

BIZARRO WORLD

Widely regarded as having some of the best macro in Asia, Sabah's Mabul Island is enjoying a renaissance as a rollicking wide-angle destination as well

By Jason Isley/Scubazoo

THE DATE: October 1996. I climbed through the front hatch of the transfer boat and jumped onto the beach for the very first time. "Welcome to Sipadan," said the divemaster as he shook my hand.

That year, Simon Christopher started Scubazoo with just a Hi8 camera and VHS deck, and I was on Sipadan to run the video studio at one of the resorts. I thought I was better prepared for a Robinson Crusoe-like experience, but the island's tiny size and remoteness soon had vivid images of shipwrecks and my boy Friday running through my head.

It didn't take long for Sipadan's underwater life to blow me away though, and the difficulties associated with living on such a small island were a very small price to pay for having the best diving in the world on my doorstep. Literally.

My love for Sipadan grew rapidly, and in those first years I probably made over 1,500 dives around Sipadan alone; and my desire to create a book about the island became almost an addiction. And yet something was always missing.

Even though we had some very good macro life around Sipadan, the dive guides from Mabul would tell us stories of crazy frogfish, crocodilefish, flamboyant cuttlefish and pipefish all to be found on the reefs there. I'd only just started to shoot macro so I couldn't wait to see this amazing diversity of crazy critters.

If the guests at the resort were interested, we'd have the rare opportunity to take a boat across to Mabul and hunt down some of the critters. Sadly our eyes weren't up to the task of spotting such well-camouflaged creatures among the reef. It wasn't until 1999, when Scubazoo started its first studio based at Sipadan-Mabul Resort (SMART) on Mabul that I finally had the chance to live and dive Mabul on a more permanent basis, particularly with the guides that really knew the creatures and the reefs.

Unfortunately my time on Mabul was short-lived – the head office in Kota Kinabalu was expanding, and we were being hired for TV broadcast filming in other parts of the world. Since then, I've visited and dived Mabul for various filming or photography trips, but I haven't stayed there for two years. Would this be a glorious homecoming, or a reunion I'd just as soon forget.

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ALL MIXED UP

Mabul's first two resorts, SMART and Sipadan Water Village (SWV), were built from 1993 to 1994. Seaventures, an accommodation rig converted into a dive resort, was moved to Mabul in 1996 and became the third resort to offer diving. Although all three mainly catered for tourists wanting to dive nearby Sipadan, the resorts also continued to dive around Mabul and quickly discovered the riches waiting to be found.

The incredible variety of life made up for the fact that the reefs were generally in pretty poor condition, due to overfishing and the occasional fish bomb many years ago. To remedy this, SWV started a coral-planting project in 1997 that continues to this day.

On arrival at Borneo Divers' resort during my recent trip, the first thing I noticed was the obvious changes to the island itself – four jetties lined the beach where only one had stood for so long, and Mabul is now as busy as it has ever been. SMART have a second resort – Mabul Water Bungalows – and Borneo Divers finished its own Mabul resort in 2003. There are also four budget lodges on the other side of the island, where you can stay and dive both Mabul and Sipadan. When you consider the fact the island also supports roughly 2,000 people in several villages tucked in between the resorts, Mabul is looking a little overcrowded to say the least. But had it affected the underwater scene?

Mabul has always been used as a gateway to Sipadan, with most of the boats heading to Sipadan for two dives and then returning to Mabul for a third boat dive. Not everybody loves the muck diving, and certainly not everybody wants to watch a flamboyant cuttlefish feed for an entire dive.

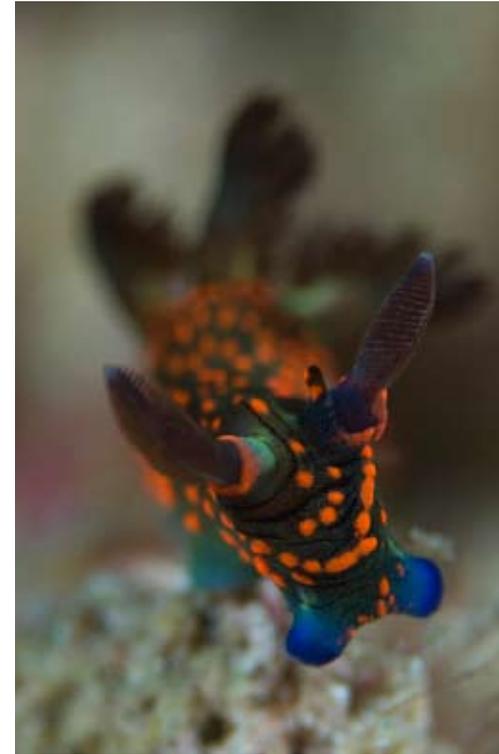
...I WAS READY FOR SOME CRAZY SMALL CRITTER ACTION, WHEN WHAT SHOULD FIRST GREET ME BUT A HIGH SCHOOL OF SNAPPERS.





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But times have changed, and nowadays guests are as likely to dive around Mabul for the entire day as they are to head over to Sipadan. Hitting the water at Ray Point for my first dive, with macro gear in tow, I was ready for some crazy small critter action, when what should first greet me but a huge school of snappers. Had we skipped across to Sipadan by mistake?

Apparently not. The diving around Mabul has certainly changed, with lots of schooling fish and plenty of healthy coral. With the presence of the resorts on the island the fishing boats have stayed away, and this is reflected in the abundant fish life – it's as if all the schools have migrated from Sipadan to Mabul!

Having ignored the snapper, my next encounter was with a dozen small bumphead parrotfish, which cruised by feeding on the coral; further frustrating me because I was armed with only a 105 mm macro lens. Luckily the Borneo Divers' guide went into macro-mode and immediately found two leaf scorpionfish and an orangutan crab. He pointed out nudibranchs everywhere and then found a painted frogfish, resplendently coloured. It was a busy dive and a good start to the trip, even if I could only take pictures of the broadclub cuttlefish's eye at the end of the dive.

AH, MACRO

For the second dive we headed to Paradise 2, which runs from SWV Resort past the Borneo Divers jetty and is, in fact, Borneo Divers' house reef. As we descended through yet more snapper and a school of slim line barracuda, I closed my eyes until I heard the first tank bang from the guide – he'd found a pair of black harlequin ghost pipefish. A great start soon followed by a giant frogfish, crocodilefish, ringed

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pipefish and, for the finale, a flamboyant cuttlefish feeding at the base of the reef. A small wreck placed at the base of one of the jetties has attracted plenty of life and made the perfect end to the dive.

The next few days passed by, with the guides from Borneo Divers discovering more crazy critters at the various sites around Mabul like Eel Garden and Ribbon Valley. But it wasn't until we finally dived one of my favourite spots, beneath the Seaventures rig, that I was well and truly spoiled for macro choice.

The descent meant another huge school of slim line barracuda and a large juvenile giant grouper, which sat on the sand as if waiting for the assembled group of photographers. Just as surprising was the resident school of snapper – I would never have guessed it could get quite so large. It's Mabul, gosh darnit, and I was adamant about using my macro set-up. And on this dive I was rewarded with a beautiful purple robust ghost pipefish and two different pygmy seahorses – the orange Hippocampus denise and the purple H. bargibanti. We then headed over to see a spectacular red and white harlequin ghost pipefish.

Snapping away, I soon realised I was being closely watched by a giant frogfish sharing the metal frame I was gently leaning on. This site is overcrowded with predators and it's very easy to ignore the more common characters such as the lionfish, scorpionfish, crocodilefish, and blue spotted stingrays. There are plenty of artificial reef structures below Seaventures, and the shelter these provide go a long way to explaining the huge diversity and sheer amount of life the rig supports.

HOME(MADE) REEFS

I'd heard about SMART's artificial reefs opposite the new Mabul Bungalow Resort jetty on the Old House Reef, but hadn't ever dived them. The resort owners have constructed huge wooden frames, set up a field of concrete reef-balls, and have even experimented with artificial sea grass. As we approached the underwater structures it soon became obvious that, once again, Mabul is looking more like Sipadan than Sipadan. Schools of fish that were the stars of the show – the huge wooden frames were completely hidden by a wall of jacks.

We'd dived at Sipadan a few days prior and the size of the school at Mabul dwarfed that of Sipadan's famed school. The jacks started circling us and eventually cloaked us in shadows as we were engulfed by the huge mass. Schools of snapper and slim line barracuda were also present and several giant groupers that live among the structures came out to inspect the new intruders. True to form and an example

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MABUL NAVIGATOR

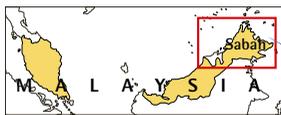
PACK YOUR BAGS: Fly to Tawau, Sabah, from Kota Kinabalu or Kuala Lumpur. From there it's a two-hour car ride to Semporna, where you board a speedboat for your one-hour ride to Mabul.

ENTRY/VISA REQUIREMENTS: Visitors to Malaysia are given a two-month visa upon arrival.

BEST TIME TO DIVE: Year round

DIVE WITH: Borneo Divers and Seasports (borneodivers.info), Seaventures (seaventuresdive.com),

SMART (sipadan-mabul.com.my), SWV (swvresort.com)



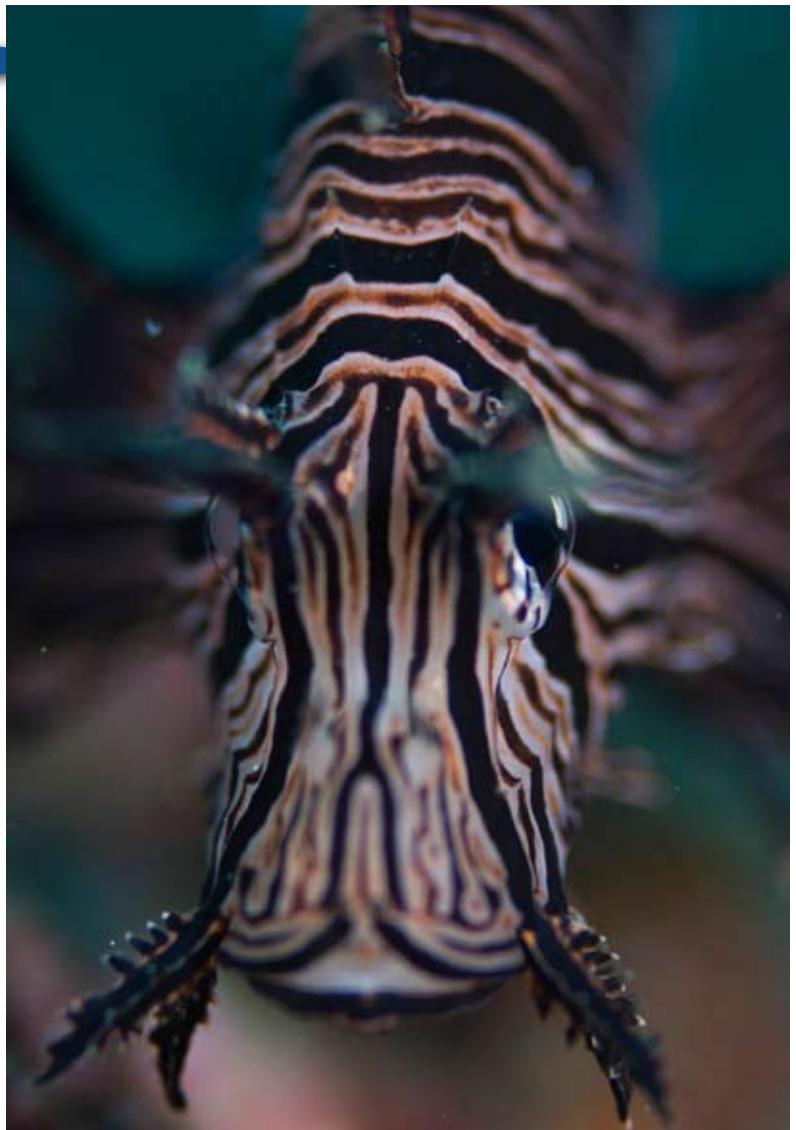
of how stubborn I can be, I shot a tiny clown frogfish, ignoring the incredible display above me as the jacks continued to circle.

On my last day I'd decided enough was enough, and ditched the macro lens in favour of the wide-angle, in order to try and capture some of Mabul's schooling action. It's not the first time I've used wide-angle at Mabul as I've often taken close focus wide-angle shots of the larger creatures; this time I wanted to capture the feeling brought on by that huge school of jacks.

Unfortunately Mother Nature had other intentions. The bright sun that graced our dive the previous day wasn't there on our return to Old House Reef, even though the jacks were. I had the added bonus of the friendliest cuttlefish I've ever come across – a handsome cephalopod that kissed my dome port, a fitting end to a remarkable trip.

The schooling fish at Mabul make it a worthwhile testing ground for your wide-angle skills, even though the visibility isn't as good as on Sipadan. The presence of the resorts has certainly helped protect the local reefs and, combined with their efforts to build artificial reefs and plant new corals, Mabul's fish life has exploded exponentially. I've even heard reports of white tip reef sharks hanging off the deeper ledges behind the huge structures on Old House Reef, a sure sign of the area's recovery.

Turtles are now regularly seen feeding or resting on the surrounding reefs and, perhaps in the years to come, they might start nesting once again on Mabul. The last decade has seen many changes to Sipadan's closest neighbour, not only in the growth of tourism but also the incredible explosion of marine life below the surface. Just make sure next time you take your wide-angle rig on every dive! **SD**



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