

DESTINATION ♦ MALAYSIA



WESTERN TARSIER

It's amazing what you'll see on Borneo's Kinabatangan River with an eagle-eyed guide or two in your boat.

PICTURE: MARGARITA STEINHARDT

WILD NIGHTS IN BORNEO

A nocturnal venture down a Malaysian river puts rare and incredible wildlife in the spotlight

MARGARITA STEINHARDT

surprise a Buffy fish owl that has just landed on a weathered tree stump rising out of the water in the middle of the river. With its massive wings outstretched, it follows us with a piercing gaze of its huge yellow eyes, that give its face a perpetually baffled expression.

The only creature that is not surprised by our appearance is the tiny and incredibly bright blue-eared kingfisher. Perched on a thin branch overhanging the river, it lifts its head towards the dark sky and pretends not to see us drifting slowly with the current right underneath it.

Overnight, we stay at Osman's homestay. It is a large wooden house with a spacious veranda lifted on stilts over the bank of the river. Above the TV, in between Islamic calligraphy art, hang photos of Osman with Sir David Attenborough.

The next afternoon we return to Menanggul and find ourselves in a completely different world. By day the river is bursting with life. Noisy hornbills fly overhead, proboscis monkeys crash through the canopy and pig-tailed macaques squabble on the river bank while keeping a watchful eye for the crocodiles.

"Jens, here is something for you," Mike calls. "There is a snake in the branches up ahead." We stare at the tree he is pointing at, but unsurprisingly see nothing.

"No, two snakes," pitches in Osman. "No wait, four snakes!"

Jens has been dying to see a snake ever since missing one a few days earlier, but four together seems like a bit of a stretch.

Yet as we approach the tree, we are able to make out four bright yellow collared shapes.

"Grey-tailed racers," Mike explains as we watch the snakes wake up one by one and move languidly through the branches. None of us has seen anything like this before, and in the case of Mike and Osman that says a lot.

Are we witnessing some kind of unknown reptilian behaviour?

At night, we find another rarity – an Oriental Bay owl – a bird so rare that even Mike has never seen one before. At first, we hear its call coming from the thick jungle. Mike mimics its call, tricking the bird into believing it's being challenged by another owl.

Outraged, the bird comes to investigate, eventually landing in a reasonably open spot where we can finally see it. It is tiny and looks like most other barn owls, yet by playing "hard to get" with the bird watchers it elevates itself to the top of their bucket lists.

The last encounter we have on the river is with a Western tarsier.

A distant relative of all the other primates on the river, this animal is so strange, you would think it is made out of spare parts. Its enormous eyes take up most of its face. In fact, each of its eyeballs is as big as its entire brain.

Its fingers are so long that some reach the length of its entire upper arm. It is a little gremlin out of children's fairytales, impossibly cute, and the big-eyed face stays in my mind long after we leave the river bank.

On my last morning at Osman's, I discover yet another face of Kinabatangan when I find the river shrouded in thick morning mist.

It is an eerie scene of vague shadows concealed by the ghostly white haze – a haunting farewell from the river.

The moonless tropical night is perfectly still, as we cruise along Borneo's Kinabatangan River in search of nocturnal wildlife. Our spotlight beam dances across the curtain of the ghostly dark forest on the river bank.

The only sounds that break the silence are the rhythmic puffing of the boat engine and the occasional squeaks of flying foxes gorging themselves on fruit high up in the dark canopy.

With me in the boat are Jo from the UK and Jens from Sweden, as well as our two guides: Mike, who is guiding us for our entire two weeks in Borneo, and Osman, our host on the river for the next two nights. Both of them, we come to believe, have superhuman vision when it comes to finding wildlife.

Soon Osman spots something on the bank and the mood in the boat changes dramatically. Now five pairs of eyes are glued to the centre of the spotlight beam.

Mike sees the animal immediately. "It's a Philippine slow loris. Very low in the tree," he whispers excitedly pointing out the location.

We see it too now. What was just a pair of bright dots at first (loris's eyes reflecting in the spotlight beam), now transform into the cutest face imaginable.

Looking down at us with its cartoonishly large eyes, the loris appears as surprised to see us as we are to see it. We stare at each other in mute amazement.

Of all the wildlife-watching hot spots in Borneo, lower Kinabatangan River in the Malaysian state of Sabah is where you are most likely to experience wildlife up close.

Sadly, the reason for this abundance is that the wildlife has nowhere else to go.

Pushed by the encroaching oil palm plantations, the animals are trapped in the narrow stretch of forest on the river bank. If more land is cleared, we will lose this unexpected wildlife haven for good.

But for now, the loris is safe.

We leave the loris to its nightly exploits and

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TOURING
Adventure Alternative Borneo offers tours starting from \$300 for two nights for river homestay to \$600 for an upscale lodge. Prices include all food and drink, accommodation and transfers from Sandakan.
adventurealternativeborneo.com

FURTHER READING
Mammals of Borneo and their ecology by Phillipps & Phillipps available through Booktopia

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The trip lived up to all my expectations - Egypt was very hot, but we managed to explore all I wanted. The game parks were the highlight though - they covered a wide variety of terrain, and we saw all the Big 5 and lots more besides!

E Kolar (July 2017)
Cairo to Zanzibar

★★★★★
We loved Petra and the Treasury especially the night tour. Magic. We loved the hot air balloon ride over the temples in Egypt. The Nile cruise was lovely. Our guide Mohamed always did his best to get us rooms with a view and he always succeeded. He made our tour special as did Arhimid in Jordan.

C Klein (March 2017)
Egypt & Jordan in Depth

★★★★★
A childhood dream fulfilled. An amazing feeling whenever thinking about the moment of standing in front of the Great Pyramids, cruising along the Nile, floating on the Dead Sea, starting at the Treasury of Petra, or camel riding through the desert sand of Wadi Rum.

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