



# LAYANG LAYANG

a.



b.



c.

The flight from Kota Kinabalu took just over an hour on the 16-seater propeller plane, and an hour later, after the speedy welcome-cocktail registration was done, I was on one of the resort's customised dive boats, heading toward a dive site called "The Valley".

Much has been written about the remote "Swallow Reef" atoll, usually referred to by its Malay name Layang Layang. Best known for its crystal-clear water, deep walls and big fish action, Layang Layang is a must-visit destination for every underwater photographer.

A dark-blue line marks the outer edge of the atoll, where the reef drops to a

2,000-metre abyss. I had my wide-angle lens with me, in anticipation of good visibility and large marine animals. I descended along with a couple of German divers, greeted immediately by a hawksbill turtle swimming against the gentle current. She scanned every crack in the reef, looking for an afternoon snack, then returned to the surface for a breath of fresh air.

The condition of the Layang Layang reef is outstanding. I have rarely seen such dense coral cover and variety of hard and soft coral — perfect for picturesque seascape photography. For instance, Layang Layang's walls are covered with sea fans that come in all colours and

shapes. Frame them against a diver and a blue background and you'll get a nice image like those you often see in dive magazine ads. Some of the sea fans are ten metres or more in size, no doubt tens if not hundreds of years old.

As we drifted along the ridge, a steady stream of blue-streaked fusiliers passed, followed by a group of bluefin trevallies. I noticed a small school of panda butterflyfish milling around a large coral boulder — pretty yellow-white fish against an azure-blue background with streams of sunlight — exactly what I was looking for. It took a while for the shy fish to get used to my presence. By the time I got close

enough to frame them for a series of shots, it was time for our safety stop.

The next day's theme was "big is beautiful" — at least that's what our divemaster Su had in mind. Hunting for schooling hammerhead sharks was the primary aim.

The tricky part about photographing schooling hammerhead sharks is timing. You need to be at the right spot at the right time, usually in open water, far from the reef. That day, our timing was off, and we spent a lot of time watching our own bubbles paint beautiful patterns on a deep blue canvas. Upon our return to the reef however, we encountered

a large school of big-eyed trevallies playing in the current, all waiting to be photographed.

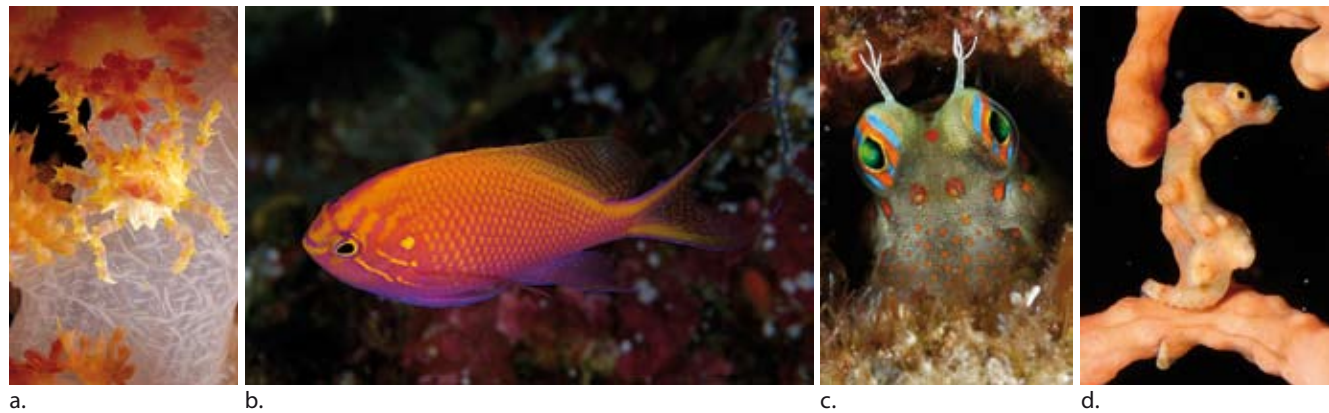
On the next dive, we looked for devil rays and manta rays closer to the reef. The dive started off with a small school of chevron barracuda in a few metres of water, followed by two massive, grim-looking dogtooth tuna and a large school of batfish that had emerged from the deep. Halfway through the dive, I became so preoccupied with photographing a fully grown starry pufferfish that I momentarily lost sight of the group.

Just as I thought I had caught a glimpse of my fellow divers, I spotted a single

juvenile manta ray heading my way. I pointed my camera and triggered the shutter. The ray didn't seem to notice me as it glided over. Ecstatic, I surfaced to tell my dive buddies, only to learn that they had just spent 20 minutes in the company of six devil rays.

- a. Juvenile manta ray (*Manta birostris*) passing overhead
- b. Chevron barracuda (*Sphyaena qenie*) patrolling the shallow reef top
- c. Schooling panda butterflyfish (*Chaetodon adiergastos*)





- a. Perfectly camouflaged *Dendronephthya* soft coral crab (*Hoplophrys oatesii*)
- b. A rarely seen hawk *Anthias* (*Serranocirrhitus latus*) lurking under a coral ledge
- c. Cute but shy redspotted blenny (*Blenniella periphthalmus*)
- d. The elusive Denise pygmy seahorse (*Hippocampus denise*), just a few millimetres in size
- e. A school of mighty scalloped hammerhead sharks (*Sphyrna lewini*)

Over the next few days, I explored Layang Layang's reefs for close-up and macro photography opportunities. Fortunately for me, my dive guide Su turned out to be a walking encyclopedia of ichthyology and a macro wizard. He spotted one photogenic critter after the other — soft coral crabs, rarely seen *Anthias*, hogfish, giant frogfish, mantis shrimp, gobies, a whole array of cute blennies and more.

For one dive, we committed to photographing a *Hippocampus denise* pygmy seahorse that another divemaster had discovered two days earlier. I found the sea fan where the tiny (less than one centimetre) seahorse lived. It was located in an overhang, so photographing the little seahorse was a challenge that required perfect buoyancy. Fortunately, I managed to

get at least one decent picture, even if the pygmy was less than cooperative.

By the later part of my visit, I had plenty of good images, but I hadn't taken a photo of hammerheads in the big blue. On our second attempt to dive with these magnificent animals, Su had calibrated his "shark clock" just right. A mere ten minutes into the dive, and he was frantically waving his torchlight. Moments later, a large school of scalloped hammerhead sharks approached. We all stayed calm and watched in silent reverie as they passed. Awesome!

Layang Layang offers underwater photographers a huge selection of pictorial subjects. During my stay, other divers saw sunfish, spinner dolphins and manta rays. You can bet that I'll be back for more. ☺



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