

#21 GET UP CLOSE TO AN Orangutan

A TRIP TO SEMENGGOH NATURE RESERVE IN SARAWAK, BORNEO, OFFERS THE CHANCE TO SEE THE MISCHIEVOUS RED APES IN THEIR NATURAL HABITAT. WORDS: LAURA HOLT

Seduku is not happy. Relentlessly, she hammers at the coconut shell, smashing it onto the wooden deck. Despite her best efforts, she can't seem to crack the thick, coir-covered husk open. She's no amateur, though: the oldest of all the orangutans at Semenggoh Nature Reserve, this 45-year-old grandmother is not one to give up easily. Indeed, like all the red apes at this 1,600-acre nature reserve, near Kuching, the capital of the Malaysian state of Sarawak, Seduku has already overcome considerable adversity to be here.

Down it comes again, and wham: the glossy white milk comes spilling out.

A total of 27 semi-wild orangutans reside in the primary forest

surrounding Semenggoh, although its focus has shifted somewhat since opening in 1975. Having successfully released so many red apes into the reserve over the last 40 years, the rehabilitation programme has now transferred to Matang Wildlife Centre in the Kubah National Park, allowing Semenggoh to concentrate solely on studying the biology and behaviour of its tree-dwelling residents.

However, a key part of the centre's activities also revolves around raising awareness about the plight of the beleaguered primates, which it does through twice-daily feeding sessions.

Open to the public, these provide supplementary rather than essential sustenance for the apes, which are otherwise encouraged to forage in

the forest for themselves. Yet it's the relative scarcity of food in the jungle, combined with their solitary existence and slow reproductive cycle — which can see a span of up to eight years between offspring — that explains why orangutans are in such a predicament.

The other reason, of course, is man — responsible for the illegal pet trade, palm-oil plantations, habitat loss and hunting for meat or medicine. According to the WWF, worldwide numbers now stand at around 75,000, confined to Borneo and Sumatra, where once they roamed as far afield as South China and mainland Indonesia. But centres such as Semenggoh are seeking to redress that balance, giving orphaned or captured orangutans a sanctuary in which to roam.

Pongo the orangutan with young in Semenggoh

After watching Seduku do her worst with the coconut husk, as two of her six children and grandchildren play contentedly nearby, I move through the jungle to the main feeding station.

The sound of the rainforest intensifies as I walk, hinting at the gibbons, porcupines, crocodiles, river terrapins and birds that also call Semenggoh home. Cicadas and frogs chime in as I reach a clearing and wait for the afternoon's fruit delivery to arrive.

Semenggoh tries to keep things as natural as possible. A few overhead ropes and the feeding platforms are all that suggests the presence of man.

Then, suddenly, the ropes begins to move.

With perfect dexterity, a flash of red hair zip-wires down the line, scooping

up bananas with her hands and feet. This, I discover, is Analisa, a 19-year-old female, who swiftly retreats up to the canopy to gorge on her pickings. Like Seduku, she's a regular at feeding times, more reliant perhaps on the supplementary food than the males. This becomes especially pronounced

during the 'fruiting season', roughly from November to February, when wild food becomes abundant and sightings of the apes, females or males, can be rare.

It's time to draw the session to a close, we're told by warden Dominic, who jokes the orangutans need to find a hotel room for the night. But Seduku is refusing to bid us farewell. As her son Ganya and her grandchild Anaku gambol in the branches above, she stretches out on her back, red-tufted belly turned upward, and lets her hands thud heavily onto the deck. She may be in her twilight years, but I'm pleased to see she's not growing old gracefully.

Feeding at Semenggoh take place twice daily, from 9–10am and 3–3.30pm. ebooking.sarawak.gov.my

Where else?

DANUM

THE LOWDOWN: Danum Valley Conservation Area encompasses a 100,000-acre tract of lowland tropical forest, accessible from the nearest town, Lahad Datu, 50 miles away.

THE USP: With no human settlements nearby, Danum is a haven for Borneo's wildlife. Dorm beds and camping pitches at the Danum Valley Field Center (danumvalley.info) and chalets at Borneo Rainforest Lodge (borneonaturetours.com) are the only accommodation options, so visitor numbers are kept low. Activities include treks, night walks, river cruises and 4WD drives.

THE PROSPECTS: One of the best chances to see orangutans in the wild, as well as abundant birdlife, including hornbills, eagles and drongos, plus pygmy elephants, sun bears and red leaf monkeys. Sticky Rice Travel has good guides. stickyrice.com

KINABATANGAN

THE LOWDOWN: The Kinabatangan River weaves through the mountains of Sabah leaving a dramatic 350-mile wildlife haven in its wake. Safaris are carried out by motorised longboat, whisking you past mangrove swamps and primary forest. Stilted retreats, such as Kinabatangan Riverside Lodge, can be booked through tour operators such as Abercrombie & Kent. abercrombiekent.co.uk

THE USP: Wildlife spotting can be twinned with activities, such as a visit to the Gomantong Caves.

THE PROSPECTS: There's a good chance of sighting orangutans, which come to gorge on the fruit trees by the water's edge, plus proboscis monkeys, macaques and estuarine crocodiles.

BATANG AI

THE LOWDOWN: Comprised of a vast artificial lake and rainforest-backed river, the Batang Ai region offers visitors the chance to combine meeting members of the Iban tribe with wildlife-spotting excursions.

THE USP: The Menyang region of Batang Ai has been declared a Wildlife Conservation area, meaning you can search for red apes, content in the knowledge they're being protected.

THE PROSPECTS: There's a good chance of spotting orangutans while travelling by boat upriver, and an even better chance while hiking into the forest. 📍

SEPILOK



Victor Joseph

Orangutan Care and Training Coordinator
Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre

Why is Sepilok a good place to see orangutans?

The orangutans roam in their natural habitat and by visiting you support their conservation.

What do you do?

I work in the outdoor nursery with the babies, aged four to seven. I clean the cages and platforms, assist the vet, and feed them at night. Essentially, my job is to help them become independent. They'll occasionally return to the centre for a free meal, once they're released, but otherwise they're wild.

What's most rewarding?

Teaching the infants to climb and forage. Sepilok replaces their natural mother's teachings by joining the younger orangutans with older orphans who'll show them the skills they need.

When should we visit?

Arrive half an hour before feeding times (10am and 3pm). Usually, in the afternoon, mothers arrive with their babies. It's amazing sitting there hearing them approach as they swing through the trees. orangutan-appeal.org.uk