

— A beautiful female Rhinoceros Hornbill *Buceros rhinoceros*, easily identified by the pale blue, red-ringed eye. Males have black, unringed eyes instead.



BORNEO'S KINABATANGAN

THE RIVER OF LIFE

Part Two of our extensive feature on Sabah's Nature Reserve - one of South East Asia's most beautiful and rewarding wildlife photography destinations



*The tranquil waters of the Menanggol
flow slowly between two thick curtains of
vegetation, offering unique vistas and
exceptional wildlife sightings.*

TEXT BY ANDREA FERRARI
PHOTOS BY ANDREA & ANTONELLA FERRARI

*I*n the first part of our extensive feature about the Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary (see *ANIMA MUNDI – Adventures in Wildlife Photography* Issue 11) we have described in detail its coastal lowland and riverine forest environments, the wildlife which one can reasonably hope to see and photograph there and the general “feel” and atmosphere of this truly wonderful destination, one of South-East Asia’s best wilderness areas. For those interested in the bare facts, we follow up in this issue with a selected series of snippets from Wikipedia

about the geographical and administrative aspects of the general area. This makes for “dry” and rather unappealing reading, but we realize that - for some reason - this part of the world (and Borneo in particular) still seems to be suffering from general preconceptions among the public. The island of Borneo is not peopled by man-eating carnivorous plants or head-hunting, blood-crazed savages: rather, it is a beautiful destination for wildlife and nature lovers, with very good (and occasionally truly superb) tourist infrastructures and very few practical difficulties. Read on...

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■ Sightings of beautiful Temple Pit Vipers *Tropidolaemus subannulatus* are quite common among the Menanggol’s thick riverine vegetation.





A sub-adult Saltwater
or Estuarine Crocodile
Crocodylus porosus basking
on a muddy riverbank
during the rainy season.

THE ADMINISTRATIVE AREA

The Kinabatangan district is located in Sandakan Division, in the east of Sabah, Malaysia on the island of Borneo. The district office is located in Kota Kinabatangan. Its population was estimated to be around 86,783 in 2000. Kinabatangan is mostly populated with 'Orang Sungai' (people of the river), one of the Indigenous Group in Sabah. Economic activities are centered around oil palm plantations, forestry and wood-based industries (we might add that palm oil plantations are also a major concern for the welfare of the local wildlife and the general environment of the

Kinabatangan area, and that tourism now plays an important part in the local, small-scale economy, providing jobs to a large number of Orang Sungai). The nearby Kinabatangan River is an area with tropical lowland rainforest vegetation and ecosystems. The area is wet and humid and the swampy lowlands are home to Borneo's indigenous Proboscis Monkey. Other places of interest in the area are the Gomantong Caves. The 78 000 hectares of the Kinabatangan and Segama rivers was gazetted in 2008 as "Kinabatangan-Segama Wetlands Ramsar site". The recognition is significant, as the wetlands comprise rarely found coastal mangrove swamps and peat jungles.

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The slow-flowing Menanggol is at its atmospheric, mist-shrouded best in the very early morning hours.

■ The large and very active Grey-tailed Racer *Gonyosoma oxycephalum* is occasionally encountered within Borneo in its dazzling yellow color phase rather than its more common bright green one.



THE WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

The Kinabatangan River (Sungai Kinabatangan) is located in Sabah, eastern Malaysia, on the island of Borneo. It is the second longest river in Malaysia, with a length of 560 kilometers from its headwaters in the mountains of southwest Sabah, to its outlet at the Sulu Sea, east of Sandakan. Kinabatangan is known for its remarkable wildlife and fascinating habitats such as limestone caves at Gomantong hill, dryland dipterocarp forests, riverine forest, freshwater swamp forest, oxbow lakes and

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■ The Menanggal's thickly forested shores are often graced by the imposing flower of the Simpoh Air *Dillenia suffroticosa*.



■ Primates are very well represented in the Kinabatangan river basin area. Left, Long-tailed or Crab-eating Macaque *Macaca fascicularis*. Right, top, a female Proboscis monkey *Nasalis larvatus*; right, bottom, a juvenile Orangutan *Pongo pygmaeus*.





*Stormy skies - heralding frequent ■
and violent downpours - offer
uniquely dramatic vistas along the
Kinabatangan forest-fringed shores.*

brackish mangrove swamps near the coast. The ecology of the upper reaches of the river has been severely disrupted by excessive logging and clearing of land for plantations. However, the original lowland forests and mangrove swamps near the coast have largely survived, provide sanctuary for a population of Saltwater Crocodiles (*Crocodylus porosus*), and contain some of Borneo's highest concentrations of wildlife. Of special note are Borneo's indigenous Proboscis

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Slowly and silently cruising along the Kinabatangan offers frequent, close observation of large Saltwater or Estuarine Crocodiles *Crocodylus porosus* from the relative safety of a small boat.





Left, a tree-dwelling Grey-tailed Racer *Gonyosoma oxycephalum* in its yellow phase; right, the Buffy Fish-Owl *Ketupa ketupu*, a relatively common denizen of the riverine shores at night.



At dawn and twilight the pygmy elephants emerge from the forest

■ *Bornean Pygmy Elephants*
Elephas maximus borneensis, an endemic subspecies, are best observed as they feed along the river's edge.





■ The shores of the Kinabatangan are a true birdwatcher's heaven. Far left, Rhinoceros Hornbill *Buceros rhinoceros*; left, Grey-headed Fish-eagle *Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus*.

Bornean Pygmy Elephant ■
Elephas maximus borneensis -
 despite its relatively small size,
 this species can be
 occasionally aggressive and
 should always be approached
 with extreme caution.

monkeys, Bornean orangutan, Asian elephants, Sumatran rhinoceros and the endemic Borneo river shark. The area is also known for its great variety of birdlife. Each year, the lashing rains of the northeast monsoon cause the river to swell rapidly. Unable to discharge into the sea quickly enough, the river frequently overflows its banks and spreads across the flat land of its lower reaches, creating a huge floodplain. The lower Kinabatangan teems with animal and plant life, making it the best area for viewing wildlife, not just in Sabah but all of Southeast Asia. In 1997, 270 square kilometres of the lower Kinabatangan floodplain were declared a protected area, and in 2001 this designation was upgraded to that of "bird sanctuary", largely through the efforts of NGOs. Further efforts to have the area declared a Wildlife Refuge or even National Park had been however opposed by oil palm plantation owners seeking to expand their cultivated land. By August 2006, following media attention after a decapitated elephant's head was found floating down the river, the area was

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*With the coming of the rains
reptile life literally explodes
all over the river shores*



Very large Water Monitors *Varanus salvator* can be often observed as they forage on the river's muddy shores, especially during the wet season.



■ Herping heaven!
 Top left, Mangrove snake
Boiga dendrophila;
 top right, Harlequin Tree
 Frog *Rhacophorus pardalis*.
 Bottom left, Borneo Spitting
 Cobra *Naja sumatrana*;
 bottom right, a rare
 Slender-tailed Wolf Snake
Lepturophis borneensis.





The Kinabatangan is one of the best sites anywhere - outside of Australia - to see the Saltwater or Estuarine Crocodile *Crocodylus porosus* at close quarters in the wild.



■ A pair of Stork-billed Kingfisher *Pelargopsis capensis* photographed on their perch at night.

gazetted under the State's Wildlife Conservation Enactment of 1997 as the Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary. It is now under the purview of the Sabah Wildlife Department. Currently, most nature tourism is concentrated around Sukau, accessible by road and offering comfortable accommodation to visitors prepared to pay for well-managed tours. The most populated area and also the Central Administration for Kinabatangan is Kinabatangan Town, along the Sandakan-Lahad Datu highway and about 90 kilometers from Sandakan Town. The largest cave system in Sabah, Gomantong Caves, can be found in this region.

GETTING THERE

For centuries, the rare treasures of Borneo's forests acted like a magnet for traders in search of edible bird's nests, rhinoceros horn, elephant ivory and hornbill casques for the Emperor and the wealthy mandarins of China. They also sought a hardwood resin, damar; flexible rattan vines; beeswax to make candles; fragrant woods and oil-rich illipe nuts. Today one can fly from Kota Kinabalu to Sandakan on Malaysia Airlines, whilst those from Kuala Lumpur can take direct daily flights to

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Top left, Sphynx Moth *Daphnis hypothous*; top right, an unidentified species of Pyralidae. Bottom left, Assassin bug *Eulyes amoena*; bottom right, Sphynx Moth *Ambulyx substrigilis*.





■ A rare encounter with the mildly venomous, tree- and ground-dwelling Black-headed Cat snake *Boiga nigriceps*.

■ The strange-looking *Penthicodes farinosa*, a rare Fulgorid planthopper which is occasionally observed on tree trunks in the riverine rainforest of the Kinabatangan.



Sandakan on AirAsia. Alternatively, one can take an air-conditioned coach to Sandakan or Lahad Datu from Kota Kinabalu. One can also take a ferry to Sukau from the Sandakan harbour. The Kinabatangan region can be visited all year round, though it is often flooded during the wettest part of the year in December and January. The main flowering and fruiting season, from April to October is generally fairly dry and a good time to spot many birds and animals. During the northeast monsoon, from November to March, there are often heavy showers during the afternoons, particularly during December and January. During the rainy season, however, it is possible to negotiate many of the river channels leading into the oxbow lakes, where there is a greater concentration of wildlife. ●

Life in the tree-tops.
Left, Orangutan *Pongo pygmaeus*, an adult female with her baby;
middle, a female Rhinoceros Hornbill *Buceros rhinoceros*;
right, Long-tailed or Crab-eating Macaque *Macaca fascicularis*.





A large Estuarine
or Saltwater crocodile
Crocodylus porosus
lurks among a patch
of the introduced
and highly invasive
Water hyacinth
Eichhornia crassipes.



Large Cat snakes ■
belonging to the
genus *Boiga* are
very common along
the Kinabatangan's
forested shores.
Left, a stunning
Mangrove snake
Boiga dendrophila;
right, a Dog-tooth
Cat snake *Boiga
cynodon*.



Observing at close quarters the Smooth Otter *Lutra (Lutrogale) perspicillata* is largely a matter of luck - and perseverance. This is an exceptionally active and inquisitive riverine species.






■ Top left, Colugo
 or Flying Lemur
Cynocephalus
variegatus;
 top right, Stork-billed
 Kingfisher *Pelargopsis*
capensis; bottom right,
 Black-and-red Broadbill
Cymbirhynchus
macrorhynchus;
 bottom left, Temple Pit
 viper *Tropidolaemus*
subannulatus.



*Prehistoric-looking
giant reptiles ambling
along the riverbanks*

The Water Monitors 
Varanus salvator sub.
macromaculatus of the
Kinabatangan river
basin can reach
a remarkable size
(often over 200cm)
and a very heavy weight
(more than 20kgs).





Left, Rhinoceros Hornbill *Buceros rhinoceros*; middle, Great Egret *Egretta alba*; right, a Crested Serpent Eagle *Spilornis cheela* with its snake prey.





■ Estuarine or Saltwater crocodile *Crocodylus porosus* are best observed when basking on mud riverbanks exposed by receding tides. Low water levels are supposed to be ideal, but we had some of our best sightings at the peak of the rainy season in January.



The best wildlife viewing opportunities are offered when exploring the waterways in very small groups and in a private boat.



■ Left, a subadult male Temple Pit viper *Tropidolaemus subannulatus*; right, a female Long-tailed or Crab-eating Macaque *Macaca fascicularis* with her day-old baby.



Absolute silence and ■
floating noiselessly
downstream with a
switched-off engine are
mandatory if one wants to
approach really closely
the Estuarine or Saltwater
crocodile *Crocodylus*
porosus of the
Kinabatangan. In a few
instances we have actually
got within touching
distance of these truly
impressive predators.



Bornean Pygmy Elephants
Elephas maximus borneensis
can also be approached
very closely by boat when
grazing by the river's edge.



*Face to face with
the endemic Pygmy
elephants of Borneo*



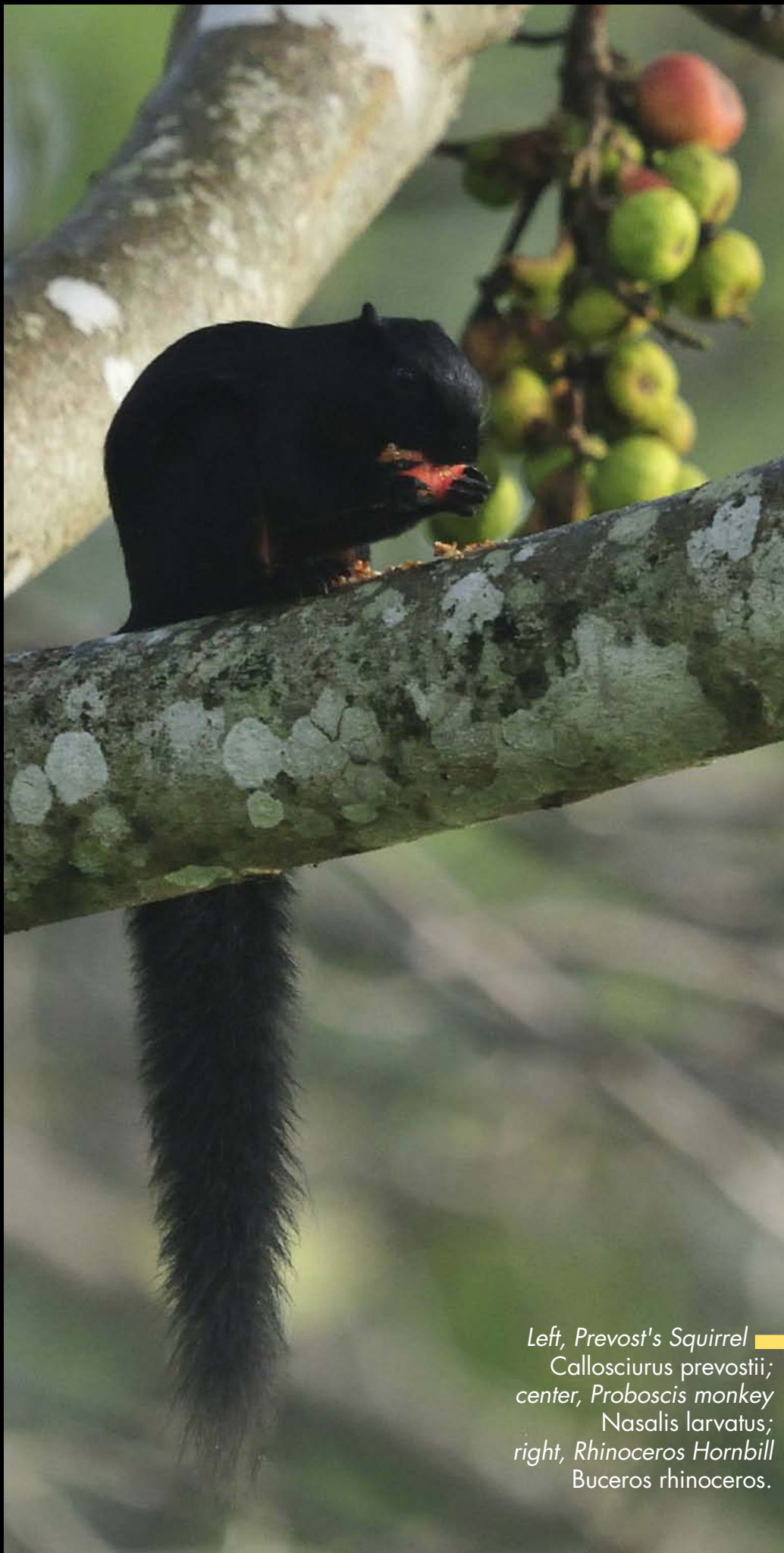
Top left, Prevost's Squirrel
Callosciurus prevostii;
top right, Harlequin Tree Frog
Rhacophorus pardalis.
Bottom right, Blue-eared Kingfisher
Alcedo meninting;
bottom left, Harlequin Tree Frog
Rhacophorus pardalis.



Large Water Monitors ■
Varanus salvator can often be approached very closely as they forage for frogs and crabs in shallow water by the river's edge.

A cosmopolitan but nevertheless impressive and very elegant species, the Great Egret *Egretta alba* is often observed at the water's edge.





Left, Prevost's Squirrel
Callosciurus prevostii;
center, Proboscis monkey
Nasalis larvatus;
right, Rhinoceros Hornbill
Buceros rhinoceros.






*Dark, deep waters where
great Saltwater Crocodiles
lurk in silent, patient wait*

The Kinabatangan is one of the last - and possibly the most important - strongholds of the Estuarine Crocodile *Crocodylus porosus* in Borneo.



■ The human-like, penetrating gaze of an adult male Proboscis monkey *Nasalis larvatus* - this is the Alpha male of the troop, easily identified by the large nasal appendage which has suggested its popular name.



Strictly herbivores,  Proboscis monkeys *Nasalis larvatus* can however display an impressive set of canine teeth, especially prominent in mature males. Notice the bright red penis of the specimen, which in males of this species appears to be permanently erected.





■ Sexual dymorphism in the Proboscis monkey *Nasalis larvatus* is particularly accentuated, with adult dominant males (left) sporting huge nasal appendages and round, protruding bellies. Juveniles and females (right) are slimmer and with a much smaller nose.



*The exquisite elegance
of the Whiskered Tern
in the oxbow lagoon*

*Whiskered Tern *Chilidonias*
hybridus, a simply elegant bird
which seems almost out of place in
the general visual exuberance of
its exotic brethren in the area.*





Two more portraits of a Proboscis monkey *Nasalis larvatus* Alpha male show to advantage the range of facial expression and the exquisite coat of this extraordinary primate species.





Quiet, dark corners where forest and river meet along some of the Kinabatangan's smallest tributaries offer great photographic opportunities. This is an Estuarine or Saltwater crocodile *Crocodylus porosus* basking on muddy riverbank and being reflected in the still waters of the Menanggol.



A close-up portrait of a large Water Monitor *Varanus salvator*. The fly perched on the back of its neck gives a good idea of the large size of this impressive, fast and agile reptilian predator.

A portrait of Bornean
Pygmy Elephants *Elephas
maximus borneensis* as
they graze by the
Kinabatangan's shore in a
late May afternoon.
By careful and very
cautious manouvering one
can get within touching
distance of these
impressive animals,
but one should never
underestimate their
irritability and offensive
potential - safety always
comes first!





■ A large and possibly gravid *Trimeresurus subannulatus* female - the most common of Borneo's Pit vipers and an amazingly beautiful species.



■ Night walks in the Abai area - when feasible - offer wonderful macrophotography opportunities, despite the omnipresent (but harmless) leeches. Left, a large Stick Insect; right, a dangerously venomous Giant Centipede *Scolopendra sp.*, whose bite invariably causes excruciating, long-lasting pain.



■ At the end of the rains, in April-May - juveniles of all species abound. This is a very young Striped Bronzeback *Dendrelaphis caudolineatus*.



■ The lazy, sprawled posture of this basking Saltwater crocodile *Crocodylus porosus* belies its lightning speed in attack and flight alike. Never try to get close to one if you are not on a safe boat with an experienced guide.



At-a-glance travel guide

COUNTRY OF DESTINATION: MALAYSIAN BORNEO



USEFUL TIPS FOR YOUR EXPEDITION

Some simple, common sense, field-tested advice and information to make the best out of your trip and avoid hassles, worries and problems

ROUTE: You will probably arrive in Kota Kinabalu - Sabah's capital city - with a flight originating from Kuala Lumpur or Singapore. From KK it's a short 45 mins domestic connecting flight to Sandakan, the coastal town on the Sulu Sea where you'll be spending one or two nights to recuperate before moving on - by car or boat - to the Kinabatangan. Once in Sandakan you might also want to stay longer and visit the Sepilok-Kabili Forest Reserve, which hosts an Orangutan Rehabilitation program.

MEANS OF TRANSPORT: The Kinabatangan is reached by private car or by river launch and is mostly explored by river boat, with a few occasional

short forest walks thrown in (especially at night). All riverside lodges in Sukau offer boat trips (in groups), but if you are serious about your photography rent your own river boat with a private guide and an experienced boatman - it really does make a difference. For all bookings we can safely recommend our friend and professional photographer **Cede Prudente's** company **North Borneo Safari**, the most reliable and experienced wildlife tour operator in town.

CURRENCY: Malaysian Ringgit, but USD and Euros are widely accepted by most tour operators in Sandakan and by most riverside lodges.

ACCOMODATION: The Kinabatangan river basin offers a large number of basic, no-frills campsites and several more expensive lodges, both in Sukau and in Abai. Lodges proper are usually very comfortable, spotlessly clean and just by the river's edge. We can safely suggest the lovely and very comfortable **Bukit Melapi/Proboscis Lodge**, where we usually stay when we visit the area.

FOOD: Malaysians - and Sabahans in particular - love to eat! You'll have lots of fresh vegetables, great tropical fruit, tasty fish soups, plenty of squid and prawns (try the local river variety - you'll also support the local economy) and lots of steamed/grilled fresh

The lifelong dream of all wildlife photography lovers come true



seafood. Food is perfectly safe (and not too spicy, if you're squeamish about that aspect - we aren't!).

LANGUAGE: Bahasa Malaysia and English, which is perfectly spoken in all lodges and by all guides.

WORRIES: None whatsoever. Borneo has a romantic film-image of steaming, forbidden jungles and savage head-hunters, but in fact the Malaysian states of Sarawak and Sabah (which are part of the island of Borneo together with the Sultanate of Brunei and the Indonesian region of Kalimantan) are well-developed (some might say too much) and well-organized. Crime is almost non-existent, food is wonderful and tourism is very well cared for. Once in a few years there are spasms of violence (mostly kidnappings) in the coastal islands by pirates from the Sulu Sea, but these occurrences are rare and there are Army detachments to stand guard.

HEALTH: We have been visiting regularly Borneo for the past twenty years - sometimes twice a year! - and we haven't been sick once, despite having been all over the place and having been bitten by scores of mosquitoes. Leeches - in case you worry - are perfectly harmless and do not transmit any dangerous tropical disease. Just be careful with the sun (one can get easily sunstroke if going on long boat trips without a hat) and follow the usual precautions regarding street food and drink. Water served in the lodges is usually perfectly safe to drink.

CLIMATE: Equatorial lowland coastal forest - very humid, occasionally extremely hot, with frequent torrential downpours and extensive flooding during the rainy season from November to March. Nothing to worry about anyway, as you won't be doing too much walking in the forest - river trips in the early morning or at night can even be surprisingly cool.

BESIDES: Sabah has much to offer to the adventurous traveler and the wildlife enthusiast - we usually suggest to pick a destination and stick to it for at least a couple of weeks, but if you want to squeeze the most out of your stay (and your international flight) you might want to visit several other National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries - such as the demanding and exhilarating Mount Kinabalu (near Kota Kinabalu), the pristine and remote Danum Valley (see our feature on issue 1 of ANIMA MUNDI) or Tabin Forest Reserve. Opportunities for wildlife photography enthusiasts are endless! Sabah also boasts some stunning seaside locations - one can indulge in world-class scuba diving at Pulau Sipadan, Pulau Mabul or Layang Layang atoll, or opt to relax by the beach on private, exclusive islands such as Pulau Lankayan or Pulau Mantanani. Whatever your decisions will be, you won't be disappointed - this we can guarantee! ●