



# Sultans & speedboats

LUXURIOUS PALACES, UNEXPECTED SPORTS  
AND AMUSING MONKEYS AWAIT THE VISITOR TO  
THIS TINY BUT INTRIGUING ASIAN SULTANATE.

By Richard Asher

“**Y**our final stop, is Brunei?” asks the stewardess, with a bundle of landing cards in her hand. “Yes indeed,” I reply. “Not transit?” she continues with a puzzled look. “You’re getting off in Brunei, sir?”

I begin to doubt myself. Should I stay on board? Am I doing something weird? Apparently so: finally furnished with a landing card, I turn to watch her skip briskly through the rest of the plane. Heads shake on both sides of the aisle.

I shrug and bury my nose in my novel. I’m still quite happy to be getting off in Brunei Darussalam. I’ll take my chances.

Brunei knows it can’t live off the fat of its natural resources forever, and wants the world’s tourists to see that this small kingdom on Borneo is worth a stopover. Golfers are part of the

demographic they’re after, so it’s a neat trick that a golf course is about the first thing anyone sees when they land: the RBA Golf Club is right at the end of the runway.

I’m thoroughly cranky and tired by the time I arrive at the Empire Hotel & Country Club. So I watch a savage tropical storm of wind, thunder and rain from my sheltered balcony, then collapse into one of the most comfortable beds I’ve ever known at 8pm Brunei time.

## THE BUZZ IN BANDAR

I didn’t expect to write this, but Bandar Seri Begawan is cool. This has a lot to do with speeding motorboats. The waterfront area is, by day and by night, an inferno of racing boats, slap-slapping their way across the choppy French onion soup that is the Brunei River.

This is way more interesting than your average Formula 1 Powerboat event. It’s main selling point for the bystander is that the boatmen (I spotted a boatwoman, too) are all going in different directions. They’re actually water taxis carrying various students, housewives and businesspeople from the downtown shore to the (also cool) water villages across the water. So they’re flat out, every which way. At night, they continue the game, and do it by little more than household torchlight. Somehow they manage to miss crashing into each other, but boy do they give the place a buzz. Literally.

I’m not surprised to learn that official races between these water taxis are not unheard of. I get the strong impression that the passenger fares are just a bonus for some of these guys. They look like









Golf tourism is key to Brunei's future, and with courses like this the future looks bright

## 'I'd expected a slick Gulf-style yawn of a city teeming with modern skyscrapers. Not so'

they'd charge back and forth all day for nothing if they had to.

All this tomfoolery puts the seal on Bandar's unmistakable X-factor. There's the feel of a steamy, bustling Asian trading port of legend; an exotic Oriental trading port that I wasn't ready for. I'd expected a slick Gulf-style yawn of a city, teeming with modern skyscrapers, banks and McDonald's. Not so.

It's not just the boats. Add to them the golden domes of the Sultan's mighty palace of nearly 2000 rooms, the call to prayer echoing across the town and the historic but decidedly lived-in water village, and you've got yourself as spicy an Oriental concoction as you could want.

Brunei's only McDonald's is, in fact, well away from the downtown area. Skyscrapers are non-existent, because buildings aren't allowed to be higher than the 58-metre minarets of the Jame'Asr Hassanil Bolkliah mosque.

### LONG LIVE THE SULTAN

Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkliah is one of only a handful of absolute rulers in the world. In Brunei, the Sultan gets a lot of the credit for the good life people lead.

It is an intriguing and arguably unique setup. Those who reckon a

benevolent dictatorship is the best form of government have a pretty good example in Brunei.

Okay, the personality cult stuff is there, and nowhere is it more evident than just up the road from the waterfront, where a vast portrait of the Sultan overlooks the daily comings and goings.

But where it differs from, say, North Korea, is that there are deeds to back up the propaganda. Bruneians get practically free health care and education, which isn't bad considering they don't pay tax. They can also get free land or a free house if it's needed. The roads are good, petrol is cheap and it's one of the safest countries around. Retirement age is a spritely 60. And when things do need paying for, they're cheaper than in, say, Australia.

In a fleeting superficial visit such as mine, you're forced to conclude that true democracy isn't of great concern to a small population that lives well.

### ROYAL REGALIA

Since you can't understand Brunei without understanding its royalty, the free (another clever goodwill gesture from the Sultan) Royal Regalia Building is worth a peek. There's a recreation of the room where he was coronated in



A caddy is one thing, but a waiter?

## 'YOUR MAJESTY' JUST WON'T CUT IT

Brunei isn't an especially large place, so there's always a reasonable chance that you might bump into the Sultan. If you do happen to cross paths, it's best to get his title right. Luckily, it's simple enough to remember:

*His Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkliah Mu'izzaddin Waddaulah ibni Al-Marhum Sultan Haji Omar Ali Saifuddien Sa'adul Khairi Waddien, Sultan and Yang Di-Pertuan of Brunei Darussalam.*



Start your engines: Brunei's water taxis are known to enjoy a race or two



## THE GOLF

When they're not racing boats or indulging in tug of war (considered the national sport), many Bruneians enjoy a spot of golf. The Empire Country Club is the only world-class course in the country, and it's ever so convenient if you're staying at the hotel. Designed by Jack Nicklaus, it's not your average forgiving resort course – and yes, there are a few bunkers! Deep jungle lines many of the holes, which is disconcerting if you tend to spray it. If that's you, bring many balls.

The Empire – no stranger to pro events after hosting the Asian Tour's Brunei Open for several years – will be hosting the Royal Trophy (Asia versus Europe) matches this December. While the contest should be a good one, the real intrigue lies in who will get the Emperor Suite. Home captain Jose Maria Olazabal? Or will the host, Joe Ozaki, get first choice? There was no word yet at the time of writing.

There are only a handful of other courses in Brunei. The RBA GC is next best, although some way behind the Empire. Wedged between the airport and a highway, and dominated by water, it's Brunei's answer to The Lakes GC in Sydney. But although in reasonable condition, it's flat, open and offers little respite from the elements.

The Pantai Mentiri Golf Club has the feel of an Australian country course, and its condition is pretty rough. But it does have a superb seaside location, with better views than the Empire – you can see the Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak across the water. There's also less jungle in which to lose balls. If that sounds good to you, it could be worth an outing.

1968, complete with a cat of solid gold – one of several pre-Islamic remnants in the royal setup.

There are also some curiosities in the section where the Sultan's gifts from various heads of state are housed. Of particular comedy value is the walrus statuette given by former Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien. Somewhat more chillingly, there also happens to be a self-aggrandising shield (with portrait, naturally) from Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, best known for his ongoing work in butchering his opposition into non-existence.

Not far away is that Jame'Asr Hassanil Bolkhiah mosque, built in 1994 and dedicated to the current Sultan. He's the 29th ruler of Brunei, so naturally there are 29 steps up to the main hall, 29 columns inside and 29 domes on top. Anybody can visit – usual dress codes apply – and it's definitely worth doing so. The vast main hall is a marvel, not only for its enormous dome but also for its impossibly humongous Austrian chandelier.

## INTO THE EMPIRE

Curiously enough, this was the most opulent thing I saw in a country that was way less flashy than I'd expected. The exception is the Empire, playground for local royalty and discerning tourists alike. It's not the sort of hotel you forget easily, what with the gold-crystal camel (not life-sized, sadly) in the lobby and the sheer scale of the central Atrium, which towers to 53 metres.

The rooms have just had a renovation, but the keycards remain as uncooperative as keycards all over the world. They're hands-down the worst invention to hit the travel industry in the last two decades. As usual, I have to insert the card anywhere between five and 17 times before the door tires of the game and lets me in. Since no hotel on earth is able to make the damn things work properly, how about we all go back to regular keys? First time, every time... what was wrong with that?

One room that is worth any amount of hassle to get into, though, is the Emperor Suite. This really is opulent, and its lists of awards proves I'm not the only one





who thinks so. It's basically an upper-class suburban house modified to fit the top floor of a hotel, complete with a substantial indoor swimming pool area. Prince Charles is among the celebrities to have stayed here (Camilla stayed across the hall in the Empress Suite, should you be curious), and for \$16,600 a night it can be yours.

### BRIDES AND APES

On the way back to the airport, the car passes beneath an elaborate hoarding that adorns a bridge across the highway. It's to do with the royal wedding, kicking off just as I'm departing. One of the Sultan's daughters is getting hitched, and a week's festivities are just underway.

With congratulatory banners hanging above shop entrances and free concerts all over town, it's hard to escape that feeling that you're in some kind of fairy story. All the Kingdom rejoices, feasts and toasts the happy Prince and Princess, who live happily ever after. Can it really be so?

There must be another face to

Brunei, one that gives less cause for smugness. But I haven't found it on this trip. The only thing that seems to mildly upset the locals (and me) is that the orangutans of Borneo have not seen fit to cross the border, preferring to remain resolutely Indonesian or Malaysian. It's fair to say Brunei lags behind its neighbours when it comes to its hairy primate offerings.

On the subject of apes, it should be noted that the Bahasa Brunei language uses the same word for 'proboscis monkey' and 'white person'. It's a complicated story that dates back to the original Dutch explorers landing in these parts, at which point the inhabitants noted that Europeans had terribly large noses.

I don't mean to imply that Bruneians are secretly sniggering at tourists. On the contrary, the welcome is pretty good and I found that smiles were always returned. Next time the air hostess comes round with those landing cards, I'll be happy to be the odd one out again. And I might just be a tad smug about it.

## ALL YOUR TRAVEL DETAILS

BRUNEIAN HOSPITALITY AT ITS BEST

### WHERE TO STAY

#### EMPIRE HOTEL & COUNTRY CLUB

The hotel of choice for discerning royals and heads of state. The place to sleep and be seen sleeping. This gargantuan hotel is luxurious and the facilities seemingly boundless.

Jerudong

+673 241 8888

[theempirehotel.com](http://theempirehotel.com)

#### RADISSON

Has few advantages over the Empire, but a location close to Bandar Seri Begawan is potentially one of them.

Jalan Sungai Kianggeh

+673 224 4272

[radisson.com](http://radisson.com)

### FOOD AND RESTAURANTS

#### GADONG NIGHT MARKET

Not strictly luxury dining, but this is a cultural and culinary experience not to be missed. Try all sorts of things you've never heard of, and pay next to nothing for it.

Gadong, near Bandar Seri Begawan

### WHERE TO PLAY

#### EMPIRE HOTEL & COUNTRY CLUB

Brunei's premier course, it's a Jack Nicklaus design that hosts the Royal Trophy in December 2012. There's also a floodlit driving range.

Jerudong

+673 241 8222

[theempirehotel.com](http://theempirehotel.com)

#### RBA GOLF CLUB

Great if you like a flat course and planes taking off over your head!

Off Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah Highway, near airport

+673 234 3724

#### PANTAI MENTIRI

Bottom of the conditioning ladder, it's nonetheless a friendly seaside course with better views than either of those above.

Jalan Kota Batu, Peti Surat

+673 279 1021

### FLIGHTS

#### ROYAL BRUNEI AIRLINES

Flights from Melbourne only  
[bruneiair.com/australia](http://bruneiair.com/australia)