



The Jack Nicklaus-designed Empire Country Club is the golfing pride of Brunei.

JUNGLE RHYTHM

BORNEO IS THE ONLY ISLAND IN THE WORLD THAT CONTAINS THREE COUNTRIES. IT'S ALSO HOME TO AN EXCITING ARRAY OF GOLF COURSES FOR THOSE LOOKING FOR A SOUTH-EAST ASIAN GOLF DESTINATION WITH A NATURAL DIFFERENCE. **WORDS: STEVE KEIPERT**

It was a golf setting unlike any other. As the sun slunk quickly and quietly into the adjacent sea, the enchanting sounds of the day-end prayer session at the nearby mosque filtered across the golf course. Overhead, a jet taking off from busy Kota Kinabalu Airport added to the auditory sensation. The natural light almost gone, golf was still eminently playable as the series of floodlights took effect. Amid this scene, my 7-iron approach to Sutera Harbour Golf & Country Club's closing hole glides through the intermingling streams of darkness and manmade light. The ball lands just as I'd hoped it would on the lower level of the dual-tiered green and releases up the slope to within tap-in distance for an easy birdie. Our surroundings were decidedly un-golf-like but somehow it felt comfortable. Welcome to Borneo, where you can count on one unique experience after another.

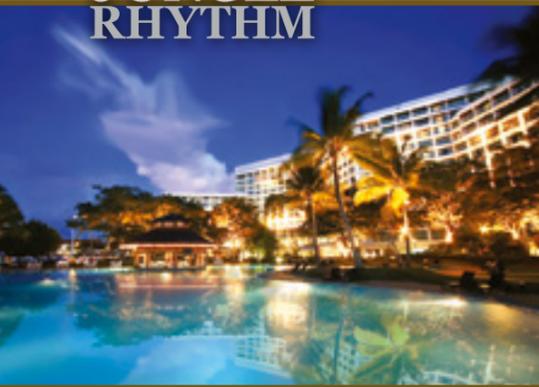
So you've heard of the place, mostly through the time-honoured phrase, "Wild man from Borneo", but where (and what) is it? Here's a quick geography lesson: Borneo is not a country but the world's third largest island. It straddles the equator to sit in both hemispheres and is the only island in the world governed by three countries, with Indonesia covering the southern three-quarters, Malaysia almost all of the northern quarter and tiny Brunei taking up about 1 percent of the land area as a coastal enclave along the northern coastline.

PHOTO: PATRICK LIM

My week on Borneo was spent largely in the Malaysian state of Sabah and its capital Kota Kinabalu before a two-day visit to Brunei. Sabah is distinctly separate and different to the rest of Malaysia, particularly the main peninsula that includes the national capital, Kuala Lumpur. And this division is noticeable. For instance, almost every vessel moored in the harbour at Kota Kinabalu has both the national and state flags flapping in the breeze, as the locals consider themselves Sabahans first and Malaysians second. In that sense, the South China Sea acts as a physical and cultural curtain in the same way as the Nullarbor Plain separates eastern and western Australia.

Time magazine once rated the vista off the coast of Kota Kinabalu across to its neighbouring islands as the fourth best sunset in the world. How one rates a sunset I am unsure, but watching the great orange orb slide into the water at a rapid pace (something that happens when you're this close to the equator, I'm told) is a sight that's difficult to tire of.

But chances are you will be here – as I was – for the golf. Is Borneo an under-rated golf destination? Oh, yes. In the north golfers can experience two tropical, South-East Asian countries with different cultures and culinary choices without needing to fly via the bustling hubs of Bangkok or Singapore – and there are numerous commendable golf options as a reward. The green fees are on the high side of reasonable, but with the



ABOVE: A balmy evening by the pool at Sutera Harbour Resort. RIGHT: The Graham Marsh-designed Sutera Harbour course makes the most of flat terrain with good use of bunkering. FAR RIGHT: Dalit Bay is located in paradise, with lush fairways meandering between thick rainforest and the ocean.

Malaysian ringgit and Brunei dollar exchanging favourably, you needn't suffer too much of a hip-pocket hit (see fact file).

Sutera Harbour at KK (as the locals call it) has 27 holes, of which 20 are floodlit. The lights were added ten years ago to allow golfers to escape the heat of the day and play in the comparative cool of the evening. It's definitely a strange setting at first, especially when you realise several of the layout's faster-growing trees had to go when they began blocking the light towers. Distances can be tough to judge as parts of the fairways are better lit than others and you'll suddenly gain multiple shadows, but ultimately it doesn't take long to adjust. The nightly cost of lighting the course from sunset to 11pm is about 2,000 ringgit (A\$600), but this novelty separates Sutera Harbour from the pack.

The three nines, all designed by Australia's Graham Marsh, were built on reclaimed land. The site is flat, but Marsh did a fine job utilising the compact and mostly featureless site. The course is a quintessential resort layout in the tropics. It isn't long but is definitely long enough, while the fairways are often generous and the greens large and grainy but with pockets that are often difficult to find with your approach shots. The rough is tangley but not ball-consuming while the bunkering is unsubtle as each one is infinitely visible and a challenge to avoid. Water hazards come into play frequently but aren't overdone and are appropriately positioned.

The golf course has improved markedly in the past couple of years, leading to greater prestige. This past January it hosted the OneAsia Tour qualifying school, at which just nine players in first stage and 18 of the 70 players to reach the final stage broke par for the four rounds.

The Lakes and Heritage nines comprise the championship layout, but the Garden nine is not a distant third. It is a stretch of golf not to be missed, constantly changing direction as the holes weave between swaying palm

trees. Several of the holes are gems, including the picturesque 6th (or 24th overall), a 330-metre par-4 flanked by the sea all the way down the left side.

The second hole on the Heritage nine was a favourite of mine, listed on the card as the 11th of the 27. A dogleg-left par-5, with the harbour visible through the dogleg and to the right once the hole turns, this part of the course is closest to the city and gives a perfect view of Kota Kinabalu and the mountain behind it, the tallest peak in South-East Asia. The aggressive line for a tee shot on 11 needs to carry a bunker inside the bend but there is ample room to the right. The second shot has to be threaded between a stand of trees on the left and sand on the right and the harbour beyond.

Aside from the signature 24th, the pick of the holes on the Garden loop is the 21st, a robust par-4 of 410 metres that affords your first look at the sea beyond the green. The last hole is a tough finisher, with trees and a boundary fence along the right side and a tree encroaching into the left half, creating a narrow chute from the tee. It's an ideal time to hit your straightest drive of the round.

Forty minutes' drive north-east, the recently refurbished Shangri-La Rasa Ria Resort includes an orangutan sanctuary where young, orphaned orangutans are nurtured before being released elsewhere in Borneo. Guests staying at the resort (and non-guests) can enjoy the viewing platform and 72-metre canopy walk to view these amazing creatures as they frolic with the handful of cheeky macaques they share their habitat with.

Dalit Bay Golf & Country Club is part of the property and is the only golf course Shangri-La owns rather than merely operates. The Australian input is evident here; Ted Parslow designed the layout and the director of golf, Aaron Johnston, is a PGA professional from Perth who has worked in Sabah and Brunei for the past dozen years. He says the course's two nines

differ markedly, as does the way the course plays throughout the year, its character altering from the wet to dry to windy seasons. Bottom line: it's never boring to play.

The stretch of holes from the 10th to the 13th is the best on the course. On the 11th tee you stand above the Tambalang River and see Mount Kinabalu as a backdrop as you attempt to find the putting surface on the 169-metre par-3. At the 13th, the fairway doglegs sharply left around water, ensuring you must be committed to your choice of line and club from the tee.

Our group found that the greens featured less grain at Dalit Bay. Still, it is a reasonably flat excursion and, like Sutera Harbour, is a resort course in every essence. It's no easy decision to pick the superior course between Dalit Bay and Sutera. The former arguably edges the latter for quality thanks to its more interesting and dynamic second nine. The par-5s at Dalit Bay also offer more strategic options and the setting is more ambient, but overall this is only marginally the superior golf destination.

If time permits, detour via Malaysia's first World Heritage site, Mount Kinabalu National Park, which is a pleasant and easy drive from either Sutera Harbour or Dalit Bay. Central to the park is the imposing granite mountain, which stands 4,095 metres tall and is the youngest mountain in the world at a mere 1.5 million years old. That's positively adolescent, really. The national park is a fantastic place to take in a rainforest walk in cooler surroundings with the mountain as an ever-present backdrop.

HIGH & DRY IN BRUNEI

An easy 40-minute flight from KK takes you to the kingdom of Brunei, a place that is equal parts curious and compelling. This tiny nation is known for its dynasty of rich sultans, lucrative gas and oil reserves and for being 'dry'. Travellers are permitted to bring limited alcohol into the country, ▶

RIGHT: You don't have to travel too far out of Kota Kinabalu to find amazing natural attractions in the surrounding rainforests. BELOW: The sun sets across Sutera Harbour. BOTTOM: Unique to the Shangri-La Rasa Ria Resort is the Orangutan Education Centre where you'll meet Sabah's icon. Kids can even help out feeding the babies.



The majestic Mt Kinabalu offers a picturesque backdrop to the Dalit Bay course.



Night golf can be played at Sutera Harbour with 20 of the 27 holes floodlit.



JUNGLE RHYTHM



ABOVE: Impenetrable jungle is never far from the wide fairways at Dalit Bay. RIGHT: Lakes and bunkers are prominent throughout the round at Dalit Bay. You have to be really on your game to avoid these hazards, especially when the wind starts blowing off the sea.



however there is none to be seen or purchased in the nation itself and you'd better consume what alcohol you do bring in behind closed doors.

Officially known as Negara Brunei Darussalam, the third sultan added the Darussalam portion of the name as recognition of his foreign heritage (Darussalam means 'abode of peace'). To most, it's simply Brunei.

The name can create some minor identity issues, though. Over lunch at Tarindak Restaurant, two Brunei Tourism representatives shared a story from a trade show they attended where the common misconception was that their country is in Africa, thanks largely to the Darussalam suffix, which is almost identical to Dar es Salaam in coastal Tanzania.

Brunei's citizens are fortunate. They pay no income tax, petrol costs only about A\$0.40 per litre and the health system is exceptional. An appointment with a doctor costs \$1 and all medication and associated costs with recovery are covered. In order to become a citizen there are four requirements: live in Brunei for 15 years, learn the language, know the national anthem and memorise the sultan's entire name, which is like learning a full word for every letter in the alphabet. The first sultan ruled from 1363 and the current sultan, Hassanal Bolkiah, is the 29th.

About 18,000 Australians travelled to Brunei last year. How many of them come to play golf is unclear but more should, and to tour one course in particular. Beside the amazingly ornate Empire Hotel in the capital Bandar Seri Begawan is **Empire Country Club**, a Jack Nicklaus design of significant standing and quality.

The majestic hotel opened in 2000 and has stood as a symbol of luxury ever since. The facts and figures are astonishing: more than 200 architects, interior designers, engineers and draftsmen had input during the design process, while gold fittings, crystal chandeliers and Italian marble illustrate that no expense was spared decorating the interior. The main atrium rises 53 metres from floor to ceiling and at every turn is adorned by artwork

placed to catch the eye. Such opulence might create a sense of guests being unable to lazily kick around in board shorts and thongs, yet in truth you probably could. For all its neck-craning, elaborate glory, the Empire is pleasantly affordable, with rooms starting from about A\$180 per night.

The golf course, meanwhile, has attracted accolades of its own. An Asian Tour venue for the Brunei Open (won by Australians three times last decade: Terry Pilkadaris in 2005, Rick Kulacz in 2008 and Darren Beck a year later), this December the spotlight will be magnified when the Empire hosts the Royal Trophy, a lower-key version of the Ryder Cup between an eight-man Asian team and an octet of European players.

Staging the event is due recognition for a hugely impressive layout that is also in peak condition. Indeed, all three courses offered a reminder of how tropical-climate grasses can still provide firm, true and fast putting surfaces. While the Empire's greens were marginally superior to the two Sabah courses on our itinerary, each set looked and played beautifully. Likewise, the Empire is definitely the pick of the three courses we played for design and strategy. Nicklaus makes wonderful use of the undulating terrain with several dramatic downhill drives and approaches before building to a thrilling crescendo from the 15th hole.



It's not hard to recognise Jack Nicklaus' bunkering style at Empire. The par-4 10th and the oceanside 15th holes (right) are prime examples of what to expect.





Empire has hosted many events but none bigger than the Royal Trophy matches between Asia and Europe.

The 502-metre par-5 flanks what the club calls “a thousand kilometres of horizon” along the left side. The fairway snakes alongside the South China Sea and a serpentine waste bunker down the left and an exposed, jungle-strewn escarpment on the right. It is a stunning hole. The 16th is an enclosed uphill par-3 before two final par-4s with plenty of challenges and options.

The second shot to the penultimate hole is a thriller. From a fairway set well below the level of the green, your approach shot must come in high and carry an expanse of jungle so menacing I doubt any golfer has managed to retrieve a ball from its clutches. The 3-iron I flushed up the hill onto that 17th green in dwindling daylight is a shot – like the golf course and lavish hotel – I will remember forever.

Several holes on the front nine are noteworthy, including a testing carry from the par-4 6th tee and the downhill 7th where, if you are lucky like our foursome, you might see a family of monkeys frolicking behind the green of the long par-3.

Another place you might spot a primate is among the mangroves lining the Brunei River where proboscis monkeys can often be found foraging near the water late in the day. This unusual species of monkey is found only in Borneo and is known for its long nose and, ahem, permanently erect penis. If, like us, you have a day to explore Bandar Seri Begawan, take the opportunity to enjoy a boat tour along the river in search of this distinctive monkey. Elsewhere in the nation’s capital, don’t miss the Royal Regalia Building and the many artefacts and stories connected to the sultans, or you might wish to wander through an open market, visit a mosque or tour Brunei Museum.

With thousands of attractions and endless stories, Borneo is a place where the unexpected usually results in a memorable surprise.



LEFT: The ocean view from the Empire Hotel in Brunei, voted the best golf resort in the Asia-Pacific in 2010 and 2011. BELOW LEFT: Plenty for sale in the markets in Bandar Seri Begawan. BELOW: Sunset behind a Brunei mosque.

WHERE TO PLAY...



SABAH

1 SUTERA HARBOUR GOLF & COUNTRY CLUB

Location: Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia
Green fees: A\$75 to A\$120, depending on the day of the week, whether you are a resort guest, if you’re playing in the daytime or at night. Night tee-times are slightly more expensive. Playing all 27 holes costs about A\$145.

Contact: www.suteraharbour.com

2 DALIT BAY GOLF & COUNTRY CLUB

Location: Tuaran, Sabah, Malaysia
Green fees: A\$85 (hotel guests) to A\$115 (non-guests).

Contact: www.dalitbaygolf.com.my

OTHER COURSES NEARBY: Nexus Golf Resort Karambunai, Sabah G&CC

BRUNEI

3 THE EMPIRE HOTEL & COUNTRY CLUB

Location: Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei
Green fees: A\$105 to A\$170, depending on the day of the week and whether or not you’re staying at the Empire Hotel.

Contact: www.theempirehotel.com/golf

OTHER COURSES NEARBY:

Royal Brunei G&CC,
Royal Brunei Airlines GC,
Mentiri GC, Panaga GC

WHERE TO STAY...

SABAH

SUTERA HARBOUR RESORT

Nestled between the shores of the South China Sea, fronting the tropical islands and the majestic Mount Kinabalu, is the grand expanse of Sutera Harbour Resort. The 384-acre resort provides a spectacular array of activities from its two side-by-side luxurious five-star hotels, golf course, marina and recreational facilities.

Contact: www.suteraharbour.com



SHANGRI-LA'S RASA RIA RESORT

Shangri-La's Rasa Ria Resort is located on Pantai Dalit Beach and is set amid a nature reserve. Malaysian-themed rooms offer spectacular beachfront

views, while the resort is also home to the magnificent Spa at Dalit Bay and the Orangutan Education Centre.

Contact: www.shangri-la.com/kotakinabalu/rasariaresort



BRUNEI

THE EMPIRE HOTEL

Voted the best Golf Resort in the Asia-Pacific in 2010 and 2011, the Empire is a luxurious sanctuary resort set in its own private 180-hectare estate of manicured gardens. Spacious rooms are equipped with balconies to take in the breathtaking view of the South China Sea.

Contact: www.theempirehotel.com

GETTING THERE

Royal Brunei Airlines flies daily from Melbourne to Brunei’s capital, Bandar Seri Begawan. Kota Kinabalu is a 40-minute flight from there. Royal Brunei Airlines also flies to a host of cities across Asia and the Middle East, plus London. The aircraft feature all the modern conveniences, however, the flights are alcohol-free (www.bruneiair.com).

USEFUL CONTACTS

- SABAH** Sabah Tourism (www.sabahitourism.com)
Golf Academy Borneo (www.golfacademyborneo.com)
- BRUNEI** Brunei Tourism (www.bruneitourism.travel)
Sunshine Borneo Tours (www.exploreborneo.com)