

DESTINATION

By Eric Madeja

Eye-to-eye with a Queensland
Grouper (*Epinephelus lanceolatus*)

A decade ago, I left my banking career behind to heed the call of the sea. On 18 October 1998, I set foot (and fins) on Sabah, the Malaysian part of Borneo. It was a major turning point in my life. Accustomed to more rudimentary living during my travels, I felt like Alice in Wonderland — in Sabah there were internet cafés, Swiss bakeries, convenience stores around every corner, hotel rooms with hot showers, and TV sets that actually worked!

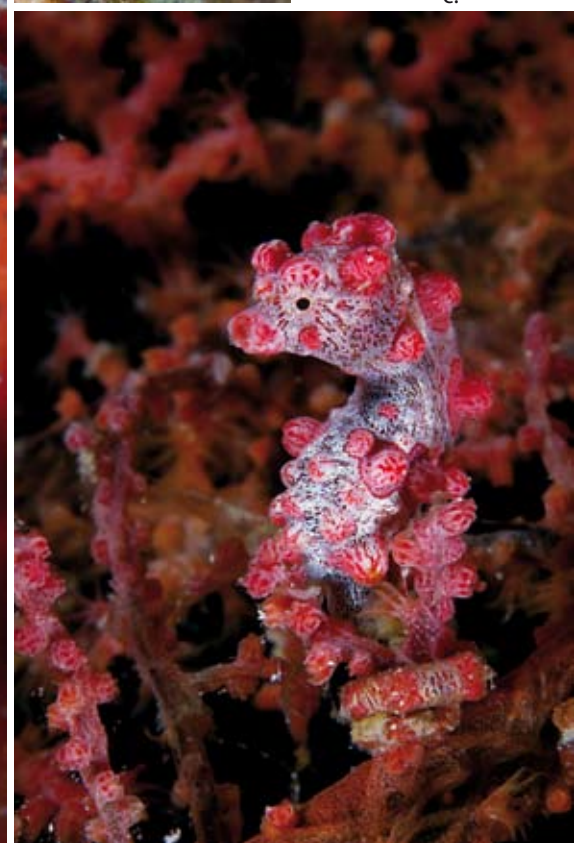
But it wasn't just the increase in comfort and luxury that made the difference. Within the stunning landscape of mountains reaching 4,100 metres and a 1,500 kilometre-long scenic coastline, I met friendly people from different cultures and backgrounds who were sincere in their warmth, and I found I had many things in common with them.

Nearly ten years later, happily married with two lovely daughters and thousands of dives logged in Sabah's waters, I feel at home more than ever. In all my time here, I've never lost the special bond I share with the local people, especially those who live next to and with the sea. And in that time, I've had many unforgettable adventures and learned many lessons, a few of which I'd like to share here with you.

Still in Love with Sabah

Anecdotes from 10 wonderful years





a. Frogfish (*Antennarius commersonii*)
 b. Blue-lined sabretooth blenny (*Plagiotremus rhinorhynchus*)
 c. Pygmy seahorse (*Hippocampus bargibanti*)

OOPS, THAT'S NOT MY CREW!

Some years back, I had the chance to dive on a small reef located halfway between the popular diving destinations of Mabul and Mataking islands. I had chartered my own dive boat with an experienced crew and was excited about the prospect of some long, shallow dives looking for critters.

Fifty minutes into the dive, I had already taken shots of an attractive tomato-red frogfish sitting motionless on top of a coral head, a blue-lined blenny peeking out of its spongy home, a couple of nudibranchs, and a tiny juvenile pinnate batfish which was trying to hide in a black featherstar. I still had plenty of air in my tank and started to look intently among seafans, in the hope of finding something special.

And find something I did — tiny pygmy seahorses! "What a dive!" I thought, as I snapped away taking portrait after portrait. Ten minutes later, with memory card full, batteries exhausted, and air nearly depleted, I started my slow ascent, happy and satisfied.

I swam toward the silhouette of my boat, did my safety stop and finally broke the surface. When I reached the boat, I noticed cooking pots hanging from the stern, fish drying in the sun, and a dozen pairs of puzzled, dark-brown eyes staring at me. Clearly, this wasn't my boat crew.

The curious stares came from an entire family of Bajau Laut, or sea gypsies, as they're known. I had mistakenly surfaced next to their boat, while my "experienced" captain had drifted hundreds of metres away to the other side of the reef.

"Apa khabar?" (How do you do?), I greeted them, trying to hide my own embarrassment. That earned me a few gentle smiles in return. I swam slightly away from their boat and inflated my safety sausage to get the attention of my boat crew.

Meanwhile I made friends with the gypsy kids, who free-dived around me and followed me around with their dugout canoe.



Sea gypsy boat





AN EMOTIONAL ROLLERCOASTER

I love seafood. Even with a population of 2.6 million people and 2.5 million tourists visiting each year, seafood is plentiful, and fish stocks in Sabah are some of the healthiest in the region. However, this may not last.

Last year I visited Kudat, a small town at the northern end of Sabah that supplies fresh seafood to the numerous restaurants in Kota Kinabalu. The entire region around Kudat, including extensive stretches of the coastline and countless islands, will soon be gazetted as the “Tun Mustapha Park”, the largest marine park in Malaysia.

One of my favourite activities whenever I go to new places is a pilgrimage to the fish market. Apart from getting the latest small-town gossip and plenty of amusing sailors’ yarns from the fishmongers, you won’t believe how much information about species diversity, fish stocks, fishing methods, the local economy and culinary culture you can collect at local markets. Where there are big and healthy fish in the market, there should be good diving nearby.

“Absolutely stunning” is how I would describe Banggi Island, the largest island of this soon-to-be marine park. Hundreds of shallow reefs in turquoise waters, endless snow-white sandy

beaches, wide-reaching mangrove forests and seagrass beds — what more could I ask for? During my visit, the villagers of Karakit, the biggest settlement on Banggi Island, reported regular sightings of the elusive dugong and spoke of mangrove areas with plenty of crocodiles. Listening to all the stories, I couldn’t wait to explore the reefs. But I wasn’t prepared for the impending emotional rollercoaster.

For the first dive, we jumped in at an unnamed reef south of Balambangan Island. Even with limited visibility due to heavy rainfalls during the night, I found myself in a tropical coral garden surrounded by huge gorgonian seafans and an amazing variety of soft and hard coral harbouring millions of colourful reef fish.

Within minutes I found angelfish, a pink scorpion leaf fish and three different kinds of clownfish. On a sandy patch, half-a-dozen different gobies were watching over the construction efforts of their blind shrimp “buddies”. Nearby I spotted a blue ribbon eel, and I sneaked a quick look at a blue-spotted stingray before it shot off. When we were about to ascend, I spotted a porcupinefish and a fimbriated moray eel snuggled underneath a small overhang as if they were the best of friends.

Excited and encouraged by what I had seen, I planned the second dive nearby. Loaded with more cameras and enormous expectations, we descended. I couldn’t believe my eyes — dead coral littered the seafloor. No seafans, no vibrant colours, no fish. An entire reef decimated to rubble. Utterly heart-wrenching.

Whether the extensive damage had been caused by the net of bottom trawlers (fishing vessels that drag a net along the seafloor), or whether the heavy use of illegal poisons and explosives for fishing had caused the extensive damage, I’ll never know.

But I took comfort in the fact that the government and NGOs involved in creating the Tun Mustapha Park are actively addressing these issues, and the destructive and dangerous practice of fish bombing has sharply decreased.

Can I still eat fresh fish without feeling guilty about contributing to overfishing and marine habitat destruction? I think so. But I’ve learned to ask about the origin of seafood, and the way it was caught or farmed. If we all ask seafood restaurants for this information in a non-threatening way, restaurant operators will get the message that customers care — a small step in the right direction.

- | | | |
|----|----|----|
| a. | b. | c. |
| d. | e. | f. |
| | g. | |
| | h. | |
- a. Catch of the day
 - b. Mangrove tree roots
 - c. Estuarine crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*)
 - d. Gorgonian seafan
 - e. Leaf scorpionfish (*Taenianotus triacanthus*)
 - f. Blue ribbon eel (*Rhinomuraena quaesita*)
 - g. Fimbriated moray eel (*Gymnothorax fimbriatus*) and black-blotched porcupinefish (*Diodon liturosus*) snuggling
 - h. Destroyed reef — only rubble left

DEEP-SEA MONSTER

Reputed to be fearless and daring, “compressor” or “hookah” divers risk their lives daily to pick sea cucumbers and other valuable marine products from the seafloor. Believe me, breathing from an unregulated flow of air from a long hose connected to a small air compressor on the surface is no piece of cake. On a filming assignment in the Tun Sakaran Marine Park — another recently gazetted park not far from the small town of Semporna — I once had a rather embarrassing encounter with a compressor diver.

I had spotted the compressor dive team from a distance. By the time we got close to their boat, the diver had already disappeared into the deep blue, leaving his air-controlling team on board. The diver and surface team communicate by pulling on a rope, using pre-agreed signals to increase or decrease air pressure, or to pull the diver quickly back in case of an emergency.

Keen to film the diver at work, I quickly geared up and got ready my camera and two very powerful lights. The current was running strong as I struggled to follow the hose down to the seabed. At about 35 metres, I caught sight of the diver’s bubbles. Visibility could not have been more than five metres. I turned on my lights and approached the diver from above and behind so I wouldn’t miss any of the action. The diver didn’t

notice me until I was a few metres away. He must have sensed a presence, then immediately stopped everything and turned around — only to come face-to-face with two massive glowing “eyes” looking down at him. I saw his pupils widening with fear, and before I realised what was happening, he had signaled an emergency situation to his buddies and shot back to the surface in panic.

Trying to catch up with the troubled diver, I ascended at once but was slowed by the ascent rate dictated by my dive computer. When I finally reached the surface, my boat crew waved frantically and asked me what happened below. Apparently, the compressor diver came up screaming and shouting in the local dialect, saying he just had encountered a deep-sea monster. The entire compressor team departed in record time!

So that’s how I contributed to the creation of new myth about terrifying deep-sea creatures roaming the Celebes Sea.



a. Compressor diver at work
b. Deep-sea monster



“BAJAU LAUT” — NOMADS OF THE SEA

The traditional lifestyle of these nomadic hunters and gatherers of the reefs has always intrigued me. Entire clans live, cook, eat, sleep, work and even bear children on board a vessel not bigger than the front porch or parking space of our homes.

I’ve heard stories of newborn infants being thrown into the sea right after birth to determine their general strength and chance of survival, a tradition that seems cruel to us, but understandable for a society so dependent on the mercy of the ocean, with little access to “western” medical care.

Travelling the waters between Sabah, the Philippines and Indonesia for many generations, these seafarers have accumulated their own outstanding knowledge of the sea, the creatures and plants living in it, and how to utilise them for their survival. Most Bajau Laut possess no travel documents or citizenship of any of the countries they frequent, which hasn’t been much of an issue in the past, but modern society, with its need for rules and regulations and properly defined borders, has made life difficult for these people. So it comes as no surprise that the Bajau Laut have become somewhat cautious and incommunicative toward “outsiders”.

If you’re fortunate enough to come across some of the families on their “lepas” (boats) during your diving vacation, ask the help of your resort’s staff to communicate. The sea gypsies have their own language and dialects, but most locals understand bits of the Bajau language, which is commonly spoken along the east coast of Sabah.

My own experience shows that once they get to know you, they’re actually quite curious about your way of life, values and worldview. My Caucasian nose gets lots of attention. One thing that puzzles the Bajau Laut is how much effort and expense we take to dive on the reef and not take anything from the reef, and yet at the same time, we pay fortunes to dine on fresh seafood in seafront restaurants. An oxymoron that definitely got me thinking!









Sea gypsy children playing with dugout canoe

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Divers enjoying themselves at Sipadan Island's Dropoff

PHANTOM FISH

Rising from the deep ocean, famous for its abundance of sea turtles, big schools of fish, pelagics and sheer walls teeming with life, Sipadan is one of the world's top dive destinations.

Marine life was outstanding when I first descended the famous "Dropoff" a decade ago, and remains outstanding today. I've observed the reef community constantly rejuvenate itself over the years. Courting, mating and breeding behaviour of many species can be seen on a regular basis, from the smallest dragonet to big animals like sharks and sea turtles. Most indicator-species for a healthy reef — such as sharks, groupers and butterflyfish — can be seen swimming around in large numbers, including fully grown adults as well as juvenile forms.

However, I'm particularly worried about one thing that could harm this wonderful habitat — phantom fish.

Have you ever been diving along the reef, looking for the unexpected pelagic, when suddenly you spot something hovering in midwater? It's a...a... phantom fish, more commonly known as a plastic bag. The increasing number of plastic bags, amount of styrofoam packaging and other man-made debris I encounter underwater is distressing. And with an estimated 1,000+ years decomposition time for every plastic bag, your grandchildren will probably log dives with huge schools of phantom fish along phantom reefs if we don't act now.

There's a growing international movement to ban or discourage the use of plastic bags. Until governments in Southeast Asia start supporting the idea, each one of us can help a little by reducing waste and recycling. I teach my children that a single plastic bag can be used multiple times before being considered garbage.

The photo below shows a rather unusual, but innovative recycling method used by an ingenious young boy taking swimming lessons in the small town of Semporna.



Plastic bag recycling — Semporna-style



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a. Green turtles (*Chelonia mydas*) abound at Sipadan Island
b. "School bus" at Banggi Island



TEN "MUST-DOS" IN SABAH



1. Walk through a local fish market
2. Eat with your family at a seafood restaurant
3. Taste fresh "sea-grapes" (lato) with vinegar and chilli
4. Drink hot chocolate made from locally grown cocoa beans
5. Join a "kampung" (village) wedding ceremony
6. Enjoy sunrise on top of Mount Kinabalu
7. Enjoy sunset at "Simpang Mengayau", the northernmost tip of Borneo
8. Observe proboscis monkeys and orangutans at the Kinabatangan River
9. Witness sea turtles laying eggs at Turtle Island Park
10. Dive as much you can!

CRYSTAL BALL GAZING

As I've met and continue to meet many Malaysians and expatriates who share my passion and concern for the environment, I'm optimistic that Sabah will remain a top ecotourism destination. My ambition for the next ten years is to be part of an environmentally aware society that treasures its cultural diversity and the natural resources bestowed upon it. We all need to work on how best to protect and preserve these natural wonders for our children and future generations. For now, I extend a warm welcome to this beautiful place I've come to call home, and hope that you'll have a chance to visit soon. ☺

SPECIAL THANKS to my wife and my children for their never-ending love, support, patience and understanding.



Eric Madeja

FROM THE AUTHOR

www.treasure-images.com

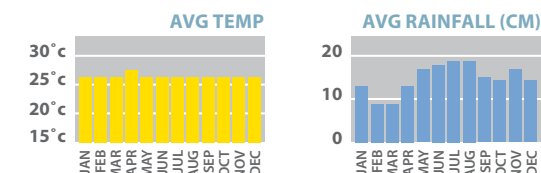
"The beauty of Sabah lies not only in its natural treasures, but much more in a truly multicultural society which will embrace every visitor with a warm heart and open arms. Visit us and feel it for yourself!"



Various airlines operate direct flights to the state capital Kota Kinabalu, including SilkAir and Malaysia Airlines. For an updated list visit www.sabahtourism.com. Domestic flights within Sabah are generally inexpensive and are operated by Malaysian Airlines (www.malaysiaairlines.com), Air Asia (www.airasia.com) and FlyAsianXpress (www.flyasianxpress.com).



Diving is possible throughout the year. More rain and rougher seas can be expected from November until February. Water temperatures range from 26°C to 30°C all year round, which makes a 3mm wetsuit sufficient.



Visitors from most countries are allowed to enter Malaysia without a visa for a visit not exceeding one month. Passports must be valid for at least six months. Those coming into Sabah from Peninsular Malaysia are required to go through customs and immigration on arrival in Kota Kinabalu. Check with the Malaysian embassy or consulate nearest to you for up-to-date information.



GSM coverage is good in all major towns. However, some rural areas and most of the islands are without coverage. Most of the resorts have internet access via satellite.



220V, 50Hz. 110V is available at some resorts.

PLUGS



Malaysian Ringgit. Change your foreign currency at the airport upon arrival. Some banks won't accept old US\$ bills, bills of small denomination (US\$1, US\$5), or bills with certain serial numbers. Tipping is not customary in Malaysia. However, resorts may have a tip box.



There are no vaccinations required for Sabah, but it's advisable to take anti-malaria medication if you plan to visit remote areas.



GMT + 8 hrs

Out of Bed



and into the Water



Rigged to Dive!



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