

FOOTLOOSE

I am writing this from the Shangri-La Tanjung Aru Resort in Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia. The nearest international airport to reach Kota Kinabalu is Hong Kong. Kota Kinabalu is also connected to Singapore by direct flights. However, the cheapest option for tourists to reach Kota Kinabalu is to fly to Kuala Lumpur and board the Air Asia flight to Kota Kinabalu which leaves at 7:00 am. The flight from Kuala Lumpur to Kota Kinabalu takes 150 minutes. Kota Kinabalu is the capital of Sabah, one of the two East Malaysian States on the island of Borneo adjacent to the Indonesian state of Kalimantan. One of the most fascinating aspects of the state of Sabah is its greenery and most of the state is covered with a thick tropical rainforest. It must be admitted that though timber logging over the years has wiped away a lot of Borneo's virgin rainforest, a few patch-

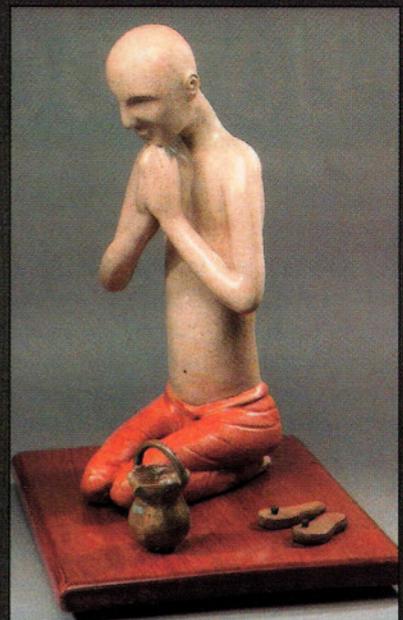
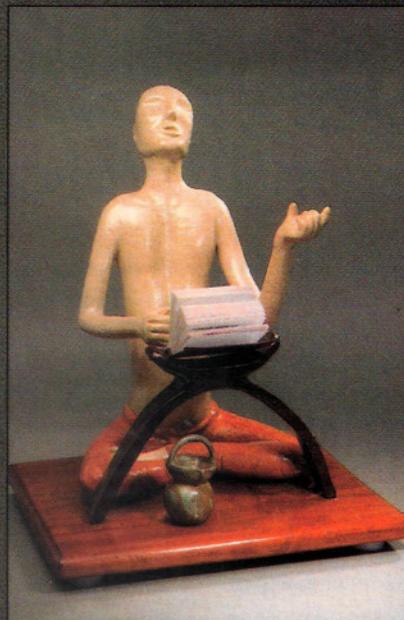
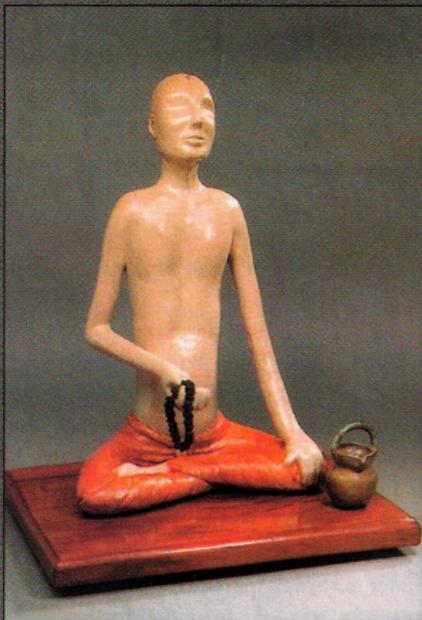
es of green continue to exist due to their remote location and inaccessibility.

One such patch of green is at Kampung Bantul. Nestled on the upper echelon of the Kalimantan Hills, Kampung Bantul is a longhouse that houses 200 Muruts, one of the indigenous tribes of Borneo. The community way of living has been their way of life for centuries and several generations have lived together as a single family over the years. A longhouse is a long wooden house built on stilts that can house about 200 residents. Small partitions separate the individual units but common areas are provided for bathing, cooking and recreation. There is no electricity and most Muruts prefer to bathe in the river that flows between the several kampungs that dot this highland rainforest.

MY MOWGLI DAYS



An aerial view of Borneo



Kavita Gupta Merchant's pottery as a creative art form idealises Ganesha idols in contemporary and innovative postures. By **SUREKHA KADAPA - BOSE**

says. It was this fascination, which later led her to take up pottery as her forte. Leaving a well established, highly academic job was a dilemma for her but she decided to go along with her gut feeling. "It was Jimmy, my husband who advised me to concentrate on one art form and to acquire proper training before converting my hobby to my profession," explains Kavita who conducts workshops for schools in and around Mumbai beside training artisans recommended by the development commissioner (Handicrafts).

She got trained from institutions and individuals based in Mumbai, Bangalore, Delhi on various aspects of pottery. She had held many solo exhibitions at Bilmat Zeramiez, Showcase

Art Gallery, Murali Art Gallery, Abitare Art Gallery besides some group exhibitions too where her Ganeshas sold for Rs 400 to Rs 3000 while other sculptures have fetched around Rs 5000. Though some of her works at present is available in the price range of Rs 400 to Rs 5000 a piece at Bombay Stores in Fort and Satguru at Bandra, she prefers to deal with individual contacts. "In shops, my works loses their uniqueness. None of my work is assembly line production. Each is worked by hands and separately. I want to retain that unique identity and not get replicated," signs off Kavita. **btw**



The flora and fauna that surround Kampung Bantul is spectacular. You sight hundreds of birds of colourful hues singing their flowery tunes at the break of dawn. As the sun rises, butterflies begin their beauty parade on the river bank. At nightfall, fireflies light up the mangrove swamps that stretch across the river. Mother Nature continues her magic throughout the night when one can sight mouse-deer, wild boar, monkeys and rabbits that come out of their hibernation in the cover of darkness. A canoe ride in the wee hours of the morning over the mighty mountain stream is extremely soothing and pleasant.

The view from the longhouse at Kampung Bantul is nothing short of majestic. A thick tropical forest surrounds this picturesque hill nestled in a canopy of green and you can find a several small beaches by the side of the river and relax to the tune of nature while lying on a soft bed of dried leaves. This is one of the most powerful tools for relaxation and harmonising your energy in tune with the universe. One of the most soothing ways to relax and communicate with nature is to take a long cruise on the Logongon river which winds its way through the verdant hills.

You wake up before dawn and make your way carefully in the semi-darkness to the banks of the river. The wooden canoe is a boon for the Muruts being the lifeline that con-



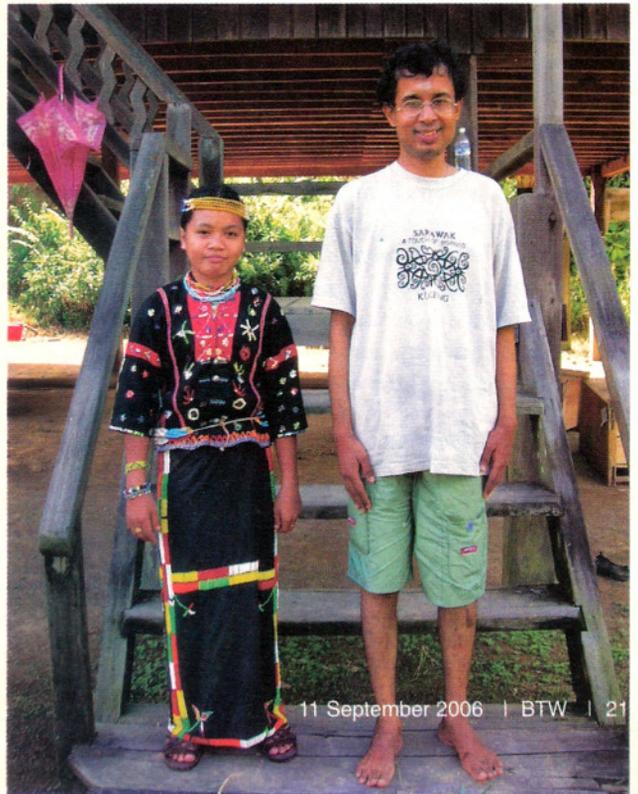
A giant tree in the tropical forest

In Borneo the picturesque hills are nestled in a canopy of green and you can find a several small beaches by the side of the river to relax to the tune of nature while lying on a soft bed of dried leaves. By **MURLI MENON**

nects them to the mainland. It is interesting to note that each and everything in the longhouse was either built there or transported to it by canoes or boats. As petrol-powered boats are beyond the reach of a majority of Muruts, the canoe is the equivalent of a bicycle. One canoe can hold two passengers - each with a paddle - comfortably. Paddling in the gushing mountain stream is the equivalent of river rafting. The canoe swirls, bobs up and down and is guided by the gushing waters. All one has to do is guide the canoe away from the numerous boulders and rocks strewn across the river. Paddling upstream is a different cup of tea altogether. One has to depend on the Murut navigator's muscle power as he overpowers the current with swift strokes of the paddle as you try to keep pace with him.

Progress across the swirling waters is like a snail crawling to reach the summit of Mount Everest. Hours of paddling could come to naught if caught in the path of a strong wave. One can hear the chirping of the birds as the sky begins to brighten and the lush greenery surrounding the hills is uncovered by the morning light. The hilltops are covered by snowy clouds and the sounds of the rainforest hang

The Writer with a Murut woman





The longhouse stands surrounded by nature

in the air. One spots a few stray mouse deer and wild boars as one is pushed towards the banks of the river. It is a tough task maintaining your balance on the canoe as it is pushed by the waters at all times. One has to have nerves of steel and the confidence of a blindfolded tightrope walker to face the powerful forces of nature.

The canoe ride takes you through several picturesque kampungs along the way. We inch our way up to the nearest kampung named Kampung Saliman. Here it is time for some rice porridge (*bubur*) with red chilly paste (*lada*) that is the staple food of these humble Murut tribals who co-exist with nature in Borneo's verdant rainforest. After a quick rest on the banks of the river that resembles a mini-beach, one begins to trek through the forest for spotting wildlife. The trek is exciting except for the leeches that cling to your feet at every step and the incessant rain that disappears as unexpectedly as it appears. Getting drenched is the only option while trekking in the forest, as everything gets wet during the canoe ride anyway. The experience of rain in a rainforest is incredible. One leaves one's footprints on the wet and muddy forest floor, but carries home memories to last one a lifetime. The downpour is virtual simulation of being under a waterfall - every pore of one's body gets drenched in a few minutes. You seek refuge under the thick bamboo grove that offers some respite from the fury of nature. But the rain is like a rainbow and stops as suddenly as it started.

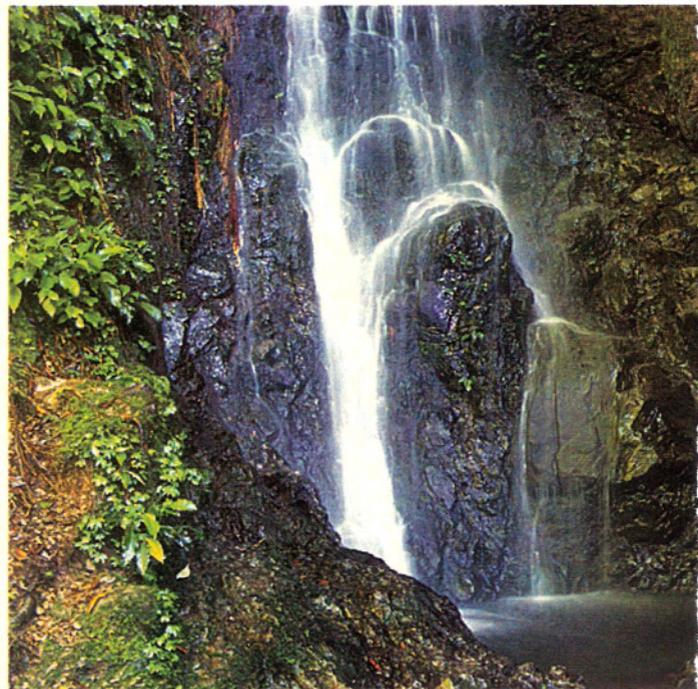
stay here

Shangri-La Tanjung Aru Beach Resort is a comfortable place to stay. Located off a private beach, it offers a spectacular view of the setting sun.

You have to trek through various shades of green, mountain-streams, thick highland rainforest and mangrove swamps along the trekking route. One experiences the thrill of passing through verdant undulating terrain and varied tropical landscape at every step of this adventure. One gets to observe tropical flora, insects, birds and butterflies at close quarters during this jungle walk. The most soul-stirring part of the trek is watching the butterflies while crashing through the jungle. This is an unforgettable experience as one can observe hundreds of species of butterflies in various shapes and colours. You should be careful to plan the trek so that you return to your base kampung by nightfall, as night trekking is bound to be difficult if not impossible.

You start the motor boat ride to the next kampung of Selungai, where a village market or *tamu* is in progress. You can purchase wooden masks, bamboo baskets with traditional tribal motifs, bamboo shoots, tapioca and wild fruit at this weekly market. Men and women clad in traditional Murut costumes beat the gong and enjoy this weekly community gathering where residents of the neighbouring kampungs converge. After Selungai, the currents get stronger and it takes almost an hour to get to kampung Pagalungan. Here, the Malaysian immigration authorities, army and police have their camps. Murut families who are divided between Malaysia and Indonesia get permits here to visit

The waterfall, the unique flora and fauna, is a feast to the eyes



eat here

Kota Kinabalu has small restaurants that serve Indian and Chinese cuisine.

- You get freshly steamed vegetables with soya and boiled rice at Chinese vegetarian near Wisma Medreka. The Kwa Teow (flat rice noodles) with vegetables is delicious.
- Jothy's Restaurant is good value for money for Indian vegetarian food.
- Swiss Chef Beat Enderly at the Shangri-La Tanjung Aru resort can whip up traditional Malay vegan delicacies and vegetable rice at short notice.
- Fresh fruits are available at the local market near Centre Point.



Rare flowers of the forest

each other at Pagalungan. A few minutes by boat divides the local villages across two different countries.

Salong, which is the last kampung on the journey, is connected to Sapulut by a forest road. The boat journey from Pagalungan to Salong takes about forty minutes. After reaching Salong, you hop on to a shared four-wheel jeep for a bumpy journey to Sapulut where you meet the smooth expressway to Nawaban. The distance from Salong to Sapulut is approximately 30 km; and Nawaban is 40 km. away from Sapulut and one passes the town of Sook at the 22 km. mark. Keningau, which is a larger town, is 20 km.

away from Nawaban. You can cruise at 100 km per hour once you reach Sapulut and the drive from Sapulut to Keningau (61 km) should take longer than 40 minutes on the deserted expressway. The return journey from Keningau to Kota Kinabalu (131 km.) takes all of three hours and you reach the cool confines of your hotel room in the late hours of the night.

Kota Kinabalu is connected by direct flights from Kuala Lumpur and Hong Kong besides internal flights from other Malaysian cities. The city centre is approximately 10 km from Kota Kinabalu airport. The transfer from the airport to the city centre costs RM 20. Prepaid air-conditioned cabs are available on arrival.

From Kota Kinabalu, one needs to proceed to Keningau, which is approximately 131 km away by shared mini-bus. From Keningau, you need to take another mini-bus to Sapulut which is at a distance of 60 km. The bus fare should not exceed RM 40. You have to wait for a shared four-wheel drive jeep going to Kampung Salong at Sapulut. For RM 10, these jeeps will drop you till the boat jetty at Salong where the motorable road ends. Then, you have to charter a boat at RM 500 or pay RM 50 to other chartered boats to drop you till Kampung Bantul. Kampung Bantul is the last settlement on the Malaysian border. The next Kampung after Bantul is in Indonesia. The Indonesian state of Kalimantan borders Sabah. It takes approximately six hours to drive from Kota Kinabalu to Salong. The boat ride from Kampung Salong to Kampung Bantul could take about two hours depending on the current and water level. Only motor boats can cross the swirling waters. An expert boatman and navigator are required to guide the boat over the river while avoiding the rocks and the mangrove swamps that line the riverbanks. **btw**

