

LIFE IS



SIMPLE ON WATER



Instead of the floating atolls of Kevin Costner's magnum opus, **'Water World'**, here is an ancient civilization that has been living in stilt houses on the River Brunei, in Negara Brunei Darussalam on the verdant island of Borneo. How does it feel to live on water, day in and day out?

By Sravasti Ghosh Dastidar





Haji comes from a family of boat builders and repairers. He learnt the ropes from his father, apprenticing from the age of 12, and has now taught his son how to repair boats

SEEING HIS GRANDCHILDREN leaving for school in the morning, walking the narrow wooden planks to their primary, middle or high schools in the village, the *pembina bot datuk* (boat builder grandfather), Haji, prays for their safety. It's not road accidents that worry him. He lives in a wooden house, propped up on concrete piles, in one of the oldest and largest heritage water villages of the world. The thought of unguarded infants falling into the water and drowning bothers him. Or maybe one of the older children, playing on the way to school, will carelessly step on a loose plank and fall into the water. Will they remember to keep to the middle of the wooden pathways?

It is imperative that *Kampong Ayer* (water village) of Bandar Seri Begawan inhabitants in Brunei know to swim. Only a few of the 17,000 people currently living in water villages may not be swimmers. The village's population has declined from 40,000 a few decades

ago. Haji has ensured that his family learns to swim and has taken care to see that the infants in his house don't tumble into the water. The thought keeps him hopeful.

He is ready for his day's work.

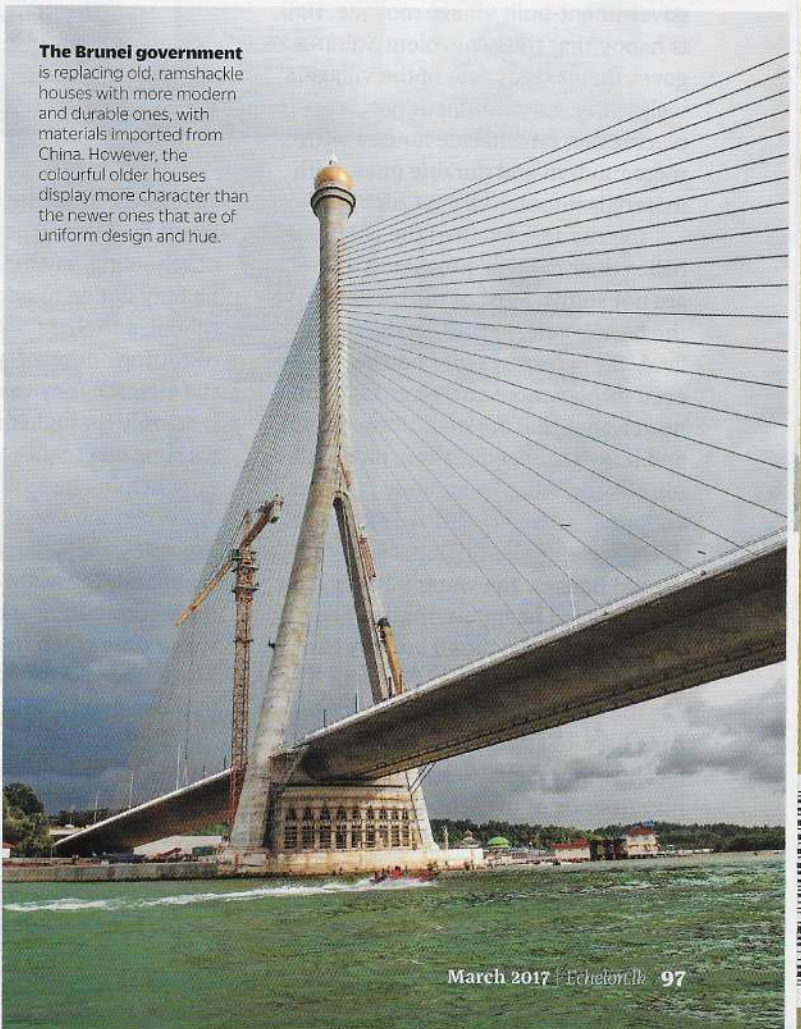
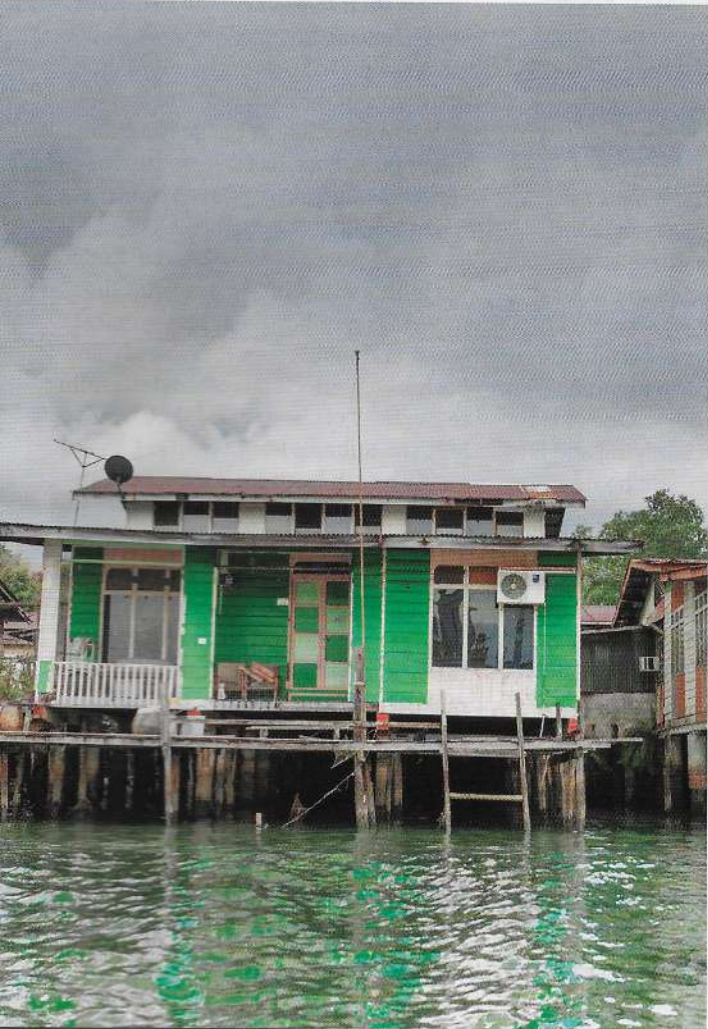
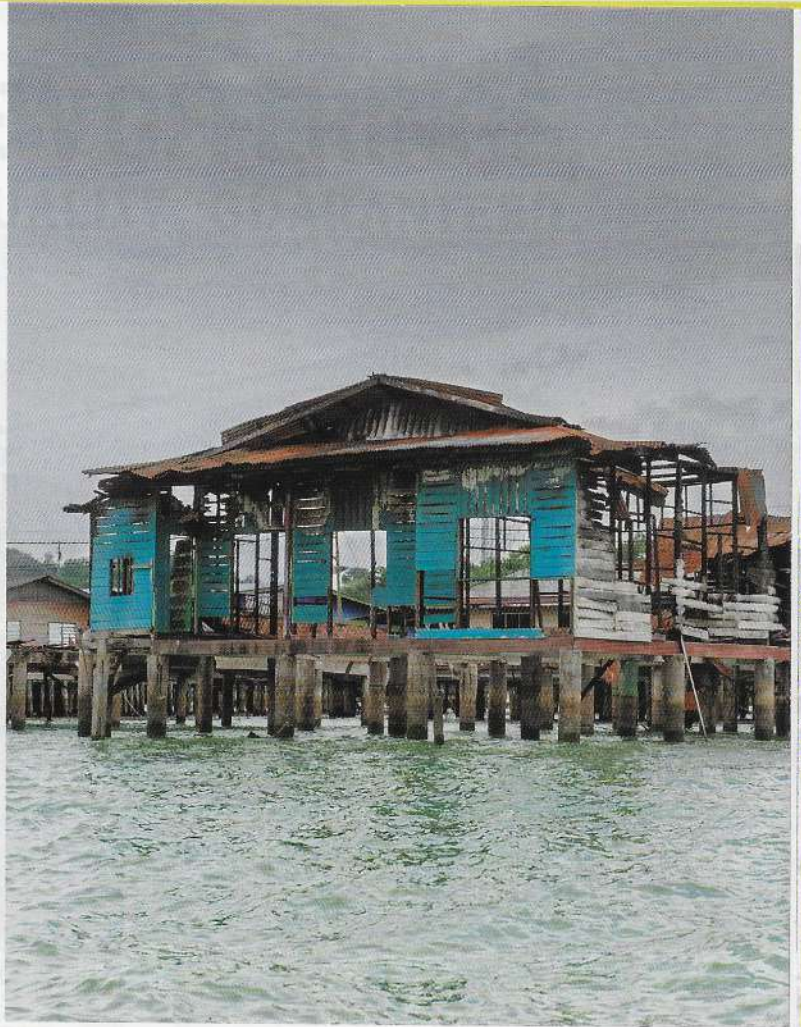
The Haji's are a family of boat builders and repairers. Only a handful of boat makers are left in the water villages now. He learnt the ropes from his father, apprenticing from the age of 12. Haji has now taught his son how to repair boats and is optimistic that he will soon take an interest in building them too. His son and hired mechanics help in the arduous work of building a boat from scratch.

Wood is usually sourced from Malaysia. Felling trees is prohibited in lush Brunei, known for its rich eco-tourism. It takes almost a month to build a long boat that costs around 13,000 to 14,000 Bruneian dollars. Demand for racing boats is high, and trophies displayed on Haji's mantelpiece bear proof of his

passion. Fishermen, handicraftsmen, wood collectors and cloth weavers have long left the water village in search of new livelihoods. Meanwhile, his amiable wife, Hajiyah, has already prepared and delivered the daily supply of snacks for children of government schools. She readies the house for international tourists for whom the doors open from 9am to 5pm. Nowadays, most tourists are Chinese.

Hajiyah welcomes them with a smile, and traditional Malay sweets like *Selurut*, *Apang*, *Ardam* and *Bahulu*, and tea. She has been living in the water village since birth and knows no other life. Three of her children live on land (most Bruneians prefer secure government jobs) and visit their parents on weekends. Her life revolves around hospitality – welcoming tourists, extended family and neighbours, every day. Privacy is elusive. The family cooks and eats, watches TV, and chats even while tourists go in and out of the rooms.

Haji prays at home. On Fridays, all the men of the village pray in the



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government-built village mosque. Haji is happy that the benevolent Sultan's government takes care of the villagers' well-being. The administration is replacing old, ramshackle houses with more modern and durable ones, with materials imported from China.

The rundown look of the older ones belies their owners' prosperity. These are not slums. Most of the owners have the best of cars, parked on the mainland. The colourful older houses, however, display more character than the newer ones that are of uniform design and hue. Health, education, piped water, electricity and telephone facilities are provided free for Brunei's citizens. Sewage disposal is still an issue with the old houses. The water villages have stilt-propped hospitals, marine fire stations and schools, all built by the government.

The children of a particular *kampung* have to attend schools in that locality. They can also use the wooden playgrounds of the schools beyond school hours. Open spaces are not common in water villages. The education system has its positives and negatives.

Just as the students do not have to travel far, if a student misses a month of schooling, say for health reasons, he may not be re-admitted to the local school, and there is a very slim chance of getting admitted to schools outside the vicinity. They can go to the mainland only for higher studies. One of Haji's sons had to give up studying and is now helping his father build boats.

When the family needs to shop for groceries, they take a water-taxi to the mainland. These are easily available for daily commuters and tourists. There was a time when trading was done on boats. The villages had a pulsating life in those days.

These settlements are over 1,300 years old. Italian explorer Antonio Pigafetta described the villages in 1521: "That city is entirely built on salt water, except the houses of the king and certain chiefs. It contains twenty-five

thousand hearths. The houses are all constructed of wood and built up from the ground on tall pillars. When the tide is high, women go in boats through the settlement selling articles necessary to maintain life."

The women do not go from house to house peddling their wares anymore. The *padian* (floating) markets are no more. Now, they have the *kedai runcit* (local grocery stores) that remain open from 2pm to 10pm instead, but can be of help 24/7. There are restaurants and cooking gas stores in the villages, too. Many of Haji's neighbours keep poultry in hanging pens for a steady supply of eggs and meat.

The number of villages has dwindled over time, as the citizens have been encouraged to move to dry and disease-free land since 1906. Frequent fires have also contributed to people losing their homes and moving to the mainland. Hajiyah says that, once fire breaks out, all they can do is panic and run for their lives using the pathways. Seven houses can become a heap of cinders within 10 minutes. Firefighters do their best, but a recent fire consumed more than 20 houses and the inhabitants have had to resettle. The concrete pilings and piles of burnt wood are all that remain.

Apart from fire hazards, Haji finds life in this water world peaceful. The proboscis monkey-filled hilly tropical forest and mangroves form an idyllic backdrop, with clouds often descending to the level of the houses. They overlook the Sultan's *Istana* (palace), the Sultan's 60th birthday monument, the picturesque Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin Mosque and the capital city of Bandar Seri Begawan, which is still refreshingly devoid of skyscrapers.

As the mellowed sun washes over the scenic villages, Haji's grandchildren make a noisy return to wake up the sleepy neighbourhood. The tourists leave for the mainland. Haji, with the setting sun behind him and the towering single-pillar new bridge on his right, leaves in his boat to attend his night shift as a security officer. ⑤