

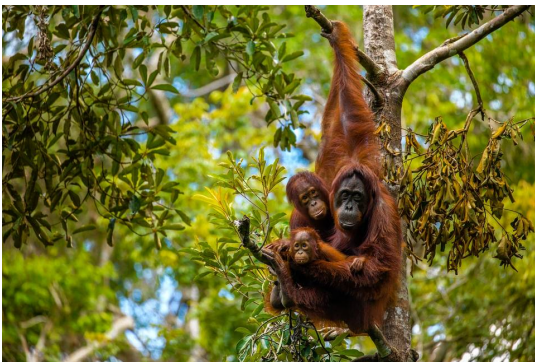
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OFF DUTY TRAVEL

# A River Cruise Through Borneo to Hang With Orangutans

A river trip through remote Borneo leads to endearing, if frightening, encounters with the island's rapidly disappearing primates



SWINGING SET | Orangutans at Camp Leakey, a preserve and scientific research station in Indonesia's Tanjung Puting National Park on the island of Borneo. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

By Sarah Rose

Feb. 4, 2016 12:13 p.m. ET

**THE MOTHER** orangutan hung from a tree branch and pried her baby's fingers off her chest. Her infant was just five months old, as big as a human baby of the same age, with wild tufts of red hair and a pursed bottom lip. I stood a few feet below while the mom moved her baby's hand to a vine and supported his bottom as he stretched a leg toward the creeper and wrapped his toes around it.

The 29-year-old orangutan mother, named Uning by the researchers at Borneo's Camp Leakey refuge, looked at me with her coffee-bean eyes, then turned back to her baby and let him go. I held my breath as the little one caught himself and hung tightly to the swinging vine.

"This is how orangutans learn to climb," explained our park guide, Rini Mariani, a local who lives in the small Indonesian port town of Kumai. (Borneo, Asia's largest island, is divided among three countries: Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei.)

Camp Leakey is an orangutan-research station in Indonesia's Tanjung Puting National Park, on the southern coast of Borneo. I had joined my friend Diane and her 13-year-old daughter, Maia, on a three-day riverboat trip through the Indonesian part of the island to Camp Leakey and a few other preserves where orangutans can be seen in the wild.

"They're like our redheaded relatives," Diane said to ginger-haired Maia.

It's easy to feel a connection with orangutans. Sharing 96% of our DNA, they are our cousins from just the other side of Uncanny Valley. And they are in danger. Ms. Mariani said that Borneo's jungles, their primary habitat, are being cleared at a reckless pace to

accommodate mining and logging and to meet global demand for palm oil. According to the World Wildlife Fund, the animals' habitat has shrunk by 50% in the past two decades. "Sometimes you can hear chain saws from inside the park," Ms. Mariani said.

Two days before meeting Uning, we had boarded a riverboat in Kumai and motored up the Sekonyer River, which forms the boundary of Tanjung Puting National Park. Our boat looked like a bright green-and-yellow version of the African Queen, with no-frills living quarters on the upper deck, equipped with a dining table, lounge chairs and mattresses.

During the day, we'd watch the pale-pink water hyacinths float by and survey the jungle tree canopy, filled with macaques, gibbons and the rare, long-nosed proboscis monkey.



CURRENT EVENT | River boats on the way to Camp Leakey. PHOTO: ORANGUTANG ODYSSEYS

At night, our crew would string mosquito nets to form veiled bedrooms on deck, and we would fall asleep to a symphony of cicada and bullfrogs and awaken to the soprano call of gibbons.

We were chugging our way to Camp Leakey, a refuge created by Dr. Biruté Galdikas, a protégé of paleoanthropologist Louis Leakey, who also mentored Dian Fossey and Jane Goodall. Dr. Galdikas's research laid the groundwork for understanding the life-cycle and behavior of these gentle, tree-dwelling animals. (Fun fact: The mothers have only one baby at a time and nurse their offspring for six to seven years.) Forty years later, her rescued orangutans are introduced to tourists by name and happily shake hands with their fans like well-mannered children.

At Camp Leakey, the jungle air was swampy and so humid that I feared it could start to rain any moment. Just as I leaned lazily against a tree, I felt the rain begin to fall. An attentive guide immediately lofted his umbrella over my camera and me. As it turned out, it wasn't a cloudburst at all, but a steady stream of monkey urine. "I consider it an honor," I told Maia, who was doubled over in laughter.

Just then, Tom, the dominant male ape, ignored the roped-off boundaries that separated spectators from the orangutans and lumbered toward us. He carried himself with regal bearing, as if convinced he was king of this jungle. He had the wide cheek pads of an alpha male, which made him look bigger than his 250 pounds.

We'd been warned that Tom was unpredictable and as strong as eight men combined. A sign nearby read, "Don't stand between a male and female orangutan." But the female orangutans and their babies sat before us on the platform as Tom approached from behind us. We were all standing smack between Tom and the females.

I was as thrilled as I was terrified, but on that day at least, Tom showed more interest in the food than the ladies. He ignored us entirely, like a celebrity who pays no notice to the swarming paparazzi.

We walked back over to Uning's jungle gym, where a tourist was shooting rapid-fire photos of the climbing lessons Uning was giving her son. Uning grew agitated, baring her teeth in a show of maternal aggression. A guide gently asked the man to stop, but he continued to fire an artillery barrage of flashes.

Maia stepped up to him. "Why don't you respect the creatures we have all come to see, as well as the people who are here to protect them?" she demanded. The flashes from his camera abruptly ceased.



A male orangutan PHOTO: ORANGUTAN ODYSSEYS

“That orangutan mama went totally ape,” Diane said, laughing, as we hiked back to our floating home in the fading daylight.

“So did Maia,” I said.

**Getting There: Trigana Air** ([trigana-air.com](http://trigana-air.com)) and **Kalstar Aviation** ([kalstar.com](http://kalstar.com)) offer daily flights from Jakarta, Indonesia’s capital, to the city of Pangkalan Bun. Flights cost

about \$45 each way and can be booked online. Taxis from Pangkalan Bun to the port town of

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Kumai run about \$20.



**Staying There:** Our excellent guide, Rini Mariani, can be booked independently through **Orangutantour.id** ([orangutantour.id](http://orangutantour.id)).

**Orangutan Odysseys**, an international outfitter based in Australia, offers a three-day, two-night itinerary similar to the one we took (which was arranged on the fly through a local tour operator) for \$400 per person for four passengers. The price includes one night at Rimba Lodge, a rustic ecolodge near the park, and one night aboard a river boat. The fee also includes the guide, cooks, food, crew, park

fees and all transfers ([orangutanodysseys.com](http://orangutanodysseys.com)).

**What to bring:** Borneo is considered a malaria zone, so be sure to consult with your doctor or a travel-medicine specialist regarding effective antimalarial medications. I found a 95% DEET-based mosquito repellent very effective against bites, saving me from a lot of itching, but it is not a substitute for an antimalarial.

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