

bako magic

Dave Stamboulis gets bewitched by Bako National Park in Sarawak, Borneo



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THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT arriving at a destination by boat. Once you leave the road behind, you feel a lifetime removed from the modern world as billboards, shopping malls and satellite dishes disappear.

As our boat pulls away from Bako Bazaar – a tiny ramshackle fishing village clinging to a small estuary in Sarawak, Borneo – the houses on stilts recede and we are soon navigating the open sea. Verdant forests fringed by rocky headlands are on one side, and the cloud-covered Mount Santubong rises above the Santubong Peninsula on the other.

We land on the beach at Bako National Park and are greeted by a pig-like creature that's badly in need of a shave. Mashor,

my guide, sees my expression and laughs. "Don't worry, they are harmless. Bearded pigs. They come out of the jungle and lounge around the park canteen, hoping to steal scraps from the cafeteria staff." Consulting my guidebook I see that the bristly fellow is indeed a Bornean bearded pig, indigenous to the region.

For a nature and wildlife adventure junkie like myself, it is becoming progressively harder to find anywhere 'untouched' in South-East Asia. There are just too many people, too many demands on the environment and too many technological changes to keep the pristine spots pristine. But I'd seen some photos of Bako National Park and its quiet beaches. It also offered a

chance to trek jungles and see Borneo's pendulous-nosed proboscis monkeys in the wild – an opportunity that I thought was too good to pass up.

Once the incongruity of seeing a pig with a beard standing on a beach wears off, I discover the national park offers plenty of other distractions. A loud screeching from the trees above the path so the visitors' centre soon reveals a pair of silvery langurs, more commonly known as silverleaf monkeys. They're extremely cute and playful primates, distinguished by their spiky punk-rock hairstyles. They're also quite shy and often difficult to spot, so Mashor is delighted as he hastily struggles to pull out a pair of binoculars. He tells

me that it is easy to confuse the more common macaques with the docile silverleafs, and that there is only one way to be sure: the daily swooping attacks around the canteen tables, in bungalows and even full-scale tent raids along the

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beach are invariably made by scavenging macaques that fear nothing in their quest for food.

After a quick bite at the park canteen we set off to explore. For the intrepid

hiker, Bako has a wealth of trail options to choose from, all colour-coded walks ranging from full-day, rarely traversed bushwhacks to leisurely half-day strolls. They take in an astounding variety of terrain, from mangroves and grasslands

to dipterocarp tropical rainforest and coastal vegetation.

We spend our first morning meandering along the coastline, by mangrove swamps in the sea, which are only revealed in full

during low tide. This is also the time when the hungry proboscis monkeys descend from the jungle treetops to look for fruit.

The coastline of Bako is covered in twisted limestone formations and sea stacks: pillars formed by erosion from the wind and waves. Erosion here has also created dramatically steep cliffs and postcard-perfect bays with white sand beaches. Some of these spots can be accessed by boat, but Bako has notoriously strong ebb and flow tides that mean they are only accessible during certain times each day. Most of the best spots have to be reached the good old-fashioned way – through the jungle on foot.



Borneo, the third-largest island in the world, is home to over 15,000 plant species and more than 1,400 mammals, amphibians, birds, insects and other jungle critters. Covered by dense tropical rainforest and once run by ethnic tribes who practiced headhunting, most of the island went unexplored by Westerners until World War II. During that time, it was said that orangutans could swing across the island from tree to tree. Then, in the 1980s, the Bornean forests were razed at an unbelievable rate and fears reverberated around the world that perhaps the planet's most incredible region of biodiversity would become nothing more than a memory. Fortunately, some of this land still prospers – including in areas like Bako National Park.

For my second day of trekking, I opt for the three-hour return trip to Pandan Kecil – the most spectacular trail in Bako that doesn't require a full-blown camping expedition. Leaving the flatlands around the park headquarters behind, we set off on foot. After climbing up through the jungle to a plateau, the route meanders through scrub vegetation where we spot dozens of pitcher plants: a carnivorous plant that uses its weird elongated shape to trap insects.



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Plunging back into forest, Mashor's eagle eyes pick out a lime-green pit viper curled around a branch in the overgrowth. The snake is the only venomous creature to be found here. Its venom can paralyse the nervous system within minutes, causing intense pain, vomiting, respiratory failure and even death. Mashor tells me the sombre story of a Chinese tourist who thought that the viper was a rubber fake, planted there by park rangers to impress tourists. I don't need to ask him what happened when the guy reached out to grab it.

The trail descends and then emerges on a cliff, with sweeping views of the picturesque Pandan Kecil beach below. The bay is a perfect crescent of white sand and turquoise water. It's a welcoming sight after the steamy hike up.

After a swim we slowly trek back towards headquarters, where a cold shower, dinner and a comfortable bungalow await. A cold beer makes it a perfect end to the day. Thus far, Bako has exceeded all expectations,

yet I still yearn to see the park's top draw: those darned funny long-nosed monkeys.

Halfway through the following morning, I finally hear proboscis calls while I'm trekking in the jungle. But other than blurry glimpses of bodies flying through the dense canopy, they remain hidden from view. It isn't until Mashor and I come out of the jungle in the afternoon, out near the mangrove swamps, that I get to meet the superstars of Bako.




malaysia

Sadly, there are only about 7,000 proboscis monkeys left in the wild. Indigenous to Borneo, the monkeys are famed for their bizarre features – an enormous penis-like nose (up to seven inches long on an alpha male), and an equally enormous pot belly, which make up more than 20 per cent of the monkey's weight. The fat stomachs are due to special digestive chambers, which remove toxins accumulated from their mangrove-leaf diet. And as for the noses, they are there for one reason only: to attract a mate. In Borneo, size does matter.

The proboscis monkeys move easily, from swinging in trees in the jungle to running along the beach. They are enthusiastic swimmers; when we reach the mangrove swamps, now fully exposed at low tide, we are treated to a scene

of over a hundred monkeys. They are indeed a comical sight. Mashor tells me that they are known as 'orang belanda', which is Malay for 'dutchman', because Indonesians think their bellies and noses resemble the country's early Dutch colonisers.

The sun begins to set over the South China Sea and the mosquitoes make their presence known. Mashor and I sit in silence without speaking. Many of Bako's visitors are day-trippers, so they have long departed and we have the place to ourselves. Well, just us and a hundred-odd monkeys with enormous schnozzes.

It is a rare and privileged moment to be sitting among a group of endangered species in such a magical spot. I smile, happy to know that Borneo still offers plenty of places for adventure. 



GET PLANNING

Get There

Malaysia Airlines has daily flights to Kuala Lumpur from most major cities in Australia. Connecting flights go to Kuching in Sarawak. Return flights cost around A\$1,100. www.malaysiaairlines.com

Stay There

Bako National Park

The national park has simple fan chalets along with a basic canteen, which serves meals three times a day. Make sure you book in advance – space is limited. Camping is also an option if you can manage the humidity.

Tour There

Borneo Adventure is the major tour and travel operator in Sarawak. They are known for their excellent conservation work and sustainable tourism operations, which involve local communities. A two-day trip to Bako National Park from Kuching including transportation, overnight in Bako, meals, park fees and an English-speaking guide costs A\$140 per person. www.borneoadventure.com