

By Valerie Tamis

From the High Seas to the Jungles of Borneo

At 6:30 A.M., passengers already crowded the starboard rail as the *Sun Viking* steamed through a sun-dappled harbor. The man next to me whistled a familiar tune as he focused his camcorder on red-prowed fishing boats skimming over the sapphire water. On the pier, a dancing troupe in turquoise-and-pink sarongs swayed to the rhythmic cadence of the gamelan orchestra sitting cross-legged behind them.

"Hello, Bali," I whispered.

This was the sixth day of a Royal Caribbean cruise punctuated with fascinating forays through exotic Southeast Asia ports. After my floating fortnight, I would head to Borneo to trek in the rain forest and view wildlife on the island's northern tip. I had relished combining this seafaring indulgence with a dollop of active adventure from the moment the *Sun Viking* weighed anchor and plied through the pewter-hued channel away from Singapore.

Our itinerary seemed inspired by Vasco da Gama's logbook. After crossing the Java Sea, we'd navigate the Malacca Straits, stopping for a day in Semarang, Surabaya, Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Phuket. This day's shore excursion was on Bali, the "island of 10,000 temples" in the Indonesian archipelago. From the bus window I spotted shimmering rice paddies tended by women wearing pointy straw hats, and long-horned water buffalo hauling wooden carts.

"Bali Hai, you special island," I murmured and suddenly recognized the *South Pacific* melody the man was whistling when we docked at this lush tropical place.

Each port revealed the intricate patchwork of cultures and religions that permeate Southeast Asia. At Borobudur Temple on the outskirts of Semarang, Indonesia, I walked through a maze of 72 dome-shaped stupas, each containing a statue of a sitting Buddha, and, ironically, heard a muezzin announcing midday prayers over the loudspeaker. In Chor

Soo Kong (the Snake Temple) on the Malaysian island of Penang, I warily eyeballed green pit vipers twined around branches atop the altar. "They're lulled harmless by the incense," the guide explained. His calming words didn't prevent my own religious experience—dear God!—when a passenger's camera strap brushed against my bare leg.

In addition to taking careening pedicab rides through Penang's traffic-clogged streets and eating spicy Thai food that galvanized the tongue, shopping was a primary port activity. On Bali, I timidly bargained with an aggressive hawker touting "three dollah!" batik sarongs, but by Phuket I was a pro. "That's my final offer," I stated, turning away from an almond-eyed woman holding a lavender silk picture frame I itched to buy.

"Okay," she answered.

Yesss!

The last day at sea, I lazed on a poolside lounge reading a Borneo guidebook. Maybe it was the equatorial sun, but I was utterly unfazed by the book's numerous references to the giant intestinal

flukes and 30-foot pythons that call the third-largest island in the world their home. Besides, as a seasoned 54-year-old traveler, I was not exactly a babe in the woods.

It was 100 degrees when I walked from the airport at Kota Kinabalu, the capital of the Malaysian state of Sabah on northern Borneo, and settled into an air-conditioned Mercedes sedan. "Welcome, Ms. Tamis," the hotel chauffeur said, handing me an iced towel. Minutes later we arrived at Shangri-La's Tanjung Aru Resort. This five-star complex



DALE BERMAN





hugging the South China Sea—whose amenities included hibiscus-hemmed tennis courts, snorkeling safaris to offshore reefs, and a swimming pool nearly the size of Lake Tahoe—was my way-station before forging into the hinterland. I surveyed the welcoming fruit platter on the dresser and the James Gent of London toiletries in the marble bathroom and thought, *Ten thousand miles from home can be quite civilized.*



Since the resort had also arranged my special tour into the wilds of Borneo, I was eager to check my itinerary.

"Are you positive this is what you want?" the concierge asked. I had requested a hands-on look at the island's flora and fauna, but his raised eyebrows hinted this could be a walk on the wild side. "I think so," I said tentatively.

Two days later I was bouncing along in a Land Rover on a dirt road. We passed several houses built on stilts but nary another car or human being. Rain pelted my yellow slicker as I hopped from the van. Despite the dusklike setting, my wristwatch read 11:30. "It's a short walk to the Gomanong caves," Fernando, my guide, said.

We started along a muddy path made nearly impassable by green and yellow vines, drooping fronds, and rotting tree stumps. Every corkscrewing leafy tendril or curled root triggered reptilian images in my mind.

Suddenly, I looked down and screamed, "There's a leech on my leg!" Paralyzed, I watched Fernando calmly lean over and flick it off. After several minutes we arrived at a rushing cocoa-colored brook, and he clasped my hand tightly as we waded through waist-high water that saturated my khaki shorts.

"Inside this cave are more than a million swiftlets, who make the key ingredient in bird's nest soup," Fernando announced proudly, as I stared at a 30-foot vertical slit in the dense verdant foliage. "And look!" he exclaimed. "Four pit vipers in the trees above the entrance!"

"Uh, Fernando . . ." I sputtered.

"Do not be afraid," he interjected. "They're sleeping."

Praying they didn't get a wake-up call, I minced my way ➤ **continued on page 56**

Val trades shipboard pampering for the wonders of Borneo. Shy and nomadic, the orangutan is rarely seen. A street hawker in Bali with a bundle of batiks. The soil in Indonesia is so fertile that rice crops are harvested three times a year. Val and Fernando en route to the Rain Forest Lodge.

From the High Seas to the Jungles of Borneo

continued from pg. 37

across two flimsy bamboo poles that stretched 15 feet over black goo into the cave.

"Don't fall off or you'll sink up to your knees in guano," Fernando cautioned. Inside, my eyes adjusted to the darkness and I heard the swoosh of swiftlets circling overhead. The 2 million resident bats were, thankfully, napping.

"Keep away from the walls," Fernando advised.

I gaped at thousands of two-inch cockroaches swarming over the limestone walls and answered, "I've had enough."

Back in the car, my hands still trembled as we drove to Sukau, a village along the Kinabatangan River. We boarded a *perahu* (wooden fishing boat) to cruise to the Rain Forest Lodge, my home for three days. Resting on stilts, the simple 10-room structure features an open-air sitting area with cushioned rattan chairs. A gift shop in a corner of the office sells wildlife books and (uh-oh) "leech socks," and my 8-by-10-foot room included a private shower and toilet. This eco-conscious lodge, featuring solar-powered fans and palm-oil lamps for illumination, is situated right in the heart of the jungle.

Cacophonous screeches outside my window, along with rain pounding relentlessly on the tin roof, made for fitful sleep. I was terrified that the lodge's pet cobra ("He lives only in the garden," Fernando promised) might slither into my room, since the garden was currently under two feet of steadily rising river water ("Our worst floods in 30 years," Fernando informed me).

As I closed my eyes to sleep, I agonized over the whereabouts of the fuzzy brown spider with four-inch legs that had been creeping across my ceiling.

Morning came at last. Mist cloaked the Kinabatangan when I boarded the *perahu* for a wildlife cruise. The electric motor was barely audible, so I could hear hornbills cackling and pittas

whistling from fig trees as we glided up the muddy river. I was watching a white-bellied eagle soar overhead when Fernando yelled, "Proboscis monkeys!" We edged close to the riverbank and watched branches shake as pot-bellied, Jimmy Durante-nosed monkeys, who live only on Borneo, cavorted through the treetops. Darling critters, but their B.O. was pervasive.

Fernando surprised me by turning the boat into what appeared to be a solid wall of trees bordering the river. "This is the secret passage," he said as we entered a narrow tributary of the Kinabatangan. Low-hanging branches grazed my hair and Fernando unsheathed his machete to hack through the intrusive undergrowth. "Stay alert, because vipers nest in these trees," he warned.

My heart skipped yet another beat when a four-foot monitor lizard leapt over the prow of the boat, but Fernando was orgasmic. "This is your lucky day, Val!" he gushed. "We seldom see them!" We emerged, finally, in a serene lake fringed with mangroves. Fernando pointed up and whispered, "Look!" There, napping in a leafy nest in a gapis tree, was a male orangutan.

I'd never been farther from civilization in all my life, but seeing the "wild man of Borneo" in the flesh was worth every pulse-pounding moment. From bats to bushwhacking, I'd done it all—and also accumulated enough stories for cocktail party chatter to last till the millennium.

Cruise Line: Royal Caribbean Cruises. Auto Club members will receive a two-category upgrade on selected sailings between August 5 and September 16, 1996.

Lodging: Shangri-La Tanjung Aru Resort, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia.

Tour Operator: Borneo Eco Tour, telephone 60-88-234009.

Insider Tips: Don't trek through Borneo unless you're wearing long trousers and long-sleeved shirts; sturdy, waterproof boots or sneakers; and a visored hat. Bring spare plastic bags (to protect film, camera, and writing material) and powerful insect repellent. "Leech socks" are optional.