apad Runan (2110m), on the Indonesian border.

### Ba Kelalan

The three-day trek from Bario to the village of Ba Kelalan (see p216) is a good route for those who don't want to cover the same ground twice (you can arrange to fly out of Ba Kelalan so that you don't have to return to Bario). It covers a variety of mostly gentle terrain and gives a good overview of the Kelabit Highlands.

The typical itinerary is as follows: day one – Bario to Pa Lungan (four hours); day two – Pa Lungan to Pa Rumpai (eight hours); day three – Pa Rumpai to Ba Kelalan (three hours). Note that this route takes you through part of Kalimantan, which is officially illegal. Please consult carefully with your guides about whether this is possible at the time you attempt the route. It may be possible to detour around Kalimantan to avoid trouble.

### Gunung Murud

Sarawak's highest mountain (2423m) is just begging to be climbed, but very few visitors go to the trouble required to put together a trip. The mountain can be reached from both Ba Kelalan and Bario; from Bario, the more common starting point, a typical return trip takes six days. Needless to say, this is only for the very fit.

The typical itinerary from Bario is as follows: day one – Bario to Pa Lungan (four hours); day two – Pa Lungan to Long Rapung (four hours); day three – Long Rapung to Church Camp (eight hours); day four – Church Camp to summit and back to Church Camp (seven hours); day five – Church Camp to Long Rapung (eight hours); day six – Long Rapung to Bario (eight hours).

### Batu Lawi

If you were sitting on the left side of the plane from Miri to Bario, you probably caught a glimpse of the 2046m spire of Batu Lawi. While an ascent of this spire (known as the 'male peak' of the mountain) is only for expert technical rock climbers, an ascent of the lower 'female peak' is possible for fit trekkers without any special technical skills. It's a three-day return trip from Bario.

The typical itinerary is as follows: day one – Bario to Base Camp via Pa Ukat (eight hours); day two – Base Camp to summit to Base Camp (10 hours); day three – Base Camp to Bario (eight hours).

in a small house on the main road. Meals are available if ordered in advance.

**Gem's Lodge** (☎ 019-815 5779; [gems\\_lodge@yahoo.com](mailto:gems_lodge@yahoo.com); r RM60) Bario itself is hardly a bustling metropolis, but this welcoming guesthouse, just 6km southeast of town near the longhouse village of Pa Umor, is tranquillity incarnate. The owner, Jaman, is one of Bario's nicest, best and most informative guides. He offers a wide array of treks, tours and excursions based on his own formidable local knowledge. There are four pleasant private rooms and a cosy common area. Email ahead to arrange a pick-up.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

The only practical way to Bario is by air and it's easily one of the most exciting flights in Southeast Asia. After crossing the lowlands of western Sarawak, you sweep by the dense rainforest of Brunei, followed by the brilliant peaks of Mulu National Park (you can peer right into the yawning maw of Deer Cave) before flying by the fantastic spire of 2046m Batu Lawi (all of these sights are only visible from the left side of the aircraft as you fly from Miri to Bario).

It takes 30 minutes to walk into Bario from the airport. Turn left at the T-junction.

**Malaysia Airlines** (☎ 1-300-883-000; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my) has at least one flight daily between Miri and Bario (return RM145, 50 minutes). Communication between the Malaysian Airlines office in Bario and Malaysian Airlines offices elsewhere is haphazard, so reconfirm your flight out of Bario as soon as you arrive. Flights are often booked out well in advance and are dependent on the weather; cancellations aren't uncommon.

Guesthouse operators in Bario can arrange 4WD transport on logging roads down to Miri, but you'll have to pay around RM500 (and your butt cheeks will pay even more dearly as you bounce your way down the hellish roads).

## BA KELALAN

Ba Kelalan, known for its apples and organic vegetables, is the other main centre in the highlands, though it's even smaller than Bario.

Trekking to or from Bario is a good option, as you can catch a flight there or back to avoid covering the same stretch twice. The round trip should take three to four days, passing through Pa Lungan and Long Rapung. Walks in this area are difficult – you'll need to have your own food and shelter, and be prepared for some hard slogging.

The best accommodation in Ba Kelalan is the **Apple Lodge**, run by **Borneo Jungle Safari** (☎ 085-435736; www.borneojunglesafari.com; 174A Jln Brooke) in Miri.

**MASwings** (www.maswings.com.my) currently flies here from Bario twice a week, though flights are often cancelled. Flights and 4WD transport to Lawas are also available.

# LIMBANG DIVISION

## LIMBANG

☎ 085 / pop 3700

Limbang is the centre of the section of Sarawak that divides Brunei into two parts. It's of limited interest to travellers, but you may find yourself passing through here en route between Brunei and Sabah or after a trip down the Headhunters' Trail from Mulu National Park. Those expecting to find a sleepy backwater will be surprised to find a bustling and relatively prosperous city on the banks of the Sungai Limbang.

## Orientation & Information

The main part of Limbang sits along the east bank of the Sungai Limbang, which loops across

a forested plain before emptying into Brunei Bay. A range of low hills further east marks the border with Brunei's Temburong district.

The older part of town is only a couple of hundred metres square and is bordered on the riverbank by a two-storey, blue-roofed main market. The massive complex looming over the wharf area is the Purnama Hotel and its attendant shopping mall, Limbang Plaza. The centre is largely comprised of concrete shophouses containing hotels, cafés, karaoke bars and snooker halls.

Boats to Brunei and Labuan leave from the wharf below the blue-roofed market, and taxis park just outside. Boats to Lawas tie up at the jetty a few hundred metres downstream. Buses leave from a stand a couple of blocks east of the river, behind the old part of town. The airport is about 4km south of town.

There are several moneychangers on Jln Kuba and a Maybank on Jln Bank.

## Sights

A **tamu** (weekly market) is held on Friday in the car park in front of the main market. Bisayah villagers, many of whom still speak the Brunei Malay dialect, come in from all around the district to attend.

The small but informative **Limbang Regional Museum** (Muzium Wilayah; admission free; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sun) is upstairs in another of Charles Brooke's forts, built in 1897. The collection is well presented and features exhibits on archaeology, culture and crafts of the region. To get here, follow the riverbank upstream (south) past the police station and look for the replica totem pole.

Down the road from the museum and up a steep drive is a pretty **park** with an artificial lake backed by forest. It's a pleasant place to pass some time if you're waiting for a flight.

## Sleeping & Eating

Being a port town, most of Limbang's cheaper places are a little sleazy, with hourly rates and grotty rooms. You'll escape the sleaze by paying a bit more for midrange accommodation.

**Royal Park Hotel** (☎ 212-155; Lot 1089 Jln Buangsiol; r from RM60; ☎) Much better value than the budget fleabags in the centre of town, this clean, well-run hotel is worth the walk to get to. From the town centre, walk north (downstream) along the river. It's about 400m north of Limbang town centre, just in from the river.

**Metro Hotel** (☎ 211-133; Lot 781 Jln Bangkita; r from RM50; ☎) If you can't be bothered to walk up to the Royal Park, the Metro Hotel is a just barely acceptable option in the middle of town. It's a little smoky and threadbare, but it's within easy walking distance of the jetty and the bus station.

**Purnama Hotel** (☎ 216-700; Jln Buangsiol; r RM150; ☎) A four-star hotel with friendly staff, the Purnama has large, adequate rooms, a café, a lounge bar, a spa and a fitness centre, as well as all the consumerist delights of Limbang Plaza. Discounts make it particularly good value.

There are food stalls on the 1st floor of the waterfront market, at the bus station and along the river. Basic Malay and Chinese food is served in *kedai kopi* in the town centre.

## Getting There & Around

### AIR

**Malaysia Airlines** (☎ 1-300-883-000; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my) has flights to Miri (RM65) and Kota Kinabalu (KK; RM75). The airport is 4km south of the town centre, a RM10 taxi ride.

### BOAT

The express boat to Pulau Labuan in Sabah leaves at 8.30am daily (RM25, two hours). Speedboats go to Bandar Seri Begawan in Brunei (RM15, 30 minutes) and Lawas in Sarawak (RM25, one hour) when sufficient passengers turn up (you may find yourself waiting quite a while). Boats leave from the jetty outside the immigration hall on the river, just upstream from the large pink building housing the market (Bengunan Tamu Limbang).

### BUS

There are buses to Kuala Lurah, at the border with Brunei, that depart at 9.30am, 1pm and 5pm (RM5.50, one hour). There are buses to Medamit (RM5) but none to the Temburong District of Brunei (you'll have to take a taxi). Buses depart from the stand a few blocks east of the river in the centre of town. There is also a daily bus from Limbang across

Brunei to Miri (RM40, three hours, departs Limbang at 9am).

### CAR

A taxi to Kuala Lurah, at the border with Brunei, will cost RM40. Most taxi drivers will refuse to continue over the border to Bandar Seri Begawan (BSB) due to the time it takes to clear immigration. You can walk across the border and catch another taxi onward to BSB for about B\$10. A taxi from Limbang to the border with the Temburong District of Brunei will cost RM15, and, once again, taxi drivers will usually refuse to cross. Once across, you'll have to hitch or arrange a private car (which will not be easy). Consider heading to Temburong (Bangar) from BSB or negotiate with a taxi driver from Limbang to take you all the way.

## LAWAS

☎ 085 / pop 1080

Lawas is a transit point in the sliver of Sarawak pinched between Sabah and the Temburong district of Brunei. There is of little interest to travellers.

**Hotel Perdana** (☎ 285-888; Lot 365 Jln Punang; r from 46; ☎) is the best economy hotel in town, although it's a little frayed round the edges. To get there, start with your back to the main market (Pasar Baru Lawas) and go left, following the main road out of town. It will be on your right after about 300m.

There are several **Malaysia Airlines** (☎ 1-300-883-000; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my) flights each week to/from Miri (RM70). The airport is 2km from town. There is a branch of **Maybank** in the centre of town.

A boat to Limbang (RM28, one hour) leaves at 9am every day but Thursday. A boat to Labuan (RM33, two hours) leaves at 7.30am every day except Tuesday and Thursday. Boats leave from the jetty on the west side of town, just downstream from the Shell petrol station. Buses head to Kota Kinabalu in Sabah (RM20) at 7am and 1pm daily.

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