

# dive for a living

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+ WHEN WE HEAR THE EXPRESSION 'DIVING FOR A LIVING', MOST OF US IMAGINE SCUBA INSTRUCTORS OR DIVEMASTERS WORKING IN AN EXOTIC ISLAND PARADISE SURROUNDED BY SHINING CYAN SEAS AND SNOW-WHITE SANDY BEACHES. BUT ON A RECENT FILMING ASSIGNMENT OFF THE EAST COAST OF SABAH, MALAYSIAN BORNEO, IN AN AREA LITTLE KNOWN TO TOURISM, I HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO DIVE WITH SOME EXTRAORDINARY PEOPLE TO WHOM THE TERM DIVING FOR A LIVING MEANS EXACTLY THAT.

**THE DIVE CREW** I met Maadil, a young Bajau(\*) many years ago when he was still working as a boatman in one of the former resorts on world-renowned Sipadan Island. Over the years it was good to see him progress to become a PADI certified Divemaster who worked for various diving operators in the region. Only recently I had the chance to sit down and talk to him about his childhood. Maadil grew up in a village on one of the islands not far from the Malaysia-Philippines border, where he learned to fish and harvest various sea products. This is also where he started his diving career as a 'compressor diver'.

wrecked fiberglass boat, which were combined with some rubber straps to secure his feet. "Much more thrust and also much longer lasting than the fins we used to cut from plywood" he explained to me with all the confidence of a seasoned dive equipment salesman. Then he showed me his oval shaped single-lens full frame mask which gave him the nostalgic look of a 1950s diving pioneer. For 'buoyancy control' he used a standard scuba diving weightbelt he'd been given by Maadil to replace his old way of using a rope with parts of scrap

In all the years I've been living in Sabah, I'd heard many tales of local compressor divers, also sometimes called hookah divers, using homemade gear to dive to unbelievable depths salvaging wrecks, collecting sea cucumbers and seahorses, or simply to hunt fish. Though I was sceptical about the substance of most of these stories, my doubts were silenced when I was invited by Maadil to find out what 'diving for a living' really means.

**HOMEMADE GEAR** It was a cloudy morning when I arrived at his village. Maadil and various members of his large family welcomed me with tea and homemade pastries. After introducing me to the village elders, I became acquainted to Julbasa, his younger brother-in-law, and Pakcik Pulau ('Uncle Island') the last remaining active compressor diver in the family. Julbasa decided it was time to show me his 'state-of-the-art' dive gear.

This started with his latest addition, a pair of 'jet fins' cut out from the remains of a



metal tied to it. "Essential and of great importance", he added, "are the woollen cap and a skin suit to prevent heat loss and a pair of (gardener) gloves to protect from the sharp spines of caught fish and lobsters". Other important tools for the job are a homemade *panah* (speargun) and a mesh net to collect speared fish and other valuable items such as shells and sea cucumbers. He'd made a 'helmet' from an old automobile tire with a Toshiba underwater torch strapped to it to allow him to hunt for night active creatures. How amazing!

However, most impressive to me was the

“ HE'D MADE A 'HELMET' FROM AN OLD AUTOMOBILE TIRE WITH A TOSHIBA UNDERWATER TORCH STRAPPED TO IT TO ALLOW HIM TO HUNT FOR NIGHT ACTIVE CREATURES. ”

an emergency situation, he just would need to pull the hose three times to signal Pakcik Pulau to pull him straight up to the surface. A thought which stressed me even more, considering the extensive nitrogen levels that must be in his bloodstream after being submerged

the way it is". Luckily today the Navy would provide a recompression chamber for free to local divers who got the bends. Much better than in the old days when the traditional way of 'recompression' was to bury the diver in the sand up to the neck, and leave him there for a few days until the symptoms and pain disappeared. When I asked him about the success rate of his ancestors' healing practices, his reply was simple: "Sometimes it helped, sometimes not!"

I came to the island to do some filming and try local style compressor diving myself, but by this point in the

used to catch fish alive, but also kills coral polyps and other living creatures it settles on, which devastates reefs.

"How do they do it and if there are such big profits to make, why aren't you doing it?" I had to ask to satisfy my curiosity. "We stopped doing it some years ago, after we saw the destruction it caused to the reefs surrounding our island. My brother-in-law Maadil learnt a lot becoming and working as a Divemaster. He shared his knowledge about the symbiotic relationships in the sea and made us understand how important it is for future fish stocks to have a healthy

with the mock-cyanide and disappeared beneath the boat. Equipped with conventional scuba gear and my camera, I followed him to a small reef at a depth of about 45 feet (14 metres).

His finning technique appeared to be quite different from what I had expected. Treading the water with powerful bicycle-kicks which propelled him forward with astonishing accuracy and speed, he showed me his hunting skills by spearing various fish before he finally staged the promised coconut milk powder attack on a squaretail coral grouper, so I could take some pictures.

Upon surfacing it was finally my turn to chew on that old rubber air hose. Without my BCD or Regulator and with fiberglass fins strapped to my bare feet, I sunk to the bottom of the reef like a rock. The whirlpool like experience inside my mouth made things worse and I had to concentrate hard not to lose my only source of air. I struggled to control my movements and it took just 15 minutes and the mild current had drifted me away from the reef into the blue. Thus ended my short-lived career as compressor diver.



small boat they utilized as a base. Simply by using a 'water pump' engine connected to the boat's propeller by a long shaft, the little craft could achieve speeds greater than 25 knots. What is even more remarkable is that the same water-pump engine was also running the homemade diving compressor which I found to be traced back to an air-conditioner his uncle managed to acquire from a local car workshop! The only air supply the diver had during collecting and hunting came from a half-inch wide (2.5 centimetre) and 150 feet long (45 metre) plastic hose running from the compressor outlet directly into the divers.

**DANGERS AND FEARS** Reading my troubled eyes, Julbasa explained that compressor failures very rarely occur. In

for more than one hour at the time. After inquiring about his knowledge and fears of decompression sickness, he clarified that the low pressure of their small compressor limited them to a maximum depth of (only?) 90 feet (27 metres). Unfortunately big fish and valuable shells have become hard to find in shallow water these days and the high demand and rising prices for certain seafood has encouraged some compressor divers to take great risks. "It forces them to use powerful compressors and to dive to depth of 150 feet (45 metres) and more!" Pakcik Pulau elaborated.

"Do accidents occur?" I asked. "Of course, everyone knows at least a friend or relative who has died in the past from compressor diving activities! That's just

conversation, I envisioned myself buried on the beach and left behind to dry like salted fish.

**SODIUM CYANIDE OR COCONUT MILK POWDER?** "Let's talk about your target species", I suggested, swiftly changing the topic. As it turns out, they usually dive at night and spear sleeping reef fish and collect nocturnal species such as lobsters, shells and crabs. Some other compressor divers would dive at daytime and use *sujum* (sodium cyanide) to stun their prey, which would be sold to the very lucrative live reef fish trade for seafood restaurants and aquarium fish collectors.

I heard about the illegal practice of using sodium cyanide but I've never actually seen anybody doing it. Sodium cyanide is

coral reef" Julbasa stated. "If you want, I will show you how it works and you can take some pictures!" he offered after recognizing my interest in that illegal hunting practice. "But we don't want to use any *sujum*, we will use coconut milk powder instead. Looks the same, but won't destroy anything!" he added to my astonishment.

**BITE THE HOSE!** Within minutes we were out on the reef. Julbasa placed the hose in his mouth and explained; "You have to bite the hose with your teeth to regulate the air flow. As soon you get deeper, pull the hose once and signal Pakcik Pulau to increase the air pressure. Any excess air will automatically escape your mouth. I will go first." He grabbed his speargun, the mesh net and the bottle



## reality check°



**GOOD NEWS!** It was a day in my life that deepened my respect for the people living on the hundreds of remote islands in this region. The insight in Julbasa and Pakcik Pulau's view of the world has given me a better understanding of what 'living with the sea' means. It also gave me hope – with a little education more young fellows like Maadil could become 'ambassadors of the sea' to their own people to help preserve our marine environment for the next generation.

Only a few weeks later back in my office I received a call from Maadil thanking me for the pictures I'd sent to his family. He informed me that Julbasa started recently working in a diving resort. His job is to clean the jacuzzi, but his ultimate goal is clear as day – to take up scuba diving and become a certified Divemaster just like Maadil.

(\* ) *The Bajau are one of Sabah's many races, mainly inhabiting the eastern coastal region.*



### THE AUTHOR

Eric Madeja is an underwater filmmaker and photographer with a special interest in humans interacting with the ocean. More than 10 years ago, he left his career as a Swiss banker behind, to follow 'the call of the Sea' to South East Asia. Today he lives with his wife and two daughters in Sabah,

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