

DERMAKOT BORNEO

10/05/2026- 7 NIGHTS

It's ridiculous how much of a pull Sabah has on me. The main highway out of Sandakan is potholed, lined with palm plantations and clearings and yet as we drive along I feel so alive and so pumped (it's the only way I can describe it). Traffic is bad because of the road works, it's hot, the landscape is really not interesting but yet I feel compelled to look out into it and just have it soak into my soul.

The feeling did dissipate over time, (it's a good 5-6 hr drive) but returns once we hit the actual forest. I think it is partly that the area reminds me of North Queensland, colours and textures anyway. Maybe it is also the anticipation of being in the forest and what sightings I may have.

MG was waiting for us at Telupid and I got a warm MG welcome (those who know him will know what I mean.) Nice to see he hasn't changed, still has the same aloofness! We did have a bit of a catch up whilst waiting for dinner.

Our drive to the Dermakot Forest Field Station felt faster than last time. (I think I had a slow driver.) It has also rained a little which is nice. Hopefully it brings the animals out. It's a little busy here with 3-4 other groups. We are leaving later than normal (9ish) to avoid them so it will be a late one. Luckily it's just a 3-hr drive as I might be falling asleep if there isn't much animal life out there!

I was a little nervous on whether it would be good given the lack of success a month ago. (Yes, I came a month ago as well!) I've been very careful to not upsell the area to my safari companion, Mat, as that is a sure-fire way to get no sightings. MG was his normal hyper self-moving the light around so fast it almost makes you dizzy following it. It is definitely his style as all the other guides I've had are much slower and sit longer on trees, but it works well for him and he really doesn't seem to miss much. One of his first spots was this tiny ranee mouse. I have no idea how he saw it and unfortunately it was too fast for us to

see. Next up was a Bornean Crested lizard flaked out on a branch looking super chill! I seems I needn't have worried we wouldn't see anything! It was still quiet, but we saw a sambar deer, a couple of striped palm civets, Thomas's flying squirrels, a stunning Malay civet and 3 different leopard cats!



Island Palm Civet

Not all the sightings were good ones but the Malay civet and one of the leopard cats were good ones which was lovely.

11 th May

Spent much of today just chilling in my room. It was so hot and muggy that nothing was out and about. Our plan was to leave about 7pm for our night drive but just before 7 it started to rain, like a serious downpour! Thunder and lightning right on top of us. And I mean right on top of us! I wished for a bit of rain but obviously I wasn't specific enough! Lightning is definitely striking around us! It is sooo loud! The road is going to be hideous! Not sure I have 100% confidence in our driver either, wish we had Norman! (Best driver I have ever had.) Just when you think the rain is getting lighter it starts back heavy again! I guess it's still earlyish, 8pm. It does remind me of home though and sitting out on our back deck watching and listening to the rain. It was one of my favourite things to do.

It finally eased at 9 so we jumped in our vehicle and headed off. The streams were all close to flooding already which was quite something as they had a fair way to reach the road level. We hadn't even made it out of the accommodation area before we saw our first civet! This boded well and we were rewarded for our patience by numerous sightings of civets, snakes and leopard cats as well as sambar deer, flying squirrels and even a tiny Sunda tree mouse. Of course, MG spotted loads more of all the regulars but he only really points out the animals that are close or that we haven't seen much of. This of course makes it feel like there isn't much there, but when you know that's what he is doing you realise just how special it is here. You get to know when he has seen something close as he will turn off the main torch and go red light as we drive a bit closer. The excitement is instantaneous as you try and pick out what it is and where. Most often he uses this technique with the leopard cats as they can be quite shy. Once the cat is a little settled, he will bring up the main torch so you can see the animal better but sometimes you only really see it in the red light. We were lucky tonight that we had one who settled and posed for us, not that I could take a photo as she was just a little too far away. sometimes I wish I did have a DSLR camera with me so I could share my experiences with you but it was a decision I made to live more in the moment rather than be trying to frame an image and get everything in focus. There are attachments you can get for your phone to bring it into the realms of a real camera but this just brings you into that same scenario. Luckily MG has let me use photos from his extensive collection. The accommodation I have commented on before, but I think it is a shame that they don't invest in a little more in upkeep. There is mould on some of the walls in the rooms and they are covered in marks, the beds are like hardboards and there is never any soap, basically everything is falling further and further into disrepair. The climate definitely makes for a tough place for maintenance but a little bit of work could go a long way and it is easier to maintain once things are back at a "clean" level. Now I'm not really complaining as the air con works, there is hot water, the food is pretty good, they do cheap laundry and the phones work. Also the cost is less than staying in other areas where it is more resort orientated and most importantly the sightings are fabulous.

12 th May

After a shocking night of very little sleep we headed out around 7pm. Interestingly we have been eating dinner before going out as opposed to taking dinner with us. I'm not sure why this is, but it does mean we start later. I think it is to do with not crossing over with the other groups as they are usually just getting back when we head out. We were all a little nervous of the weather as we headed out as there are some definite rain clouds around. I found out later

MG had been thinking it was a terrible idea and I know Mat was sceptical. I had a case of mums' optimism so wasn't too worried. Fortunately my optimism won out and there was only one section of about 15 mins where we had to retire to inside the car due to the rain! Thanks Mum, *spoiler alert* in actual fact we saw more in that 15 mins than we had earlier in the night!

Turns out the more you have seen the less you stop as the nights go by. Not a bad thing but it does make for long periods between sightings. Also, who would have thought leopard cats would make it on to the no stopping list! That's how many sightings we have had. Although to be fair we still stop if it looks like a good sighting and I'd stop every time if it was up to me!

Tonight's haul consisted predominantly of Island Palm civets which we didn't often stop for. These guys have a distinctive sweet odour and you will often smell them even if you don't see them. We also had a great sighting of a Wallace's flying frog which MG was quite excited by as it was the first in a long while due to the lack of rain. He even made Mat get out his proper camera to take a photo! Respect! These guys are a very attractive green and gold frog quite reminiscent of our green tree frogs. Thinking about it I should have got out to take a closer one with my phone but I have only just now thought of it. Shows how tired I was.

It wasn't long after this that the rain really came down and we squeezed into the 4 x 4. Eyes now glued to the road ahead we were rewarded by the crossing of a long tail porcupine! This is a bit of a rarity and a first for me. It is more the shape of a civet or mongoose than what you normally think associate with a porcupine, but scruffy with small spikes. Wasn't a super good sighting but definitely recognisable. The rain started to ease and MG got back out to spotlight with the promise to stop if he saw anything but again it was through watching the road he'd we saw our next mammal, another porcupine but this time a Malayan which is much larger and looks more like what you know as a porcupine.



Malayan Porcupine

Next up was a Dog Tooth Cat snake. It was about 2 m and with a beautiful spot pattern.

We made it to a hut that we could stop at and enjoyed a coffee while waiting to see what the weather had in store. Given this was Mats second last night and if we called it early and it rained tomorrow, he would miss out MG made the call to risk it and keep going. This was another good call as we only had a light sprinkling of rain for the rest of the night. Mind you it was a very quiet night. As I said we saw plenty of leopard cats and Island Palm Civets but rarely stopped. We did see a Hoses Flying Pygmy Squirrel (It looked like a flying brown ball), a pair of Malayan porcupines, a striped bronze back snake and a glimpse of a very well hidden mouse deer. I was so tired there were times I was actually wishing us home but then I'd see something or even just look at the stars and remember just how special it is here and get back into the groove.

May 13

Fortunately, I had a better sleep but I'm still pretty tired. One thing I have enjoyed is the thinking time you have on a safari drive. I've been contemplating the difference between "wild" vs "habituated" vs "domesticated". The animals here are still very much "wild" even though there are safari drives pretty much every night. Some will sit and watch you from a fairly exposed position but on

the whole they move off the road and into the bushes fairly quickly. On the Kinabatangan they are more habituated and tend to not pay you too much attention. Partly I guess because you are on the water and they are in the trees. In other places, like Madagascar and Costa Rica, they often have feeding stations where animals are encouraged to come hang out. Even Africa uses water sources in this way. Animals in these areas are way more habituated to the point of almost seeming domesticated and sometimes you are even allowed to feed them. I'm not a fan of feeding wildlife, a) it can make for problem human - animal interactions, B) it can be bad for their health; but also it changes the experience you have. Don't get me wrong I have sat at numerous feeding stations, or man-made water sources watching the assorted animals come and go but you do feel like you could be at a zoo. I enjoy the thrill of the chase but I also love being able to just sit with habituated animals as they go about their business without showing you any care. I've been very fortunate that I've got to experience this with numerous animals over the years, especially as more often than not it was just my mother and I that were present as I never had the funds to join wildlife tours so it was just chance encounters. Now that I've had the chance to go on such tours I can really appreciate how lucky we have been. So much goes into providing these kinds of opportunities to the paying guest. What I especially like is having the knowledge of the guides to find, positively identify and then explain to you about the various animals and their habits. A good guide is definitely worth every penny. MG is one such guide, his interpersonal skills are definitely his own but there aren't many people I know who can spend 7 hrs spotlighting with the energy and commitment he does, nor with the amazing visual processing skills that allow him to spot a stick insect at night as we drive by!!!!

Whilst tonight's night drive didn't provide us with a lot of sightings there were some pretty good ones of animals I hadn't seen properly before. I even got a good photo of Wallace's Flying Frog with my phone!



Wallace's Flying Frog

We had a Moon Rat walk right past our vehicle, behaviour which MG has never seen before. This is a white rat that is about the size of a possum and kind of

resembles the American possums. We got to see a Hoses Pygmy Flying squirrel properly. This guy is very like our sugar glider in size and shape. They rarely sit still so to have a brief moment where it did was magic. Lastly was the Sunda Stink Badger or skunk. I've mostly only smelt them. It is a cute little fellow with beady eyes and a white spiky hairdo a bit like Rod Stewart! The white continues down his back to his stumpy tail like a mullet or rats tail! Having seen this guy now I realised I saw one back in the mid 2000's on my 2nd trip to Borneo, didn't see it clearly at the time so couldn't ID it but the shape and walking style match.

Of course it wouldn't be a good night safari without having seen a few leopard cats as well!



14/15 May

I'm just going to run a couple of nights in together as I didn't get around to writing yesterday.

Had no sleep really, crazy how that works sometimes! It is going to make for a long night! MG's wife Alcey is here at the moment. Lovely gal, incredibly capable and tiny at probably 5 ft. She is also a guide at Adventure Alternative Borneo (AAB). They have 3 regular female guides which is great, and from all reports they are exceptional guides.

At dinner I watched the Malay boys serve up the food. They all look like they are teenagers, all have this messy hair thing going on and they move in this very quiet, gentle but nervous way. They all come out with plates at the same time it's so cute!

There has hardly been a day when I haven't seen something new even if it was just an insect. I've added Leaf-nosed Pit Viper, a few stick insects, a tarantula and Banded Civet to my list. The latter was quite exciting as its banded pattern is very reminiscent of a thylacine! (an extinct Australian marsupial reminiscent of a dog) I had two very good sightings. The first was in the bushes but quite visible as it munched away on some unlucky animal. The next materialised beside us and crossed the road just behind us giving me a great look at the crazy banding. It looks like someone stencilled it on to copy the Thylacine!



Photo by Mike Gordon

Banded Palm Civet

I was also pretty stoked with the tarantula too, love these guys. Apparently, the one here can be quite blue in colour. The one we saw was very pale but that may be partly the strong light washing it out.

On one of the nights we got rained out halfway through so the second day we went out for an afternoon drive as well. It was definitely not as good for mammal sightings but we did get a few birds which was nice. We saw a very large group of Rhinoceros hornbills flying over, must have been 40 odd! I really do enjoy driving along during this time especially if it's not too hot.

With an afternoon drive as well as a night drive it was a very long night. I really don't know how MG or Zac our driver manage it. Even after having had a great nights sleep I was struggling with my attention. Partly I guess it is to do with

having sooo much going on in my personal life with trying to decided what I'm doing next. I've not been tested like this in ages.

Luckily there were enough sightings I could pull myself back to the present. Especially blessed to have a couple more good leopard cat sightings so I feel even if I don't see my clouded tonight it has been a very successful trip. I also have a new motto "Regret nothing, you made the right decision at the time."

16 may

Second last day or really last day as tomorrow is a travel day. Always super sad to reach this point in the trip. I am happy with how it's all gone and definitely know having MG is the way to go. Next time I'll try and organise the trip ahead of time so can get some fellow companions as it's not financially viable to do it alone even for a few days.

Tonight's safari was quiet but I still had a couple of first timers, the stunning Green Crested Lizard, Harlequin Tree Frog and Dark Eared Tree Frog.



Photo by Mike Gordon

Harlequin Tree Frog

Of course there was the usual suspects, Malay Civets, Island Palm Civets, Stripped Palm Civet, Slow Loris and assort flying squirrels.



Photo by Mike Gordon

Philippine Slow Loris



We also had some great Leopard Cat sightings and I actually got one on phone video! It wasn't facing me which was a shame but I'll take it.

The drive out of Dermakot was fairly uneventful but we did see a king cobra crossing the road. It had to be a good 4 mtrs and spanned the entire road and then some. Glad we were in the car and saw it before we got too close.

For the first time I am actually ready to go home. I think it will partly be as I've been travelling for the past 11 weeks, granted 5 were in China so semi settled, but still transient. Unfortunately I'm going home to an equally transient space with no clear direction. Wish me luck on my next path

Borneo Anglehead lizard *Gonocephalus Bornensis* (I think)
Green crested lizard *Bronchocela cristatella*
Bornean Leaf-nosed pit viper *Craspedocephalus borneensis*
Sunda King cobra *Ophiophagus bungarus*
Yellow Vine snake *Ahaetulla prasina*
Dog tooth cat snake *Boiga cynodon*
Striped bronzeback snake *Dendrelaphis caudolineatus*
Bornean Keeled Pit Viper *Tropidolaemus subannulatus*
Reticulated Python *Malayopython reticulatus*

Harlequin tree frog *Rhacophorus pardalis*
Dark ear tree frog *Polypedates macrotis*
Wallace's flying frog *Rhacophorus nigropalmatus*

Blue-banded Kingfisher *Alcedo peninsulae*
Buffy fish owl *Ketupa ketupu*
Wreathed horn bill *Rhyticeros undulatus*
Rhinoceros Horn bill *Buceros rhinoceros*
Blyth's Paradise Flycatcher *Terpsiphone affinis*
Barred eagle-owl *Ketupa sumatrana*
Black and Red Broadbill *Cymbirhynchus macrorhynchos*
Oriental Dollar bird *Eurystomus orientalis*
White crowned shama *Copsychus stricklandii*
Chestnut breasted Malkoha *Phaenicophaeus curvirostris*
Lesser coucal *Centropus bengalensis*

Tube Nose Bat (not sure which one)
Borneo Stink Badger *Mydaus javanensis lucifer*
Island Palm Civet *Paradoxurus hermaphroditus*
Malayan civet *Viverra zangalunga*
Striped Palm Civet or Small-toothed Palm civet *Arctogalidia trivirgata*
Banded Palm Civet *Hemigalus derbyanus*
Sambar Deer *Rusa unicolor*
Thomas's Flying Squirrel *Aeromys thomasi*
Red Giant Flying Squirrel *Petaurista petaurista*
Black Flying Squirrel *Aeromys tephromelas*
Hoses Pygmy Flying Squirrel *Petaurillus hosei*
Sunda Tree Mouse *Chiropodomys major*

Long-tailed Porcupine *Trichys fasciculata*
Malayan Porcupine *Hystrix brachyura*
Lesser Mouse Deer *Tragulus Kanchil*
Moonrat *Echinosorex gymnure*
Phillippine Slow Loris *Nyciticebus menagensis*
Sunda Leopard Cat *Prionailurus javanensis*

2 species of Stick insect
Tarantula