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Super ecotourism destinations in Malaysia

Trekking through lush rainforests to see endangered species such as orangutans and proboscis monkeys, white-water rafting down Sungai Kampar or exploring mangrove swamps ... when it comes to ecotourism, Malaysia has so much to offer as it is home to a diverse array of ecosystems, and a wide variety of flora and fauna.

What is ecotourism?

The term ecotourism, which emerged in the late 1980s, refers to a form of sustainable tourism that focuses on responsible travel to natural

areas, with the aim of preserving the environment and promoting local communities. It seeks to minimise the negative impact of tourism on the environment, while providing economic and social benefits to

local communities. Ecotourism involves activities such as hiking, birdwatching, and wildlife viewing, and often takes place in protected areas such as national parks and wildlife reserves. It promotes conservation by

providing financial incentives for the preservation of natural habitats and biodiversity.

Taman Negara National Park

Spanning across three states – Pahang, Kelantan and Terengganu – Taman Negara is Malaysia's premier National Park. It is one of the oldest tropical rainforests in the world, estimated to be 130 million years old. It is home to rare mammals including the Malayan Tiger, as well as birds such as hornbills and the rare Malayan peacock-pheasant. Here, mountain climbers can scale Gunung Tahan, the highest mountain (2,187m) in Peninsular Malaysia.

Gunung Mulu National Park, Sarawak

In Sarawak, you can find this famous park that merges caves, forests, and karst stone formations, and is teeming with Malaysia's rich biodiversity. Gunung Mulu National Park in Sarawak, is the most studied tropical karst area in the world. The park is dominated by Gunung Mulu (2,377m), a sandstone pinnacle. The caves here are home to millions of cave swiftlets and bats. Also look out for giant porcupines and insects, and thousands of incredible plants!

Kinabatangan River, Sabah

This is Malaysia's second-longest river (560km) stretching from Sabah's interior to the Sulu Sea, snaking through the Sabah lowlands and supporting a wide variety of wildlife, including the orangutan and proboscis monkey. A total of 26,000ha was gazetted as the 'Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary' under the State's Wildlife Conservation Enactment of 1997.

Kuala Gandah Elephant Sanctuary, Pahang

Run by the Department of Wildlife and National Parks, Kuala Gandah Elephant Sanctuary offers a safe sanctuary for endangered and orphaned elephants that have been rescued from all over the peninsula. The sanctuary promotes public awareness of the elephants' plight in Malaysia and educates the public on the significance of habitat and environmental protection. Activities include feeding and bathing the elephants.

Santubong, Sarawak

The Santubong area is one of the best places in Sarawak to see the rare Irrawaddy dolphin, along the Santubong, Salak and Buntal river estuaries. Dolphin-watching tours run from April-November, which can be combined with a mangrove cruise where you can see other fascinating wildlife including crocodiles, mudskippers, crabs, shellfish and proboscis monkeys. On rare occasions you might spot finless porpoises and Indo-pacific humpback dolphins.

Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM) Selangor

FRIM is one of the leading institutions in tropical forestry research in the world. The Institute sits on a 545-ha site adjacent to the Bukit Lagong Forest Reserve in the Kepong municipality. Only 30 minutes away from Kuala Lumpur, the national heritage site is home to lush green forests, and beautiful flora and fauna. Here, you can camp, go on a picnic or do some bird-watching. Also check out their popular canopy walkway, which offers a panoramic view of the forest and KL.

The Royal Belum State Park, Perak

The Royal Belum State Park is located within the Belum-Temengor rainforest complex. Together with Taman Negara National Park it is one of the oldest rainforests in the world, dating back over 130 million years. It is home to 10 hornbill species and more than 3000 species of flowering plants, including the world's largest flower (the Rafflesia). It's also the natural habitat for some of the world's most threatened mammals, such as the Malayan Tiger and Sumatran Rhinoceros.

Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre, Sabah

The Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre (SOURC) was established in 1964 to rehabilitate orphaned, injured or displaced orangutans, and return them back to the wild. Under the administration of Sabah Wildlife Department, the centre is located within the Kabili Sepilok Forest Reserve. While you are here, you can also visit the Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre (BSBCC) next door.

Kilim Karst Geoforest Park, Kedah

Part of Unesco's network of global geoparks since 2006, the 4,354ha Kilim Karst Geoforest Park, 20 minutes from Kuala Lumpur, Langkawi offers some of the best ecotourism experiences thanks to its ancient geological heritage, natural wonders, myriad of flora and fauna, and vibrant local community. Kilim Geoforest Park is home to a sprawling mangrove forest and ancient gigantic limestone rock formations rising from the river bed, formed some 500 million years ago.

Gopeng, Perak

Gopeng white water rafting, on Sungai Kampar, is only 20 minutes from Ipoh. Sungai Kampar has 22 rapids which range from Grade 2 to Grade 3+, and is surrounded by lush rainforest. For those with a thirst for adventure, there are also caves and abseiling opportunities nearby.