

## MADAGASCAR

**Aventura Diving, L'Heure Bleu, August/September 2007, Michael Jöst (mijoe@arcor.de), Kehl.** Experience: 1600 dives. Vis: 50 to 120 feet. Water: 28 C, calm and flat. Overfishing and spearfishing leave some reefs nearly empty of fish. Some small areas have good, healthy coral and a good mixture and variety of fish life. Most dive sites are deeper than 15 m; no chance of multilevel or safety stop in the shallows, watching fish. Nitrox would be a good idea — so far nothing there. 14-day stay too long for the diving. Some nice deep dive sites down to 70 m with huge gorgonia on boulders with canyons and tunnels, some smaller caves but nearly no fish life. Visibility great. Aventura Diving gave me 14 days of different sites and even went out for diving with me being the only customer. As a single, I often had some bad experience in other places, multiple times same dive sites and buddied up with beginners. Coming back from a dive, we got close to four humpback whales cruising the waters between Nosy Be and Madagascar. Awesome to see them coming up for air or their fluke above surface on their way down. A full meal, starter, main course, dessert plus wine was around 5 to 9 EUR. Most times they had delicious fish dishes on their menu and some not too spicy local food — for example, zebu sirloin steak in vanilla sauce, really a new experience for your taste buds.

## MALAYSIA

Sipadan, a tiny island off Borneo where 20 divers and others were kidnapped by Filipino Muslim terrorists nearly a decade ago, 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 Mabul Resort, March 2007, Yvonne Lanelli (EVLanelli@zianet.com), Alto, NM.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 15 to 50 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm. Terrific place to see Mandarinfish, turtles, blue-ringed octopus, flamboyant cuttlefish, frogfish, ornate ghost pipefish. Our package included 3 dives and three buffet meals with lodging in roomy beachfront duplex cabaña with king-sized bed, AC, hot showers. Twilight dives extra. Free wireless, swimming pool, bar, ice cream stand, gift shop, critter reference books. Dive op provided large showers, cabinet storage, equipment repair. Dives well-organized with sites, times and divers clearly indicated. Dive staff helpful with equipment transfers, dive orientation. Divemasters knowledgeable about critters; accommodating to divers' requests and concerns. 5- to 30-minute boat rides with snacks, water. Buffet meals mostly Asian and local specialties. Bottled water provided. Airport transfers on time and efficient. Resort staff helpful but not obsequious. Our cabin and public areas clean, nicely furnished and well-kept. Clientele includes Aussies, Europeans, Hong Kongese, locals; families as well as singles. My dive buddy and I were the only Americans. Socializing easy and fun, particularly on Poolside Buffet night with live music by divemaster band. English universally used. Bring adapter/converter for 220 V. and Asian three-prong outlet. Local airlines charge extra for baggage over 30 pounds. Resort isolated, self-contained. Schedule free time in city of Kota

Kinabalu, eco-touring in Sanakan or with orangutans for complete Borneo experience.

**Borneo Divers, Kapalai Resort, July 2007, Roger Gray, Annandale, VA.**

The resort is built on a coral head and sandbar in the middle of nowhere. The bungalows are all connected by wide walkways. The rooms are large with ceiling fans. My room had one full and one twin bed, no air-conditioning. Also, the room has a large bathroom and a private balcony. All the meals were buffet-style with plenty of choices. If you wanted something special to eat, the cooks would try to make it for you. You can get beer and wine. If doing a night dive, let the staff know and they will hold a plate of food for you. The dive staff is friendly and helpful. The divemasters knew how to find the small critters. If you needed help getting in or out of the water, the staff was there to help. Sipadan island is a great dive site; the hard and soft coral are outstanding. Small critters are everywhere, along with schools of large bumphead parrotfish. Too many turtles to count, large school of barracuda and plenty of sharks. Just too many different kinds of fish to list. The down side was all dives were 45 minutes plus 3 minutes for safety stop. The resort does not care how many dives you have done or how many years you have been diving. You cannot go to Sipadan until you do what they call a break-in dive with them at the resort reef. Also must have a minimum of 6 divers to go to Sipadan and for only two dives. Dive package gets you 3 boat dives a day. You cannot get any more boat dives in a day. I tried and was told no. You can dive the resort reef if you have a dive buddy.

**Lankayan Dive, Lankayan Resort, September 2006, Bill Ehler (wehler@satx.**

**rr.com), Helotes, TX.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 20 to 50 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm, choppy, no currents. We were met at the airport and taken to the harbor for transportation by boat to the island. It is a 1.5 hour boat ride in a boat with two new 225 HP outboards. There was GPS and radio but no toilet. The resort is extremely comfortable, well maintained and managed. The food is first rate! The resort runs a very active turtle hatchery and education program. Strong military presence on island. Distant blasts heard on most dives. The resort seems to cater to a European clientele. All of the staff were enthusiastic and have a "can do" attitude. Lankayan is one of Sabah's jewels. The viz during our stay was poor due to feeder bands from a very strong typhoon over the Philippines. All dive sites have permanent moorings. The dive operation is well managed, with very good rental gear. All cold tank fills were in excess of 3000 psi. UW Photography Comments: The dive boats did not have soak tanks, nor was there room for a tank if there were more than 6 diver.

**Mataking Reef Resort, September 2006, J. Sloane (sloane.strickler@gmail.com), Washington, DC.**

Experience: 501-1000 dives. Water: surge. I paid for 2 long boat trips (3 hours round trip) to Sipadan (six dives total) and then dove at Mataking the remaining days. Sipadan was a very pretty wall with big fish everywhere, including bumphead parrotfish, giant trevally, sharks (whitetips with some grays thrown in) and schooling jacks and barracuda. Sipadan is also blessed with an abundance of turtles. Little current except for at Barracuda Point, where the current was strong each time. Except for also having a large local turtle population, the diving at Mataking

and surrounding islands is completely different from Sipadan. The reefs are generally coral outcroppings situated on a sloping sand bottom. The coral is either in excellent shape, completely destroyed or somewhere in between depending on the site. I was fortunate enough to see a blue ring octopus, a sea moth, Mandarin fish, mantis shrimp, lots of anemone creatures, orangutan crab, scorpion fish, stone fish, lots of frog fish, crocodile fish, etc. The diving was done as a group drift dive. The current could often be very strong and the resort may not be ideally suited for beginner divers for that reason. The resort imposed certain depth floors for each dive and generally limited dives to 50 minutes. I often came up with plenty of air in my tank, but I never found the limits overly restrictive and I always felt that the limits were negotiable depending on what was happening in the dive. The resort offers three boat dives a day (8.30 AM, 11 AM and 3 PM) as well as offering unlimited shore diving on the house reef, although I wasn't fully able to take advantage of this offer because I often could not find a buddy for the later dives. The dive staff was friendly and helpful. Their English ranged from good to sufficient. I felt that the dive staff made an effort to keep the dive groups small and every time my dive group got to be more than 5 or so, the dive shop sent out another boat, although the resort was not at all crowded with divers the week I was there. There were actually a lot of people staying at the resort who did not dive. The Reef Resort sits on a very small island that it shares with a small police station (the police/army presence in both the neighborhoods of Sipadan and Matakang was very noticeable). The rooms are air conditioned, large and very comfortable. Everyone's

room is less than a minute's walk from the water. The dive shop is mainly an open air affair with plenty of room. It is adjacent to the restaurant, which has three open sides. The food could use some improvement but was more than sufficient in both quality and quantity, and the bar was fully stocked. The service of the staff was excellent. I think overall Bunaken/Lembah Straits in Sulawesi is probably better for the small stuff, although Sulawesi does not have the big stuff close to it like Matakang does. If I ever went back, I would dive Sipadan out of a Mabul resort for 4 days and then do 4 days at Matakang to get the full flavor of both the big and the small and leave the long boat trips for someone else.

**Sipadan Water Village, June 2007, Bill Hardee (bhardee@prismnet.com), Austin, TX.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 50 Feet. Water: 78 to 81 F, calm. The staff, from the GM to the maintenance workers, go out of their way to insure everyone has the best experience possible. The food, the bar, the dive staff, the boat crews, the rooms. The divemasters will do whatever it takes to find exactly whatever critter you want, every time. This resort is all about photography. They plan all dives around getting the best photo opportunities. They have camera rooms, not tables, and 4 large rinse tanks for camera gear only.

**SMART/Mabul Water Bungalows, August 2006, John Sommerer (jcsommerer@verizon.net), Silver Spring, MD.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm, choppy. Mabul Water Bungalows an upscale partner of Sipadan-Mabul Resort (SMART). Great accommodations, good restaurant, great service, nice spa. Dive operation same as SMART. Did

not group divers according to experience — we had several dives with recent certifications, which is not good for either the muck (Mabul) nor the blue diving (Sipadan). Boat crews good, helpful, and careful with your gear. One divemaster was great (Deniah): enthusiastic, talented, and flexible. Unfortunately, we spent most of our time with another (Eddy), who was none of these. Most irritating was his impatience to get the dive over with; he'd start signaling "safety stop" at 39 minutes. After he'd made a major screw-up (and there were several, including taking a group out into the blue and then losing his direction — we were out there for 35 minutes, until I went to the surface and took a compass bearing) — you might get a 50-minute dive by way of apology. Despite listings on dive board, frequently changed dive sites to places closer to the resort. Only did Kapalai once. Some major issues with Sipadan permits. One couple who stayed 12 days only got to Sipadan 5 times. We went over twice, to be turned back. Second time, all divers pushed back really hard, and we ended up doing both dives there on the side of the island away from the Malaysian military post, with our surface interval on the boat. Would not recommend going here until this is sorted out. Don't know if it's a problem in general, with SMART, or with our particular dive master. Resort did not volunteer refunds of the Sipadan levy. The muck is not remotely comparable to Lembeh, so Mabul is not a destination unto itself, in my opinion. Sipadan pretty much as advertised, with lots of turtles, big school of bumphead parrotfish (usually only seen on 6:00 a.m. dive at Barracuda Point), lots of whitetip sharks, fewer gray reef sharks, and an occasional hammerhead or leopard shark (South Point seemed best

for the last three). Barracuda school there, but shy, and with new divers in our group both times we found them, we didn't see them for long. We did a long trip to see Borneo wildlife, which was great, and we had good luck in both the Kinabatangan River (3 days) area and Danum Valley (3 days). If I was just diving, I would not come here. Komodo/Manado, Indonesia, and Palau represent better diving for comparable distance from US. UW Photography Comments: If you want pictures of green turtles, or bumphead parrotfish, this is the place. Good coral also.

**SMART, October 2006, Phil Gans (PGans@PGans.com), Golden, CO.**

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 60 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm. The resort is on the Island of Mabul, about 15 minutes from Sipadan. The diving is exceptionally good. At Sipadan, where we went for 2 of the three daily dives, there were tons of turtles and lots of white tip sharks resting on the bottom. On two days we saw a school of barracuda. There were thousands of them swimming in circles at one point. Some of the divers were surrounded by them. We also saw a very large school of jacks. There was also a school of very large bump head parrot fish. The school was not large, about 25 fish, but the bump-heads were about 2 or even 3 feet long. the corals were gorgeous and healthy. We only saw a couple of hammerhead at a distance. We also saw lots of healthy and large reef fish at both Sipadan and Mabul, plenty of nudibranchs, including a flamingo dancer at night, and things like a pigmy seahorse, frog fish, leaf fish pipe fish, ghost pipe fish, juvenile frog fish, crocodile fish, etc. Mabul is small. You can walk around it in less than an hour. It has a few resorts, including some water bungalows owned by the same people. There

is a converted well station that acts as a resort, another set of water bungalows and another resort on the island. The village on the island is very poor, but the people are very nice. Smart had good food, and a good staff. When I was there they were only at half capacity until the last two days when they hit full capacity. At that point the dive boats became too full, and the dives on some of the boats became shorter to accommodate less-experienced divers.

**SMART Water Bungalows, September 2007, Steven Levin, Arlington, VA.**

Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 45 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm. This is my sixth visit to the Water Bungalows over the last three years. The quality of the bungalows, food, and operation of the resort remains high. SMART has two operations on the island of Mabul. On the main island there are chalets, a restaurant, and dive center. Separate from the main island resort are the Water Bungalows, at the end of a long jetty with a beautiful setting. Each bungalow is independent, with a large deck, A/C, mini-fridge, desk, sofa, bed(s), and satellite television. A separate restaurant for the Water Bungalows serves good food. All meals are buffets. In the morning there are eggs cooked to ordered and freshly squeezed orange juice. Throughout the day there is fruit and cookies. Lunch and dinner features a range of three or four dishes such as lamb, beef, fish, prawns as well as salads, soup, and desserts. The usual diving program is two dives a day at Sipadan and a third dive at Mabul or Kapalai. Due to the restrictions at Sipadan on the number of divers, dive boats leave for Sipadan at 5:30 A.M., 9 A.M., and 12:30 P.M. for their two dives. There is gear storage and pickup/dropoff for the divers at the Water Bungalows. Diving at Sipadan offers

dramatic walls with large numbers of turtles — green and hawksbill. Sharks, mostly white tips, are seen frequently, as well as resident schools of jacks and bumphead parrotfish. Some zebra and hammerhead sharks deeper. The interval between dives at Sipadan is spent on the beach where sandwiches, hot drinks, and fruit are provided. The trip to Sipadan from Mabul takes about 25 minutes when the sea is flat but can be up to an hour if there are big swells. Diving at Mabul and Kapalai is about little creatures. There are mini-walls such as Lobster Wall and slopes at places such as Ray Point and the Eel Garden. Small creatures can include frogfish, nudibranchs, flatworms, pipefish, orangutan crabs, etc. At the SMART House tanks are available and you can enter the water from steps down to the water. The House Reef is an extensive area with many large man-made structures. There is a resident school of jacks, some large groupers, and other small creatures, including frogfish. Getting to the resort involves flying to Tawau, which can be done via Kota Kinabalu or Kuala Lumpur. After flying to Tawau, there is a 1+ hour drive to Semporna (port) and a 40-minute boat ride to the resort. An excellent operation with diversified diving. UW Photography Comments: On the boats there is a small bucket in which people put their masks and small cameras. Other than that, boats at best have a mat on which cameras can be placed. At the overwater bungalows, there are no camera facilities other than a rinse area. Charging and other camera activities are carried out in your bungalow.

## MALDIVES

These 7000 low-lying coral islands