



Slow Boat to Orangutans (Central Kalimantan)

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Orangutans live in six of Kalimantan's nine national parks, but don't let those numbers fool you. Unlike American humorist Mark Twain's quip about himself, reports of the orangutans' demise are not greatly exaggerated.



In Twain's day a century ago, Borneo had 230,000 wild orangutans. Today, there may be as few as 15,000, and even less in Sumatra. A United Nations report last year forecast 98 percent of the orangutans' rainforest habitat will be destroyed by 2022, mainly due to logging and palm oil plantations.

So to see orangutans in the jungle, move fast but take the slow boat to Tanjung

Puting National Park in Central Kalimantan. This reserve along the banks of the Sekonyer river is home to wild specimens and three orangutan rehabilitation camps.

The camps, which some purists sneer at, guarantee close encounters with Asia's only great ape. Rehabilitation camps train orphaned or ex-captive orangutans to live in the wild. In case students have trouble applying their lessons, rangers provide bananas, cassava and milk at daily feedings in the jungle. Although it's now gospel that orangutans should have little contact with humans, the rule is enforced to different degrees at each camp. The camps also are home to macaques, and feeding platforms attract scavenging wild pigs. Brilliant butterflies abound – as do mosquitoes, so apply repellent before coming ashore. Leave the repellent on the boat, though, because it's extremely toxic to orangutans.

Orangutans' round, brown eyes exude deep understanding and compassion, making it easy to believe their DNA differs from humans' by a scant 3 percent. But an orangutan and baby swinging through branch to branch using both hands and feet, each equipped with an opposable thumb, advertises just how spectacularly unique our redheaded cousins are.

In addition to orangutan camps, Tanjung Puting also features Pasalat, raising indigenous saplings for reforestation. Friends of the National Parks Foundation (www.fnfpf.org) welcomes volunteers for Pasalat, its orangutan program and community education and outreach activities around Tanjung Puting.

Unlike Kalimantan's other orangutan redoubts, Tanjung Puting is simple, even pleasant to reach. Virtually every other orangutan habitat requires

some combination of travel over execrably poor roads (even by Kalimantan standards) and lengthy jungle treks. For Tanjung Puting, fly to Pangkalan Bun, ride on a good road 30 minutes to Kumai, collecting necessary park permits en route, board a comfortable klotok and you're jungle bound without breaking a sweat or jarring a kidney.

For the uninitiated, a klotok is an eight-meter wooden boat that serves as a floating luxury campground. Details vary but all klotok feature a shaded top deck, toilet and shower facilities and a lower deck for crew. Boats sleep at least four guests, with mattresses and mosquito nets arranged on deck at bedtime. A cook and guide are recommended options.



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Travel

Either choose a klotok and crew once you arrive in Kumai, or use an agent such as Borneo Holidays (borneoholidays@plantet-save.com, (812) 500 0508) to arrange seamless transfer from airport to apes.

The klotok's inboard motor gently putt-putting along the three-and-a-half-hour journey upriver will remind classic movie buffs of *The African Queen*, starring Katharine Hepburn and Humphrey Bogart. Rounding the bends, the more literary minded may recall Joseph Conrad's Kalimantan classic *Lord Jim*.

Gliding through tropical heath and peat forests, the boat seems to attract vibrantly colored diving kingfishers and improbably top-heavy hornbills, among Tanjung Puting's 200 species of birds. You're also bound to spot Borneo's unique proboscis monkey. These potbellied light brown primates, named for their flabby, sometimes bulbous noses (and nicknamed *monyet belanda* – Dutch monkey – for that and their white facial fur) live in groups of 20 or more. As the klotok approach, troops often leap inelegantly from their perches and swim across the river, using the propeller noise as protection from hungry crocodiles.

Once docked at a camp, the walk to the feeding platforms is 15 minutes or less, suitable for anyone aged four to 84. Camps stagger feeding times, so it's possible to catch at least two sessions daily. Guides can also arrange walks within the 415,040 hectare reserve in search of wildlife and, in season, wild orchids.

After a day of game cruising, the captain will anchor for the night among the pandanus fronds, spiky-haired stick figures guarding the shoreline. After supper by candlelight – digging into chicken curry or grilled fish, you'll be glad you opted for the cook instead of being sentenced to instant noodles – sleep comes easily. Awakening just after dawn to a gibbon's whoop or orangutan's bellowing long call, you'll feel like a true orang hutan – person of the jungle – comfortable among your redheaded cousins.

+ **Muhammad Cohen**

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