

Heritage & Historical Places in
SARAWAK



SARAWAK TOURISM BOARD
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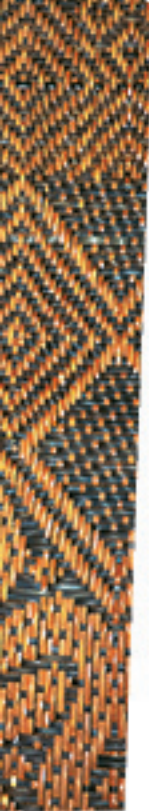
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Sarawak
More to Discover



Sarawak

Sarawak is the largest state in Malaysia, stretching some 800 km along the northwest coast of Borneo, the world's third largest island. A beautiful land coloured by peace, tradition and unmatched biodiversity, it is a prime destination for discerning travellers seeking vibrant culture, exhilarating adventure and breath-taking nature.

You can share in the lifestyle of an upriver longhouse, follow in the footsteps of a dynasty of White Rajahs, explore gigantic caves in the heart of the Borneo rainforest, or paddle through jungle streams in search of elusive wild orangutans, to mention just a few possibilities. Whatever your choice, you will leave Sarawak with memories to last a lifetime.

Whether you stay in a luxurious resort, an award winning boutique hotel, a heritage homestay or a simple jungle camp, you will be cared for with genuine warmth and sincerity. The people of Sarawak are equally at home in the past and the present, taking the same pride in their traditions of hospitality as they do in their modern infrastructure and seamless connectivity.

Revealing a side of Asia unlike anywhere else, Sarawak is a place for people seeking authentic and engaging experiences rather than tourist-trap clichés. And most importantly, it's a safe, peaceful and friendly place to visit, for large groups and solo travellers alike. Make Sarawak your next destination, as the highlight of your visit to Southeast Asia, or as a journey of discovery all on its own.



Heritage & Historical Places in SARAWAK

Introduction

The Malaysian state of Sarawak occupies the north-western section of the majestic island of Borneo which straddles the equator. Major rivers gush from the central highlands northwards into the South China Sea.

The climate is typical of the location. Average temperatures vary from 27 C to 32 C. There is ample rainfall all the year round, but there is little variation between 'summer' in July or 'winter' in December. Sarawak is never very hot, or really cold!

The indigenous inhabitants of Sarawak used to live in small groups, roaming the dense rainforest to find their sustenance, and sheltering in caves like Niah. As time passed they learnt to build sturdy longhouses by the clear rivers, and to grow rice. They fished, hunted and farmed for their daily food.

Sarawak is still comparatively sparsely settled, with about 3 million people on 124,000 kilometer square, but people now live in modern towns, villages and longhouses. Niah Cave, surrounded by dense rainforest, has become a popular nature tourism destination.



Sarawak and the World

The India-China sea routes of antiquity skirted the northern coast of Borneo. Traces of ancient trading settlements have been found in several sites on the Sarawak coast. After landing, seafarers from far

away gave thanks to their gods for a safe journey across the dangerous seas. A small Buddha figure and the remains of a Tantric shrine at Santubong bear silent witness to this custom, and to visitors from China, from India, maybe from other countries as well.

Today, Santubong is a quiet Malay village at the mouth of the Sarawak River; 1000 years ago it was a busy market town. Traders exchanged luxury wares from distant lands for jungle resins, rattan canes, kingfisher feathers, bee's wax, birds' nests and more arcane *materia medica* from the jungle. This is how Chinese ceramics were introduced to the indigenous population of Sarawak, where such treasures are still kept in high regard.



Santubong was once connected with some iron smelting industry. Little is known about the extent of this activity, or even who the workers were, or where they got the iron ore from. They left a lot of iron slag behind, and a number of mysterious carved rocks and boulders. Today's inhabitants of the area know nothing about it.



It is believed that sailors often camped on the Borneo coast to wait for the monsoon to change; they probably built huts to shelter them for a few weeks or months, But after a few decades – maybe centuries? – of human activity, the rainforest quietly obliterates the evidence. No ruins of large buildings, temples or palaces have been found in Sarawak....yet.

The River – the Highway

Seen from the sea, Mt. Santubong at the west mouth of Sarawak River is a steep cone. For centuries it has guided mariners – traders as well as raiders! – to a safe anchorage.

For many centuries, the Sarawak River was the 'main road' from the sea to the hilly hinterland. He who controlled the river controlled the territory, which produced a valuable mineral: antimony. While Sarawak was under the loose suzerainty of Brunei, the Sultan's men came to collect tribute from time to time. In the 18th century a young nobleman from that principality was Sultan of Sarawak for a short period. His tomb, re-furbished by the piety of his collateral descendants, stands at the foot of Mt. Santubong.



In the 19th century, European explorers and administrators considered Santubong their 'sanatorium'. They built a few wooden huts to stay in when they felt the need for the cool sea air, which surgeon-bishop Francis McDougall had diagnosed as 'salubrious.'

Long after the Victorian picnickers have passed on, Santubong is still a preferred recreation spot. An elegantly laid-out golf course attracts sportsmen. A number of hotels provide comfort and access to the beach, the air is still salubrious, and a good

road replaces the day-long boat trip of old. Unless you like boats: the nearby Wetland National Park is best visited by water; and local fishermen are often prepared to take 'fishing visitors' out on their trips to sea.



Among Santubong's many attractions is the Sarawak Cultural Village, a picturesque assemblage of Sarawak's main ethnic groups in one idyllic village. Local and foreign visitors stroll among the olden-times houses, sample traditional food and sing along with the cultural dance show.

The White Rajahs



One colourful segment of Sarawak history starts in the 1830s, when the trim yacht of an English gentleman-adventurer sailed into these waters. James Brooke gave some timely assistance to the Brunei rulers stationed in Kuching at the time, and eventually had the territory (the western fifth of today's Sarawak) ceded to him by the Sultan, together with the title 'Rajah'.

Those were stirring times! Brooke managed his small country with the aid of a few loyal followers, by making friends with indigenous chiefs where possible, or mounting small-scale military operations to 'pacify' those who weren't prepared to accept his rule. Pirates at sea were a perennial problem; the often rebellious gold miners who had crossed the border from Dutch Borneo added to the heady mix.



Most of the miners were Hakka Chinese, and many stayed on after the gold had been worked out. Expert farmers and gardeners, they grew Sarawak's signature crop – pepper – and supplied vegetables, fruit, poultry and pork to the growing towns. The well-preserved wooden bazaar of Siniawan, half an hour's drive from Kuching, was one of the gold miners' rallying points. Today it hosts a colourful market – with lots of Hakka food! – on weekends, and specially Saturday nights.

Rajah James' successor, Charles Brooke, improved on his uncle's work. He extended the boundaries eastward, he put order into the administration, he kept a tight rein on finances. A DO in the 'outstations' was still 'monarch of all he surveyed', but he had to answer to the Rajah at regular intervals.



By the early 20th century, Sarawak was a sleepy backwater – until a world war broke up the idyll. The centenary of Brooke Rule was happily celebrated in

August 1941, but by December the Japanese Army had occupied the small state.

At the end of the war, the Third Rajah declined to resume his reign. He ceded Sarawak to the British Crown in 1956, and the land was administered as a Crown Colony until it became a partner to the formation of Malaysia in 1963.



These dates are important! Nearly all the 'quaint colonial buildings' our visitors admire, especially in Kuching, were built during the Brooke rule. Sarawak was only a colony from 1946 to 1963.

A stroll in Kuching Old Town

Kuching Main Bazaar follows the oldest traffic route, the Sarawak River. The picturesque Old Town clusters around the Court House (1874) a small fort which used to protect the main jetty, the Sarawak Steamship Company godown. A few rows of shop-houses called Gambier Street, India Street and Carpenter Street on both sides of the Round Tower (1886) completed the commercial section in the early Brooke days. A Chinese temple at the downstreams end and a Mosque upstreams completed the township, overlooked by the Bishop's House (1848) and Cathedral on a small hillock further back. The Rajah's Astana (Palace, 1870) and Fort Margherita (1879) watched over the town from the opposite bank.



Walk past the neo-classical Post Office to the famous Sarawak Museum, at the time of writing, closed for renovations (scheduled to re-open in 2020). An excellent ethnographic exhibition is laid on in the building next to the Museum.



Nobody could miss the feisty Police Station (1931) with its barred windows, or another section of old shophouses circling the 'Open Market' which is, literally, open day and night. The Open Market is where night birds congregate for a bowl of rice porridge after a night out on the tiles!

Kuching is a vibrant, growing town. Some old landmarks had to make way for development, new ones catch the visitor's eye. The gold-roofed State Parliament looms on the bank opposite Main Bazaar (irreverently dubbed the 'lemon squeezer'), and an exuberant new pedestrian bridge spans the river at the point where tall ships used to rock at their moorings.

Town and Beyond..

The old Malay kampong (village) of Kuching nestles in a wide loop of the Sarawak River, just upstreams from the Old Town. A few fine old 'Sarawak-style' houses are still preserved here, well maintained by their proud owners.



Downstream, past the Chinese temple, is the suburb or Padungan. This was mostly built in the 1920s when a boom in rubber prices put money

into people's pockets—there is a marked difference between the sober building style of the Main Bazaar (1880s) and this wide, tree-shaded road of quaintly ornamented shophouses!



Kuching lies in a flat alluvial plain; it is difficult to get a good view of the town from any one spot. Cross the river by sampan (small ferry) to get a full view of the Main Bazaar, stop briefly on the lower bridge to see the high-rises of New Kuching.

If you're going to the Sarawak Cultural village, stop at the the Cat Museum! Yes, that's not a mistake – the word 'Kuching' actually means 'cat', so the city fathers decided to host a museum of all things feline in City Hall North. Arty – quaint – sentimental – kitschy – the lot!

In Sarawak, you're never far from the rainforest. There are three National Parks are within day-trip distance of Kuching: Bako National Park, home of the long-nosed proboscis monkeys and lots of other jungle dwellers, Kubah which also hosts a little zoo, and Gunung Gading where the , ahem, *smelly* Rafflesia blooms from time to time. A facebook page, Gunung Gading National Park, alerts interested visitors when a Rafflesia is about to bloom.

Hit the road....go East!

As Sarawak's territory grew eastward (at the expense of the nominal overlord!) the Brookes found it advisable to secure nodal points. 'He who controls the rivers controls the hinterland!' Rivers were still the main traffic routes, so Forts were built at major confluences.

Travellers from Kuching to Sibu usually stop for a bowl of noodles in the market town of Serian, or

a cool dip in the Ranchan Pools. But don't forget Fort Alice (1864) in Simanggang (now Sri Aman); it's well worth a short detour off the highway! Expertly restored and open to the public, the fortress sits on top of a rocky outcrop overlooking the river from where trouble was expected to come – and frequently did.

Forts didn't just serve military purposes. They housed the government office, the dispensary, the police station, the court, the prison, occasionally the place to confine a violent madman!



Some of the forts have survived the ravages of time and are now used as district Museums. Fort Lily in Betong, built to keep the aggressive Saribas warriors under some sort of control, is closed (as of 2018), but even the outside is photogenic.

Ulu Ai, Lemanak and Saribas are all reached from the Kuching-Sibu road; these are the traditional 'longhouse districts' of the hospitable Iban people.

Bintulu village at the mouth of the Kemena river has grown into a large, modern town, mainly due to the petroleum industry. But the small bazaar as it then was has a claim to historical fame: Sarawak's first Council Negri (State Parliament) was held here, in 1867. Though the Rajah did not institute a legislative assembly in the modern sense of the term, he was wise enough to consult the chiefs of his people and (sometimes) take their advice.

The Mighty Rajang

The Rajang is Malaysia's longest river. It rises in the Central Plateau of Borneo, homeland of the Orang Ulu ('upriver people') flows past the rice farms of an Iban population, and meanders to its wide delta

where busy Melanau fishermen farm sago in the deep peat swamps.



Fort Alice at Kapit was built to control the aggressive Ibans, today it is a beautifully kept historical and cultural Museum. Fort Emma at Kanowit is still in use for civic purposes. The cannon of both forts point to the river – ‘...he who controls the river...’ The best way to travel to Kapit and beyond, up the wild rapids to Belaga, is still by boat.

At the point where the waters divide into the delta lies Sibiu. This was a thriving little market town in the 19th century. A government-sponsored influx of Foochow migrants from China soon transformed it into a big market town, and the hub of the Rajang. The new arrivals were supposed to plant rice, but they soon discovered the economic possibilities of rubber!



There are three ways to get from Kuching to Sibiu: by road, by air, or by river and sea. The trip down Sarawak River, along the coast and then up the Rajang is a unique adventure in itself.

Adventurous travelers make their way up the Rajang, almost to its source, to visit the Lanjak-Entimau National Park. This is one of the few such nature reserves that span a boundary; part lies in Sarawak, part in Indonesian Kalimantan, so the Orang Utan don't need passports...

Miri -- The Age of Oil

For most travelers, Miri is just a staging point to somewhere else. That's a pity. Miri is a trim, quite new city – it was smashed to smithereens during World War II! Miri was the centre of Sarawak's petroleum industry, so the invaders and then the liberators fought bitterly for this prize. Oil is still pumped offshore, but the town has much to offer to holiday-makers too: there is less rainfall than in Kuching, the white beaches are *really* long, and there are a few great dive sites just off shore!

Before oil was discovered, Miri was just a little fishing village. The 'capital' of the Baram River was Marudi, a hard day's paddle up the Baram. Fort Hose still bears witness to the township's past importance, named after one of the White Rajah's more eccentric civil servants. But it is Miri, at the mouth of that great river, that's the starting point for visits to the sturdy longhouses of the Orang Ulu and Iban on the river and its confluents. Many of them can now be reached by road, but make no mistake: the river is still a busy traffic route!

Lambir National Park with its bubbling waterfalls is the preferred Sunday-picnic destination for the good townsfolk of Miri. A much larger National Park is usually reached by air: the great caves and razor-sharp pinnacles of Mulu have been declared a UNESCO World Heritage site.



The pre-history buffs will enjoy Niah National Park. This is easily reached by road, but once inside the climbing and cave-scrambling starts. Niah is where Malaysia's history starts; human remains over 40,000 years old have been found here. The cave was not only inhabited in the dim past, it also served as a burial cave where the dead were deposited in boat-like coffins under a frieze of mysterious wall paintings.