

# A RAINFOREST RAMBLE

Oil-rich Brunei has more to offer than oversized mosques topped with gilded roofs. Take a walk on its wild side.

By HO YUN KUAN

“**T**here’s our boat,” says our guide. Turning to look down the river to the right where he had pointed, we saw nothing that looked like our ride. The secluded Temburong river was deserted except for a line of brightly painted longboats bobbing with the current along the banks. Long, narrow and wooden, these simple vessels resemble stretched-out canoes.

An Iban man was standing on a bright green one. He started up the tiny outboard

Nothing obstructs the view from Ulu Temburong’s narrow, 50m-high canopy walkway.

motor. Its chugging sound broke the peace and a few startled birds escaped from the surrounding foliage.

“He’s ready. Let’s get on,” the guide urges. It finally dawned on us that we were to traverse the river the way the natives do.

Taking a 45-minute longboat ride down the Temburong river is the only way into Ulu Temburong National Park. The waterway is too shallow for bigger vessels, necessitating the use of traditional longboats.

Ulu Temburong National Park is situated within the strictly guarded Batu Apoi Forest

Photo DAVID KIRKLAND/BRUNEI TOURISM



Only an exclusive one square kilometre is open to tourists via guided tours.

Reserve, a 500sqkm area of untouched primary rainforest. The pristine wilderness is a gem to scientists, who flock there from around the world to conduct biodiversity research. Only an exclusive one square kilometre is open to tourists via guided tours.

As we manoeuvred our way upstream, our guide regaled us with stories of famous visitors. Jerry Hall had visited a few times with her family and friends. "She would get off to help us push the boat," he boasts, recalling Hall's visit during one dry season when the water level was so low, the bottom of the boat kept scraping the riverbed.

Sitting low in the traditional boat, we could easily trail our hands in the cool waters. Tiny fishes darted boldly between our fingers, while flycatcher birds played a safe distance away. The leisurely journey felt almost like an intimate tete-a-tete with nature.

The longboat ride ended at Ulu Ulu National Park Resort ([www.ululuresort.com](http://www.ululuresort.com)), our base from which to explore the rainforest. From here, guests have several options, including hiking to one of the many waterfalls, going for a night trek or tubing down the river. We chose the canopy walk



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and soon found ourselves facing a steep climb up countless steps. The boardwalk is well-maintained and the total distance only about one kilometre, but the humidity was intense and breathing felt difficult.


An aluminium and steel structure, looking like little more than the makeshift scaffolding commonly found in construction sites, came into view.

Rising 42m into the air and comprising two giant ladders connected by a suspension bridge, this is the canopy walk. Protective cages surround the ladder, but they did nothing to temper our fear. The structure swayed visibly in the slight breeze and the aluminium



More than 300 designers, technicians and craftsmen were involved in the six-year construction of Empire Hotel. From top: the hotel's Empress Suite and Ambassador Suite.

resonated a low, hollow sound with every step we took. We were well rewarded for our courage. At the end of the tense climb, we stepped out onto the suspension bridge and were treated to a panoramic view of the dense rainforest, spread out beneath us like a lush green carpet.

The best time to visit is at the break of dawn, for the breathtaking sunrise and the best chance to spot the rainforest's inhabitants, who are at their most active. Gibbons, hornbills and flying squirrels are the more commonly seen; the rest of the wild population betray their whereabouts with a cacophony of screeches and hoots, as well as the occasional rustling of foliage. 

**WHERE TO STAY:  
THE EMPIRE HOTEL AND COUNTRY CLUB**

Almost a destination in itself, this palatial hotel is partly owned by the sultan and it definitely shows. The marble and gold lobby, with a ceiling that stretches 12 storeys high, impresses guests from the get-go. Facilities within the 180-hectare property include a golf course designed by American champion golfer Jack Nicklaus, a spa and a country club.

The most luxurious room is the 666sqm Emperior Suite, which has been the temporary home of visiting heads of state. The suite can only be accessed by a private elevator and boasts a private indoor heated pool, cinema, walk-in wardrobe and sauna. It comes complete with gold-threaded carpets and faucets made of semi-precious lapis lazuli. [www.theempirehotel.com](http://www.theempirehotel.com)

Empire Hotel's golf course is among the best in Asia and plays host to events such as the Brunei Open and Aberdeen Brunei Senior Masters Tournament.

