

A-Level Road Trip

The Cambridge Marine Science A-level requires students to understand how the different fishing technologies affect fisheries management and how that can be monitored. When you put these all together you get “ROAD TRIP!”

[More information on the 2018 Marine Science A-level here](#)



Our epic connect-the-dots takes the Levellers from coast to coast via every fish-market we can reasonably visit. It begins in Semporna and ends in Bandar Sri Begawan, Brunei. It's over 2000km and takes us 10 days of coasts, rivers, mountains, beaches and fish markets. LOTS of fish markets.

More on the fish markets to come – here I just want to describe the road trip itself because it's pretty awesome.



We start, unsurprisingly, in Semporna. The word “Semporna” means “perfect” which has to be the ultimate irony since the most politically correct description would be “dire” and things only get worse from that point. A depressing trip to the fish-market is followed by a leisurely drive two hours or so North to Lahad Datu.



This particular stretch of the road is unusual in that there are lots of troupes of monkeys; macaques for the most part, both long and pig-tailed. We see them playing in the verges crossing the street and tight-ropeing effortlessly along the electricity cables.

Lahad Datu is a typical rural town in Sabah, the market is full of women who clearly came in on the morning bus with the days crop of vegetables to hawk. There are a disproportionate number of banana sellers and a pretty impressive live poultry market.

Carrying on we motor through the endless hectares of oil-palm. The uniform trees in regimented rows extend from horizon to horizon in an unbroken vista for three hours. It's a sobering thought that whilst this is currently a lucrative cash-crop it can't be

eaten and that the global economy is going to suffer a major blow when it falls out of favour. The oil-palm farmers of tomorrow are the coal-miners of today.

There is a brief stop where the main road crosses the Kinabatangan river. It would be nice to take time for a river cruise to indulge in the density of wildlife along its banks however we come swiftly to the conclusion that this illusion is created by the green deserts of oil palm that surround it and move swiftly on.



Having left Lahad Datu mid-morning we are in good time to catch the afternoon feeding at Sepilok. We wait for the crowds to disperse and wander on to the Orang-Utan nursery trying to pretend we can't hear chain-saws from within this remnant of Borneo's once-endless forests. After that a walk around the Rainforest Discovery Centre makes a pleasant change from all the marine before we continue on to Sandakan.



Ostensibly a small city, but in reality a big town, Sandakan is divided into old and new. The old town is a few streets hemmed in between a steep hill and the sea whilst the clean, modern new areas of town are some distance inland. Even the old town is an interesting juxtaposition. Modern hotels and eateries are taking advantage of the undeveloped sea-front whilst backing onto rundown streets that oscillate between derelict and merely condemned.

From Sandakan there is the long-haul drive across the width of Borneo. We head inland, firstly to the central town of Ranau and then up to Kundasang on the shoulders of Mount Kinabalu. As the road begins to climb (and presumably the logging became more challenging) there is finally a reprieve to the endless oil-palm. In the pockets of real forest the air is cooler; cleaner; fresher. It's easy to appreciate what a healthy ecosystem does for the planet when the contrast is so stark.

Hoping for clear skies we tip over the shoulder of Kinabalu and begin the descent towards the West coast. There are stunning views of the plummeting scenery IF you

aren't the driver; not to mention the magnificence of Kinabalu itself. The mountain is a batholith and its steep slopes are scarred from the massive landslides during the 2014 earthquake but that just showcases its cascades of waterfalls more clearly. Nobody sleeps for this section of the trip. Everyone is torn between the constant refrain of "look at the view" and the realisation that if the brakes fail we're all going to be a headline in tomorrow's paper.

We finally make it to Kota Kinabalu; bustling capital and the only source of cheese that's not a Kraft slice in the state. A couple of days R&R here translates as "everybody do your laundry, stuff yourselves with pizza and make the most of happy hour at El Centro". Careful planning generally means we're here in time to enjoy the Sunday market which is a pleasant tourist note in a tour of local towns for local people.

From KK the road heads most decidedly south; wandering along the coastal plain between the Crocker Mountain range and the South China Sea. Sadly this flat, fertile land is rapidly being converted from the emerald shimmer of padi fields to the stygian gloom of oil-palm.

For the most part, the trip across Borneo is largely uncomplicated. There are two major roads, one north-south and one east-west and all signs point towards Kota Kinabalu. Once you're heading away from the capital though all the road signs and useful indicators seem to be replaced by "Not this way"s. For other intrepid travellers I leave this advice. Once you pass the Sabah-Sarawak border, at the unlabelled round about, TURN RIGHT! This is important.

We finally reach the next fish-market at the sleepy river town of Lawas. Comprising just a few bustling streets Lawas mostly serves the needs of the "upriver" communities in the heart of Borneo. Since river fish are not in our remit we press on to Limbang.

Another river town, but this one at the top of Brunei bay. Logs coming down river are transferred to sea-going barges at this point and the riverine vegetation changes to mangroves. You can catch a river boat that speeds through the mangrove channels to BSB, the capital city of Brunei, in under half-an-hour (compared to the two hours by road). They're not known as Flying Coffins for nothing though so we continue along the road.

If Limbang is not one of the wettest places on the planet then I'll eat my umbrella. The wind blows from the South China Sea picking up water, rises over Brunei (which is largely dry) and then deluges on Limbang. Everything here is gleaming green and slightly steaming constantly.

We finally make it into Brunei. We take a quick tour of down-town to see the tourist bits we're supposed to see and then we head inland in search of where the real people are. Bandar Seri Begawan, more commonly called BSB, is a planned city. An army of men with geography degrees have worked out what should go where and placed it thusly. I'm sure it'll be perfect in 50 years. At the moment though the city

centre is a ghost town after 5pm and all the Bruneians are hanging out at food courts in the suburbs.

Our final stop is the fish-market at Jerudong Beach in Brunei. It's utterly different from anything we've seen before. The coast is managed, the sand trapped and the currents guided. The result is rather sterile, almost a fake, designed by people who'd seen pictures of, but never been to, a beach. It is however the Westernmost point of our road trip and having seen the sun rise over the Celebes Sea we can watch it set over the South China Sea.