

both legs of trip. Owner was unduly hung up on enforcing the buddy system — to the point that it ruined a couple of dives for my buddy (who does wide-angle photography) and me (a mostly macro guy). We changed boats after a couple of days, and divemaster Graham was much more accommodating. Handling of camera gear by the Indonesian crew was unsatisfactory: my Nikonos V was flooded in the rinse tank after a dive on the second day: crew twisted the 20 mm lens about 90 degrees, exposing the o-ring, putting the camera out of commission for the trip. Buddy lost a 20 mm optical finder, which rough handling apparently loosened. Boat dives varied from poor to excellent but too many sites were mediocre. Two-tank morning boat trips left the resort between 8:30 and 9:00, but often did not return until 1:30 or 2:00. Toward the end a few divers (including me) opted to sit out the boat dives and enjoy the superb house reef.

MALAYSIA

Sipadan, the tiny island off Malaysian Borneo, was the scary site for a political kidnapping last year, so before considering this destination, get information from your government. Sipadan is crowded with new resorts... Why? Imagine 20 to 30 giant turtles on every dive, sharks, jacks, schooling barracuda, and the best shore diving anywhere. While there's an abundance of turtles year-round, counts are highest in July and August, although the reef in front

of the resorts is showing signs of distress from the crowds. . . . Layang Layang Resort is a relatively young resort in the Spratly Islands; because of their oil reserves, the islands are claimed by China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei, and Taiwan as well as Malaysia. Schooling hammerheads and pristine reefs lure divers, but nothing lives on the flat coral atoll except birds. . . . Hammerhead season is March and April, but the resort operates from March to October. . . .

Layang Layang

Layang Layang, April 2000, Michael Fox, Shinkawa, Tokyo, Japan. Vis: 70-90 ft. Water: 80 degrees. No deco diving. I went during "peak" hammerhead season but didn't see one. On many dives we were encouraged to drift in the blue water looking for hammerheads. Saw one large manta (5-6 m wide) and a few dogtooth tuna. Many turtles, schools of jacks, barracuda and titan triggerfish. Only a few sharks, (reef, whitetip and leopard). Dives nearly all wall dives starting about 30 feet (from there a sloping reef to the surface). Currents moderate to none. Three dives a day (9,11 and 12) and all within 10-20 minutes from dock. Cameras placed on a mat in the front of the boat. Rinse tank available on the dock. Rooms clean but walls are paper-thin. Cable TV but hot water only 5-7/7:30 pm and water pressure poor. Food was buffet but not much variety. Requested special meal

(grilled chicken) which was good but was asked not to "advertise" that I had a special meal because then everyone would ask for one! Small island (and Malaysian navy occupies a part of the island that is off limits to guests) but felt pretty safe. Coral in great condition and some walls have some neat undercuts. Without the hammerheads, diving was a little repetitive after 4 days. Some dive crew very helpful and pleasant while some were indifferent. Shore diving only with buddy but visibility in the lagoon was maybe 10 ft. Dive briefings done before getting on board and are pretty thorough. Briefly snorkeled with dolphins one afternoon. **(011-60-3-243-3166, Fax 011-60-3-243-3177)**

Mabul

Sea Ventures Dive Resort, April 2000, Ricky Tuss, Wilmington, DE.

The resort was a converted jack-up oil rig, About 300 yards off Mabul, Malaysia, an island about 5 miles North of Sipadan. The resort is like living on a large, stationary live aboard without the rocking. The rooms were adequate, but the food was great. There was plenty of room to stretch out and relax between dives. The staff was extremely friendly and efficient. The dive operation needs some professional help. The orientation was the worst that I have ever heard. It wouldn't take much to make it a first class operation, just a little attention to detail and some concern for safety. The house reef which is directly under the resort was fantastic. Multiple frog fish, leaf scorpion fish,

lion fish, stone fish, crocodile fish, nudibranch, mantis shrimp, moray eel, and much more. We ensured that we completed at least two house reef dives every day. With all of this to see on the house reef, the star attraction was Sipadan about a 20 minute boat ride away. We started each day two tank dive off Sipadan. On some dives, there were at least 30 different turtles spotted. The other marine life was just as prevalent... white tip sharks, unicorn fish, napoleon wrasse, bump head parrot fish, etc. The walls were spectacular with very healthy corals. The worst part of the trip were the Philippine pirates that took 20 hostages from Sipadan while we were there. Mabul had a much larger contingent of police than did Sipadan, so we were safer. We dived Sipadan the morning after the abduction, before we (the guests) had even know of the event. I couldn't understand why there were so few dive boats nor why the people on the island were staring at us. We did the last dives allowed before Sipadan was shut down for diving. We had two Malaysian gun boats guarding us the next night. The second worst part of the trip was the garbage. Plastic, plastic everywhere. I mentioned this to the resort dive operator and they just gave me a blank stare. We even had the boat driver through plastic in the water once to our horror. **(60 088-26-1669, 60 088-25-1669; Fax 60 088-25-1667)**

SMART/Sipadan-Mabul Resort, July 2000, Marty Dawson (mdawson@coral.org), San Ramon, CA. Vis: 20 to 50 Feet. Water: 83 to

86 F, calm. Dive your own profile. There were just 4 of us with the dive guide in water 50 ft. and above for muck diving. We were able to stay down over an hour each dive. Sipadan-Mabul Resort was wonderful. A little more upscale in accommodations from Sipadan Paradise Resort. The boats looked newer, and were faster and larger. No fresh water for cameras on boat, but rides were only 3-5 minutes. Cameras were set on the floor on a cushion. Boat crew handled cameras with care. Had E-6 processing at the resort. Had a "TV Room" where you could watch your video. The resort was only about 1/4 full (mostly Europeans), so the 4 in our group had a boat to ourselves. Our dive guide, Jasni, and boat driver and crewman, Malik and Remil, were wonderful. They carried our gear, set things up, and once they watched, knew our individual quirks.... who wanted help, who wanted their camera handed to them. Each time I came up from a dive, there was Malik's huge smile greeting me while he took my camera, then my BC/tank and fins. Jasni discovered we had just come from Sipadan seeing the big critters, and realized we wanted to see the small stuff. He was an awesome guide. We made 8 dives and every single dive he showed us many new creatures. We would never have spotted some without him. He never hurried us. Sadly, the coral's weren't in much better shape than on Sipadan. One favorite dive was underneath a rescued oil platform/dive resort called Sea Ventures, off Mabul. It is amazing how creatures find habitat in

junk...like the beautiful fish and sponges at Town Pier and Salt Pier in Bonaire. At the Wreck, under the pilings, we saw 2 huge yellow frogfish, one huge brown frogfish, fantastically colored huge purple and white nudibranchs, scads of crocodile fish, scorpionfish, herds of goatfish, and a flamboyant cuttlefish! We would like to go back and we'll stay at Sipadan-Mabul, do a couple of dives at Sipadan (15-20 minute boat ride) and spend the rest of the time finding the unbelievable and elusive muck critters! I was delighted to see SMART Divers has a "Reef Preservation Policy" that they require each diver to read and sign. It has rules like don't sit on, stand on or kick the corals, no gloves, don't drag your camera gear or gauges across the coral (things I saw done at Sipadan by certain groups of divers). The dive guide has the authority to warn you, and if it's determined you are doing it on purpose, keep you out of the water. I wonder if they really enforce these rules. I didn't get to see it in action.
(P.O. Box 14125; 88847; Kota Kinabalu, Sabah; Malaysia)

Setarawarni Tourism, January 2000, Rosel Rivera. Sipadan: as everyone knows, it's expensive, right? Wrong! We headed to Semporna to get a deal. We found Setarawarni Tourism that is in the lobby of the Seafest Inn. We shopped around and the resorts are pretty much the same price, depending on the bookings. North Borneo Dive and Sea Sports does day trips to Sipadan. There was also a guy calling himself uncle Chung running around

offering deals. It seems that North Borneo and Borneo Divers (people have been complaining to Borneo Divers thinking that North Borneo and Borneo Divers are the same).

Setarawarni Tourism has a lodge on Mabul as their base. It's mostly for the budget diver, more of no frills deal. The accommodation is basic. Sipadan is only 20 minutes from Mabul and the diving is great. We also dived around Mabul which is good also. The 3D/2N package w/equipment, 3 dives a day, accommodation was RM 650.00 (US\$175.00) Their equipment is new and their dive staff (all local) are excellent and professional. Best of all they only cater for a max of 8 divers. The web address is <http://asiaconnect.virtualave.net> and the e-mail is setarawarni@hotmail.com. The guy to talk to is Peter. (Phone/Fax 60 089-78-2366)

Sipadan-Mabul Resort, September/October 1999, Barry Lipman, Brookfield, CT. Mostly sunny, with rain once or twice a day. Water: Calm and flat. Currents from nothing to two knots, sometimes all in one dive and in two different directions. Beginners beware: there's also some downcurrents. Water around 80s, a 3 mm suit was the norm. Buddy diving enforced, but one can hire a dive-master as a buddy. No time restrictions, depth supposedly limited to 130 feet but no one checked. SMART Divers, AKA Sipadan Mabul Resort, offers a combination of world class muck diving and daily two or three tank trips to nearby Sipadan, where legions of white tip sharks are everywhere, with schooling barracudas and jacks frequently forming

tornados, tons of tropicals including all manner of triggers, parrots, and anthias, and of course, everywhere you look you find large turtles sleeping, swimming, eating, and even mating. While the diving on Sipadan can be quite exciting, often with rapid currents and plenty of Big Stuff, the diving on Mabul and Kapalai islands offer a good assortment of the little stuff: seahorses, banded and coral pipefish, to the Harlequin Ghost Pipefish (many, in different colors), to Giant Frogfish almost as large as soccer balls (three next to each other in one photo!), to Spike Fin and Twin Spot Gobies, to Blue Ribbon Eels, to the elusive and beautiful Mandarin Goby (plenty of 'em on Mabul and Kapalai). The only problem I had was film! My divemaster, Jasne, kept finding everything I asked for, so it was easy to empty two cameras on every dive. Bring twice as much film as you think you'll need and it still might not be enough. The staff outnumbers the guests and they simply can't do enough for you, and they do it pleasantly and with a smile. Leave whatever you want on your porch and they will get it down to the boats for you and later bring it back. No problem with expensive and delicate camera gear; the staff is quite reliable. The food was good and plentiful, with at least two choices, usually more, at every meal. The rooms are clean and have A/C and ceiling fans and private heads with effective demand hot water shower systems. There's no problem with insects on Mabul, but Sipadan can be another story... There is a tech

department, with Nitrox and Draeger rebreathers that offer a variety of tech courses including cavern and cave diving. Get one of the instructors to take you on a tour of the Turtle Tomb on Sipadan; it's quite a spiritual experience! Good E-6 processing daily.

Sipadan Water Village, July 2000, (Name held by request). Malaysia Underwater Photo competition in Mabul. Sipadan Water Village was wonderful. It's all built on stilts over the water so we had very few bugs and lots of sea breezes. The diving there is macro heaven and we had daily boat trips to Sipadan Island to dive with the turtles, barracudas and sharks. Another sponsor, Malaysia Airlines did a great job getting us all to and from the resorts and were very generous on overnight allowances. Kodak graciously supplied free film for the photo contest. Rich and Gail Todd did an exceptional job of running the contest and keeping all the contestants and their film in order. With everyone taking photos and having film developed daily this could have been a nightmare, but they pulled it off! Sea & Sea brought in camera housings and lenses for everyone to try to offer free instruction. They also sponsored many of the major prizes. The only negative on the trip was the terrible job done by IDE, which handled the travel arrangements. Just a few of the problems were itineraries were printed incorrectly so flight times didn't match the tickets, they lost checks sent in for payments, people who had committed months previously found that they had no seats on the flights

and had to go standby. A group making a side trip were denied airline boarding since their tickets were incorrectly made out and each person lost \$145. One person who paid full price for the trip noticed her air ticket had only tax marked on it! Turns out IDE had given her a contest winner's free ticket! Since this was a free ticket she also had no seat reserved for her on the flights! IDE is not professionally run. (60 89-75-5011, 60 89-75-1777, 60 019-853-9701; Fax 60 89-75-2997)

Sipadan Island

Abdillah's Sipadan Paradise Resort, July 2000, Suz and Steve Turek, Redding, CA. Vis: 50 to 75 Feet. Water: 80 to 83 F. We were very happy with the service, the staff made us feel very comfortable. However, we were really disappointed in the condition of the reefs. There was a large storm in 1999, which contributed to the condition, but we also witnessed large groups of divers sitting on the coral, kicking the coral, letting their camera equipment drag on the coral. We were also disappointed the dive masters/operator didn't give a thorough briefing when we arrived on the island, as to good reef practices. They told us not to break the coral, but nothing else. The divemasters also witnessed the divers doing these harmful things to the coral, but didn't say one thing to them. Unless something is done now to educate divers, the reefs of Sipadan will continue to suffer immensely. Need to have a fresh water tank on the boat for camera equipment. (60 88-22-1586,

60 88-23-8264, 60 88-22-3918, or 60 88-23-3562; Fax 60 88-23-5055)

Abdillah's Sipadan Paradise Resort, July 2000, Marty Dawson

(mdawson@coral.org), San Ramon, CA. Vis: 50 to 70 Feet. Water: 83 to 86 F, choppy currents. At first, we were asked to stay with the dive-master, but we were taking photos, and with fairly strong currents and poor vis, would lose the bunch. We were told 45 minute dives. Frustrating. I came back with 1200-1600 psi every dive. I made a huge mistake. I did not read my latest Chapbook before I left. I was so overwhelmed by the sad condition of the corals on my first dive, I nearly let it cast a pall on the rest of the diving. If I had known the corals were in such bad shape, I would have focused on the incredible schools of barracuda, jack, bumphead parrotfish; the fish are all still there. I wonder if there are as many as there used to be. No special setups on boats for cameras....boat rides only 5-10 minutes. We love looking at and photographing the small critters, but there were some strong currents. It was hard to stop to take the photo. We had plenty of dead coral to hold onto. The dead coral was on the sloping part of the reefs, the walls didn't look as bad. This resort (as were all the resorts) fairly empty. I'm sure it had to do with the recent kidnapping. Definite military presence on the island. Guys with guns over their shoulders kept hidden most of the time. Military boats patrolling the waters every day. Helicopters overhead every day. We felt safe. There

were only 25-30 divers. We were the only Americans. Four French divers, and 2 Swedish divers, but most of the guests were Japanese. Our first 2 days, we were crowded onto an old, small boat. The seas were rough, the currents strong, all of us had cameras, and we were trying to backroll in. It was very trying. Then we were put on one of their larger boats, the sea got better, and life was good again. They would tell us a certain time to be ready for the next dive. We would be there...and either be late or early. If the board said 6:00 am, that meant 6:00 am or 6:30 am. If we asked the guide and he said 2:30 pm, it was either 2:30 or 3:00. Not too pleasant when you're suited up and it's 86 degrees. We did a night dive from shore at Drop Off. The resort carried our tanks down the beach. This was a "buddy dive," no divemaster along. We had a marvelous dive on the wall, shallow, warm water, no current, scads of photo subjects. We were down 1 hour and 20 minutes. Oh My Gosh, were we in trouble....no one told us they only wanted us to do a 30 minute dive! They thought something had happened to us. We would never have broken the rules if we'd known (we sure would have asked if we could stay longer, though). We really did have a good, safe time and saw incredible creatures.

Borneo Divers, September 1999, Doris Larson (bobdoris@home.com)
Pleasant Hill, CA. Vis: 30 to 100 feet. Water: 83 degrees, calm and flat, choppy. Dive your own profile? Yes. The best shore dive in the world. We spent a few days on Mabul too. I

loved the frogfish and other weird critters. Probably my favorite trip; it was lots better than Papua, New Guinea. (011-60-88-222-226; Fax 011-60-88-221-550; e-mail bdivers@po.jaring.my; website www.jaring.my/bdivers)

Borneo Divers, December 1999, Pat and Kathy Day (daynight@erols.com), Woodstock, MD. Vis: 80 to 150 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 degrees. . The diving was unbelievable! Our shore dive was Drop Off Reef that was 10 feet from the gear room and another 10 feet into the water was the sheer drop off to 2000 feet! Boat dives were 5 minute maximum. The aquatic life was awesome; turtles everywhere, white tip shark, leopard shark, hammerhead, barracuda by the thousands, schools of huge bumphead parrot fish, lion fish, crocodile fish, nudibranchs, varieties of anemone fish, just more variety and numbers of fish than we have ever seen before. Soft and hard coral which was just beautiful. The resort was rustic; ask for a room w/ AC which is a great thing to have. Food and service was good and very friendly, except Mr. Fish at the photo shop whose demeanor was totally unfriendly, acted like we were all in his way on HIS island. A 5 star dive trip as the dives were totally free of supervision (although one dive master stopped a Japanese girl when he noticed she was going in for her 7th dive in about 6 hours!). Traveling half way around the world is rough. Sipadan Island is a must for serious divers! The travel agency Reef and Rainforest (Kristin) was great to

deal with as she's a diver and sets your trip up very nicely! (Ph: 011-60-88-222-226, Fax: 011-60-88-221-550, e-mail: bdivers@po.jaring.my, Website: www.jaring.my/bdivers)

Borneo Divers, May 2000, Nick Roger-Vasselin, Reno, NV. Visibility 100 feet plus. Water 86. Arrived about two weeks after the hostage taking. There had been dozens of cancellations at the resorts (we considered canceling but were glad we didn't) and the island was empty and we were able to experience one of the top dive destinations in the world without ever seeing another dive boat. Wall diving only and it is amazing. Beach diving is incredible, as the wall starts 30 feet from shore so night diving is a breeze. Schools of massive bumphead parrotfish sleep in the holes about 40 feet from shore. Definitely insist on an afternoon dive in neighboring Mabul, about 20 minutes away for an incredible muck dive where you will see lots of crocodile fish, razorfish, mandarin fish etc. Accommodations are good but basic. Some rooms have a/c, first come, first served. Food is nutritious and plentiful, though not gourmet. If you ask for a special meal, they will be more than happy to accommodate you. The only negative that we, along with the few others, found was the resident photopro Steve Fish and his wife, who treated everyone with arrogance and disdain as though they don't exist. We thought it rather strange since they are trying to sell their services, but during the whole week they not once said a word to

anyone. Other than that it is still an amazing dive destination.

MALDIVES

These 7000 low-lying coral islands in a 1200-mile chain southeast of India will be the first to disappear if global warming raises sea levels significantly. Warming has already taken a toll on the reefs, which suffered significant coral bleaching. About 200 of the islands are inhabited (although visitors have very little interaction with the 175,000 predominantly-Muslim residents), and several are devoted entirely to small resorts that offer average to excellent tropical reef diving with big fish action — if the resort has a knowledgeable staff that knows where and when to find it. However, the Maldives are best dived from live-aboards. . . . Given its large influx of European divers, this could be one of the most dived regions of the world. . . . Dive rules are strict for this part of the world. . . . Expect year-round daily temperatures of roughly 85 degrees and abundant rainfall, which is distributed evenly from May through December. . . .

Bandos Island Resort, June 2000, Phil and Linda Stasik (Stasik@quancon.com), Merritt Island, Florida. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 83-87° F. Total freedom to dive their excellent house reef however we chose. During boat dives, we were expected to stay with the

guide, but we generally (within safe limits) maxed out our computers. We loved this place! We were well informed by a good web site. We knew in advance that June is the “southwest monsoon” season, so we expected rain showers mixed with some sun and that’s what we got (Florida weather). The monsoon also means lower vis, but the plankton attracts the mantas. The expert (English, German, and Japanese-speaking) guides took us right to “Sunlight Thila” which is a reliable manta cleaning station. At least 10 big (up to 4 meters) mantas that circled and looped with us until our film and bottom time were expired. Bleaching (from abnormally high water temps in past couple of years) has affected the hard corals from about 30-50% depending on the location. You had to push away massive schools of beautiful fish to see the coral, though. The rainbow of healthy soft corals are thriving in the warm waters. We played with several friendly Napoleon wrasses and turtles on a couple of dives. 3 to 5 foot blacktip sharks were always prowling the house reef. A 4-foot spotted eagle ray who was headed for the bottom to feed almost bumped into us on our guided welcome dive. Lion fish everywhere! We saw every variety of beautiful Indian Ocean tropical fish here. The dive shop folks told us that only 20% of resort visitors are divers, so there is a lot for non-divers to do as well. Excellent exercise/sports complex. They operate the only hyperbaric chamber in the Maldives, and it is staffed with a full time German dive physician and