

Brunei Darussalam



The last remnants of an empire that once included all of Borneo and the southwest Philippines, Brunei is now one of the smallest countries on earth – two tiny slivers of land lodged in the northern coast of Sarawak. This tiny country is blessed with some of the largest oil fields in southeast Asia, and, perhaps not surprisingly, one of the wealthiest rulers on earth. Thanks to these underground riches, Brunei has been able to spare most of its above-ground resources, and the country boasts some of the most intact primary rainforest in all of Borneo.

Whatever else you can say about Brunei, this much is certain: it won't be what you expect. Those expecting a mini-Dubai on the shores of the South China Sea will be surprised to find that Brunei is remarkably quiet and undeveloped. Those expecting a stern Islamic theocracy will find a relaxed country and an easy-going people. Those expecting another version of Sarawak or Sabah will find that Brunei feels qualitatively different from its nearest neighbours.

For most people Brunei is merely a stopover on the overland journey between Sabah and Sarawak, or between Europe and Oceania on a Royal Brunei Airlines flight, but there is enough here to make Brunei a destination in its own right. First, there is the capital of Bandar Seri Begawan (BSB) with its soaring mosques and picturesque water-villages. Then, there is the rainforest, which is best experienced in the fine Ulu Temburong National Park. Finally, there are the oddities of the country: the Jerudong Park Playground, a surreal semideserted amusement park, and the Empire Country Club and Hotel, a US\$1 billion monument to misguided public spending.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Enjoy the mosques, museums and water villages of Brunei's peaceful capital, **Bandar Seri Begawan** (p221)
- Tear through the marshes between Bandar Seri Begawan and Bangar on one of Brunei's best **boat rides** (p227)
- Climb high above Brunei's intact primary rainforest and swim in a cool jungle river in Brunei's best park, **Ulu Temburong National Park** (p234)
- Trek past the base of giant dipterocarp trees and savour a view that extends all the way to Brunei Bay in **Peradayan Forest Reserve** (p233)
- Marvel at the **Empire Hotel** (p229), a sprawling monument to misguided spending



■ POPULATION: 379,400

■ AREA: 5765 SQ KM

HISTORY

The earliest recorded references to Brunei's presence relate to China's trading connections with 'Puni' in the 6th century, during the Tang dynasty. Prior to the region's embrace of Islam, Brunei was within the boundaries of the Sumatran Srivijaya Empire, then the Majapahit Empire of Java. By the 15th and 16th centuries, the so-called Golden Age of Sultan Bolkiaah, Brunei Darussalam had become a considerable power itself in the region, with its rule extending throughout Borneo and into the Philippines.

The Spanish and Portuguese were the first European visitors, arriving in the 16th century, but they failed to make inroads by force. In the early 19th century, the more subtle approach of the British, in the guise of Sarawak's first raja, James Brooke, spelled the end of Brunei's power. A series of 'treaties' was forced upon the sultan as Brooke consolidated his hold over the town of Kuching. In 1888 Brunei became a British protectorate and was gradually whittled away until, with a final dash of absurdity, Limbang was ceded to Sarawak in 1890, dividing the crippled sultanate into two parts.

In 1929, just as Brunei was about to be swallowed up entirely, oil was discovered, turning the tiny state into an economic power overnight. The present sultan's father, Sultan Omar Saifuddin, kept Brunei out of the Malayan confederacy, preferring that the country remain a British protectorate and the oil money remain on home soil. He's credited with laying the foundations for Brunei's solid development.

In 1962, in the lead up to amalgamation with the new state of Malaysia, the British pressured to hold elections. The opposition Ra'ayat Party, which wanted to keep Brunei independent and make the sultan a constitutional monarch within a democracy, won an overwhelming victory. When the sultan refused to allow the new government into power, an armed rebellion broke out, supported by the Indonesian government. The uprising was quickly crushed with British military backing, and the 'Abode of Peace' has been under emergency laws ever since.

Saifuddin abdicated in 1967, leaving the throne to his popular son and heir, Sultan Hassanal Bolkiaah. Early in 1984 the new ruler reluctantly led his tightly ruled country into complete independence from Britain. As a

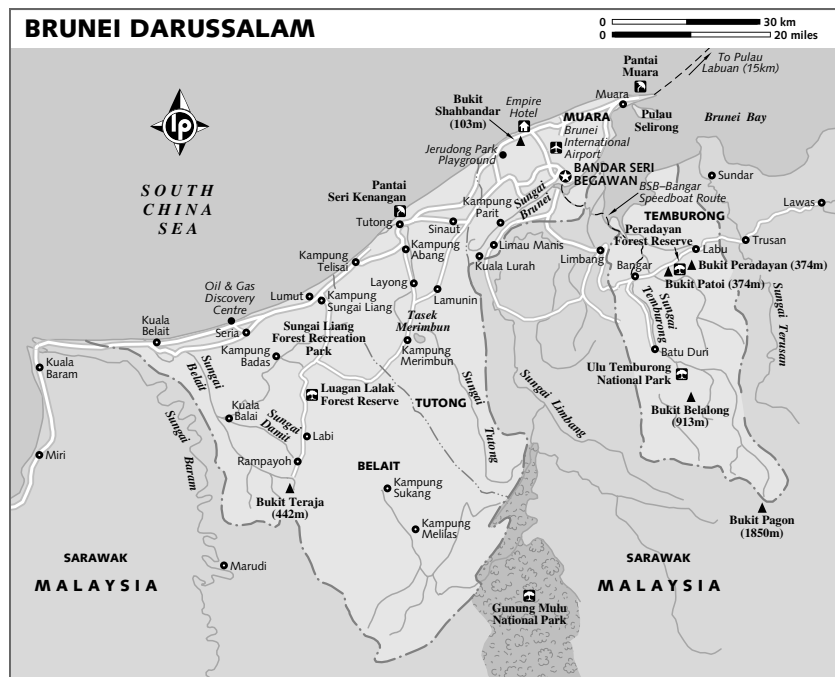
former public-school boy and graduate of Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, the sultan rather enjoyed British patronage and the country still has close ties to Britain.

After independence, Brunei veered towards Islamic fundamentalism, adopting a national ideology known as Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB). This institutionalised dogma stresses Malay culture, Islam and monarchy, and is promulgated through the ministries of education, religious affairs and information. In 1991 the sale of alcohol was banned and stricter dress codes were introduced, and in 1992 the study of MIB became compulsory in schools.

In recent years signs have begun to emerge that Brunei is not the model state it once was. The government has recognised a relatively small but growing unemployment problem, and disaffected youths have been blamed for isolated incidents of crime. The most disaffected youth of them all, the sultan's younger brother Prince Jefri, became a byword for extravagance both in his private life and, rather more seriously, in his role as finance minister. Scandals and rumours of financial corruption forced the sultan to sack Jefri in 1997, but the damage had been done, and Brunei found itself with seriously depleted financial reserves.

Perhaps as a result of these factors, the prevailing climate in Brunei today seems to be one of controlled reform as the sultan struggles to keep pace with the modern world. In 2004, the legislative council was finally restored after 20 years of 'emergency' law. So far the 29 incumbents are all royal relatives or cronies, but the constitution has been amended to allow the council to expand to 45 members in the future, with 15 of them elected by the public. In another significant step, former radical leader Muhammad Yasin Abdul Rahman, who was once jailed for his part in the 1962 rebellion, has been allowed to form a new opposition party, the National Development Party.

The mere mention of the words 'election' and 'opposition' must have brought the sultan out in a sweat, as he promptly hedged his bets by adding another clause to the constitution stating that he 'can do no wrong in either his personal or any official capacity'. Perhaps the sultan was worried that his marriage to a 27-year-old Malaysian journalist (technically his third wife – he's still married to the first,



and divorced his second in 2003) might have undermined his popularity. Either way, don't expect to see Bruneians at a polling booth any time soon.

There was a whiff of reform in November 2004 when the sultan amended the constitution to allow for the first parliamentary elections in 40 years. However, only one-third of parliamentarians will be publicly elected and the rest will still be hand-picked by the sultan, when and if the election ever happens (Bruneians are still waiting).

In 1998 the sultan's son, Crown Prince Al-Muhtadee Billah Bolkhiah, was proclaimed heir to the throne and began preparing for the role as Brunei's next ruler and 30th sultan. That preparation included the 30-year-old prince's wedding in September 2004 to 17-year-old Sarah Salleh, in a ceremony attended by thousands of guests. While Brunei may not be facing the same promise of prosperity that existed when the current sultan took the throne in 1967, it's clear that the sultan sees the crown prince's careful apprenticeship as crucial for the continuing (and absolute) rule of the monarchy.

Whatever its political waverings, Brunei's wealth still allows its citizens to enjoy an unprecedented standard of living. Literacy stands at 94%, average life expectancy is 77 years, and there are pensions for all, free medical care, free schooling, free sport and leisure centres, cheap loans, subsidies for many purchases (including cars), short working weeks, no income tax and the highest minimum wages in the region. The sultan even marked his 60th birthday in 2006 by awarding civil servants their first pay rise in 20 years. Economic diversification and new deep-sea explorations for oil aim to keep the cash rolling in, and as long as it does, the people of Brunei should stay happy with their lot.

CLIMATE

For information on the climate of Brunei, see p13 and p291.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

There are flights between Brunei and the following cities: Auckland, Bangkok, Brisbane, Darwin, Denpasar (Bali), Dubai, Frankfurt,

Hong Kong, Jakarta, Jeddah, Kuala Lumpur, London, Manila, Perth, Sharjah, Shanghai, Singapore, Surabaya and Sydney, to Bandar Seri Begawan. For details, see p227.

Boat

There are boat connections between Muara (BSB's port) and Pulau Labuan (Sabah), where you can get onward boats to Kota Kinabalu, Limbang and Lawa. There are direct speedboats between BSB and Limbang, in Sarawak's Limbang District. For details, see p227.

Road

There are road connections between Kuala Belait and Miri, in Sarawak (see p232); there are also road connections between BSB and Limbang, in Sarawak (see p227). For details on crossing between Brunei and the Limbang Division of Sarawak (and onward to KK in Sabah) see the Across Temburong By Land boxed text (p234).

GETTING AROUND

Coastal Brunei is laced with excellent roads, and these are well served by taxis and buses. As you head inland, roads peter out almost completely, with only a few paved ones and the occasional dirt track. River travel is possible on a few of the country's rivers, most notably up the Sungai Temburong in the Temburong District. There are no commercial flights around this small country. For details on getting around Brunei, see the Getting There & Away sections in this chapter and the Transport chapter (p302).

VISAS AND OVERLAND TRAVEL

If you are coming overland from Miri in Sarawak to BSB and intend to continue overland up to Sabah, or vice versa (that is, if you want to traverse Brunei in either direction), you should get a multiple-entry visa as you arrive since you'll be entering and leaving Brunei twice, due to the country's unique layout.

Also, note that travelling from Miri to BSB is fiddly, with up to five changes of transport. Several travellers guesthouses in Miri can organise direct minibuses, which cost only a little more. Unfortunately, we haven't seen comparable overland deals between BSB and Kota Kinabalu (Sabah), perhaps because the boat is so easy and fairly direct.

BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN

pop 81,500

Bandar Seri Begawan ('City of the Abdicated Sultan'; BSB) is most notable for the absence of the mayhem that is typical of most south-east Asian cities. In fact, central BSB introduces itself to the traveller as a quiet, pleasant, greenery-dotted city with a low skyline that's decorated with minarets and neat arrangements of buildings. Despite the city's rather sterile atmosphere and almost total lack of nightlife, there is something quite alluring about the city and it is well worth a day or two of lazy exploration.

To start with, you can visit the excellent Royal Regalia Museum and then wander over to the nearby Omar Ali Saifuddin Mosque. After this, you can take a bus down to the Brunei Museum and check out the fine Islamic Art Gallery contained therein. Those with more time might head out to see Jame' Asr Hassanah Bolkhiah Mosque or the Istana Nurul Iman, two of the city's better outlying attractions.

However, the real heart and soul of BSB is in its sprawling *kampung ayer* (water villages), and the best time to check them out is in the early evening when another brilliant Borneo sunset starts to set the sky on fire. As you wind your way along Sungai Brunei, you'll be treated to a most pleasing visual composition: otherworldly domed mosques rising out of rickety water villages with the teeming Borneo jungle as a backdrop.

ORIENTATION

Central BSB is a compact grid aligned roughly north-south and bounded on three sides by water: the Brunei and Kedayan Rivers on the south and west respectively, and a tidal canal on the east. Jalan Sultan runs down the middle of the city and forms its main artery. It's also home to the major banks, the post office, airline offices, coffee shops and some good restaurants, as well as the Royal Regalia Museum. The Omar Ali Saifuddin Mosque, on the western edge of the city centre, dominates the landscape. Most sights are within walking distance of, or a short bus ride from, the city centre.

Between Omar Ali Saifuddin Mosque and the riverfront are two massive buildings forming the Yayasan Sultan Haji Hassanah Bolkhiah Complex. Usually called the Yayasan Complex, this huge shopping mall leads to Jalan MacArthur, across which are waterfront