



KLIAS WETLAND



by TADPOLE



Today Klias is one of the hottest destinations in the west coast, as tourists do not need to fly to Sandakan to see proboscis monkey. Klias is situated about 10 KM southwest of Beaufort town, about 1.5 hours drive from Kota Kinabalu. A day trip to Klias costs about RM180 to RM220 per person.

Klias is the largest peat swamp forest of Sabah, located on the delta of the Padas and Bukau rivers. At first glance, it does not look like an impressive attraction. Unlike a lively and flowing river, what you will see is a stalled brackish river with unpleasant smell. However, 10 out of 10 tourists gave a thumb-up after the trip.

RIVER SAFARI

After a light refreshment, we started our afternoon river cruise around 4:30pm. We immediately knew that this trip would promise an awesome adventure when we saw monitor lizard, otter, kingfisher, brahmny kites, hornbills and herons in the first hour of the journey. Many trees along the Klias River have buttresses and stilt roots to support themselves in the soft peat, as well as hoop roots and knee roots to breath. The dominant trees here are mangrove and Dungun, a riverside tall tree with coppery foliage. The vegetation of Klias is a mix of peat forests, mangroves, nipah swamps, freshwater swamp forests, open marshes, heath forest and dryland forests, one of the most outstanding examples of peat swamp forest in Borneo.

When sunset approached, it was time for the real show to began. Primates moved to the trees next to the river to call it a day. After 6 PM, long-tailed macaques and silver-leaf monkeys showed up. We could get quite close to macaques, as they did not seem to bother with human presence.

However, proboscis monkeys were very elusive. They scampered into the deeper part of the jungle even before our boat came close enough for better view. They were really agile and acrobatic jumpers. They could hop from one tree to another over a big gap. No problem even if they fall into the river, because they are also good swimmers. A group of proboscis monkeys usually gather in a group of five or more. The leader of the group also known as the alpha male usually sit on highest spot. With such a pendulous nose and protruding belly, you would not mistake it for something else. They blend into the environment so well that I always needed a while to spot where they were. Now everyone was happy.

We saw a few more groups and luckily our boat did not capsize when all overexcited tourists rushed to one side of the vessel to watch the superstar of Borneo. Proboscis monkeys live in riverine forests such as mangrove and peat swamp of Borneo, and they are not found in Peninsular Malaysia. They eat primarily young mangrove leaves (which is toxic to other animals), and

they have developed highly complex sacculated stomachs with specialised bacteria to digest this diet. The best time to see them are in the late afternoon and in the early morning.

SUMMER XMAS TREE!

We were back to shore after 6:30pm, and dinner was served shortly. While eating, I saw a striped tree skink, which is native to Borneo. When the sky was totally dark, we started our river cruise around 7:30pm. This blackwater swamp forest is a dead world at night. It was a bit creepy to cruise on black water in the darkness. The guide used spot light to scan for red eyes of crocodile. Crocodiles might be around but we did not see any.

Very soon we saw twinkling stars, not... not on the ground, but on a tree! The guide turned off the light and we saw fireflies. "kelip-kelip", firefly flashes on a big tree. The fireflies in Klias is pteroptyx tener. They signaled for mates through their synchronized flashing. Everyone was quiet and amazed at this natural wonder. Such phenomena starts at 6:30pm and continues through the night until dawn. The best time to observe fireflies is on moonless nights between 8pm to 11pm. The male fireflies flash and attract more females to form larger groups.

However, firefly is very vulnerable to changes in its environment. Land clearing for plantation and housing along the river bank can destroy their habitat, as female fireflies lay their eggs in moist soil about 5M to 30M from river edge, where they spend 4 to 7 months, before morphing into adult. The use of pesticide in plantation can kill the fireflies. Artificial lights drives fireflies away since the light will disturb their flashing signal. For example, due to farming and light pollution, the population of fireflies in the river of Kuala Selangor (a world famous firefly site) has declined. The population of fireflies decreased drastically, leaving disappointed tourists and lamenting tour operators. We should learn a lesson from them.

PEAT SWAMP: a forgotten ecosystem

Many know corals and mangrove are the nurseries of our valuable seafood, but relatively less environmentalists talk about peat swamp, so is it a wasteland? I researched and the facts stunned me.

What is Peat Swamp Forest?

