

SARAWAK

Food Guide



SARAWAK TOURISM BOARD
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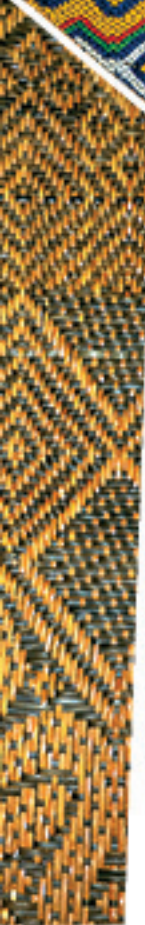
Sarawak

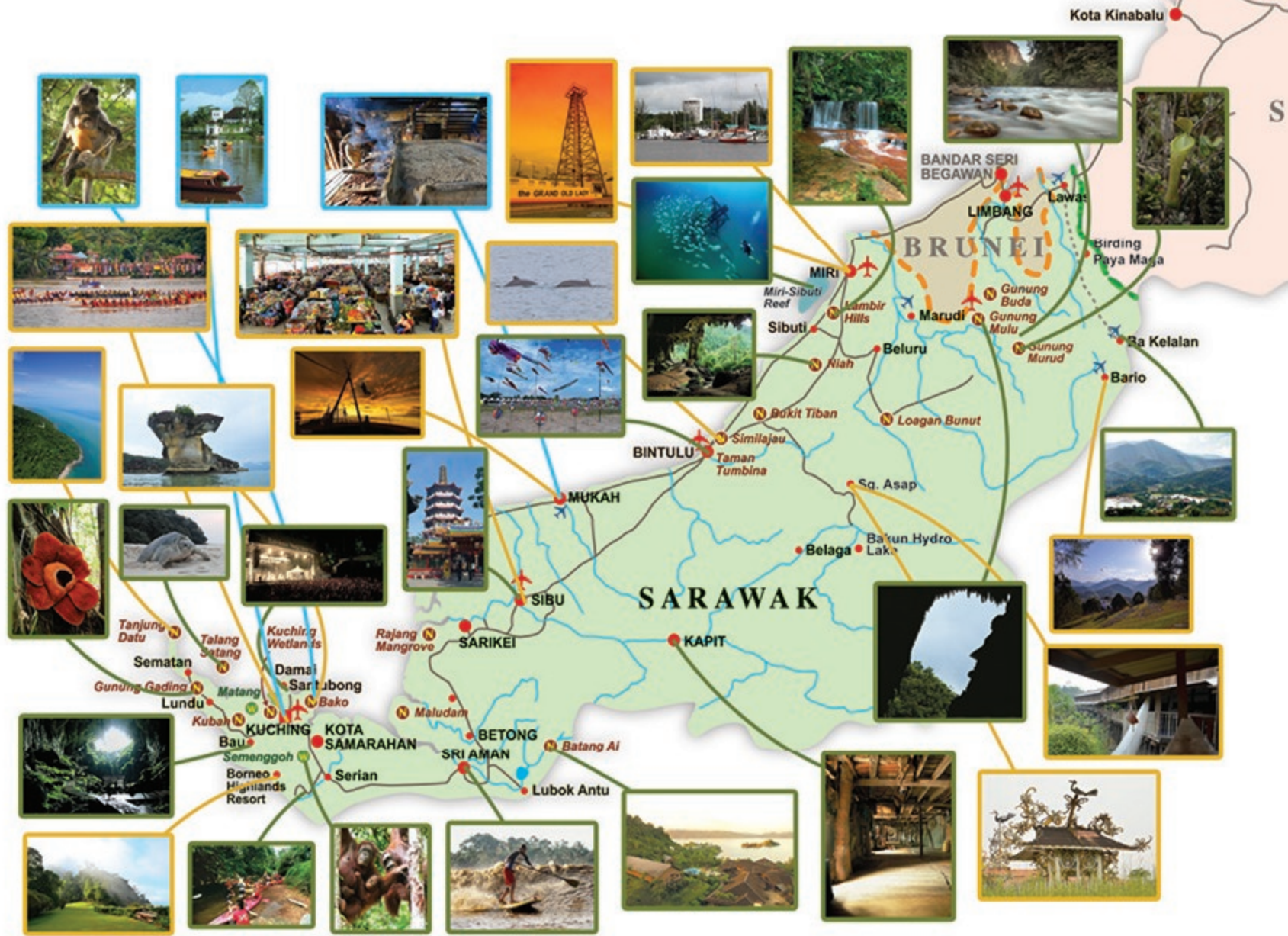
Sarawak is the largest state in Malaysia, stretching some 800 km along the northwest coast of Borneo, the world's third largest island. A beautiful land coloured by peace, tradition and unmatched biodiversity, it is a prime destination for discerning travellers seeking vibrant culture, exhilarating adventure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





SARAWAK

Food Guide

In Sarawak, when we meet friends and relatives, we rarely ask “How are you?” We prefer “Have you eaten yet?” This is the standard greeting in over 30 different languages and dialects. Ethnically and culturally, we are a very diverse people, but we Sarawakians all share one obsession – food! And it’s an obsession we love to share with visitors.

STREET FOOD

Sarawak is famous for its street food, although very little is actually cooked and eaten directly on the street nowadays. Hawkers operate from coffee shops and purpose-built hawker centres, although you can still enjoy your meal at a street-side table and watch the world go by. Popular regional dishes include Hainanese Chicken Rice, spicy Mee Jawa, Bak Kut Teh (pork rib soup) and freshly grilled Satay. But this guide is all about Sarawak’s unique cuisine, so if you want to get a real taste of Sarawak, try some of the distinctive and delicious dishes listed below.

Sarawak Laksa



Sarawak Laksa was ranked by the late chef and food broadcaster Anthony Bourdain as one of the world’s Top-10 hawker dishes. It’s originated from Kuching’s Peranakan (Straits Chinese) community and is nowadays enjoyed by all Sarawakians. It consists of vermicelli rice noodles soaked in a spicy-sour shrimp-based broth made from over 30 different herbs and spices then thickened with coconut milk. It is topped with crunchy beansprouts, boiled prawn, shredded

chicken and thin slices of omelette and a sprinkling of fresh coriander. It is served with spicy sambal made from pounded chillies and *belacan* (shrimp paste) and a freshly cut calamansi (*limau kasturi* or golden lime) that you can add according to taste. Every Sarawakian has their own favourite laksa stall, so try as many as you can, but bear in mind that many of the most popular stalls sell out before lunchtime.

Kolok Mee



Found mostly in Kuching, Kolok mee is the simplest dish imaginable – light yellow egg noodles stirred with pork lard, soy sauce and black vinegar – but it is one of the tastiest and hardest to prepare. Each portion of fresh noodles must be cooked perfectly *al dente* and then vigorously swirled in lard and vinegar until each strand is evenly coated – a powerful wrist action is crucial! The noodles are then topped with slices of char siew (barbecued pork) and minced pork, dressed with chopped spring onions and served with sliced chillies. Kolok mee is served for breakfast, lunch and dinner, but never by the same hawker as it's tiring to prepare. An order of kolok mee "special" will get you a serving of prawns or wonton (pork dumplings). Mee pok is a Teochew variant using flat yellow noodles.

Note: Muslim-friendly (Halal) versions served at Muslim outlets.

Kueh Chap



Kueh Chap (literally "cake soup" in Hokkien Chinese) is a dish of wide, flat rice noodles cut into squares and served with a rich herbal soup made from pork meat, pig liver and pig intestines, topped off with fried beancurd and boiled egg. Every hawker's soup recipe is a closely-guarded secret, often handed down for generations. If you aren't a big fan of offal, most hawkers will happily prepare a meat-only version on request.

Note: Muslim-friendly (Halal) versions served at Muslim outlets.

Tomato Kuey Teow



This is a popular local variation (found only in Sarawak) of Cantonese kuey teow. Large, flat rice noodles are stir-fried with chicken, pak choy (or other green vegetable), fish cake, squid and prawns then served in a silky egg sauce laced with generous amounts of tomato ketchup.

Kampua Mee



Kampua mee ("dry plate noodles" in the Foochow dialect) is Sibu's answer to Kuching's kolok mee, using slightly straighter hand-made noodles compared to kolok mee's machine-made version. The other main difference is that onion oil is used instead of vinegar,

giving a charred, bittersweet flavour. Toppings include minced pork, vegetables, char siew and wonton, accompanied by a bowl of clear soup.

Note: Muslim-friendly (Halal) versions served at Muslim outlets.

Gu Bak Mee



Gu bak mee is a Hokkien beef noodle dish using hand-made rice noodles served with a peppery, savoury beef soup. It can be served “dry” with the noodles dressed in lard and vinegar and the soup served as a side dish, or “wet” with the noodles in the soup. There is usually a choice of meat only or meat with innards (liver and tripe).

Note: Muslim-friendly (Halal) versions served at Muslim outlets.

Belacan Beehoon



A strongly flavoured, savoury, spicy dish that is not for everyone, belacan beehoon uses mee hoon (vermicelli rice noodles), braised squid, beansprouts and shredded cucumber, smothered with thick, pungent *belacan* sauce (fermented shrimp paste).

Sio Bee



Sio Bee is Sarawak’s most popular *dim sum* dish. A local variation on the world-famous Cantonese *Siu Mai*, it is a glutinous rice dumpling stuffed with minced pork, black mushroom, spring onions and ginger, then steamed to firm, chewy perfection. Sio bee is best eaten with sweet chilli sauce for breakfast or as a mid-morning snack – most vendors sell out by lunchtime.

Note: Halal versions made with chicken can be found on hotel dim sum menus.

Mee Sua



A richly flavoured Foochow dish from Sibu, mee sua consists of very thin, thread-like rice noodles served in a soup made from Chinese red wine and ginger, with large chunks of tender braised chicken. This is one of the trickiest hawker dishes to prepare – the

noodles are so thin that just a few seconds extra cooking will cause them to stick together.

Note: Muslim-friendly (Halal) versions served at Muslim outlets.

Sibu King Prawn Noodles



A favourite in Central Sarawak, Sibu's version of king prawn noodles comprises thick yellow egg noodles blanched in a rich, spicy prawn-based broth and topped with two or three giant freshwater prawns, fresh from the Rejang River. Nowadays the dish is also available in Kuching and Miri.

Ding Bian Hu



Ding Bian Hu is one of Sibu's best-kept secrets – a Foochow dish of pork-bone soup thickened with rice flour, to which is added squid, fried onion, edible black fungus, sliced fish balls, sliced pork, pig liver, chopped spring onions, dried day lily (golden needle) and fish stock. Rich and hearty, it is served steaming hot with pepper and vinegar for seasoning.

Note: Muslim-friendly (Halal) version not available.

Kompia



The Kompia is Sibu's answer to the bagel. Dotted with sesame seeds and roasted tandoori style, these fresh bread rolls are traditionally served stuffed with slices of stewed pork or scoops of minced pork. Nowadays a variety of kompia are available, including cheese flavoured and sweetened versions that can be enjoyed on their own.

Note: Muslim-friendly (Halal) versions served at Muslim outlets.

Economy Rice



At lunchtimes, many hawker stalls and coffee shops serve economy rice, also known as mixed rice, fast food or *nasi campur*. These are four different names for the same dish - a plate of steamed rice with portions of meat, fish and vegetables selected from the delicacies on display. This serving style is not unique to Sarawak, but you will often find uniquely Sarawakian home-cooked dishes on offer, such as crispy jungle ferns, *kacang ma*, chicken in bamboo and even *umai* – check the next chapter for descriptions.

HOME COOKING

Many of Sarawak's signature dishes are cooked at home, using fresh local ingredients served in the unique cooking styles of the many ethnic communities of Sarawak. Fortunately some of these dishes have become so popular that they can now be found in restaurants and food stalls.

Jungle Ferns



Sarawak's edible jungle ferns come in two varieties, thin-stemmed *midin* and chunky *paku*. Crispy, nutty and delicately flavoured, both are equally delicious stir fried with *belacan* (fermented shrimp paste), dried anchovies, Chinese wine or just plain garlic. Most seafood restaurants serve them and they can sometimes be found at economy rice stalls. Do not leave Sarawak without trying them!

Chicken In Bamboo



Manok Pansoh, to use its proper Iban name, is Sarawak's signature longhouse dish. Most indigenous communities still argue over who invented it but it was most likely hunting parties who didn't want to carry cooking pots through the jungle. Chicken pieces are squeezed into freshly cut bamboo tubes, along with lemongrass, *tepus* (wild ginger) and tapioca leaves. The tubes are then cooked over an open fire until the bamboo is charred and blackened. The result is succulent, delicately flavoured steamed chicken complete with soup and vegetables, with no pots to wash afterwards. Simply unmissable, it can be found in restaurants specializing in Dayak cuisine and in almost every Dayak village and longhouse.

Umai



The *ceviche* of Borneo, *umai* was invented by the Melanau fishermen from Central Sarawak who wanted to "cook" their catch but didn't want to set their fishing boats on fire. Thin slices of fresh fish, prawn or squid are marinated in calamansi lime juice, together with chillies, onions, garlic and salt. The acid in the lime juice "cooks" the ingredients in just a few minutes. Some versions also add fresh ginger and black pepper, but whatever the recipe, the result is usually very spicy. Traditionally served with sago pearls, *umai* also goes perfectly with steamed rice.

Bubur Pedas

This thick and spicy rice porridge is usually served in Malay homes during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadhan for the breaking of fast. The porridge is flavoured with turmeric, lemongrass, galangal, chillies, ginger, coconut and shallots, and the ingredients can include any combination of carrots,

potatoes, leafy greens, mushrooms, bean curd, bamboo shoots, turmeric leaves, long beans, dried shrimp and shredded chicken. It is available at every Ramadan Market during the fasting month and a few Malay restaurants serve it all year round.

Bario Rice



Bario rice is a traditional rice variety cultivated by hand with no pesticides or herbicides by the Kelabit people of northeast Sarawak. It has earned its own Geographic Indication for its uniqueness, and has a soft texture with fine, elongated grains, a delicate aroma and superb flavour. Many chefs and gourmets consider it to be the finest rice variety in Southeast Asia. It can be found at restaurants serving indigenous cuisine and some fine-dining outlets. Visitors can also buy a bag or two to cook at home,

Nasi Aruk

It may look like fried rice, but this traditional Sarawak Malay dish is not fried at all, but seared in a dry wok (kuali) without any oil. Steamed rice is mixed with chopped garlic, onion, and anchovies then seared (with constant stirring) until it achieves a smoky, barbecue flavour. Served in some Malay restaurants and coffee shops.

Kacang Ma



Kacang ma was invented by Sarawak's Hakka Chinese community for serving to mothers in confinement after childbirth. The main herbal ingredient, also known as kacang ma (Chinese motherwort or ka chian ma) is believed to help women recover their strength after delivery, but is bitter and unpleasant tasting. However, when it is used in a chicken stew, together with sesame oil, ginger and liberal doses of rice wine, the result is a rich, complex and savoury dish that restores energy, especially on a cold and rainy day. Mostly cooked at home, but some restaurants offer it occasionally.

Ambal



Ambal is the local name for a species of thin-shelled bamboo clam that lives in the sand-flats along Sarawak's coastline. It is harvested between October and April by groups of mostly Malay ladies who walk out onto the sand flats to collect them from their burrows; from a distance they look like they are walking on water! It is served in curry sauce in West Malaysia but in Sarawak it is also prepared steamed in Chinese rice wine, which better suits its delicate flavour and texture. It is available at most seafood restaurants when in season.

Sago Grubs (Ulat Mulong)



Sago grubs are the larvae of the Capricorn beetle, which mature in the trunks of sago palms. They are a popular delicacy in sago-growing areas, especially among the Melanau people of central Sarawak. Eaten fresh and still alive, they are sweet and creamy. When fried briefly in soya sauce, they resemble chicken in flavour if not texture. Visitors are most likely to encounter them offered for sale in rural markets, especially in Central Sarawak. If you dare to try one (or a few) you will earn the undying respect of the locals!

SWEETS, SNACKS AND DESSERTS

In Sarawak you will find every type of sweet, snack and dessert sold in Malaysia, including such national delicacies as *cendol*, *ais kacang*, *pisang goreng* (banana fritters), *apam balik* (rice flour waffles) and *bubur cha cha* (sweet rice porridge). But we also have a few special sweet delicacies that are only found here.

Kek Lapis Sarawak



Kek lapis Sarawak (Sarawak layer cake) is so popular that it has spawned an entire cottage industry. It is also so unique that it has had its own Geographical Indication under the global TRIPS Agreement since 2010. Simple layer cakes were introduced by Betawi (Indonesian) visitors around 40 years ago, but local bakers (mostly Malay Muslim ladies) have added amazing new colours and flavours and a single slice of cake can include dozens of geometric motifs. A sweet snack for every festive occasion, kek lapis is available almost everywhere in Sarawak. Its popularity is also booming throughout the country – almost every West Malaysian visitor returns home with a few cakes in their luggage!

Tebaloi

Tebaloi is a sweet biscuit made by the Melanau people from sago flour, desiccated coconut and sugar. The dough is rolled onto banana leaves which are then grilled over an open fire. Traditional tebaloi biscuits have a sweet, slightly nutty flavour. Recently new flavours have been introduced including vanilla, turmeric, pandan, strawberry, chocolate and vanilla. Tebaloi is widely available from supermarkets and sundry shops, but for the most original flavour, get yours from the Old Market in Mukah, Central Sarawak.

Gula Apong Ice Cream



Gula apong is a type of palm sugar made from the nipah palm, which grows abundantly in the coastal lowlands near Kuching. It has a subtly different, nuttier flavour compared to the *gula melaka* found in West Malaysia. Many sundry shops and market stalls sell the raw sugar if you want to try some in your coffee. Local vendors also use it in place of gula melaka on desserts. However, it really tastes best when gula apong syrup is drizzled over a cone of vanilla or gula apong flavoured ice cream. Available from street vendors and cafes throughout Sarawak.

TROPICAL FRUITS

Sarawak has a huge variety of tropical fruits on offer, including rambutans, mangosteens, bananas, jackfruits, papayas, mangos, guavas, soursops, honey apples, durians and dozens more, all of which can also be found elsewhere in the region. But we also have a few that are unique to Sarawak, or unique to Borneo at least.

Dabai



Also known as the jungle olive, the dabai is a firm-fleshed, oily fruit found only in Central Sarawak. It appears to be rock-hard, but when soaked for 10-15 minutes in hot water the flesh becomes soft, with a savoury nutty flavour and a texture like a fresh date. Best served with a soya sauce dip. Available from market stalls when in season from December to March.

Sarikei Pineapple



Pineapples grown in and around the town of Sarikei in central Sarawak are renowned worldwide for their remarkable sweetness and depth of flavour. The pineapple harvest has been so important to the town's economy that Sarikei holds a week-long Pineapple and Fruits Festival every November.

Terung Dayak



The terung dayak (Dayak eggplant) is a variety of eggplant unique to West Borneo. The uncooked fruit is very firm but when cooked it develops a succulent texture similar to a slightly unripe mango, with a wonderful sour flavour that pairs perfectly with fish dishes and eliminates any "fishy" flavour or aroma. Most seafood restaurants serve it as a key ingredient in steamed fish dishes.

SEAFOOD



Sarawak offers superb seafood, hardly surprising with such a long coastline and over 40 major rivers.

Highlights include red snapper, pomfret, seabass, prawns, lobsters, slipper lobsters, clams and other marine delicacies cooked in dozens of different ways. Fish from Sarawak's fast-flowing rivers are highly prized; the rare and elusive *empurau* (Borneo Masheer) sells for up to RM5,000 per kg! Fortunately other dishes are much more affordably priced. Cooking styles are mostly Chinese, predominantly Teochew, but adapted to showcase local ingredients at their best. If you are not a fan of fish or seafood, most seafood outlets also serve excellent beef, chicken, venison and vegetarian dishes. Sarawakians eat early, so come before 6.30 pm or after 9 pm to be sure of a table.

VEGETARIAN & VEGAN

There is a good selection of vegetarian and vegan restaurants and food stalls in Kuching and Miri. Many restaurants serving meat and fish can also prepare vegetarian dishes on request.

INTERNATIONAL CUISINE

If you want a taste of home or an occasional break from local dishes, you will find all of the world's major cuisines available in Sarawak, mostly in the urban centres of Kuching, Sibul, Bintulu and Miri. You can choose from American, Chinese, French, Fusion, German, Indian, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, The Philippines, Spanish, Swiss and Thai to mention just a few. For fast food in familiar surroundings, International and local franchise outlets can be found in every shopping mall and in city centres.

DRINKS

It's always easy to quench your thirst in Sarawak. Inexpensively priced tea, coffee, milo, cold drinks and juices are freshly made in every coffee shop and café, speciality coffee and tea outlets are everywhere, while canned and bottled beer is available in non-Muslim coffee shops. Draught and imported beer is served in pubs and hotel bars, along with a good selection of wine and spirits. Sarawak also has a very special drink of its own to offer the thirsty visitor.

Tuak



Tuak is a potent wine brewed from glutinous rice by the Iban and Bidayuh ethnic groups, and visitors to longhouses are sure to be welcomed with a glass. It is bad manners to refuse except for health or religious reasons. Young tuak can be a little sweet, but when aged for a year or two it is as rich and full bodied as sherry. Tuak plays an important part in longhouse festivities, with a few drops spilled onto the floor for the spirits to enjoy. In rural areas, you can buy a bottle or two directly from the producer, while some Dayak-run bars and cafes in Kuching sell it by the glass or bottle.

SOMETHING TO TAKE HOME

Sarawak cuisine relies on fresh local produce, so it's almost impossible to cook authentic local dishes when you return home. However, there are a few local ingredients you can bring back to give your cooking a taste of Sarawak.

Sarawak Pepper



Sarawak pepper, the king of spices, is famous for its high quality and distinctive taste. It has been highly praised by chefs the world over and is probably the best quality pepper money can buy! If you are travelling in the countryside, make sure to visit a pepper garden and buy directly from the grower. High-quality Sarawak pepper and pepper-based products are widely available in Sarawak's towns and cities.

Sarawak Laksa Paste

You may not be able to serve up real Sarawak Laksa at home, but a sachet or two of laksa paste (available in any supermarket) will add wonderful flavours and aromas to your cooking. Use it with fish dishes and curries or as a marinade, for an exotic taste of Sarawak wherever you are.

Bario Salt

Bario, in the Kelabit Highlands in Northeast Sarawak, is famous for its high-potassium salt. The Kelabit people extract it by evaporating water from local salt springs, then putting it through a traditional firing and drying process in bamboo tubes. The finished product is then wrapped in large leaves bound with rattan, ready for market. The salt is 100% organic and the perfect gift for health-conscious food-loving friends.

Bird Nests

Edible bird's nests are created by various species of swiftlet using solidified saliva. They are prized in Chinese cuisine due to their rarity and high nutritional value when made into bird nest soup. For centuries, Sarawak has exported top quality nests from its extensive cave systems, and in recent years local entrepreneurs have also introduced "swiftlet-houses" for the sustainable harvesting of nests. A number of specialist retailers offer high quality bird nests for sale at very competitive prices.

WHERE TO EAT?

Nobody has counted the number of food outlets in Sarawak, but there are certainly many thousands of places to eat. It would be unfair to list just a few, so it's best to make your own discoveries. Sarawak seems to have more food bloggers per capita than any other place

in Southeast Asia, so a quick internet search will yield some valuable recommendations. The Sarawak Tourism Board publishes regional guides that provide a selection of food listings for Southwest, Central and Northeast Sarawak, and staff at the Visitor Information Centres are happy to advise. The people you meet are also a great source of information; friendly and approachable, most Sarawakians love to show off their knowledge of local cuisine.

What we can assure you is that excellent food is served everywhere: fine dining outlets in heritage buildings and 5-star hotels; beachfront seafood restaurants; lovingly restored old shophouses; bustling coffee shops and hawker centres; and last but not least, simple village cafes and food stalls.



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Saturday & Public Holidays: 9am – 3pm
Closed on Sundays

Online Information

Detailed travel information for Sarawak is available from STB's online outlets:

www.sarawaktourism.com

www.facebook.com/visitsarawak

www.twitter.com/SarawakTravel

www.youtube.com/user/sarawaktourismbcm

www.weibo.com/sarawaktourism (华语)

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