

Sibu

Where Sarawak Still Tastes Real



Sibu rarely comes up in conversation. That might be the best thing about it.

The Rejang River, Malaysia's longest, 563 kilometres (km), runs through it. Everything here began with that river, and in many ways, still moves because of it.

Two thirds of Sibu's population traces its roots to Foochow, in southeastern China. The earliest settlers arrived at the turn of the twentieth century, travelling by river, clearing land, building trade from almost nothing. That legacy settled into everyday life — into the way people speak, and gather.

By morning, it is already in full view.

Coffee shops are loud chairs scraping, teaspoons hitting porcelain cups, voices cutting across the room in a mix of Hokkien, Foochow, Malay, Iban, English. Conversations overlap.

Cups are cleared and replaced without a word. Someone is already halfway through his third coffee. Someone else is folding yesterday's newspaper into precise squares. Orders are shouted, not written. The drinks arrive quickly — thick, dark coffee poured from a height, tea pulled until it froths.

This is Sibu at 8:00 AM. The rest of the day only gets better.



Photo credit Tourism Sarawak Board



What Sibu Does Best

Ask any Sibu local what they miss most when they leave. The answer is almost always *kampung* mee, springy wheat noodles tossed in dark soy, served simply. No broth. It is the food Sibu people return to. Each *kopitiam* (traditional coffee shop) has its own ratio, its own noodle texture.

For a deeper appreciation of what goes into the bowl, a handful of local operators offer *kampung*-making sessions, kneading, pulling, getting the texture right under the guidance of someone who has been doing it since childhood.

Then pull up a stool at the nearest kopitiam, order a bowl, and let the coffee, thick, dark, pulled through a cotton sock and tasting of roasted grain and something close to caramel do the rest.

Then there is *kompia*, a small *Foochow* flatbread, sesame-seeded, baked in a wood-fired clay oven until the outside crisps and the inside stays chewy.

If you want to understand what the Rajang River actually produces, order the Empurau fish. In Mandarin it is called *wang bu liao*, which is both a boast and an accurate description. It is the most prized freshwater fish in Malaysia, fed on wild fruits that fall from the trees overhanging the river, which gives the flesh a taste that is creamy, faintly sweet, with a hint of wild fruit. The scales get deep-fried separately into a crisp dish of their own. Expect to pay anywhere from RM800 to RM1,500 per kilograms (kg), a price that makes every bite count. Ask your hotel where to find it that day as availability depends on the catch.

Inside Malaysia's Largest Market

The Sibu Central Market is the largest indoor market in Malaysia, with around 1,100 stalls spread across multiple floors. The stalls cover everything a Sibu kitchen needs, river fish, jungle vegetables, hand-rolled noodles, tropical fruits, and spices from the Borneo interior. *Kek lapis* (layer cake) is

stacked in varieties. Homemade *tuak* (rice wine) sits alongside freshly ground coffee. Wild *midin* fern (fiddlehead fern), the best green vegetable in East Malaysia, turns up in bundles still cool from the rainforest.

The sights are only half of it. Then there is the noise.

Hokkien bargaining cuts across Iban conversation, Malay shifts to Mandarin mid-exchange. Nobody pauses for it. In Sibu, code-switching is just how sentences work.

Before you leave the market, find a vendor selling Sarawak pineapple, freshly cut. Unlike regular pineapple that leaves a faint burn on your tongue, this variety is entirely sweet, with no sharpness at the finish.

In this spread,
Clockwise from left: Fresh midin stir-fried, a Sarawak staple; a *kampung* noodle maker tending to his freshly stretched noodles; traditional lapis cake in vibrant layers; *kampung* noodles tossed simply but full of flavour; and a classic glass of iced kopi, part of Sibu's daily ritual.



In this spread,

Clockwise from top left: Home cooked local delectable dishes; handmade goods lining narrow aisles of markets; colourful fresh fruit cups ready to grab; a golden seafood omelette perfectly cooked to order; and a temple glowing at dusk, reflecting Sibü's rich heritage and belief.



When the Night Market Rises

A few streets from the Central Market, the Sibü Night Market comes alive as the sun goes down. Stalls stretch down the street, smoke rising from the grills, woks hitting the flame, the smell of grilled river fish and fresh lime in the air, tables filling up as the night settles in.

The food is the star. Oyster omelettes with a sharp squeeze of lime, stuffed tofu, fresh fruit juices, plates of noodles, and a local take on *takoyaki* made with squid instead of octopus. You will find pork and non-pork dishes side by side, served in the easy

Malaysian communal spirit of a town that loves to eat together.

The whole town seems to relocate here after dark. There are plenty of night markets in Malaysia, but Sibü's feels like the whole town has gathered for an open-air dinner party.

One honest warning: tables and chairs are scarce. Most of what you buy gets eaten standing up, or walking slowly to the next stall. In Sibü, that is not a problem. It is just how dinner at the night market works.



“The winding river, the vibrant markets and the dignity of the iconic long house; these are the textures of Sibü, in its truest form – raw, authentic and yet to be shaped by the hands of mass tourism.”

On the River at Dusk

An hour on the Rejang as the sun goes down is worth rearranging your evening for. From the water, Sibü reveals a different side – old houses and villages on stilts, mosques and temples, shipyards, the town's skyline reflected on the river. Fishermen work the banks as the light fades.

The further you drift from the wharf, the quieter it gets. On a clear evening, the sunset does the rest.

Photo credit Tourism Sarawak Board



Into the Longhouse

An Iban longhouse experience, accessible from Sibü, houses multiple households in one communal structure. Visitors are welcomed with a traditional toasting ceremony. Rice wine served to every guest, with non-alcoholic options available, followed by dancing, conversation, and home-cooked Iban food. Chicken and vegetables cooked in bamboo, the smoke still in the flavour.

The Iban have been welcoming strangers for a long time, and it shows in the ease of it — the way a grandmother might gesture for you to sit closer, or a young man explains the meaning of the beadwork his mother is wearing, patiently, because he wants you to understand.

You arrive as a stranger and leave having eaten someone's grandmother's cooking.

Go Before Everyone Else Does

Sibü will not appear on any short-list this year, and that is precisely the window. The Tua Pek Kong Temple, founded in 1890 and the oldest Chinese temple in Sibü, has a seven-storey pagoda you can climb for a view that puts the whole town in context - the Rejang wide and slow below, the shophouses low against the treeline, the water the colour it has always been.

This is Sibü at ground level. The river, the market, the grandmother waving you closer. There are parts of Malaysia that haven't been smoothed for visitors yet. Sibü is one of them.

Come while it lasts.



Photo credit Tourism Sarawak Board

In this spread,

Clockwise from top left: A cultural performance inside a longhouse; elevated wooden architecture set deep in the rainforest; intricate details of communal living spaces; and a contrast of modern Sibü and its past.

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