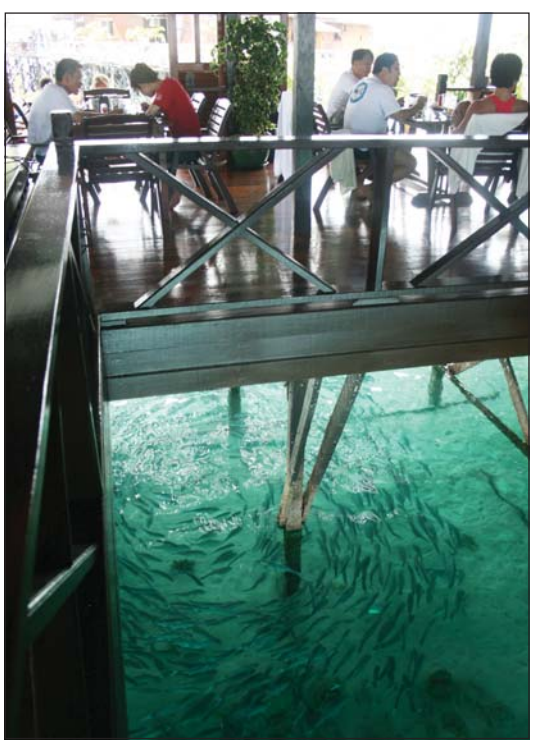
Islands of Sempor



Half of the popular attractions in Malaysia are related to sea and islands. Besides the tropical weather, white sandy beaches and crystal clear seawater, the islands of Sabah are rich in marine biodiversity. The sea of Semporna lies inside the Coral Triangle, "The Amazon of the Seas" that covers six countries, and Malaysia (North and East of Sabah) is one of them. With an area equal in size to half of the United States, Coral Triangle is home to 75% of coral species, more than half of the world's reefs, 3,000 species of reef fish, and seven species of marine turtle.

Last year there were about 40,337 tourists came to dive in Sabah. You can bet most of them dive in one of the islands below.

POM POM ISLAND

Pom Pom is 45 minutes by boat from Semporna. This island has almost everything what a tourist expects for a dream holiday on island. The chalets are built with traditional local methods which make them blend in nicely with the ambiance of the island. What I really like about Pom-Pom is its environmental-friendly approaches to operate the resort. For example, they have a turtle hatchery to protect the turtle eggs, a reverse osmosis re-cycling rainwater system to cut down pollution from importing of water, and the waste water and residual waste is re-cycled and used for irrigation and fertilization for their gardens. As tourists are getting more conservation-conscious, green resort like Pom Pom should Resort should be a role model for other island resorts to follow.

MATAKING ISLAND

Mataking is well-known as a romance island even for newlyweds from Italy. In fact Mataking is a 2-in-1 island, with 20 acres of land divided between two islands, namely Mataking Kecil and Mataking Besar. During low tide, you can walk to other island on long stretch of sandy beach that connects two islands. For divers, you can post a letter in "Underwater Post Office", the first of its kind in Malaysia. The mailbox is on Mataking 1, an old 40-foot wooden cargo ship sank by Mataking in March 2006, to create an artificial reef. For non-divers, you may laze on the beach or try activities such as Jamu Spa, batik painting and kayaking. You also can join night trekking to see fireflies, turtles and the rare coconut crab.

KAPALAI ISLAND

Kapalai is a magic island, as the island will "disappear" during high tide. Kapalai was once a beautiful island 200 years ago, but due to land erosion, now what remains is a narrow sandy bar only visible during low tide. This makes its wooden accommodation looks like a floating resort. The chalets are built on high wooden stilts on the sand and connected by boardwalk. At night you can see marine lives such as lionfish, sting ray and even turtle active under the walkways. There is an opening on the deck of the restaurant. You can see schools of fish passing under the viewing hole. On Kapalai, you feel like you are living in the middle of the ocean, not just an island.

MABUL ISLAND

Mabul is one of the best muck-diving sites in the world. When I saw Mabul, I was amazed by abundant of corals growing so near to the shore. This is quite impossible when the island has over 2,000 of residents. Thanks to the tour operators who engage the local community on conservation, the marine ecology of this island is recovering from its history of fish bombing. Just drop off from the end of the jetty for a dive or snorkelling, you would see variety of macro life such as flamboyant cuttlefish, blue-ringed octopus, spike-fin gobies and frogfish. Mabul is near to Sipadan, an ideal stop-over for divers who want to dive in Sipadan. The resorts and dive operators on Mabul have been trying to involve the locals in beach and underwater clean-ups, coral transplanting and environmental education. One of them even pays the villagers to collect the garbage, which otherwise would end up in the sea. For some guesthouses, I hope they could be more eco-friendly, for example, I do not feel comfortable to see my bath water goes directly into the sea.

SIPADAN ISLAND

As one of the top 10 dive sites in the world, Sipadan does not need more introduction. Sipadan is the only oceanic island of Malaysia. This mushroom-shape island was formed by living corals growing on top of an extinct undersea volcano, which rises 600M from the ocean floor. There a total of 12 dive sites in Sipadan, and the most recommended dive sites are the Barracuda Point, South Point, Hanging Garden and Turtle Cavern. Most divers can spot many green and hawksbill turtles, sharks and school of large fishes in a single dive.

However, please save Sipadan (best) for the last. I feel uneasy when divers, who just earn their cert, say, "Now I want to go to Sipadan!" The water current in Sipadan is a bit strong. We do not want those clumsy new divers, who cannot control their buoyancy totally, kick and crush the fragile corals by accident. And please stop chasing and touching the sea turtles!

That is a right decision that the government asked all the dive resorts moved out of Sipadan in year 2004, to preserve the island's pristine state. The number of divers allowed to dive in Sipadan is also limited to 120 persons a day. Although the tourism ministry is constantly pressured by the tour operators to increase the daily quota, I am glad that the government's determination to protect the marine ecosystem does not change.

TUN SAKARAN MARINE PARK

In photo exhibition of Sabah, if you see those beautiful photos of primitive stilt houses over

turquoise sea water, usu
boat in foreground, ver
the islands of Tun Saka
Also known as the Semp
consists of eight isla
Bodgaya, Sebangkat,
Sibuan, Maiga, Church
and is the largest marin

With a size of 350 sq
concentration of coral
though this park is no
TSMP has more biodiv
and habitats. Total sp
includes 544 species
species of hard coral, 7
species sponge, 265 s
species echinoderms. I
the Park as pristine as it
it as a dive paradise.

CURRENT ISSUES

People always take t
think that it has inexhau
take any pollution. Mos
there are far less fishe
water of Semporna is lis
meaning that our cora
alarming rate. Besides
and destructive fishin
factors.

POLLUTION