

# Wild at heart

It may be one of the world’s last frontiers, but **EVIE FARRELL** discovers the Malaysian state of Sabah is also a picture-perfect paradise where amazing wildlife, wild adventures and stunning seaside resorts await families.

“Hello Sabah, it’s so good to be here,” announced nine-year-old Emmie with a smile as we flew into its capital, Kota Kinabalu. This wild Malaysian state on the island of Borneo had captured our hearts years before, and we’d longed to return. Now we were back and ready to explore.

### Welcome to the jungle

With its thick green jungle and unique wildlife, friendly locals, fresh seafood and hawker markets, and enthralling tribal traditions, the island of Sabah is renowned as an exciting family travel destination. Here, families can spot orangutans in the wild and visit rehabilitation centres to learn about wildlife conservation, spend time with communities that still live in traditional longhouses, and swim and snorkel in clear blue water off white-sand beaches. It’s safe, it’s friendly and it’s affordable.

Sabah’s jungles and rainforests, long winding rivers, cavernous caves, rolling green hills, towering mountains and verdant valleys

are all cloaked in ancient myths and were once home to tribes with specialties ranging from agriculture and rice wine-making to headhunting. It hasn’t been on the popular tourist path for long, so it remains genuine and raw, its people humble and proud to share their ‘land below the wind’ with an increasing stream of travellers.

### Capital capers

Keen to get to know more of Sabah, Emmie and I mapped out a route winding northeast

from Kota Kinabalu to the Kinabatangan River, and began our adventure.

From the capital, we took the 20-minute boat ride from **Jesselton Point Waterfront** to the islands of the **Abdul Rahman Marine Park**, where we snorkelled above corals and colourful fish before being strapped into a harness and ziplining over the crystalline water between Gaya Island and Pulau Sapi.

At the **Mari Mari Cultural Village**, we explored traditional longhouses where Sabahan tribes live under the guidance of a Chief, learning all about Sabah’s tribal history and traditions as we experienced it ourselves. Afterwards, we visited the beautiful floating **Kota Kinabalu City Mosque** before wandering down to the hawker markets to feast on fresh seafood and watch the sun set over the harbour.

“When do we get to the rafflesia, mum?” asked Emmie, impatient to see the world’s biggest flower. It didn’t take long. The next day, instead of climbing Mount Kinabalu, we explored the **Kinabalu National Park**, floating in the natural thermal pools at **Poring Hot Springs** and climbing high into the jungle canopy to walk along woven bridges connected to the tops of soaring tree trunks. Once we had descended, we spotted a huge red rafflesia under the trees, thankfully without its famous rotten-meat scent, released to attract the flies that pollinate it.

At Pekan Nabal, we tasted the sweetest pineapple grown at the foot of Mount Kinabalu and spent the night at the **Sabah Tea Resort** in Ranau with views of the mountain poking through the clouds.

More poignantly, at **Kundasang War Memorial**, we honoured the Australian, New



“Genuine and raw, Sabah’s people humble and proud to share their ‘land below the wind’”



01 A quirky proboscis monkey © Nokuro/Shutterstock.com 02 The islands of Sabah © Petr Tran/Shutterstock.com 03 Sabahan tribal life 04 Emmie meets an orangutan 05 Pygmy elephants along the Kinabatangan River 06 Exploring Sabah’s jungles 07 A giant rafflesia. Images 03–07 © Evie Farrell



Zealand and British prisoners of war who died in prison camps or on the tortuous Sandakan Death Marches during World War II. Only six of the thousands of prisoners survived, helped by local tribes after they escaped.

Wildlife wandering

After a drive through mountain and jungle, we arrived at the **Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre**. Feeding time is twice a day and semi-wild orangutans – often mothers carefully holding their clinging babies – swing down from the jungle to feeding platforms for fresh fruit. At the nursery, orphaned babies and toddlers feed on smaller platforms and play on their climbing equipment, learning valuable life skills to help them return to the jungle.

Before returning to Kota Kinabalu, we headed to Kinabatangan River for two days of wildlife-spotting river safaris. Each morning and evening, our boat would take us up and down the river, spotting wild orangutans,



pygmy elephants, proboscis monkeys, crocodiles, hornbills, silver leaf monkeys and many other unique species of extraordinary wildlife and birds.

A little luxe

We returned to Kota Kinabalu to finish our trip with a stay at **Shangri-La’s Tanjung Aru Resort & Spa** for some luxury and hours of slipping down water slides and splashing in the pool. It provided a blissful end to our Borneo journey, a combination of adventure and indulgence that taught us both so much about the environment, about Sabah and about the value of exploring as a family. ■

Sabah Report Card

- Info [sabahtourism.com](http://sabahtourism.com)
- Getting around MASwings flies domestically throughout Sabah and Sarawak. [maswings.com.my](http://maswings.com.my)
- Stay [sabahtea.com.my](http://sabahtea.com.my) [shangri-la.com](http://shangri-la.com)
- Do [marimariculturalvillage.com](http://marimariculturalvillage.com) [orangutan-appeal.org.uk](http://orangutan-appeal.org.uk)

Golden moments in Sabah

The most treasured family memories are those enshrined in perfect surroundings, where golden rays of sunshine and a feeling of timelessness offer a prevailing sense of freedom.

Create unforgettable golden moments in Sabah, Malaysian Borneo.



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