

Sandakan

Gateway to Nature

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HISTORY

Sandakan is a captivating town with its very own charm, friendly people and many fabulous places to eat seafood. Sandakan has also its own intriguing history and traces its roots back to the early 1870s, when William Clarke Cowie, a Scottish adventurer and engineer was trading guns and ammunition with the Sultan of Sulu so that he could protect his territories from the Spanish. In return, the Sultan granted Cowie permission to settle on Pulau Timbang in the Sandakan Bay, where there was a small Suluk village. Cowie called his base Sandakan, deriving the word from Suluk "sanda" and the suffix "kan", and Sandakan translates roughly into 'the place that was pawned'. Cowie's settlement soon became known as "Kampung Jerman" because a lot of Germans called at his trading post.

In 1879 the settlement was relocated to Buli Sim-Sim, which at that time was a narrow, uninhabited coastal fringe of jungle and mangroves. However, Cowie found that the natural harbour was one of the most beautiful in the world, and he renamed his new settlement "Elopura", meaning 'Beautiful Harbour'. But eventually the name Sandakan prevailed, and in 1883 the British North Borneo Chartered Company (BNBCC) moved its capital in North Borneo from Kudat to Sandakan. The trading post developed into a striving little town, but all business came to an abrupt end when the Japanese invaded Borneo during WWII. To liberate the town Allied bombers nearly flattened Sandakan towards the end of the war, and in retaliation the Japanese burnt whatever had survived the bombings. Sandakan virtually ceased to exist in June 1945.

After WWII, and faced with the impossibly expensive task of rebuilding Sabah, the BNBCC relinquished its rights to the British Crown, and in 1946 under colonial administration Sabah's capital was moved to Jesselton (now Kota Kinabalu).

Nevertheless Sandakan was rebuilt and became Sabah's first and foremost port for the export of timber. Thus, after the war Sandakan grew bigger and stronger, and prospered with revenge! During its heydays, it is said that Sandakan had the greatest concentration of millionaires in the world! This prosperity naturally led to an influx of people from all over the world, from China over India to Arabia and Europe, from Indonesia to the Philippines and even to Japan. However, the seemingly inexhaustible supply of tropical timber dwindled fast and today most natural resources are depleted, with the reminders in protected reserves for plants and animals. Sandakan developed much of the former jungle into palm plantations, but due to the jungle reserves and vast conservation areas of one of the world's oldest rainforest it is famous now as the gateway to Sabah's unique and rich flora & fauna.

PLACES OF INTEREST IN SANDAKAN

Being the former capital of Sabah (then North Borneo), Sandakan is rich in historical monuments and other places of interest. Maybe the most famous, and a very important reminder for that matter, is the Australian WWII Memorial. It is dedicated to some 2700 Australian POW who died at the Sandakan POW camp and in the ensuing death marches through the jungles of Sabah. It is located on Jalan Labuk Utara, Mile 8, and travel agents in Sandakan offer regular tours there. Alternatively, you can take a taxi to visit this site of quiet remembrance. Another site that links pre-war times with colonial times is the former House of Agnes Keith, and her husband, Harry Keith. Harry Keith was the forest curator in British North Borneo, and his American wife, Agnes, followed him to Sabah. Here, she wrote with much emotion and insight three books, the most famous being "The Land Below the Wind". The Keith's suffered imprisonment during WWII, and Agnes' second book "Three Came Home" details their and the Sabah's people war experience. The house is currently being renovated and will open as a museum soon. Adjacent to the Agnes Keith House, also located on Bukit Istana and with a wonderful view over Sandakan Town and Bay is the English Tea House. Visit this place for an authentic 'colonial' tea-time, or some elegant dining.

Sandakan has an important Chinese population, and there are several nice temples that can be visited, such as the century-old Tham Kung Temple on Mile 1 1/2 Jalan Utara. The special feature about this temple is the 'preservation of a temple within a temple'. The original shrine was lifted and transferred to within the new temple in an effort to conserve it, a first in Malaysia. Then there is the Sam Sing Kung Temple, or the 'Three Saints' Temple' at the edge of the town padang. The three saints are Kwan Woon Cheung, the saint of righteousness; the goddess Tin Hou, worshipped by fishermen; and the Emperor Min Cheong, worshipped by those who seek success in examinations. Before school exams you will find hopeful students at this temple, which was built by four Chinese communities: the Hakka, Cantonese, Hainanese and Teochew.

A popular temple that is on the regular city tour is the Puh Jih Shih Buddha Temple, erected on a 100-meter high hilltop above Tanah Merah, and with a breathtaking view over Sandakan Bay. The interior is an extravaganza in red and gold, with writhing dragons and gilded Buddha's. The temple protects the Sandakan people and brings health and wealth.

Other places of worship include the Masjid Jamek, which belongs to the earliest buildings of Sandakan and was constructed in the 1890s by Indian fabric peddlers of Muslim faith. During WWII it served as a hiding place for Muslims, and occasionally European officials, and thus it came periodically under fire during that period of Sabah's history. The quaint Mosque is situated on Jalan Enam, next to the Hotel Sandakan. St Michaels & All Angels Church, one of Sabah's first and only granite churches can be found on Elton Hill. The beautiful building, reminiscent of an English countryside church, was completed in 1913, after twenty years of construction work. The stones for the church came from a granite quarry at Buli Sim-Sim.

Other places of interest in Sandakan town area are the Japanese Cemetery along Jalan Istana, with a monument to those Japanese soldiers who fought and died in Sabah during WWII, and the Japanese women who worked here and died in Sandakan; the Crocodile Farm and the Forestry Headquarters at Labuk Road; the Labuk Bay Proboscis Sanctuary within the Yet Hing Oil Palm Plantation; the world renown Sepilok Orang Utan Rehabilitation Centre in Sepilok; and the Sandakan Golf.

If you stroll through Sandakan you will find it an intriguing town full of the colours and scents of Asia. It is a truly bustling town and at times you have to push your way through crowds and merchandise that spill over into the sidewalk from the many shops, especially along Pryer Street, the road opposite the Central Market. Here you find bargain clothing, cheap watches, jewellers, birds nests, Indonesian cigarettes, cobblers, preserved ducks and other exotic foods, and much what could be collected under the term 'colonial ware' in a happy profusion. The shops are intercepted with restaurants that serve all sorts of delicious foods, from 'coto Makassar' over Indian 'roti canai' to Chinese fried noodles. The Sandakan Central Market is where you find perhaps the most amazing and largest variety of seafood in Sabah, along with vegetables, spices and oils, cheap clothing and Indonesian sarongs. The busiest time is on Sunday, when it is tamu in Sandakan! In the harbour behind the market you find the wooden vessels of Suluk fishermen, and those of barter traders from the Philippines. In the large you can see Berhala Island, which has its history of its own: the now quiet and largely forested island with its characteristic, abrupt red cliffs once housed the leper colony of Sandakan, and during WWII the Japanese interned civilians and POW on the island before sending them off to camps in Kuching, Sarawak.

In the evening, Sandakan offers a variety of night markets and food stalls popping up everywhere and selling local charcoal grilled specialities, from freshly caught fish and squid to chicken wings and 'Western Burgers', all served with a hot chilly sauce. Local restaurants and coffee shops are open until late, serving Chinese and Malay cuisine at its best, in convivial and unpretentious company. But the town gets quiet rather early in the evening; people in Sandakan get up early in the morning!

How to Get to Sandakan & Accommodation

By air (several daily flights, 45 mins) or by car or overland bus (ca 5 hours, 230 km); there are plenty of simple but clean hotels in and around Sandakan, and also within walking distance from the Sepilok Orang Utan Rehabilitation Centre. The Sandakan Hotel centrally located in the city is our preferred hotel and the Sabah Hotel, on a hill above Sandakan offers 4-star comfort inclusive of swimming pool and great buffet meals.

