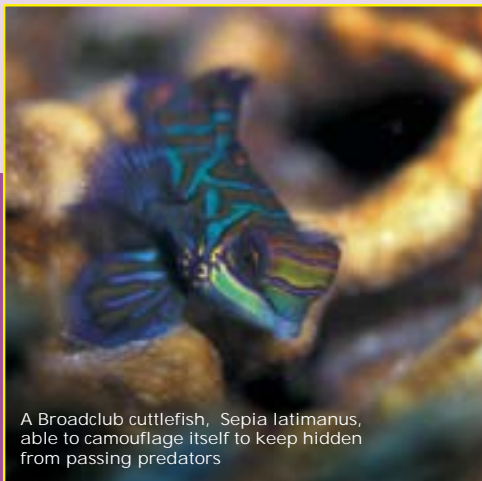


**ESPECIALLY FOR YOU...** Sabah Deputy Chief Minister (centre) Datuk Yahya Hussin seems to say as he presents a memento to his host, Sultan and Yang Di Pertuan of Brunei, Sultan Paduka Seri Baginda Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Mu'zzaddin Waddaulah Ibni Al-Marhum Sultan Haji Omar Ali Saifuddien Sa'adul Khairi Waddien (right).

The latter was in Brunei to present an invitation from the Sabah Head of State Tun Ahmadshah Abdullah to the Sultan for a State visit.

Yahya, who is also the Minister of Agriculture and Food Industry, was accompanied by State Secretary, Datuk Sukarti Wakiman, Malaysian High Commissioner to Brunei Encik Ghaffar Madin.



A Broadclub cuttlefish, *Sepia latimanus*, able to camouflage itself to keep hidden from passing predators



The Mandarin fish is decorated with striking neon-coloured lines and dots



A Blue-spotted ribbontail ray, clearly identified by its bright blue spots, is often seen in shallow sandy areas in search of food.

# Mabul revisited

**M**ARINA Aman Sham, an independent writer and nature lover once again delve into the beauty of Mabul, an island off the Tawau coast in Sabah and still wax eloquent. She finds this island fascinating and charming to say the least.

"Mabul has its charm. An oval-shaped island of a modest 20 hectares, visitors drawn by its aquatic characteristics can choose to stay in one of the four upmarket resorts; with a choice of being on land, or over shallow water perched on stilts, or in one of the six back-to-basics backpacker lodgings hidden amongst village homes, giving tourists a close-up view of community life on Mabul," she shares.

Thirteen dive sites are dotted around Mabul at depths of between 5 and 20 metres, with a combination of different traits - coral reefs, sandy sea beds, jetties and somewhat controversial artificial reefs.

Controversial in that, although artificial reefs are able to serve as important spawning and nursery grounds, they do not provide a solution for the decline of the health of natural reefs. Any way, divers who take the time to look down at the nooks and crannies that define the reefs and at the sandy beds are the ones who emerge with tales of spotting a cuttlefish mesmerizing its prey through its hypnotic display of colours before it lashes out to capture it.

"Dive sites around Mabul offer different experiences, from the swaying figures of hundreds of garden eels including the Spotted garden eel (*Heteroconger hassi*) and Spaghetti garden eel (*Gorgasia maculate*) that defines Eel Garden, to the commonly found Blue-spotted ribbontail ray (*Taeniura lymma*) and two species of Pygmy seahorses (*Hippocampus bargibanti* and *Hippocampus denise*) highly sought after for photographic opportunity in Stingray City," Marina continues.

It is no wonder that great fascination for Mabul exists worldwide. On any given day, one can find people from all walks of life traipsing the jetties of Mabul. By virtue of their passion for the underwater world, they are indeed nature lovers; most making the trip for the sole purpose of diving.

Others, too, make the trip she says, adding that recently a group of 44 environmentally mindful Scottish students visited Sabah, which included a 10-day stint around Semporna. Participating in both beach and underwater clean-ups in the region, including on Mabul, their enthusiasm towards conservation was indeed refreshing.

"This is a group who came from the other side of the world to lend a hand in improving Sabah's environment," she says adding that they must be applauded, and their actions made an example.

"With the number of divers to Mabul on an increase, one must step back and ask, are we mindful of what we are doing?" she questions.

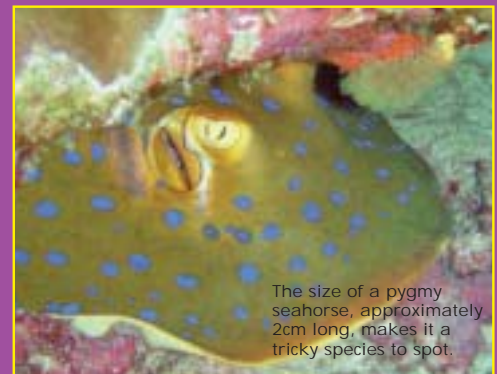
As stated during a talk given to the students by WWF's Daniel Doughty, 'Through the continuous, collaborative management of Mabul and its surrounding areas by relevant parties, particularly those in the dive industry, Mabul can potentially be, and sustain itself, as a world class dive site'.

For the uninitiated Marina recommends that they search for Mabul on Google and the widely used search engine will come up with scores of pages for one to explore.

"Mabul Island is featured extensively, not only on the Internet, but in numerous magazines targeting divers of all status, from recreational to professional, even potential divers."

Magazines include *ScubaDiver* and *Asian Diver*, whose writings delve into intimate details of the underwater world - the spawning ritual of the multi-coloured mandarin fish; the symbiotic relationship between goby and shrimp where the shrimp is warned of approaching danger by the goby, and, in turn, provides the goby with a home; and other comparably interesting stories.

It must be remembered however that the homes of the gobies and the shrimps need protection from the harsher reality of tourism. Divers are advised to be mindful and respect their underwater hosts, without which, they will be diving in clear uninhabited blue water and sand.-Photographs courtesy of ©WWF-Malaysia/Nina Ho



The size of a pygmy seahorse, approximately 2cm long, makes it a tricky species to spot.



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