

ence: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 15 to 25 Meters. Water: 27 to 28 Celsius, choppy, currents. Pulau Weh is easy to reach via Medan and Banda Aceh. Two fast ferries from Banda Aceh connect every day to Weh (1 h). It is another hour by taxi to Gapang beach and Lumbalumba Diving Resort. There are decent bungalows close by, some even with a/c. We were the first guests to visit P. Weh after the tsunami. There is little damage under water. The main dive sites did not show signs of destruction. Biodiversity is high with nice coral (hard and soft) and big schools of fish, many species of moray eels, scorpion fish and nice nudibranchs. Underwater volcano - much better and more active than the underwater volcano north of Manado in the Sangihe Archipelago - and the WW2-wreck of Sophie Rickmers, which lies in more than 40m on the sandy bottom. Lumbalumba is a professionally organized dive base with two dive boats (no sun protection) and well-maintained dive gear. Special freshwater tank for photographers. No special area for photographers. There is a lot of sand around. So be careful!

## MALAYSIA

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

**Borneo Divers, August 2005, Dale Finch (flya737@aol.com), Chapel Hill, NC.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 75 to 100 Feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, calm,

choppy. Divers suit up at the Dive Shop. At low tide there can be a substantial walk out to the end of the dock because there is no channel into the Resort. However, it does preserve some muck life worth snorkeling. Borneo Divers arranged all of our land excursions and accommodations as well as the diving. They always met us promptly at the airports, took us to our hotels, and coordinated tours by touring companies. When unexpected weather altered our access to some sites, they seamlessly rearranged our itinerary. Be sure to visit the Orang Utan Sanctuary and stay at the beautifully landscaped Sepilok Nature Resort, they have an extensive orchid garden. UW Photography Comments: The boat captain will house your cameras on life jackets for the extended boat ride to Sipadan, but there is no dunk tank on board. Consistent help was available entering and exiting the water. The dive shop does have a dedicated dunk tank for cameras. Although they have computers available for email, there is no free image download.

**Borneo Divers, Kapalai Resort, July 2006, Tracey Bennett (Tdives@cox.net), Las Vegas, NV.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 45 to 85 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm, choppy, currents. The resort is casual and comfortable, a creation of boardwalks and bungalows stemming out from a tiny sandbar in the middle of nowhere. All the rooms are the same with 2 twin beds, double ceiling fans, large bathroom and balcony. Each private balcony has a floodlight that is switched on at night. I spent hours gazing at blue spotted stingrays, trumpetfish, lionfish and anemones from the window near my bed. Meals are buffet style with a nice variety of choices. Beer and wine available. They ran out of diet coke and

could not replace it during the 4 days of my stay. Diving was organized and the divemasters and staff were super friendly. You are assigned a boat, and most days do 2 dives in Sipadan and a 3rd dive in Mabul or Kapalai. Night dives on the house reef whenever you want as long as you have a buddy. If there are a minimum of 6 divers you can do a 5:30 am Sipadan dive to catch the schooling bumphead parrotfish. Each morning as I walked to the dive shop, I was greeted by a smiling crewman who took my camera, placed it in a laundry basket padded with a life vest, wrapped a damp towel over the top, and placed it in a shady spot on the boat. On the first day, when we arrived at the Sipadan guard shack to pay the US\$10 levy, the guard turned us away saying that there were already too many people diving. We angrily circled around for a bit then went back to give it another shot. Our divemaster was able to convince him to let us dive. We saw schooling barracuda and walls of jacks, as well as 10 - 12 reef sharks on one dive. Huge sea turtles swam out with the current over walls and into the blue. Muck diving around Mabul and Kapalai was great, although the guides didn't seem to be as experienced in spotting critters compared with the guides at Sipadan Water Village. The only thing that disappointed me was the strictly enforced 45 minute, including the safety stop, dive time. UW Photography Comments: Designed rinse tanks on dock. Staff experienced at handling cameras.

**East Marine, Arwana Perhentian Resort, May 2006, Roger Gray, Annandale, VA.** Experience: 350+ dives. No town so you are limited on shopping. Bring what you need. Water is and is US\$1 for a liter. Arwana is one of the few resorts with a pier. So you will go

over the side of the boat into the water to get to the other resorts. Behind the palm trees is a three-story resort that holds 430. The rooms are large and spacious; the beds are firm but comfortable. Plenty of space to spread out your stuff. TV. The AC works well; the room has a ceiling fan above the bed. Big swimming pool. The food was buffet-style and did have some good Malaysian cuisine. You can get the food package or go a la carte. There are four more resorts that you could walk to. Can get a beer but no mixed drinks. Staff was friendly and helpful. East Marine also works with a couple of other nearby resorts. Snorkelers are mainly handled by the resort staff, not by the dive staff. A good thing, because 300 came in the day after I got there. They will take snorkelers if only a couple of them. They are mainly dedicated to divers. You can do up to 5 dives a day - 4 day dives and a night dive. The staff will set up your gear. They will have all your gear loaded on the boats for you; they carry all the gear and wash it for you each day. No small boat had more than 6 divers. They do have a larger boat for about 20 divers. They will take you out even if you are the only diver. The most divers were 6, but most of the time it was the divemaster and me. All dives were 50 to 55 minutes. OR 2 minutes decompression timed by your computer. The dive is not over, just come up to shallower water to finish the dive. It had no distant visibility, at most, 15 feet of clear water. You can see farther but cannot take any pictures. UP close to the reef, I had 3-6 feet of clear water. Good enough to take pictures. They have 26 dive sites up to 80 feet or 25 meters to choose from. We would meet before each dive and talk about sites with the best visibility. The staff worked

hard to find clear water. The coral reefs are in good condition. The soft coral is outstanding. There is some small damage to some hard coral, but overall it is in good shape. There are vast quantities of small fish. Of course, there are no large fish, but that is true almost everywhere now. There are also many moray eels. There were too many types of nudibranchs to list. Overall, the diving was good, the reefs are in good enough shape to satisfy any diver from beginner to expert. Note: all dive briefings were in English.

**Laguna Redang Resort, May 2006, Roger Gray, Annandale, VA.** Experience: 350+ dives. The Laguna is a large resort that can handle 500+ guests. The rooms are large and spacious; I had 4 beds in my room. The layout of the room gives you plenty of space to spread out your stuff. It has a TV. The AC works well; also, the room has a ceiling fan. Big swimming pool. The food was buffet-style and was not too bad. It did have some good Malaysian cuisine. You can get the food package or go a la carte. There are 7 more resorts that you could walk to. Can get beer and mixed drinks. Also, the staff was great. The dive center caters to snorkelers. The snorkelers gather at the dive center to wait for their boats. Depending on the time of day, between 100 and 300 snorkelers were hanging around the dive center. It made it hard to gear up and watch your gear. No water for the divers; the resort wants to sell it to you. All dives are kept to 40-45 minutes. Most of the dive is to only 18 meters. Redang claims 30 meters of visibility. Best I saw was 15 meters in 30 feet of water. Visibility dropped when we went deeper, down to about 6 feet. Visibility was so poor below 30-35 feet. It was not worth going. You would think the dive staff would dive shallow so we could

have some good visibility, but our complaints fell on deaf ears. When we had visibility; the coral was outstanding and lots of fish.

**Sipadan Water Village, April 2006, Linda and Ron Welf, Montara, CA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 70 to 140 Feet. Water: 83 to 84 F, calm. Our stay on Mabul Island had a great combination of wall dives with pelagics and turtles on Sipadan Island in the morning and odd critters on Mabul and Kapalai Islands in the afternoon. In 9 relaxing days, we did 25 dives, 18 of which were on Sipadan. The diversity of fish was such that even repeat visits to the same dive site were enjoyable. The Malaysian military with assault rifles have a full-time presence on Sipadan and local police boats often stopped overnight at Mabul. This provided a great deal of peace of mind, in view of past incidents. Our favorite site "Barracuda Point" hosted both pelagics and colorful reef fish. The wall tapers into a sandy area, a cleaning station for white tips. Here we watched cleaner wrasse enter shark gills and then be "coughed" out. Larger grey reef sharks were below 80 feet. On one dive, a large leopard shark swam by twice. Considering the constant diver traffic on this tiny spot of ocean, the Sipadan reef looked relatively healthy, with the beat up site "Drop Off" near the boat jetty, being the exception. Just when we became disappointed here, over a hundred large bumphead parrotfish swam right through our group of divers. And there were some rare small fish here too. At twenty feet, we were surrounded by thousands of jacks as they moved in a large circle. There were also large schools of mackerel, blue trigger, bannerfish, fusiliers, and smaller schools of barracuda, spadefish, and sweetlips. On most Sipadan dives, we

came face-to-face with sea turtles, perhaps fifteen or twenty per dive. Many turtles were on ledges and could be approached closely. White tip sharks were also a frequent sighting. In the shallows, tiny golden, pink, turquoise, and fuchsia colored fish were plentiful. Titan triggerfish were building nests and if a diver got too close, they launched an attack. Also saw anemonefish (tomato, pink, orange, Clark's and the false clown), lionfish, scorpion fish, blue ribbon eels, cuttlefish, bird wrasse, sailfin tang, fire and two-tone dartfish, rabbitfish, puffer, angelfish, checkered snapper, clown triggerfish, hawkfish, octopus, moray eel, flying gurnard, flounder, shrimp goby and blind shrimp at their shared burrows, blue-spotted ray, unicorn fish, and an ornate ghost pipefish. Mabul has three dive resorts. Our spacious over-water bungalows had no AC, but there was a high velocity fan. Since there were no screens on the windows and sliding doorways, we were vulnerable to bugs. One windless night, I did get bites all over my face while sleeping. My husband applied 100% DEET before bed, and was spared. After taking one look at me, the manager Alex installed a mosquito net over our bed. Meals were buffet style and had a variety of choices. Breakfast starts at 6:30 AM and the boat departs Mabul around 7:30 AM. The house reef had some exotic juvenile batfish and shallow water fish like razorfish. From the pier at night, we could see an eagle ray and several lionfish. Off Mabul, we enjoyed diving under the Seaventure oil platform, where we found scorpion fish, frogfish, stonefish, cockatoo wasp fish, batfish and many crocodile flatheads. We also found Spanish dancer flatworms, several nudibranchs laying eggs and a pygmy seahorse. Our friends saw a

stargazer swim and then settle into the sand. "Elvis" is a huge moray living inside a cage of metal debris. Tiny Kapalai is really only a sandbank visible at low tide, on which a new dive resort has been built. This diving seemed best for macro photography. We visited the Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Center then took an overnight boat trip tour into the jungle to view the wildlife along the Kinabatangan River. Get an air-conditioned jungle bungalow, because it is hot and humid. Along the river, we saw a python, orangutan, macaques, boar swimming, many exotic birds, a large crocodile sunning itself, and endangered proboscis monkeys clambering through the trees.

**Sipadan Water Village, June 2006, Tracey Bennett (Tdives@cox.net), Las Vegas, NV.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 45 to 85 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm, choppy, currents. From LAX it took two days to get to Sipadan Water Village. It is an amazing accommodation, with potted plants and trees along the boardwalks that lead to private bungalows. My deluxe room was large, with a separate sitting area, huge bathroom and wrap around deck. If you are at the end of the boardwalk it is a brisk 5 min. walk to the dive shop. Not easy with a heavy camera. There is a full bar and the restaurant serves meals buffet style with choices of American, Asian, and local dishes. The dive shop is organized and caters to 40 plus divers most days. Your name will be posted under the boat you are assigned to and you can choose all combinations of diving Sipadan, Mabul and Kapalai in a single day. You can change boats daily to dive the areas desired, and the divemasters are eager to fulfill requests for particular sites. 3 dives per day with a possible 4th dive in Sipadan or a dusk dive at 5:30. Night

dives allowed only for groups traveling on a dive shop sponsored trip. Sipadan divers are required to pay a US\$10 levy to the government each day they dive the reefs around the island. The boat will stop by the guard shack on the way to a site and pay for the whole boat. If you prepay the levy with the rest of your reservations and decide not to dive every day in Sipadan, the resort will not refund the unused levy. Saw barracuda, batfish, schools of jacks, turtles, and sharks. Sometimes currents would start to rip and we would tuck in and fly together through valleys and channels until we reached an area that was not affected. There were areas with healthy hard corals, but many areas void of coral. Hopefully the recent closing of the accommodations on Sipadan will allow the corals to grow back. Many whitetips on most dives. A few huge grey reef sharks and three leopard sharks. June and July is a great time to see sea turtles as it is mating season. We saw huge turtles on most dives. Muck diving at Mabul and Kapalai was excellent. Tons of nudibranchs, painted frogfish, orangutan crabs, giant mantis shrimps, soft coral crabs, blue ribbon eels, leaf fish, whip coral shrimp, ornate ghost pipefish, robust pipefish, cuttlefish, longnose hawkfish, pigmy seahorses, and a rare pink hairy octopus made it hard to decide where to dive the next day. Guides at the resort were excellent critter spotters. UW Photography Comments: Water buckets on boats upon request. Ample rinse facilities on dock. Small camera rooms near shop available for rent.

## MALDIVES

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 significant coral bleaching, but live-aboards still find exciting fish life. Many of the 200 inhabited islands have classy resorts catering to Europeans, with good to excellent diving.

**Pro Divers, Komandoo, March 2006, John Purcell (mtwashjohn@aol.com), Mt. Washington, MA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 6 to 100 feet. Water: 80 to 85 F, strong currents. We were the only Americans on Island. People could not have been nicer. Long trip. +27 hours to get back to the States. This resort has fresh and diverse foods. Never got boring. Plenty to choose from for the adventurous or stick to chicken and salad. Spa at resort. Accommodations were clean and the Jacuzzi water villas were new and beautiful. Overall dive experience was fantastic. Strong currents. Not for the weak. Barbara and Tom ran Pro Divers. We found them to be quite efficient and helpful; they were shorthanded and took up the slack well. We had dive masters from other resorts to fill in and all were knowledgeable and friendly. Barbara was into photography and when you dove with her you were basically on your own. She was into Macro and never looked up. Tom planned every dive to the last detail. We looked forward to diving with him. Had two dive boats ; one in German and one in English. Resort is probably 60 English, 40 German. Barbara and Tom — German. UW Photography Comments: no rinse tank on boats but large enough area to set equipment and not worry. Lots of photographers, including dive operator.