

had to offer). Dive masters John and Steve gave detailed briefings on reef topography, sea life and suggested photo settings. The dive staff accommodated the variety of diving styles and interests without fail. Sea creatures you might run across on your dives would be banded sea snakes, scorpion fish, frogfish, leaf fish, crocodile fish, pipefish, blue ribbon eels, stonefish, cleaner shrimp, porcelain crabs and seven varieties of anemone fish. We dove in 3mm wetsuits, which suited us fine but if you want to stay warmer the resort recommends 5mm.

Wakatobi, August 2003, William Deertz (wdeertz@centrin.net.id), Los Angeles, CA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 25 to 75 feet. Water: 78 to 81 F, calm. Fantastic resort in very remote area with outstanding diving. Their claim for the “world’s best house reef” is absolutely true. Several new bungalows added, eventually resort will be all bungalows as long house is converted to photo studio/training classrooms. Food was nothing short of spectacular especially when you consider the remoteness of the site.

Generally 3 boat dives per day to nearby sites, longest boat ride was maybe 40 minutes. Unlimited shore dives on the house reef remainder of day.

Recent air charter from Bali makes this a very easily reached destination in comfort. Overall the coral is in excellent, pristine condition. Minimal pelagics but then again you aren’t going here to see that sort of stuff, it’s the small critters that are in amazing abundance. Plenty of space in the newly air conditioned camera/charging room.

MALAYSIA

Sipadan, the tiny island off Malaysian Borneo, was the scary site for a political kidnapping of divers in 1999, so before considering this destination, get information from your government. Sipadan is crowded with new resorts. 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 Resort, October 2002, Capt. Lada Simek, Ossining, NY. Experience: 1,000+ dives.

Layang-Layang is an atoll about five miles in diameter, about 250 miles west of Borneo. As you fly in, you do not see an island, only a white, new, concrete runway with a small naval base at one end and a resort at the other. The distance from land, (coupled

with the fact that men with guns patrol the island every two hours), makes it most unlikely to be a target for terrorists. There is a gunboat tied up within a hundred feet of the dive boat. They do not permit access to the military base or night diving from shore, for security reasons. Every two hours men with guns patrol the island and radar on the base is operating all the time. The island advertises itself as a bird colony, but perhaps due to the feral cats running wild and construction equipment mining sand to expand the runway, we saw few. Malaria or other diseases are not a problem. The resort can handle up to 130 divers, although it averages 30 to 40. When we were there, they had three, yet there were still eight or more choices for breakfast and more for lunch and dinner. The rooms are modern, elegant, comfortable, and clean. The staff could not possibly be more helpful and cooperative. Food was Malaysian — a mix of Indian and Indonesian with Thai — simply wonderful, served buffet style, with fresh fruit on the table with every meal. Opportunity to overeat is a constant and major hazard. The resort closes November through February for the monsoon season. The water is safe to drink, there is no malaria, and water temperature is 84 F year round. The manager, Richard Yeo, had done an excellent job since his four years there. They wake you up at seven. You can have toast and coffee. The dive boat leaves at 8 a.m. The longest trip is 15 minutes. Dive times are 45 minutes to an hour. You get back, jump in a huge and gorgeous pool for a rinse, and have breakfast. Next boat goes out at 11

a.m., followed by lunch, followed by a 3 p.m. dive, snack, and dinner. The day seems long and relaxing, and you benefit by having a long interval between all dives. We ended up liking this arrangement very much. Shore diving is limited but available. Dive boats are steel 22-foot catamarans, extremely stable and follow the group with the gentle current, if any. Dive briefings were detailed with diagrams on the wall before each departure. You can expect to see every critter one would expect. There were turtles and sharks on every dive, at least five species of lionfish, nudibranchs, soft corals — everything healthy, and the fish approachable. Even after extensive diving in the Caribbean, Mexico, Bahamas, and California, I was simply awed by the marine world at this atoll. Whatever you wish to consider — coral, fish, macro — Lyang-Lyang is a quantum level higher. Visibility was over 100 feet and sometimes way over 100 feet. The most amazing, however, was the variety of marine life. I would conservatively estimate it to be 50% to 100% greater than the healthiest reef in the Caribbean. Even after a dozen dives, I could find a dozen fish I had not seen before. Malaysian Airline was efficient, service excellent, food good, and the plane was more comfortable than most. It made the 23-hour trip back and the longer trip to tolerable. The flights were only 25% to 30% full. (www.layanglayang.com)

Mabul

Kapalai, September 2002, Michelle Ginsburg, Tampa, FL. Experience:

More than 1,000 dives. Vis: 20 to 150 feet. Water: 79 to 82 F, calm. Kapalai is a beautiful water village, built on piers with no island. It offers great macro opportunities. Boat dives around the resort at neighboring Mabul Island yielded frogfish, coral gobies, pygmy lionfish, nudibranchs, mimic blue ring octopus, tiny cuttlefish, ghost pipefish, seahorses, and many other exotic critters. Shore dives were great for mating mandarins — fabulous night dives. Three boat dives a day — unlimited shore diving was available. If bigger fish were your passion, you could take a 15 minute boat ride, spend the entire day at Sipadan where endless turtles, barracuda, sharks, and jack schools could be seen. Accommodations and service at Kapalai were outstanding and far surpassed the crowded, buggy conditions on Sipadan. Food was tasty, fresh, and plentiful. Dive boats were in good condition, the dive crew helpful and professional. Divemasters were alert to your experience level and treated you accordingly. Those that needed hand holding got it, and advanced divers were allowed to dive their own profiles. This was our second visit, and we stayed a month this time. Enthusiastic dive guides good at finding requested subjects. All cameras handled with care, good rinse tanks provided, no E-6 processing. Between my buddy and me, we took over 9,500 digital slide images. (<http://sipadan-kapalai.com>)

Palau Kapalia, Kapalia, March 2003, Bill Journey, Roseville, MN. Dives logged: 855. Vis: 20 to 30 feet. Water: 79 to 80 F. Wow! Incredible resort on stilts, surrounded by ocean.

Great Chinese-style food, always a cool breeze, muck-style diving. We were comfortable in lycra skins while most Europeans and Asians had 3 mm wetsuits. Vis was not great, but the variety and abundance of macro critters was amazing. Every dive crocodile fish, many nudibranchs, cleaner shrimps, frogfish, pipefish, anemone fish, various sea squirts, and sea stars. Each dive displayed some new macro critter for me, mandarin fish, leaf fish, stone fish, two spot goby, fire dartfish, corals pipefish, mantis shrimp, ghost shrimp, razorfish, banded boggy, jawfish, spider crab, sea cukes, giant frogfish, sea horses.

Sipadan-Mabul Resort, Smart Divers, January 2003, Glenn Davis, Pittsburg, CA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 100 feet. Water: 81 to 86 F, calm, choppy. This resort is on Mabul, a 20-minute ride on a fast boat from Sipadan. Mabul is larger than Sipadan, and the resorts have better services and fewer insects that bite. Dive boats take guests daily to Sipadan for two dives, then lunch, then one muck dive around Mabul Island or Kapalai Island (also close). Service was excellent; they cart the tanks and gear to the boat and back. You just rinse and hang your gear at the end of the dive day. Diving was great! Corals weren't as large as I hoped but were quite lush and healthy. Nice sponges, fans, and soft corals. Some nice hard corals. Impressive vertical, deep-to-shallow walls around Sipadan. Good muck diving in Mabul. All the dives were excellent around Sipadan; the muck diving took some getting used to but was interesting once one got an eye for it. Vis

was 20 to 30 in the muck dive and 60 to 100+ for the wall dives. My companion had bad stomach issues during this part of our trip (we dove the Maldives the week before), and I also had mild tummy trouble that cleared up the day after we left this resort. Not sure if it was the water or the food, but there was something there that wasn't right. Didn't seem to trouble other people, or they didn't mention it. Sipadan is overrun with dive operators — it is a small island, and there is a lot of trash in the waters and on the beaches. There are five dive resorts on Sipadan, three on Mabul (one is an ugly, recycled off-shore oil drilling platform), and one water village on Kapalai Island (which is really just a sand bar). The locals really don't care for the islands at all; this was mentioned on another *Undercurrent* post I read before my trip. Malaysia is a third world country with grinding poverty that is apparent away from the resorts. It reminded me of Honduras. The islands of Mabul, Sipadan, and Kapalai could be kept pristine without much trouble. Malaysia purports to be an ecotourist destination, and it would be nice if the government put some effort into taking care of these resources. We visited the rainforest nature areas of Sepilok and Sakau, preserves within trashy regions. We went to Singapore. What a difference! That city/state/country is amazingly clean, pristine and prosperous. No wonder Malaysia hates Singapore. Photography: No camera table, rinse tank, or fresh water for cameras on dive boat — just a saltwater wet towel to cover equipment during lunch/surface interval. Lounge chair pad was laid

across stern of boat deck for cameras. At the resort the camera tank's water wasn't changed daily like the gear rinse tanks. After two days I noticed insect larva swimming around in camera tank and had to ask several times that the water be changed. They don't have water plumbed to it like the other rinse tanks and have to string a hose from the restaurant's foot washing faucet area. Scubazoo, a worldwide British concession service, did good E6 processing and have a light table for guests. (www.sipadan-mabul.com.my)

Pulau Payar

Langawaki Coral, August 2003, Mel McCombie, New Haven, CT, and Harris Friedberg. Number of dives: about 1400 each. The island of Pulau Payar about an hour and a half from Penang is described as a “marine park, truly a natural paradise.” If you include huge floating rafts of garbage, pollution, sewage, gross overcrowding, and over fishing as part of your definition of a natural paradise, you'll love it. We did not. Vis was awful owing to the pollution, the water was warm (about 84 degrees F), and the few animals left were largely algaevores like sea urchins. We did see a number of fat potato cod, but that was about it. The poor dive guides were overworked (ours told us he did five dives that day) and the largely Asian divers seemed happy to drape themselves over the struggling corals to take pictures. This was one of those experiences that belied the saying that “a bad day diving beats a good day working.” I'd rather have worked.

Sipadan Island

Borneo Divers, October 2002, Capt. Lada Simek, Ossining, NY.

Experience: Instructor, age 64, 1,000+ dives, 20+ tropical dive trips. Sipadan is a sandy island about a quarter of a mile in diameter, 25 miles east of Borneo. To get here, you fly to Kuola Lampur, the capital (23 hours), then fly to Tawau in Borneo (six hours), then an hour by bus, and finally an hour by boat. There are five resorts with no more permitted. We dove with Borneo Divers. Our accommodations were spartan — the plywood furniture could have been made by a high school woodworking class. There was no air conditioning but a ceiling fan. The bathroom was absolutely disgusting, cleaned daily but with brown stains from an upstairs leak, peeling paint, and water in the shower that did not drain but filled the whole room. The manager said that they were going to tear the building down and replace it, but it had been this way for six months. The food was buffet style and excellent, being a mix of Indonesian, Indian, and Malay. There was always fresh fruit and vegetables. Feral cats are allowed to wander in the dining room. Undoubtedly they kill many young turtles also. Water is distilled, so it is safe to drink. Malaria and Dengue fever are not a problem. Insects are about on par with most tropical destinations. There is a photo shop and film processing. You can step out of your room and find a 50-pound, seven-foot lizard in front of your door. Turtle walks were available to nine people each night. The diving is superb. Visibility at that time was on the low side (60 to 90 feet). The wall begins in

four feet of water, 50 feet in front of the resort. It is honeycombed with small holes in which you can often see a sleeping turtle or huge (60 pound?) bumphead parrot fish. Turtles are so ubiquitous that we saw as many as four at a time, and twice they bumped into me. All life is quite approachable, water temperature around 84, but keep your skin on. There are stinging critters in the water. The cavern with turtle skeletons is in front of the resort and interesting to see. Sharks on every dive. Divers get suited up in the dive shop, then walk with their tanks on across the beach to the boats. This is less than comfortable, but the boat trips are minutes long, and it was tolerable. My most memorable dive was finning through a densely packed, house-size school of barracuda to find an 18-foot long whale shark on the other side. While the airport checks are pretty good, there was no baggage check at the dock to board the boat. Any of the dozen employees brought to the island daily or with the supply boats could have carried weapons. There was one day when a police boat visited and stayed for an afternoon, but that is all the observable security measures we could see. Borneo Divers is next door to the resort that was raided by terrorists some time ago.

(www.borneodivers.info)

Palau Sipadan Resort, March 2003, Bill Jurney, Roseville, MN.

Dives logged: 855. Vis: 40 to 60 feet. Water: 79 to 81 F. Dive restrictions enforced: 45 min. Sipadan Island may not be what it used to be, but it is still world class diving. Resort was outstanding and served good Chinese-style food.

Shore dive 30 feet in front was outstanding. All diving is on walls, sometimes changing currents means you should be experienced. All dives had many turtles, sharks, many crinoids, titan triggerfish, varieties of nudibranches, usually saw a frogfish and anemone fish. Most often went to Barracuda Point for all the action of the immense schools of jacks and maybe the schooling barracuda.

Sipadan Water Village, March 2003, Barbara & Larry Murphy, Atlanta, GA. Vis: 40-120 ft. Water: 82 F. Large dive resort constructed on pilings and connected by boardwalks to the tiny island of Mabul in Borneo's Celebes Sea. The resort is larger, more luxurious and has superior food to nearby Kapalai. By living on the water we always had a wonderful breeze and were not bothered by insects as were guests at another resort on Mabul. The dive program is efficiently organized around 3 boat dives daily which includes 1 to Sipadan, 17 minutes away in calm seas, 45 in choppy conditions. There is unlimited shore diving. Each diver is assigned a locker for fins, masks, and weight belts. A separate locked building provides hanging space for BCs and regulators on a numbered peg system which insures their being placed on the correct boat. We were happy to rent for \$5 daily 1 of 4 camera rooms across from the dive shop since the 10 minute walk to and from our bungalow with 2 heavy housed cameras would have been a chore. The resort is Japanese owned and most of its clients hail from Japan. Diving around Mabul is easy whether on shal-

low patch reefs, sea grass beds or on its best site, the oil platform which was moved to the area and now serves as a budget dive hotel. Depths range from 20'-80'. The area is home to many interesting juvenile and small critters: thorny seahorses, brown and green robust ghost pipefish, giant pipefish, flatworms, nudibrachs, squid, leaffish, mantis shrimp, cuttlefish, twin-spot gobies, mandarin fish, dragonets and juvenile batfish. After 20 years of diving, we finally spotted our first blue ringed octopus. The most exciting site remains the oil platform for its collection of yellow and black giant frogfish. One dive we found 6 sitting on an abandoned metal shelf next to a pile of junk which housed Elvis, surely the largest green moray in existence. Every Sipadan dive featured large numbers of turtles and reef white tips for which the island is renowned. Schooling barracuda were not around as in 2002, but were replaced by squadrons of pyramid butterfly fish cascading down the walls. On one exceptional dive we were surrounded by a moving wall comprised of hundreds of jacks. Though the reef tops here are rubble due to storms and turtle over-grazing, there still remain some nice hard corals below 40' at most sites. It was obvious after 6 days into an 11 day stay that the resort had run out of dive sites. They did not know the many interesting places that Kapalai frequents. Only after much probing did we learn that the resort will take groups to dive the mangroves outside of Semporna, the jumping off spot from the mainland. On a return we would split the time between Kapalai and Sipadan Water

Village for more varied diving.
(www.sipadan-village.com.my)

Tioman

Berjaya Tioman Beach Resort (PADI), July 2003, Thomas Lippert (thomas.lippert@bluewin.ch), Brugg, AG, Switzerland. Vis: 5-15 m. Enforced: 50 min and max depth around 25 m. This was my first time of diving in Malaysia (Tioman) and I thought it would be comparable with diving I did before in Indonesia. The diving was disappointing for me (just a number I was 23 days there a did only 11 dives, because I was always hoping that it will improve). Dive times were limited to around 50 min, and the deepest dive I did was 26 m. The dive operation is a PADI dive center, and you have to do a check out dive a small island (Rengis) which is just 200 m away from the beach (11 m deep), where you can see some corals and fish (I saw there the only turtle in all dives) and where all snorkelers go. After this checkout dive you can go on the 2 tank dive trips with the boat (if they have 4-5 divers, which was always the case). The boat is quite slow, and it takes 1-2h to get to the dive sites, which are mainly small islands (e.g., Chebeh, Tiger Reef, etc., small sandwich type lunch is supplied, but bring your drinking water). On the dive trips all divers go together (including divers which just received the certification), and the diving is, as said above limited in depth and time. The reefs look in general quite healthy (but I saw on all dives crown of stars, up to 50 on one dive), with soft and hard coral, swim troughs etc. The dis-

appointing part was the lack of fish, especially slightly larger fish (to see a Napoleon of 1.5 m was considered to be a treat), but also small critters were not really there. The visibility was also quite bad, and with groups including beginners a good cause for trouble. The dive shop was run quite efficient, but it catered mainly to the beginners (taught by the shop), with not too much effort for advanced divers and better dive sites (I heard that there is wreck near by, but they never go there — 30 m dive). The dive guides were relaxed and easy going, while the dive shop boss tries to enforce a no touch policy (even on rocks). There are supposedly better dive sites — but we could never go there as long as I was there, due to the wind and current. The resort is quite nice. I had a bungalow type room close to the beach. The rooms were kept clean and functional (including small refrigerator and TV, phone, etc.). The beach had deck chairs with shadow (the same at the pool where you can get towels and drinks). The dive shop is at one end of the resort, meaning that I had about 500 m from my room, (but there is a shuttle service). The resort includes all kind activities but I used mainly the new spa, which was excellent (several types of massage, beauty treatments, wellness). The food was also good, due to the variety. I had only booked with breakfast and used for lunch and dinner the one of the 5-6? restaurants (from Chinese, to grill, western style, and buffet), which allowed a nice variation of food (and many paid for it). There is also a quite good variety on wines.
(www.berjayaresorts.com.my/tioman-beach/info.html)