



The Tamu

More than just a weekly market, the tamu is a social gathering, an occasion where people meet and trade foods, goods and the latest news. Sabah would not be Sabah without the tamu, and visitors to the "Land Below the Wind" should not miss out on a visit to a tamu. Probably the most known and most visited tamu in Sabah is the Kota Belud Sunday Tamu, widely advertised and promoted. Kota Belud is only some 70 kilometres from Kota Kinabalu, and virtually every tour agent in Sabah offers Sunday trips to see the colourful display of local foods and handicraft there. At the Kota Belud Tamu you can delve into the timeless atmosphere of the tamu and experience the spirit of what makes it so unique. Watch elderly Bajau women who offer their handicraft while smoking hand-rolled 'kirai' cigarettes and chatting with the busy Dusun women who sell home grown tobacco, heavily chewing on Betel nuts. Stop at some of the traditional healers and those who pretend to be, offering oils, powders and herbs for nearly every ailment; admire the hand-crafted parangs (machetes) of the Bajau; meet the seafaring Ubian and Irranun displaying their array of seafood of every description, fresh and dried; and be charmed by the Indian traders and their display of batik sarongs and blouses, next to school uniforms, cheap footwear and sun glasses, imitation watches and video games. In between you'll spot some Chinese entrepreneur selling everything from cooking pots over washing powder to exercise books for students. There is virtually nothing you could not get on the tamu in Sabah: Indian herbs, plastic buckets, handcrafted traditional baskets and mats, yeast and earth-ware jars for rice wine, clothes hangers, cassettes with the latest international pop hits or Dusun songs, beaded souvenirs and bamboo instruments, you name it! And of course the people! Of every creed and race, the tamu in Sabah is a gathering place for its people!

The Tamu Besar in Kota Belud is held yearly in addition to the weekly Sunday market, an especially grand occasion and you will be spoilt with cultural displays that are otherwise a rarity: Bajau horsemen in traditional gear, their horses clad in equally resplendent costumes, showing off their spirited skills; wedding displays that depict the long and exuberantly colourful traditional heritage of the Bajau community in Kota Belud; mesmerizing dances by local troupes in resplendent traditional costumes and much more.

The tamu goes a long way back in history, long before there were shopping malls and supermarkets. It seems that it has always been a trading occasion for the locals, and a tamu near the sea provided an exchange ground for produce from the interior, collected, hunted or cultivated by the Kadazandusun people, with products from the sea, produced by the seafaring Ubian, Irranun and other tribes. To this day, the tamu ground remains a favourite shopping venue for most Sabahans, an early morning visit to a tamu will prove this easily. One of the charms of a local tamu is its timeless feel to it. Not much has changed from the olden day tamu to the contemporary one except that certain offers have changed. Now as then, you will find fresh vegetables and local herbs, traditional medicine, tobacco and parangs, steaming hot cakes and other local delicatessen (such as sago-grubs botot and fresh water eels hindung...), dried fish and fresh seafood, meat and fruit pickles, cooking pots and farm tools. Salt, which was mostly produced by the Ubian in the olden days and sold in rocks, has been replaced by fine grain salt traded by Chinese, and the home spun, intricately woven cloths of the Irranun have been replaced by cheaper, printed fabrics Indian traders peddle. Dive into this colourful mix of people and merchandise, take your time just as the locals do: squat down to chat with the vendor of yeast for rice wine, and find out when and where there is a next wedding; describe your ailments to a herb-selling man behind his collection of roots, herbs, oils and other medicine and bargain for a concoction full of an age-old jungle wisdom; negotiate the prices for colourful sarongs and stop to listen to the mesmerizing sounds of the gongs that are hand-wrought and sold by the Rungus.

The tamu was regulated (and presumably taxed...) by the British, who recognised the importance of this special gathering. Proclamations and announcements were made during the tamu which each village held at a particular day of the week, or of the month. It was, and is, a most effective tool for distributing news to the distant interior, and to receiving reports from those far outposts. I have many friends, young and old, who only come to town once every month. Their village is a two-day march from the next main road with bus connection, and I have been invited to many a wedding to remote areas, a cultural insight that I otherwise would have missed were it not for the tamu. The people from those inaccessible interior areas are still mostly self-sufficient rice farmers, and plant tobacco which they sell on the market. Some are expert in traditional herbal lore and collect tongkat ali (Sabah's 'natural Viagra') and other miraculous herbs which they take to the market. When they go back to their village they bring with them salt, coffee and sugar, and other commodities such as tooth-paste and soap to complement their otherwise traditional and simple life-style.

While the Sunday tamu of Kota Belud and the Sunday tamu of Kota Kinabalu at Gaya Street have long been the attention of visitors to Sabah there are still some weekly markets virtually untouched by mainstream tourists. Such insider tips are the effervescent Thursday/Friday tamu of Donggongon, just outside Kota Kinabalu; the simple but charming Sunday tamu of Kota Marudu and Tuaran; and the grand tamu in Ranau, held every first day of each month – they also have a Sunday tamu, but the monthly tamu is by far more exuberant and interesting. The most interesting tamu in Sabah are held on the west coast, but generally each town in Sabah has its tamu and Sandakan has a particularly cheerful Sunday tamu. At these markets you will find less souvenir handicraft, but an even more authentic feel. Mingle with the locals, take your time and let yourself be inspired by the age-old charm and timelessness of the Sabah Tamu!

By HERMAN SCHOLZ, The Flying Dusun

Sabah's weekly open air markets

WHERE TO STAY

Winner Hotel
Phone: 60 088 243222
Fax: 60 088 217345

Hotel Deleton
Phone: 60 088 252222
Fax: 60 088 267999

Best Western Kinabalu Daya Hotel
Phone: 60 088 240000
Fax: 60 088 263909

The Palace Hotel
Phone: 60 088 211911
Fax: 60 088 211600

Hotel Shangri-La
Phone: 60 088 212800
Fax: 60 088 212078

Likas Square Business Suites
Phone: 60 088 252233
Fax: 60 088 251122

Tang Dynasty Hotel
Phone: 60 088 263389 /
251155
Fax: 60 088 263989 / 265566

Beverly Hotel
Phone: 60 088 258998
Fax: 60 088 258778

Promenade Hotel
Phone: 60 088 265555
Fax: 60 088 246666 / 253980

Hyatt Regency Kinabalu
Phone: 60 088 221234
Fax: 60 088 225972

Le Meridien Kota Kinabalu
Phone: 60 088 322222
Fax: 60 088 322223

Nexus Resort Karambunai
Phone: 6 088 411222 / 411030
Fax: 6 088 411020 / 412028

Shangri-La Tanjung Aru
Resort
Phone: 60 088 225800 / 41800
/ 293306 (Reserv)
Fax: 60 088 244871 / 217155

Sutera Harbour Resort -
Magellan Sutera
Phone: 6 088 318 888
Fax: 6 088 317 777

Sutera Harbour Resort
- Pacific Sutera
Phone: 6 088 318888
Fax: 6 088 317777

Imperial International Hotel
Kota Kinabalu
Phone: 6 088 522888 / 447200
Fax: 6 088 522999 / 442300
Email: www.imperialkk.com

Imperial Boutec Hotel
Kota Kinabalu
Phone: 6 088 525969
Fax: 6 088 525968