

Rig Diving in Borneo

by Mark Webster

I first became serious about underwater photography when working offshore as a commercial diver in the late 1970's. In those days being a reliable photographer was a valuable skill that ensured I stayed in regular work, as dive time is very expensive if the images fail to come out and need to be taken again. Life as a commercial diver can be rough on occasions and I can remember some pretty unpleasant living conditions particularly on jack up rigs in various locations. So when the opportunity arose to visit a unique dive operation on Mabul Island, which is based on a former jack up rig, I was more than fascinated by the prospect!

The name of Sipadan island has been in the top ten destinations for divers ever since Jacques Cousteau declared it one of the richest reef systems on the planet. I first heard of it more than thirty years ago from a Malaysian friend who used to camp and dive on the island before it became a must do dive travel destination. Despite his encouragement to visit in those early days work and life conspired to prevent me and it has taken until

now to see if the area lived up to its reputation as a stunning location for marine life and underwater photography.

In the 1980's Sipadan was developed very quickly as a resort destination and it was not long before this tiny island had five busy dive centres operating year round. Large numbers of divers visited the island during the following years and it was no surprise that conservationists soon began warning that the reef structures could not survive the numbers of visitors. These warnings were eventually heeded by the Malaysian government and they arbitrarily closed all the dive centres and demolished the resorts at the end of 2004. Now there is only a visitor centre and an army base on the island to cater for the comfort and protection of the strictly limited numbers of divers who are permitted to visit each day. Sipadan was declared a National Park by the Malaysian government on 1 October 2009 and longer term the aim is to have the island and reefs declared a UNESCO World Heritage site.

To reach Seaventures rig resort you must first find your way to Tawau



The Seaventures rig resort – perhaps unique amongst dive resorts. Nikon D200, 18-200mm zoom, programme mode.

The lift platform on the Seaventures rig makes diving the house reef and boarding the dive boats effortless. Olympus 3050 programme mode.

airport in Sabah Borneo where you are collected and driven to the port of Semporna, which takes between 40-60 minutes. A fast boat transfer from Semporna is next and as we approached Mabul island I strained to get my first glimpse of the rig.



When it came the rig itself was no surprise but the location within sight of a lush tropical island certainly was. My fellow travellers seemed to think nothing of it but all my previous arrivals at rigs like this had been certainly been somewhat different. The deck of the rig stands perhaps 50-60ft above the water and there is a lift platform to raise you from water level to the main deck, a very neat solution which was also going to prove very useful for the diving to come.

Sipadan island is visible from the resort and is only a twenty minute boat ride away. A maximum of 120 divers per day are now allowed to visit Sipadan and each dive centre must apply for permits for their own guests in advance which are then confirmed on a daily basis. So you are not guaranteed to have a permit each day as this will depend on the total number of divers in the resorts and the efficiency of your own resort in applying for the permits.

On arrival each day at Sipadan you have to register with the Marine Park office who will check your name and passport number against the permits for the day. The system is effective and, whilst I am not sure if there were 120 divers at the time of my visits, it did not feel crowded on the island between dives and we rarely saw divers from other groups in the water.

Seaventures have the permit system well organised and most of the guests during my stay were able to visit Sipadan as often as they wished and I managed to total four days permits in a seven day stay. Whilst many resorts will spend the whole day at Sipadan the Seaventures approach is a little different and works well. The boats leave at 06:00 and you can be diving by 06:30 which means that although light levels are lower you will have the best chance of seeing schooling bump head parrot fish and sleepy turtles along the reef. Breakfast follows on the island followed by two further dives with a second visit to the island for a coffee and snack in between. You are generally back at the rig by 12:30 for lunch and then have the whole afternoon available for dives from the rig or another boat excursion to Mabul or Kapalai.

The rig itself was converted from a drilling platform to accommodation only in the mid 1980's and so was well suited to its current role when the new owners acquired it and moved it to Mabul to open in 1999. What used to be the drill deck is now the dining area and bar at one end and a large wet area at the other for the diving equipment, showers etc. There are single, twin, double and family rooms to choose from and whilst the accommodation does not compare with that of the neighbouring



Bearded scorpion fish are everywhere under the Seaventures rig particularly amongst the steel debris and artificial reef structures. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Subtronic Mini's, ISO200 f16 1/80.

Velvet ghost pipefish are a feature of the Seaventures dive site along with ornate ghost pipe fish. Having seen them once you can return as often as you need to perfect the shot. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, 2X teleconverter, Subtronic Mini's, ISO200 f16 1/20.



luxurious resorts it does not intend to. The accommodation is basic but comfortable and is pitched at those divers would want both a lower price point and the opportunity to dive as much as possible. This will make the resort attractive to photographers, although during my visit there was not a dedicated camera room, but I was shown an area that is planned for this function. Despite preparing the cameras and charging flash guns in your room, it is no great hardship and once your equipment is on the dive deck there is plenty of space for it and a large dedicated camera rinse tank.

The staff look after you very well here and will load all you kit onto the boats each day at the appropriate time if your name is on the dive board. If you want to dive from the rig at any time just advise the deck staff, kit up and step on the lift which takes you down into the water (knee depth for me) and you just step in. When you finish the dive the lift operator submerges the platform for you and brings you back to the main deck....very easy diving! The house reef below the rig is excellent and also has several artificial structures, which attract additional marine life, and a muck dive which in addition to the usual suspects boasts rarities like pygmy seahorses, velvet ghost pipefish, flamboyant cuttlefish and orang-utan crabs. The rig attracts

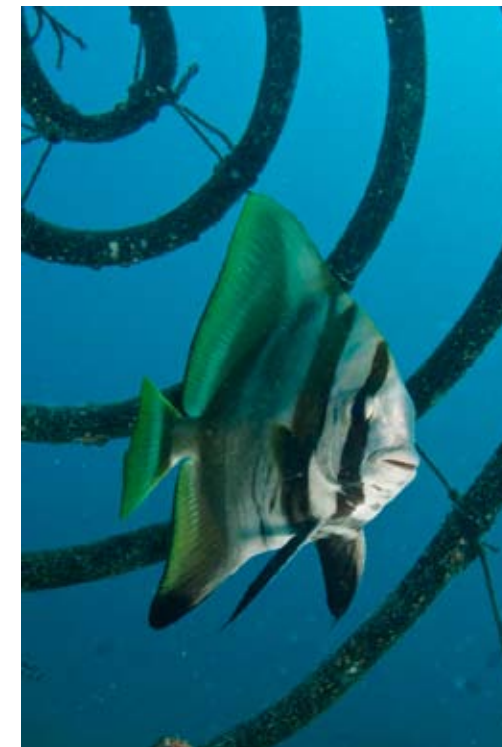


Hairy squat lobsters are regularly found on barrel sponges and make an excellent macro subject. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, f18 1/125.

many schools of fish including a resident shoal of juvenile barracuda, bait fish, sardines and jacks. There are a series of down lines below the surface to take you to the seabed and a horizontal line at 6m to provide a hang off during your safety stop. Depths vary between 14-18m and there is plenty of small fish and macro life on the legs to keep you amused during ascent.

Sipadan itself is of course famous for wall diving and big fish encounters. I had heard a lot about

the resident spiralling large schools of barracuda and big eye trevally and both these stars can be seen on a daily basis. It is a buzz getting close to and amongst a big school of fish and both these species will offer a photographic challenge as their silver scales reflect flash light very effectively. On almost every dive you can guarantee that you will encounter reef sharks, green and hawksbill turtles (in such abundance that you may find yourself suffering from turtle fatigue!), barracuda, big eye trevally, bump head parrot



Batfish are commonly seen on the dive under the Seaventures rig where they favour the artificial structures which can provide some interesting negative space. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Subtronic Mini's, ISO200 f11 1/80.

fish dog tooth tuna and numerous other schooling fish. Your guide will make a point of instructing you to keep looking out into the blue for hammerheads, mantas and whale sharks, although their possible presence will depend on the season.

The walls themselves are decorated with a wide variety of soft and hard corals, black corals, sea fans and barrel and tube sponges with plenty of small reef fish life.

You should also watch out for some of the stroppiest titan trigger fish I have encountered who seem to enjoy attacking for no good reason and can give you a nasty surprise when your eye is glued to the viewfinder! Currents can be strong at certain points around the island during the day, but even if your dive starts with current there are plenty of shelter points along the reef to stop and take images and you will eventually progress far enough around the reef to be sheltered from the current.

There are thirteen named dive sites around the island some with enticing names like whitetip avenue, turtle patch and lobster lair but many are quite similar and you will end up visiting more than one during a dive if the current is strong. At the end of your dive you can move up in to the shallows and fringing reef and explore some of the smaller life which is often overlooked in pursuit of the big name denizens. In some areas the corals are stunning whilst in others there is evidence of storm and diver damage but even these areas are worth exploring as they offer ideal habitat for scorpion fish, stone fish, ribbon eels, jaw fish and dozens of shrimp



Soft corals are abundant all along the Sipadan walls and make a perfect wide angle composition. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Subtronic Mini's, ISO200 f11 1/60.

and goby lairs.

Although Sipadan is seen as the primary destination for this area both Mabul and Kapalai offer a contrasting marine habitat which is not to be missed. Whilst Sipadan is all about sheer walls, coral reefs and big fish action the diving around Mabul and Kapalai also offers some splendid reef and muck diving and the chance to see



If you want to see the bump head parrot fish schooling at Sipadan then you must dive early in the day when they congregate to be cleaned in the shallows. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Subtronic Mini's, ISO400 f16 1/80

some of the weirder denizens of the Celebes Sea.

There are around fifteen named dive sites around Mabul which vary between gently sloping reefs, shallow walls and sand and rubble areas. There are also a number of artificial reef structures located on the north side of the island which have well established marine eco systems. So you can first enjoy a reef dive on the south side where I saw all the anticipated players including garden

eels, carpet anemones with clown fish, exotic nudibranchs and even a rare mosaic octopus. Then follow this with a dive on the artificial structures at say Froggies Lair and you can see a selection of amazingly camouflaged frog fish, leaf scorpion fish, octopus, squid and cuttlefish. The structures also attract schools of jacks, sweetlips, fusiliers, bat fish and within them some very large grouper. Generally the visibility around Mabul is not normally as clear as the walls



The reefs at Kapalai are a good spot to look for unusual species like these two clown frog fish perched on top of a coral head. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Isetecnic Mini's, ISO200 f11 1/30.

of Sipadan but the variety of marine life particularly at the macro level certainly makes up for this.

From a distance the resort on Kapalai seems to be standing in open ocean. Erosion here has reduced the small island to little more than a sand bar on top of the Litigan Reef area and so is fully submerged at most states of the tide. The resort stands on stilts a few feet above the water and is a testament to the normally very calm seas here. There are twenty eight named dive sites here around

the island once again either on the gently sloping reef or on a selection of artificial reef structures and fishing boat wrecks located on sand flats on the south side of the island. The structures are covered in invertebrate life and attract a wide variety of fish species. Get closer and you will find several different species of colourful nudibranchs feeding on the tunicates and hydroids together with hawk fish and blennies and frog fish when you least expect it. There are a wide variety of corals on the reef slopes



Tunicates and hydroids cover the artificial reef structures at Kapalai and make an attractive still life image. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, 2X teleconverter, Subtronic Mini's, ISO200 f16 1/30.

with numerous colonial sea whips which are often home to ornate ghost pipe fish. If you dive on the south side do not miss the chance to explore under the resort jetty at the end of the dive where you will find schools of sweetlips and bat fish plus the chance to spot blue ringed octopus and flamboyant cuttlefish.

So was it worth the wait to finally get to dive this top ten ranked dive location? I think that the answer is a resounding yes as the combination of dive sites and habitats offers a

terrific variety of marine life and scenic opportunities which is not found at many locations around the globe. The Seaventures operation offers the serious photographer the chance to maximise dive time on a very productive site which encourages you to revisit subjects with a different lens or technique in mind to perfect the final image. If you make the long haul to this destination be sure to set aside some time for other attractions within Malaysia which has a lot to offer above the water as well.

On a closing note a few comments about security in this area. During my trip the UK and US Foreign Office websites had updated their area warnings and Malaysia and more specifically the areas around Sipadan, Mabul and Kapalai were included on the list as potential trouble spots. My own experience here was that the Malaysian government and the resorts seem to be focussed on the potential threat. There is a police and naval presence on Mabul and the army base on Sipadan itself. During my visit I saw regular naval patrols and also navy helicopters making regular flights over the area. Tourism and particularly diving tourism is a very important source of income for this area and the Malaysian government seem intent on ensuring that visitors feel safe and secure. There has not been an incident here involving tourists here since the kidnapping from Sipadan in 2000. I talked about this to other visiting divers from Europe, the USA and Asia and none seemed to be concerned or felt uncomfortable. I suppose that if we followed the warnings and advice slavishly we would not travel to many of the outstanding dive locations around the globe. However, you must of course make your own decisions when considering diving overseas although if you were to exclude this part of Malaysia you will certainly be

www.uwpmag.com

missing out on some excellent diving and the opportunity to enjoy the other cultural and wildlife attractions that this country has on offer.

Mark Webster
www.photec.co.uk



Mark Webster stayed with Seaventures on the dive platform at Mabul Island
www.seaventuresdive.com

Getting there:

A number of airlines fly to Kuala Lumpur direct from London or via one of the European hubs. From KL you fly to Tawau in Sabah on the island of Borneo and transfer by road to the port of Semporna. The final leg is a speed

boat transfer to your resort which takes around 45 minutes.

Mark Webster flew with KLM and Malaysian airlines. KLM sell a 23kg sports package for diving equipment at EU 40 each way whilst Malaysian Airlines offer a free 10kg excess for diving equipment.

When to Go:

This area can be dived throughout the year. The rainy season is between November and February.

Money:

The local currency is the Malaysian Ringit but most resorts will accept

Stirling, Euros and US Dollars as well as credit cards.

Health:

Some areas of Malaysia have a malaria and dengue fever risk. Mabul island is a low risk area but you should consult your doctor or MASTA

www.masta-travel-health.com

Further Information:

Malaysian Tourist Board

www.tourism.gov.my

Underwater Photography Workshops with Mark Webster 2010

A diver is underwater, holding a large camera, next to a large, flat fish. The background is blue water.

Red Sea 1-8 October 2010
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