

Sumbiling Eco Village : A model for community-based ecotourism in Brunei

Kg Sumbiling Lama, Jalan Batang Duri, Temburong, Brunei Darussalam

Deep in the lush rainforests of Temburong, Brunei Darussalam, Sumbiling Eco Village (SEV) has grown from a modest initiative into a recognized model for sustainable, community-based tourism. It demonstrates that tourism, when grounded in local leadership and environmental stewardship, can create livelihoods, preserve cultural traditions, and offer visitors meaningful experiences. What begun as one man's personal vision has grown into a dynamic partnership between the village and visitors from around the world.

Quality destinations

Work conditions

Skills

Initiative	Sumbiling Eco Village (SEV) is a social enterprise launched in 2008, promoting sustainable ecotourism in Temburong, Brunei. SEV is built on a community-based model, employing local villagers and sharing economic benefits with them through fair practices. The initiative aims to improve villager livelihoods, foster environmental awareness, and showcase Brunei's natural beauty, becoming a leader in eco-tourism in Borneo.
Actors	Private sector, primarily led by Mr. Leslie Chinag Jin Kiong and supported by the local community of Sumbiling Lama Village
URL	www.sumbiling.com/

Planting the first seed

The story of SEV began with a simple but pressing challenge. In the early 2000s, Mr. Leslie Chiang, then working for a Brunei-based tour operator, frequently brought guests to explore the Ulu Temburong National Park. Yet the area lacked basic infrastructure: no toilets, no dining areas, and nowhere comfortable to rest.

At the same time, the surrounding Iban community, traditionally forest gatherers, faced limited economic opportunities. Mr. Chiang saw both a problem and a possibility. His solution was to establish a small base for eco-tourism-starting, quite literally, with a toilet.



Centred on people and their community

One characteristic of Sumbiling Eco Village is an unwavering commitment to the local community. Many of the staff, all of whom come from the nearby village of Sumbiling Lama, had limited formal education of regular employment before joining SEV. Rather than viewing this as a barrier, Mr. Chiang saw value in their rainforest expertise.

Through training, villagers developed new skills in hospitality and earned certification in first aid, fire safety, and jungle guiding. This generated not only work but dignity, confidence, and a sense of contribution.

These days, SEV'S community-centred approach goes beyond jobs. Tour boats are rented directly from villagers, and fresh fish and prawns are purchased from local families. This ensures that the benefits of tourism are shared across households, strengthening livelihoods and reinforcing a collective interest in protecting the natural environment that sustains the village.



Photo: Sumbiling Eco Village

Culinary delights with deeper immersion into nature

For visitors, SEV is more than a place to stay; it offers immersion. Small group sizes ensure personal connections and meaningful exchanges. Guests can trek through the jungle with local guides, learning about medicinal plants passed down through generations, or join night walks to discover fireflies, rare insects, and sometimes even glowing mushrooms.

Accommodation is simple yet comfortable, designed to bring guests close to nature without unnecessary distractions. The aim is not luxury, but authenticity; a chance to slow down, tune into the rainforest, and connect with the people who call it home.

Food is another highlight. More than half of the vegetables served at SEV are foraged from the nearby forest or sourced from village gardens. Bamboo chicken, cooked over an open fire inside freshly cut bamboo, has become a signature dish. SEV has even hosted training sessions for chefs from across Brunei to study this traditional technique. Dining here is a celebration of Bruneian flavors rooted in tradition and sustainability.



Quality, safety, and sustainability

SEV has always prioritized quality over quantity. Rather than pursuit of mass tourism, the emphasis is on careful environmental stewardship and delivering a meaningful experience for each guest. That philosophy has paid off: Lonely Planet named SEV one of Brunei's top three places to visit, and the village continues to earn strong reviews on travel platforms.

Safety is treated with equal seriousness. SEV is a certified adventure site, and staff are rigorously trained to ensure the well-being of guests, including the many school groups that use the site for outdoor education camps.

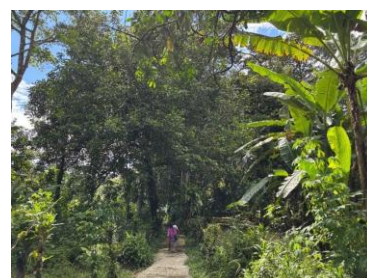
Sustainability, meanwhile, is a core value. Plastic use is kept to a minimum, vegetable gardens help reduce reliance on external supplies, and recycled materials are used in construction. These efforts show both visitors and local residents that conservation is not an abstract concept but a daily way of life.



Challenges and breakthroughs

The path was not always smooth. In the early days, many villagers were shy around strangers. Bridging the gap between traditional values and work rhythms with the expectations of international tourists required patience, trust, and adaptability. As Mr. Chiang reflects, "Money cannot buy the heart." It took time and mutual respect to build lasting bonds.

Over the years, SEV's inclusive approach has transformed hesitation into pride. Today, villagers engage visitors with confidence and enthusiasm, eager to share their heritage. Many guests, in turn, come back year after year.



Blueprint for the future

Sumbiling Eco Village offers a valuable lesson in the power of sustainable tourism when people come first.

What began with a single toilet now stands as a symbol of what is possible when vision meets perseverance. For Brunei, SEV is a source of pride. For travelers, it is an unforgettable journey. And for the wider tourism community, it is proof that the most powerful stories are not about places, but about the people who bring those places to life.



Interview

