

By HERMAN SCHOLZ, The Flying Dusun

Tambunan

WHERE TO STAY

HISTORY

Tambunan has a long history though little is known about prehistoric times. Closer to the advent of the British the Tambunan Dusun people, still scattered over 70 villages in this vast and fertile valley between the Crocker and Trus Madi Ranges lived a little by outsiders disturbed life. They planted rice along the river in 'wet-rice fields' and were hunters and gatherers, and indulged in the occasional head hunting which seems to have been, back then, a widespread and popular sport in Borneo. The Tambunan Dusun, however, did not practise headhunting as a sport, but rather took the heads of those who disturbed their Shangri-la. Or so they claim.

With the advent of the British came missionaries and they soon found scenic Tambunan with its agreeable climate. At an average of a 1000 m a.s.l. this place was arguably not as hot as the coastal plains and the missionaries did some serious work. The Dusun are traditionally animists with their own genesis and one god (who, for practical reasons as everybody will understand, is married), and shamans, generally female, who maintained harmony between the living, the spirits and the astral world. The shamans, called Bobolizan were also expert healers and midwives, besides being wife and mother. To-day, there are no more shamans in Tambunan, and virtually nobody who knows anything about traditional healing plants. But then there is also precariously little rainforest left which could yield those healing plants. Instead, in the small town of Tambunan there are a couple of pharmacies and a dispensary distributing for all sorts of aches 'Panadol'...



flutes and other toys, certain knives (for example for cutting the umbilical cord), fish traps and other animal traps, chicken coops, baskets, bridges, of course also drinking straws for Tambunan's famous siopon (rice wine in jars) and much more. Under colonial rule the Tambunan people had to plant 20 bamboo sprouts for every bamboo cut and to-day the slopes of the surrounding hills are covered in thick bamboo forests.

Today Tambunan Town is still very small and laid back, the people extremely friendly and seemingly never in a hurry. Parties here are still celebrated with much gusto and without any consideration for to-morrow - why not simply add another day partying! Of course, siopon 'flows' liberally during any celebration and everybody is heartily invited to join.

The Tambunan sports complex just outside town, with its impressive grand stand, easily takes up more space than the actual town...

PLACES OF INTEREST IN TAMBUNAN

Tambunan as we know it to-day was built sometime in the 1980's and as such there is really nothing that would interest the traveller. Again, it is in the surroundings that one finds a couple of interesting historical and other sites, and of course the people are simply fantastic! If you have time the journey from KK to Tambunan with its dramatic landscapes is worth while. You travel over the Crocker Range and into the scenic valley of Tambunan with its terraced rice fields, and along the way there is the Tambunan Rafflesia Conservation Area where one has good chances to see those rare, but largest, flowers in the world. Then there is a popular picnic/recreation area at the impressive Mewah waterfall. For history buffs: it was in Tambunan where Mat Salleh had his final hideout, and where he was finally vanquished by the English. The small Mat Salleh Memorial a couple of kilometers outside town marks the spot of his fort, which was razed to the ground after his defeat. Then there is of course Trus Madi, with 2642 m Malaysia's second highest mountain. Intrepid travellers can climb the jungle clad mountain - as there is no tourism infrastructure and the mountain is located in a forest concession rather than in a national park you are not likely to spot many tourists. You are more likely to spot rare and endemic orchids, pitcher plants and birds!

Under pre-colonial rule Tambunan was not accessible by road as it is to-day, but there was a well frequented 'salt trail' linking the coast with the interior. Then, it took some three to five days to reach this place. Communication was a little improved when the British had bridle trails established, on which one could travel with a pony (or 'two men abreast'), and rest houses along the trail.

The Tambunan Dusun are expert craftsmen with bamboo, something that has survived until now. Then, virtually everything was made from bamboo: house floors, walls and roofs, drinking cups, water carriers,

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