

KING OF THE SWINGERS

NG KiDS hangs out with orangutans in Sabah, Malaysian Borneo...

It's absolutely chucking it down and NG KiDS is getting soaked. We're in the steamy Kabili-Sepilok rainforest in Borneo, Southeast Asia, visiting the Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre.

Most of the orangutans that arrive at Sepilok are rescued orphans. Some have lost their mums and homes due to deforestation. Others have been illegally caught and kept as pets. But they've been brought here to learn how to survive in the wild.

Learning the ropes

"Orangutan babies stay with their mums for 7-8 years in the wild," explains our guide, Gary Solacito. "During that time they're taught all the skills they need to survive in the forest, such as nest-building, finding the best fruits to eat and climbing – because

orangutans spend most of their lives in the treetops."

Orangutans make nests by folding branches and lining them with leaves – comfy!



It's Gary!

Orangutans are the world's largest tree-climbing mammals!

The name 'orangutan' means 'person of the forest' in the Malay language.

Orangutans are top tool makers! They use leaves as umbrellas to shelter from the rain, and sticks to scoop insects out of holes. Some have even been seen spearing fish in rivers!



Best buds

To help the orphans learn survival skills, Sepilok has a brilliant buddy scheme! Older orphans befriend newbies, transferring the skills they've already learned. Baby orphans play in an Indoor Nursery where they meet and interact with other little apes. Then, when they're about four, they move to a specially designed outdoor playground where they practise climbing and swinging!

Built to climb

Orangutans' bodies are perfectly suited to life in the trees. Their massive, strong arms, measuring up to 2m in length, help them reach tree branches, allowing them to swing (known as brachiation) from branch to branch. Long curved fingers and toes help them grip fruit and tools, and climb trees – some have been recorded climbing more than 40m up!

Into the forest

"Once the orphans are about 7-8 years old, they'll have learned enough survival skills to begin life in the forest surrounding the centre," explains Gary. The orangutans in the 43km² forest are free to wander where they like, but they'll continue to learn from their elders. They find food themselves and sleep high up in the trees, building new nests in the canopy every day (left).

"Older orangutans may disappear into the forest for many years before turning up again!" says Gary.

Snack time

We head to the reserve's forest feeding station, where rangers leave out bananas and long beans twice a day. The team deliberately keep the diet bland to encourage the apes to go off and find more interesting meals such as figs, mangosteens, durian fruit, jackfruit and rambutans growing wild in the forest. Orangutans also eat young leaves, insects, small animals and even tree bark.

"There's no guarantee we'll see orangutans at the feeding platform today," says Gary. "But that's actually a good thing – if they don't turn up it means there's plenty of fruit for them to eat in the forest, and that their rehabilitation is going well!"

Dominant males have large flanges on their faces – these help them make loud long calls which attract females from across the forest.



NG KIDS flew to Sabah in Borneo courtesy of Royal Brunei Airlines (flyroyalbrunei.com). We stayed at the Shangri-La's Rasa Ria Resort & Spa near Kota Kinabalu (shangri-la.com/kotakinabalu/rasariaresort). With thanks to sabahtourism.com and borneosandakantours.com for providing the trip to Sepilok. To read more about the rehabilitation centre and find out how you can help orangutans, head to orangutan-appeal.org.uk

Waiting game

We watch the trees, wondering whether today will be one of those bitter-sweet days. But soon we hear a rustling in the trees. A mother orangutan swings down from a branch onto the platform, her baby, born at the centre, clutching her chest. Mum sits there, munching, while the youngster nestles into her round hairy body. Then a long, thin arm stretches out and takes a banana. The baby starts snacking, too (below).



Time for tea!

Just keep looking

The urge to reach out and touch the beautiful pair is overwhelming! But Gary quickly puts us straight. "Visitors must never touch the orangutans," he warns. "Humans and orangutans can share illnesses such as flu and tummy bugs. Tourists also use mosquito repellent and suntan lotion, chemicals that are bad for the apes." So we simply watch, in awe, as the pair feed together in the rain.

Hope for the future?

Sadly, orangutans are now Critically Endangered due to deforestation and the illegal pet trade – just 71,820 remain in the wild, 57,350 of them in Borneo. The remainder are on the Indonesian island of Sumatra. But, thanks to centres like Sepilok, forest conservation and better public education about orangutans' plight, it's hoped that the future for these majestic apes will soon be looking a little brighter.

Main pic: iRange and Nest © Gettyimages UK; Umbrella © Nature PL; Gary, mum and baby © Tim Herbert.