

assistance in and out of the water and warm drinks (tea, hot cocoa) after each dive. There are three boat dives per day. They permit additional shore dives any time on a nice, large house reef. Nitrox friendly. Thorough dive briefings are given each morning. They allow divers to dive their own profiles. They require every diver to do a checkout dive, I believe to group divers with similar skills on one of the three dive boats. Our divemaster, John, has a great personality and was good at finding multiple blue ribbon eels, a frog fish, a ghost pipefish, crocodile fish, scorpion fish, many pigmy seahorses (smaller than you would think), a rainbow full of nudibranchs, sea snakes, leaf fish, multiple large and small cuttlefish (and their eggs nestled in corals). We didn't see any large animals (a couple of bugs in crevasses, but no pelagics). The corals, fans and other sea life were gorgeous, large and undamaged (the resort has ensured that many reefs are not used for fishing). Vis was occasionally reduced and darkened, as several brief rainstorms came through churning up the sea. However, it's a great experience to surface in a downpour! Dives are slow paced and thorough with John scanning the reefs and walls for things you could miss. Patience within the dive group is required for viewing so many small critters with a magnifying glass, one person at a time. The flight from LA to Singapore is 17 hours, and then another 2.5 from Singapore to Bali. A night stay over in Bali before taking their charter plane to Sulawesi the next morning (the Hotel Intercontinental is very nice — www.bali.intercontinental.com/). The resort built the airstrip in

Sulawesi, where you take a boat approximately 20 minutes to the resort. We stayed another four days in Bali at the Four Seasons in Sayan (www.fourseasons.com/sayan/). UW Photography Comments: Great setups all around. Resort featured a separate large camera room with work benches and dual power (110/220). Large boats had rinse tanks, large camera platform and attentive personnel. Dive guide attentive to photographers allowing plenty of time for everyone (non-photographers, photographers and videographers) to see subject matter and get the shots we wanted.

MALAYSIA

Sipadan, a tiny island off Borneo where 20 divers and others were kidnapped by Filipino Muslim terrorists, no longer has land accommodations. Yet, one can still reach the good diving around the island from other resorts. Malaysia has diving that competes well with Indonesia, but its diving infrastructure is not comparably developed.

Borneo Divers, Mabul Resort, July 2005, Jerry Tuttle (milo3@cox.net), Phoenix, AZ. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm. Borneo Divers does a great job of getting you from Kota Kinabalu to the resort and back. The resort cottages and clean and comfortable, the resort staff is competent, friendly and helpful. The food is repetitious and bland and the menu is some odd idea of what the western and European palates want. Except for fried noodles every morning

there was little Malaysian cuisine. The dive staff was friendly and helpful, but certainly some divemasters are more familiar with the dive sites and for small critters that is essential. I stayed at Sipadan in 1993 at the Borneo Divers Lodge. Although my memory may be slipping the fish life around the Island does not seem to have suffered. Turtles and whitetips are abundant. We spotted a hammerhead and several blacktips. The schooling barracuda are still there. Maybe the school is a little smaller. The school of bumphead parrotfish is not nearly as large. You would not be disappointed by the fish life. Unfortunately the island is crowded with divers all diving the few dive sites simultaneously. Without island accommodations all the day boats converge on the island daily with maybe 150 divers in the water often on the same sites. Mabul is no Lembeh for critters but a good divemaster can find ghost pipefish, frogfish, blue ribbon eels and some interesting nudibranchs. We spent eight days here. That's too long. Four dive days are plenty. UW Photography Comments: No e-6 facilities, no separate charging facilities for UWP, boats used to transport to Sipadan and other dive sites have no special accommodations for UWP.

Kapalai, April 2005, Laura Todd (LTodd@co.humboldt.ca.us), McKinleyville, CA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 25 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 F, calm, currents. Kapalai is an exquisite retreat. Everybody gets an overwater bungalow with louvered windows, most of which swing open completely to better appreciate the fabulous views, a deck to watch the lagoon from and

a gorgeous tiled bathroom with both tub and shower. Single guests will be assigned a roommate based on gender (unless willing to pay a steep single supplement). The snorkeling around the resort is marvelous, with swirls of juvenile fish, needle fish, feeding shells, clownfish, lionfish and blue spot rays. It's a good deal as well, with room, 3 meals and 3 boat dives going for about \$150/person/day. Transfers from Tawau airport are also included. Meals are communal and good, not fancy. Coffee, tea, crackers, cookies and a Tang-like juice available. The bar appeared to have beer only. Decent gift shop with sundries and some replacement dive gear plus small library of ID books. The staff was organized and friendly. A warning for my fellow Dramamine queens: the sea around Kapalai is mostly calm but when the wind picks up, your little bungalow can really get to moving on its stilts. The only thing that marred the hotel side of the experience was construction noise. They are expanding now that accommodations on nearby Sipadan are closed. Every morning there is a 2-tank trip to Sipadan, about 20 minutes away. Diving can be crowded, with at least 3 other companies sending several boats each at the same time. The dives were satisfying, with several truly stunning bait balls. If you are mellow, the huge swirls of jacks, etc. will part to let you in the center. Saw at least 6 turtles on every dive, all close. Also mating turtles on the surface. Many white tip sharks. A few people saw distant hammerheads. A couple leopard sharks. Nice small tropicals. There is only 1 dive per day at Kapalai per day unless you want to

do an unguided night dive. So there is much less focus on the small exotic critters this area is known for. We did see: ornate ghost pipefish, Napoleon snake eel, white eyed morays, longnose hawkfish, blue ribbon eels, peacock mantis shrimp, robust ghost pipefish, an assortment of beautiful small crabs and shrimp, a barramundi (very shy), a stonefish, and several nudibranchs. A few nice flatworms, including the gorgeous pseudobiceros with yellow border about 1/4 inch and magenta center. Only one frogfish all week. No cephalopods at all. Only one trip to neighboring Mabul in a week. The boats are poorly set up for diving with the tank wells in the bow, necessitating that staff bring divers their rigs one at a time. They put 12-14 divers on the small boats so gearing up is unpleasant in choppy seas. The boats have shade and overhead storage; they are in radio contact with the resort and carry leftover breakfast goodies but no other amenities. They also switch divers from one boat to another once or twice daily which among other things means you have to carry your weights around and for another that you never get used to one dive guide, nor they to you. For the afternoon dive, they make customers gear up completely, then walk down a set of uneven steps carrying mask, fins, camera, etc onto the gunwale of a bobbing boat — not fun. It's a boat dive with sites 5-15 minutes away, plenty of time to gear up so this approach remains a puzzle. The quality of the guiding varied, my favorites were Leto and Andy. One divemaster picked up a little nudibranch and the poor thing tumbled down a coral face when he set

it down carelessly. Make sure to devote some time to topside Malaysia. They have primary rainforest, rare rhinos, pygmy elephants, tremendous assortment of birds, etc. The famous orangutan refuge is easy to see. The travel desk at my hotel arranged a tour with a private contractor and for the equivalent of \$100 I got a customized day of sightseeing including the only Rafflesia (huge red strange flower) blooming in all of Sabah that day, lunch and admission to the national park with a guide whose knowledge of local ecology was encyclopedic. I stayed at the Beverly while in Kota Kinabalu and can highly recommend it. It's a modern business style hotel with some view rooms (Mt. Kinabalu) and a great breakfast buffet included in the \$45 price. The trip was ably arranged by Katie of Reef and Rainforest. UW Photography Comments: Separate rinse tank on dive dock. No accommodations at all on boat — cameras must be held in lap.

Layang Layang, April 2005, Laura Todd (LTodd@co.humboldt.ca.us), McKinleyville, CA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 75 to 100 Feet. Water: 83 F, choppy, no currents. Few hammerheads, (one of the main reasons I went). The resort opens in March for more hammer action. The sea will be rougher, but since the boats come in after every dive and they enforce a 45-minute limit, there's not time to get seasick. If you really need calm seas, wait until the wind switches for sure in late May (the water will be too warm for the big guys then). Other guests did see a thresher shark and a whale shark. There's an amazing level of luxury considering you are 150 miles from

anywhere in the South China Sea: satellite TV, freshwater pool, international phone calling, etc. The accommodations are uninspired, just functional motel block rooms with dark paneling but have air conditioning. The landscaping is nice, with hammocks and plenty of pool side lounges. It's a great value with 5 meals and 3 boat dives per day. Every meal has lots of variety, from the onion and fish things that Asians prefer for breakfast to a custom omelet bar to baked beans on toast. Great fresh fruit and desserts at lunch and dinner. Tea could be either sweet or savory local snack. The staff is friendly and organized in a low key way. Gift shop with reasonable t-shirts and dive supplies. The boats are simple, with shade and safety gear. No heads, but they return to the resort between dives. Communal gear storage is huge. The outdoor drying racks are in full sun most of the day. Divemasters are responsive to guest requests, safety conscious. All speak 2-3 languages. Gauges and weights are metric. You should easily get to all the sites here in a week. The big critters tend to hang out at the points of the island, where currents can be unpredictable. Most sites are sheer walls, 6000 feet straight down — if you drop anything, that's the last you'll see of it! We were treated to several bait balls with hundreds of jacks swirling around, often with a giant trevally cruising the outside. The best was a huge school of brilliant blue fusiliers with a turtle on the outside. One or two gray or black tip sharks each dive. Lots of great small tropical fish, including long nose hawk fish, fire gobies, leaf fish, and the exquisite long nose filefish (bright

turquoise with yellow markings). many nudibranchs, mostly quite small. Several clownfish species. Usually a couple turtles every dive. There's night diving when 6 or more people sign up. The island is nothing much to look at. There's a tiny beach with some decent shells to walk to. The bird refuge is one tiny, stinky island that you can only see from the boat — no landing. The island is shared by the Malaysian Navy. The website gives the impression that this is on some remote part of Layang Layang, but you can throw a rock from the dive dock and hit it. Their website is otherwise accurate except that they have many more than 3 charter flights a week (the plane is Spartan, but it gets you there). Sometimes they even put on 2 per day when it's busy. The young-looking sailors hang out at the beach in the evenings and sometimes eat at the restaurant. They were friendly but most don't have enough English to get beyond introductions. No photos/video of military staff or facilities is allowed. The guests were a mix of Malaysians, Europeans, a few Aussies and Brits, Japanese; few Americans, but not a problem. UW Photography: Photo gear is laid on mats in the bow. Cameras handled with care by staff. Good rinse and work areas on shore. Video pro on site. No processing.

Pulau-Sipadan Resort/Lankayan Island Resort, March 2005, Sally Schroeder (s72767@yahoo.com), Port Orange, FL. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 20 to 30 Feet. Water: 76 to 82 F, calm, no currents. I do long dives and was not told up front about the 45 min limit. Which did not go over well. I had in person chats with the book-

ing folks prior to this trip. The resort is nice, clean cabins on the beach, nice private balconies, clean hot water showers/ baths w/ flush toilets, baby blacktip reef sharks all over the shallows under the pier were nice to watch. Good food and friendly resort staff. Nice buffet food service in beach front locale with a good breeze. The 1st, 2nd and 3rd tanks I put my gear on were filled to over 4,000 pounds. Dive staff did not seem to think this was a problem. Super silty dive sites (I only saw 2+ the pier) really poor for photos and few fish. I did not stick around to see more. So this is limited commentary. Got on the 1st boat only 2 other divers. The guide, when asked what interesting things we should look for, said "follow me." I put gear on in the water. When the boat driver went to hand my gear down to me, it crashed to the floor of the boat as he had left it standing on a seat for a moment. The dive guide showed me not a single thing while underwater. After 45 min I got tapped on the shoulder and told to surface. I had more than 2,000 pounds in a 63 size tank. Night dive was alone under the docks where there were maybe a dozen fish. 3 other divers did a 25 min dive and left. I stayed in over an hour just to give things a really look about. Second boat dive was the next morning. Dive was briefed for 45 min. I asked what the deal was on the 45 min and was told I needed to charter my own boat, driver and private guide for who knows how much additional \$\$'s if I wished to be in the water over 45 min. During this, my last dive with these folks, there were 9 dynamite blasts during the dive. None of the other 3 divers seemed surprised. After serious

discussions with the dive operator I have reached an agreeable settlement with them. Sabah is a beautiful state to visit. I did lots of land things after this aborted diving episode. Big green lush mountains, jungle, waterfalls, hiking, canopy walks, orangutans, in all a great adventure place to visit. I know it offers great diving, I just did not find it this time. UW Photography Comments: Nothing on the boat specifically for camera gear. Wash bin for gear and separate for camera on the pier where you board the boat. Wet bins of gear in 1 room seemed to be the only on the pier gear area. Rooms were a 50-meter walk.

Reef Resort, December 2004, Sharon Hurst (donghu@earthlink.net), Bartlesville, OK. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 20 to 60 Feet. Water: 79 to 81 F, calm, choppy, currents. Start of the monsoon season. Matakang Island is a beautiful tropical island 45 minutes by fast boat off the eastern coast of Borneo, Malaysia. We flew from Kuala Lumpur to Kota Kinabalu (on Borneo), then to Tawau on the east side, where Reef Resort staff met us and ferried to the dock for the boat ride to Matakang. The only inhabitants on the island are the guests and staff of Reef Resort, plus the coconut crabs. We stayed eight days, however, only two days seemed crowded when large groups of Chinese tours came in for a brief overnight. The staff is welcoming and helpful. Accommodations are so gorgeous, built in typical Malaysian style. We were upgraded to a deluxe bungalow on the beach, which had a beautiful deck overlooking the water and lots of space inside. Meals were served buffet-style

in the open-air dining/bar area over the water. Most food was Chinese and Malaysian/Indonesian, which was delicious. There were some western foods. Topside activities — volleyball, kayaking, snorkeling. We spent our surface intervals walking around the island (that took an hour), crossing over to the smaller adjacent islet at low tide, lolling on the deck, and getting massages. There's nice coral in front of the resort, starting at 15 feet and sloping down to 60 feet and deeper. Mostly coral heads, and it gets sparse below 60 feet, so we confined our diving to the shallower depths. Small tropicals and macro creatures were abundant on these shore dives. Morays, octopus, crocodile fish, unicorn fish, leaf fish, plus all the other typical Pacific types. You had to take the boat to see turtles and rays. We never saw sharks. Matak-ing Island is across the channel from Sipadan, so it has many of the same types of sea life. Currents could get strong and might change midway through the dive, making it impossible to return to the entry point. On our shore dives, the resort always posted a boat to keep watch for us in case we needed to get picked up. There were three boat dives a day — 8:30, 10:30, and 2pm — which left promptly and took divers' requests. (Reef Resort will take divers on a 3-dive day trip to Sipadan). I wouldn't classify the diving as superb, although maybe that was due to the time of year, but it was certainly acceptable. I've been diving for over 15 years while my husband was only certified a week before we went to Malaysia. The dive shop was terrific, with plenty of space to leave our gear overnight and between dives,

plenty of filled tanks all day and night, plenty of showers and snacks, a full line of rental gear. The rinse tanks were limited and rarely cleaned. However, they were installing several more tanks and when we complained about the dirty water, they cleaned the tanks and refilled them. It's a wonderful spot for people who want to get away from it all, especially couples looking for a romantic hideaway. And I think the diving is good enough for experienced divers to be satisfied, especially given the nice shore diving which allows for plenty of bottom time even when the boats aren't going out. A nice add-on for those who have time: stay in a jungle camp on the Kinabatangan River and search out pygmy elephants, river crocodiles, and orangutans, then climb to the top of Mount Kinabalu. (Website: www.mataking.com).

MALDIVE ISLANDS

These 7000 low-lying coral islands in a 1200-mile chain southeast of India will be among the first to disappear when global warming raises sea levels significantly. The reefs have suffered coral bleaching, but liveaboards still find exciting fish life. Many of the 200 inhabited islands have classy resorts catering to Europeans, with good to excellent diving.

Bandos Island

Bandos Island Resort, December 2004, Donna, Dhahran, EP. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 15 to 30 Feet. Water: 82 to 88 F., currents. Wonderful resort.