

# Semporna and its surrounding islands

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ground.

The first sight of Pulau Bohey Dulang and Pulau Bodgaya took my breath away. The sheer cliffs and lush tropical jungle of Bohey Dulang, Bodgaya (often called by its abbreviation Gaya), and the Tetangan islands make for a striking contrast to the uninspiring flat and coconut-covered islands and islets around them. These imposing figures are part of the rim of an ancient volcanic crater, now inundated and encircled by coral reefs. The cliff-fringed Bodgaya and Bohey Dulang are majestic with their peaks shooting vertically up from the sea, some reaching a towering 300 metre.

Together with travelling companion Otto, our first stop in exploring the Semporna Islands was Bohey Dulang. The island is home to the now dilapidated Japanese-owned pearl farm, which virtually closed off the island to visitors until 1992 when the company suddenly closed shop. The Kaya Pearl Co., is now home to a Sabah Park research/visitors centre as well as an army and security outpost. There is little to see here except for the Sabah Park's office, which serves as an exhibit room, store room and meeting room. For the more adventurous traveller, there's a three-hour climb to Bohey Dulang's highest peak for a breathtaking view of the surrounding islands.

Separated from Bohey Dulang by just a few metres at one end, Bodgaya features a more hospitable terrain for a community of Bajau Laut. It's thickly covered jungle slope made it the ideal obstacle course for the world famous Sabah Eco- Challenge Race in 2000.

20 minutes boat ride away is Pulau Sibuan, home to two families of Bajau Laut and an army base. With the current tight security imposed on traveling around Semporna's water, make sure the person organising the trip has made a formal request to the relevant authority before you set off. We stopped by Sibuan for a security check with the resident army personnel. Once the formalities were over, we became their guests and spent an interesting afternoon sharing lunch and stories. The local Bajau Laut inhabitants generously supplied coconuts.

Otto and I had earlier planned on diving at one of our island destinations. Refreshed after our lunch we decided to explore Sibuan's underwater world. Otto explains that Sibuan's gentle sandy slope has made it a favourite among snorkelers and first-time divers. The marine life is not as rich as those found in Sipadan but the massive barrel sponges and plate corals towering the floor bed is a magnificent sight nonetheless.

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Semporna's islands are valuable for the sheer magnitude of marine biodiversity they support. Islands located in the Sulabayan area were identified in the National Eco-Tourism Plan as a potential marine eco-tourism site thus prompting the Semporna Islands Project. Conducted by the Ministry of Tourism, Environment, Science and Technology it is in collaboration with Sabah Parks, WWF Malaysia, UK's Marine Conservation Society and Belgium's Nature Link. It is designed to help foster understanding of the importance of marine conservation on the islands and is carried through displays, exhibitions and workshop among schoolteachers, local community and relevant officials.

Plans are also underway to gazette eight islands, Bohey Dulang, Bodgaya, Tetagan, Sebangkat, Selakan, Maiga, Sibuan and Mantabuan, to be known as Semporna Islands Park. Well-developed and extensive coral reefs are present surrounding the islands and these supports a high diversity of fishes, soft corals, sponges, anemones, echinoderms, mollusks and other species. Diversity is greater than that of Pulau Sipadan and is reported to be comparable to that of Australia's Great Barrier Reef.

Some of the islands are uninhabited, while others have long been occupied by fishing villages and small farms. The banned practice of blast fishing have removed the larger more conspicuous fish and caused damage to coral around these islands.

The 350 square km area will be managed by Sabah Parks where communities would be allowed to remain provided they conduct sustainable fishing. Such move has been met with some resistance from local inhabitants who want to maintain rights to their traditional fishing

