

Mention the oceanic island of Pulau Sipadan to any diver and chances are they have heard of its name. Situated off the east coast of Malaysian Borneo, the island was made famous by Jacques Cousteau in one of his voyages. After producing the documentary "Ghost of The Sea Turtles" in 1983, he reported, "I have seen other places like Sipadan, 45 years ago, but now no more. Now we have found an untouched piece of art." Rising from the ocean in the heart of the Indo-Pacific basin, the biodiversity of this extinct volcano island has one of the richest Jacques has seen.

A stone's throw away from this paradise, associated with the name of Sipadan, lie two other islands of Pulau Mabul and Pulau Kapalai. Both islands might not have any 600 metres walls that drop to the abyss nor endless walls of corals but from the numerous visits I have made, I have found both islands exploding with small critters.

Small Treasures, Big Rewards



The yields from all my dives on either island always excited me. Unlike Sipadan where turtles, barracudas, jacks, trevallies, bumphead parrotfishes, sharks and the occasional manta rays are abundant. With fantastic corals squeezed into every nook and cranny on the walls, diving off Mabul and Kapalai is like a participation in treasure hunts on every dive.

Slimy sea slugs, yucks?

While you chance yourself in catching a glimpse of the big fishes or even the elusive hammerhead sharks that patrol the depths around Sipadan island, muck-diving or as it is called while diving in Mabul and Kapalai requires a very sharp pair of eyes. A great advantage if you have an eagle-eyed dive guide who can help you along. The rewards can range from psychedelic nudibranchs that resembled a hybrid-human character in an undersea exploration television series in the 80's. While one nudibranch looks out of this world, displaying their vivid colours that signal they are poisonous, others are pure cannibals. The Gymnodorididae species, for example, preys on other nudibranchs for food. Even attacking their meals that are bigger than themselves. Majority of the nudibranchs (By definition, it is a shell-less, marine snail of the suborder Nudibranchia, having external, often branched respiratory appendages on the back and sides) feed on soft corals, tunicates and hydroids. Using the toxins from the soft corals they ingested as a defence mechanism to ward off predators that might find this slow moving sea slug an easy meal.



Underwater frogs

Then there are the ugly but adorable frogfishes or anglerfishes (Antennariidae family). These fishes are bottom dwellers that seldom move and can stay in a location for days. With "hands" to help them stay rooted to the reef, they sit and wait for their next meal to unknowingly swim by or by baiting them with their anglers – that look like shrimps or worms in most cases. Dangling their "bait" in front of their mouth and jiggling it to make it look real. When their unsuspecting meal happens to approach, a fast gulp from the frogfish and the show is all over. Once, I had the opportunity to observe a frogfish with its partially eaten meal still hanging out of its mouth. Obviously, the frogfish ate more than it could swallow.

Patience sometimes can reward the viewer - to be able to perform a feat by swallowing another fish, they periodically have to stretch their jaws by yawning. Watching them doing their exercise will be one scene where I would guess you wished you could do the same. But do not move off yet, frogfishes tend to yawn three to four times in succession. So if you missed their first performance, linger on and watch a re-run. Most likely on their third yawn, you can see how wide they can open their mouths - Talk about bigmouths.

