



BORNEO ADVENTURE

Longhouse living in Sarawak

Let **Douglas Elliot**, a native Sarawakian, take you on a trip through the Land of the Hornbills. It's all about the wildlife, virgin rainforests, longhouses and amazing indigenous communities

Strap on your trekking boots and get ready to answer the call of the jungle! Located on the island of Borneo, Sarawak is still shrouded in mystery with an interior that's still relatively untouched and a lush 130-million-year-old rainforest teeming with wildlife. Journey deep into the heart of Borneo and experience the unique culture and the warmth of its people. Made up of over 40 sub-ethnic groups, planning a stay in a longhouse (communal house) offers a rare insight into how indigenous communities live in this beautiful part of Malaysia.

IF YOU'RE PRESSED FOR TIME

Visit the Bidayuh longhouses which are located within Kuching and require a much shorter drive.

A word of advice – the experience here may not be as authentic as those found in the interior as these longhouses have modern facilities. For a more extreme experience, consider flying to the Kelabit Highlands in a turboprop plane and staying with the Kelabit community of Bario.



Learn a useful skill from the hunters of the tribe – like shooting a blowpipe

supplied by a generator – basics that will suffice a comfortable stay. While the facilities may be slightly lacking, the warm hospitality more than makes up for it!

From Kuching to the interior

A four-hour drive from the state's capital of Kuching lies Batang Ai, a remote area that is part of a large national park covering 24,040 hectares and is a biodiversity haven that houses inhabitants like the *orang utan*, hornbills, sun bears, clouded leopards, civet cats and mouse deer. As you journey inland, you'll be greeted with the sight of undulating green hills, rice fields, pepper plantations



and scattered villages. Stop in the small town of Serian and Lachau to visit their markets and peruse obscure jungle produce and local handicrafts. To reach the longhouse, you have to take longboat upriver which will take approximately one hour.

Upon arrival at the longhouse, you'll be introduced to the chief of the house or *tuai rumah* and given a quick tour. Come evening, join the hosts for a dinner of typical local dishes and to socialise with the other residents at the *ruai* (communal area). Although they appear to be a shy lot, the Ibans are pretty generous with their smiles, so make sure you engage with them as they will have lots to tell you! A highlight of the

The longhouse

A dwelling place of the Dayaks (a generic term for the main tribes of Borneo) in Sarawak, the longhouse – as its name suggests – is a long wooden structure that's built above ground on stilts. Featuring a *tanju* (long veranda), a typical longhouse can easily house more than 20 families living in separate *bilek* or private rooms.

No two longhouses are alike as they vary in size and design according to the tribes. However, most will provide basic accommodation that may include running water, simple mattresses, mosquito nets and electricity



evening will be the traditional *ngajat* dance performance and while it's not customary, a small token presented to the chief during this time won't hurt and may even win you brownie points.

What follows next is really fun. The elders gather in the *ruai* offering rounds of potent *tuak* or rice wine. As with any situation where there're copious amounts of home-brewed alcohol, expect merrymaking and innocent rowdiness to last through the night. Although the impending doom of the morning after is inevitable, it's best not to turn down their hospitality so as to not upset them. If in the morning you somehow wake up feeling fine, tag along for a walk into the jungle where you'll discover *orang utan* nests and try out native plants and fruits. Or you could learn a useful skill from the hunters

of the tribe – like shooting a blowpipe. By lunch, retreat to the river and experience a one-of-a-kind jungle picnic with a feast of *manok pansoh* (chicken cooked in bamboo), grilled fish and more.

Go to Sarawak, visit a longhouse, immerse yourself in a 130-million-year-old rainforest, look out for hornbills and drink *tuak*. It will probably be the best part of your holiday!

Contact the **Sarawak Tourism Board** (+608 242 3600/sarawaktourism.com) for more information on longhouse stays or visit **Borneo Adventure** (55 *Jalan Main Bazaar*. +608 224 5175/borneoadventure.com) and **Borneo Experiences** (1 *Lebuh Temple*. +608 242 9239/borneoexperiences.com) for recommended tours and packages.

Before you go

- The Iban are the largest ethnic group in Sarawak and comprise 30 percent of the state's population.
- The Iban are also known as the Sea Dayak due to their living near bodies of water.
- Although they're mostly Christian now, they're still deeply rooted in their old traditions.
- The Iban men were once formidable head hunters and had a history of collecting skulls as trophies. The practice was outlawed by the government during the 1800s, although it has been occasionally revived since then in times of war and strife.
- The *kelingai* or the tribal tattoo marks the body of a warrior and is a sign of manhood. The most popular design is the *bunga terung* (eggplant flower) that's tattooed on the front shoulders.
- Traditional Iban foods include *manok pansoh*, *midin* (fiddlehead ferns) and juicy sago worms – which are sometimes eaten raw!

Handy tips

- Wear comfortable shoes and clothing
- Before entering the house, always remove your shoes
- Pack insect repellent and a small first aid kit
- Be respectful of the local customs and traditions
- Bring practical gifts that can be easily distributed (ask your guide if unsure)
- Always ask for permission before taking photos of anyone