

A slow boat to a kinder and gentler

B·O·R·N·E·O



Fearsome totems and facade carvings outside village longhouses, above, are designed to scare away evil spirits.

Private floating platforms at typical villages, right, serve residents as boat dock, bath house and source of water supply.





One long, covered, open-air deck, above, serves as dining room, bedroom and viewing platform aboard a kapal plying the Mahakam River.

A native woman, left, in the village of Mancong dons traditional clothing.

Children, far left, perform in a festival of dance and music put on for visitors to a longhouse in Mancong.

Adventure comes with comfort along Mahakam River

Story and photos
by Edward I. Placidi

ON THE MAHAKAM RIVER, Borneo — 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 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 the 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 today it can be experienced, in relative comfort, on a slow-boat adventure.

Our kapal, looking much like an African Queen, 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 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 today's evolving Borneo. Beyond its banks lies the receding Borneo of the past. And engulfing them both is the tropical rain forest with its orchids and wildlife. We would see it all.

With 280,100 square miles, Borneo is the world's third largest island. Its mountainous terrain is dissected by the equator, largely clad in dense forest and drained by several major rivers, none more important than the Mahakam. The island, however, is actually no longer known as Borneo. The northern half is shared by the Sultanate of Brunei and the Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak. The southern half is Indonesia's Kalimantan, with the Mahakam watering the province of East Kalimantan.

Indonesia has long offered incentives to entice settlers, and Indonesians have come, from Java, Sumatra and elsewhere,

fueling growth of the coastal cities and the river settlements up country.

There was only a scattering of villages along the Mahakam, but each seemed immense. Rough clapboard houses with shingled roofs, shutters for windows, and built on stilts to withstand the surging waters of the heavy rains, stretch for miles along the banks. But they go no deeper than the water's edge. 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. The villages are beehives of activity as *ketintings*, motorized canoes serving as water taxis, are joined by flat-bottomed sampans balancing stacks of lobster traps and *kapals* loading and unloading people and supplies.

As we sailed by, people were busy soaping themselves, brushing teeth or washing clothes on their platforms — but

BORNEO/E2

Volga riverboat excursion draws much enthusiasm

By Herb and Ruth Shannon

Q: I'm still skeptical of the glowing reports from several of your readers about the Russian riverboat cruise on the Volga.

I give credit to the Soviets for trying to make this capitalist venture work, but I can't believe everything went so smoothly in the first year of operation. How come so many of the people who were on that one ship this year live in the local area?

— Randolph Harrington, Santa Monica

A: Beats us. Maybe the postman knows. It seems that every time we open the mail, there is another unsolicited testimonial for the 1,000-mile, 14-day cruise from Moscow.

Since this is the second time you have written on this subject, following are a couple of those messages, which may answer most of your questions:

— We read a letter in your column from Kathy Petroczy of San Pedro about her trip on the U.S.S.R. ship MS Russ. We took the same trip on the same vessel. All her statements were true and certainly not exaggerated. The trip was fabulous.

We would like to add one

note. The ship and river were so smooth we actually had to look out the large picture window of our cabin to see if we were moving.

— Mel and Elle Scott, Atascadero

— The MV Russ was all sold out when I applied last summer, but the Russians put another riverboat into service. Ours was identical to the Russ except a little bit older and maybe a hair smaller. I can pronounce the name, but I can't spell it. One of the Russian letters looks like a backward number three.

We had a great bunch on the cruise. There was quite a large group from the Long Beach-Seal Beach area, and one woman from Reno who knew those people. There was a doctor from Santa Monica, people from Missouri and New Jersey — all over the U.S.

Our trip was from Sept. 15-28. Some of my friends took a later tour, when the weather was colder, and they didn't enjoy it as much as I did. The only other thing that might be considered a drawback for a cruise is that you don't get a

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

choice of meals.

There was absolutely no restriction on anything we did. The Intourist people on board and in the cities we visited were very helpful in interpreting and helping us meet the local people.

Also, all the city bus tours were included in the cruise cost. On most cruises, port of call tours are optional at extra cost. The only extras were the circus and the opera in Moscow.

In Moscow, we went to the Armory, in the Kremlin, where the Faberge jeweled eggs are on display. That was fascinating. I looked inside one big one. A miniature train was running around inside.

There was also an exhibit of the former royal family costumes, including the old czar's uniforms. One of the empress dresses had 3,000 opals on it.

— Frank Erickson, Long Beach

If you have a travel question, send it to Herb and Ruth Shannon in care of Don Chapman, Travel Editor, at this paper.



The Ettal Monastery, built in the 14th century, is one of Bavaria's rococo wonders. It houses a distillery which produces a liqueur rumored to have mysterious medicinal powers.

Munich is hub for Bavaria visit

Story and photo by Lora Cicalo

MUNICH, Germany — One of Munich's many advantages as a tourist destination is its proximity to other points of interest such as the Black Forest, the Bavarian Forest, Lake Constance or the Bavarian Alps.

One day trip will take you south toward the Alps to Oberammergau and the nearby monastery at Ettal, with a side trip to one of Bavaria's many castles.

The monastery at Ettal was founded in 1330 by Ludwig the Bavarian as a home for Benedictine monks as well as a group of knights and their wives. It is still a monastery and houses a school and a distillery for the famous liqueur rumored to have great medicinal powers.

The original church was nearly destroyed by fire in 1744 as it was undergoing major renovations, but was rebuilt in brilliant rococo style, with an abundance of gold and a spectacular dome that floods the ceiling paintings with light.

After leaving the hallowed walls of the monastery, head west a few miles to Schloss Linderhof for a visit to one of King Ludwig II's three castles. Although quite small by palatial standards, Linderhof displays the opulent lifestyle and zest for fine living enjoyed by Bavaria's colorful ruler (sometimes referred to as "Mad King Ludwig").

The grounds reflect the somewhat grandiose style of the castle itself — lush gardens with towering statues, a huge reflecting pond and an ornate, soaring fountain. Once inside the castle doors, one is immediately struck by the architecture and decor — described by a fellow traveler

as "baroque bombastic." Virtually every inch of every wall and ceiling seems adorned with gold, tapestry or mirrors.

Ludwig's idiosyncrasies are evident throughout the castle, but perhaps nowhere as obvious as in the dining room, which has a large table rigged to a pulley system. At mealtimes, the table would be lowered through the floor to the kitchen below and then raised fully set and laden with food, then lowered again at the end of the meal, thereby eliminating the "intrusion" of servants.

Across from the castle is a series of zigzagging stairs leading to a grand pavilion, which offers a spectacular view of the residence surrounded by mountains and formal gardens.

From Schloss Linderhof, it is just a few miles east to the village of Oberammergau. The tiny town is best known for its Passion Play, presented every 10 years. But there is a great deal more to this village.

Oberammergau has been a center for wood carving for centuries, and potters, painters and other artists have found their niche in the area as well.

The craft museum Heimatmuseum has a display showing the history and process of wood carving and an exquisite collection of pottery and creches.

Oberammergau is nothing short of a tourist mecca during the Passion Play's run, yet the true essence and charm of the village and its people shine through no matter what the season.

Lora Cicalo is a Copley News Service writer and photographer.

Borneo

few failed to stop and wave. At Muara Muntai, a village entirely on stilts with wood-plank sidewalks, we were greeted by smiles — from virtually everyone.

The *kapal* was our base and transportation on the main river, but to navigate tributaries, marshes and lakes for visits to 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 crossed Lake Jempang to the floating village of Tanjung

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.

From Tanjung Isuy, we bounced 40 minutes down a rough road of brilliant orange dirt, piled in the back of a mini pick-up with wood benches, to Mancong. As we entered the stilt village, divided by a stream lined with parked canoes, bells began to ring alerting the inhabitants to our arrival.

Within minutes, at an immense longhouse many times the size of Tanjung Isuy's, another festival of music and

Borneo was peaceful and exhilarating at the same time, from a hushed forest of black orchids to the wild white water of up-country tributaries, from the busy life on the Mahakam to the dazzling orange and pink sunsets over the dark waters.

For graciousness and friendliness toward visitors, Indonesia is perhaps unsurpassed, and it was no less true on Borneo. In fact, wild and savage Borneo was a kinder, gentler experience.

Trekking through the deepest interior remains a treacherous undertaking today, but from the deck of our *kapal* we enjoyed well-prepared, tasty food

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the floating village of Tanjung Isuy, with its cruise-up provision stores and tea houses, landing to beaming children screaming "Hello, Mister!" Half the village is on terra firma and we walked a few minutes to the *lamin*, or longhouse, our lodging for the night.

The *lamin* is a traditional Dayak communal house, with a row of bedrooms along a wide common area carpeted in grass mats running the length of the ornately carved wooden building. An extended-family once called it home, but today it's a living museum. Fewer and fewer Dayak live this way anymore.

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.

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 once called for human heads.

Like all longhouses, Tanjung Isuy's was protected by fearsome totems and facade carvings that scare away evil spirits (or so believed the animist Dayaks, who in recent years have been turning to Catholicism and Islam). To enter the *lamin*, which was built on wooden piles to protect from flooding, wild animals and enemies, one climbs notched logs. Inside is found traditional simplicity: grass-mat floors, rattan walls, a hole-in-the-floor toilet and bucket of water for a shower.

It was perhaps fitting that the traditional *lamins* turned out to be Borneo's wildest places. Seemingly the entire village came to welcome and party with us.

Dozens arrived in kaleidoscopic traditional dress to perform dances accompanied by a multitude of percussion and twangy string instruments. Their guests, willing or not, were pulled into the dances, learning gracious steps one moment and being startled by the feigned attack of spear-toting warriors the next.

After a dinner of river prawns and rice, and a raucous gin rummy game with our

the size of Tanjung Isuy's, another festival of music and dance was underway — a rollicking time of smearing mud on each other's faces, splashing "waters of friendship" and shooting blowguns.

Here as at Tanjung Isuy, artisans were at work or brought their creations and spread them out for sale. The *lamins* have been preserved by the government as cultural as well as artisan centers, where you'll find everything from wood carvings and intricately beaded baskets to multi-colored, hand-loomed textiles.

the deck of our *kapal* we enjoyed well-prepared, tasty food in generous portions (from lobster with mushrooms and hearty vegetable soups to breakfasts of fried eggs, toast, jam and fresh tropical fruits); traveled undisturbed by insects (because of the moving boat); and received exceptional service and attention.

This is Borneo in the 1990s.

Edward I. Placidi is a freelance travel writer and photographer based in the San Fernando Valley.

Things to know before you go

Garuda Airlines offers four direct flights a week from Los Angeles to Jakarta with fares beginning at \$1,236. Garuda's flights from Jakarta to Balikpapan, jump-off spot for Mahakam River trips, are offered four times daily at about \$260.

Trips run four and five nights and start at about \$600 per person for the complete package including airport transfers and one night on either end of the adventure at the four-star Hotel Benakutai in Balikpapan. Los Angeles tour operators offering the trip include: Vayatours, Garuda Orient Holidays, Pacific Discoveries and Orient Pacific Express.

Dry July is the most popular time to visit, but the wet season (usually an hour or two of rain daily), notably December through February, is recommended because the river is high. Bring a poncho

regardless of season because the weather can change from hour to hour.

Although Malaria is no longer considered a problem, consult your physician about taking malaria pills as a precaution. It is also wise to bring insect repellent and a strong sun block.

The *lamins*, or longhouses, are centers for the production and sale of local artisans' works, including wood carvings; intricately beaded baskets; bead, bone and figurine necklaces; and colorful textiles, vests and wrap-around sarongs.

For further information write the Indonesia Tourist Promotion Office for North America, 3457 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles 90010 or phone (213) 387-2078.

— Edward I. Placidi

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