



ORANGUTANS OF Borneo

THIS BIODIVERSE ISLAND NORTH OF BALI, INDONESIA, IS HOME TO THE OLDEST RAINFOREST ON THE PLANET, AS WELL AS ENDANGERED ANIMALS LIKE THE ORANGUTAN. WHILE THE OLD ISLAND WAYS ARE BEGINNING TO CHANGE, YOU STILL HAVE TIME TO EXPERIENCE THE AUTHENTICITY OF BORNEO AND POSSIBLY EVEN SAVE A SPECIES.

STORY BY ANDREA M. ROTONDO
PHOTOGRAPHY BY LEONARD HOSPIDOR

IT ALL STARTED WITH A MOVIE. On a whim I'd gone to see *Born to Be Wild*, which documents the lives of orphaned captive orangutans in Borneo and the primatologist, Dr. Biruté Galdikas, who rehabilitates them so they can eventually re-enter the wild and lead normal lives.

The orangutans on screen mesmerized me and I left the theater wanting to learn more. I read books to find out why they were on the verge of extinction (orangutans, which share 97 percent of our genetic code, are only found on Borneo and in a small area of Sumatra; deforestation—especially in favor of palm oil plantations—is depleting the orangutans' habitat and pushing the species toward extinction). I searched online for everything related to these apes and came across an expedition around Borneo with Australia-based Orion Expedition Cruises.

Orion had partnered with Dr. Galdikas herself and was offering a ten-night voyage aboard the 100-guest mega-yacht, Orion II. The doctor would lecture on board as well as guide us on shore through Borneo's 130-million-year-old rainforest and Camp Leakey, the research station she founded in 1971.

That's how we found ourselves making our way down a well-trodden path slicing through the peat swamp forest outside the village of Pasir Panjang in Central Kalimantan, Borneo. Our guide from Dr. Galdikas' Orangutan Care Center talked in hushed tones, "We're about to enter a clearing and a few feet away will be about 20 juvenile orangutans. They are orphaned animals and we're rehabilitating them to re-enter the wild on their own," she whispered.

"These animals are used to humans," she went on to say, "but they are still wild animals. Stand back and wait patiently." Then she finished her thought with a bit of a smirk and wink: "If one wishes to engage you, you'll know it!"

I was excited and, if you want to know the truth, a tiny bit nervous. We'd spent the past two days based out of nearby Kumai, a small port town. We explored the



Kumai River aboard local wooden boats called klotoks, waving at villagers on the river bank while we searched for orangutan, proboscis monkey (the ones with the Jimmy Durante noses), gibbons, Bornean bearded pig, estuarine crocodiles, 420 species of resident birds, and 15,000 species of flowering plants. Borneo's biodiversity is striking and you can see plants and animals here that you won't find anywhere else on earth. Those of us who were eagle-eyed did catch glimpses of wild orangutans high up in trees and, as the sun set, everyone was treated to the acrobatic stylings of a large troupe of proboscis that leapt from the treetops on one side of the river to the other. Pure magic!

When we weren't on the river, we were trekking through the rainforest in Tanjung Puting National Park to see orangutans that come to the feeding platforms at Camp Leakey and Pondok Tanggui. It was there that we were introduced to "Tom," a very large and strong male who made it known to all his visitors—by shaking tree trunks and demonstrating his male "vigor" with a less-than-receptive female—that he ruled this part of Tanjung Puting. After that experience, I wondered how I'd feel about getting close to any orangutan.

The thought of Tom was still firmly planted in my mind as I tucked my camera into my pocket and hid my water bottle in my backpack, as instructed by our guide. (Orangutans are super-curious. If you're wearing a necklace, they'll snatch it off your neck; if you've got a water bottle, they'll help themselves to a drink.)

Just as I finished zipping my pack, we were in the clearing and my line of sight led to more than a dozen happy, silly, young orangutans—some swinging on a makeshift jungle-gym and others lazing under a stand of trees. These little guys did not look quite as intimidating as Tom had!

Suddenly one of the smaller oranges looked up, saw us, and got to her feet. She walked—on two legs, a very un-orangutan-like thing to do—right toward me! When this fuzzy orange creature was just a foot away, she extended her hand and grasped mine. She gave a decided tug on my arm and we sat down in the grass. She was very interested in playing with my sneakers and untied each shoelace. What was more amazing was the fact that she tried to re-tie the laces...although unsuccessfully! Laughter



JESSICA BALLANTYNE

CAMP LEAKEY AND THE ORANGUTAN CARE AND QUARANTINE CENTER

Dr. Biruté Galdikas founded Camp Leakey, the orangutan research station in the heart of the Indonesian national park, Tanjung Puting, in 1971 with her then-husband Rod Brindamour. It's here that Dr. Galdikas spent decades watching and researching the orangutan species. She's been a leader in forest protection and stewardship and has lobbied the Indonesian government many times on behalf of protecting Tanjung Puting National Park from illegal logging.

Dr. Galdikas is fond of telling visitors that, "Camp Leakey is one of the longest continuous studies of any wild animal population ever carried out in the history of science." Today the station is manned by dozens of scientists, students, and locals. Visitors, with local guides and the proper permits, can call upon Camp Leakey during daytime hours to observe the orangutans from a distance.

Another integral part of Dr. Galdikas' plan to save the orangutan in Borneo is the Orangutan Care Center and Quarantine. She established the center in 1998 with her charitable organization, Orangutan Foundation International. This 197-acre forest campus near the village of Pasir Panjang was set up to care for and rehabilitate confiscated ex-captive orangutans and injured wild orangutans. Veterinarians staff OCCQ at all times, and a staff of 130 care for more than 330 orangutan orphans. Each animal will eventually be released into the wild.

OCCQ maintains an operating room and X-ray machine and plenty of space for the orangutans to learn how to function on their own. Many of the orphans are released daily to forage in the trees for food and practice their nest-building skills. Staff members often sleep out in the trees with the orangutans in the hopes of encouraging them to live full-time in the wild. The Orangutan Care Center is closed to the public with the exception of tours like the one arranged for Orion Expedition Cruises. It's here that you can hold and feed a baby orangutan and play with juvenile animals.

Donations fund the operation of the center and you can learn more about OCCQ and Camp Leakey at the Orangutan Foundation International's website at www.orangutan.org.



bubbled up from deep within me—the type of giggles you just can't suppress—and I marveled at how easily this creature could communicate with me.

I eagerly looked up to scan the horizon in search of my husband. He was standing about 20 feet away with a much larger male orangutan in front of him. This juvenile was staring at my husband's sock-and-sandal-clad feet. What had captured this orangutan's attention, I wondered? I had my answer when the orang tentatively reached out with his index finger and pushed down one of my husband's argyle socks. He quickly retracted his hand—almost as if he was afraid—and looked up quizzically. The ape reached out again and pulled the sock back up. That little orangutan was in awe of a simple sock.

During all this, the onboard naturalists from Orion Expedition Cruises were walking through the group taking photos and keeping an eye out for the more mischievous orangutans that were tempted to rifle through unattended backpacks.

I've traveled the world over but had never had an experience quite like this one before. Orion has really done their homework when it comes to Borneo and all of Southeast Asia. The line offers truly uncommon voyages that pair a luxury mega-yacht, five-star service with a crew complement of 70, and a team of knowledgeable naturalists and guides with on-land experiences to which the average person just can't gain access. (Note: While I sailed aboard *Orion II* and that ship will finish out the 2012 season in Borneo, *Orion I* will sail these itineraries in 2013 and beyond.)

While Dr. Galdikas and our overnight stay in Tanjung Puting National Park is the reason many of us booked this particular cruise, our time in Central Kalimantan was certainly not the only high point of the itinerary. We embarked from Bali, Indonesia, and most travelers took the opportunity to arrive early and spend a few days exploring the Hindu temples, beaches, inland rice paddies, Mount Agung (an active volcano), and the artsy village of Ubud.

In addition to exploring the Indonesian region of Borneo, our itinerary also introduced us to Malaysian Borneo with an overnight stay in Kuching, which with a population of 618,000 is the largest city on the island and is also the capital of the Sarawak state.

Several days later, when we arrived at Sarawak's Bako National Park, I began to appreciate Orion's foresight into planning activities for all levels of athleticism. While I took an easy nature stroll along the park's boardwalk that winds through the mangroves and ended up sitting on a mudflat beach watching macaques dig for clams in the sand, others went on a "take-no-prisoners" high-energy hike across the top of the island. Both groups made the acquaintance of proboscis monkeys, lutungs, and macaques as well as wild Borneo pigs and piglets. These multiple options were available just about everywhere we went and I realized that I would likely not have seen as much of Borneo without Orion's expedition ship and fleet of ten Zodiacs that spirited us up and down black water rivers and island inlets to get to places that most tourists never see.

Trekking and hiking in the heat and humidity of the equator can be tiring and Orion wisely ended our itinerary with two days of island exploration in the Natuna and Anambas archipelagos. Our last evening aboard *Orion II* was spent, like so many others, dining on deck under the stars (which just seem to shine brighter when looking up at them from the vast South China Sea). We struggled with the idea that in a few hours we'd dock in bustling Singapore and each head for home.

The orangutans of Borneo—and the welcoming people of Indonesia and Malaysia—set this trip apart from all others. If you've done the Galapagos, sailed the Amazon, visited The Kimberley in Western Australia, and explored Antarctica, the next great adventure awaits you in the heart of Borneo. ♦

To learn more about Orion's Borneo visit cruiseandtravellifestyles.com

THE INS AND OUTS OF ORION

You might think that expedition cruise ships are simply rugged, no-nonsense vessels that can take whatever the ocean tosses at them. And, while that's true, some expedition ships—like *Orion*—have perfected elegant style as well as functionality.

In actuality, *Orion* feels more like a mega-yacht that you and your friends chartered for the adventure of a lifetime than a cruise ship on which you've booked passage. There's room for just 106 guests and a crew of 70 caters to their every need. Within hours, bonds are forged between guests and the vibe around the ship feels like a cross between a New Year's Eve party and family reunion.

The layout of the ship is conducive to spending time with your traveling companions. The Lecture Theatre is where you'll spend a lot of time listening to guest lecturers before heading to the Galaxy Observation Lounge on Deck 6 to watch the scenery go by. There's a well stocked library (complete with a laptop with Internet access) and Leda Lounge. Outdoors head to the Jacuzzi spa and bar on the Sun Deck and dine al fresco at the Delphinus Outdoor Café, on Deck 4, at breakfast, lunch, and sometimes dinner when the weather cooperates.

Don't forget that *Orion* also has a Marina Platform at the stern from which you'll board Zodiacs to explore each port of call. There are also 10 two-man kayaks as well as enough snorkel gear for everyone.



Above: Orion I
Left: Sun deck with Jacuzzi spa
Below: Leda Lounge



Evenings are spent enjoying multi-course gourmet meals at the Constellation Restaurant before heading back to the lounge for a nightcap.

There's a range of accommodations from which to choose, including the four spacious owners' suites that are each 345 square feet and include a separate bedroom and living room. Six balcony suites offer floor-to-ceiling glass doors leading to a private French balcony. There are two 230-square-foot deluxe oceanview suites with panoramic windows, 19 junior suites (also with windows). The remaining staterooms are outfitted with either large oval windows or dual portholes.

It's clear to see that *Orion* is different from other expedition ships. The cruise line likes to say that it attracts travelers and not tourists. If you're a "traveler" *Orion* will feel like home to you.



Above: Balcony suite
Left: Constellation Restaurant