

Land below the wind

Formerly known as British North Borneo, Sabah, meaning 'the land below the wind' is an eclectic mix of history, charming tradition and fascinating wildlife.

BY JESSICA ABELSOHN

Whispers of war

During World War II, North Borneo was used heavily by the Japanese as a port. It was also where they held many of their prisoners of war. There were more than 2400 POWs held in the Sandakan camp, mostly Australian. Only six survived. As the Allies neared, the Japanese forced the prisoners to walk to Ranau, approximately 250 kilometres away. These are known as the death marches.

As we're driving to the Dawn Service at the memorial park, our guide tells us the story of the ring lady. Near the POW camp there was a young lady who would secretly feed the prisoners. One morning, she returned to give them their food and found seven rings in a tin, presumably wedding rings. The soldiers were gone but they'd left their thanks.

The memorial park sits on the site of the former POW camp and provides

an insight into what happened to the prisoners in Sandakan.

When you're in Kota Kinabalu, it's definitely worth heading to the Kundasang War Memorial and Gardens. Here, the caretaker Mr Sevee Chararuks, who has been credited with bringing the gardens back to life, helps us plant yellow daisies in the Australian garden to commemorate the lives lost. The memorial also pays tribute to the British soldiers and the people of North Borneo who risked their lives to help soldiers during the war.

Mount Kinabalu

Kota Kinabalu is hugged by the South China Sea and the all-imposing Mount Kinabalu, part of the Crocker ranges and one of the highest mountain peaks in south east Asia. As you climb the mountain, the air gets thinner and the clouds thicker. When we arrived, a few of us entered

the rainforest for a one-kilometre trail walk through the lush flora. If you don't want to do too much walking, you can explore the mountain garden, home to the rare Rothschild's Slipper Orchard.

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If you're feeling adventurous, you can trek to the peak. According to our guide, there are three types of trekkers. The normal climbers who take two days and one night to reach the peak. The sub-normal climbers who do it in a day-trip. And the abnormal climbers. Every



← The summit of Mount Kinabalu, Low's Peak, is 4095 metres above sea level.



Wildlife

Sabah is known for its wildlife, whether it's cheeky orangutans swinging through the trees or pigmy elephants prancing through the jungle. The Sepilok Orang Utan Rehabilitation Centre and the Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre are both sanctuaries dedicated to helping orangutans and sun bears back into the wild. Visit Sepilok during feeding hour and wait as the ropes jingle before the orangutans appear. Sometimes they'll play up to their audience, teasing their fellow orangutans and chasing each other around.

If you want to see more animals, head to the Kinabatangan River and head up to the village of Sukau. Along the way, you'll hopefully see monkeys climbing the trees, birds soaring through the sky and loads of fish in the river. If you're lucky, you'll spot the elephants. You can also stop on the way at Abai Village for some high tea and mingle with the locals.

October, climbers from around the world travel to Sabah to compete in the Mount Kinabalu International Climbathon. It's the hardest mountain race in the world. At present, the record stands at just under two hours and 30 minutes.

There are a few stories about the history of the mountain's name. The main tribe on the mountain, the Kadazan Dusun say that the mountain was home to a local woman, deserted by her Chinese prince. Every day she would climb to the peak in search of her prince's ship which she believed was coming back to get her. Eventually she fell ill, dying at the top of the cold mountain.

The mountain, touched by her loyalty to her husband, turned the woman into stone, facing her towards the South China Sea so she can always watch for her husband's return.

See the Kinabalu sites

When you're in Kota Kinabalu, there's plenty to do other than climbing mountains. If you missed out on seeing the animals in the wild, Lok Kawi Wildlife Sanctuary is a worthy excursion. The animals are in enclosures across the 280 acres and there's also a botanical garden with flowers native to Borneo. The park was mostly created to educate the public about the wildlife of Borneo and the importance of conservation. The animals are changed every few weeks so they never feel cooped up.

If you've always fancied taking a steam train like in the old days, hop on board the North Borneo Railway. The British Vulcan Steam Train runs gently through several villages and your passport is stamped as you pass through each one. Along the way, enjoy a delicious Colonial-style tiffin lunch as the paddy fields, trees and villages pass you by.

Mari Mari Cultural Village, meaning come come, showcases what village life was like for the tribes of Sabah. Each show home has been created by descendants of the tribe and as you enter each house, guides show you how the villagers lived and what each tribe was most known for, whether it was rice wine, tattoo-making or even headhunting warriors. ••



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E: groups@tradetravel.com
T: 1800 034 439 (toll free)
or +61 7 5574 3733

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