

After Hours



Alpha male Richie looks long and hard at visitors to the Semenggoh Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre.



Sunset on the Salak River.



Fishing at Talang-Talang Island.



Turtle eggs.

All creatures great and small

Turtles, orangutans and fireflies — all in a couple of days touring.

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FACTFILE

Getting there: Malaysia Airlines (www.malaysiaairlines.com) flies direct from Perth, Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane to Kuala Lumpur. From here, you can board a flight to Kuching.

Staying there: Permai Rainforest Resort (www.permainrainforest.com) is an eco resort set on the shore of the South China Sea.

More information: For details about joining the turtle conservation program, or about the Semenggoh Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre, visit www.sarawakforestry.com. For information about Salak River Cruises, visit www.masamaborneo.com

Before we actually do anything, we're introduced to the hatchlings. In the same way a German shepherd puppy has paws and forelegs seemingly out of proportion to their body, the hatchlings' flippers are huge compared with their tiny shells. And they're so fragile. Holding one around the middle — between thumb and forefinger, so as to allow the flippers free movement — the tiny turtle feels as robust as an unripe plum.

Moments later, we're treated to the first mature female sea turtle — giant, ancient and apparently rather clumsy, digging into the sand to lay her eggs. Flicking sand in a wide arc behind, she grunts and almost hisses with the effort of nesting, and then lays her eggs in a conical hole behind her.

Once she's left, it's up to one of the volunteers to stick an arm down the hole and carefully remove and count the golf ball-size eggs. Each nest can contain more than 100 eggs, and there are plenty more turtles to come in tonight, so we roll up our sleeves and ready ourselves for a long one.

Another animal in the sights of conservationists is the orangutan.

At the Semenggoh Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre, 30-something alpha male Richie stands not 5m away from me — reeking, shaggy and very intimidating. At well over 120kg, Richie can rapidly dismember a wayward human. (They say a female orangutan has the strength of about seven men; for Richie, it's closer to 15.)

He looks long and hard over his shoulder at the startled crowd he has just divided, after wandering from his feeding platform to the walkway, and heads back the way he came. Just in case I wasn't already pouring with sweat.

Once numbering more than 100,000, orangutans are in serious decline across Borneo and the Indonesian island of Sumatra, with only 30,000 remaining in the wild. This may seem a large number, but bear in mind that a female orangutan only produces one offspring about every 15 or 20 years, and she may only live to 40.

One primary way to save

these incredible animals is through education, which is where Semenggoh comes in.

Entry to the centre only costs three ringgit (\$A1) — and it is conveniently located at the edge of Sarawak's capital, Kuching. The centre hopes that public support will translate into a more concerted effort by government and industry to maintain the orangutans' habitat, currently disappearing due to forestry and development.

Only half an hour away from Kuching is the magnificent Santubong Peninsula. This spiny ridge of jungle shelters some excellent swimming beaches and wildlife-rich mangroves. Here, you can board an animal-spotting boat tour from the Permai Rainforest Resort on Damai Beach for a short cruise along the Salak River.

The keen eyes of our guide catch sight of a tree full of the long-nosed primates known as proboscis monkeys. Our skipper cuts the engine and we glide to the bank, mangrove roots poking up through the sand like thick, sparse stubble. Metres away, legions of mudskippers shuffle on-shore. Above, the more we look, the more we see; adult males, mothers with their young, cavorting adolescents.

Soon, the sun sets in earnest, rapidly turning the languid waters of the Salak into fantastic purple striations, catching our craft's wake as we continue up its mauve, magenta length.

Once in total darkness, we again pull up at the riverbank. The shrubbery ahead of us is at first uninteresting, but then it's dusted with tiny fairy lights — fireflies in their thousands are decamped on the leaves. One flies in front of my eyes and I catch it, revealing it in torchlight to be a rather ordinary looking brown insect, about the size of a Tic Tac, before it blasts off, luminescent into the night.

Our prize sighting of the evening is crocodiles. Sweeping the muddy banks in silence with two powerful spotlights, we look for the red flash of reptilian eyes. But when we see them and glide to the bank, we're treated only to a quick splash and a sinuous blur vanishing into the inky river. ●