



Far from the
**MADDING
CROWD**

By Sreerema Banoo

Ba Kelalan is perfect for reconnecting with nature and getting off the grid.

The village swimming pool

ONE over, two under, two over, one under, one over, two under, two over, one under... I chant to myself as I clumsily attempt to weave the base of a basket (at least that is the goal), all the while keeping all the strips of plastic from unravelling.

I am quite proud of my handiwork and show the results to Auntie Rinai. She takes one look at it, shakes her head and proceeds to unravel the weave. She starts over, and before long she has the start of the base while I stare helplessly. I decide to throw in the towel – basket making, I say to myself, will turn me into a basket case.

My travel mate, Jenifer on the other hand perseveres and is determined to crack the code of basket weaving. “There is a method to this,” she mutters obstinately. But it’s not long before she too admits defeat. “We’re better off just sticking to making bread,” she says, checking on the dough that’s been proving near the window.

We are in the village of Long Rusu, one of nine villages in Ba Kelalan, nestled in the highlands of Sarawak, and the last couple of days have been nothing if not restful (the headache of basket weaving aside).

Since our arrival we have done nothing but eat, nap, read, and chat with the friendly villagers. These are just the kind of activities one would prescribe to forget the hustle and bustle of city life. That’s made easier by the fact that here in the highlands there is no mobile phone coverage, and so in effect, there is no Internet and its attached distractions. It is bliss, really.

Jenifer and I decided on visiting Ba Kelalan early this year, and by chance a mutual friend, Carolyn, who divides her time between KL and Ba Kelalan offered to organise the trip for us, including hosting us at her homestay in Long Rusu.

Ba Kelalan is located in the Bario Highlands, but unlike its more famous sister village of Bario, it receives fewer visitors. The people of Ba Kelalan, who are from the Lun Bawang tribe, are mainly farmers and over the course of our visit we see that these soft-spoken and friendly people have a deep sense of pride for their land and culture.

The journey to Ba Kelalan begins in Miri, and the easiest way is via air thanks to Malaysia Airlines’ rural air service, MASWings, which offers three flights a week to the highland settlement. The journey on the 19-seat Twin Otter aircraft takes about 1½-hours, including a 10-minute transit in the town of Lawas. Part of the joy of travel is the journey and that is true in this case, with the fun beginning at the



1 Nursery in preparation for the planting season
 2 Auntie Rinai (left) and Auntie Rose attempt to teach us basket weaving
 3 Ba Kelalan is named after the Kelalan river

4 A weigh-in is required of every passenger
 5 After a 10-minute transit we are off to Ba Kelalan
 6 A view of the cockpit

7 Green as far as the eye can see, one would be forgiven for thinking that they've arrived in paradise

Miri airport itself, where all passengers have to be weighed (with their hand luggage) during check-in.

Then there is the flight itself – we get onboard, the pilot makes a short announcement to belt up and we take off. During the first half of the flight (to Lawas) we fly over large tracts of oil palm plantations and small riverine villages and towns. The vistas on the second half of the journey are more spectacular. We fly over lush virgin jungles and hills, and as the plane dips, you catch a glimpse of settlements along the Kelalan river. It is these settlements that collectively make up Ba Kelalan, located some 1,000 metres above sea level.

The plane touches down in Buduk Nur, the largest village in Ba Kelalan, and we are met by our hosts Carolyn and her husband Paulus who run a homestay in the neighbouring village of Long Rusu.

It's a small village (population 20) comprising nine houses and a church that sit on a small valley overlooking paddy fields. Just beyond the fields is a mountain range over which lies Kalimantan, Indonesia. It is truly a pastoral setting, with chickens roaming around, dogs sleeping in the sun and buffaloes chewing idly in the meadow.

First thing on our itinerary is to just relax (we do a lot of that over the next three days), have some lunch and then just lounge about, for although the climate in Ba Kelalan is relatively cool (it can get pretty chilly in the evenings and early mornings), we are still in Southeast Asia and the afternoon heat is intense.

In the early evening, we bundle into the pick-up truck and make our way to the edge of Ba Kelalan. From here we make our way on foot into a jungle to forage for vegetables and herbs – well, Paulus does that anyway, Jenifer and I tag along and basically try not to fall into the stream or get scratched by some of the thorny shrubs.

We find an abundance of bunga kantan – in all its forms from the pods to the bud and flower – and the aroma is intoxicating.



These bunga kantan feature prominently in our dinner later that evening – stir fried with fiddlehead shoots that were also foraged from the jungle, tossed in a pomelo salad – as well as breakfast the next day where it’s mixed into the rice porridge.

Food – the partaking of it, that is – is a big part of our holiday in Ba Kelalan, and rightly so for the greens are fresh and tasty (and there are plenty of it!), the fruits, in particular the pineapple, delectably sweet, and the fish incredibly fresh. Meat eaters will also appreciate the availability of game meats such as wild boar and venison. For me though, the highlight of the meals in Ba Kelalan was the rice, from the fluffy white Adan rice (which Ba Kelalan is known for), to the unique red and black or purple rice.

Rice is an important part of the lives and culture of the Lun Bawang people and that importance is reflected on the table with rice being eaten and honoured at every meal.

The best way to burn off what we had eaten was to walk it off, and there is no shortage of walks or treks here. One morning we trekked

up a small hill, through a jungle to a vantage point, aptly called the viewpoint, that afforded us a panoramic view of Buduk Nur and the neighbouring village of Long Langai. If you’re up to a more challenging trek, there is Mount Murud. At 2,650m, Sarawak’s highest mountain is easily accessible from Ba Kelalan.

Apart from the natural beauty of the surroundings, Ba Kelalan also has a few sites of tourism interest such as crocodile mound fashioned from soil and earth. These sites celebrate the Lun Bawang people’s cultural past – before embracing Christianity, head-hunting was practiced and the strength of the warriors were celebrated with the building of these crocodile mounds where much singing, drinking and celebrating would take place.

There’s also fishing, and if you are around during the planting season in August you could also help the villagers plant paddy. But really, while you can easily fill the hours with activities, as we discovered, Ba Kelalan is an ideal destination to escape the demands and distractions of city life. Sometimes, getting off the grid is one of the best parts of a holiday. ■

