

JAPAN



TRAVEL

My Paradise: Brunei: Tiny Asian nation of big promises

By RON ROMAN

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Kayaking in the hotel's outdoor pool. (Photo by Ron Roman)

In early spring my Better Half (Yeon Hee) and I, along with her brother and his wife, decided to take a Seoul-based tour-guided trip to the tiny Royal Kingdom of Brunei on the northern coastline of the island of Borneo. It's a Muslim nation. We arrived during Ramadan, the Muslim Holy Month, though that didn't totally restrict most sightseeing activities. Of the 20-plus countries I've been to in the Far East alone, it was one of 10 or so remaining to check off on my to-do bucket list.

Before going further, of my 45 countries and territories visited worldwide, let me state unequivocally Brunei has the most difficult visa-entry protocol to navigate. Seemingly endless hoops to jump in and out of, all in tiny print on smart-phone screens and then to be confirmed with your PC email address or smart phone, if your eyes can still survive the strain. Took me an hour and 15 minutes. If you can wade through this quagmire, though, your trip will definitely be worthwhile.

We left Incheon International Airport late at night arriving at Brunei International Airport around 3 a.m. and met our Korean tour guide (“Huny”) and local driver, plus six others in our group, and went straight to the Higher Hotel. Not a bad place to stay, if you don’t mind getting stuck in the elevator (I did while racing to the toilet!) or working out in the mini-gym where equipment was sparse and a good portion malfunctioning. But, overall, food and sleeping accommodations were decent enough.

Late in the morning we checked out and ate lunch at a local Chinese restaurant. (During Ramadan in the daytime, Muslims are expected to abstain from food and drink. The facades of restaurants may be covered so to appear closed.) We chowed down on an ordinary outlay of Chinese cuisine and washed it down with hot tea. But beer boozers beware: Brunei is a teetotalling country. No beer guzzling allowed. No liquor stores of any kind, tobacco distributors, and few tattoo parlors, none prominently advertised. It’s not Saudi Arabia, let alone Afghanistan, but culturally conservative nonetheless. In fact, I didn’t see a single cigarette butt anywhere. Also note men’s shorts are prohibited when visiting mosques. Wear long pants, guys. Got it?

Five-star hotel

We would be on our way to the five-star, palatial Brunei Empire Hotel, the number one hotel in the country, according to Huny, and one of the finest in Asia, if not the world. From outside the entrance to the reception desk of the atrium, you’ll see a huge chandelier. Continue inside and you’ll walk into a magnificent marvel of classic Islamic architecture blended with towering modern Western-style white columns with gold-gilded tapestry sitting atop gleaming marble floors. Look straight up. The rotunda inside the atrium resembles the rotunda of the U.S. Capitol. Walk out the main atrium and you’ll see multiple “mini- hotels” five stories high throughout the complex.



Inside the Brunei Empire Hotel atrium. (Photo by Ron Roman)

The complex grounds look like an oversized golf course, perhaps because it has one designed by golf great Jack Nicklaus. Inside the expansive spread of individual hotels are beautifully decorated and brilliantly colored rooms. A copy of the Muslim Quran complete with an English translation remains in every room. The copy in my room was about the most exquisitely formatted and elaborately designed book I ever saw. One thing, though: It's best not to visit during Ramadan. Some places may be shuttered, activities limited.

In the afternoon, we wandered around the complex, eventually deciding on canoeing in the huge outdoor swimming pool followed by a cool dip. It was soon time for dinner at a nearby Thai restaurant, then back to our hotel to sleep, though not before discovering a personalized Welcome Note from the Empire Hotel manager in our room. Nice.

There was time for a quick workout after breakfast the following day at the complex gym, the first full-fledged hotel gym I had ever set foot in — anywhere. After a quick box lunch, this would end our stay at this magnificent hotel.

Monkeys and crocs

We boarded our van for a little hike in Tasek Lama Recreational Park. Lots of fidgeting, spastic monkeys running wild amidst the famous timbaran tree, about 30 feet high, alongside water gum trees. A relaxing park to hike in with cool air and verdant vegetation.



Monkeys frolicking in Tasek Lama Recreational Park. (Photo by Ron Roman)

Next up was Gadong Market, ordinarily open at night, but because of Ramadan, now only open for business during the day. Lots of cheap drinks and dishes, but not to be consumed on premises during daytime in honor of Ramadan. And plenty of cats, fat and pregnant, lying lazily on the floor. My wife, a kind-hearted soul, couldn't resist buying fish to feed them. The locals stared and smiled. (Though you may see an occasional dog, Muslims generally don't like them: Islamic scripture. Caveat: There are exceptions, especially among Muslims living in non-Muslim countries.)



A vendor at Gadong Market. (Photo by Ron Roman)

Now it would be a long ride by Brunei standards — you can drive across the entire country in about two hours — to Tembrurong Island (“Land of the Birds”) for overnight “glamping” at The Abode, a recreational resort overhanging the crocodile-infested Labu River. Over-the-

river-bank bungalows erected atop concrete columns are reached by walking over steel docks. If you're a nature lover, this even beats a night at the luxurious Empire Brunei. Just don't expect to swim!

After unpacking, we set out for a covered boat ride in a slight drizzle. Tree-hugging monkeys were the main attraction; crocs were on coffee break. Low-hanging clouds mixed with lingering fog in the distant sunset. Then time for dinner at the open-air Sunset Lounge, also erected over the river, while taking in a gentle breeze wafting off the riverbed. Then another riverboat ride, but in pitch darkness in search of fireflies. Not many, yet we did spy a lonely crocodile eyeing us from ashore, detected by the gleam of his eye reflected by the captain's flashlight.



A typical Brunei full-course meal at the Sunset Lounge in The Abode. (Photo by Ron Roman)

The bungalows have no Wi-Fi, PCs, Internet, TVs, radios — nothing to distract you from nature and ultimately getting an uninterrupted good night's sleep. That's the selling point. This unnerved my wife, come nightfall a web-surfing junkie.

The day broke clear and peaceful. There's something about waking up to find yourself atop a balcony over water's edge and looking out over a sleepy river, hardly moving. Even the birds were silent. The wife reminded me to wear long pants because we'd be visiting a mosque. When I zipped up the pants, I could feel I had already packed on a few pounds. Then everyone was served breakfast outdoors on their bungalow balcony. It was eerily silent. Used to living amidst the jingle jangle of greater Seoul, it felt like dining in a morgue. Takes time for the nerves to unjangle, hmm? Felt weird, yet good, to be tech-free.

Museum and speedboat

It was showtime once again. Everyone hopped in the van, and we were on our way back to the Empire Brunei to pick up a couple who decided to stay an extra night. Then it was another drive for a Korean lunch, but first a stopover to feed wild monkeys at a nearby park.

No regular tour would be complete without a visit to a major museum. That was next up with a stop at the Royal Regalia Museum. Take off your shoes first. The museum is dedicated to illustrating the history of all Brunei sultans dating to 1363 A.D. The current sultan (the 29th) was coronated in 1967 while barely out of his teens. The museum is truly remarkable with beautiful and brilliant artwork, artifacts and architecture. Too much to detail here; it's deserving of another article. Take my word for it. If you lack for time, put this place on the top of your itinerary.

Next up: a quick speedboat ride on the Brunei River. What was particularly interesting was to see the sheer number of rundown and decrepit wooden fishermen's homes placed on stilts over the riverside. Hundreds. (Though Brunei is decently affluent.) Our tour guide soon straightened out my negative presumptions. Somewhat. Huny said despite the homes' decrepit veneer, the interiors are updated and nice; he's been inside them. These homes are part of Kampung Ayer (Water Town), the biggest water village in the world, and a place now designated by the government as some sort of historic landmark.

Upon getting off, we took a break across the street at an outdoor shopping plaza. Though a weekday afternoon in a congested urban area, it was all but deserted. I sat down on a bench to jot a few notes for this article. The nearby mosque's loudspeakers blared, beckoning the faithful to prayers. It was the Omar Ali Saifuddien Mosque (SOAS for short), second largest in-country, named after the 28th sultan, yet currently closed to non-Muslim visitors during Ramadan.



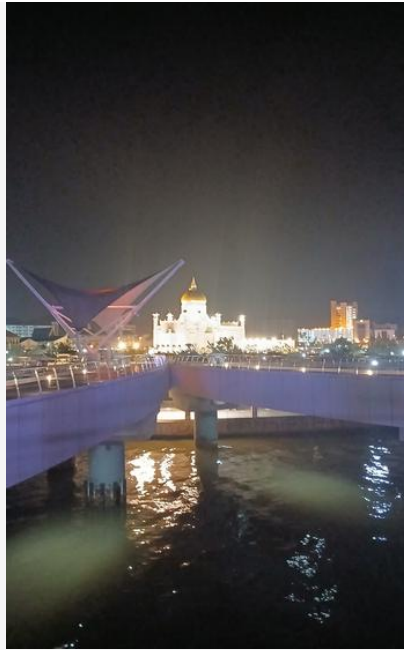
Sultans and mosque

Next up: a lucky moment. We stopped by the gates of the sultan's palace (Istana Nural Iman), the largest residential palace in the world with 1,788 rooms and costing \$1.4 billion, for photos. The gate guard said the sultan would be returning in 10 minutes. And, no, we didn't shake hands, but I did get a photo of him whizzing by in his black Mercedes G63 wagon, driving solo. He waved to the crowd as the gates opened and swallowed up the vehicle. Huny said he doesn't ride with a chauffeur or bodyguard and his vehicle has no license plate. He owns 7,000 vehicles. And you thought comedian Jay Leno had a big collection?

Onto Jerudong Park, a huge park for raising horses for the royal family: polo grounds, stables, expansive lush green fields complete with golf course and extravagant club house and luxury restaurant. We briefly got off to walk around and pet the horses. A state-of-the-art cancer center is located nearby.

We were on our way to share what would be our final meal for the trip: nothing especial this time, only a standard fare of traditional Brunei cuisine, and to make our way to the Jame' Asr Hassanil Bolkiah ("JAMI") Mosque, named after the current sultan. With everything lit up at night, you can walk the marbled-tiled grounds with their bubbling water fountains dotting the palatial grounds and look skyward at its gold-gilded domes and towering minarets gleaming under the starlight. The Grand Mosque is the largest in the country; its architectural design is one of the most magnificent in the world. It's truly the capstone event of any trip to the country.

Lastly, we went on another river walk, this one in the dead of night. The walkway was all lit up and offered a great view of the SOAS Mosque in the distance. We followed up with one last, quick pit stop at Starbucks for a black tea latte — and then it was off to the airport to say good-bye to Brunei, the tiny Asian nation of Big Promises.



The Omar Ali Saifuddien Mosque in the distance at nightfall. (Photo by Ron Roman)

About the author



Ron Roman (Photo by Ron Roman)

*As Associate Professor of English and Humanities, Ron Roman taught with the University of Maryland Global Campus (UMGC-Asia) from 1996 until retiring in 2020. He has written extensive travel, academic, and political articles for regional, national, and international publications. His alternate-history apocalyptic doomsday thriller *Of Ashes and Dust* (Histria Books/2022) was a 2023 Finalist for the Chanticleer International Book Award (CIBA) Global Thrillers category and his poetry collection (*A Poetic Rhapsody of the Soul*) is scheduled to be published by Windtree Press in late 2025.*

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