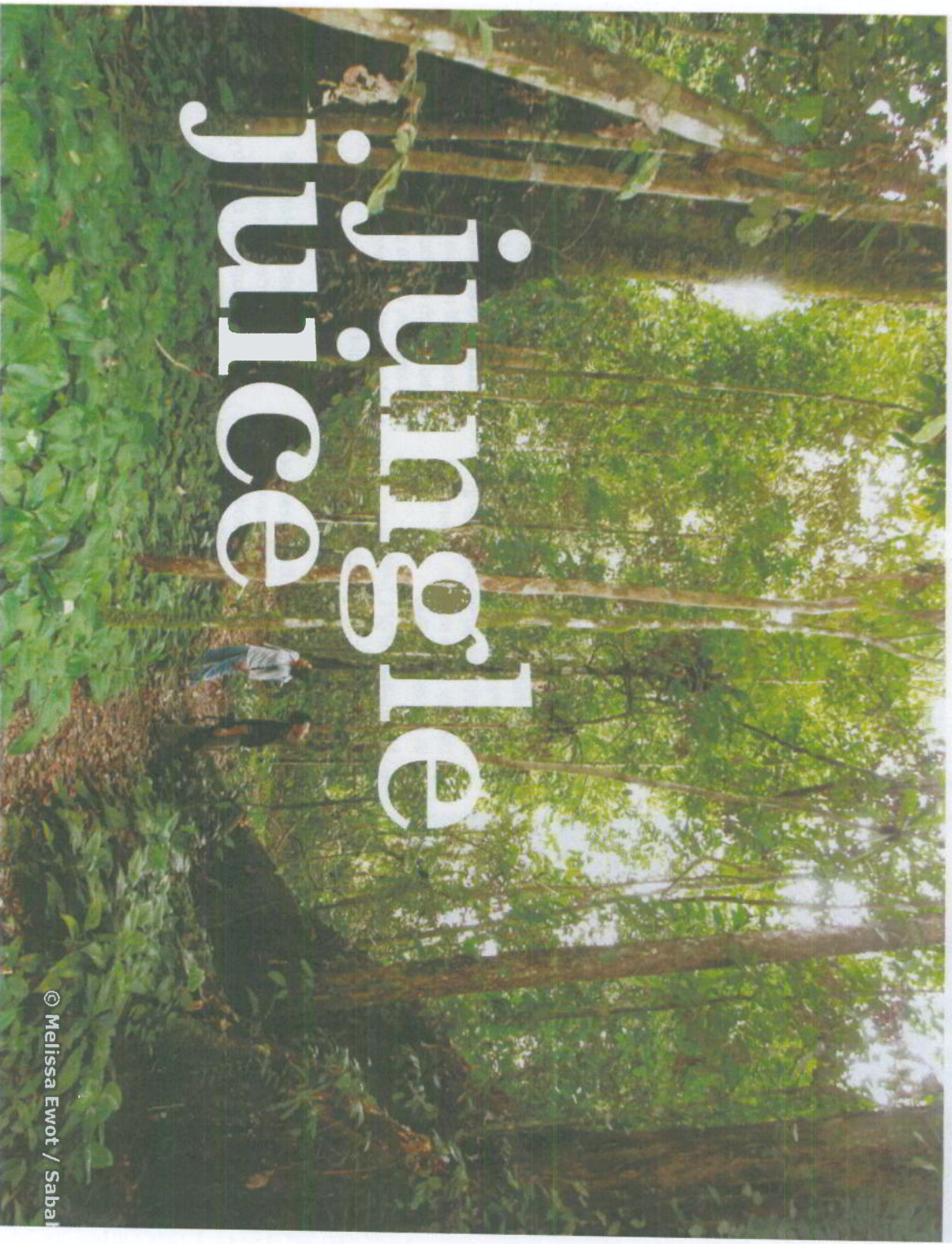


epicurean

From a tribe of water dwellers who only know land as a foreign place, to the human equivalent of the animal world, the orangutans, Borneo is a land of contrasts. Casey [REDACTED] finds her idea of a holiday turned on its head.



# juice jungle

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I'm in the deep, dark jungles of Malaysia. This is not usually my idea of a holiday. So what have I got myself into? I'm not a nature enthusiast. I do not know what a nepenthes pitcher is and wildlife and bird watching don't fill me with glee, but here I am in an ecotourism hotspot, somewhere in the deepest sanctum of northern Borneo, the world's third largest island.

The destination is Sabah and, little do I know, this place is about to turn my idea of a holiday on its head.

Sabah, known as 'The Land Below the Wind', is popular for its mix of wildlife conservation attractions, orangutans and pygmy elephants, rainforests, islands, crystal clear water and friendly locals.

My guide Sam arrives to escort me, inform me and, inevitably, become a memorable character and friend as we launch into the wild.

Gazing out of the car window to the sea I notice distant structures built in to the water. Apparently, these wooden-hut structures built on the thinnest of stilts are home to the sea gypsies, a Muslim tribe who have only ever lived on water in these huts or on boats. Having their feet on solid ground is foreign and unnerving for sea gypsies who only come to the land to bury their dead or to get supplies for their boats. In fact, coming to land leaves them hightailed.

Sam explains how the sea children, also known as 'boat people', can hold their breath for up to five minutes. They live on very little, money is just a means to get by, and, for many, fishing is a livelihood. So intimate is their relationship with the ocean, some say sea gypsies predicted the deadly 2004 tsunami and fled to the mountains well before the tsunami hit.

Our car picks up speed as Sam prepares me for my first brush with the wilds of Borneo: the man of the forest, the orangutan.

Arriving at the Sepilok Orang-utan Rehabilitation Centre I set eyes for the first time on the orang-utans. I can't help but immediately feel a bond with this endangered species. Maybe it's because I am a 'ranga' as a fellow Aussie points

out, but it's more than a shared hair colour.

Orangutans don't merely mimic human behaviour, genetically they are 96.4 per cent human-like.

She is totally absorbed with her child, oblivious to the prying eyes of tourists.

Getting up close and personal with orangutans touches one's soul and it's a little unnerving for someone whose experience with nature can be summed up in three words: Foxtal TV documentaries.

The oppressive heat and humidity is forgotten as I watch a mother orangutan nurturing her baby, cradling it in her arms just like a human mother would embrace her newborn.

The mother places her baby in the crook of her arm, staring deeply into its eyes as she carefully caresses the baby's head as it falls asleep. She is totally absorbed with her child, oblivious to the prying eyes of tourists.

But all is not as it seems as I am told of the very real threats to the orangutans' survival. The demand for palm oil from plantations is

proving to be problematic for orangutans. The development of plantations has left behind only pockets of rainforest that are unable to sustain the ape and many are orphaned and die because they are separated from their mothers.

Slowly, a change in local attitudes combined with government projects, be from charities and rehabilitation projects is saving hundreds of orangutans.

It is dusk and time to head back to my room for a rest and refresh before I launch into a new day and the wild world of the pachyderm.

Next stop is the Kinabatangan River – home to the rare pygmy elephants as well as proboscis monkeys, silver leaf monk birds, reptiles, mangrove swamps and forests. I find myself perched in a boat a few other tourists doing a bit of what locals call "jungle fishing" as we cruise down the river. Within 30 minutes the word goes out, the hush comes down a we hold our breath as we spot one of the coveted pygmy elephants grazing by the river. Nature – what a concept!

The mood in the boat lifts considerably as we float along the Kinabatangan River which runs a 560 kilometre course through some of the richest ecosystem on earth, before it meets the sea.

It's a tired and sweaty traveller that returns to the lodge after a day of jungle spotting but I am greeted with a heart welcome by smiling young Malaysian girls offering cold juice.

On one particular evening I am the on guest at the lodge and treated to a foot and dance spectacular which is normally put on for an entire crowd. I am starting to get into the swing of adventure holidays – just as am I leaving!

It's dawn on my last day in Kota Kinabalu. The sun is just coming from behind the distant mountains as the Muslim prayer echoes across the city from loud speakers.

It's been a journey and I've come to realise that you don't need a Las Vegas full of man-made tourist attractions to enter your holiday; there's a natural world discover full of stunning scenery and searching moments. My inner wilder child is unearthed, my typical view of holiday is thrown out the window and I'll be forever thankful to Sabah.

*The writer's visit in Sabah was funded by the Sabah Tourism Board. For details visit [www.sabahtourism.com](http://www.sabahtourism.com)*

*Royal Brunei Airlines flies from Australia to Kota Kinabalu. Visit [www.bruneiair.com/australia/](http://www.bruneiair.com/australia/)*

*Details of National Seniors' 2011 fully escorted wildlife tour to Borneo call 1300 883 750*

