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BRUNEI TOWN, BRUNEI -- This tiny Sultanate, 200 years ago a thriving pirate's hangout, has developed a modern and unique way of life in an isolated part of Borneo, the third largest island in the world.

The "modern", made possibly by rich oil fields lying within its borders, has produced the highest per capita income on the continent and the largest mosque in Southeast Asia.

The "unique" is Kampong Ayer -- a city on stilts built entirely on the waters of the Brunei River. In the Malayan language, kampong means village; ayer means water.

Brunei, an independent Malay Sultante under British protection, totalling 2,226 square miles, or about twice the size of Rhode Island, is situated in the middle of the northern coast of Borneo.

The capital of the country, Brunei Town, is built on the coast of the Brunei River. It is a charmingly quiet city of Chinese-owned shops with windowless store fronts opening directly onto the streets lined by deep monsoon drains. It is the largest Malay city in the world, but 15,000 of the Malays live in Kampong Ayer, which historical accounts date back to 1500.

In the mid-afternoon at high tide, my launch made a tour of the broad waterways and narrow alleys between the houses of the 30 villages composing Kampong Ayer. Women do the laundry on the front steps of their houses, hanging it on the narrow porches to dry. Children can take a swim in their "back yard". Traders on Oriental gondolas paddle from house to house selling their wares.

The more inexpensive houses have floors with large cracks between the wooden slats. I found it dangerous for high-heeled shoes. But it is not only more economical for the Brunei Malays, but also makes housekeeping simple. Dirt is pushed -- not under the rug -- but out the holes. Household garbage is dumped down the hatch -- not out the back -- and the tide below eliminates the need for street cleaners and garbage collectors.

Houses are built in small clusters connected with boardwalks, but there is no bridge to Brunei Town on the mainland. Outboard motors outnumber cars in Brunei by 20 to one. Boats are parked under the houses built on 16-foot piles, with about four-feet appearing above water at high tide. A few boats had special "garages" built for them -- a thatched roof over a small elongated shelter.

Eighteen government launches transport the children to and from schools built both on land and on the water. A broad platform in front of the school serves as a playground, though some children take a dip in the brownish water during recess. Kampong Ayer also has its own clinics, shops and meeting places.

As my launch zipped down the big waterway, a sign read "Water Main," which warned that boats could not be anchored there. A man with his two small sons in a row boat stopped at one water filling station to get a barrel-ful of drinking water.

As we made a right-hand turn passed one house, a small black tin can on a rope dropped down between the slivers of the floorboards, then up again. A modest soul was taking a drip-drip bath. The immodest ones just hopped out the back door to take theirs and with 80-degree temperatures and oppressive humidity the more baths a day the better.

My launch driver invited me to his house, built on the water just two years ago for \$14,000 Malayan (\$3 Malayan to US \$1). The house was shared with his brother and his family. We parked the outboard motor boat by the front steps, a ladder-life affair, and scrambled up.

The driver, a Haji -- one who had been to Mecca -- introduced me to his ~~mother~~^{mother}-in-law, a spindly, small-boned woman, whom he claimed was 102 years old.

The house with large, spacious rooms, was clean. It had brightly polished floors of a red-wood, freshly painted walls decorated with large palmleaf food covers shaped like coolie hats, and a minimum of furniture, but all first-class. In one end of the front room was the master's bed, a high-posted bed in French Renaissance style with a silky pink bed cover reaching to the floor, a high canopy covered with the same material and the mattress piled high with pink-cased pillows. A portable radio-phonograph combination and a typewriter lay on tables and, like many of the homes, a radio aerial rose from the roof.

Asked why the Malays preferred their houses on water, the driver replied, "It's our wish." He also said it was cheaper than building on land. Originally the kampongs may have been built on water for defense, for sanitation reasons and probably for climatic reasons; the air on water being cooler than the heat on the land. The government is encouraging the families of Kampong Ayer to live in new settlements on land.

I then stopped at a government-operated shop where silversmiths produce their famous works, made of 93% pure silver. I was shown cigarette tins and flower bowls, all with simple floral patterns, and a few pins. Only 30 or so persons, all ^{living} in Kampong Ayer, practice the silver craft, which has been handed down from generation to generation for about 450 years when it is thought to have been introduced from Java. The shop also sold the beautifully handwoven sarongs (skirts) with gold thread, which cost from US \$30 to US \$100.

In the morning I had visited the largest mosque in Southeast Asia -- an elegant, chalky structure rising high above Kampong Ayer and the two-storied shops of Brunei Town. The 145-foot minaret, where the muezzin calls the Moslems to worship, the gold leaf onion-shaped dome surrounded by 8 cupolas of glistening gold mosaic and the exterior of blinding white made a remarkably stately sight for such a small country. Total cost of the mosque upon its opening in September, 1958, was \$7.7 million Malayan or approximately US \$2.6 million.

I walked down the spacious floors of toothpaste white marble and admired some of the millions of pieces of gold leaf -- all imported from Italy. As it was mid-morning and not a scheduled prayer time, the green handwoven rugs from India were rolled back.

Nearly all the material used in the structure were imported. Granite came from Hong Kong. From Britain came the bronze doors and four huge chandeliers designed by His Highness the Sultan, the biggest weighing four tons. It is so heavy that when it is lowered to the floor for cleaning, it takes two men three hours to raise it to its place in the dome.

It is undoubtedly one of the most modern mosques in the world. A radio amplifying system carries the readings from the Koran throughout the building. An elevator carries the muezzin to the top of the minaret. That is, it does when it is working. I had to walk up the 268 steps. Electric lighting is utilized inside and outside. One item that was not imported was a beautifully handmade incense burner of Brunei silver -- and it had been made electric.

On a dark night, the coastline of Brunei can be spotted from the sea one hundred miles away. It is aflame like a gigantic bonfire set for a mammoth weiner roast. The flames spring from 14 torches scattered along the oil fields to burn exhaust natural gas. The fields have yielded in recent years an average annual revenue of \$100 million Malayan in royalties and taxes to the state treasury.

Driving east along the main road from Seria, the oil field area, to Brunei Town, I thought I saw a double sunset. Ahead in the east were the bright flames of the oil-made light; in the west was the sun setting behind the expansive jungle.

Now the tiny country is a happy one. But in the past it was neither small nor peaceful. For more than 1000 years Brunei played an important part in Southeast Asian affairs. Its swirling coast was a nesting place for the worst pirates roaming the south seas. Coastal towns were attacked; property looted; inhabitants captured only to be sold as slaves. By the sixteenth century Sultan Bolkiah, nicknamed "The Singing Captain", had extended his control over the whole of Borneo and nearby islands. Piracy reached its peak in the early 1800's; then the power of Brunei began to shrink to its present-day microscopic size.

But the scars of the old romantic days of the pirates still besiege Brunei. As my ship pushed down the Brunei River, it zigzagged through a line of concrete beacons like a soccer player with the ball to avoid a shipload of stones that had been sunk by pirates years ago for easy attacks on trapped vessels.