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Kinabatangan *Cruising the*

By Melissa Leong

In the still of the night, the swampy jungle feels almost alive. The green canopies of the day transform into lifeless shadows looming above our heads, enveloping our tiny boat as we chug along the Kinabatangan river. Nobody makes a sound and our eyes dart left and right for signs of night life. A rustle in the bush and an unidentifiable squawk make us jump ever so slightly. And suddenly, two glowing eyes peer from behind the foliage and quickly disappear...

Forget National Geographic. I spent a weekend in the thick of Sabah's wildlife hotspot, the riverbanks of the Kinabatangan. The second longest river in Malaysia, Kinabatangan is a nature enthusiasts' dream. It is probably one of the few remaining places in the world where man can venture into the natural habitats of some of the most elusive wildlife and catch a personal glimpse of creatures great and small. My journey began in Kampung Abai, a quaint community just an hour and a half by speedboat from the Sandakan jetty. Our humble abode for the first day would be the Abai Jungle Lodge – and a jungle lodge it was. Surrounded by the forest, we were visited by macaques in the evening and were told that some fortunate guests had even come across a clouded leopard during their nature walk (guests can stroll along the boardwalk built behind the lodge that runs into the jungle and back to the lodge area. Great for spotting wildlife). My first question was straight to the point,

"Can we see elephants?" Perhaps, came the reply of our guide, Junior. In the evening, we hopped into a boat and began our night cruise. Junior said that during the night cruise, there was a good chance we would spot nocturnal friends. "But be reminded that these wildlife cruise outings do not guarantee a sighting – It really depends on your luck," he pointed out. "No elephants I suppose?" I asked. Probably tomorrow, he said. We crossed our fingers. We managed to catch a glimpse of several Kingfisher birds, asleep on tiny branches and at some point, a crocodile made a brief appearance but disappeared faster than you can say, "Crikey, she's a beauty!" It was a rather quiet night but we still had two days to go. And I had yet to see my elephant.

The next day, my friends and I were off to take part in a tree-planting project organized by S.I Tours, our handler for the trip. The company embarked on an interesting project whereby the villagers of Abai monitor a tree-planting activity. Each visitor to the lodge contributes RM1.00 to plant a tree in their name and in return, the villagers receive RM10.00 for each tree planted. Amy Chin, Director of S.I Tours, explained that this was their way of giving back to the community and to have the local people involved in tourism development. "The villagers have been extremely co-operative and over the years, they have developed an appreciation for the tourism industry and how important it is to have