

Wheelchair access in Sabah, Borneo

Want to experience pristine tropical rainforests teeming with life before naughty humans turn them all into wooden flooring, outdoor furniture and soybean and palm oil plantations? There are only a few places around the world with a substantial chunk of tropical rainforest remaining and Borneo is 1 of them, with the added benefits of a crazy array of wildlife including apes, flying lemurs and elephants, and a sane array of human life that does not want to rob you at gunpoint and can provide the infrastructure to get you to some of the best bits. At least this is the case in Sabah. Sabah is 1 of 2 provinces of Malaysia that make up the island of Borneo; the remainder of the island is split between Indonesia (Kalimantan) and Brunei.

Sabah is where we chose to go in October this year (2020) as we discovered that there are great wheelchair accessible destinations and lodges within the tropical rainforest there. I'm a C5/C6 tetraplegic and went with my wife and brother for the school holiday period after I had spent a long time researching and booking mostly wheelchair accessible places to stay. I booked 3 nights each at 3 different lodges, getting progressively further into the jungle as we went. I also booked 3 nights stopover in Singapore on the way there, and 2 nights stopover in Kota Kinabalu, the city we were due to fly home from, on the way back.

Our Singapore stopover was fine—we hadn't been there before so it was somewhat interesting and it was an easy introduction to the heat and hustle of our Asian adventure (we stayed at Wangz hotel there). The 1st place we stayed on Borneo was Sepilok, which is ½ an hour taxi ride from Sandakan, the city we flew into from Singapore. We could not find wheelchair accessible accommodation in Sepilok, but Sepilok is where there is a reasonable remnant of jungle and new wheelchair accessible orangutan and sun bear rehabilitation centres, and a Rainforest Discovery Centre. Sandakan has wheelchair accessible accommodation and we did go back there for an afternoon to pick up supplies and get a taste of the local city (it's rather tasty, and doable, with help, in a wheelchair).

I was afraid of being overwhelmed by tourists at Sepilok, given its on what tourist trail there is on Borneo, but it was surprisingly mellow. Our first stop was the orangutan rehabilitation centre which is great and very accessible for a wheelchair. I was surprised by how affected I was by watching the orangutans—I thought they would all be much of a muchness after seeing so many on TV, but once you are in their presence, you cannot help be won over by their... Humanity (if only humans were as gentle as they are, this world would not be such a mess). We could easily have come back here for a 2nd visit. The sun bear centre was next and is also great and also very accessible for a wheelchair, including a small canopy walkway that gives you a great view of the sun bears as they forage through the forest foliage for... Dog biscuits (rather tasty). While the orangutan's and sun bear's main dangers in the wild are habitat loss and the pet trade, sun bears have the further and greater danger that mainly Chinese people love to carve them up and use their body parts in folk medicine, so they are in much greater danger of extinction, as has happened to the Bornean rhinoceros (approximately 3 of them are left alive).

Our second day in Sepilok we dedicated to the Rainforest Discovery Centre, an area of rainforest with a range of trails, plant nursery and information centre, lake, café etc. A wheelchair person needs help to get around here, but surprisingly, my brother got me onto the canopy walkway, and with help from my wife also we negotiated a few steps on the walkway and I got right to the end. Unfortunately, my caster wheel fell off my wheelchair as we were coming back down the walkway, so I had a forced rest afternoon back at the lodge, while the friendly staff at the Sepilok Jungle Lodge where we stayed managed to jury-rig my wheelchair for me and it struggled mightily through the

rest of the trip. We could easily have stayed another day in Sepilok, but who knows until you actually go?

Our next stop was at Sukau Rainforest Lodge on the Kinabatang River, the only wheelchair accessible lodge I could find among half a dozen or so lodges on the river. I almost booked with another cheaper lodge that said they were very happy to help me negotiate the many stairs, but I felt that it was worth paying the extra money to stay at a place that had dedicated wheelchair access. The lodge is ultra-fancy and the professionalism and facilities they provide took a lot of stress and difficulty out of our anticipation and experience. It was here that we saw the most wildlife as people can view the wildlife, which comes to the river to bathe/ feed/ drink/ display/ rest, from boats and because of the restricted area the animals have to move in given nearby palm plantations. Amongst other critters, there's millions of monkeys including the potbelly proboscis monkeys, heaps of hornbills, and we had good views of an elephant and a small view of an alpha male orangutan (why do the wild ones insist on hanging out in the treetops, out of reach of all the selfie sticks?).

Our final stop in the jungle was the most eagerly anticipated-Borneo Rainforest Lodge. Even fancier than Sukau, it is the only accommodation in the pristine, unlogged Danum Valley conservation reserve. I wasn't sure how much I would be able to see here as, well, wheelchairs weren't designed for the jungle. I was a bit limited to the area around the lodge, including a 400 m board walk through the forest, along with the access road and another small road. But with the addition of a guide and a helper that the lodge had wisely convinced me to book we got up the canopy walkway here and overall I saw a lot of new animals including a great, long view of a leopard cat, different types of monkeys, more flying lemurs and squirrels (and dammit, why won't these guys launch through the air for my photo opportunity), many new types of birds, bearded pigs and although I never saw the gibbons, we could hear their raucous, haunting calls each morning and my brother and wife had a good view of them on a walk. Also, our accommodation had a balcony with a beautiful view over the river and the forested hills above and in the evening the deer came down to graze by the river and the frogs, geckos, bats and fireflies came to visit us on our balcony.

Suddenly our 3 days at Borneo Rainforest Lodge evaporated and it was time for our 2-night stopover in Kota Kinabalu before flying back home. Kota Kinabalu seems a pretty typical pint-sized Southeast Asian city, except for the surreal number of Chinese and Korean tourists, presumably there to buy their pangolin scales and sun bear parts, before lying on the beach for a few days and heading back home (possibly false information). As is typical, the city has terrible traffic, piles of people and gargantuan gutters everywhere, manic markets, a brief respite on the waterfront and smells and tastes galore. Surprisingly we got a great wheelchair access room here at an otherwise nondescript hotel-the hotel sixty3.

So, if you love nature, and want to experience the last of the world's almost intact ecosystems before we shovel them down our throats, get to Borneo as soon as you can. I have posted reviews of all our accommodation on trip advisor, so you can check out the details there and feel free to drop me a line if you are thinking of going and want more detail. On a side note, although this was a short trip for me and I have flown across the Pacific and back number of times since my spinal cord injury, a pressure area on my tailbone was apparent upon my return. So next time we go searching for something besides the daily grind, vigilance in skin checking and aeroplane transferring will be required.

By Trent Mabbett