



A guide to the:

Sambeja Lestari Orangutan Volunteer Project



The Samboja Lestari Orangutan Volunteer Project

Focus: Orangutans
Location: Borneo

Start Dates: Set Dates - Please Enquire
Arrival & Starting Point: Balikpapan

Situated in an area of restored tropical rainforest, the Samboja Lestari Orangutan Volunteer Project exists to rehabilitate and release a number of injured, orphaned or abandoned orangutans. The project's roots date back to 2001, when the Borneo Orangutan Survival Foundation (BOSF) began purchasing land in East Kalimantan to combat severe deforestation in the region. However, the loss of forest through logging, drought, and forest fires also led to the displacement of hundreds of orangutans, amongst other wildlife species, and it is with this knowledge that BOSF set out to create the safe haven we know today as Samboja Lestari.

Since the project's inception, the forests around Samboja have become home to 1,200 species of trees, 137 species of birds, and 9 species of primates. Of course, the project's main aim is to protect the endangered orangutan, rehabilitating and releasing as many of these great apes as possible back into the wild. Every year since 2012, the project has returned a number of orangutans to their endemic home, thanks to the hard work of the team at the sanctuary. However, despite the sanctuary's successes, they still need volunteers!



By joining the project, you will help the sanctuary team continue their care for these great apes by assisting with a range of activities. One of the primary and most exciting activities here is enrichment. With over 100 orangutans living at Samboja Lestari, it's essential that each individual is encouraged to develop their natural behaviours, which is made possible through activities that stimulate their senses. You will help to create exciting new enrichment items for the orangutans, and have the opportunity to distribute your creations (from a safe distance) to the apes before observing their behaviours.

Elsewhere, you'll assist with the construction and maintenance of both the orangutan and sun bear enclosures, ensuring that the animals at Samboja Lestari are as happy and comfortable as they can be during their time here. Your help with a range of activities will support the sanctuary team in their mission to rehabilitate as many orangutans as possible, with the ultimate goal of seeing them return to their natural rainforest homes. This is an incredibly rewarding way to volunteer, and an experience which will remain with you for many years to come.

Enrichment

Enrichment plays a big role in orangutan rehabilitation, and it's a core part of the project. The goal is simple: keep curious minds busy and encourage the kinds of problem-solving skills orangutans would use in the wild. That might mean drilling holes into pieces of wood and filling them with porridge. While porridge isn't exactly a rainforest food, the challenge of figuring out how to get it out is very real. Orangutans use sticks as tools, testing ideas and improving their dexterity skills that matter long after the snack is gone.

For orangutans who can't be released back into the wild, enrichment is just as significant. It adds variety, stimulation, and a bit of fun to their daily routine. Something as simple as a fruit-filled ice block can keep them occupied and using skills just as they would in the wild. Encouraging orangutans to explore new textures and tastes rather than rushing straight to eat it is engaging, rewarding, and essential for well-being.

Volunteers are often at the heart of the most creative ideas. Past favourites have included carved watermelons packed with treats and other playful challenges that turn feeding time into a puzzle. This is often one of the most enjoyable parts of the project, especially when you get to hand out the enrichment (from a safe distance) yourself. If inspiration strikes while you're there, you're encouraged to share it. The orangutans and sun bears will almost certainly appreciate it!



Observation

Once the orangutans have been given their enrichment, you'll get to see the results first-hand during an observation session. It's rewarding watching how they interact with what you've made. It also serves a real purpose in building a clearer picture of each orangutan's behaviour, health, and overall well-being. You'll head out with a member of the project team on a circuit around the islands, observing from the safety of the boat and keeping a careful eye on how the orangutans are doing. It's calm, focused work, and a great chance to spot individual personalities in action. It's also one of the best opportunities to take close-up photos, so bringing a camera is highly recommended!



Husbandry

One way to ensure the smooth running of this project is to help out on a range of husbandry activities, such as cleaning the orangutan enclosures and the fruit store, where food for the orangutans and sun bears is prepared. You will also assist with leaf collection, gathering suitable foliage from the jungle for the orangutans to use when building their nests.



Construction & Maintenance

Because the sanctuary is always evolving, construction and maintenance are a regular part of life on the project. Tasks range from repairing orangutan platforms and painting buildings to helping with small and medium-sized jobs throughout the week, with larger builds happening from time to time. A past example is the construction of a gabion wall. With several orangutan islands on site, erosion can become an issue, and keeping every island safe and usable is essential as the sanctuary continues to grow. Volunteers helped build a wall to stabilise the land and ensure the island could be used again safely. Others have supported the construction of holding enclosures for sick orangutans, creating secure spaces where they can receive the care and monitoring they need. Whether you're tackling a bigger build or lending a hand with everyday upkeep, every task plays a part in keeping the sanctuary running safely and smoothly.



Working With Sun Bears

Although the orangutans are a major focus of the project, you'll also be involved in supporting the 70+ sun bears that live at Samboja. Tasks include general enclosure maintenance and helping to build new structures for the bears to use. You'll also assist with enrichment activities designed to keep them active and engaged. These might involve hiding food around the site or preparing simple feeding challenges, such as filling bamboo tubes with food, which encourage the bears to use their natural foraging behaviours and stay physically active.



Reforestation

Expanding the 1800-hectare grounds of Samboja Lestari Orangutan Sanctuary, the BOS Foundation has recently secured areas of degraded land that were once teeming with forest flora. As part of your itinerary, you will help to plant trees in these areas, contributing to the restoration of the forest to its former glory!





A Canopy Walk

The canopy walk offers a chance to see the rainforest from a whole new level. You'll head up to one of the highest points in the forest, keeping watch for diverse jungle flora and wildlife along the way, with the calls of singing gibbons often drifting through the canopy. It's an immersive way to experience the scale and biodiversity of the Bornean rainforest, leaving you with unforgettable views and encounters.

A Trip To The Night Market

During your stay, you'll have the chance to explore a bustling night market, soaking up the sights, sounds, and energy of the local area. It's also the perfect place to sample authentic Indonesian cuisine, with a wide variety of dishes to tempt your taste buds. From smoky chicken satay sticks to a host of other local favourites, there's something for everyone!



River Cruise

An afternoon of pure relaxation is spent on the Black River. You'll board a boat and travel along the winding river in search of the endangered proboscis monkey, which is most famous for its oversized nose. On your journey, you will pass through a fishing village to see how the local people live, before travelling out to sea to watch the sunset.



Itinerary

Below is an example of a two-week itinerary on this project. Please note that your daily activities may be subject to change as they are dependent on weather conditions and the project's requirements.

Day 1

After arriving into Balikpapan Airport, you will be met by a project representative and transferred to the lodge at Samboja Lestari. Here, you will meet the other volunteers and receive a briefing of the project, and may even catch a quick glimpse of the orangutans before dinner!

Day 2

After breakfast, you will be given a tour of the orangutan and sun bear facilities at Samboja, and will also climb the fire tower for an amazing view of the project area. In the evening, you will enjoy dinner with your group before learning more about the project's history.

Day 3

This is your first project day, and you will take part in a variety of activities ranging from enrichment creation to food preparation for both the orangutans and the sun bears.

Day 4

Today's activities will revolve around the sun bears, as you will spend time cleaning their enclosures, creating enrichment and preparing food for these wonderful animals. Later in the afternoon, you may even try your hand at a construction activity!

Day 5

Your group will spend a little time away from the project site today as you head into the city. Whilst exploring Balikpapan, you may wish to visit the craft market, try some local foods, or go shopping at the mall. You will also enjoy a nice lunch alongside your group and the volunteer coordinators!

Day 6

Your morning will be spent making stimulating enrichment items for the orangutans, whilst later in the afternoon you may have the opportunity to hand your new creations to the animals themselves! Later on, you will head to the night market with your group.

Day 7

This morning you'll help with any current construction projects, such as building platforms on the orangutan islands. Then, in the afternoon, you will create enrichment for the orangutans in an area which overlooks the islands, offering a fantastic view of the apes.

Day 8

Have a little lie-in and a relaxed morning off, before heading out onto the Black River in the afternoon. This fantastic boat trip may even allow you to catch sight of the iconic proboscis monkey in the wild, so be sure to bring your camera along!

Day 9

This morning, you'll focus on reforesting an area of degraded land, breathing life back into the area and creating a habitat for many Bornean species. In the afternoon, you may help gather branches for nest-making and take part in a construction activity if the project requires it.

Itinerary

Day 10

You'll begin your day by either working on enrichment for the orangutans, or helping out on another construction activity. Later on, you'll embark on a canopy walk in the rainforest, heading high up amongst the trees in search of singing gibbons, as well as other exciting jungle flora and fauna!

Days 11-12

Your final two days at the project will be spent working with the orangutans, as you continue creating enrichment items for them. If you haven't yet had the opportunity, you may also head out on a boat to hand enrichment and food items to the orangutans. On your final evening, you'll enjoy a farewell meal with your group and the project coordinators.

Day 13

If you're here for two weeks, this will sadly be your departure day and you'll be taken back to the airport. Those staying for longer will continue with their day-to-day activities.

While the activities carried out on this project are certainly rewarding, they can also be hard work. Additionally, the rainforest is a hot and humid environment, and it is for these reasons that a moderate level of fitness is recommended for this project. There are no specific skills or prior experience necessary for taking part; all we ask is that you arrive with a commitment to the project's aims and are willing to work as part of a team. Above all, you must have a passion for wildlife conservation!



Accommodation

During your time on the project, you'll stay in a twin-share room at Samboja Ecolodge, thoughtfully designed with sustainability in mind, featuring all walls made from recycled materials. You'll share your room with one other volunteer of the same sex, unless you're volunteering with a friend, family member, or partner, in which case you'll be accommodated together. Each room is equipped with air conditioning, mosquito nets, and an en-suite bathroom with a warm shower and Western-style toilet, ensuring a comfortable and exciting stay in the midst of the rainforest.



Food & Drink

You'll enjoy three meals a day, all served buffet-style in the lodge, giving you plenty of fuel for your days on the project. Breakfast offers a mix of Indonesian and Western favourites, from cereals and eggs to rice or noodle dishes, fresh fruit, and juice. Lunch and dinner usually feature rice with chicken, seafood, or beef alongside vegetables, with noodles often on the menu. Vegetarians and vegans are well catered for too, with options such as tofu dishes. If you have any special dietary requirements, just let us know before you arrive so the team can make sure the right ingredients are ready for you.



What's Included

- Accommodation
- Transfers
- Three meals per day
- Tea, coffee and drinking water at the lodge
- English-speaking coordinator
- A boat trip along the Black River
- A canopy walk through the treetops
- A donation to the project

Not Included

- Flights
- Vaccinations
- Travel insurance
- Visas

Volunteer Reviews

Sarah

"I loved everything! If I had to pick one moment it would be looking into an orangutans eyes and being overwhelmed by the wisdom he seemed to have."



Simon

"The entire experience surpassed expectation and I don't think I could have asked for a better project coordinator."



Amy

"The whole experience was brilliant and I would definitely do another Great Project in the future!"





What Next?

Becoming a volunteer on the Samboja Lestari Orangutan Volunteer Project is simple, and you can help make a difference to orangutan conservation efforts in just a few simple steps...



Visit the website to select your start date and how long you would like to volunteer for.



Secure your place online by paying a deposit of £195. You'll have up to 60 days before your start date to pay your remaining balance.



Prepare for your trip and ask your dedicated travel expert any questions before packing your bags and heading off to Borneo!



Finally, have an incredible time and don't forget to send in or tag us in your photos!

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