



MICHAEL GEBICKI

ar Ubud, Bali

putting his money where his heart lies in the quest for a greener, smarter planet. The crops, the pool, the organic toiletries, the use of bamboo to create soaring roofs that recall the futurist ideas of Buckminster Fuller, and the combination of hi-tech with tradition reveal this is the work of a man on a mission.

If this is a glimpse of the future, bring it on.

Michael Gebicki was a guest of Bambu Indah.

Checklist

- Bambu Indah, Sayan, Ubud, Bali.** +62 361 977 922; bambuindah.com.
- Tariff:** From about \$200 for two, including breakfast.
- Getting there:** The hotel can arrange transport from anywhere in Bali via private taxi.
- Checking in:** Couples, families.
- Bedtime reading:** *Island of Bali* by Miguel Covarrubias.
- Wheelchair access:** None.
- Stepping out:** The surrounding village is a lovely place to absorb the sounds and sights of the real Bali; but avoid walking along busy major thoroughfares.
- Brickbats:** You might be the only guests.
- Bouquets:** The authentically Balinese food, the serenity and sense of deep cultural immersion.

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Selective Tours

Indonesia's Kalimantan is the best place to see orang-utans in their natural forest habitat

CHRIS VINEY

Think. Again.



AS our boat glides into the coffee-coloured waters of the Sekonyer River in southern Borneo, the synchronised tattoo of the diesel engine is swallowed by dense rainforest lining the banks. Our guide has just finished telling us that it's rare to see wildlife this far down the river. But then his arm suddenly shoots out to point.

"Orang-utan!" he calls. In the tangle of vegetation there's a glimpse of red; it's an adult female with a baby cradled in one arm, while the other holds the tender palm leaf she is munching. The boat slows and backs up; she watches us warily then moves away, disappearing with a shake and crash of foliage.

It's our first taste of the chance sightings and close observations of these endlessly fascinating animals that we'll experience during the next few days.

My companions aboard this vessel that locals call a *klotok* are Amber Partington, a primate keeper at Melbourne Zoo and the Victorian state representative of the Australian Orang-utan Project, and Stephen Leonard, an environmental lawyer and legal adviser to the AOP.

We are travelling to see orang-utans in the Tanjung Puting National Park in Central Kalimantan, a province of Indonesian Borneo. Orang-utans (the name means man of the forest) are Asia's only large primate and the biggest tree-dwelling creature on earth. Their range once extended across eastern Asia but they are now restricted to small areas of Borneo and Sumatra, where their rainforest habitat is being ruthlessly destroyed by logging, mining and widespread land-clearing for palm oil plantations.

Listed as critically endangered, wild populations of orang-utans could face extinction within the next two decades, so places such as Tanjung Puting National Park are essential refuges that need not only to be preserved but extended through active programs of reforestation and further protection of untouched areas of rainforest.

We cruise upriver at a stately three knots, reaching our base at Rimba Lodge after a two-hour journey. We're not expecting five-star luxury and the lodge isn't fancy, but it's perfectly comfort-

Two young orang-utans swing through trees; the apes are Asia's only large primate and critically endangered

In the swing with Borneo's red apes

able and the rustic style suits the remoteness of the location. The rooms have air conditioning, ceiling fans, mosquito nets and private facilities, and the restaurant serves good local-style food; for religious reasons, this part of Kalimantan is an alcohol-free zone so those who enjoy a glass of wine with meals need to bring supplies.

Each day we leave the lodge after breakfast and join other *klotoks* heading upriver to Camp Leakey, on a tributary of the Sekonyer. The camp was established in the 1970s by Birute Galdikas, one of the three women whose long-term research projects on primates were originally

As we walk, the orang-utans come quietly from the forest, climbing down from a slow and graceful strength that is mesmerising

mentored by the legendary archaeologist Louis Leakey. (The others were Dian Fossey, tragically murdered in 1985 while studying mountain gorillas in Rwanda, and Jane Goodall, whose groundbreaking work on chimpanzees continues through the Jane Goodall Institute.)

At Camp Leakey, Galdikas spent many years studying and working with young orang-utans orphaned by hunting, poaching or land-clearing, then releasing them back into the wild. Today, the rehabilitation work continues at the Orangutan Foundation International's care centre in the nearby city of Pangkalan Bun, but the animals are now released in areas of Kalimantan with no existing wild orang-utan populations. Meanwhile, at Camp Leakey

their heads to stay dry until the rain stops.

Well, what can you say? It's simply a moment for shaking your head in awe and wonder.

Then it's back to the river for lunch or a cold afternoon drink under the shade of the *klotok* canopy before the cruise back to Rimba Lodge. We rustle through close corridors of greenery, enjoying the cool breeze, spotting busy groups of macaques and proboscis monkeys playing and perching high in riverside trees, keeping an eye out for crocodiles sheltering next to logs in the water and watching for birds. Kingfishers flash their neon colours of electric blue and red; hornbills glide, their bizarre headgear and outstretched pinions giving them the air of pterodactyls.

After three memorable days, our *klotok* chugs back down the Sekonyer and crosses Kumai Harbour to its home port. There are still a couple of days ahead of us before we reach home, but our thoughts aren't on the next airport: they're somewhere back up along that wilderness river, where our close cousins, the wonderful red apes of Borneo, hang on to a precarious existence in their protected little island of rainforest.

Checklist

- Kalimantan** in Indonesian Borneo is the best place to see orang-utans in their natural rainforest habitat. Garuda Indonesia's Bali on any Budget Borneo Wilderness Tour includes return flights from Bali to Pangkalanbun in Kalimantan, hire of your own riverboat and crew, services of a local guide, accommodation in Jakarta and Pangkalan Bun, and three nights at Rimba Lodge in the Tanjung Puting National Park. More: balianybudget.com.au
- orangutan.org.au



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Meanwhile, at Camp Leakey

research goes on and the descendants of the first orang-utans released there are thriving in a semi-wild state in the surrounding rainforest, returning each day to feeding platforms, where rangers leave bunches of Borneo's tiny but delicious bananas.

The platforms are where visitors experience close encounters with these intriguing creatures. As we walk, the orang-utans come quietly from the forest, following us along the track towards the platform and climbing down from the trees with a slow and graceful strength that is mesmerising. They look at us steadily with intelligent eyes and expressions of curiosity; it's immediately clear orang-utans are very close to humans in many ways. After chimpanzees and gorillas, orang-utans are our closest primate relatives.

Every day we spend an unforgettable couple of hours with the animals, visiting different feeding platforms, marvelling at the orang-utans' climbing skills, seeing how their huge fingers can so nimbly peel a banana, admiring the gentle way the mothers hold and carry their babies, and even sharing the apprehension of the younger males when an adult male appears, his large size, wide cheek pads and powerful presence proclaiming his dominance of the group.

I prefer to watch the orang-utans in silence and I find the noisy commentary of some of the visitors irritating, even disrespectful of the animals. But we do observe things so amazing that it's impossible not to laugh aloud or gasp in astonishment. A very young baby reaches out to its mother's nipple and suckles; as it does, the mother softly kisses it on the forehead. There's a sudden shower of rain; the orang-utans climb high into the trees, break off leafy branches and hold them over

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