



Air Asia's flight to Kuching, Sarawak

# Sarawak's Surprises

## Five days and four nights in the land of the White Rajahs

By Shannon Ravenel

Confession: when I registered my husband and myself for the November 2010 Sarawak Study Tour, directed by FOM veteran Louise Macul, I had never heard of Sarawak.

But, by the time we boarded our Air Asia plane – with the prophetic word, 'AMAZING' painted in puffy primary colors on its fuselage – I knew more, gleaned from reports presented at Louise's pre-tour meeting:

- Sarawak is a Malaysian state (since 1963) in Borneo.
- In the mid 1800s, in return for suppressing rebellious Malay and tribal chiefs, Briton James Brooke was granted the Sarawak River area as a personal fief by the Sultan of Brunei, thus becoming Southeast Asia's first 'White Rajah'.
- Brookes of two succeeding generations inherited the title and oversight of Sarawak, until 1946.
- Darwin's contemporary, Alfred Russell Wallace, spent 15 months in the Malay Archipelago collecting more than 125,000 specimen mammals, birds, beetles and butterflies on which he based his own ideas of evolution.
- Today, Sarawak's population is 2.3 million – 21% Malay, 30% Chinese, 30% Iban tribal natives and others.



Longboats ready for departure from the resort jetty



Longhouse 9 at Batang Ai Hilton Longhouse Resort

Once we landed at Kuching airport (met there by Louise and three guides), there was so much more to learn. Sarawak's catchwords – Headhunters, Longhouses, Great Apes, Ancient Rain Forests, White *Rajahs* – have surprising stories behind them. Headhunting, for instance, is indeed a thing of the past, the second White *Rajah*, Charles Brooke, having worked hard to put an end to it. Even so, in Kuching's beautiful old Sarawak Museum (built by Brooke in 1891), there's a carefully reconstructed tribal longhouse, complete with human skulls hanging from the rafters. Our museum guide explained that the heads of the vanquished were thought to provide 'life forces', thus the practice of keeping and displaying them.

And the 'longhouse' itself? By the end of our four Sarawakian days, we had visited one deep in the jungle. There we were invited inside to meet the chief (and toast him with homemade rice wine), visit a longhouse 'home' (each nuclear family has its own apartment inside the longhouse) and watch a tribal dance. We also participated in a blow-gun competition and cheered for the roosters in a spur-less, deathless cock fight – all part of the welcome to the Iban community of Rumah Ukum where cock fights sometimes settle family disputes.

We also spent two nights in an altogether modern longhouse, the Batang Ai Hilton Longhouse Resort, on an island in the middle of one of the most beautiful lakes this side of Switzerland. To get from there to Rumah Ukum, we rode in three narrow, wooden 'longboats'. These same boats took us to a riverside beach from which we climbed to a jungle waterfall (some of us dove into its sparkling pool), ate a meal cooked in bamboo over campfires by Ibans and took part in another chug-a-lug custom. OOOOOOoooo Hah! *This* homemade libation wasn't wine, but hard likker!

On the way to and from Batang Ai Lake, we ate fine meals at small village restaurants, which always featured the favourite Sarawak vegetable *midin* or jungle ferns. At the Semenggoh wildlife centre, we watched three mother orangutans swing down from the trees, babes in arms, to accept bottles of milk from the rangers. The director of the Great Orangutan Project explained the organisation's efforts to save this endangered species.

In Kuching, we saw more lovely 19th century buildings including the old Parliament, which now houses a stylish restaurant called, appropriately, The Magna Carta. There, on the last night of our Sarawak adventure, we were serenaded by our remarkable native guide, Alvin Danker, a Eurasian *Bidayah*, who sang a rendition of the Frank Sinatra hit, *All the Way*.

Just as prophesied by the Air Asia logo, Sarawak is, indeed, AMAZING!

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Assistant Features Editor of *PASSAGE*, **Shannon Ravenel**, is a US book editor with the good fortune to be spending three years in Singapore.

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Photos by the author