



# INTO THE WILD

Playful orangutans, whale sharks and Komodo dragons are never far away on this sustainable voyage of discovery

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## A sense of calm

envelops me in the humid morning heat as our three-man canoe glides through the still waters around the seemingly impenetrable forested island of Pulau Kaja. The only sound is the rhythmic wash of the river breaking against the bow, occasionally punctuated by distant birdsong. We round a bend and suddenly we're not alone, and I try to suppress an audible gasp.

The near silence is broken by an orangutan, cracking fallen branches underfoot as he walks upright into the undergrowth carrying an entire bunch of bananas as if they're a posy of flowers. Our guide reckons he weighs around 200lbs. Another cools off in the water with his arms - spanning nearly eight feet - contentedly crossed on a partially submerged log. Overhead, two more of the world's largest tree-dwelling mammals sit on a branch, oblivious to our awe-struck presence.

When I embarked on the four-day trip in Kalimantan, the Indonesian part of Borneo which comprises almost three-quarters of the island, I thought we'd be lucky to see one or two of these extraordinary creatures, which share 97% of their DNA with humans. On the first day we count 19. No prizes for guessing what subject dominates the conversation that night back onboard the eight-passenger *Rahai'i Pangun*, a rustic traditional boat converted by local craftsmen for orangutan spotting eco-tours starting in Palangka Raya, less than a two-hour flight from the main airline gateway of Jakarta.

It's operated by WOW Borneo, founded in 2008 by visionary women Gaye Thavisin and Lorna Dowson-Collins to pioneer sustainable tourism on the remote Kahayan and Rungan rivers and surrounding waterways. In turn, the social enterprise organisation works closely with the Borneo Orangutan Survival Foundation (BOS) which is committed to saving these critically endangered great apes and tackling deforestation, which threatens their future, through initiatives including community projects.

We visit one of the foundation's two 'reintroduction' programmes, the only scheme of its kind approved by the Indonesian government, to rehabilitate rescued orangutans - many hunted illegally and kept as pets - back into the wild. On canoe trips to different inland islands over ensuing days we catch close-up glimpses of more. No longer being fed, and with no human interaction, they gather food for themselves and are almost ready for release. While nothing's ever guaranteed, some visitors may spot truly wild orangutans.

### VILLAGE LIFE

On other days *Rahai'i Pangun* transports us to remote villages, many only accessible by water, where we scramble across makeshift gangways usually only used by locals and untouched by tourism. Everywhere we go our guide Arif comes too, ready to draw on his encyclopaedic knowledge to answer any questions.

We sample the curiously sweet and sour taste of honey from equally intriguing and docile stingless bees (their sting is actually too small to cause any pain). The colonies are part of an NGO project to improve the livelihoods of villages. Along the way we pass shops piled high with food and household goods, including petrol in old plastic bottles (the local gas station, according to Arif), and mobile mini-marts packed into panniers straddling motorbikes. The one selling ice cream attracts plenty of youngsters, who giggle and wave at us shyly from behind their coveted vanilla cones.

Unsurprisingly, we take hundreds of photos and a fellow traveller fills pages of her journal each day. However, there's even more to come. Recently SeaTrek Sailing Adventures partnered with WOW Borneo to offer the *Orangutans and Dragons* itinerary as an addition to its seafaring portfolio, and now it's time to go in search of the latter.

### IN SEARCH OF DRAGONS

We fly to Bali for a couple of nights before hopping on another plane to Flores island. At the harbour, we board a robust rubber dinghy and catch the first sight of our next floating home; the 24-passenger *Ombak Putih*, translating as 'white wave' in Indonesian. It's a traditional two-masted pinisi sailing vessel, launched in 1997 as a cargo ship before an extensive refit to carry passengers. ►

**Opening spread, left to right:** Glimpse orangutans on a Kalimantan sailing; explore Borneo's lush rainforests **Opposite, clockwise from top left:** Cruise guests will be immersed in remote village life; Moyo's mesmerising Mata Jitu waterfall; witness Komodo dragons on the giant lizards' eponymous island; WOW Borneo's rustic *Rahai'i Pangun* river ship carries eight adventurers

IMAGES: SEATREK SAILING ADVENTURES; MATT HALL

With its sweeping pointed prow and gleaming dark wood interiors, it has a pleasantly piratical feel about it. That night, I'm quickly rocked to sleep in my bunk bed against a backdrop of gently creaking timbers. I wake to sunlight flooding in through the porthole.

For the next week we sail around the open sea and straits surrounding Komodo National Park, within the Lesser Sunda Islands. Excitingly, the first day brings an excursion to find the namesake dragons and, like the orangutans before, we don't have to wait long.

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The island of Komodo and neighbouring islands such as Rinca are the only place on earth to see some of the world's largest lizard, with a population nearing 5,000 and measuring in at up to 10 feet in length and more than 300 pounds. The first one lumbers into view, forked tongue flicking in and out to 'smell' prey and with toxic saliva, used to inflict a deadly bite, dripping from its mouth. I'm heartened when the park guide says they only eat once or twice a month, and hope its last mealtime was recent, which thankfully seems to be the case when it takes no interest in a passing deer. At the opposite end of the scale, infant dragons mainly live in trees for the first few years of their life and we're lucky to spot one taking a few baby steps on the ground. Our guide says this is a rarity and, not for the first time, we feel both humbled and privileged to be in such an incredible and diverse wildlife environment.

While the dragons don't breathe fire, some of the conical islands do. This whole area has been shaped by volcanoes, and not all of the action occurs above ground. On snorkelling trips we sometimes see streams of bubbles created by gases from volcanic activity deep in the seabed. ►

**This page:** Onboard *Ombak Putih*, guests will sail the seas and straits surrounding the Komodo National Park, from the coastline of Flores through speckled islets, taking in spectacular views



**WHAT LIES BENEATH**

Snorkelling is a big part of the SeaTrek experience, sometimes with two outings daily. The region is in the heart of the Asia Pacific Coral Triangle, with some of the world's richest marine habitats. I'm not the most confident snorkeller, and was impressed by the care and attention to shown to me and other rookies. It didn't take long for me to be totally immersed in the kaleidoscope of fish, languid turtles and incredible corals. One day we even got the chance to play an active role in a coral conservation project, helping to plant tiny corals in areas where they would thrive.

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Rounding off the trio of big wildlife encounters was a morning snorkel in the hope of seeing whale sharks; each with a polka-dotted skin as unique as human fingerprints. With four-foot-wide mouths they sound fearsome, but they're slow-moving gentle giants. Incapable of biting or chewing, they filter feed by ingesting huge quantities of fish and plankton as they gulp in gallons of seawater. We're rewarded with the sight of two, and even the most seasoned snorkellers in the group declare it their best-ever underwater spectacle.

On the last night the crew lay on a beach barbecue beneath a star-sprinkled sky dominated by the bright Southern Cross. Back on *Ombak Putih*, I'm gently swayed into another deep and unbroken sleep. This breathtaking journey into a land of dragons and remarkable creatures has all the qualities of a dream, but when I wake up the next morning know it's all been real.

**GETTING THERE**

SeaTrek Sailing Adventures' 12-night SeaTrek with Orangutans and Dragons (Borneo and Komodo) cruise, departs on 12 dates from 8 April to 16 August 2025. Prices start from £6,100 per person, including internal flights from Borneo, airport transfers and a resort stay in Bali. International flights are extra. [seatrekballi.com](http://seatrekballi.com)

**This page:** Witness whale sharks, the gentle giants of the Pacific, during snorkelling sessions  
**Opposite, clockwise from top left:** Masted sailing vessel *Ombak Putih* started life as a cargo ship; WOW Borneo supports the Borneo Orangutan Survival Foundation; enjoy delicious, fresh informal buffet meals onboard *Rahai'i Pangun*; guests become a tight-knit crew on this small ship

IMAGES: SEATREK SAILING ADVENTURES; MATT HALL



**5 TOP CRUISE TIPS**

- 1. Pack light**, the trip is very informal and SeaTrek provides a sarong and a water bottle (both to keep), plus complimentary laundry for up to four items per day.
- 2. A rash vest** for swimming and snorkelling is recommended to avoid getting sunburn. Beach shoes are also useful.
- 3. Trainers, or walking shoes, and sandals are the only footwear you'll need.** SeaTrek prefers passengers to go barefoot on the boat to protect the wooden decking, although you can take 'indoor' shoes to wear if you prefer.
- 4. Bring a bottle of your favourite tippie.** While there is a pay-for bar, the line actively encourages guests to bring their own spirits onboard. Mixers are free.
- 5. Prepare for a digital detox.** You might pick up a phone signal in some of the more populated islands but there's no wifi on *Ombak Putih*. Being out of touch adds to the escapist adventure of this voyage.

