

After an easy 20nm motor sailing close to the wind from Labuan, we entered the Muara channel, easily avoiding the reported submerged wall to the starboard side since the channel is wide. We had some current (3-4 kts?) against us so it took a while ... Port authority called us as we entered and asked the usual questions: *name of vessel, how many aboard, where sailing from, where planning to go anchor*. A big cargo also called us on VHF 16 to ask us to pass starboard to starboard. And even thanked us after we had passed each other. Like in Sabah, the people are quite nice! Got to see hangars with some of Brunei's navy ships and even sail under a new bridge just before getting at the Royal Brunei Yacht Club anchorage area in Serasa. The bridge has navigation lights showing red or green so you know where to pass under. The clearance height is also shown by led lights, 28 meters. We made it shortly before sundown and went by dinghy the next morning to clear in. Clearing in was easy, by 8am the various officials arrived at the ferry dock, as the first ferry departs at that time. Gave our clearance papers out of Labuan to Health, Port, Customs & Immigration (in that order). Took about 45min with zero cost. Later went ashore to check the Royal Brunei Yacht Club facility. Nicely set up with pool and restaurant and lots of kids' sailing activities scheduled as well as a small boatyard. Cost 5 BNB/day to use the facilities incl wifi at the bar and in the library. Met Paul, the current Commodore, a very nice person who made us feel welcome!

It is a long trip (1hour/2 public buses) to get into Bandar, the capital, from the Muara area, so we decided to go anchor at the Kota Batu RBYC annex facility closer to town and spend more time later at the Serasa RBYC when coming back before checking out of Brunei. We took advantage of the incoming tide to go into Sangai (river) Brunei and find a place to anchor closer to city center. In front of the Mangrove Paradise Resort, (where Allan of Intrepid Marine (who has a desk there) can arrange services for cruisers), the river was either too deep or too shallow for our comfort so we decided to keep going and anchor just before the new bridge (15m clearance) near the center of town, and the Water Village (a village on stilts), in an anchorage mentioned by earlier cruisers. There was lots of room altho some wake from passing water-taxis. Little did we know that a new law is now in force that no vessel can anchor anywhere close to town ..So just before sunset, we were told by a MPA patrol boat that we had to leave, just as it was getting dark! Sympathetic to our protests, but just following orders, they escorted us back to the RBYC Kota Batu anchorage but let us anchor in the middle of the river where depth is actually more shallow, 30ft versus 50+ft next RBYC). The officers were very nice and apologetic . We suggested that this new law be told to visitors when checking in :). So, practically the closest permissible option is to anchor near the RBYC Kota Batu. Not sure about the reason of that new law but it might be in relation to escalating thievery in town. Leaving your dinghy in town is also discouraged as thieves even stole an ambulance once! Big towns often tend to be more prone to thievery so it is probably a wise regulation that might be this time for our protection!

The personnel at RBYC were all very nice and we tried to be mindful of this plush annex restaurant near town. At 80 B\$/month, the membership is quite upscale! The floating dock is very practical to leave your dinghy with no worry. Some members come for lunch but the place rocks mostly in the evening (without loud noises :)
Via email and phone, Allan from Intrepid Tours arranged for us a driver and van to get diesel at a nearby petrol station (they even provide empty containers if you need). At 32Bc / liter plus

30B\$ for transport up to 300 l, you get diesel at half price of Malaysia (less than 1/3 price of Philippines!). To fill our dinghy/generator gasoline supplies, I just dinghied to a river fuel station and filled my jerrycans right in the dinghy (at 37 Bc / l, another bargain). Did not have a chance to meet Allan as he must probably have been too busy at the time ...

The most remarkable aspect of Bandar Seri Begawan (Bandar or BSB for short), the capital of Brunei, is the plenitude of architectural buildings and bridges. From mosques, sultan palaces to museums, there are plenty of photo opportunities! Everything is well kept and all museums are admission-free. To travel around from the RBYC in Kota Batu, you hop in a local bus or get a ride when someone stops to pick you up (either a free ride or an 'unofficial' taxi charging bus fare). Near the tourism office at the river edge is the main bus station with numbered lines going to all parts of the province. Unfortunately, the frequency of buses is: few and far between. From town back to Kota Batu and the YC, take bus 39. Cost is always 1B\$ to anywhere (50Bc for seniors over 60) but ask a transit ticket if it takes 2 rides to get to your destination. Taxis are quite expensive at 10x bus rates minimum. A good solution if you like to travel around is to rent a car and self-drive using Waze (better than Google Map). We used a comfortable car from J C Avenue Travel and Tour Services (eyien.iev@gmail.com) to visit all attractions around town on one day, and to go visit Temburong province on another day. We recommend the Maritime Museum (interesting underwater archaeology section) and Technology Museum (Technology not being IT at all, but the indigenous way of living – housing, fishing, hunting, ...). The Crown Regalia Museum is also a place to feel the monarchy in history and how citizens are treated. All 300,000 or so Brunei citizens enjoy free education & health care ... part of the income from oil resources. Plenty more insights, pros and cons, can be read online and in guide books. The shopping district of Gadong has little to offer as shopping in nearby Labuan is duty-free. No public selling of tobacco or alcohol here in this Muslim country but ok in private. All public buses stop at 6-7pm so a car will also be handy to go out for dinner. If you like to sample Malay food, we highly recommend the Tarindak Restaurant with views over the river and bridge. Great buffet with lots of tasty local dishes in spacious A/C restaurant that actually is part of the Royal Brunei Polo & Riding Club.

For a original day adventure, we decided to go visit the Sumbiling Eco-village in Temburong, a different province of Brunei (reputed to have the most extensive and pristine rain forest in this part of Borneo) separated from the capital province by a part of Malaysia! The shortest way to go to Temburong is to get to the ferry dock in town and take the water-taxi at 0745 or 0830 for a 45min river ride to the dock in Temburong and from there a van to the village. Last ferry back towards BSB is 315pm. (Contact Leslie Chiang : leslie@borneoguide.com) Comparing convenience, fun and costs, we decided to take the unconventional alternative for visitors, which was to drive there on our own. And for the first time in our traveling, we got 8 stamps in our passports in 1 day as we had to pass the border from Brunei to enter Malaysia then after 45km, exit Malaysia and reenter Brunei, and did it in reverse in the afternoon after our visit to the Sumbiling Eco-village! Leslie has been working with the Sumbiling community to develop the eco-village as a livelihood, showing visitors their everyday way of life: foraging food in the jungle and in their garden, medicinal herbs, hunting & fishing, river trips, and preparing wild, healthy, and tasty meals ... got a chance to blow poison darts like in Borneo lore .. also you can swim in the river as crocodiles sleep during the day! The Eco Village has basic, but comfortable accommodations if you'd like to stay longer.

After a week of discovering this part of Brunei, we decided to stop a few days back at the RBYC in Serasa to first scuba some of the wrecks with Poni Divers and then easy self-check

out with the local authorities before sailing back to Labuan. We timed our sailing back to Serasa to take advantage of the outgoing current in the river and arrived while local kids were sailing small dinghies around. We can recommend Poni Divers (www.ponidivers.com): well organized, special dive speedboat and top equipment. It took us no time to travel in comfort to 2 great dives: on Bokiah Wreck, packed with coral and schools of fish in 24m and a broken oil rig in 18m. You can dinghy from the RBYC to the dive center located just a few hundred yards left of the RBYC. Look for the Grand Stand/stadium overlooking the water, the center is attached to this complex. Back at the RBYC, we met Paul Turton, the very pleasant Commodore of the RBYC, checked on internet, had a nice lunch from their extensive menu, traded some paperbacks and checked on our emails via their wifi (speed not very impressive).

As far as internet goes, we were also quite disappointed in the services offered by the local company, Progresif. They sounded better than the other company with unlimited plans and cheaper rates (although 4x price than in Malaysia) but the speed was very low at Kota Batu RBYC so the unlimited did not really justify the 25B\$/week visitors plan and the 1Gb/week visitor plan lasted less than 1 day using smart phone to navigate in town! So the best is to use the wifi at the RBYC included in the 5B\$ daily temporary cruiser membership including use of facilities, dock, washing machine!

Checking out at the ferry docks had us run a treasure hunt again, going from one office to the other with lots of forms to fill & copies to give .. but at least all 5 offices are located conveniently together, people are nice and it cost nothing but some time !

Did we enjoy Brunei? yes for the people, grandiose sights, cheaper fuel, the chance to leave Malaysia easily and return to get another 3 mo visa... Will we return? Yes, we hope so if we revisit Borneo ... perhaps with Sail Malaysia to the East in 2-3 years ???

After drinks & munchies at the YC, we had a good night of sleep before our return to Malaysia, this time to explore Sarawak >>> see Malaysia – Borneo