



A resting orangutan. Opposite: the Kinabatangan River.

BIG

SHUTTERSTOCK (2)

FIVE

In the living, breathing forests of Malaysian Borneo, conservation is bringing deeper meaning to the safari experience.
By Charukesi Ramadurai

Borneo Rainforest Lodge.
From top opposite: a
lounging proboscis
monkey; the Raffles'
pitcher plant.



“LOOK, THE FOREST IS BREATHING,”

KURT DOUGLAS'S SOFT voice breaks into my reveries. Here I had been thinking, *What is that wispy white blanket floating above the trees? Is it mist? Is it smoke? Is it...?*, but now I am not sure if I'd actually said the words aloud or if Kurt, my wildlife guide from Borneo Eco Tours, read my mind. As a nemophilist—a lover of the jungle, a haunter of the woods—I go to the forest often, just to breathe. So, I know the forest to be a living, shapeshifting being. I had just never thought of it as actually breathing.

Sure enough, when I look again, the low-hanging fog does make it seem like the forest is sending up deep, puffy breaths. But then, this is Borneo, one of the world's oldest rainforests, where stranger things have been known to happen.

The more I stare at the trees fringing this ancient forest, the calmer I find my own breathing and heartbeat becoming. And I needed this, given how excited I had been just a few moments ago, to see a giant orangutan swinging through the treetops.

I am on a boat safari on the Kinabatangan River in Sabah, the smaller of the two states in Malaysian Borneo. Borneo is the world's third-largest island, divided between Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei. There are many other superlatives associated with this land, including the world's biggest flower (*Rafflesia arnoldii*) and the world's tallest tropical tree (the yellow maranti, or *Shorea faguettiana*). Above all, it is known for its incredible array of native fauna.

Everyone knows about orangutans, but as wildlife photographer and conservationist Cede Prudente, recent winner of the Sabah Tourism Champion award, tells me, there's so much more in these jungles. “Borneo is home to iconic species like the clouded leopard, and the helmeted hornbill, alongside colourful pitta species, extraordinary insects and herptiles, and thousands of plant species, many found nowhere else on earth.”

And so, I am here on this boat with Kurt in search of Sabah's animal residents, particularly the orangutan. Sharing more than 90 percent of their DNA with humans, these intelligent primates are found only in Borneo (in both Malaysia and Indonesia) and Sumatra. In fact, the name “orang-utan” itself comes from the Malay language, translating into “man of the forest,” and that is how endemic these mammals are to this region.

But seeing them in the wild is getting tougher and rarer, given the continued destruction of their natural





Clockwise from top left: Walking amongst the canopy in Danum Valley; a rhinoceros hornbill; a leopard cat; cruising along the Kinabatangan River.

habitats to make way for more profitable palm plantations. Add to this once-unchecked hunting for the illegal pet trade and to a lesser extent, for bushmeat, and you can see why they are now classified as Critically Endangered in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

My first encounter with these great apes had been just a few months earlier, during my stay at Borneo Rainforest Lodge, deep in the heart of the Danum Valley Conservation Area, further south in Sabah. With more than 70 orangutans recorded around the lodge, I had been optimistic about sightings.

And sure enough, on my very first morning hike with resident naturalist Noorafarahin Antonio—Farah, to guests—we had spotted and followed two orangutans on their morning feeding expedition. I was captivated by the seeming ease with which these massive apes swung from branch to branch, picking and eating fruit along the way. Later that morning, from high up on the canopy skywalk at one end of the property, we had also gotten a close view of a newly discarded orangutan nest. “They are great engineers and know just the right kind of branches to use for maximum comfort,” Farah had explained.

Sadly, that was the only time I saw orangutans on that trip, although a troop of curious red leaf monkeys turned up regularly at breakfast time. But like all true wildlifers, I longed for more and better sightings, which is why is why I headed back to Borneo the first chance I got.

Cut to the present, I am delighted and agitated in equal measures by the fleeting glimpse of a giant male from the boat, just a furry orange blob whizzing through the canopy, before disappearing from view. I focus on the misty breath of the rainforest, and remind myself this is just the first safari.

On this visit, I am staying at the Sukau Rainforest Lodge, located right on the banks of the Kinabatangan River. Kurt had met me at Sandakan airport for the two-hour speedboat transfer to the lodge. Owned and managed by Borneo Eco Tours, this lodge has hosted many celebrities, including the granddaddy of

nature commentary, Sir David Attenborough himself (who has lent his name to a villa and a boardwalk here).

From the lodge, I set off on daily morning and evening boat safaris in the Lower Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary, located along the river. Although I have orangutans firmly in mind, I also know enough to keep my eyes and ears (and oh yes, my mind) open to other bird and animal sightings. After all, this region is home to 10 species of primates, including more than 1,000 orangutans and countless proboscis monkeys, 50 mammal and 20 reptile species, and hundreds of avian species.

Speaking of primates, the next thing we come across is a troop of proboscis monkeys sitting on trees, so Kurt directs the boat towards the shore for a closer look. And there they are, the males proudly displaying their bulbous noses and potbellied stomachs (along with tiny, but fiery red penises). “The more dominant males have a larger nose and belly, which is attractive to the females,” Kurt explains. So, with these monkeys, size does seem to matter, although not in the way I would have expected.

As with all young ones—human or otherwise—the babies are leaping around the branches, dipping in and out of the water, and generally contriving to annoy their poor mothers (with smaller, cuter, upturned noses). The fathers, and perhaps uncles too, watch unperturbed, as the kids continue to screech and scamper. Kurt says, “Proboscis monkeys are social creatures, and one dominant male usually leads a group with several females and babies.”

Over the next few safaris, we come across many more of these twitchy monkeys, stopping to watch their antics each time. Along the way, Kurt keeps up a steady narrative of trivia about the biome, pointing out flora and fauna: a startled sambar deer on the banks, water lilies that are clogging up the placid oxbow lake, long-tailed and pig-tailed macaques, and a couple of sunbathing estuarine crocodiles that have camouflaged so well as to avoid detection by untrained eyes like mine. And then there are the birds! Dwarf kingfishers and oriental pied



SHUTTERSTOCK (4); MAP ILLUSTRATED BY VERONICA INVEEN

hornbills, and one of my most cherished bird sightings: the magnificent rhinoceros hornbill with the shiny yellow-orange casque on its head.

On a particularly warm afternoon, when I am nodding off in post-prandial stupor, Kurt turns to me after a quick phone call, warning me to hang tight. Turns out, he has received news about a herd of pygmy elephants several miles downriver, and he wants us to get there before they finish their feed and move on. When we finally pull up at the spot half an hour later, they are still munching on the tall grass. And they look super relaxed, perhaps basking in the same warm afterglow of a good meal as I am.

The smallest subspecies of Asian elephants, these live in matrilineal societies, with a wise, old female leading a small herd of eight to 10 other females and calves. The Malaysian unit of the World Wildlife Fund says that there are only 1,000 of them left in the wild. As with other endangered species, habitat loss is one of the main culprits, driving them closer to human settlements in search of food, provoking attacks, and often, killings.

According to conservationist Cede, there is now an increased focus on conservation, with the creation of more protected areas and improved wildlife management. "In Sabah, there's a real effort to balance development and conservation, which gives me hope for the future. That said, challenges remain, and continued teamwork between government, local communities, industry, and conservation groups is essential to protect Sabah's wildlife and forests," he says.

These pachyderms are different from those I have seen growing up in India; overall smaller and more rounded, with short trunks and long tails. It is wonderful to watch them eat and play at such close quarters, especially when two of them interlock their trunks for what seems to be an intense conversation. By now, Kurt is almost jumping with excitement. "We see orangutans all the time, but this is such a rare sighting," he declares.

Kurt also has some other news. "Now you have seen the Borneo Big Five," he beams at me, counting the orangutan, proboscis monkey, estuarine crocodile, rhinoceros hornbill and pygmy elephant on his fingers. The concept of a Borneo Big Five is new to me, although I have been following the worldwide discourse about the need for a



From top left: Pygmy elephants at play; sunset over Danum Valley rainforest.

new lens through which to view the wildlife safari experience, since the term "Big Five" originally stood for those which were the most challenging to hunt on foot in the African savannah.

One of the most influential of these campaigns has been the "New Big 5" initiated by photographer and journalist, and author of *The New Big 5: A Global Photography Project for Endangered Wildlife*, Graeme Green, who wanted to turn the idea of the colonial-era hunting term on its head, using it to shine the spotlight on conservation instead. "I thought it would be far better and more meaningful to have a Big 5 of wildlife photography, rather than a Big 5 of hunting. Shooting with cameras, rather than guns," Graeme tells me over email.

This New Big 5 project emerged from a collaboration with photographers, conservationists and wildlife charities across the world. And out of a year-long public vote, a new list of the five most charismatic animals to photograph was born: elephant, gorilla, polar bear, lion and tiger. "The purpose of the project was to raise awareness for all wildlife and the many threats they face, including pollution, poaching, the illegal wildlife trade, deforestation and climate change," he explains.

In the last few years, other similar top-five lists have sprung up, particularly in Africa. And as I now discover, to my pleasant surprise, in Borneo. Graeme believes it is a great way to focus people's attention on some key species, since the impact is felt across the whole ecosystem they inhabit—whether these are elephants or lions, or in the case of Borneo, orangutans.

I am only somewhat thrilled by Kurt's revelation: it is true that I have seen all the five, but I am longing for a memorable orangutan sighting. My wish comes true the very next morning—not on a safari, but when I am walking back to my room after breakfast. Midway along the Hornbill Boardwalk, I look up when I hear rustling right above my head. And there they are: Lucky and Hope, the resident orangutans of Sukau Rainforest Lodge. For nearly 20 minutes, I stand transfixed, ignoring the crick in my neck, watching the mother and baby enjoy their morning feast of fruit and leaves. I turn to Kurt with a smile, to say, "Now I have seen it all." 🌍

GETTING THERE

Danum Valley is 2.5 hours by road from the nearest airport, at Lahad Datu, with a direct flight from Kota Kinabalu or from Kuala Lumpur via Sandakan. For Sukau, fly into Sandakan for a boat or jeep transfer to the riverside lodge.

WHERE TO STAY

Borneo Rainforest Lodge borneonature-tours.com; three-day, two-night packages from RM5,844 per person.

Sukau sukau.com; from RM3557 per person, including stay, meals, airport transfers, safaris and nature activities.

WHAT TO DO

Borneo Eco Tours borneoecotours.com; two day, one night wildlife tours from RM1,897.