Sail through my pages
but keep me on this ship.
Read me online.

The Bajau Laut
Spirited Seafarers
Living on the water, moving from island to island, and sometimes settling along the coastal areas of the Malay Archipelago (though concentrated in the area of the Sulu Sea), the seafaring Bajau Laut live a simple life in some of the most enchanting places on earth.
The charming Bajau Laut wooden stilt huts can accommodate anywhere between a family of four or five to a small community encompassing about 30 roommates. These stilt houses, which usually take three weeks to erect, are equipped with only basic necessities.
1. Pictured here is Nalu, a Bajau Laut who migrated from the Philippines 26 years ago. A self-taught carpenter, he can easily design a fishing boat in about a week all by himself, without even an initial sketch to go by. The traditional craft of boat building is passed down from generation to generation.

2. A young Bajau Laut boy flies a home-made kite in the stilt village of Bangau-Bangau, Semporna, Sabah. The simple kite is constructed from a plastic bottle, plastic material, bamboo string and a rope.

3. A stunning vista enjoyed by the Bajau Laut who roam the seas. As a result of comprehensive conservation efforts by Sabah Parks authorities, the reefs at Tun Sakaran Marine Park remain pristine, allowing marine life to flourish. Pictured here is Pulau Bodgaya (Bodgaya Island), the largest among the eight islands within the marine park, which is a prime site for snorkelling and hiking.

4. The Bajau Laut even produce their own sunscreen called borak buas, which is essentially rice powder. Pictured here is Nora Sita with her kids, full of curiosity as their mother makes borak buas. After the rice is ground to a fine texture, the rice powder is kneaded into small balls for easier storage.
Way of the Bajau Laut

For most of us, kicking back in a seaside chalet on stilts at some of the most renowned dive locations in the world would make for the perfect getaway. But, for the Bajau Laut, living on the seas in these areas is a daily struggle for survival.

The Bajau Laut are indigenous people of the Sulu Archipelago. They are endemic to this region, and are broadly made up of two sets of communities according to whether they live on land or on water – Bajau Darat (Land Bajau) and Bajau Laut (Sea Bajau). The Bajau Laut are also expert seafarers known by other names such as reef people and sea nomads. While some Bajau Laut live on houseboats, others live in stilt villages in shallow waters. Globalisation has had minimal impact on the Bajau Laut’s culture, even though they are often within the vicinity of buzzing tourism at resorts and dive spots. To this day, the Bajau Laut’s way of life is practically the same as it was for their ancestors centuries ago.

Floating Beauties

The Regatta Lepa boat festival, held annually in the town of Semporna in the East Malaysian state of Sabah on Borneo island, is a magnificent showcase of the legendary connection between the Bajau Laut and the sea. Every year in April, the sea nomads from near and far gather for the regatta that is organised by the Semporna District Office. One of the main festival highlights is the boat parade, where the Bajau Laut pay homage to their traditional single-masted sailboat as they vie for the title of the most beautiful lepa (sailboat). To win, the Bajau Laut need to impress the judges with their lively performance of traditional music and dance on board their vessel, as well as outstanding boat decoration. The eye-catching flotilla not only honours the Bajau Laut legacy, but also offers visitors a unique experience as they watch the sea nomads parade their beautifully-decorated sailboats.

Aside from the lepa competition, the festival also features various other colourful and vibrant activities including the lepa beauty pageant, boat racing and a duck-catching contest.

1. Reef fish make up a large portion of the Bajau Laut’s daily catch, which is often sold at street markets in coastal towns like Semporna.

2. Pictured here are Bajau Laut kids playing a type of table pool game, similar to billiards. This is a common game played by both adults and children alike.

OPPOSITE PAGE A Bajau Laut girl cruises from island to island in her boat to sell her fresh catch, which mostly consists of shellfish, lobster, snails, sea cucumbers and sea urchins, to locals and visitors. The Bajau Laut’s isolated lifestyle allows them to continue the age-old way of life of their ancestors, and their ways are taught to their children from a young age. For the most part, planning ahead for the future is not a priority for the sea nomads, daily survival is.
1. Some Bajau Laut families live on houseboats. The spartan lifestyle of the Bajau Laut calls for the barest of necessities, and often consists mainly of fishing gear, simple cooking utensils and an outfit or two for each family member. They go ashore every now and then to sell seafood to islanders, then stock up on essentials. Before sunset, the family returns to their houseboats.

2. Fishing is the main daily activity for the Bajau Laut. Some of them have diverged into other vocations like being involved in local tourism activities, but the majority remain fishermen who live in stilt villages, or on the sea.

3. A young Bajau Laut girl with borak buas on her face. Borak buas is mainly used by the womenfolk, particularly the younger unmarried ones as it is believed to give wearers a flawless complexion, and make them more appealing to potential suitors.