

Sandakan Animal Sanctuaries



AFTER diving in the Sipidan area, we made the journey due north to Sandakan. This part of Malaysia has a very different feel to that of the peninsula: maybe that is to be expected from the distance involved in travelling here from Kuala Lumpur.

It gets dark and light earlier here compared to West Malaysia and this seems to be reflected in the way people organise their days. But the main difference is the frontier feel to Sabah in particular. If there is a wild, wild east, this is probably it. Faces, food and attitudes all seem to be different, but this only adds to the quality of the experience.

We quickly located a hotel slightly out of the city centre. The price was good and it helped to be placed conveniently for trips out to the Orang Utan sanctuary at Sepilok and the turtle sanctuary at the aptly named Turtle Island Park.

Our first priority was food and we headed to 'The Old Tea House' via the 1000 steps which meander their way from the town centre up to an observation point with great views out over the bay. For two people from the United Kingdom there was something almost bizarre about taking lunch in the shade with a croquet lawn by our side all just eight degrees north of the equator and with the temperature in the nineties! The old colonial building which houses the indoor seating has been beautifully restored but it was the food and the views that really impressed and we whiled away the afternoon downing cakes and planning the next two days

itineraries.

... a stroll through walkways in the dense forest to observe feeding at a couple of platforms established as sort of half-way houses for these gentle giants ...

Sepilok Orang Utan Sanctuary has been established as a rehabilitation centre for orphaned examples of the only great apes outside of Africa. Visitors are welcome at various points during the day when a short video is shown to introduce their work before a stroll through walkways in the dense forest to observe feeding at a couple of platforms established as sort of half-way houses for these gentle giants before they are re-introduced to the wild.

Before long, auburn silhouettes could be seen swinging through the branches. An assortment of gangly, all too human youngsters and adolescents proceeded to entertain the assembled people (apes being aped by apes!) before enjoying the milk and bananas that had been left out for them. There was something utterly beguiling in seeing these threatened animals at such close range. As they began their amble back into the jungle, we were treated to an amazingly close encounter by the biggest of the Orang Utans who hopped down onto the walkway and casually allowed us to follow him for twenty minutes.

We left full of admiration for the Sanctuary and their work and can only hope that they continue to be successful in ensuring that these totemic animals flourish as their fragile environ-

ment continues to be challenged. Our charismatic taxi driver, Muhammad Ali whisked us back into town and we headed out to sample some of Sabah's prodigious seafood at a local restaurant. Super-fresh prawns, Garoupa and squid all added up to a memorable feast for less than twenty Euros at a thriving restaurant by the side of the bay before retiring ready for an early start to Turtle Island Park the next day.

Turtle Island Park is unique because it is the only place in the world where both Hawksbill and Green turtles nest all year round. Very little is still known about the lives of turtles except that they can live to be one hundred years old and return to nest at the same spot that they themselves were hatched.

We departed from the jetty in Sandakan under heavy skies for the rapid and relatively smooth 45 minute journey to the island. As we approached, storm clouds were gathering and before long there was some very heavy rain. This seemed to dampen everyone's spirits too. The very brief introductory talk that we were given suggested that we might well not get to see turtles if it was raining and particularly if there was any lightning which would frighten away these gracious creatures.

Although the accommodation, restricted in numbers to help prevent too harsh an impact on the park was adequate, we were never made to feel particularly welcome and it was a rather sombre group of people who assembled after the basic evening meal to await news from a ranger that

a turtle had been spotted. Just when we had about given up hope, with jet black skies outside threatening rain and worse, the call went up that a turtle had been spotted. What a bizarre sight we must have made: forty people edging along the beach led by a solitary torch to find a huge turtle burrowed in the sand laying ping-pong sized eggs which the ranger promptly removed for safe incubation.

But for the second time in as many days, there was something intensely moving about the experience of seeing endangered animals in their natural habitat. With awe, we silently watched, trying our best to take viewable pictures even though we were forbidden to use flash. Slowly the process was completed and as the turtle inched its way back towards the sea, we followed the ranger to place the eggs in the safe incubation spot before releasing some newborn hatchlings back into the sea, sobered by the thought that their survival rate would probably be only one per cent. Forty tired but elated people then made their way to bed ready for the early start back to Sandakan the next day.

As we departed for Kuala Lumpur, we pondered on the privileged spectacles that we had witnessed and were glad that we had visited this special part of Malaysia that had not only reminded us what a unique country this was, but confirmed our growing belief that it is its inherent diversity of peoples, landscapes and cultures that had made our adventure so unforgettable.

© TourismMalaysia