

DIVING DERAWAN

by Morris Gregory

It took three plane journeys followed by a lengthy boat ride down the river Berau to get to Derawan, a small island off the coast of Borneo. We had been lured by the dive travel brochures promise of Mantas, Barracuda and a wealth of macro life and were about to put that to the test.

The check out dive with Eddie, our dive guide, was at Turtle Bay. It was a gentle drift with plenty to see including a small shoal of batfish, humphead wrasse, lionfish, clams, nudibranchs and lots more. Near the end we came across five turtles, a female being mated by one of the males while the other three were harassing the couple eager to muscle in on the act themselves. I hadn't had time to get my camera gear ready for this dive so had to be content with watching the spectacle unfold before me while cursing the missed photo opportunity through my regulator. Not a bad start to the diving.

The first full day was at sites around Derawan Island, with visits to Sangalaki and Kakaban islands planned for the following days. We began at Lighthouse 1, another gentle drift starting on a plateau at 5m which then shelved down to 30m. We gradually made our way back up the slope throughout the dive and saw a variety of multi coloured nudibranchs, blennies, tunicates, wrasse, batfish and a couple of green turtles. On a later dive at this site Eddie found a blue ribbon eel that he teased out of its burrow with a long piece of wire, not a practice I was very happy with, but we did get to appreciate the full beauty of the eel with it's small bright blue and yellow head attached to a long blue sinuous body. The next dive was on an Unidentified Shipwreck and had very similar life to the first, with a couple of large turtles hiding under



the small wreck and several blennies poking out of the burrows they shared with tiny shrimps in a symbiotic relationship. It was the last dive of the day at Tutturuga that proved to be the most eventful. As before it started as a pleasant drift but only ten minutes later the current picked up considerably, almost tearing our masks off and making it difficult for me to keep a firm grip on my camera gear. Eventually it was impossible for the group of seven to keep together so we split into two smaller ones and ours found a long rope, attached to a jetty, to grab hold of. We edged our

way along it hoping to find some calmer water but to no avail so inflated a delayed smb and surfaced. The others weren't too far away and Eddie had found some slack water so we regrouped and finished the dive in much calmer conditions. The highlight of this more relaxed part of the dive was seeing a turtle on a small coral mount that served as a cleaning station. It was content to pose totally unconcerned while I finned around it taking photos from various angles until I ran out of film.

As with many dive locations there is a Coral Garden and a Shark



Apart from the turtle laying eggs, which was taken on my wife Sally's Motormarine II with built in flash, the photos were all taken with a Sigma 50mm macro lens on a Nikon 801S in a Subal housing. They were lit with twin Ikelite strobes, an Ai and an MV on a combination of Ikelite and ultralight arms. Film was Fujichrome 100 iso Sensia II. I don't keep a detailed record of exposures but as they are all macro or close up shots they are likely to have been between 1/60th or 1/125 at f11 or f16.

Point. The former was appropriately named having a host of mostly hard and some soft corals with numerous anemones scattered amongst them, each with its attendant clown fish that, with their usual belligerent attitude, would attack my twin strobes making the task of taking photos that much harder. Unfortunately we didn't see any sharks at Shark Point but near the beginning of the dive, at 28m, we came across a creature that was one

of the reasons for travelling so far, a tiny pygmy sea horse extremely well camouflaged on a fan of gorgonian coral. I got just two shots of it before another diver joined the scene and sent up a cloud of sand with their fins. Moving on to a nearby coral fan we found a long nosed hawkfish and then it was time to start ascending the slope stopping off to look at the blue and orange tunicates and a crocodilefish before returning to the boat.

Lighthouse 2 didn't look very promising. Visibility was only a metre or so with a murky, milky appearance. We descended to the bottom at 15m and began to explore, being greeted with a vast forest of whip corals that parted before us in the eerie, ethereal atmosphere provided by the low visibility. On many of corals were crinoids of various colours, with feathery arms opened out greedily gathering in the passing plankton. One or two even left their corals and did a balletic dance across to another one. An hour later the dive was over but not before I had managed to get a photo of a dumpling squid as we did our safety stop. Eddie apologised for the poor dive and was puzzled by our beaming smiles and animated chatter as we agreed how fantastic it had been.

At Shark Cave, a wall dive to 37m, we did see a couple of sharks, both white tips that swam gracefully away as we approached. However, it was the purple fire gobies that Eddie had brought us to see and we did find a few of these beautiful little fish before ascending past some very large gorgonian fans which we scoured for pygmy seahorses but without any success. Getting back to the shelf at around 10m Eddie found us an Orang Utan crab on a bubble anemone. It looked like a small brown blob to me but closer inspection revealed the shape of a crab with very hairy legs. I took a couple of pictures but was much more interested in the nearby ghost shrimp that looked far more photogenic.

Derawan Jetty was the location for our night dives. It turned out to be an excellent site with plenty of fish and other life to see. There can sometimes be quite a current running through it but both times we did the dive it was relatively slack making it easy to slowly fin around taking in the macro life. Apart from numerous lionfish out hunting, and using our torch beams to do so, the life



included free swimming moray eels, hermit crabs, scorpion fish nudibranchs and plenty of soft corals. A brief glimpse of a mandarin fish, no bigger than my thumbnail but spectacularly colourful rounded things off.

Sangalaki

The first trip to the nearby islands was to Sangalaki where we did two dives from Manta Point, both drifting with, and sometimes finning against, strong currents. On the first we went down a slope to 15m and very shortly after saw our first mantas of the trip. Six of them cruised by near the surface but the plankton in the water reduced the visibility and with it the photo opportunities. On the second dive we didn't see any mantas but did get close to a couple of white tip reef sharks and one black tip. Other sights included garden eels, that invariably disappeared into their burrows just as I got within photographing distance, several moray eels and a lone cuttlefish.

On our second trip to Sangalaki we snorkelled rather than dived with the mantas. This brought us much closer to them and was a more involving experience as they cruised by effortlessly while we did our best to try and keep up or just lay in the water waiting for the next

monster to pass by. We landed on Sangalaki at a small fishing village and after lunch watched as 2,500 baby turtles were simultaneously released into the sea shortly followed by a sea eagle swooping down to take it's pick of them.

Kakaban

The other island visited was Kakaban where there are often large shoals of barracuda to be seen. At Barracuda Point there were very strong currents which it was necessary to fin diagonally across, past some dead coral, and then hug the bottom at 35m, while looking out for a rope to grab hold of. This provided a good stopping off point for watching the barracuda which were there in large numbers as were the trevallies and also several white tips. The dive was completed by finning round the corner into calmer, shallower waters, where there are coral gardens hosting a variety of macro life including leaf fish and frog fish both spotted for us as usual by Eddie.

For me, the best feature of Kakaban is the marine lake that takes up most of the interior of the island and is host to stingless jellyfish. A short, but not easy, trek through woodland, over jagged rocks and across a very unsteady rope bridge gets you to the lakeside.

As respite from fighting the currents around the island it was very relaxing to snorkel with the jellyfish and investigate the myriad life amongst the roots of the mangrove trees. There were all sorts of juvenile fish, brightly coloured sponges and even brighter nudibranchs together with numerous weird looking creatures that I couldn't identify. A fascinating place with loads of photographic potential.

Conclusion

Overall the diving was very good and at times excellent. El Nino had taken it's toll on the corals but there aren't many places that can offer such a wide variety of marine life, from the tiny pygmy seahorse and mandarin fish through to turtles, barracuda, sharks and manta rays. If you're interested in wrecks then you'll be sadly disappointed but for photographers the main problem is deciding whether to use a wide angle for the mantas or a macro for the smaller stuff

All of the diving is guided, which I found very irritating at times, wanting to spend time on my photography, but Eddie did find several small creatures which I'm sure I would certainly have missed otherwise

The dive centre, Derawan Dive Resort, was professionally run and the small wooden boats were fine for the relatively short journeys but had no head on them so it was a case of peeing in the wetsuit or crossing your legs for a couple of hours if you were caught short.

On land there is very little to do, it's very much a diving island, but we did have the privilege one evening of seeing a green turtle coming ashore and laying her eggs.

It may have been a long way to go but the effort was certainly rewarded.

Morris Gregory



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