

*From Langkawi to Sipadan*

# Glimpses of Malaysia

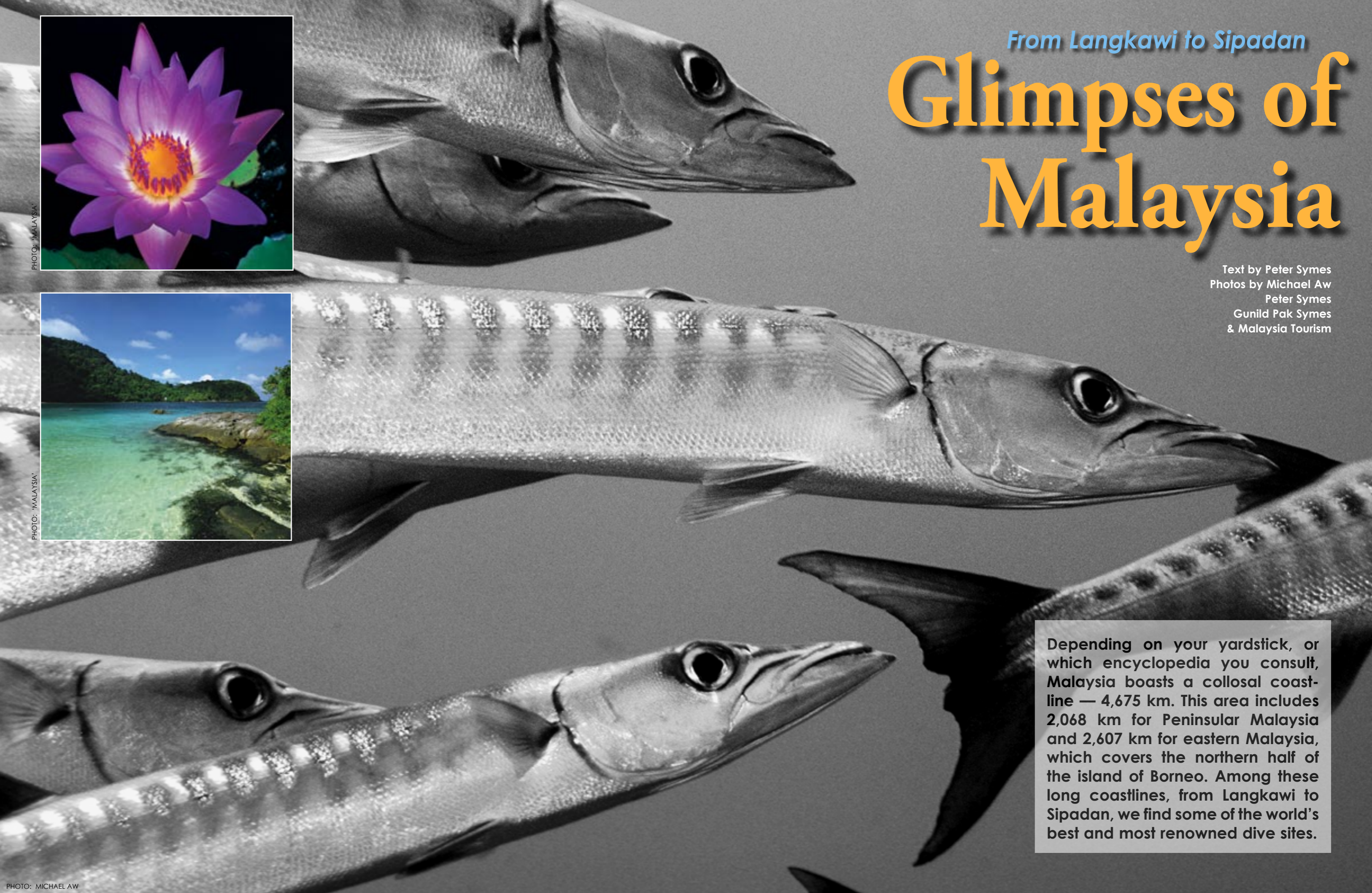
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& Malaysia Tourism



PHOTO: 'MALAYSIA'



PHOTO: 'MALAYSIA'



Depending on your yardstick, or which encyclopedia you consult, Malaysia boasts a colossal coastline — 4,675 km. This area includes 2,068 km for Peninsular Malaysia and 2,607 km for eastern Malaysia, which covers the northern half of the island of Borneo. Among these long coastlines, from Langkawi to Sipadan, we find some of the world's best and most renowned dive sites.

PHOTO: MICHAEL AW

# Glimpses of Malaysia

For most divers, Malaysian diving means the island of Sipadan off Sabah in Borneo — even novices tend to get that glazed look on their faces when the word “Sipadan” is uttered. Sipadan is still a true gem, but the environmental restraints, which always meant that the island had limited space to offer, have recently been increased. Authorities have forced a number of dive operators to vacate their structures on the island. Sipadan, Mabul and Layang Layang are all famous names, but maybe the time has come to take a further look at what Malaysia has to offer? Aside from so many new dive sites just waiting to be discovered, there are also an incredible amount of exciting adventures above water. This country boasts cultural and natural riches like few other territories.

While this magazine may be primarily for divers by divers, diving is not just diving anymore. It would be gross negligence not to take at least a brief look at a few of the cultural and land excursions that can be conveniently and easily included in a dive trip to the region. Be it her dense, mysterious rainforests once haunted by head-hunters and now the home of proboscis monkeys, hornbills and of course orang-utans, or the exciting, dynamic capital of Kuala Lumpur, where modernity rubs shoulders with tradition and where you can shop till you drop before exploring the vibrant restaurant scene, or the white sand-fringed resort islands of Penang, Langkawi and Pangkor, with villas built on stilts over the water in the manner of a traditional Malay fishing village — all over Malaysia you'll find coral reefs, tropical jungles and friendly locals who speak English as well as Malay. Borneo is also home to Mount Kinabulu, the region's highest summit.

In this way, Malaysia can be likened to a treasure trove of adventures. Some gems are already found and polished while others are still waiting to be discovered. It is so hard to choose — there are so many good dive operators in the area that it is impossible to be equally fair to everyone who deserves an overview here.



Spa at Pangkor Laut Resort



Pitcher Plants



Sunset at Tanjung Rhu River, Langkawi



Details of decoration on fishing boat

# Malaysia!



Overview of the main dive destinations within Malaysia and the sites described in this article



Kuala Lumpur at night



Orang-Utan in the Sepilok reserve



PHOTO: 'MALAYSIA'

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*Malaysia has a tropical climate with an average of 32°C and water temperature 28-30°C all year round. The best diving season on the west coast is from October-November to January-February, exactly the opposite to the east coast where the season starts again in March.*

## The West Coast



- 1. Langkawi & Pulau Payar
- 2. Pulau Penang
- 3. Sembilan Islands and Pulau Jarak

TOP: Ghost pipefish  
 INSET: Langkawi village shops  
 RIGHT: Diving in Malaysia

### Langkawi & Pulau Payar

Langkawi, a cluster of 99 islands separated from mainland Malaysia by the Straits of Malacca, is a district of the state of Kedah in Northern Malaysia and lies approximately 51 km west of Kedah. Only four of the 99 islands are inhabited — Pulau Langkawi (the main island), Pulau Tuba, Pulau Rebak and Pulau Dayang Bunting.

Langkawi is a duty-free shopping haven offering an attractive range of local and imported goods for those with a yen, dollar or euro for shopping. Since Langkawi is an island, it is surrounded by beautiful beaches and also

many other smaller islands. And you can guess that the beaches are a huge attraction. The most popular beach hangouts in Langkawi are Pantai Cenang, Burau Bay and Pantai Tanjung Rhu. Pantai Cenang is the more happening place where you can swim, water ski, jet ski, do some sailing, boating and other water activities. Burau Bay and Pantai Tanjung Rhu have a more relaxed pace.

Dive-wise, however, it is the nearby Pulau Payar Marine Park, about 19 nautical miles south of Langkawi Island and 32 nautical miles north of Pulau Pinang, that holds the greatest attractions. These islands, famous for the varied and colourful marine life that they support, offer the best diving on Peninsular Malaysia's west coast.

The park is comprised of four uninhabited islands: Payar, Lembu, Kaca and Segantang, which make

up Malaysia's oldest Marine Park sanctuary, have been protected since 1985. The park has been called a shining example of how proper conservation, good management and the promotion of eco-tourism can safeguard a healthy environment for future generations.

At Pulau Payar, the largest of the four islands, you will find the Marine Park Centre which was set up and operated by the Fisheries Department. If you are not into water activities, check out the two hiking trails that have been constructed to enable visitors to explore and enjoy breathtaking views of the surrounding sea and beyond.

The waters of Pulau Payar have an additional attraction: artificial reefs built from tires, concrete blocks and old boats, which over the years have developed into mature reefs that are teeming with

PHOTO: MALAYSIA

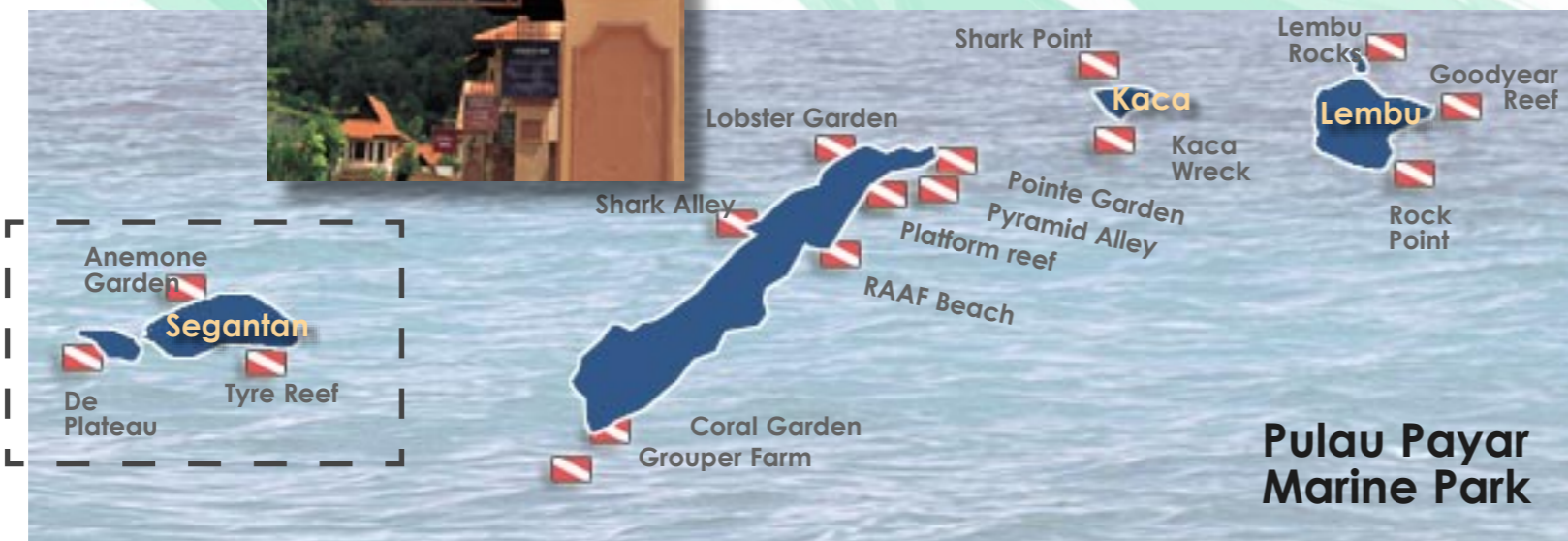
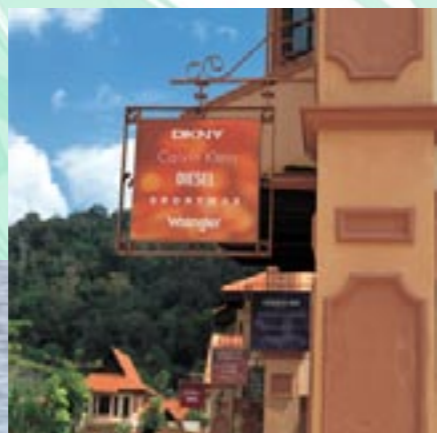


PHOTO: MALAYSIA



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The northern section of the Straits of Malacca, which is one of the world's busiest shipping channels, may have had its draught altered significantly due to the tsunami that hit Asia on the 26th of December 2004, according to a report in the shipping journal, *Portsworld*. Water depths in parts of the Straits of Malacca could have dropped from 4000 feet (1333 m) before the quake to as low as 100 feet (33 m) and thousands of navigational aides, such as buoys held in place by mushroom-shaped anchors have been carried off to new locations. Old shipwrecks marked on charts had been relocated, joined by new wrecks that would have to be salvaged, moved or charted.



## Sembilan Islands & Pulau Jarak

Further south, near Lumut lies Pulau Sembilan. The dive sites here are generally more challenging due to the currents and sometimes the visibility is not more than 2-3 metres. Diving depth ranges from 5 m to 40 m. White Rock, which is characterised by a lighthouse, has steep walls to 40 m, where groupers and snappers sleep in the crevices and under overhangs. In the open water, it is not unusual to see barracuda, jacks and other big pelagic species.

Around Saga, Lalang, Rumbia and Buluh, one finds nice reefs with lots of table corals and brain corals as well as tentacle corals. Around the orange daisy

corals, it is common to see big schools of damselfish. It is also a good site for coral scallops and nudibranches. Among the prevalent species of fish, we find parrotfish, angelfish, pufferfish, lionfish and moray eels.



PHOTO: PETER SYMES

Right in the middle of the straits, 40 miles (64 km) off Pulau Pangkor, lies Pulau Jarak, a small uninhabited island that has bet-

ter underwater visibility due to its remoteness. Dolphins and sailfish have been sighted here, but beyond that there are probably well-kept secrets unknown to everyone but the most hardcore divers.

Divers would do well to exploring this archipelago. The dive season is busy from November through March, since one can't dive at all on the east coast during that time. The diving is easy with a maximum depth of 15-20 m in the interesting areas, whereas in the deeper parts, there is mostly sandy bottom. There is one submerged reef off Jarak at about 25 m depth, however the currents can be quite strong there.



PHOTO: MALAYSIA

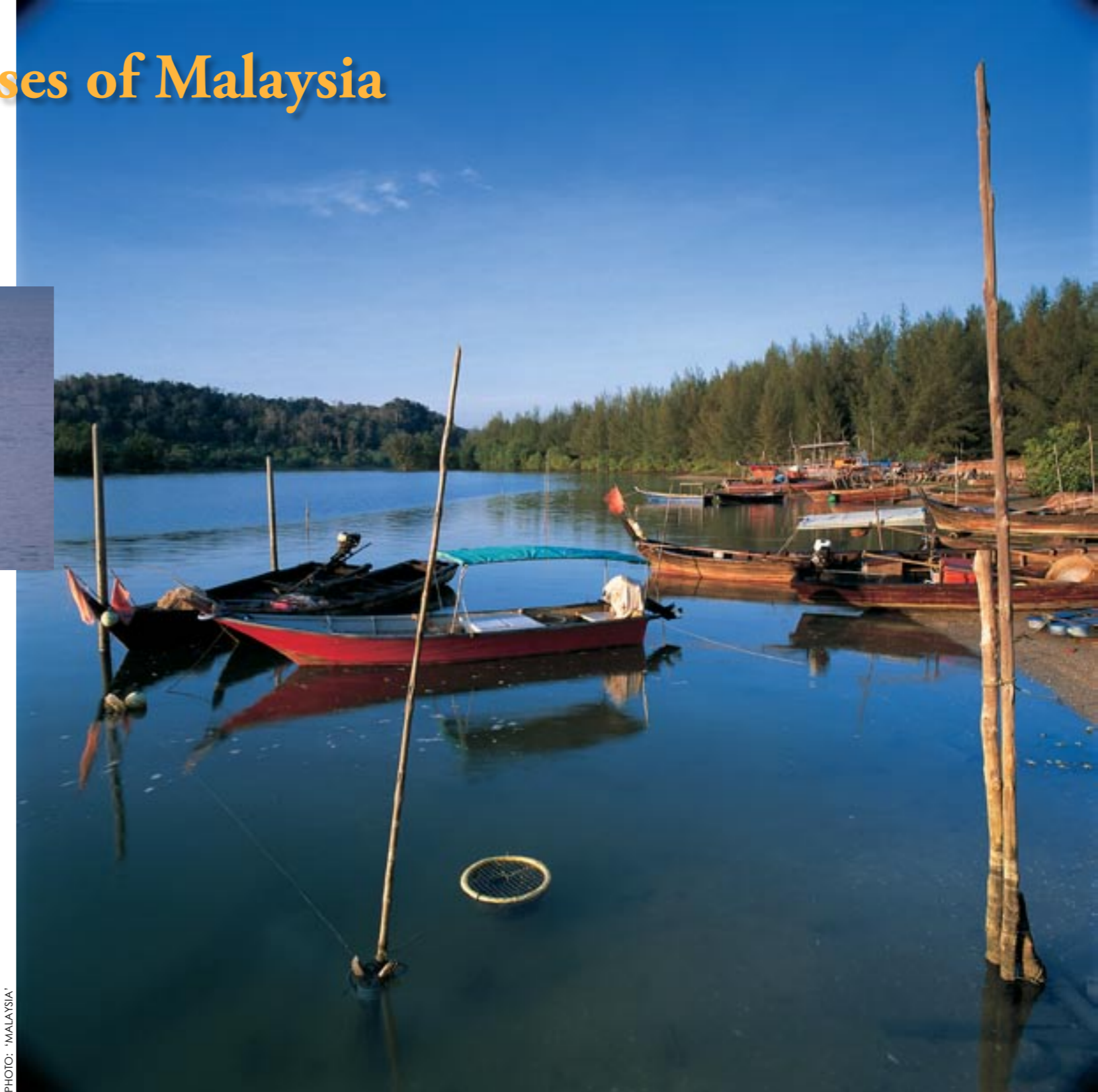


PHOTO: MALAYSIA

ABOVE: Fishing boats at Taryung Rhu River, Langkawi. INSET: Fishing boat, Georgetown, Penang. LEFT: Nudibranch

## Western Malaysia & the Tsunami

Langkawi, the Malaysian area closest to the epicentre and the hardest hit towns in Thailand, reported on

January 2, 2005, that the wave that hit Langkawi was not a tsunami, but a 'shadow wave' - a normal wave caused by the tsunami that passed to the north and hit the coast of Thailand hundreds of kilometers away. The Indonesian mainland stood between

the quake center and Langkawi, effectively providing shelter from the huge waves that caused havoc in Thailand and other countries. The wave that reached Langkawi was very weak. The impact of the tsunami that struck Penang was also minimal.

However, official records showed that 31 people in Penang drowned after tidal waves hit the coastal areas.

The Malaysian Association of Hotels reported that there was no damage to the hotels and their surrounding areas and facilities, except to the

beach front, which needed cleaning of debris. There were no casualties of foreign tourists reported. The situation is back to normal as all hotels are operating as usual. Tourist attractions are not affected. Fortunately, it's business as usual in Penang.

## The East Coast



- 4. Perhentian Islands
- 5. Redang Islands
- 6. Pulau Tangol
- 7. Pulau Tioman
- 8. Pulau Aur

*The three most popular destinations of the East Coast are the Perhentian Islands, the Redang Archipelago and Tioman Island.*

**The East Coast** Peninsular Malaysia's east coast is often quoted as the real Malaysia. A collection of fishing villages, beaches and picturesque islands and, with little industry to pollute its waters, it offers great diving. For a long time, these islands were a secret of divers.

Later, the exclusive resorts moved into the area. As a result, a 45 km stretch of the Terengganu coastline — including Pulau Redang and its neighbouring islands, Pulau Pinang, Pulau Lima, Pulau Ekor Tebu, Pulau Lang Tengah, Pulau Perhentian Besar, Pulau Perhentian Kecil, Pulau Susu Dara and Pulau Kapas — was declared a Marine National Park in 1991 in order to protect the area.

The reserve is an attempt to preserve the wonders that are found here, and to reverse some of the damage wrought by resort construction and over fishing. Snorkelling is restricted to certain areas, and the Malaysian Department of Fisheries is busy building artificial reefs.

**The Perhentian Islands** have a relaxed diving atmosphere in an idyllic, laid-back setting. They consist of two main islands — Perhentian Besar (Big Stopover Island) and Perhentian Kecil (Small Stopover Island) plus several small rocks and islets to the north-west, the latter giving the best diving. Most tourist accommodation is on Perhentian Besar. Due to the annual monsoon, the islands are

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virtually inaccessible from November to January. Dive sites are very varied, from current-swept rocks close to the Perhentians and Bidong, to gentle slopes covered with sea anemones around Redang, to underwater mounds in Lang Tengah. All these places also have excellent house reefs that are good for night dives or snorkeling.

The underwater topography usually consists of jumbles of boulders that form caves, crevices and tunnels carpeted with soft corals. In this shallow, warm water, the growth of marine life is prolific. While the visibility in these waters is generally excellent, extending up to 30 metres in fine weather conditions, a combination of tides and an overnight rainstorm may stir up the sea floor resulting in less than optimal visibility.

Among the many varieties of marine life, regular encounters include Jacks, Yellowtail, Giant Clams, Triggerfish, Puffers, Spotted Porcupinefish, Blue and Yellow Fusiliers, Pencilfish, and huge Lionfish — that's not forgetting the myriads of tiny silver cardinalfish that jet around

in an amazing display of synchronicity. But even when less than ideal visibility is encountered, the unspoiled table coral formations are spectacular and the abundance of hydrozoans, anthozoans, brain coral, sea fans, sea whips and sea cucumbers is breathtaking. Dolphins and pilot whales can be seen in the area during July and August. Whalesharks are spotted a few times every year.

**Pulau Kerengga Besar**, a steep volcanic island that rises sharply out of the sea, appears to be home to various species of rays. Stingrays can be found resting on the ocean bottom or winging gracefully past with manta Rays hovering overhead. Harp corals, nudibranchs and featherstars are common. Deeper down, there are fields of stony corals and barrel sponges covered with alabaster sea cucumbers. Where the boulders meet the sand, there are many fish species, including stingrays, parrotfish and pufferfish.

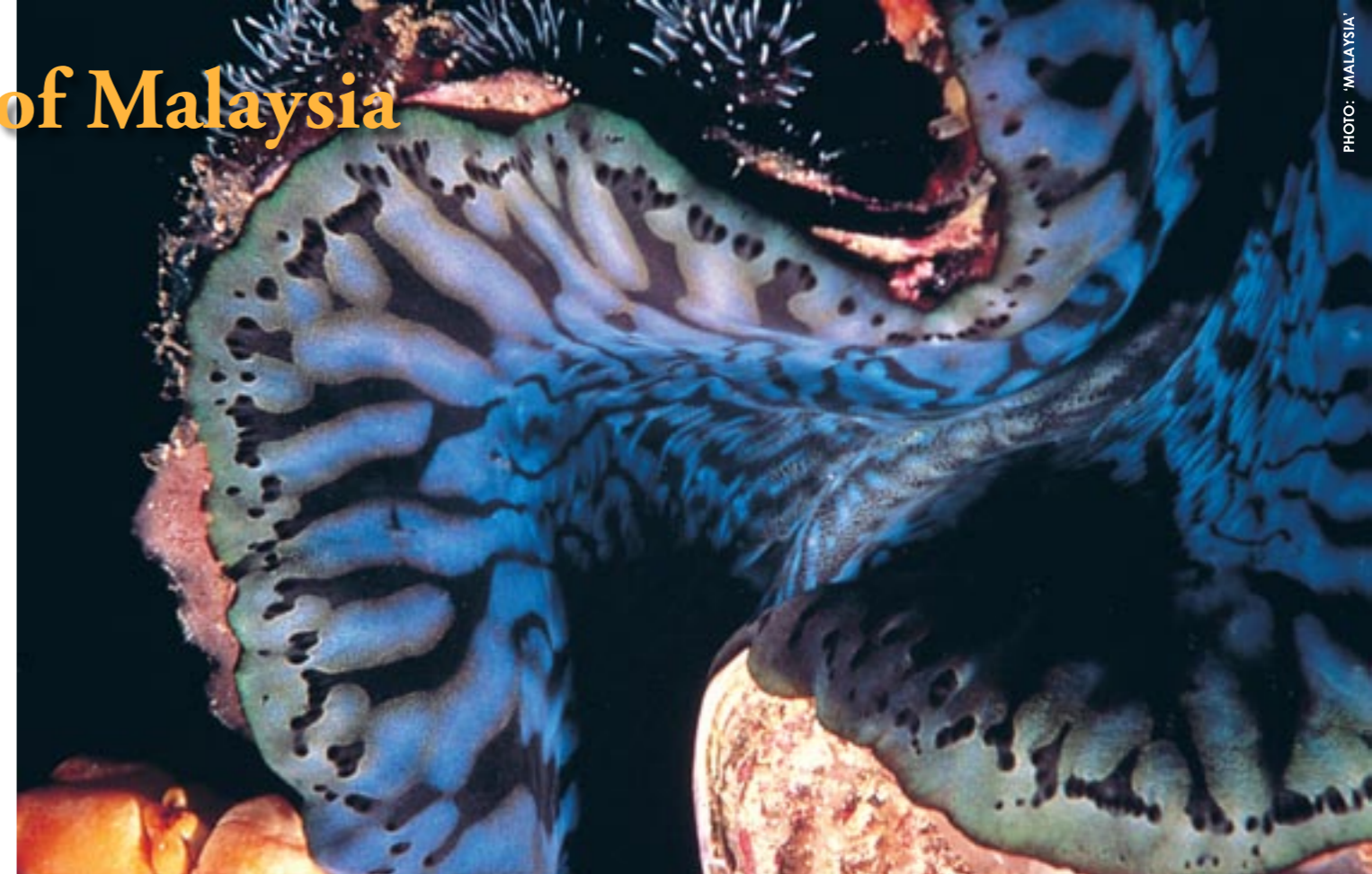
Pulau Lang Tengah Island lies in the middle of the Marine Park sanctuary. Here, we find crystal-clear water, pristine beaches and untouched tropical jungle as well as a coastline of arresting beauty with white sandy beaches.

A map of a few of the many dive sites around the Perhentians

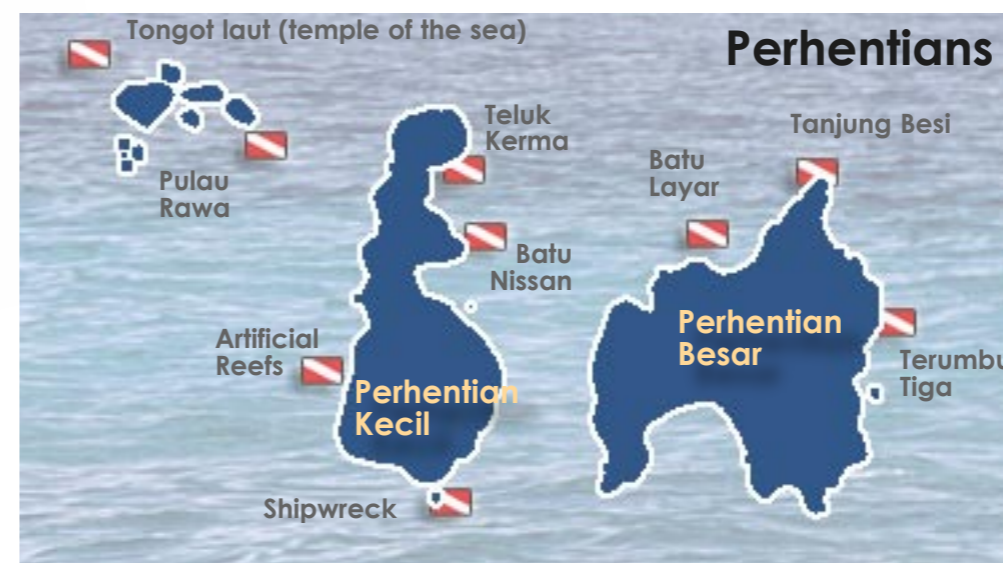
LEFT: Soft coral and seashell



PHOTO: 'MALAYSIA'



Giant clam



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shrimps and occasional Spanish dancers. Green and hawksbill turtles are common. Reef fish are plentiful, and pelagic species, including manta rays and whalesharks, are frequently encountered.

The Redang Archipelago's Big Seamount is considered by many to be the most spectacular dive site in peninsular Malaysia. Lying 50 m north of the island of Lima, it rises from 30 m to within 10 m of the surface and is covered in anemones, gorgonians, tunicates, hard encrusting corals and soft tree corals, with boulder coral, lettuce coral, staghorn coral and acropora table corals.

Pulau Kapas (Kapas Island) and its neighbouring island, Pulau Gemia, are two popular

**The Redang Archipelago** consists of the island of Redang, the much smaller island of Pinang and seven tiny islets.\* This group of islands and a marine park established in 1985 boasts white sandy beaches, crystal-clear water and spectacular coral reefs, which are among the richest in the country, making the area one of the best dive spots in the world.

The reefs of the Redang Archipelago are home to over 55 genera of corals, 100 species of fish as well as 52 genera of stony corals, including the largest boulder coral in this half of the country.

Fish to look out for are snappers, jacks, rabbitfish, silver barracudas, clownfish, triggerfish and parrotfish. Turtles are a common sight and you may also spot the occasional cuttlefish, squid and eagle ray. Featherstars, hydroids, black coral, anemones, sea fans and sponges dominate the reefs of Redang. For macro-lovers, there are also nudibranchs, mantis

day excursion and overnight destinations for locals and foreign tourists seeking a quick gateway, as the island is just four nautical miles from Marang. Kapas also seems to have become the refuge of those who want to avoid the Perhentian crowd. Places to stay range from camping sites to dormitories to island resorts with en suite facilities. The only thing that never changes on this island is the constant number of backpackers arriving and departing each day. The key attraction for diving at Pulau Kapas is the

World War II shipwreck located five nautical miles offshore. The outer reefs here are home to featherstars, hydroids, black coral, anemones, sea fans and sponges as well as manta shrimp, nudibranchs and the occasional Spanish dancer. During the months of April to August, green and hawksbill turtles come onshore to lay eggs. Pulau Kapas has also become a popular place for squid fishing especially in the month of June.

**The Tenggol group of islands** is the most southerly of Terengganu's Marine Parks. It consists of Pulau Tenggol, Pulau Nyireh, Tokong Timur, Tokong Talang, Tokong Burung and Tokong Kemudi. The main island, Pulau Tenggol, is about 50 hectares in size and is one of the most beautiful and serene islands off peninsular Malaysia's east coast. It is also famous for its spectacular rocky cliffs that offer many excellent dive sites of pris-

tine coral formations and a number of submerged rocks with excellent coral growths. The deep waters surrounding the island offer good visibility especially during the months of April until June. Marine life that can be seen here includes sharks, rays, nudibranch and a wide variety of hard and soft coral. Before being declared a marine park, Pulau Tenggol was a favourite hunting ground for spear-fishermen, particularly for snappers and groupers.



ABOVE: Malaysian seafood. RIGHT: Diving in Malaysia

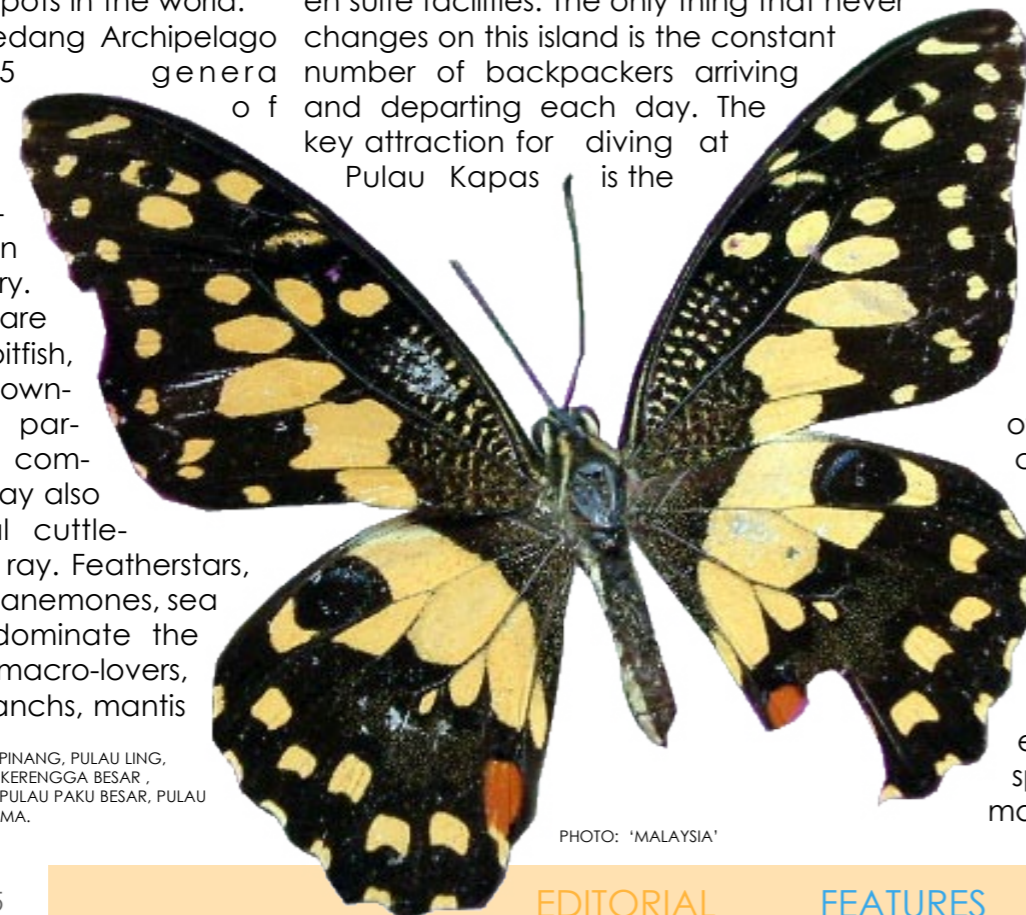


PHOTO: 'MALAYSIA'



\* PULAU REDANG, PULAU PINANG, PULAU LING, PULAU EKOR TEBU, PULAU KERENGGGA BESAR, PULAU KERENGGGA KECIL, PULAU PAKU BESAR, PULAU PAKU KECIL AND PULAU LIMA.

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**Tioman** is the largest and most developed of the 64 volcanic islands in the Seri Buat archipelago that make up the Pahang Marine Parks. In 1958, Pulau Tioman was chosen to be James Michener's fictitious Bali Hai for the filming of the Hollywood classic, "South Pacific." Since then, Pulau Tioman, which is easily accessible by air or boat, became a popular tourist attraction especially among underwater explorers.

The Tioman Marine Park is zoned as a sanctuary for the coral reef community and the shallow, still waters near Tioman, such as at the sites of Pirate Reef and Renggis Island, are perfect for training the less experienced diver. Further out to sea, the Tioman Island dive sites such as Chebeh and Tiger Reef, are set in deeper waters where you may encounter challenging currents and also the chance to see larger species.

There is plenty of coral circling most of the island including alyconarian soft corals and multi-colored staghorn coral. You will most likely run into all the usual reef life, the most numerous of which being parrotfish and butterflyfish. The best diving is around the small islets and rocks to the west and north-west where an incredible variety of angelfish and butterflyfish can be found. The water is clear to a depth of about 30 metres. Turtles and cuttlefish laying eggs are common in July and August.

There are some other islands off the east coast that have good diving but are less visited. Dive sites also include over a dozen wrecks — mainly scuttled wooden-hulled fishing trawlers. Even

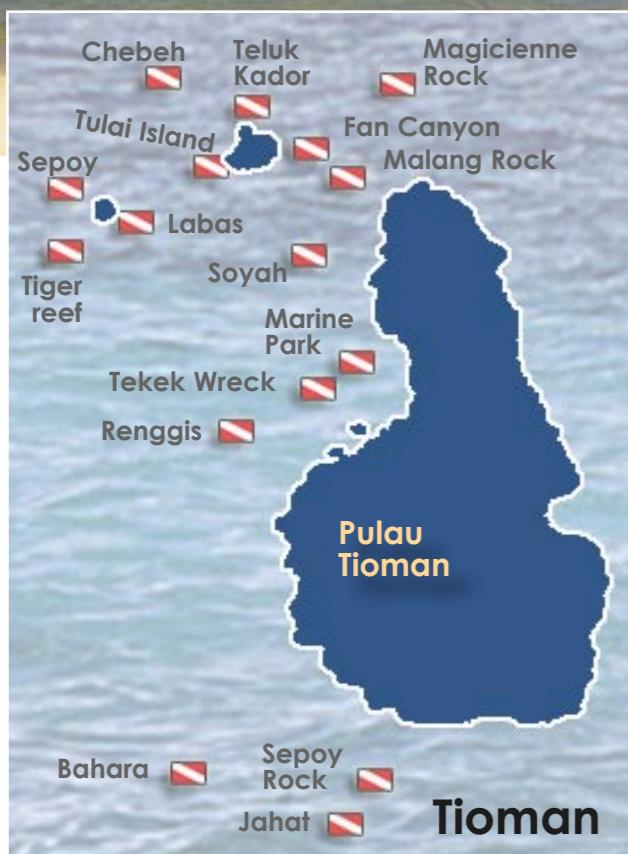
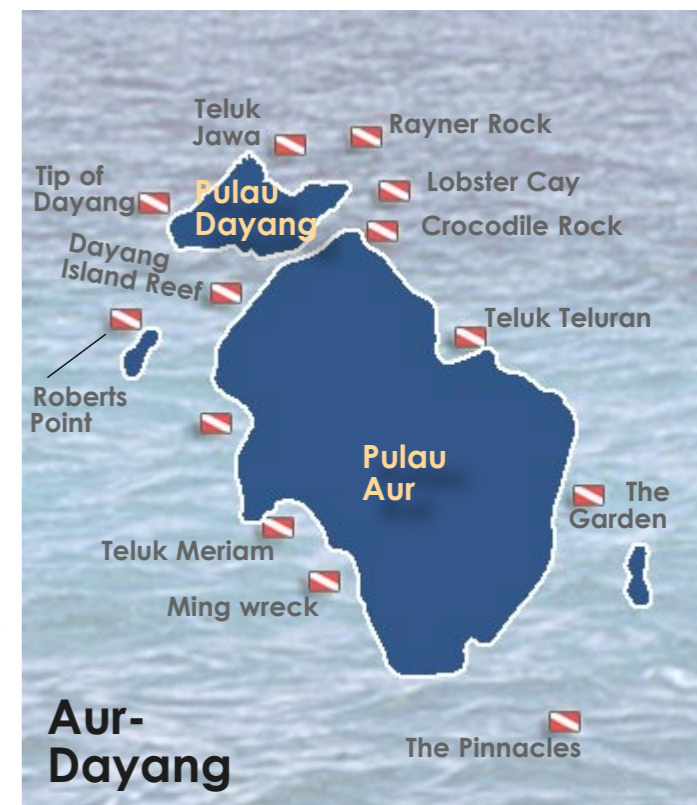
big wreck fans and technical divers will enjoy Tioman as there are several South China Sea wrecks in the area. These Second World War treasures — including the Prince of Wales, the Repulse, Varella and various submarines and battleships — lie all around Tioman, normally at a depth of 40 m or more.

**Pulau Aur** is located 65 km east of Mersing on the east coast of Johor. Together with surrounding islands Pulau Dayang, Pulau Lang and Pulau Pinang, it makes up for about half of Johor Marine park. The blue waters here are deeper than around the inner islands.

Due to its remoteness from the mainland, visibility is excellent and sightings of big pelagics are common. However,

cost of boat rentals is high and scuba diving has been possible only in groups pre-arranged by dive shops in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. Spectacular dive sites include Teluk Teluran with large undulating corals — which are home to various octopuses, crabs and moray eels — the Ming dynasty wreck at Teluk Mariam and the wall diving at Pulau Pinang, which is also good for drift diving.

Accommodation is available only on Pulau Dayang and Pulau Aur. Amenities are pretty basic as electricity to the rooms is limited and there is no hot running water. It is a popular getaway for divers based in Singapore for which reason it can be quite busy at weekends. However, you may have the island practically to yourself on weekdays.



Colonies of sponges and soft corals are motels for feather stars and cardinal fishes



Whip goby and black coral shrimp

## Events & holidays

The major Islamic events are connected with Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim calendar. The major Malaysian festival is Hari Raya Pusa, which marks the end of Ramadan with three days of joyful celebrations. Hari Raya Haji marks the successful completion of the hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca)

# HMS Prince of Wales and Repulse



Photo taken from Japanese aircraft showing the sinking of HMS Repulse on December 10, 1941. Source: US Naval Historical center

If you're into deep technical diving, then 95 km off Kuantan lie the wrecks of two of the most powerful ships in the British Royal Navy from the second World War: The 35,000-ton battleship HMS Prince of Wales and the 32,000-ton battle cruiser HMS Repulse. The Repulse is on her starboard side in about 55 m of water, with the decks leaning at about a 30-35 degree angle. HMS Prince of Wales lies in 66-68 metres of water buried in the soft bottom, but she is completely upside down. The bottom is silty and the visibility rarely good. Also two Dutch submarines and a British mine-sweeper found their final destination in the South China Sea after hitting the same mine field. The main difference between Tioman and other World War II wreck diving destinations is that most of the wrecks around here are in deeper water and therefore only suitable for technical divers.

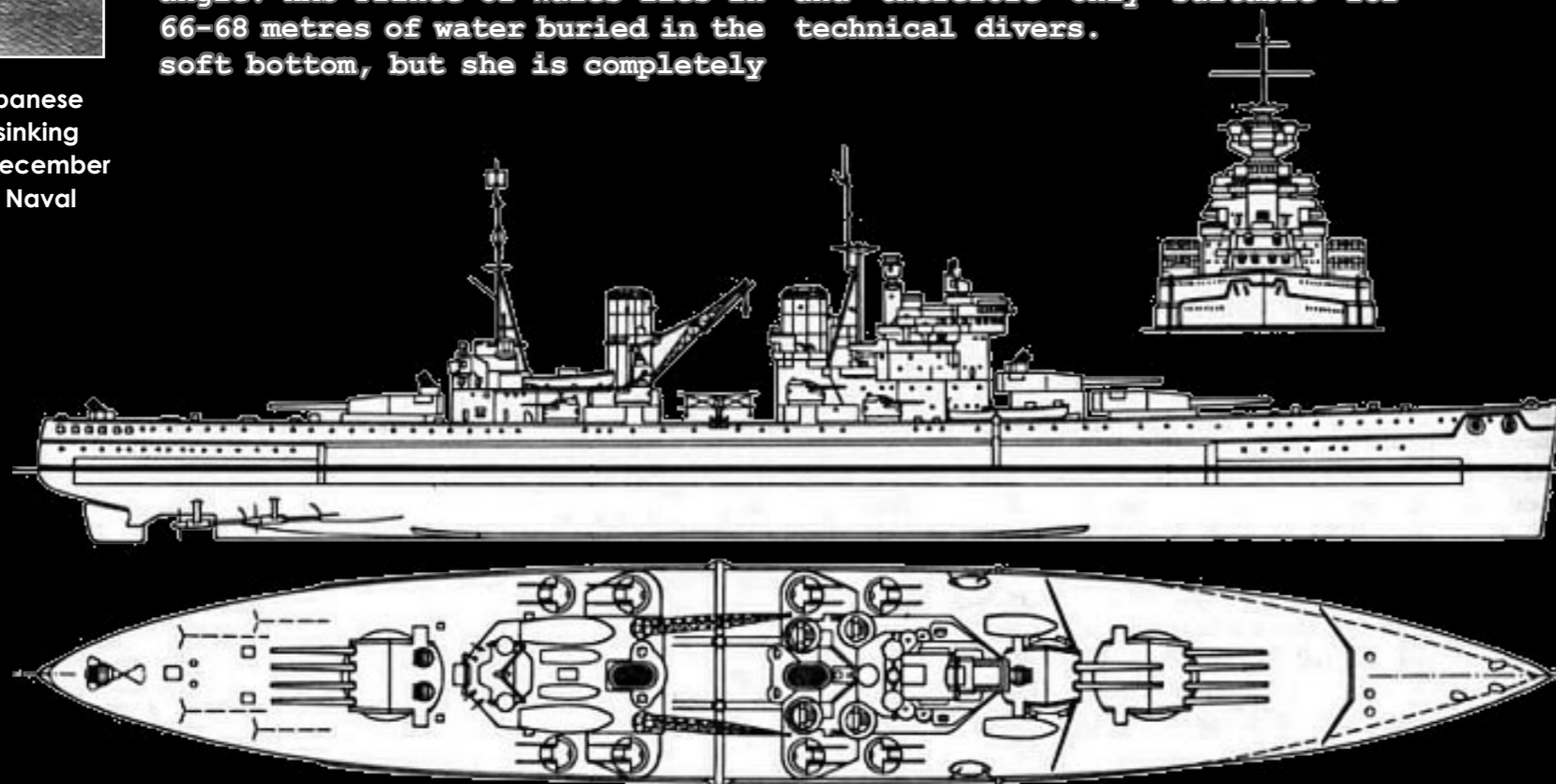


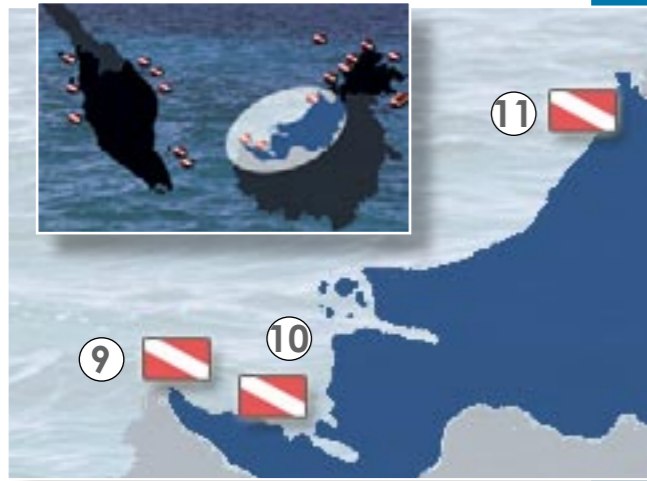
PHOTO: 'MALAYSIA'

with a two-day feast of cakes and sweets. Chinese New Year, in January or February, is welcomed with dances, parades and a lot of good cheer.

The festival of Thaipusam in late January is one of the most dramatic Hindu festivals during which devotees honour Lord Subramaniam with acts of amazing masochism — definitely not for the squeamish. In Kuala Lumpur, devotees march to nearby Batu Caves. In Penang, the event is celebrated at the Waterfall Temple.

The Kota Belud Tamu Besar is a huge tribal gathering held in May at Kota Belud near Kota Kinabalu in Sabah. It includes a massive market, traditional ceremonies, ornately decorated horsemen, medicine men and tribal handicrafts. A smaller tamu is held in Kota Belud every Sunday if you're not visiting during May.





9. Tanjung Datu  
10. Talang Salang  
11. Miri

*“Unlike reefs on the neighbouring state of Sabah and those of Indonesia and the Philippines, which are consistently exploited by destructive blasts and cyanide fishing, Miri reefs are relatively pristine. There are no conspicuous signs of damage or impact from high sedimentation or illegal fishing indicating that the reefs of the Miri-Sibuti areas are among the last remaining ones in the world”*

*Michael Aw*

PHOTO: MICHAEL AW

More than 30 ethnic groups live together harmoniously in Sarawak, including 21 native ethnic groups, Malay and Chinese. Even with such diversity, individual groups have retained their cultural identity, observing traditional customs and rituals on a day-to-day basis. Tourists are welcome everywhere and the people are all very friendly. English is widely spoken although the national language is Malay.

Despite the fact that three quarters of its landmass is still covered with the world's oldest tropical rainforests and latticed with rivers and tributaries, travel around Sarawak is easy. Ten national parks scattered throughout the state make for easy access to Sarawak's splendid natural treasures. Residents include the endemic proboscis monkey, the famous bearded pig, silver leaf monkeys and long-tailed macaques. The

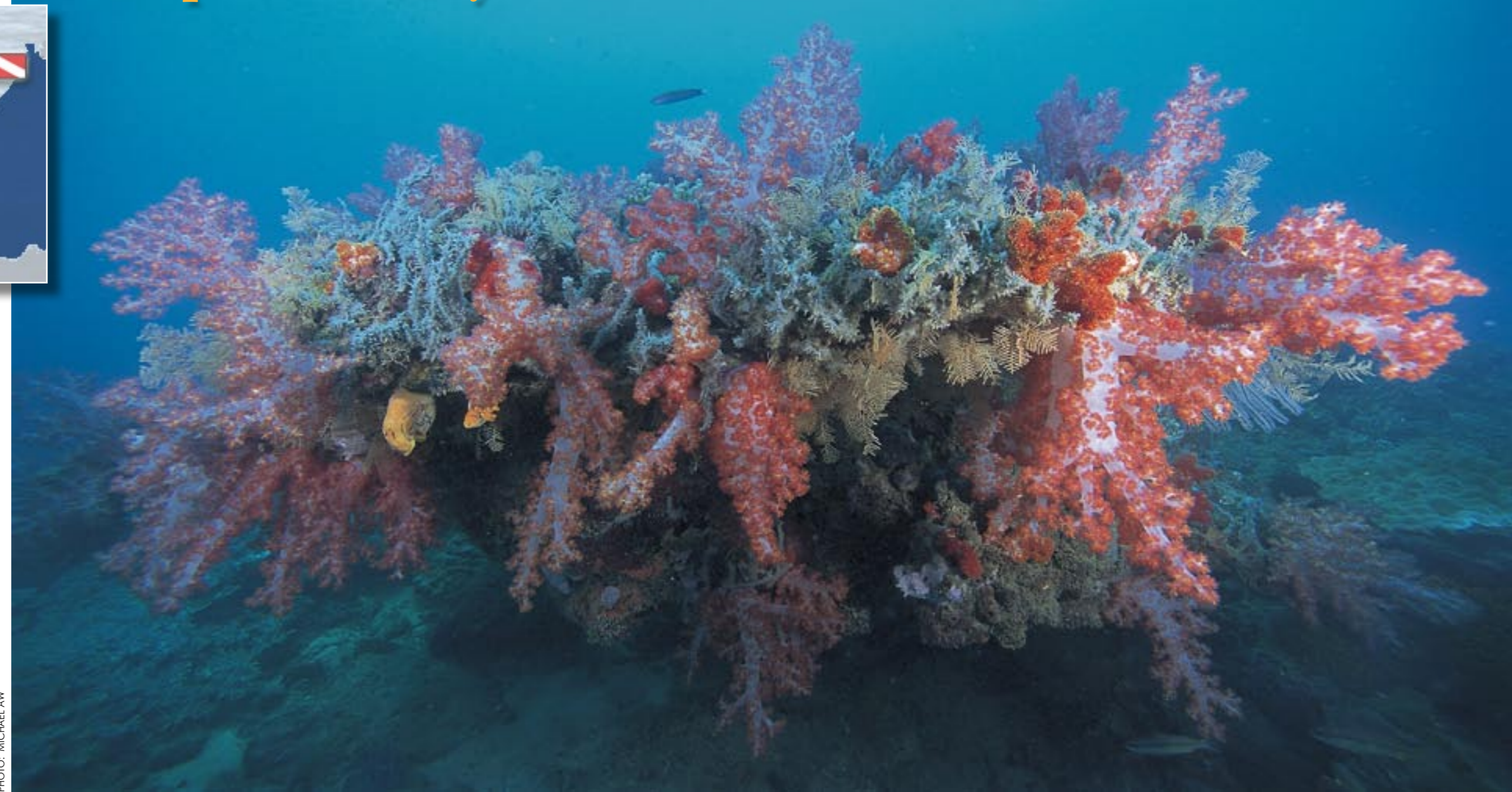
park also showcases a wide variety of vegetation found in Borneo including carnivorous pitcher plants, sundews, bladderworts and the world's largest flower — the one metre wide Rafflesia.

Miri, near the border with Brunei, is the gateway to the north of Sarawak and its spectacular national parks, rivers and highlands. Niah and Gunung Mulu National Parks in Northwest Sarawak are perhaps the best known in Sarawak with

their spectacular limestone cave formations. The famous limestone caves here include the world's largest cave passage and the world's largest natural rock chamber.

Most of the waters around Sarawak are not great dive locations because of the shallow waters and a number of muddy and swampy estuaries lying off the coastlines. The best spot for diving in West

Sarawak is around the Talang-Talang islands, a marine turtle sanctuary. The corals surrounding this island are remarkable in their variety. There's a colourful palette of fish, and the waters are pleasant and very safe. The area around the Talang-Talang islands was, however, recently gazetted as a national park. This change has brought about some confusion as to how the public may enjoy the natural beauty, which is now



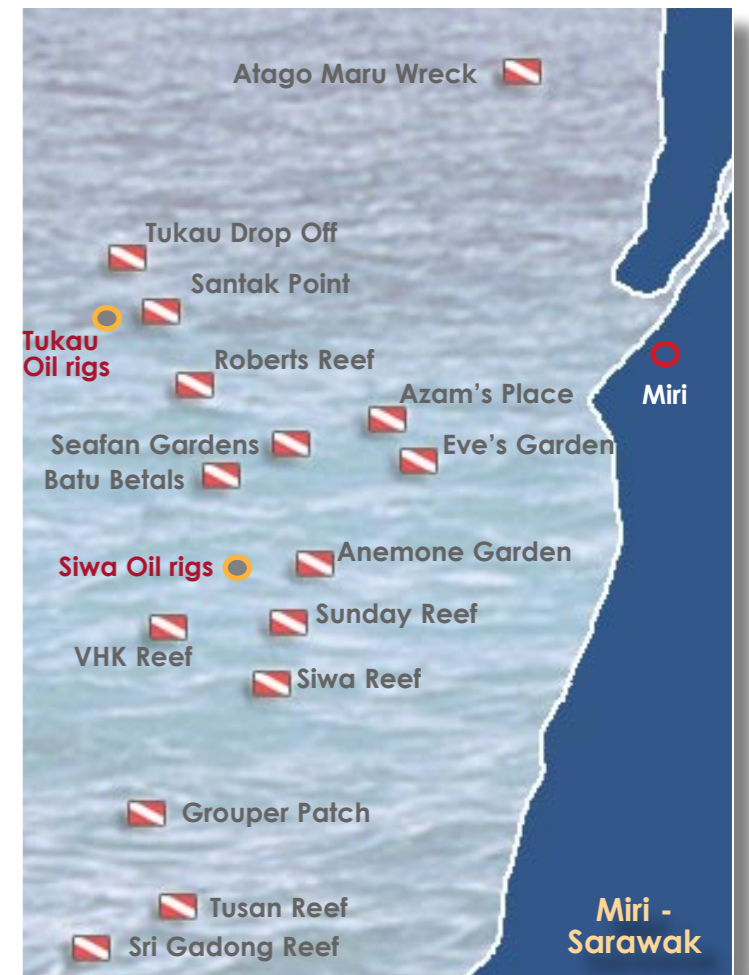
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PHOTOS: MICHAEL AW

INSET: Double horn nudibranch

LEFT: The pilons of an oil rig make a good home for soft coral gardens and marine life which shelter there like this school of batfish



preserved as part of the national heritage. At turtle nesting time, no marine traffic is allowed near the islands at all.

The underwater scenery around Satang is not as attractive as Talang-Talang. Visibility is not too good and the nearer you are to the mouth of Sarawak River, the cloudier the water gets.

Off the rivermouth there is some

wreck diving, but these dives are regarded as quite challenging. Also challenging are the waters around Tanjung Datus, the rocky headland at the northwest cape of the great island of Borneo. Here, two ocean currents clash together creating underwater turbulence that can only be managed by experienced divers.

The artificial reefs at Talang-

Satang National Park were constructed for marine conservation using concrete reef balls. Since 1998, about one thousand reef balls have been deployed around the coast of Sarawak. This is the first reef ball project in Asia and was instigated for conservation purposes. The National Park has important turtle nesting beaches, and reef balls are used to stop

trawlers from trawling within the resting areas used by turtles during the nesting season that falls between May and October. A permit from the Forest Department is necessary for entry into the park.

**Gunung Gading National Park** Trek through the mountains to view beautiful waterfalls and rare plants. You

may come across the Rafflesia, the world's largest flower, whose blooms measure a metre across. Mountains sweep down to the sea. This park lies on the extreme western tip of the State.

The debris-free mountain streams ensure crystal clear waters off some of Sarawak's finest beaches. There are also coral formations close in to shore that make this yet-to-be-explored dive site ideal for scuba diving. On shore, the park is rich in flora and fauna.

**Miri** Just 30 minutes off the coastline of Miri, there are several diving spots where natural reefs provide diverse marine life. The dive locations have next to no current most of the time and water temperature averages 30 degrees Celsius. The reefs here are all patch reefs

with varying depths from 7 to 30 meters with average visibility of 10 to 30 meters. You can explore old shipwrecks and spectacular coral reefs. South Luconia Shoals, Eve's Garden, Anemore Garden, Royal Charlotte Atoll Grouper Patch Reef, Sri Gadong and Atago Mari Wrecks are just some of the newest attractions for diving enthusiasts. There are more than 15 dive sites with the latest one dubbed "Rig to Reef"— a recently submerged decommissioned oil platform that is the only one in Malaysia. The best dive season is April to October.

**Labuan island** is located 115 km south of Kota Kinabalu and 8km off the mainland of Sabah at the northern mouth of Brunei. Its deep harbour and duty free port attract shipping from all over the

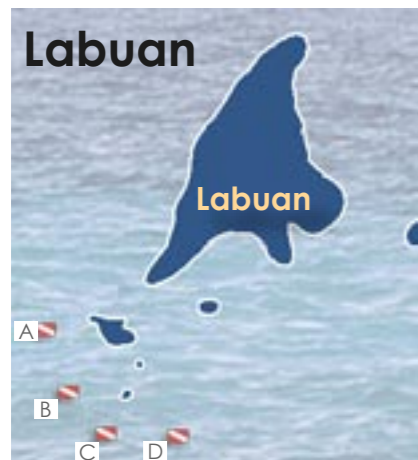


## Sabah



- |                                    |                  |             |
|------------------------------------|------------------|-------------|
| 12. Labuan                         | 16. Mantanani    | 21. Mabul   |
| 13. Pulau Tiga                     | 17. Kudat wrecks | 22. Sipadan |
| 14. Layang-Layang                  | 18. Lankayan     |             |
| 15. Tunku Abdul Rahman Marine Park | 19. Mataking     |             |
|                                    | 20. Kapalai      |             |

world and in 1990, Labuan was declared the International Offshore Finance Centre of Malaysia. Although three islands – Pulau Kumaran, Pulau Rusukan Kecil and Pulau Rusukan Besar — are designated as Marine Parks, the special underwater attractions of Labuan are its shipwrecks. Four well-researched and regularly dived wrecks to the southwest make this area “the wreck diving center of Malaysia.” Two of the wrecks are from World War II, the U.S. Navy minehunter, the USS Salure, also known as the “American Wreck,”



- A. Blue Water Wreck
- B. Cement Wreck
- C. American Wreck
- D. Australian Wreck

and the Dutch vessel, the SS De Klerk, also known as the “Australian Wreck,” which was thought to have been sunk by the Royal Australian Air Force.

The other two wrecks were sunk in the 1980’s, the Philippine stern trawler, MV Mabini Padre, locally called the “Blue Water Wreck,” and the Tung Hwang, a Japanese freighter locally known as the “Cement Wreck.” All four ships lie in 30 m to 35 m of water, with the top portions lying at 8 m to 12 m. The water visibility varies greatly season to season from 6 m to 20 m. The type of diving on these wrecks ranges from novice to experienced wreck divers with penetration possible into the hulls, but the wrecks are great dives even if you choose not to enter them. Diving the wrecks can be arranged through Borneo Divers.

**Pulau Tiga** is an island situated in Pulau Tiga Park, located about 35 nautical miles southwest of Kota Kinabalu. Three islands make up Pulau Tiga Park — Pulau Tiga, Pulau Kalampunian Damit (better known as “Snake Island”) and Pulau Kalampunian Basar. Pulau

Double Horn nudibranch

Tiga is believed to have been formed by the eruption of several mud volcanoes, which, with the combination of subterranean gas pressure and expelled muddy sediment, could have built up the island to its present height of approximately 100 m above sea level. The only resort on the island, Pulau Tiga Resort, offers PADI dive courses and many dive sites for the novice and experienced divers including some unexplored dive locations. A rich variety of marine life can be seen including nudibranchs, bamboo sharks, cuttlefish, marbled stingray and, of course, a visit to nearby “Snake Island” guarantees sightings of banded sea snakes. The surrounding reefs are shallow with healthy coral and water visibility ranging from 6 m to 20 m.

**Tunku Abdul Rahman Marine Park** is easily accessed from Sabah’s capital, Kota Kinabalu, and is part of a larger protected ensemble that offers the double-splendor of land and sea adventures. The marine life that has been spotted here includes manta rays, turtles, lionfish, a multitude of pelagics and lots of coral. During the krill bloom from December to April, whale sharks are sometimes spotted. Located a short 15 minute boat ride from the city of Kota Kinabalu, Pulau Mamutik offers a fine site for macro photography.

**Layang-Layang** or “Swallow Reefs” is an atoll (14 sq. km) that lies about 300



PHOTO: MICHAEL LAW

## Glimpses of Malaysia

kilometres north of Labuan near the famous and disputed Spratly group of islands. Its coral walls plunge a staggering 2000 metres down to the floor of the South China Sea. In 1985, the Malaysian Federal Government began reclamation work and created a 50-acre island on one part of the reef. The island now has a 1,067-metre airstrip and a comfortable 90-room three-star resort with a full service PADI dive centre. It is now a world class diving paradise dubbed the “big fish and wall diving Mecca of Southeast Asia.”



Its warm waters are crystal clear with visibility averaging the best in the underwater world. Large shoals of pelagics, including massive numbers of barracuda, jacks and an awesome school of hammerhead sharks, numbering about a hundred individuals, regularly visit Layang-Layang. Manta rays with fin-spans of over ten feet (3 m) are also found here. Other residents include the Napoleon wrasse, Hawksbill turtles, Dog tooth tuna, Giant hammerhead wrasse and the White tip reef sharks.

**Mantanani Islands** have a new exciting resort. Dugongs have been seen occasionally in many coastal regions, but they are most consistently sighted around the Mantanani Islands which are a group of three isolated islands northwest of Kota Belud and about 80 km north of

Kota Kinabalu. Until recently, the islands were only known to a few locals. The largest island houses the only dive resort, Mantanani Resort, which is situated at the western end on the edge of a white sandy bay. Three wrecks have been discovered and many species of rays can be found: Marbled stingray, Blue spotted ray and large schools of eagle rays. For macro photographers, the “muck diving” is amazing. You will find seahorses, imperial shrimps, pink-eye gobies, jawfish, blue-ringed octopus, ribbon eels and many nudibranchs. There are now 16 dive sites identified by Mantanani Resort with many more still to be explored.

**Kudat wreck diving** is found off the northwest coast of Sabah where a group



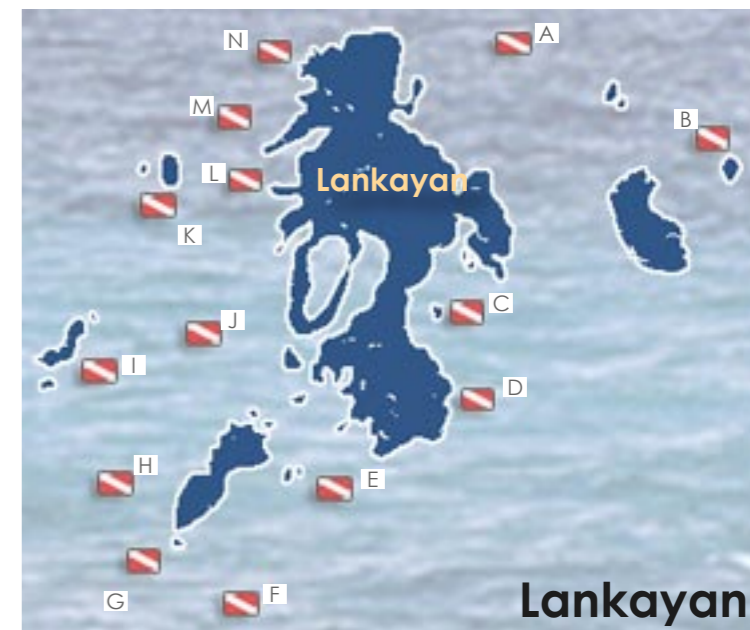
- |                  |                    |                  |
|------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| A. Great Wall    | E. Sahara Desert   | I. Police Gate   |
| B. Gilly Rock    | F. Abalone Avenue  | J. Italian Place |
| C. Boxy Avenue   | G. Southeast Point | K. Hasim Stone   |
| D. Mantis Avenue | H. Riza Garden     | L. Three wrecks  |

# Glimpses of Malaysia



## Sarawak

- A. Bimbo Rock
- B. Lost Reef
- C. Ken's Rock
- D. Mosquito Wreck
- E. Twin City
- F. Jawfish Lair
- G. Malu Malu
- H. And & Ant
- I. Supermarket Group
- J. Lankayan Wreck
- K. Froggie Fort
- L. Ricky Rock
- M. Coral Garden
- N. Fan Garden



LEFT: Deeper reef colonies of red whip and coral seascapes

BELOW: Shrimp living with bubble coral



fied. Pelagics also abound here, from large schools of scads to yellow-tail barracudas and jacks. The many schools of medium to large humphead parrotfish are always exciting to encounter. Sometimes, divers are lucky enough to meet large rays, guitarfish and even manatees. Among the 40 dive sites is Lankayan Wreck, the remains of an ocean-going boat that was used in illegal fishing here. This wreck now hosts many different species of fish from small glassfish, harlequin ghost pipefish, painted frogfish to giant grouper and marbled stingrays. Despite the remoteness, the island resort has all the amenities of a modern resort. Visitors stay in bungalows made out of local wooden materials to blend into the natural surroundings.

of islands lie with rarely dived reefs. These islands include Pulau Balambangan, Pulau Banggi, Pulau Jambongan, Pulau Molleangan, Pulau Balak and Pulau Malawali. A number of wrecks have recently been discovered in this area. All thought to be merchant ships, two are lying at 20 m to 25 m and the third is lying a little deeper at 50 m. All three wrecks resemble coral gardens. They are completely covered in colorful sponge and soft corals. Marine life around the wrecks

includes schools of glassfish, lionfish, scorpionfish and huge resident groupers. The surrounding islands have shallow reefs fringing their shores with all the usual resident reef fish such as the coral trout, butterflyfish, angelfish and the occasional cuttlefish. Sipadan-Mabul Regal Tours, which is based in Kota Kinabalu, now has a live-aboard boat, the "Scuba Explorer," regularly visiting the area. As these reefs have rarely been dived, new sites are being discovered on many of the trips.

**Lankayan Island** is a virtually uninhabited island and one of the best spots for whale shark sighting. The location of the whale shark is usually indicated by flocks of seabirds screeching high above the placid surface. Lankayan Island is also a true macro-world paradise. Large stretches of beautiful hard and soft corals belonging to numerous genera are preserved, including colourful juvenile fishes. It is possible that some of the species found here are as yet to be identi-

PHOTO: MICHAEL AW



PHOTO: PETER SYMES

# Glimpses of Malaysia

The area around Semporna at Sabah's eastern tip is home to several famous dive destinations from which a lot of the same dive sites can be reached



## Eastern Sabah

**Matakina, Kapalai, Mabul and Sipadan. From muck diving to impressive dropoffs, it is all in one place.**

**Matakina** is a small island, about 45 minutes by speedboat from Semporna. There is only one resort on the island, the Reef Dive Resort, with a total of eight executive chalets and two lodges that can accommodate up to 60 guests at one time. The Reef Dive Resort is an eco-friendly dive resort and, from the very beginning, the management of the resort has placed a great emphasis on care for

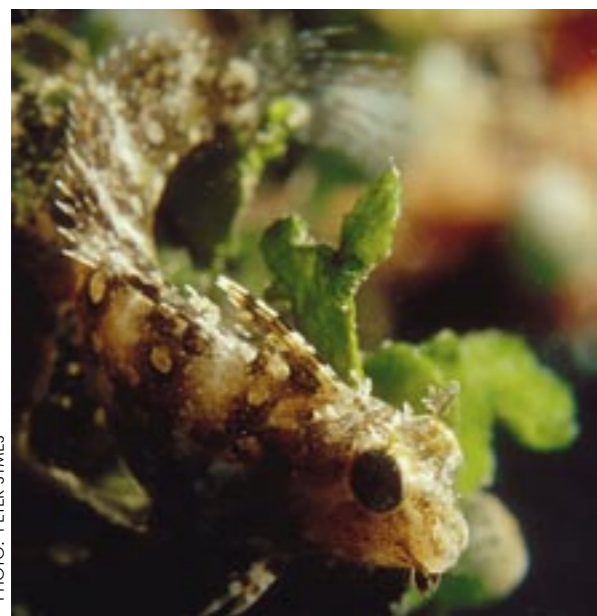


PHOTO: PETER SYMES

the environment and the surrounding sea.

Here, tourists can learn and participate in The Reef Ball project during their stay at the resort. 'Reef Balls' are made of concrete, which are then placed at various sites underwater to rebuild corals and to provide artificial homes to the underwater fishes. Since the start of the project, a total of 220 reef balls have been deployed. Coral plantings include Tubastraea Micrantha (Dark Green Tube), Knotted Fan Coral, Sea Fan (Red Gorgonian), pocillopora Verrucosa (Staghorn Coral) and Seriatopora Hystrix (Staghorn Coral).

There are about 30 dive sites around Matakina, its surrounding islands of Pandanan, Timba Timba and the Tun Sakaran Marine Park islands of Bohey Dulang and Gaya. The three best-known dive sites that surround Matakina are Magic Rick, Mantis Reef and Alice Wall. The Alice Channel, which is about 100 metres deep, connects Matakina to Sipadan Island, which is only a 45-minute boat ride away.

Midway to Sipadan, we find two other famous dive sites. Mabul and Kapalai Islands are probably the most exciting diving places for macro marine life in the wild. First, on the Ligitan Reefs, a very extensive stretch bordering the deep and vast Celebes Sea, we find a long-kept secret dive destination called Kapalai.



PHOTO: PETER SYMES

**Kapalai Island** offers some of the best "muck diving" in this part of the world. Here, divers come face to face with amazing marine creatures. Testing your skills at spotting minute and cleverly camouflaged oddities is well-rewarded. Rare subjects such as cuttlefish, blue-ringed octopus, sea moths and mating mandarinfish are seen on a regular basis. Although Kapalai is just a few minutes away by boat from Sipadan, one can expect a completely different diving experience. The only resort occupying the island is the Sipadan-Kapalai Resort, which is built on wooden stilts over the reef.

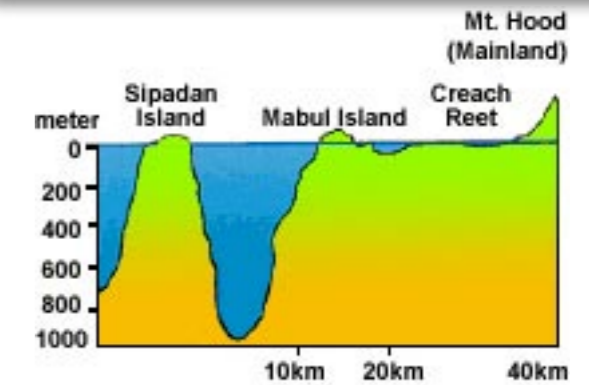
**Mabul Island** is where the phrase, "muck diving," was coined. Here, many new species have been discovered. A sheltered bay just off the luxurious resort, Sipadan Water Village, provides a natural protection to fish fry. Mabul Island sits just on the edge of the continental

shelf, downstream from the mangrove delta off Semporna. Due to the pattern of the currents in the area, Mabul Island seems to act as a scoop catching the most amazing sorts of critters. Like Kapalai, the sea bottom at Mabul seems covered with mysterious creatures.

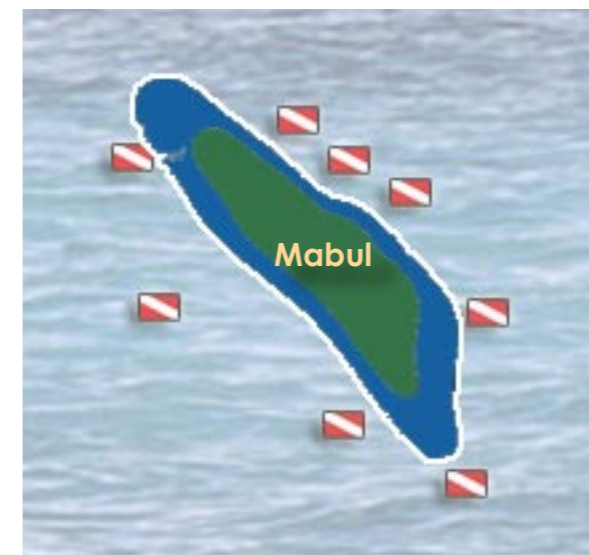
**Sipadan Island** Just a 15 minute boat ride from Mabul Island is Sipadan Island — a unique island because it sits on the oceanic bottom. With Sipadan and Kapalai practically

across the street from Mabul, the discerning diver has the best of everything within a few minutes ride, not to mention access to the Mabul's magnificent house reef.

In the following pages, we devote a whole section to diving at Sipadan Island. But first, let's go ape and check out the orang-utans at Sepilok.



Profile of the sea floor in the area. One can see that Sipadan Island is a pinnacle located in what is technically the ocean, whereas the continental shelf lies just beyond Mabul Island.





# Sepilok

Text by Michael Symes  
Photos by Peter Symes

back to health before they can be released into the forest. Many orangutans that end up here have strayed into logging camps or been rescued from captivity. Many are orphaned babies that cannot survive in the forest alone.

When the rescued orangutans first arrive at the centre, they are often in a sorry state and riddled with diseases. They are put into cages while they are treated for their ailments and nursed back to health. The wardens then teach them how to forage for fruit, climb trees and generally fend for themselves. When they are mid-way through the rehabilitation process they are released into the surrounding forest reserve. The animals then spend most of their time in the forest but often return to one of the centers five feeding platforms for a "free" meal. When the wardens feel that that an orangutan is fully rehabilitated, it is caught and returned to the wild - usually deep in the forest or to one of the National Parks or Wildlife Sanctuaries.

The objectives of the project have expanded in recent years, and while orangutan rehabilitation is still the primary goal at Sepilok, present aims include public education on conservation and research with other endangered species, such as

captive breeding of the rare and endangered rhinoceros.

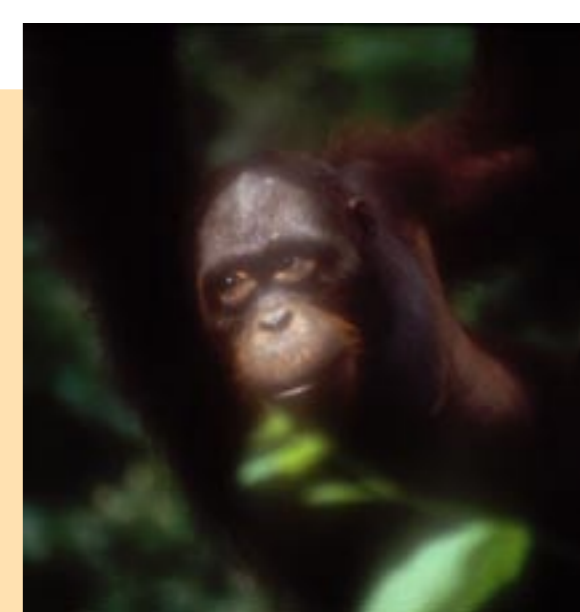
**Possibility for working at Sepilok** At Sepilok you could have the opportunity to work with these gentle and highly intelligent red apes in their natural environment. Interaction with these remarkable creatures, man's closest relative, could be an unforgettable experience. All details regarding the project are to be found at: [www.travelersworldwide.com](http://www.travelersworldwide.com)

**The Orangutan Appeal** Sepilok Orangutan Appeal UK, founded in 2000, is a registered charity based in England. It is dedicated to the rehabilitation and preservation of orangutans and their habitat in the Sabah region of Malaysian Borneo. It supports various sponsor schemes, and also publishes material, including a DVD about the Rehabilitation Centre. For further information about the important work of this charity please visit: [www.orangutan-appeal.org.uk](http://www.orangutan-appeal.org.uk)

**Late postscript** For those interested in more information regarding orangutans, Among Orangutans: Red apes and the rise of human culture has just received a very positive review in NewScientist, 22 January 2005 (Vol 185 No 2483). See [www.newscientist.com](http://www.newscientist.com) ■

## Orang Utan

The Orangutan (also spelled 'Orang Utan' or 'Orang-utan' and sometimes incorrectly as 'orangutang') is a great ape with long arms and reddish, sometimes brown hair. It is native to Malaysia and Indonesia. 'Orangutan' is derived from the Malay phrase 'Orang Hutan' meaning "man of the forest."



Orangutans are the most arboreal of the great apes, spending nearly all of their time in the trees. They are only found in rainforests on the islands of Borneo and Sumatra. These two small isolated populations were classified as subspecies until recently, when they were elevated to the specific level (*Pongo pygmaeus* on Borneo, and *P. abelii* on Sumatra). Furthermore, primatologists now recognise three subspecies of the Bornean orangutan: *P. p. pygmaeus* in northwest Borneo, *P. p. morio* in northeast and east Borneo, and *P. p. wurmbii* in southwest Borneo.

Orangutans are highly endangered in the wild. Orangutan habitat destruction due to logging, mining and forest fires has been increasing rapidly in the last decade. Much of this activity is illegal, occurring in national parks that are officially off limits to loggers, miners and plantation development. There is also a major problem with the illegal trapping of baby Orangutans for sale in the pet trade; the trappers usually kill the mother to steal the baby.

*Orangutan is derived from the Malay phrase Orang Hutan meaning man of the forest.*



## Men of the Forest at Sepilok

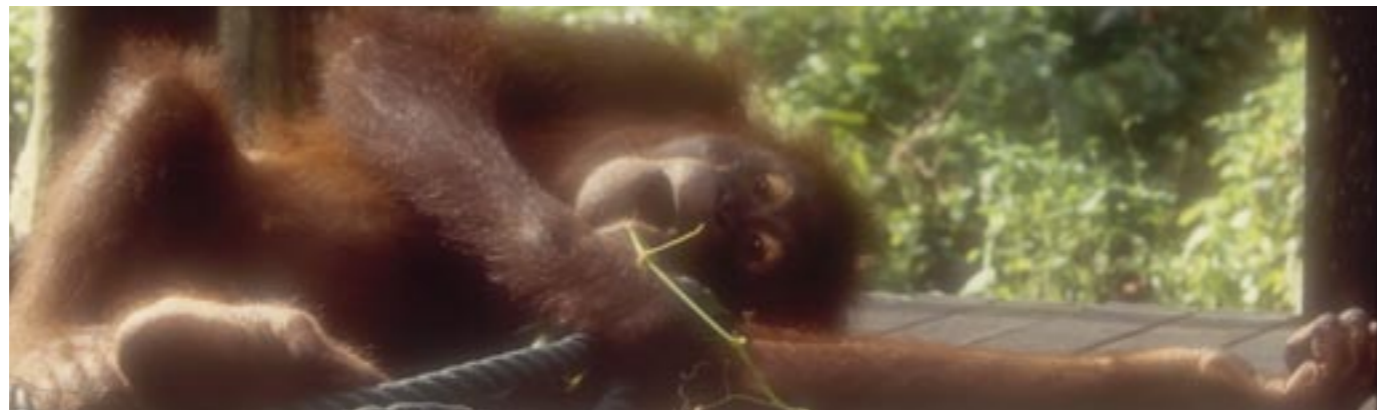
The orangutan, meaning "man of the forest" in Malay, is one of the most endangered of Malaysian wildlife species. Found only in Borneo and Sumatra, the orangutans' survival is constantly threatened by forest fires, felling of trees, poaching and illegal hunting. Orangutans are protected under the Fauna Conservation Ordinance which, among other things, prohibits hunting, trading or keeping them as pets. The population is now estimated to be as low as 15000, and so orangutans are now on the critically endangered list and face extinction within 10 years if nothing is done now.

Orangutans share 96.4% of human genes, and catch most of the diseases that affect man. They are astonishingly gentle, highly intelligent and they gaze at you with almost disconcerting frankness.

## The Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre

The Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre is situated on the east coast of Sabah, 23 km from Sandakan. A twenty-minute drive from Sandakan brings you to Kabil-Sepilok Forest, an enormous area of virgin rainforest. The wealth of indigenous and rare plants, animals and birds that have found sanctuary here must be seen to be believed. The Wildlife Reserve contains the orangutan rehabilitation centre.

This centre, established in 1964, was set up as a means of housing injured or orphaned orangutans, caring for them and nursing them





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# SIPADAN

## Still open for business?


Text by Peter Symes  
Photos by Peter Symes & Gunild Pak Symes

Jacques Cousteau called Sipadan Island a rare pearl. It is thought to have the best diving in the whole world. Take but a few steps from the beach and you can dive straight into vertical drop-offs. The wealth and diversity of species there is quite overwhelming. There are turtles everywhere, with shoals of barracuda and sharks that lay and sleep on the plateaus covered by gardens of coral.

Popular and famous but also exploited beyond what the island's fragile ecosystem could sustain, the Malaysian government was forced to act. Dive operators on Sipadan have had to vacate their structures on the island. Effective January 1st 2005, only day trips are allowed to Sipadan and these are limited to a maximum of 80 visitors.



ABOVE: Sipadan Island as seen from the dive boat



LEFT: Detail of one of the many orchids that grace the region



# Glimpses of Malaysia

**Reality check** We speed over the mirror-smooth surface at 25 knots — the jungle-covered foothills of Borneo slowly disappear behind us in the white wake. I squint my eyes under the bright tropical sun. Everyone on board this powerful motor-boat is dozing off into their own thoughts.

It all seems a little unreal to me, and difficult to grasp. That little island, like a small green fragile point seemingly hovering on the nearly invisible line of the horizon, in all that overwhelming blue, is the legendary Sipadan. Ever since my young diving days as a sports diver, coming here has been one of my biggest dreams. And for me, back when I was a poor student, it was also nearly an impossible dream. But here I am now, sitting and listening to the keel of the boat cutting through the water, as the sun warms me and jetlag melts out of my body.

My thoughts went back to the plane trip out here, to that moment of daybreak when, after a night-long flight from Europe, the plane took its silent descent. I looked down over Asia for the first time. There seemed to be something symbolic in that quiet arrival in Singapore. And now, after having flown over the South China Sea and driven across Borneo, I am here — at last. A great adventure is about to begin.



## Sipadan

- ◀ Orchids
- ▼ Mokon fishing boat



**The myth** The boat slows down as we near Sipadan. How small the island is! But there is a large reef surrounding the it. The guide looks down into the water.

We are getting close to Barracuda point, the northerly part of Sipadan's reef. The ocean current splits at this point to flow past the island, so large shoals of barracuda often collect here. Today is no exception. There are both current and barracuda, so we glide carefully into the water and swim quickly down to the edge of the reef at a depth of about 10 meters, in order to get into the lee of the current.

The wall is steep and covered by sponges and corals of every shape and form. I find a small sandy spot where I can sit and collect both my thoughts and all my photographic equipment — flash, cables, bracket and camerahouse. I look up and see an enormous barracuda-carrousel. Above me, majestic predators circle peacefully, while several sea turtles glide by looking like circling aircraft awaiting permission to land on the airstrip reef.

It is a reef abounding with life. Turtles are napping here and there. Or are they keeping a lookout? White-tip reef sharks twist lazily in and out among the blocks of coral, or lay at rest on the plateaus. There are many blue fusiliers sporting deep blue colours and perfect forms, creating their own playful shoal around the barracudas.

I slowly close-in on the barracudas. I give a gentle kick and make myself streamlined in order to be able to swim

nearer, against the current, without having to make too great an effort. With my eye stuck to the camera viewfinder I move in towards the circling predators.

Suddenly, like a flock of birds in their autumnal migration, the whole shoal changes direction and now comes towards me. A living carpet of fish-faces full of needle-sharp teeth are checking me out. The entire formation passes close by me and then around me.

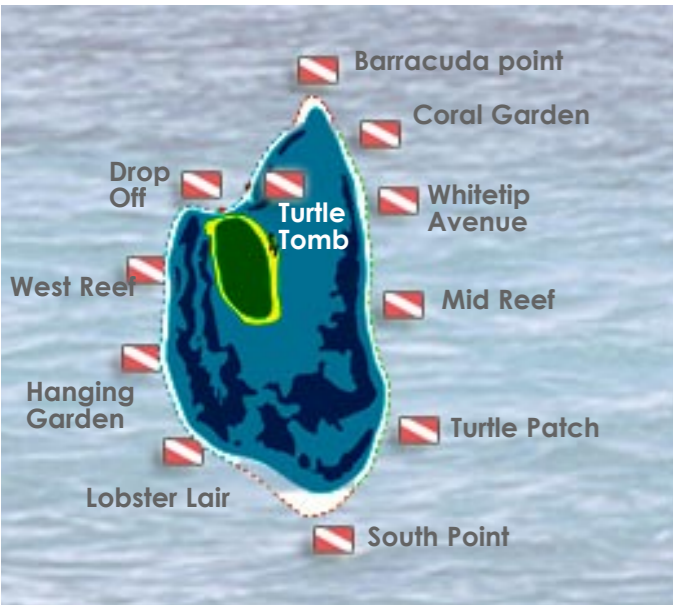
I hang there in the water, in the middle of a crowd of shiney muscular fish that, at one and the same time, consider me with some interest and yet, like aloof felines, demonstrate an arrogant indifference to my presence. I am just a guest here, and they make sure that I don't forget it.

But soon the barracuda allow me to swim with them as one of their shoal. I look around, and on both sides and over me, their bodies are parallel with mine as we swim slowly forwards. Yet even when they are swimming in a relaxed fashion they move much more rapidly than I can. It is difficult to keep up with them.

The shoal disappears into the blue haze,



Divers approach a tornado of barracudas at Barracuda Cove off Sipadan Island



# Glimpses of Malaysia Sipadan



leaving me feeling slightly dizzy after such a multitude of different impressions in so short a time, with an empty camera and a goofy empty expression on my face.

**Introspection** I shake myself loose of my moment of awe and release a surface marker buoy so that the boat can find me. It really wasn't necessary because the boatsman had kept good contact, but I always do it routinely.

We sail quietly in to the little jetty where we have a short break for lunch. We are served scalding hot tea, which we sit and drink while peacefully enjoying the scenery around us.

From the end of the short jetty, one can nearly see straight down the famous drop-off of Sipadan. Just a few meters from the beach it goes down almost vertically. Sipadan is special, in that the



island ascends like a spire from the sea floor, vertically rising straight up from the ocean bed some 800 meters down.

On and around the edge of the reef, many sea turtles can be seen sticking their noses up out of the water to get air. All is tranquil. We go for a walk on the island.

With only 12 hectares, the island is not very big, and it takes just a quarter of an hour to go round it. There are many

huts clumped together in the little bit of jungle that hugs the crown of the island. It seems bizarre. This is a remote outpost of civilization, out where the world seems to be based only on a couple of floorboards. It is a tiny island surrounded by an enormous ocean, and there is nothing here. Nothing, that is to say,

other than a fabulous underwater realm for which the diving fanatics of the world are willing to travel half way around the planet to explore!

**Strange** Pulau Sipadan means 'The Island in the Borderland' in Malay. The name fits very well, since the island crosses borders in more than one sense.

Geologically, it lies six sea miles from the continental shelf, and is Malaysia's only oceanic island. The island is topped by a coral cap. It is an atoll of indeterminate depth that has formed over a volcano rising sharply from the ocean bed. This spire seems to be a magnet for animal life, and it is that characteristic which makes the island unique.

The island is porous and has

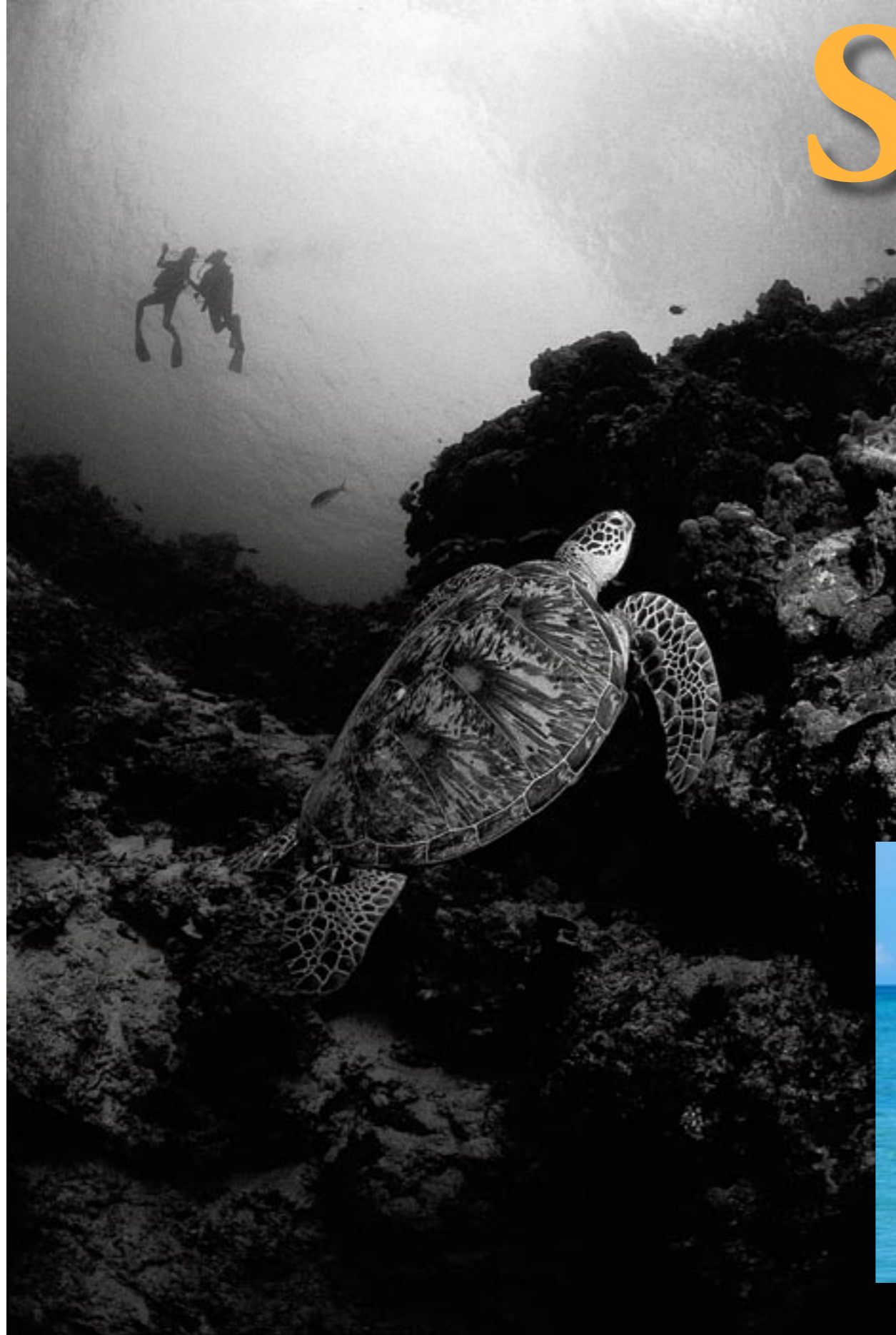
large caverns beneath it, among which is the famous Turtle Tomb. But it also contains fresh water. While the island itself is no bigger than 7-8 football pitches the surrounding reef covers about 200 hectares, and the outer reef has a circumference of 5.7 km. There is a low-water lagoon with sea-grass, different algae, small coral clumps and micro-atolls. The edge of the reef lies at a depth of two to eight meters, where the reef either goes over into a drop-off (i.e. a vertical coral wall) or a slope. About 2.4 of the 5.7 km are vertical or form overhangs, and 2.3 km of the walls have an incline of over 60%.

**Politics** The island has constantly been an object of dispute and friction regarding the setting of international frontiers. Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia have laid claim the island, not to mention, there is still an old Malay who claims that the island was given to



CLOCKWISE FROM LOWER LEFT: Sipadan Water Village Resort (SWVR) bungalows, Malaysian flora, SWVR Welcome Center & check in, view of SWVR from dive center, indigenous and nomadic Moka people fish early in the morning and at night

# Sipadan



his grandfather by the sultan of Sulu. Malaysia fought a war of independence against Indonesia in the 1960's over, among other places, the boundary that still runs right across Borneo. The Philippines have also claimed Sabah, the Malay state in which we are now located. On my last visit, I was told that Indonesia owned the island but that Malaysia had an irrevocable leasing agreement, which annoyed Indonesia, to say the least. They could clearly see that Sipadan was a magnet for tourists. With so much contradictory information, it was difficult to a handle on the confusing situation. However, I found out that the matter was settled on Dec 17, 2002, when the International Court of Justice at The Hague in The Netherlands, made a judgment in the long-pending case concerning the sovereignty of the islands of Sipadan and Ligitan. In its ruling, which



belongs to Malaysia.

Notwithstanding, the island was already declared a bird reservation back in 1933, and is therefore protected. There are frigate birds here, as well as sea-eagles, kingfishers, a number of species of dove, and a large number of rare birds whose names I did not catch. In between dives, it really is worthwhile to go round the island to look at the birdlife. The large and rare robber crabs can also be found here, as well as birgo latro, the spectacular coconut crabs which crawl up into the coconut palms to get at the fruit.

At the present time, it is the Malay tourist and environmental authorities who have responsibility for the island. And these authorities are the administrators who determine the ever-changing permits for how many guests are allowed to visit Sipadan at any one time. The authorities have stationed park rangers on the island to look after the birdlife and to protect the sea turtles that come to the beaches of Sipadan to lay their eggs.

the southern part of the island. The water is still calm. The reef is not so steep on this side, and there are large flat surfaces of coral-gardens with both hard and soft corals. Some 300 species of corals have been identified here.

Among the blocks of coral, there are many turtles to be found looking at the surrounding multi-coloured life. Down inside the corals one can find blennies with all sorts of strange growths on their fins. If one looks carefully enough, one can also find ghostpipefish which, with their superb camouflage, can disappear completely into the background. A trained eye is required to spot them when they are not moving.

The current has increased, so we let us drift lazily past the walls of coral in a northerly direction up towards Turtle Patch on the east side of Sipadan. Above us, there is a giant shoal of blue fusiliers and one or two barracuda. Beneath us, further down the coral wall, we can see the sharks patrolling. Most of them are white-tip reef sharks, but other types can occasionally be seen.

At mid-reef, our guide, Alex, waves us

is considered "final, without appeal and binding for the parties," the high court found that sovereignty of the islands

## Afternoon

After lunch we sail around South Point,

ABOVE: A gentle sea turtle rests on the reef surrounding Sipadan Island, Malaysia  
INSET: Moka people live and work and raise their families in wooden fishing boats  
TOP RIGHT: View of the beach at Sipadan-Mabul Resort



# Glimpses of Malaysia

## Sipadan

down to the bottom. He has found a large group of humphead parrot fish swimming idly between the blocks of coral. These big fish are generally rather shy of divers, but here they let us come quite close.

In the strong current, it is not so easy to hold on and at the same time control a large camera with a flash on a long bracket. So, I am really sucking air while I lay there and battle with the equipment. Each time that I edge myself forwards a couple of meters against the current, it seems as if the manometer needle is counting down like the second hand on a watch. I take a couple of shots and that's it. I must begin my rise to the surface.

While I hang there at my safety stop and drift under the dive boat, I can see down on to the plateaus on White Tip Avenue. It is an appropriate name. I think that I can count at least 25 white-tip reef sharks resting there.

It has been a good end to yet another day in paradise. I return home to my lodgings on Mabul, where a warm shower and a good meal are waiting. I can hardly wait to get my film developed.

**Turtle tomb** There is a large cavern under Sipadan with skeletons of turtles. It is part of an old legend about the island.

Cousteau's film about

Sipadan was called "The Ghost of the Sea Turtle" with reference to the local superstition. This beautiful film shows a large underwater cavern with the remains of dead turtles. Did they come here to die like elephants in an elephant cemetery? No, the explanation is much more simple and sad.

The turtles swim into the caves and can't find their way out again. So, as they can't get up to the surface to breathe, they drown. One is tempted to say, "Just like divers!" After a number of accidents, guides stopped taking divers into the cave. It is now necessary to have a cave-diving certificate.

**Biology** First and foremost, one notices all the sea turtles that seem to be everywhere, otherwise it is the big fish and the beautiful coral gardens on the plateaus and walls so characteristic of Sipadan. But also noteworthy is the fact that 496 species of fish have been recorded at Sipadan — a much greater diversity of species than is seen in the South China Sea. As a visitor, one is also struck by the large shoals of barracuda and jackfish. Manta rays and hammerhead sharks are also frequent visitors. It is also worthwhile to look out for the lesser known smaller species and other creepy-crawlies. Sipadan is situated right



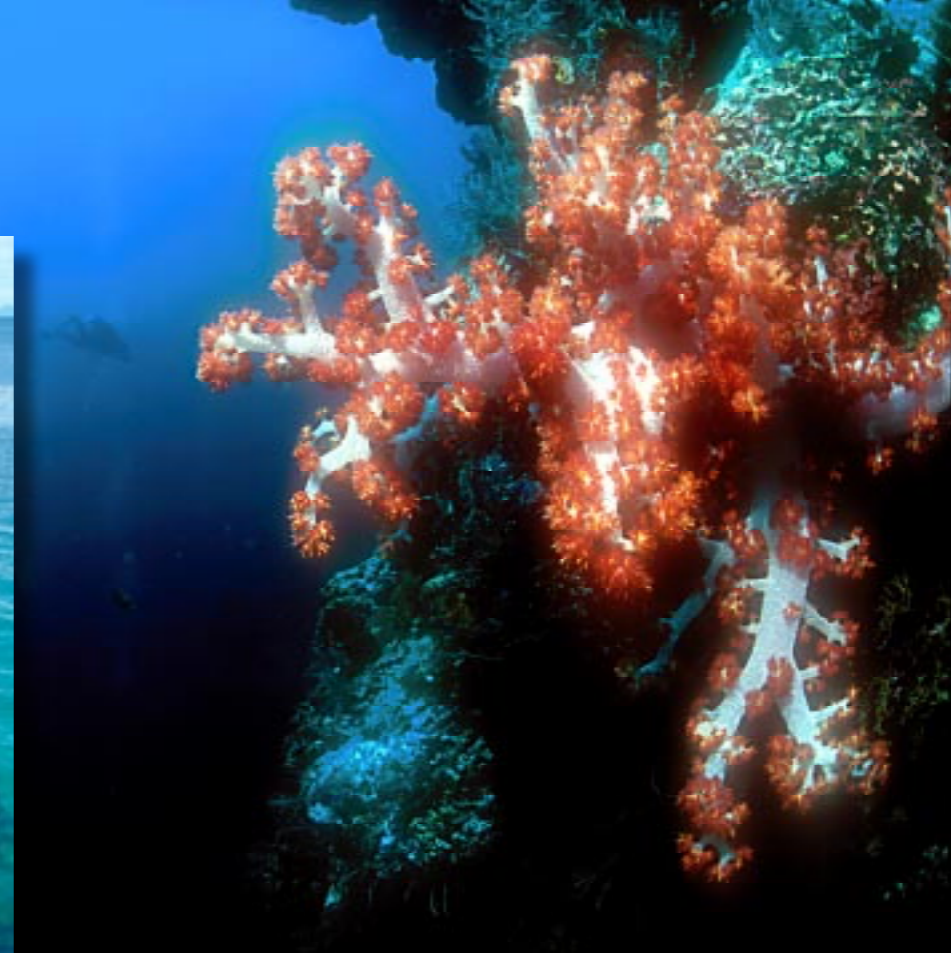
TOP: A Christmas Tree Worm braves the current  
BOTTOM: White and red corals at Sipadan Island

An abundance of marine and coral life thrives under the pier at the dive center of Sipadan Water Village

# Glimpses of Malaysia



## Sipadan



*“It is never too late to recognise something must be done to reverse the impact of human activities, and it is a wise decision to limit dive operators to conduct only day trips to Sipadan by year-end.”*

WWF  
(World Wide Fund for Nature) Malaysia Borneo programme director Dr Geoffrey Davison

in the middle of what is called the Indo-Pacific. The region is a great coherent ecological area consisting of the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean, which also includes southern Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia and Australia.

Of the turtle family, it is mainly the green soup turtle, *Chelonia mydas*, which populate the waters around Sipadan. This turtle comes to the island to lay its eggs. It can be up to 1.2m long and weigh over 180 kg. The soup turtle is first and foremost nocturnal, and lives on sea grasses. During the day it rests, and one can often meet sleeping turtles in the corals.

There are also many loggerhead turtles, *Eretmochylis imbricata*. It can be difficult to distinguish between the two species under the water, but the latter has a shell

with a serrated edge, whereas that of the soup turtle is smooth.

One can normally get very close to the soup turtles. They often appear to be crying. It is thought that the tears they shed serve to prevent their eyes from drying out and keep them free of sand.

The majority of corals at Sipadan are in fine condition and, like the fish, a large diversity of species is to be found. Within the hermatypical corals alone (these are corals that have symbiotic photosynthesising algae in their cells), over 400 species have been found. Due to the volume

of information, it is not possible to go into any detail here about this topic but briefly it can be stated that the low watered plateaus are dominated by elkhorn and table corals, plate and grape corals plus large leather corals. On the walls, fan corals and sponges can be seen. And, at greater depths, black coral and big barrel sponges dominate.

**History** Very little is known of Sipadan's early history. A unique and special ecology has been recognised at Sipadan since 1933, when the island was designated a bird reservation. It was not before the end of the 1970's, however, that serious scientific evaluations of the reef were ini-

tiated, and a deeper understanding was obtained of the significance of the island.

Through the 1980's, the WWF (World Wildlife Fund) was involved in several large investigations, and their results have laid the foundations for the environmental stipulations that now protect the island.

Between the 1930's and 1985, it was mainly fishermen and egg collectors who regularly visited the island. In 1985, Borneo Divers began dive operations on the island. They were the first operators to come to the island. At the start, there was only a tent in which divers could overnight at the island. The first huts came along in 1989. Then, Sabah Wildlife Department built a small experimental station in 1989, and in 1991 another dive operator arrived.

LEFT TO RIGHT: An underwater photographer captures images of a school of jacks under the pier of the dive center at Sipadan Water Village, a long wooden walking pier stretches out into the tranquil bay where bungalows rest on stilts, divers prepare to explore Paradise I and II at SWV, delicate red and white soft corals hang from the steep vertical walls supporting Sipadan Island

An investigation in 1992 showed that about a fifth of the northern reef was affected by the latest developments, with new construction work and the presence of boats and many divers in the water. The reef had previously been damaged by dynamite fishing, but the practice had ceased with the arrival of humans on the island. Until 1989, all the turtles that could be found were dug up and emptied of their eggs. However, this led to a fall in the population of turtles and the practice was therefore stopped.

In addition to this, it has been necessary to regulate the use of fresh water, to organise the purification of waste water and to establish effective waste disposal. With six resorts now based on the island, Sipadan was not able to bear

# Glimpses of Malaysia Sipadan



TOP LEFT: Malaysian bananas, bottled water and packaged nuts are locally produced

the ecological burden in the long run. The diving was still spectacular, but it was clear that it could not continue to be so. Unfortunately, a nasty kidnaping affair in April 2000 had a very chilling effect on tourism to the area and forced the government to put a temporary limit to the number of visitors.

Originally, only one centre had permission to build on the island. But there is a clear indication that corruption and capitalistic interests have had a large role in the development of Sipadan Island.

Early in 2004, the Malaysian federal cabinet announced the decision to close of all the dive resorts on Sipadan. Effective on the 31st of December 2004, all five resorts on the island are required to close all their facilities and move elsewhere. Chief Minister Datuk Seri Musa Aman had stated clearly that "we are doing this to preserve the environment, thus ensuring Sipadan remains the number one diving spot in the world.

As Mabul and Kapilai are close by, this fortunately does not mean that

already have resorts at both of these alternative locations that are actually rated at higher standards.

On Dec. 4, the government rejected a request from scuba diving resort operators to be allowed to remain on Sipadan for another year. The Dec. 31 deadline remained in place for the five operators on the island to vacate the popular diving spot.

Effective on January 1st, 2005, the government will allow only day trips with a maximum limited of 80 visitors. The decision is expected to strengthen Malaysia's application for the island to be listed as a world heritage site by Unesco.

**Geography** Between Sipadan and Semporna lie the islands of Mabul and Kapalai, which are also interesting dive locations. There are accommodations for divers on both islands.

These islands are within 15 minutes sailing time of each other, and it is easy to dive all three places regardless of what island upon which you choose to stay.

At the moment, Sipadan has six resorts. They are the most expensive in the area, since they are located on Sipadan Island, the target of diving in the area — "the real thing."

Considering the lodging prices, the standard of these

divers are excluded from visiting the island. Many of Sipadan's operators

accommodations is disappointing. My favorite location, Sipadan Water



Village Resort, is found on nearby Mabul Island, where there are two resorts which are both cheaper and of much better quality than those found on Sipadan. There is also a converted oil-rig near Mabul called Seaventures. On Kapalai Island, there is a resort on stilts, but the island is so small that you can hardly stand on it.

Mabul is known as the place where 'muck diving' was invented. Muck diving can best be described as diving for exciting small crawlies on the flat seabed. It is an activity that is greatly recommended — one can discover bizarre new creatures time after time.

Closer to Semporna, you can dive among the mangroves. During a longer stay in the area, divers should find time for a special diving excursion to the mangroves. It is a different diving environment with interesting natural finds that are unique to the mangrove ecosystem.

## Evaluation

Can you take the children or inexperienced divers to Sipadan? Yes, and even though it must be acknowledged that the diving is mostly for feinschmecker and those interested



BOTTOM LEFT: Bungalow chimes are sold by vendors at the resort shops and roadside stalls

TOP RIGHT: View of the dining hall at Sipadan Water Village Resort

MID RIGHT: Handmade straw baskets, wood flutes and trinkets are sold at open markets

BOTTOM RIGHT: Bags of rice, beans, peanuts, straw hats, fresh pinapples and hanging fruit fill the stalls at open air markets



# fact file



X-ray mag

## Malaysia



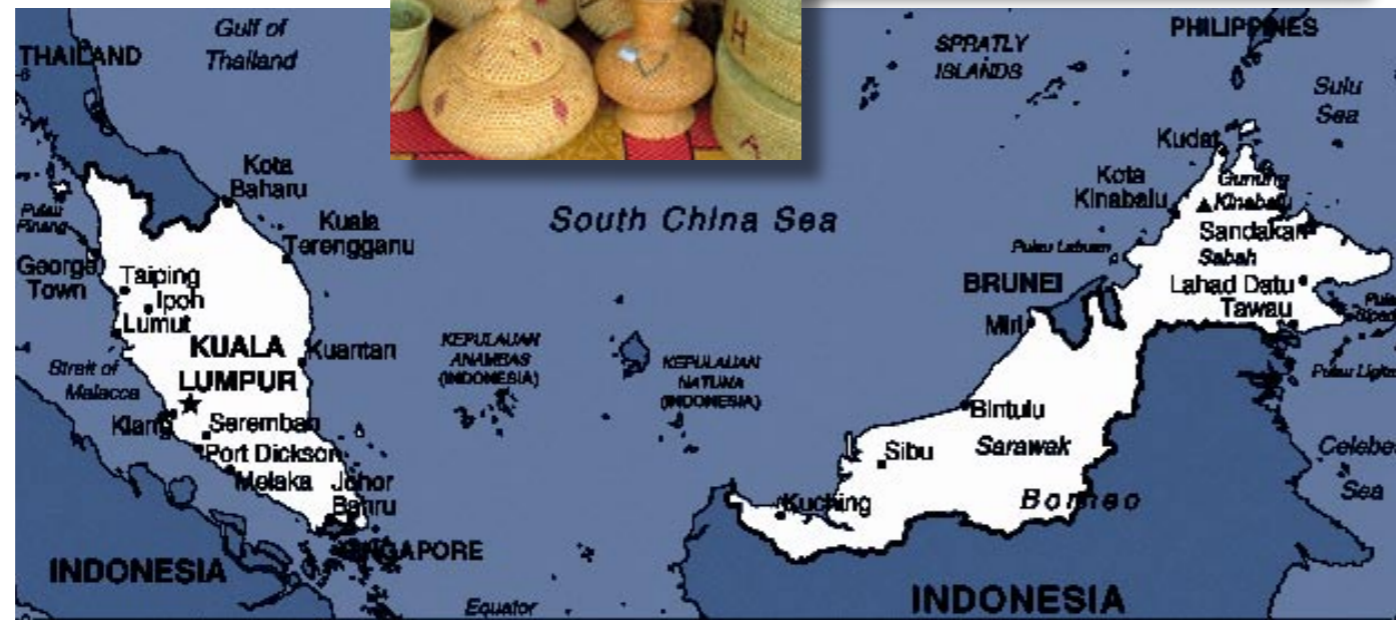
**Capital** Kuala Lumpur  
**Area** 330,000 sq. km  
Malaysia consists of the southern part of the Malay peninsula together with Sarawak and Sabah on northern Borneo. In recent years the country has enjoyed a considerable economic growth, and has declared its intention of achieving the status of an I-land, or first world nation, in 2020.

It has a population of 22 million, of which 53% are Sunni-Muslims, 17% Buddhists, 11% Taoists, 8% Christians 8%, and 7% Hindus. The average life expectancy is 71 years. Ethnic grouping include Malays 59%, Chinese 32% and Indians 9%.

**Language** the official language is Malay (Bahasa Malaysia). Other languages: Chinese, English and Tamil. English is widespread.

**Currency** Malay Ringit (RM). Exchange rate: 1 RM=.26 USD or .20 EUR; GNP per capita: US\$ 3,890; Income: agriculture 42%, service 39%, industry 19%

**Entry requirements** Passport valid for six months required. Visas are issued on arrival at no cost. Weapons or walkie-talkies are not permitted. Smuggling of narcotics is punishable by death in both Malaysia and Singapore.



**Climate** Tropical, with a south-west monsoon in May-June and a north-east monsoon in October-February.

**Electricity** 220 V, 50 Hz. The plugs are of the British type. Ordinary European plugs require adaptors loaned out at hotels.

**Health** Public hospitals accept tourists in the case of accidents. But talk to your travel agent about travel insurance. European national health insurance certificates are not valid for travel outside Europe. Vaccinations are not required at present, unless one is arriving from an area where yellow fever has been confirmed. According to the local authorities, cholera and malaria have mostly been eradicated in the area. But

it is advisable to contact your own doctor or the State Serum Institute before travelling.

**Methods of payment** BIG CITIES: ATMs. VISA, MasterCard, American Express accepted. RURAL AREAS: Cash only. Tips if any, are usually included in hotel and restaurant bills.

**Travel agents/tourism** Sabah Tourism & Promotion [www.sabahtourism.com](http://www.sabahtourism.com)  
Sabah Hotel Association (SHA) [www.borneo-online.com.my/hotel](http://www.borneo-online.com.my/hotel)

**Dive-operators/resorts** MABUL  
Sipadan-Mabul Resort \* [www.sipadan-mabul.com.my](http://www.sipadan-mabul.com.my)  
Sipadan Water Village Resort [www.swwresort.com](http://www.swwresort.com)

SIPADAN  
Borneo Sea Adventures [www.bornsea.com](http://www.bornsea.com)  
Borneo Divers & Sea Sports [www.borneodivers.info](http://www.borneodivers.info)  
Adventure Journey World Travel [www.borneo.org/ajwt](http://www.borneo.org/ajwt)  
Sipadan Dive Centre Sdn Bhd [www.mattasabah.com/sipadandive](http://www.mattasabah.com/sipadandive)

KAPALAI & SIPADAN  
Pulau Sipadan Resort & Tours [www.mattasabah.com](http://www.mattasabah.com)

SARAWAK  
Sarawak Tourism Board [www.sarawaktourism.com](http://www.sarawaktourism.com)

SABAH  
Sepilok Nature Resort [sepilok.com](http://sepilok.com)

\* Resort has nitrox and trimix  
See *directory page* for more info



Neon bright dive gear and BCDs dry very quickly under the tropical sun as they lay strewn on the pier at the dive center at Sipadan Water Village Resort

in nature, it is not difficult in itself — that is, if you don't jump down into a strong current, or dive too deep, or go into caves for which you have no training.

On the other hand, the experienced diver can find numerous challenges here. Nitrox and technical diving are available on the neighbouring island of Mabul, where many photographers will also be pleased to find E-6 developing.

It is rather a question of whether or not you want to spend your money on a travelling companion who perhaps might not be able to really understand and appreciate Sipadan. When all is said and done, it costs a great deal more to go to Sipadan Island, than say, staying a week at the Red Sea, due to the cost of air travel to a desination half way around the world.

But everyone, whatever their level of competence, will bring home the experience of a lifetime. Especially so if you round off the trip with an excursion into the jungle to see the proboscis mon-

keys, go trekking on Mount Kinabalu, white-water rafting in Saba, or visit the orangutan reservation at Sepilok.

### Visibility and Current

Visibility at most of the diving locations near to the coast decreases greatly after rain because sediment is swept out into the sea. But at Sipadan, which rises directly from the ocean bed, visibility is generally quite unaffected by rainfall, and a visibility of under 30 m is a rarity. One can dive at Sipadan the whole year, but the visibility can change greatly from one day to the next.

There can be strong currents around Sipadan, or there can be none. Especially around Barracuda Point and South Point, there can be quite a 'storm' under the water, which requires good physical condition of divers. But good visibility and good captains on the dive boats make it easy to go on an entertaining current-dive. ■