



DEFENDERS OF THE JUNGLE

In offbeat Lahad Datu, the Bukit Piton reforestation project is giving a new home to endangered orangutans, discovers
Marco Ferrarese.

We freeze and fall into silence as the pickup slows to a crawl, approaching as close as possible to a particularly low-hanging branch. For sure, we're probably now the most annoying of intruders, but as the wild orangutan rolls placidly onto his side, locking his gaze onto ours as he slowly rises to sit inside his nest and observe us, we also feel the mesmerising power of this wild exchange with nature.

This is all in a day's work at Bukit Piton, a former World Wildlife Fund-protected Class 1 forest reserve in Sabah's southwest, set in the Ulu Segama-Malua forest, a 45-minute-drive from Lahad Datu. In the past year, the area has emerged as an eco-alternative to expensive Mount Kinabalu hikes and packed river cruises on the nearby Kinabatangan River.

"We are working on this project since 2016," says Swiss-born Simon Werren, a pioneer of Lahad Datu's eco-tourism scene. His travel company and upscale namesake bed and breakfast Bike and Tours, which he runs with his Malaysian wife Itisha Ismail, pair luxury with sustainable adventure.

In turn, they use tourism revenue to fund the ambitious Bukit Piton reforestation plan, aimed at creating an improved habitat for the area's large population of wild orangutans. There are more than a hundred apes in Bukit Piton, stranded here by encroaching palm oil plantations and the fast-flowing Segama River, which, running to the south of the reserve, prevents the animals from migrating to the nearby Danum Valley forest, a potentially perfect habitat.



“In Bukit Piton, we work on a five-year plan. We don’t just plant the saplings and leave: we keep taking care of the new trees for a minimum of five years, and after that, we hope that the young forest can maintain itself,” explains Werren. The five-year support benchmark was suggested by Werren’s local partner, Dr. Teoh from Kontraktor Malaysia, an experienced planter and forester who has worked on and off in Bukit Piton for the past 20 years. “We are halfway through with the first section”, says Teoh, “and we will only know if five years is enough in another two years.”

Bukit Piton is one of Werren’s dearest projects, and one which he supports via Swiss-based NGO Brothers Cycling, which he started with his brother Philipp as they completed an ambitious cycling odyssey from Switzerland to South Africa in 2010. “The NGO helps us get donations and membership fees,

but we also rely on tourism activities, as well as sponsorship from Bike and Tours,” explains Werren.

Tourists visit for two days and one night, and the first thing they do is plant a few trees. The rest of the time is spent exploring the reserve by pickup truck, with very high chances to not only experience multiple wild orangutan sightings, but also to spot wild Borneo pygmy elephants, slow lorises, monitor lizards, and an array of tropical birds. At night, after dinner and educational talks on orangutan conservation, guests set out again to experience the jungle under the cover of darkness, before bunking down in a wooden forest longhouse amidst the sound of screeching insects.

The team’s latest achievement in Bukit Piton is the planting of over 1,200 new fig trees. “They’re a great food source for orangutans, hornbills, and many other animals living in the reserve,” says Werren, who is positioning the figs between existing patches of forest to enrich and alternate the food source of the animals. “We are trying hard to support this region in the hope that it remains a first class reserve,” he concludes. “Hopefully, it will regrow even healthier in the future.”

