

stayed on the other side of town at the glitzy DAN Eilat Hotel. Designer Adam Tihany has created an eclectic postmodern fantasy featuring boomerang-shaped tables, flashy suspended sculptures, vegetation and live birds, and a lobby ceiling lit like the night sky. The decor is especially incongruous with the many ultra-Orthodox families on vacation. The rooms were very comfortable and the food okay; by law, Israeli hotels must serve Kosher food, so don't expect to mix meats and Dairy. We found better (and cheaper) food in outside restaurants. The hotel pool and beach were gorgeous. If you are in Eilat just to dive, you're better off staying on the side of town where the dive operations are located (near the Egyptian border). If you want more variety or have non-diving folks with you, the side near the Jordanian border is best. The weather was gorgeous, with crystal clear days and a mild breeze. (Ph: 972 8 637 0581; fax 972 8 637 1033; e-mail Siam2000@siam.co.il; website www.siam.co.il)

MALAYSIA

Sipadan, the tiny island off Malaysian Borneo, was the scary site for a political kidnapping in 1999, 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. . . .

Borneo (Malaysian)

Mabul

Kapalai Dive Resort, May 2000, Marion Fitzgerald, Seaside, CA. Vis: 35-70 ft. Water: 80-82 F. Dives logged: 500+. Dive restrictions: None if experienced. Resort is 15 minutes from Sipadan. Great for diving couples. Kapalai is romantic. Built on stilts over water. Sandspit is visible only at low tide. Otherwise it looks like you've in the middle of the ocean. Fantastic sunsets and sunrises. Can watch squid and lion fish from the wooden walkways. Cuttle fish, mandarin fish, crocodile fish and mantis shrimp right off the restaurant plus frog fish (huge!). Kapalai is more for macro. More sites with nudibranch than in Sipadan. Boats will take you to Mabul and beneath the oil rig housing turned scuba resort. Lots of fish under the rig including a huge moray bigger around than my waist! Boats will go

where divers want to go — very flexible. (Ph: (60-89) 765200 (Malaysia); fax (60-89) 763575/763563; e-mail info@sepilok.com ; website <http://sipadan-kapalai.com>)

Sipadan

Pulau Sipadan Resort, May 2000, Marion Fitzgerald, Seaside, CA. Vis: 30-80 ft. Water: 79-82 F. Dives logged: 500+. Dive restrictions: 50-55 minutes, no fish feeding or touching when boat diving, must start last night dive by 10 pm. Fourth visit to Sipadan. Still lots of turtles, bumpheads, jacks, garden eels, blue fusiliers, etc. Turtles still crawling up and laying eggs under tour huts at PSR. More resorts illegally built on Sipadan. The new resorts are not policing their areas well (lost of trash behind their resorts!) Undercover police on the island due to the incident, plus daily patrols of area by Malaysian Navy. Lunch and dinner excellent as usual but breakfast could get boring if you don't like chow mein, cereal or fried eggs. (Ph: (60-89) 765200 (Malaysia); fax (60-89) 763575/763563; e-mail info@sepilok.com ; website <http://sipadan-resort.com>)

Sipadan Water Village, September 2000, Name withheld. Vis: 30-80 ft. Water: 80-84 F. Dives logged: About 3,000. I competed in the video portion of the Underwater Malaysia Photo/Video Competition in Borneo. Divemasters were the greatest, showing you how to find strange invertebrates in the sand. Especially Yoshi and Alex! Competition directors

Richard and Gayle Todd really worked hard to give us our moneys worth from sponsors Sea & Sea and Kodak. Six of the nine judges canceled, leaving only Tom Cambell (helpful in video), Doug Perrine (very willing to help out, anytime with film review) and Al Hornsby (too busy with his teenage daughter — what was she doing there? — to be that helpful, although he gave two slide shows). I.D.E. Travel agent Nadav Joshua also had relatives there, and was not available to handle simple logistical questions. He acted like he was on vacation. Despite I.D.E.'s unhelpfulness, Sea & Sea representatives Jo and Bo made it worthwhile. I learned a lot. (Ph: 60-89-752996; fax 60-89-752997; e-mail swv@sipadan-village.com.my; website www.sipadan-village.com.my)

Borneo Divers, Sea Sports of Sabah, Pulau Sipadan, September 2001, William and Frances Ungerman (Elitecorps@aol.com) Santa Ana, CA. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 90 Feet. Water: 80 to 88 F, calm. Virtually one continuous 24

If you're about to spend a few grand on a dive trip overseas, you ought to spend a few bucks to make sure you've picked the right place. Become an Undercurrent Online member: www.undercurrent.org

hour trip. Flew from LAX to Taiwan, then to Kota Kinabalu, then another flight to Taewau (accent on both syllables) then a two-hour bus ride to Semorna, the port of embarkation to Sipadan. hour and 1/2 boat ride to the Island, a thirty-acre tropical island surrounded by azure seas with the mainland of Malaysia occasionally on the horizon. Three boat dives a day with six to eight divers comfortably seated in fast runabouts. All sites are three-four minutes. Water was like glass. Walls of tropics, 20-30 turtles every dive, whitetip reef sharks everywhere. Boiling schools of trevally ("Jacks" in the Caribbean) and Chevron barracuda. Creatures big and small at every point, behind every coral head and in the blue water. Heres bumphead parrotfish. Lionfish, crocodile fish, scorpion and stone fish. Visibility is less than great. The Drop Off is directly in front of Borneo Divers. At low tide you can wade out and kneel down on the crystalline sand edge and peer into the abyss, 3000 feet straight down. Your guide may take you into a tomb of innumerable turtles who wandered in and couldn't find there way out. There is a sign which advises that divers have also died inside. Guides will take you in if you represent that you have "overhead environment experience." Shore dives are unlimited. Tanks are Aluminum 80s with consistent 3000 psi fills. Ghost pipe fish, spade fish, crocodile fish right under the Borneo Divers Pier and Drop Off Cafe. Trips to Kapalai and Mabul (twenty minutes away by boat) arranged for superb macro opportunities: frog fish,

harlequin pipe fish, blue ribbon eels in groups. An amazing place. The accommodations are basic, perhaps "primitive." Four walls and a bed. Oppressively hot with only a ceiling fan. Silent mosquitoes, sand fleas rivaling the Bay Islands. The food is horrible. Eddie the "chef" does his best but half the guests lived on peanut butter and jelly for the week. Lamb and range chicken and gelatinous, glutinous, mucous-like fish delicacies and Malaysian curry meal after meal. Eddie makes up for the monolithic meal selection with impromptu magic shows. Turtles come on the beach to lay eggs. There is even a turtle release program where you can watch the little ones scurry for the protective sea. A host of predators line up to greet the hatchlings. Five other dive operations on the island, but we rarely saw other dive groups on our sites. Time is set on Borneo Divers time, one hour ahead to maximize your dive day. Night dives must be completed by 9 pm. Large sections of storm — caused coral destruction are evident but it hasn't affected the fish life. The day we headed back a storm brewed up and our boat got lost in the Bermuda Triangle mist. Then we ran out of gas, hit the reef twice and had to ask for directions from a passing boat and borrow gas. The bus blew two tires and the plane landed so hard in KL passengers let out a scream. Spent two nights in Kota Kinabalu, the capital of Sabah State, Borneo The hotel was the Shangri-La, Tanjun Aru and was fabulous. On Sipadan the Malaysian police Navy and Marines are out in force making sure there's no

more kidnapping tourists like last year. Complete E-6 processing, video lab by Steve Fish and every attempt to accommodate the U/W photo and videographer.

Layang Layang

Layang Layang Resort, March 2000, Robert Wright, Franklin Square, NY. Vis: 50-70 ft. Water: 70-75 F. Dives logged: 10000+. Dive restrictions enforced: 130. Too long a trip for 5 days. Fantastic sea life after monsoons. Wait until water clears to virtual unlimited visibility. No social life — fantastic staff was knowledgeable and dedicated — very accommodating. Limited shopping. Too hot to use pool in heat of day. Limited hot water (ever heard of solar panels?) Hardy and ample food. (Ph: 60-3-2162 2877 (Malaysia); fax 60-3-2162 2980; e-mail layang@pop.jaring.my; website www.layanglayang.com)

Layang Layang Resort, July 2001, Jan Murdock (diver@apex2000.net) Midland, TX. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 100 to 150 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm. One hour plane trip from Kota Kinabalu. The reefs are pristine and the staff is dedicated to preserving them. The marine life is quite varied and abundant. We never saw less than 3 sharks on each dive, hundreds of barracuda, jacks, etc. The highlight was a large tiger shark. It was the first one spotted since the resort opened approximately 10 years ago. We were at the resort 7 days and there was never more than 20 divers, part of the time there were less than 15. Because it's the only facility on

the island, we felt like it was our private island. Security was never an issue: there is a naval base at one end of the island. The rooms are more than adequate for such a remote location. There is a large free form fresh water pool, lovely dining facility, TVs in the rooms and very attentive staff. The food was somewhat boring, but we took a jar of peanut butter and other snacks that served us quite well. There was a lovely barbecue on Friday night. The dive masters couldn't have been more helpful, knowledgeable, or fun. They readily identify the marine life. They are quite helpful with gear. They felt the need to restrict diving to 45 minutes with a 5 minute safety stop. There is a \$100 USD fee imposed if you come up with an empty tank which would be almost impossible to do.

Layang Layang Resort, July 2001, Bob Puschinsky (puschinsky@aol.com) Seabrook, TX. Experience: 501- 000 dives. Vis: 75 to 100 Feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, calm. Like living at a country club complete with beautiful pool and pool side lounge facilities. First class air conditioned rooms with all the amenities. The food was excellent. Easy diving from 10-diver boats. March, April and maybe May are the times for hammerhead and other sharks. The water was too warm in July for these critters. We saw manta, turtles, razor fish, napoleon wrasse, dog tooth tuna, a few gray reef and white tip shark, lion fish, lots of very aggressive titan trigger fish, morays, huge frog fish, leaf fish, blotched ray (marble ray), huge clams, leopard shark, lots of small fish, schools of jacks and barracuda and

blue spot ray. Part of the adventure is a flight via a Russian airplane charter. Smooth trips, but, they flew at 10,500 feet on the way out and 9,500 feet on the way back, un-pressurized both ways. I feel this is a little high for divers. Our travel arrangements were made by Great Destinations-Sacramento (<http://www.skindiver.com>).

Pulau Payer

Langkawi, June 2001, Randy Sanecki (rsanecki@hotmail.com) Hainesville, IL. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 75 to 80 Feet. Water: 80 to 84 F, calm currents. Pulau Payar Marine Park supplies a large assortment of underwater species surrounded by beautiful corals gardens in warm clear water. An excellent day trip for the whole family with snorkeling and swimming facilities provided along with diving packages. Composed of three small islands, Pulau Payar Marine Park is about 60 Km from the Island of Penang, Malaysia. Visibility was about 70 to 85 feet at depths down to 65'. One day is too short. Bring lots of film.

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 serious 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. . . . 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. . . .

Nakatchafushi Resort, January 2001, Terry Umbach (Janzart@sunshine.net) Sechelt, BC. Vis: 60 to 120 Feet. Water: 29 Celsius, calm choppy currents, no currents. This was a return trip to the Maldives — last in 1992. Coral is definitely in bad shape however there are signs of regrowth. Lack of colorful coral has not affected the fish life! Snorkeling on the house reefs rivals the boat diving! Very expensive! Even with your own gear, the cost of renting just a single tank and weights for a shore dive is \$35US! A boat dive is the same plus \$14 for a seat plus \$1 for the crew to put your tank on the boat. Some dives were very rewarding (sharks and mantas) while others were very disappointing (basically diving over a dead coral garden which had less fish life than back at the house reef). Nakatchafushi is a superb resort (great staff, good food, very nice accommodation, beautiful setting, superb white sand beach with sun loungers, nice areas for swimming/wading and a great pool/deck/bar/restaurant area.