

By Edward I. Placidi

MAHAKAM RIVER, BORNEO, Indonesia — The muddy river lapped at the jungle's edge in the steamy afternoon, while two black monkeys in a tall tree impassively watched us churn past. Suddenly, the water off our bow was teeming with a herd of huge brown beasts, and I spun the helm violently. I heard a heavy thud against the hull, then another. We veered sharply. And pulled away from the danger.

We were chugging into tribal hinterlands, up the mighty Mahakam that drains the wilds of eastern Borneo, where you'd expect death to be lurking at every bend in the river. Our *kapal*, however, rather than a counterpart to the African Queen, was specially outfitted for touring Borneo's interior. The herd



A typical village house built on stilts with a floating platform.

of beasts we sailed upon was a jam of driftwood and logs, courtesy of busy logging companies. And so concerned with the life-threatening dangers were the captain and crew that they let a novice take the helm while they played cards.

In today's Borneo, headhunters and malaria are no longer threats, the crocodiles that infested the rivers have been decimated for their skins, and oil, gas, timber and coal are major industries. It's not entirely the remote, savage place of legend and myth any longer. But it's still indomitable Borneo — with its rugged, daunting nature, primitive tribal peoples known collectively as Dayaks, and thriving river cultures — and it can be experienced, in relative comfort, on a slow-boat adventure.

See **JUNGLE** on 4-T

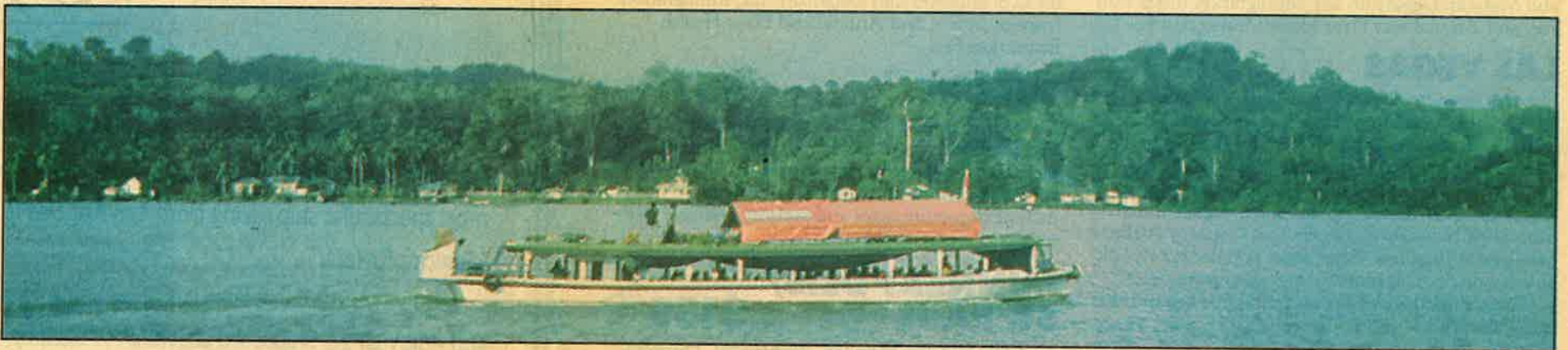
Women no longer stretch their earlobes with heavy earrings, blacken teeth or tattoo forearms.



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A boat ride to adventure

Dorneo: At jungle's edge



A typical *kapal* that carries people and cargo up and down the rivers of Borneo.

Photos by Edward Placidi

River gives glimpse of best of Borneo

JUNGLE from 1-T

Our *kapal* was typical of the river boats that carry people and cargo on Borneo's waterways. But that's where the similarity ended. Rather than rough-edged and gritty, our 75-foot-long craft was cheerfully painted in sea green and navy blue, festively festooned with flags, and kept white-glove clean. The one long, covered, open-air deck was our dining room (at a rattan table), bedroom (mattresses were rolled out and fitted with clean sheets) and viewing platform. We shared one shower and what was probably the only western-style toilet in the region.

The Mahakam is the lifeline of a thriving river culture, of an evolving Borneo of today. Beyond the banks of the main river is the receding Borneo of the past. And engulfing them both is the tropical rain forest. We would see it all.

There was only a scattering of villages along the Mahakam, but each seemed immense. Everyone has riverfront property, because a private floating platform — serving as boat dock, toilet, bath and water supply — is indispensable.

This is the evolving Kalimantan,

where settlers find new lives as fishermen and slash-and-burn farmers who imbue the air with the smell of burning jungle vegetation. There is an unexpected bustle around the villages, of *ketintings* or motorized canoes serving as water taxis, flat-bottomed *sampans* zipping by balancing stacks of lobster traps and *kapals* loading and unloading people and supplies.

The *kapal* was our base and transportation on the main river, but to navigate tributaries, marshes and lakes, in visiting the lands of the indigenous Dayak people, we boarded motorized sampans. Their flat bottoms, and propellers on long poles that operate barely submerged, allowed us to survive the floating debris and glide across tangles of vegetation.

We saw dolphins, monkeys, small herds of water buffalo, and many land and sea birds. But the more exotic beasts of Borneo — lethal anaconda, flying foxes, orangutan (Borneo is one of two places where they live in the wild) — would elude us.

We crossed Lake Jempang to the village of Tanjung Isuy and we walked a few minutes to the *la-*

min, a traditional Dayak communal house, our lodging for the night.

The *lamin* is going the way of all Dayak traditions as these once fierce forest tribal people increasingly join the mainstream. Most wear Western clothing or typical Indonesian wrap-arounds. Women customarily stretched their earlobes with heavy earrings, but the "long ears" we saw were all old. It's no longer seen as a beauty enhancer. The practices of blackening teeth and tattooing forearms are dying out as well. And — in a change reassuring to visitors — these former headhunters now use coconuts in rituals that called for human heads.

After a dinner of river prawns and rice, and a raucous gin rummy game with our guides and the local policeman, we slept on thin mattresses on the floor of our rooms, listening to the night explode in continuous thundering rain that drove the temperature down to a surprisingly cool 60 degrees.

Edward Placidi is a freelance travel writer and photographer from Van Nuys, Calif.

IF YOU GO

■ **Getting there:** Garuda Airlines (800) 342-7832 offers the only direct service from the U.S. with four Los Angeles-Jakarta flights a week from \$1,236. Garuda flies Jakarta-Balikpapan, the jump-off spot for Mahakam River trips, four times daily for about \$260.

■ **Cost:** Trips run four and five nights and start at about \$600 per person. Tour operators offering the trip include: Vayatours, (213) 487-1433; Garuda Orient Holidays, (213) 389-4600; Pacific Discoveries, (213) 383-2888; and Orient Pacific Express, (213) 480-7622. Contact them direct or your travel agent.

■ **When to go:** The wet season, notably December through February, is recommended because the river is high.

■ **Health:** Malaria is confined to isolated areas in the hinterland. However, you may want to take malaria pills. In any case, bring insect repellent and sun block.

■ **Information:** Indonesia Tourist Promotion Office for North America, 3457 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles, Calif. 90010. (213) 387-2078.