

SEMPORNA:

Nature's secret



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 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 Tetagan 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.

To visit each and every island would take more time than what was available to us. As we made our way for a brief stop in Semporna, my

tour guide pointed out the other islands. Pulau Mantabuan, approximately 3km long and 1.5km wide is another island of the Bodgaya Group. It is one of the few uninhabited islands and a familiar destination for scuba divers. Pulau Maiga is a popular stopover for fishermen seeking shelter when the sea gets rough. The island has several long stretches of white sandy beaches fringed by coconut trees. Its nutrient-rich warm water supports prolific coral growths and teeming shoals of fishes.

Semporna's violent past is evident in the peninsula's bold mountainous topography, which continues offshore. Immediately to the west of the Bodgaya group are several high islands, and beyond them, the larger islands of Silawa, Bait, Pebabag, Puno-Puno, and the largest of all, mountainous Pulau Timbun Mata which extends offshore along nearly the entire northern coast of the Semporna Peninsula. Gunung Sirongal (486 m), perched near the eastern tip of the island, is the highest offshore point in the district and serves as an essential navigational landmark.

Along the southern edge of the peninsula is a chain of several small high islands, Menampilik, Nusa Tengah, and Si Amil. Interspersed with these are more numerous low islands of stranded coral limestone. The largest and most important is Pulau Bum Bum, also the most densely populated in the district. There is a bus service that goes around the island and the fare is 50 cents whichever way you go. Scattered around the northern part of the island are seaweed farms, grown on long lines floating in the

green, shallow waters. Seaweed is an important source of income for local farmers who harvest, dry and sell them to international markets for human consumption, animal feed, pharmaceutical products, fertilizers and as industrial raw material for the production of a wide range of products. Visiting these seaweed farms is possible as long as one is prepared to haggle it out with small boat owners. They may charge as much as RM100 (just to take you there), so if you want your money's worth go during high tide when the engines are less likely to get stuck in the sandy bottom or tangled up in the seaweed.

To the south is Pulau Omodal which prior to the establishment of Semporna in 1887, served as a staging port and maritime link in the network of regional trade that extended from central Sulu to the eastern Borneo coast. Slaves were a major trading commodity and moved from Sulu through Omodal to Bulungan in eastern Kalimantan, then an important regional slave market.

The island is home to old hand-carved grave markers; their origin still debated and is either Chinese or Japanese depending on whom you ask. It's best to have a guide if you plan on exploring the island. Omodals are the least enthusiastic bunch when it comes to having foreign visitors at their doorstep. It's customary to ask permission from local villagers before you start clicking away with your camera.

We arrived back in Semporna late in the afternoon and decided to visit Bukit Tengkorak (Skull Hill), the town's only concession to tourism on the mainland. Taxis offer the quickest and most convenient mode of transportation. The five kilometer drive cost RM10 each way. If you worry about them leaving as you do the 20 minute hike up the hill, pay the fare after the trip is over.

Just 15 minutes drive from Semporna town, Bukit Tengkorak, also known as Bukit Kabongan (Hood Hill) was gazetted as a historical site by the Sabah Museum in 2000. The dug up steps have long been eaten away by the rain so the steep track up may be muddy and slippery. A second part of the climb is wooden steps that give way to observation decks. From the highest viewing point it is possible to see Pulau Bum Bum in its mass coconut-covered entirety.

Covering an area of 150 acres, this long extinct volcano served as a major pottery-making site in Southeast Asia between 4340-4350 BC. Amazingly, more than half of the pottery and obsidian artifacts date back to about 1200-900 BC, traced back to Talasea, Melanesia some 3,500 km away.

Semporna's charm is not just in its underwater life but also its wildlife and local culture. Semporna, its islands and the elusive Bajau Laut community have managed to retain some of their secrets, with that unmistakable sense mysticism and charm.



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