

Colourful Malaysian wildlife easily accessible on river cruise



A rhesus monkey makes his way toward a boat, looking for lunch.

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We cruise slowly up the muddy river, straining our eyes to detect the exotic wildlife hidden in the trees. Old Eagle Eye, our Malaysian boat driver, cigarette hanging from his lips, suddenly cuts the motor of our boat and silently points upwards.

Trees rustle and we catch our first glimpse of the proboscis monkey. The large protruding nose is unmistakable. Numerous members of his harem jump from branch to branch in the dense forest.

As we approach the edge of the Lower Kinabatangan River, Old Eagle Eye points again. The tree above us has a deadly occupant: coiled on the end of a branch is a python approximately two metres in length.

Our guide tells us that reticulated pythons are excellent swimmers and are frequently seen in this area.

Wildlife is everywhere as we are deep in the jungles of Sabah in Malaysian Borneo, where the Lower Kinabatangan River is estimated to have the largest concentration of wildlife in Malaysia.

It is home to all eight species of hornbills found in Borneo, the legendary orangutan and the rare proboscis monkey. And, as we reach the shoreline, rhesus monkeys fearlessly board our boat, hoping for a free meal.

Our guide tells us that crocodiles also dwell along the 560-kilometre river. Recent studies have indicated that river crocodiles can reach a length of seven metres. I am disturbed by this information, but fortunately we are not searching for crocodiles; today we are looking for a herd of elephants.

We come to an area where the long grass has been crushed, possibly by elephants. We disembark, eager to get a glimpse of the herd, and carefully make our way through the dense brush following prominent elephant tracks. En route, our guide teaches us basic safety tips. Leeches, he tells us, hang off the ends of leaves waiting for an unsuspecting victim to pass by -- and they are everywhere, wiggling and squirming.

We continue to follow the elephant tracks for another hour, only to reach a muddy clearing. The tracks have now disappeared, the mud having been tracked through by numerous other animals, the latest of which are those of a herd of wild boar. On hearing that boars are extremely aggressive animals, we hurriedly terminate our search for elusive elephants and return to camp for dinner and to regroup for our evening hike.

Once darkness falls, our guides supply us with flashlights and miner hats as we make our way out. One of our guides sits sharpening a knife with a half-metre-long blade.

"Big knife!" I say nervously, trying to make conversation.

"Big game we have here. As you have seen, there are pythons and wild boar in the area," he responds.

I sheepishly back off. Perhaps an evening hike in the jungles of Borneo isn't the safest choice. But it's too late to back out now.

Flashlights on, we jump over roots and rocks, manoeuvring our way through the dense bush. Our guide reaches out in the air, rapidly moving his hands. As I begin to wonder what he is doing, he instructs us to shut off our flashlights, and then opens his fists.

Fireflies fill the air, adding their magical sparkle -- almost like a reflection of thousands of stars glittering above us in the Malaysian night sky.

Upon returning, I relax on the rustic balcony back at camp gazing out at Kinabatangan River. Lights flicker on the water and then disappear. I ask my guide what they are. He says they are reflections off the eyes of crocodiles. Thankfully, however, during our earlier river trip, the local crocodiles were as elusive as the elephants.

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- Wildlife Expeditions offers adventure holidays in Borneo. Learn more at www.wildlife-expeditions.com.
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