




 ne is writing this from the Shangri-La Tanjung Aru Resort in Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia. Kota Kinabalu, on Malaysian Borneo is located 2000 km. from Kuala Lumpur. The nearest international airport to reach Kota Kinabalu is Hong Kong. Kota Kinabalu is also connected to Singapore by direct flights. However, the cheapest options for Indian tourists to reach Kota Kinabalu is to fly to Kuala Lumpur from Chennai by Indian Airlines and board the Air Asia flight to Kota Kinabalu which leaves at 7 a.m. The flight from Kuala Lumpur to Kota Kinabalu takes 150 minutes. It's almost like flying from Delhi to Trivandrum. 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.

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 164 km away by shared minibus (similar to a Tempo Traveller). From Keningau, one needs to take another shared minibus to Sapulut which is at a distance of 60 km. The bus fare does not exceed 40RM. One has to wait for shared four-wheel-drive Jeeps going to Kampung Salong at Sapulut. These Jeeps will drop you till the boat jetty at Salong where the motorable road ends, for 10 RM. Then one has to charter a boat at 500 RM or pay 50 RM to other chartered boats to drop you till Kampung Bantul. Kampung Bantul is the last settlement on the

Malaysian border. The next Kampung 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 can take about two hours depending on the current and water level. Only petrol-powered boats can cross the swirling waters. An expert boatman and navigator are required to guide the boat over the river while avoiding the rocks strewn all over and the mangrove swamps that line both banks of the river.

Kampung Bantul has been my home for the last week. Nestled on the upper echelon of the Kalimantan Hills, Kampung Bantul is a longhouse which houses 200 Muruts who are one of the indigenous tribes of Borneo. The community way of living has been the way of life for centuries and several generations have lived



porridge (*bubur*) with red chilli *chutney* (*lada*), which is the staple food of these humble Murut tribals who coexist with nature in Borneo's verdant rainforests. After a quick rest on the banks of the river which resembles a minibeach, 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 rains that disappear as unexpectedly as they appear. 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.



surprising to note that each and every thing in the longhouse, was either built there or transported to the longhouse 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 in India. 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 uphill is a different cup of tea altogether. One has to depend on the expert Murut navigator's muscle power as he overpowers the current with swift strokes of the paddle as one tries to keep pace with him.

Progress across the swirling waters like a snail crawling to reach the summit of Mount Everest. Hours of paddling can come to naught if caught in the path of a strong wave. One can hear the chirping of 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 preponderates 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 to maintain your balance on the canoe as one is pushed by the waters at all time. One has to have nerves of steel and the confidence of a blindfolded tightrope walker to face the powerful force 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

The thick downpour is virtual simulation of being under a waterfall. Every pore of one's body gets drenched in a few minutes. One seeks refuge under the thick bamboo grove which offers some respite from the fury of nature. But the rain is like a rainbow and stops as suddenly as it start. One has to trek through various shades of green, mountainstreams and thick high rainforests and mangrove swamps along the trekking route.

THE THRILL

One experiences the thrill of passing through verdant undulating terrain and varied tropical landscapes 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 our trek is watching the butterflies while making one's way through the forest. This is unforgettable as one can observe hundreds of species of butterflies in various colours and shapes. One should be careful to plan the trek such that one returns to one's base *kampung* by nightfall, as night

**THE CANOE RIDE
TAKES YOU
THROUGH SEVERAL
PICTURESQUE
KAMPUNGS ALONG
THE WAY.
WE INCH OUR WAY UP
TO THE NEAREST
KAMPUNG NAMED
KAMPUNG SALIMAN.**



together as a single family over the years. A longhouse is a long wooden house built on stilts which 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. Most Muruts prefer to bathe in the river which flows between the several Kampung that dot this highland rainforest.

The flora and fauna that surround Kampung Bantul is spectacular. One sights 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 banks. 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 who come out of their hibernation under the cover of

THE FLORA AND FAUNA THAT SURROUND KAMPUNG BANTUL IS SPECTACULAR.

ONE SIGHTS 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 BANKS.

darkness. A boat ride in the wee hours of the morning over the mighty mountain stream is extremely soothing and pleasant.

THE MAJESTIC VIEW

The view from the longhouse at Kampung Bantul is nothing short of majestic. Thick tropical forests surround this picturesque hill, nestled in a canopy of green. One can find 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 for 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. One wakes up before dawn and makes one's way carefully in the semi-darkness to the banks of the river.

The wooden canoe is a boon for the Muruts. It is the lifeline that connects them to the mainland. It is

Fact File



How to reach Kampung Kota Kinabalu

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.

How to reach Kampung Bantul

From Kota Kinabalu, one needs to proceed to Keningau which is approximately 131 km away by shared minibus. From Keningau one needs to take another minibus 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.

Where to eat at Kota Kinabalu

Kota Kinabalu has small restaurants that serve Indian and Chinese cuisine. You get freshly steamed vegetables with soya and boiled rice at Chinese vegetarian restaurant near Wisma Medreka. The *kway teow* (pronounced *koi tiyaw*) (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.

Where to stay at Kota Kinabalu

Shangri-La's Tanjung Aru Resort, located adjacent to the Kota Kinabalu Airport, is a convenient location to stay as almost all tourist attractions are easy to reach from there.

Most visitors visit Kampung Bantul as a day-trip from Kota Kinabalu.

trekking is bound to be difficult if not impossible.

One starts the motor boat ride to the next *kampung* of Selungai, where a village market or *tamu* is in progress. One can purchase wooden masks, bamboo baskets with traditional tribal motifs, bamboo shoots, tapioca and wild fruits 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 of the currents get stronger and it takes almost an hour to get to *kampung* Pagalungan. Here, the Malaysian immigration authorities, army and police have camps. Murut families who are divided between Malaysia and Indonesia get permits here to visit 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 40 minutes. After reaching Salong one hops onto a shared four-wheel driven Jeep for a bumpy journey to Sapulut where one meets the smooth expressway to Nawaban. The distance from Salong to Sapulut is approximately 30 km. From Sapulut, Nawaban is 40 km and one passes the town of Sook at the 22 km mark. Keningau, which is a larger town is 20 km from Nawaban. One can cruise at 100 km per hour once you reach Sapulut and the drive from Sapulut to Keningau (61 km) should take one no longer than 40 minutes on the deserted expressway. The return journey from Keningau to Kota Kinabalu (164 km) city takes all of three hours and one reaches the cool confines of one's hotel room in the late hours of night. We

There is only one thing which makes a dream impossible to achieve; the fear of failure.