

# Handicraft & Souvenir Experience in **SARAWAK**



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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.



### Rattan

Rattan is a 'climbing palm' that needs tall trees to reach its full length, its sturdy cables are well protected by thorns. When stripped, the strong canes can be fashioned into durable artefacts – even 'cane furniture'! Rattan was, and still is, an item of international commerce.

### Tekalong

Tekalong is related to the breadfruit tree. The inner bark of its trunk, the bast, can be detached, gently beaten, and then used like textile.

### Pandan

The leaves of the *pandan* plant, stripped of their thorny central spine, are used to make pliable mats, suitable for sleeping on, wrapping things, even using as sails in small craft. *Pandan* is not as lasting as *bemban*, but it is fast-growing.

### Timbers

From the iron-hard *belian* to the soft *plaie*, wood for every purpose is found in the rainforest. Fine-grained, attractively coloured woods are used for carving household utensils and religious icons, but the vital use of wood is for building houses and boats.

### Taya

The Iban weavers of Sarawak cultivate a species of cotton, *taya*, to spin into the thread that is used to make their masterpieces of *ikat* textile.

### Engkudu, Tarom

The dyestuffs for *ikat* weaving and other kinds of fibre crafts all came from the jungle: bark, roots, berries of various plants and trees had to be picked and correctly processed to make the desired colours. *Tarom*, a species of indigo, yields a bright blue; the root skin of the *engkudu* produces a reddish-brown.

## Love Your Trees!

A longhouse is built to last. Before the days of modern tools, huge forest giants were felled by axe, hewn into solid planks, and fashioned into structures to house one whole community!

Boats were usually hollowed out of one massive tree trunk, planks attached at the sides to increase the size of the craft.

No woodwork was ever done shoddily. House doors, pillars, steps were artistically carved.

In communities who deposited their dead above-ground, tall pillars for the purpose of holding the deceased's coffin were embellished by the best craftsmen. Elsewhere, raised houses for the deposition of the dead were carved, painted, and beautifully decorated to show respect for the final resting place of an ancestor.

One important place for demonstrating the woodcarver's skill was the prow of his boat. War boats in particular had elaborate figureheads, designed to strike terror into the enemies' hearts.

Ritual woodcarving still has its place in indigenous cultures. The Iban hold a 'hornbill festival' from time to time, an event that lasts several days and culminates in the parade of 'hornbill effigies' up and down the longhouse.



Today's craftsmen decorate wooden dishes, bowls and receptacles for the souvenir market, or carve railings, banisters and screen to adorn modern homes.

## Clever Fingers

Chairs and tables are an innovation in Sarawak's houses. 150 years ago, the 'furniture' of a longhouse consisted of mats for sitting and sleeping on, and baskets for storing one's belongings.

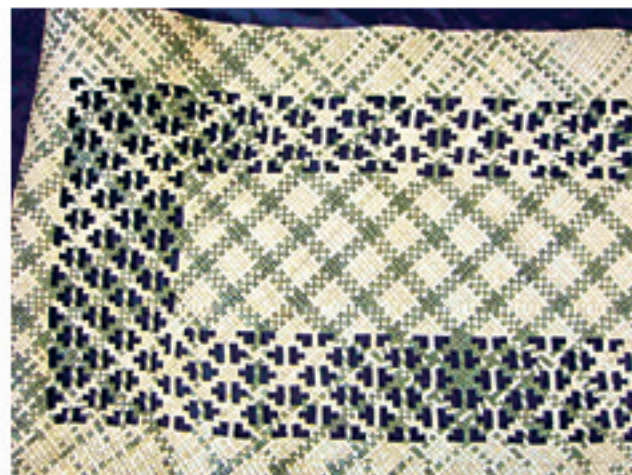


*Preparation of the bemban or rattan canes can be a lengthy process. They have to be stripped, then cut into even-sized working strips. For a really fine mat, these have to be exactly the same width.*

Making useful mats and baskets was woman's work; finely wrought patterns gave individuality and meaning to the most homely pieces. Girls helped their mothers harvest the materials, dress them, and fashion them into whatever household item was needed: a basket for washing vegetables, a large tray for drying or winnowing rice, a narrow openwork basket to use as a 'well' when brewing rice beer, small baskets for keeping dried fish or salt.

One closely-worked, tall basket with a lid of deer skin, almost water-tight, was used to store the family's belongings, such as the fancy clothes and silver ornaments used during festivals.

Each basket has its function: there are seed baskets, harvesting baskets, sturdy carrying-baskets that stand several feet taller than the men who carry them.



Most mats are made by women, but men get their turn at reed-work too: they make the rattan fish traps, or the heavy-duty floor mats of split rattan and bark cloth strips. Roofing mats for thatching houses, made of sago or apong palm leaves, are usually crafted by men.

## Textiles from the Rainforest

The original 'rainforest textile' is bark cloth, the inner bast of the *tekalong* tree. In the past, it was often used by people who didn't know the art of weaving, or couldn't afford to buy cloth from the traders. It is still commonly used as straps for carrying baskets.



The Lun Bawang people of East Sarawak make colourfully embroidered bark cloth jackets for ceremonial wear, and they have come up with a novel design: a bark cloth cowboy hat! Many novelties and souvenirs are made of this material. In recent years, artists have 'discovered' bark cloth as a unique canvas for their paintings.

The Iban women of Borneo produce a special textile: warp ikat. This craft, honed by generations of women, involves dyeing patterns into the warp thread before weaving begins.

## Ikat procedure



The term *ikat*, 'tying', describes the process: the patterns are painstakingly tied off before the yarn is immersed in a dye bath. When the warp is stretched on the backstrap loom, ready for weaving, the whole pattern can already be seen.

Only a few older women have the expert knowledge required to prepare and dyes; these elders are highly respected by the whole community.

The *ikat* designs are passed down from mother to daughter; a specially talented weaver may execute a new one after she has been authorized to do so in a dream.

A few decades ago, Iban weavers were introduced to silk yarn, a medium that enhances the beauty of the colours and designs. The best silk *ikat* pieces have received international accolades, and are found in prestigious collections. Smaller, plainer pieces of *ikat* are produced specially for the souvenir market, and find ready buyers.

## Textiles for the Court

The gold brocade textile, called *songket*, was traditionally associated with royal courts. From there the skill and lore spread; the Malay and Melanau *songket* weavers of Sarawak may well have learnt their craft from the neighbouring sultanates of Brunei and Sambas.

*Songket* is worked on a cottage loom, locally called *rumah tenun*; the pattern is tethered to a set of heddles that lift the correct combination of warp threads after each shot of the shuttle. Dressing this loom is laborious, time-consuming work that requires considerable technical knowledge, and a well-coordinated team of workers. For some patterns, some 1200 warp threads have to be fitted to 1200 heddle loops -- one single mistake would throw the whole design out of balance! It would involve cutting all the knots, and start again at the beginning of the whole painstaking process.



Today, most *songket* weavers work on commission. A wealthy family may order a length of the precious fabric for a wedding, to dress bride and groom in matching, gold-woven outfits.

After being an almost 'forgotten' craft, *songket* weaving has gained new life; young people are getting actively involved. *Songket* weavers can be found in most of the major towns in Sarawak, especially in Kuching, Serian, Kuala Rajang and Limbang. [see information page Kraftangan, SCC etc]

A number of designers are working with the precious cloth to adapt it to the contemporary lifestyle, creating fashion items, interior décor and novelties which appeal to discerning collectors, or tourists.

The really good *songket* fabric is expensive. An experienced weaver is entitled to adequate remuneration, and the best quality gilded weaving thread is very expensive! The same stricture, unfortunately, also applies to gold-worked *keringkam* textiles.

The Malay ladies of west Sarawak produce fine *tudung* or head veils with gold-thread embroidery. These *tudung keringkam* are mainly worn on ceremonial occasions, and carefully kept as family heirlooms.

To make *keringkam*, a piece of fine muslin is stretched on a rectangular wooden frame. The embroiderer usually works from memory, visualizing the motif without a paper pattern. She marks the fabric in squares of five threads, poking this 'grid' with a bronze needle. The beautiful geometric designs are worked without a needle; the gold thread is stiff enough to perforate the taut fabric. A skilled artist will complete one veil within two to six weeks, depending on the complexity of the design and length.



The expert *keringkam* worker charges per skein of the precious gold thread used, so it is up to the buyer to decide if she only wants an ornamental border, or overall gold designs.

Fashions change. Few ladies wear the *keringkam* veil nowadays, but the old craft has been adapted to new uses. Smaller pieces, mounted and framed, are sold as popular 'corporate gifts' or stylish souvenirs. The fine art of *songket* and *tudung keringkam*, as two important items of Sarawak's material culture, will always be cherished as part of the State's heritage!

## Forged in Fire

The art of metalwork has a long history in Borneo. Farmers and warriors made their own tools and weapons. Even today, heavy *parang* and smaller knives are locally produced, the metal of choice being car springs!



Weapons were always forged with special care, their hilts and sheaths elaborately decorated. Some sword fittings were carved of deer horn.

The spectacular ornaments worn by Iban ladies were mainly the work of silversmiths from nearby Kalimantan; since the 19<sup>th</sup> century Chinese artisans are also crafting elegant silver belts, chains, bangles, anklets, and the crowning headgear, the 'tall comb' tinkling with fine silver sprigs and leaves. Many families keep a treasure trove of traditional silver ornaments, but they're considered too precious to wear on ordinary occasions – enterprising artisans are making replicas of the old silver jewelry, even Dutch colonial coins, out of heavy tin foil.

The Bidayuh of West Sarawak preferred copper wire for personal adornment. A fellow could show his

affection for a comely lass by presenting her with a set of brass wire coils to wear on her legs, arms, and sometimes neck. Most of the ladies still wearing these (cumbersome!) accessories are elderly, but they have gained some modest popularity as the 'ring ladies of Sarawak'.



One ancient craft, now practically forgotten, is metal-casting. Brunei used to be a major producer of heavy brass cannon, ceremonial water kettles, containers and salvers, and the set of melodious gongs to accompany local dancing. The gongs which are still available today are mostly from Sabah, or the southern Philippines – a genuine antique Brunei-made brass gong would cost several thousand ringgit!

## Treasures From Many Lands

The bead culture is alive and well in Sarawak. Beads have been worn, and treasured, for centuries, and they are still in keen demand. Styles and uses have changed, but the beads are as popular as ever.

Strange to say, the bulk of 'Sarawak Beads' reached this land by way of trade. They came from India, China, West Asia, Europe – the masterpieces of the Venetian glassmaker's art are well represented in our repertoire. Maybe the far-away origin added to the value of these colourful beads?

Besides the larger, multi-coloured beads which are very valuable today, there is 'beadwork' made of small 'seed beads'. These are fashioned into whatever the artist fancies: an elaborate neck-piece for an Iban girl, a wide headband for her Orang Ulu cousin, tight chokers for the lady from West Sarawak ... the list is endless. Hat tops, hat blazes, shoulder sashes, whole jackets and even skirts can

be made of beadwork, provided the artist has the skill and enough beads.



A lot of beadwork is produced for the souvenir market. Traditional pieces sell well – including the rather pricey 'baby carrier basket' – but there's some modern stuff too. Fancy a beaded handphone pouch?

The market has not forgotten the antique Venetian and Bohemian beads, of course. A lively industry in East Java is turning out 'Borneo Bead Replicas', which are now available in every bazaar in Sarawak. They are good quality glass-work, and provided the seller doesn't try to palm them off as 'antique' they're perfectly acceptable. Even ladies who have a collection of genuine antiques at home buy new beads, 'to wear for everyday...I don't want to risk losing my old ones!'

## The Painted Cloth

Batik is a cotton or silk fabric decorated with wax-resist patterns. It is an old tradition, and as far as Southeast Asia is concerned, the role model is Indonesian Batik. There was a time when well-to-do matrons would refuse to wear any but genuine Jogjakarta batik sarongs.

## Batik Process



*The artist draws the design on the stretched cloth with hot wax, using a paint brush or a 'tjanting'. When the wax has cooled, the cloth is immersed in the first dye bath. After drying, the next part of the design is applied, followed by the next dye bath. When all colours have been applied, the fabric is dried, and the wax carefully scraped off, then melted off with a hot iron.*

Batik is still very popular for clothing, though the fashion has changed. Batik can be tailored into any garment, including beautiful men's shirts or ladies' gowns. Preparations for a village wedding often start with all the bride's maidens getting matching silk batik outfits!

Local artists started to paint – actually 'wax' – pictures in this medium some 50 years ago. Now that better dyes are available, a cottage industry producing batik fabric is also emerging; a lot of the artisans are women.

The batik artists are still at work, of course. Some combine batik with collage, others add bead embroidery or gold couching to batik. Creative imagination knows no limits.

## Craftfinder

Kuching Main Bazaar is one place where a lot of crafts can be found, together with souvenirs, 'what-on-earth-is-that?', and plain junk.

The Sarawak Crafts Council has a well-established outlet, often enlivened by craft demonstrations, in the former premises of the Sarawak Steamship company, on Main Bazaar. The Malaysian Handicraft Board is well worth a visit; it doesn't just feature a well stocked sales room but also workshops and training courses in old and new crafts. The *ikat* weaving school at Tun Jugah Foundation can be visited by appointment.



A number of pottery factories near Kuching produce traditional and modern clay crafts, from humble flower pots to three-foot high vases. They welcome visitors and souvenir shoppers.

One event a music fan shouldn't miss is the Rainforest World Music Festival in July – and the humming Rainforest World Crafts Bazaar right in the middle of it!

In most up-country towns there are Sunday Markets, often starting on Saturday; a few ladies from nearby villages are usually selling crafts there.