
Derawan Dive Resort, Borneo

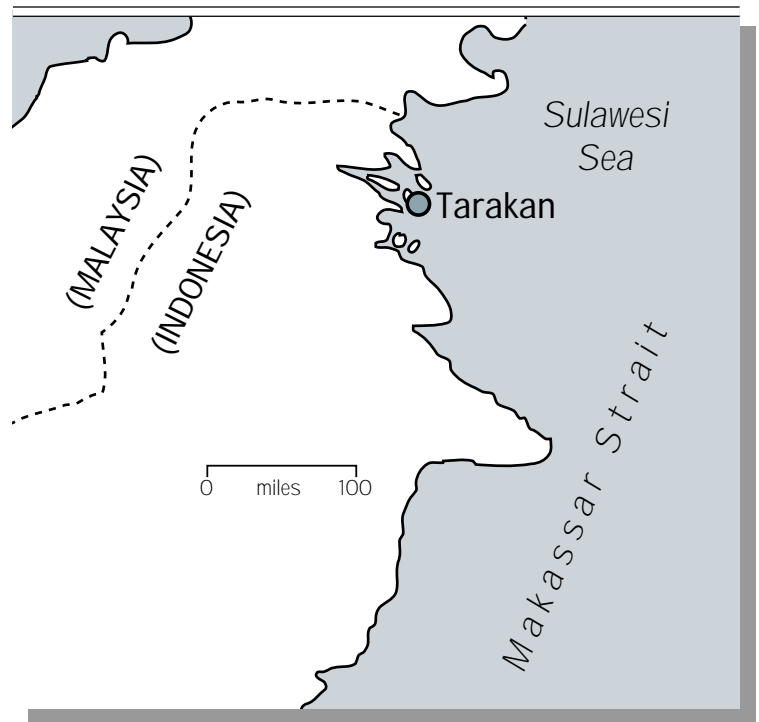
Dear Fellow Diver,

Like the previous correspondent, I dived the Manado area and loved it so much that I was willing to put up with the struggle of travel to Indonesia -- this time to dive Sangalakki, rumored to be the next Sipadan. After 46 hours of flights, delays, transports and three tries at landing in Balikpapan, on Borneo, I finally saw my first bed. The following morning, we flew to Tarakan via weird Sempati Air; the preflight candy looked like it had been in someone's pocket too long, the box lunch was filled with unidentifiable items, and the in-flight entertainment was a drawing for a free ticket to the only two destinations the airline flew.

Once we had landed, a staff member drove us to the waiting boat for a long, two-hour journey to the Derawan Dive Resort. Located on an 80-acre isle, the well-managed resort with a friendly staff is new to the American diving market. It has 20 duplex cottages, each with its own bathroom and toilet (except two), sink and shower (no hot water), mosquito-netted twin beds, a dresser, and a can of heavy-duty bug spray. Some rooms had air conditioners, but the majority had ceiling fans -- comfortable enough, thanks to the tropical breezes cooling the 90° days.

My partner and I were given liability forms to complete, but no one ever retrieved them, nor did anyone ask for our c-cards. The resort offered a beach checkout dive, but we opted out. Regardless, it proved to be a well-organized and friendly operation. One or more of their five boats -- fiberglass with twin 70-hp outboards -- left at 9:00 a.m. for a single morning dive, and went out again at 2:30 p.m. Most dives were 10-20 minutes away, but day excursions on their flat-bottom boat to Kakaban and Sangalakki Islands were the highlights. The staff took great care in handling all the gear, including disassembling, rinsing, and storing it securely. My partner washed his own camera gear in large basins beside the shop.

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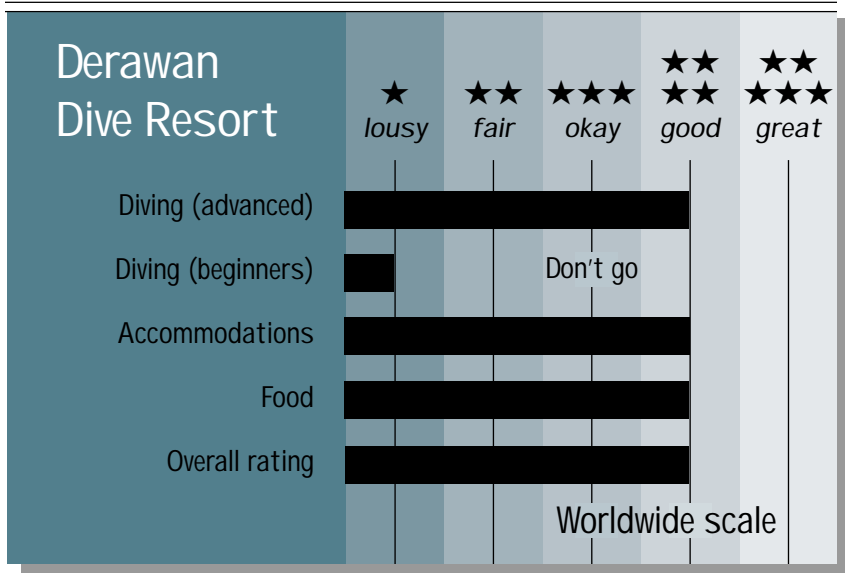


Eastern Borneo

Critters on Parade

Most of the nine dive sites around Derawan consisted of unspoiled bommies (large coral heads) sloping to a sandy bottom. There was a lot of action: turtles were abundant on every

dive, along with large cuttlefish, schooling barracudas, black ribbon eels, Napoleon wrasses, and leopard and whitetip sharks up to eight feet long. The guides provided a briefing and told us the PADI depths and time limits, but permitted my partner and me to follow our dive computers (the nearest chamber is more than 10 hours away). They came along to point out critters if we asked. At the end of each dive, we handed up our gear and climbed aboard.



At night one could take a boat dive, but life around the 600-foot pier is a macro photographer's playground. In ten feet of water I saw dwarf scorpionfish and lionfish, squat lobsters, harlequin ghost pipefish, a blue-ringed octopus, large blood-red sea slugs, stonefish, juvenile flatheads, iridescent pigmy cuttlefish, and luminous squids. February being the rainy season, visibility wasn't great -- about 50 feet. Water temperature was 82.

Sangalakki Island, a 45-minute boat ride from Derawan, is noted for predictable mantas feeding in the channel currents. They seemed to take pleasure in performing circles and flips for us snorkelers. They would come close, beckoning our touch, then swerve just as we brushed our fingertips against their sandpaper-like skin. When the plankton thinned, they headed for greener pastures.

Turtle Island Dreaming

Each night about 80 green turtles come ashore on Sangalakki Island to deposit 60-180 eggs each. To expand the turtle population, "turtle men" collect the eggs and sell them to the government for \$300 Rupiah each (25 cents). A six-month-old turtle will bring in a hefty \$2.75. Sadly, two days before we arrived on Sangalakki, pirates armed with machine guns had robbed the turtle men of their eggs.

One morning on Derawan, we were awakened before dawn by a low Bahasan whisper outside our window signaling the arrival of a turtle. We scrambled for our clothes and followed a small, weathered man through the moonlight. The enormous green turtle dug several holes and began to lay her eggs. I moved closer, lying alongside her. She was undaunted by my presence. After depositing her eggs -- the process took hours -- she "swam" to cover them, then struggled exhausted back to the ocean as dawn came.

Three dives and three meals a day filled the schedule. The food, mostly local style and very good, was served buffet style in the large gazebo-like main building that had a bar

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built over the water. Breakfast often included rice and fish soup with fried bread and meshu gorang (a pasta dish with vegetables and scrambled eggs). A variety of chicken and fish dishes with vegetables, rice, and fruit came at lunch and dinner; for nonadventurous appetites, some Western cuisine was also served. Local beer was \$3, the only alcohol sold.

Exotic Lakes, Unhappy Returns

In the interior of Kakaban Island, an hour boat trip from Derawan, lies a landlocked marine lake filled with four species of nonstinging jellyfish, coral, blennies -- all kinds of bizarre critters. We climbed small cliffs, walked through swamps, and fought off Texas-size mosquitos, praying we didn't fall into the quicksand. When I hit the lake with my snorkel gear, I knew immediately the trek was worth it. (Stay away from the mangroves; they're inhabited by poisonous snakes.)

While the whole trip rates highly as true adventure-dive travel, getting home was an adventure in patience. The weather was stormy on the ride back to Tarakan, the waters were multiple-Bonine-grade rough, and the engine frequently quit, giving everyone an equal opportunity to throw up. The scheduled two-hour boat ride lasted four hours because we ran out of gas, and the other boat hit a sandbar and nearly flipped over. When we finally kissed the dock, we found we had missed our flight and our tickets had been invalidated by the airline. Luckily, we had with us Seno, the owner, who realized he had 14 unhappy people. He put us up in the only reputable hotel, fed us, and bought us questionable airline tickets. The following morning we flew under assumed names, and some of us even changed sex (on paper only), but no one from Sempati Air raised an eyebrow.

Thinking about a Comeback

On the way home I had plenty of time to ponder my ten days on Derawan and was delighted I had made the trip -- but would seek other Indonesian adventures (including Manado again) and Papua New Guinea before returning. Yet I have special memories. Not long after I staggered into my own bed at the end of the endless red-eye flight, my phone rang. "Hello, Mrs.?" It was my dive guide, Jack, calling to make sure I had made it home okay. This was a feat itself, not only because there is only one pay phone on his island, but also because his wages are \$50 a week. My, how lucky we traveling divers are to touch and be touched by so many exquisite people.

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I arranged this trip through Art Travers at Poseidon Venture (800-854-9334, 714-644-5344, fax 714-644-5392). . . . Depending on how long you stay, all-inclusive rates run \$120 to \$160/night; some packages include trips to Sangalakki, others charge \$50/trip, so talk through before you pick. . . . Though you can contact the resort directly, you won't get different prices. Travers can arrange air; besides, I like to have an American rep for this kind of adventure. . . . Derawan Dive Resort main office phone is 0542-20258, fax 0542-20293; Derawan Island, 0551-23375, fax 0551-23274.

Ditty Bag

G. S.