

Gawai in the Head-Hunters Heartland



Mike Smith has been to Sarawak many times enjoying music festivals, national parks and longhouses but had never heard of the Gawai Festival.

Gawai is the most important festival in Sarawak and a national holiday. Dayak families get together to eat and feast in celebrating their harvest festival. Tuak, an alcoholic drink, prepared by Dayak women, is drunk in copious quantities. I recently returned from Betong, in head-hunter land, where approximately 1,500 Dayaks, in traditional clothing, proudly paraded through the town before partying all night.

Kuching, Gateway to Sarawak
Kuching was my gateway to Sarawak. The state's capital city has much to offer including a lovely, historic waterfront, beautiful murals, colonial architecture, temples, mosques and museums. There are many shops selling local goods and excellent restaurants including TOPSPOT that claims to be the best seafood hot spot in Kuching.

I settled into the Waterfront Hotel that is well located and has large rooms with superb views and a great breakfast.

Serian Market
Our chartered bus and excellent guide Frankie

got us underway next morning on our leisurely road trip to the Betong Gawai parade. We had a rest stop at Serian and took an extended break at the market. It is massive and sells everything from fruit and vegetables, meat and fish to Dayak clothing. The traders are extremely friendly and actually encourage photo taking.

Gawai, Betong Parade Ground
Overnighting at Sri Simanggang Hotel we had an early wakeup call and departed at 5:30am to ensure we arrived in Betong as the Dayaks assembled for their parade. As I entered the parade ground my first impressions were that there were hundreds of colourful participants, plenty of seated VIPs and warrior guards but hardly any spectators in the hot, humid weather.
Perhaps the whole town was in the parade or the 7:00am assembly time was too early. I wasn't sure.
The Gawai Festival is the Dayak equivalent of Christmas, aid al-Fitr or Chinese Lunar New Year. It is held in June to celebrate and give thanks for the harvest, family ties and a good life. After the celebrations it is time to plan for the next planting season in September.

Colourful Costumes
The Dayaks wear their traditional costumes, with woman in woven cloth dresses, beaded chains, silver armlets and anklets and head gear according to their tribes. The men wear shirts or sheepskin coats decorated with wild boar tusks bird feathers, brass trinkets and tribal headgear. A significant number of younger family members joined in the parade. In tribute to historical head-hunting times, miniature skulls were carried or worn as accessories by numerous people.
After what seemed like an eternity of speeches, anthems and ceremonial dancing, the procession ribbon was cut and the patient Dayaks started their parade through Betong. Some lucky attendees got a ride in floats, others performed for distinguished guests along the way but most simply strolled through town enjoying the atmosphere.



Fort Lily
After the parade we had a quick visit to Fort Lily a small fort in Betong. It was built in 1858 by James Brooke to defend colonial government officers from rebellious Dayaks in the strategic town linked to three rivers which make it easy to transport goods. The fort is made of belian, also known as Borneo Iron timber. It isn't a must see but if you have time to spare or are a history buff it is worth considering a visit.

Rumah Engkeranji
From Fort Lily we checked into Rumah Engkeranji, a modern guesthouse built in the style of a traditional longhouse. The accommodation is basic, but the landlords are charming and go out of their way to make sure you are comfortable and well fed. Thank you to Senia Anak Baer who hosted me.
Rumah Engkeranji was home to the "Gawai Open House Dinner" and the "After Party Concert". Before the "Open House Dinner" could proceed a Miring Ceremony was performed. The Miring Ceremony is to honour the gods, spirits and ancestors and to seek blessings, protection and success for the evening. A rooster was sacrificed after the lengthy Sharman's mantras.

The Walk of Friendship
It seemed to me, an outsider, that the Dayaks hedge their bets by continuing traditional rituals even though the majority converted to Christianity years ago.
The walk of friendship, handshaking along the full length of the guesthouse, perhaps 200m long, and drinking 10 shots of tuak were both exciting to witness and to be part of. It was a super night, but I retired early despite the music and dancing still to come.



Rian Batang Longhouse
Rian Batang longhouse is a short distance from Rumah Engkeranji. It is about 50 years old and has undergone numerous renovations. Interestingly the 'trophy' skulls were removed and ceremoniously buried as now the residents are all Christians. Antlers, from earlier days are used for decoration but deer can no longer be hunted.
Units in the longhouse are massive and stretch back for 40m on three levels. The longhouse chieftain MacMillan ak Dunggau's house is tastefully done. He and his wife Caroline Cedric are warm and generous hosts. One Smart Alec asked if MacMillan's brother was Johnnie Walker – possible!
I loved this tour to Sarawak and will be back there soon. Thanks to Yazmien of Bzbee for organising.

POCKET GUIDE

Tour
Thanks to Sarawak Tourism and bzbee.com.my

Sarawak Tourism Board
www.sarawaktourism.com

Bzbee Consult Sdn Bhd
bzbee.com.my

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