

# Sarawak



The east Malaysian state of Sarawak sprawls along the northwest coast of the island of Borneo – a vast expanse of secondary forest and oil palm that gradually gives rise to jungle-clad mountains along the border with Indonesian Kalimantan. Just the name Sarawak is enough to evoke a cascade of romantic images: white rajahs presiding over kingdoms of head-hunters and Sea Gypsies; longhouses sitting amid steamy jungle clearings; explorers venturing up nameless jungle rivers in search of undiscovered tribes.

While modern-day Sarawak is considerably more prosaic, you can still catch intriguing flashes of the old magic in various corners of the state. For starters, there's the capital city of Kuching – easily the island's most culturally rich city.

Then, there are the incredible natural attractions of Sarawak, several of which are world-class. Topping the list are Sarawak's incredible caves: the huge chambers of the Niah Caves National Park would be the state's most impressive natural highlight if they weren't overshadowed by those of Mulu National Park. Of course, Mulu is far more than just caves – it's got brilliant primary rainforest to trek through, high mountains to climb, wild geological formations to see and wild rivers to navigate. It is, without a doubt, one of the finest parks in Southeast Asia.

Then there are the rivers: the mighty Batang Rejang is rightly called the Amazon of Borneo, and a trip upriver is the quintessential Borneo experience. Similar trips are possible on Sungai Baram, and this is an interesting way to get to Mulu.

Finally, in northeast Sarawak, right up against the border with Kalimantan you'll find Borneo's very own Shangri La: the Kelabit Highlands, where you can trek through thick jungle, stopping each night in longhouses to savour traditional Kelabit hospitality.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Stroll the riverside promenade of **Kuching** (p162), Borneo's most culturally rich city
- Watch the oil palms and jungle slide by as you make your way into the very heart of Borneo along the **Batang Rejang** (p189)
- Take a Jules Verne-like adventure into the underground world of the **Niah Caves National Park** (p197)
- Climb to the Pinnacles – a forest of giant limestone arrowheads – in Borneo's best nature park, **Gunung Mulu National Park** (p205)
- Get back to the simple life in a longhouse high up in the cool **Kelabit Highlands** (p212)



■ POPULATION: 2.01 MILLION

■ AREA: 124,449 SQ KM

## HISTORY

Archaeological evidence suggests early man lived in Sarawak as long as 40,000 years ago, 30,000 years earlier than on the Malay peninsula. The Chinese started arriving around the 7th century, along with other Eastern traders, and from the 11th century Sarawak came under the control of various Indonesian factions. Many of today's indigenous tribes migrated from Kalimantan, including the Iban, who came here around the end of the 15th century and now make up around 30% of the state's population.

From the 15th until the early 19th century Sarawak was under the loose control of the sultanate of Brunei. It was only with the arrival of Sir James Brooke, the first of three so-called white raja, that it became a separate political region.

Brooke, invalidated from the British East India Company after being wounded in Burma, eschewed an easy retirement and set off on a voyage of discovery, aided by a sizable inheritance and a well-armed ship. He arrived in Sarawak in 1839, just in time to find the local viceroy under siege, providing the perfect opportunity to ingratiate himself with the ruling class. Brooke duly suppressed the rebellion, and by way of reward the sultan of Brunei installed him as raja of Sarawak in 1842.

When James Brooke died in 1868 he was succeeded by his nephew, Charles Brooke. Through a policy of divide and rule and the ruthless punishment of those who challenged his authority, Brooke junior extended his control and the borders of his kingdom during his long reign, which lasted until his death in 1917.

The third and last white raja was Charles Vyner Brooke, the second son of Charles Brooke, whose rule was rudely interrupted by the arrival of the Japanese in WWII. After the Japanese surrender in August 1945, Sarawak was placed under Australian military administration until Brooke, who had fled to Sydney, decided to cede his 'kingdom' to the British in 1946. On 1 July Sarawak officially became a British Crown colony, thus putting Britain in the curious position of acquiring a new colonial possession at a time when it was shedding others.

Cession was followed by a brief but bloody anticecessionist movement supported chiefly by Anthony Brooke, Vyner Brooke's nephew and heir apparent. About 300 government officers

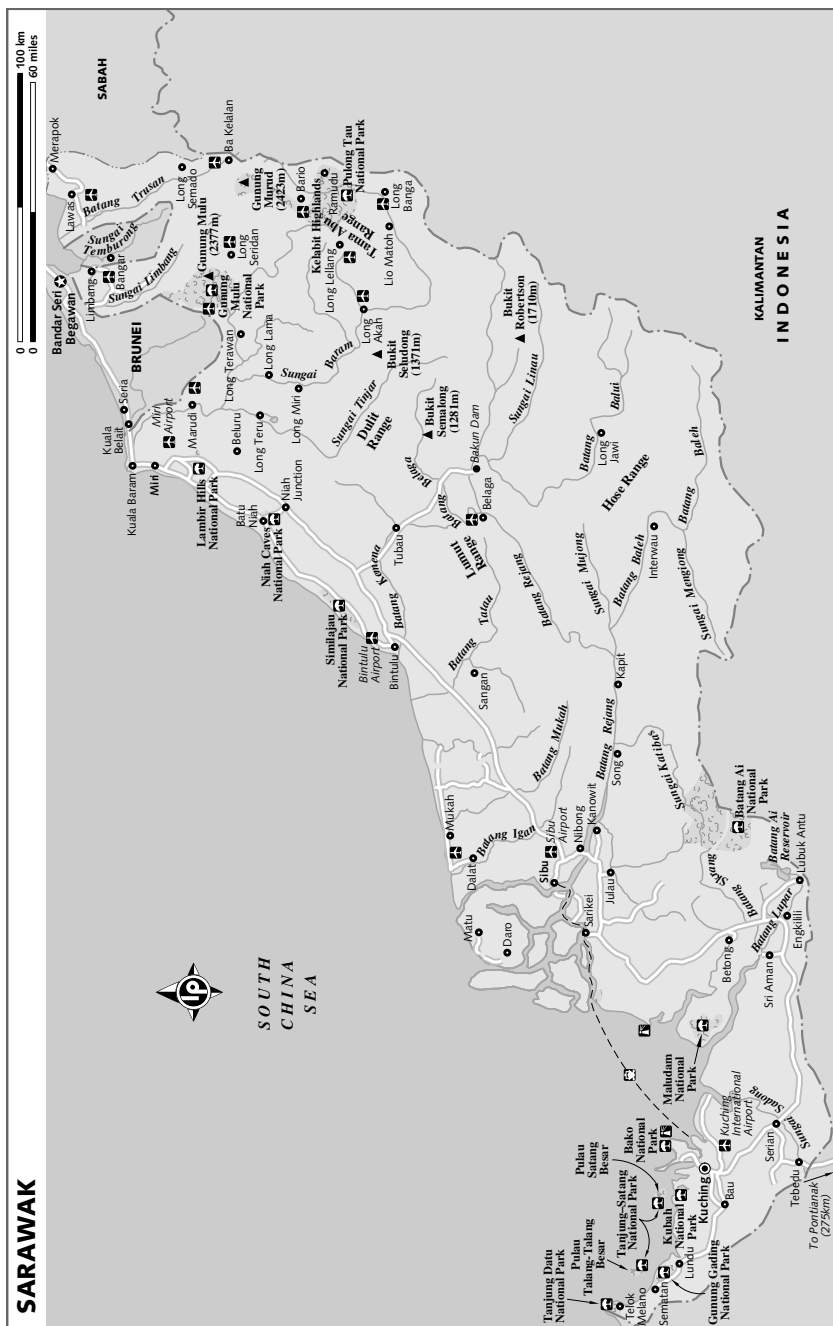
resigned in protest at being excluded from the political process, and the conflict climaxed in late 1949 when the governor of Sarawak was murdered by a Malay student. By 1951, however, the movement had lost its momentum and Brooke urged supporters to give it up.

Along with Sabah (then North Borneo) and Brunei, Sarawak remained under British control when Malaya gained its independence in 1957. In 1962 the British proposed including the Borneo territories into the Federation of Malaya. At the last minute Brunei pulled out, as the sultan (and, one suspects, Shell Oil) didn't want to see the revenue from its vast oil reserves channelled to the peninsula. At the same time, Malaya also had to convince the UN that Philippine claims to North Borneo were unfounded, as was Indonesia's argument that the formation of Malaysia was a British neocolonialist plot. The agreement was finally hammered out in July 1963, and in September of the same year the Federation of Malaysia was born.

This was also when the Indonesian Konfrontasi (Confrontation) erupted, initiated by then Indonesian president Achmed Soekarno, who hoped to destabilise the fledgling state. Paramilitary raids and army attacks across Kalimantan's border with Sarawak and Sabah continued until 1966. At the conflict's height 50,000 British, Australian and New Zealand troops were deployed in the border area, where some horrific confrontations occurred.

Internally, Sarawak also faced conflict during the early 1960s. The state's large population of impoverished Chinese peasant farmers and labourers were courted by the North Kalimantan Communist Party, which supported guerrilla activity. After the collapse of the Indonesian Communist Party in 1965, however, Indonesians and Malaysians combined forces to drive the rebels out of their bases in Sarawak.

Today Sarawak is the most multicultural state in Malaysia, with no outright ethnic majority. Economically it has avoided the pitfalls of unemployment and federal discord that plague its neighbour, Sabah, but the state budget deficit has grown steadily over the last five years and revenue still depends heavily on the much criticised timber industry. Accusations of corruption and cronyism are virtually a daily occurrence, and most people would be surprised to find out if a major



## VISAS

Sarawak is semiautonomous and treated in some ways like a separate country. If you travel from Peninsular Malaysia or Sabah into Sarawak, your passport will be checked on arrival in Sarawak and a new stay permit issued, either for 30 days or for the same period as your original Malaysia entry visa. If you are travelling directly to Sarawak, you will usually be given a 30-day entry stamp on arrival. When you leave Sarawak, your passport will be checked and a departure stamp put in your passport. When you travel from Sarawak to Peninsular Malaysia or into Sabah, you do not start a new entry period, so your 30-day (or longer) permit from Sarawak remains valid.

company didn't have some link to a government office. Despite the strongest showing for opposition parties since 1987, state elections in mid-2006 once again confirmed the ruling government amid widespread rumours of dubious tactics. Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud (now in his seventh term) has described his unchanged cabinet as 'transitional', but exactly what transitions are involved remains to be seen.

## CLIMATE

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

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Sarawak can be reached by air from Sabah, Brunei and Kalimantan (all within Borneo) and from Singapore and Peninsula Malaysia. It can be reached by road from Brunei, Sabah and Kalimantan. The Limbang Division of Sarawak can also be reached by boat from Bandar Seri Begawan (Brunei) and Pulau Labuan (Sabah).

### Air

**Malaysia Airlines** (MAS; ☎ 1-300-883-000, 03-7843-3000; www.malaysiaairlines.com) has connections between Kota Kinabalu (KK, Sabah) and Kuching, Sibul, Bintulu and Miri, as well as Gunung Mulu National National Park. They also fly between Kuala Lumpur and Kuching, Sibul, Bintulu and Miri.

**Air Asia** (☎ within Malaysia 03-8775-4000, outside Malaysia 60-3-8660-4343; www.airasia.com) has flights

between Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Johor Bahru (all in Peninsular Malaysia) and Kuching. Within Borneo, they fly between Kuching and Kota Kinabalu.

**Silk Air** (☎ in KK 265-770, in Singapore 6223-8888; www.silkair.com) has flights between Singapore and Kuching.

**Royal Brunei Airlines** (☎ in Brunei 221-2222; www.bruneiair.com) has flights between Bandar Seri Begawan (Brunei) and Kuching.

**Batavia Air** (☎ in Jakarta 386-4308, in Pontianak 721-560, in Kuching 628-166; www.batavia-air.co.id) has flights between Jakarta (Java, Indonesia) and Pontianak (Kalimantan, Indonesia) and Kuching.

For more details, see the Getting There & Away sections of the relevant destinations.

## Boat

There are speedboats between Bandar Seri Begawan and Limbang in far northern Sarawak; for details see p227. There are also speedboats between Pulau Labuan (Sabah) and Limbang and Lawas (also in far northern Sarawak); for details see p124.

## Bus

There are daily express buses between Kuching and Pontianak in Kalimantan (see p171). There are buses between Miri and Kuala Belait (Brunei), where you can get onward connections to Bandar Seri Begawan (see p232). There are bus connections between Lawas, in far northern Sarawak, and Kota Kinabalu (see p217).

## GETTING AROUND

Coastal Sarawak is traversed by a decent network of mostly paved roads, along which you can travel by bus, taxi and private car. A web of logging roads is being built at a furious rate into the interior and you can now reach destinations right up against the Kalimantan border by 4WD vehicle in some parts of the state. Malaysian Airlines flies between the major cities of the coast and also services some of the interior villages. Finally, river boats service some of the major rivers of the state, and this is one of the most interesting ways to get around. For details on getting around Sarawak, see the Getting There & Away sections above and the Transport chapter (p302).