



ONE OCEAN

MALAYSIA

EYES WIDE UP

Text by Gil Woolley/Scubazoo

Images by Scubazoo, Jason Isley and Gil Woolley

Discovering the best schools in Sabah





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1. Black snapper, *Macolor niger*, and a school of big-eye trevally, *Caranx sexfasciatus*, swimming in the sunlight above the shallow reef, Sipadan Island, Sabah, Malaysia
Image © Jason Isley/Scubazoo

2. Blue-streak fusiliers, *Pterocaesio tile*, swim close over the reef, with a whitetip reef shark, *Triaenodon obesus*, giant trevally, *Caranx ignobilis*, and a school of big-eye trevally, *Caranx sexfasciatus*, swimming above, Sipadan Island, Sabah, Malaysia
Image © Jason Isley/Scubazoo

3. School of scalloped hammerhead sharks, *Sphyrna lewini*, Layang Layang, Sabah, Malaysia
Image © Jason Isley/Scubazoo

With its ancient rainforests, rugged, granite-peaked mountains, idyllic lagoons and pristine beaches, Borneo is a wild place and perfect for a Nature lover like myself; I am fortunate enough to live and work in the Malaysian state of Sabah, which straddles the northern tip of this enormous island.

Sabah lies at the heart of the Coral Triangle and is home to some of the world's greatest marine biodiversity; it is this hidden beauty below the surface of the sea that draws divers and snorkellers from around the world. One of the greatest attractions for these visitors and locals alike are the huge schools of fish that can be found at

some of Sabah's diving hotspots. However, this is not the same for me. During my dives, I usually adopt the position of a razorfish, hovering vertically with my nose an inch from the seabed looking for critters, oblivious to anything in mid-water.

HEADS UP

The Coral Triangle is considered the global epicentre of marine biodiversity. The entire area represents one of the richest marine habitats in the world and an estimated 3,000 different species of fish, more than 600 reef-building coral species and more than 30 percent of the

world's coral reefs can be found here. Understandably, Sabah – lying at the heart of this extraordinary region – can claim to have some of the highest marine biodiversity on the planet. For a recent book project, myself and two other Scubazoo photographers travelled around the coast of Sabah documenting the highlights of the underwater world. It was during this trip that I began to leave my trusty macro set up on the boat and started to stare into the blue.

The first fish school that caught my attention was pretty tame – a small army of banded catfish stalking their way across the sand, devouring anything edible in their path in the local marine park near where I live in Kota Kinabalu. It was the way they moved as one in an ever-churning ball of stripes that got me though. How do they decide who goes in front and when to switch? Who gets the unlucky position at the edge of the pack where you could get picked off and how long do they have to stay there?

HOME OF THE HAMMERS

We travelled further up the coast to Malaysia's only atoll, Layang Layang, or Swallow Reef, which rises 2,000 metres from the floor of the South China Sea approximately 300 kilometres northwest of Kota Kinabalu. The atoll's almost total isolation means stunning visibility and pristine reefs, along with an abundance of pelagic marine life. In recent

years, Layang Layang has been the site of many special encounters, including with whale sharks, orcas, melon-headed whales and even sperm whales.

Along with the huge schools of reef fish that thrive in these pristine waters, it is the hammerheads that people flock there for and huge schools can be seen in the blue. During the daylight hours, the schools of sharks, mostly females, are actively engaged in social interactions and jockey for prime social position in the centre of the school, before breaking up at night to hunt alone. Who knew that sharks were so sociable and how do they interact during this period when gathered together?

SENSATIONAL SIPADAN

Continuing the journey along the coast, we eventually ended up on the western side of Sabah. Consistently voted one of the top dive destinations in the world, Pulau Sipadan is a must for any passionate diver. Sipadan is Malaysia's only oceanic island. This tiny speck of land, located 40 kilometres south of Semporna, is in fact a needle-like pinnacle of rock and reef surrounded by 600-metre-deep water – a constant source of nutrient-rich upwellings. These nutrients provide the basis for a remarkable food chain that culminates in the many large animals commonly encountered in Sipadan's waters. In recognition of this unique and productive ecosystem, the area is now carefully protected, with limits on the



number of divers that can visit every day and a ban on resorts on the island itself. Consequently, life there is flourishing.

As you descend into Sipadan's clear waters, the first things that greet you are the sheer walls dropping down into the abyss; the pristine, colourful reefs; the green and hawksbill turtles, too numerous to count; and the dense schools of fusilier, batfish and anthias. Then you notice the intimidating mass of jacks and barracuda, the napoleon wrasse and whitetip and grey reef sharks, and your eyes are drawn out into the blue, as tales of whale sharks, mantas and hammerheads run through your mind.

Diving around Sipadan can be a dizzying experience as the variety of fish schools that encircle you is immense. It is hard to believe that when I first dived Sipadan many years ago, the most exciting find for me was a frogfish hidden in a channel. I now gazed in awe as barracuda, sharks and turtles cruised by. Why was I sticking my head in the sand all the time?

As soon as you exit the dive boat and start to dive at the famous Drop Off dive site of Sipadan, you are confronted by an immense school of jacks. The thousands of shimmering fish rotate like a massive glitter ball, and you notice the various sharks piercing in and out, and it is hard to drag yourself away and remember you have a



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SURFACE INTERVAL

MUST TASTE

A curry puff – the perfect snack between dives.

YOU'VE GOT TO TRY

The bamboo dance, which is a lot easier after some rice wine...

DON'T FORGET YOUR...

Water bottle, sun hat and flip flops; this is the tropics so keep cool and hydrated.

IF YOU TIME IT RIGHT

The end of May is the time to join in the harvest festival celebrations.

DID YOU KNOW?

Jacques Cousteau first dived Sipadan in 1984 and famously declared, "I have seen other places like Sipadan, 45 years ago, but now no more. Now we have found an untouched piece of art."

MUST SEE

The Kinabalu National Park is a must, even if you don't have time to climb the mountain itself.



dive to continue! It would be easy to spend the whole dive encircled by this mass of fish as they constantly shift and rotate as one.

A mention has to go to the number of turtles it is possible to see on a dive here. During the mating season, you can see a string of males, sometimes up to 10 in number, frantically chasing a female. Even without the clamour of the mating season, if you time the tide right then huge numbers of turtles can be seen as they head towards their feeding grounds.

BUMPHEADS AT DAWN AND BARRACUDA TORNADOS

One of my favourite dives at Sipadan starts very early in the morning, which means you get to witness the sunrise on the journey out – a magical way to start the day.

A truly impressive sight, if you can drag yourself out of bed in time, is the procession of bumphead parrotfish. They have strong beaks to feed on live corals and algae, and a single adult will ingest tons of coral each year, which is excreted as white sand. Their feeding activity is important for the production and distribution of coral sand within a reef, and to prevent growing algae from choking coral. In the early

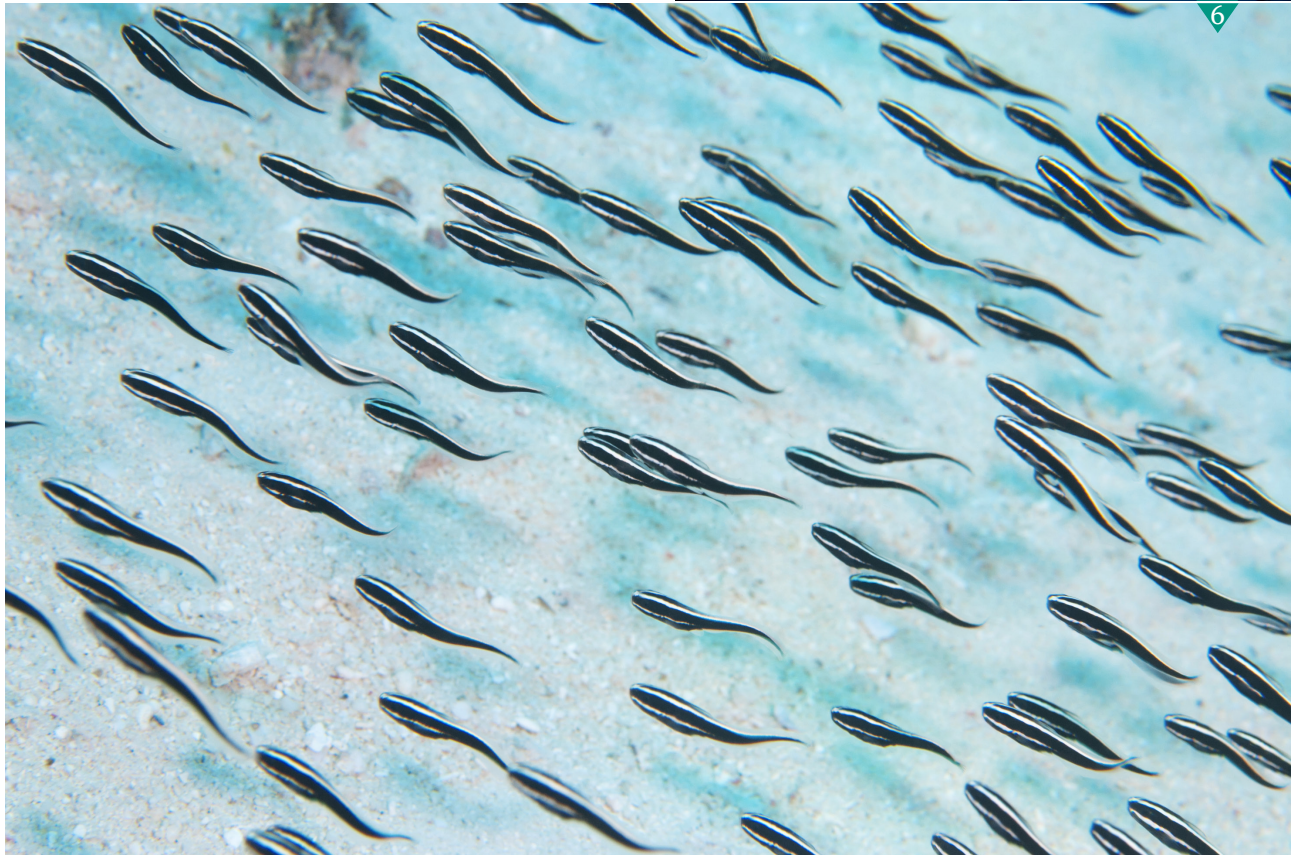
4. Bumphead parrotfish, *Bombometopon muricatum*, swimming together as a school, Sipadan, Sabah, Malaysia, Borneo
Image © Gil Woolley/Scubazoo

5. Large School of chevron barracuda, *Sphyræna qunie*, Sipadan, Celebes Sea, Sabah, East Malaysia
Image © Jason Isley/Scubazoo

6. Schooling juvenile striped catfish, *Plotosus lineatus*, shot from above, Sabah, Borneo, Malaysia
Image © Christian Loader/Scubazoo



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morning light, these huge fish make for a wonderful sight in the shallow water as they head out to deep water during the day.

7. Large school of chevron barracuda, *Sphyraena genie*, swimming over reef off Sipadan Island, Borneo, East Malaysia
Image © Gil Woolley/Scubazoo

In terms of sheer numbers, it is hard to beat a massive school of barracuda, which can form a swirling “tornado” from the sea’s surface down to a depth of 30 metres. These spectacular schools, which may contain thousands of individuals, will break up at dusk as the barracuda head off to hunt for food, and convene again at dawn. Trying to get shots of this magnificent spectacle and control my mid-water buoyancy in a ripping current was one of the most challenging yet rewarding experiences of the whole trip.

I still love to hunt for critters and can’t resist a good muck dive, but it is never long before I take my eyes away from the sand to look up and have a good look around for what might be out there, schooling around in the blue. **SDOP**

Gil Woolley is the project manager and one of the photographers for Scubazoo. Based in Kota Kinabalu on the island of Borneo, at the heart of the Coral Triangle and the planet’s richest marine biodiversity, Scubazoo is dedicated to filming and photographing the underwater realm. Their aim is to share this incredible world with as many people as possible, and to create a higher level of awareness about the marine environment, its inhabitants, biology, and the important need for its preservation for the future. www.scubazoo.com

NAVIGATOR

Getting there:

Fly to the international airport of Kota Kinabalu.

Best time to dive:

Between March and October. Water is around 26–34 degrees Centigrade.

Don’t dive without:

Your camera, on a wide-angle setting.

Essential training:

Advanced Open Water is advisable but there are no minimum requirements.

On arrival:

Most nationals do not require a visa in advance to enter Malaysia for a short, social visit. Check www.2malaysia.com/visa.htm for more info.

Dive with:

A valid passport and visa where applicable to enter Malaysia. A permit is needed to dive Sipdan – ask your resort for more details as they are limited to 120 per day.

Currency:

Malaysian Ringgit (RM)
USD 1 : 3.7 MYR

Time zone:

UTC/GMT +8

Languages:

Bahasa Malaysia, English is widely spoken.

For more information:

www.sabahtourism.com

