

Report 12
[9 August 2003]

In our last report, we left Sarawak and headed off on our own for Brunei. Brunei's full name is Nation of Brunei, Abode of Peace (Malay: Negara Brunei Darussalam). It is a sultanate located on the northern coast of the island of Borneo, bounded on the north by the South China Sea, and on all other sides by the Malaysian state of Sarawak. Dense tropical rain forest covers 84 percent of the total area of 5,765 sq km; much of it is primary growth (never logged). Petroleum and natural gas are the primary mineral resources, making it a very rich country.

The first day of the trip was long, 12-hours, but uneventful. We stopped overnight just outside a beautiful, but totally empty marina. The breakwater alone was breathtakingly huge, and incredibly well built (well, perhaps only a yachtie can appreciate a well built breakwater). We were going to anchor inside but were waved away by a soldier. We assumed that this was the Sultan's private anchorage, as another yacht had passed through and reported it to be so, and one of his palaces is nearby. It turns out that it is one of a number of failed ventures by the Sultan's brother and we probably could have anchored there overnight, had we entered later in the day and left early. In any case, we anchored just outside and spent a quiet night, sheltered by the marina wall.

On 26 June, we went into Muara and checked in with immigration and customs, one of the easiest we have encountered; we were suspicious...but thankful. Muara is a port town outside the capital city, Bandar Seri Begawan. After spending the night anchored near the Royal Brunei Yacht Club (RBYC) we went up river on the rising tide to Bandar. This was a fascinating trip. Like Malaysia, the river is lined here and there with stilt villages, called kampung air (kampung meaning village and air or ayr meaning water in Bahasa-Malayu). The earliest inhabitants of SE Asia lived in stilt villages and some of the villages can trace their origin back centuries.

Stilt villages are traditionally built of local materials, and there are still plenty of these around. First, wooden posts (now concrete) are driven into the ground, some on shore and some in the water, and then wooden houses and shops are erected over them. Equally-elevated, wooden sidewalks run helter-skelter from house to house. Water is either caught or run in from a nearby stream (see Report 4 for a brief description); nowadays they are connected to water mains. Sewage disposal is a hole in the floor to the river or tidal mud flat below, which seems to bother the environment less than our sensibilities. There is plenty of marine life, but low tide neaps can sometimes provide a pungent aroma until a higher tide cleans things up. Unfortunately, garbage disposal is often similar and many of the rivers are terribly polluted with plastic bags. We snapped a photo of one spot that was wall to wall garbage, mostly plastic. It was so dense that a cat was sunning itself atop the floating mass!

Stilt villages in Brunei are obviously more well to do, some being brand new, concrete construction with all the modern conveniences from water and sewer to phone and satellite TV. As we neared Bandar, we ran close aboard the edge of the world's largest stilt village, which occupies the entire bank opposite Bandar.

The whole river in Bandar is mayhem, mostly due to water taxis zooming around all over the river by the dozens. These are small open boats with huge outboards. We proceeded through Bandar, sightseeing, to where the water shallows near the edge of town, and then retreated about 10-miles down river to the Bandar branch of the RBYC, anchoring opposite their pontoon. The yacht club has an excellent air conditioned dining room, a snooker room, a library and so on. We had a terrific meal, including a bottle of smuggled wine (alcohol was banned in Brunei about 15 years ago) and settled in for the night.

Brunei is ruled by a sultan who is like kings used to be before they were emasculated by parliaments. He was once the richest man in the world. In any case this guy still has a few bucks, as evidenced by the jewels and other artefacts on display at the Royal Regalia building. In another display of wealth he built a beautiful theme park full of world-class rides, as a gift to the people; it must have cost hundreds of millions of dollars. While still operating, it is now nearly deserted. We rode everything that still worked and were open, except the largest roller coaster. The most awesome was the Free Fall, which took us high into the air and then dropped us to the ground. It must be like being in an elevator with a severed cable, except that on the ride, at the last possible moment, unseen technology slows the descent for a soft landing. Like most royalty, the sultan is not without skeletons in his closet. He had two wives, the first (and current) one and the second, a former airline stewardess. The latter is now imprisoned in one of the Sultan's palaces for infidelity. The man she was seeing was reportedly a very ugly Indonesian...Rasputin syndrome? She was to have her head chopped off, except that wife number one asked for clemency. He also has a brother who spends huge amounts of the royal money on questionable projects, like the unfinished marina and a 6-star hotel that is mostly under booked. He's currently out of the country in disgrace but rumour has it that he's coming back soon.

Brunei is rich in wildlife, including monkeys, birds and reptiles. At the Brunei tourist information centre, we met Jungle Dave, a local conservationist and guide. Dave is a font of knowledge about Brunei, even though he hails from a place nearby in Malaysia. Dave took us on an eco-tour of the river, upstream from Bandar. This area is protected, as is about 20-percent of the country. As such, it is closed to casual visitors, including tourists, and is therefore teeming with wildlife. A special permit is required to enter, and these are generally granted only to certified guides like Dave. We saw saltwater crocodiles, several species of egrets, lizards and monkeys. We learned that there are 39,000 proboscis monkeys in the area, the greatest number in Borneo, the only place in which they are found. If you are not familiar with these creatures, you've got to look them up in your encyclopaedia; Encarta has a photo. The Malay word for them translates as 'Dutchman', due to their striking nose and pot belly. They have the large pot belly due to the need to consume daily about twenty percent of their body weight in leaves and fruit. The adult male's large, flat and fleshy nose droops downward over the chin and probably functions to attract females. These are the largest monkey, males measuring up to about 30 inches in head and body length. We saw several bands of them on the tour, although they were far enough away to make us wish that we'd taken with us a good pair of binoculars. Until recently, the existence of these monkeys in Brunei has been kept from most of the world. Even the locals, mostly city dwellers, are not informed about them. According to Dave this secrecy is intentional, as the locals would probably hunt them to near extinction for "traditional medicine".

We stayed in Brunei for nearly two weeks, as Louise-Ann had to renew her passport. While the tourist guides generally are not high on Brunei, we were not bored; the place was worth the visit.

We left Brunei for Labuan (Sabah) on 9 July, travelling down the river back to Muara, where we discovered that our easy entry was just a fluke. We had lots of bureaucratic hurdles to leap over for our exit, including extra paperwork to atone for our earlier easy entry. Just when we figured we had it aced, the authorities realized that Louise-Ann had a new passport and required us to go back to Bandar to have it stamped. We won't bore you with the details, but it took us all afternoon to accomplish this seemingly simple task.

The trip to Labuan was uneventful, as it is only about 25 miles from Bandar. Labuan is a duty-free port, which was the reason we went there. We had planned to stop only long enough to stock up on cheap grog and then move on to Sabah. However, the city has a certain charm, despite the polluted mess that constitutes the anchorage. We entered during a rain squall and hoped to anchor in the local marina, which we heard was now disused. Well, it is not only disused; it is gone, except for the breakwater, which is closed by a boom to stop the garbage from building up in it. The last vestiges of the docks are a few pilings and broken pontoons that are piled up on the shore. The former club house is still there, operating as a hotel, which is what it really was in any case. There are, apparently, no plans to rebuild the docks, due to lack of money.

Father in, opposite the ferry terminal, we noticed a few small boats moored near a stilt village, so we anchored there. This was surprisingly comfortable, even though it is at the end of the bay where there should not be much shelter from the SW monsoon. We expected swells to bother us, but none came in. During the day, though, we were jostled about quite a bit by passing fishing boats and by water taxis similar to those in Brunei.

Stocking up in Labuan is great, as there are several decent supermarkets, a great wet market and tons of bottle shops. The selection of fish, vegetables and fruits in the wet market is awesome; although far from the biggest, it is among the best we've encountered in Malaysia. The grog is amazingly cheap. For example, a bottle of Philippine Rum costs about four U.S. bucks. Branded, hard spirits average about ten dollars a litre. Wines, mostly Australian, are on offer starting at about six dollars, and most sell for much less than the Australian domestic price.

We were invited for a tour aboard LADY DAWN, a ship used to tend off-shore oil platforms, both for anchoring, provisioning, fire fighting and rescue. There are lots of these ships around, as Borneo has lots of off shore oil. Though 20-years old, the ship is amazingly well equipped with computers and all the latest telecommunication equipment. The motor for one of its bow thrusters is more powerful than AKAMA's main engine. Its main propulsion is four CAT 3408 diesels, driving two variable pitch propellers. After the visit, two of the ship's officers took us to a local restaurant that calls itself a yacht club, which it may have been at one time. The food, all Asian, was terrific and reasonably priced.

We proceeded from Labuan to Kota Kinabalu, taking two short days to make the trip. Overnight we anchored on the secluded, eastern shore of Pulau Tiga (Third Island), where we rocked and rolled all night due to incoming swells. Pulau Tiga has a small resort on its western side, which we did not visit. Trivia buffs may want to know that this is where the first Survivor TV show was made. The next day we went to KK, taking an indirect route so as to see the islands along the way. There seems to be lots of good cruising around here.

Well, that's it for now. We intend to stay here for several months, as the weather going further north of here will not be safe until at least October.

Best to all,
Maurice & Louise-Ann

PS: We've received several emails from our readers telling us that they've passed our reports on to friends. More recently, one of our friends suggested that they be placed on a web site. While we're flattered that people find our ramblings interesting, these reports are intended to be personal letters to our friends and relatives. We would not want to see them posted on the internet or otherwise published, although passing them on to your friends, especially if they know us, is fine.

PPS: We still do not hear much from most of our friends and relatives. Please drop us an email from time to time telling us what's going on in your world.