

A lesson in patience, respect and luck trying to capture the elusive mating frenzy of the green turtles of Sipadan

这是一堂学习耐心、尊重，以及体验运气的课程，终极目标就是要捕捉诗巴丹岛绿蠓龟那创造生命的延续物种的重要时刻！

Text & Photo Gil Woolley

LOVE 爱在诗巴丹 IS IN THE AIR





When you think of a marine turtle, more often than not you will picture a sedate, old-man-of-the-sea type creature that moves slowly through the ocean grazing on drifting jellyfish. Little did we know, these creatures change dramatically when love is in the air.

As the plane touched down from the 40-minute flight into Tawau from Kota Kinabalu, the first splattering of rain could be seen on the aircraft window as I looked out at the dark clouds in the distance. The ever-changeable weather on the east coast of Sabah seemed to be taking a turn for the worst as we hastily loaded Pelican cases into the back of the van for the drive to the fishing town of Semporna to catch the boat for the next leg of our journey.

Speeding out from Semporna on the way to the Island of Mabul (our base for the next two weeks) I was reminded of the last time I was on a boat here, barely a year ago shooting for a book project. On that occasion I was diving in Semporna Strait, the channel of water lined by stilt houses just off the crowded town.

说到海龟，大部分的人在脑海中浮现的景象，就是那派恬静、悠然自得的海洋生物，它们慢慢地在海中游，定定地揪着漂流的水母。不过，若是仔细地观察海龟，它们可是会为了爱情而急速改变自己的生物呢！

Mating green turtles, *Chelonia mydas*
交配中的绿蠵龟

飞机从亚庇飞行短短的40分钟后，就到达了斗湖这个地方。在透过飞机窗户望向远处的乌云时，窗户上也洒上了细小的雨点。我们准备要开往仙本那那个捕鱼小镇，之后再搭船展开下一段的旅程。沙巴东岸的天气本就变幻无常，在赶着将Pelican的专业保护提箱放进货车后备箱时，天似乎正要变脸。

从仙本那前往马布岛（这是我们接下来会待上两个星期的地方）的途中，我想起上次搭船来这里也才不过一年前，当时除了埋头为新书的内容努力之外，也有到仙本那海峡潜水，而从陆上拥挤的城镇进入这一条水道之后，就能看到那一长串的高脚屋。



Other males approach couples biting at the mounted male's fins trying to pull him off

其他公海龟靠近这对爱侣，并且用嘴巴咬住男主角的鳍，想要将它拉下来

On the first dive I was amazed by multiple frogfish, seahorses, flamboyant cuttlefish and even a sea dragon on the first dive. However, I shuddered at the amount of trash around and the murky brown water with less than two meters visibility, we were diving right next to houses that used the channel to carry away all their waste. A far cry from the 25+ meter visibility and blue water I was hoping for if I was going to succeed in getting the turtle shots on this trip.

After a comfortable night with Scuba Junkie on Mabul Island, our dive boat was loaded and off before dawn, on the way to the world famous Sipadan Island. We registered with Sabah Parks leaving the other early morning dive boats wondering what we were up to as we moved away from the jetty yet only slowly lapping the small island. Why would we arrive so early before the crowds and then not dive? The simple answer was that we were not there to experience the pristine reefs, schools of jacks, barracuda and countless sharks. We had only one goal and that was to capture mating turtles in action.

Our plan was relatively simple. We had studied tide charts, phases of the moon, weather patterns; talked to turtle experts, and armed with all this knowledge we knew it was optimal time to witness mating behavior. All we had to do was spot them in action. Sipadan is blessed with an extremely healthy turtle population and if you have been lucky enough to dive there, you will know it is possible to see over 30 on a single dive. It was not individual turtles we were after though.

On our boat, our dive assistant took position of a lookout at the bow, the driver scanned the horizon while Roger Munns, Scubazoo's cameraman, and I peered out to the ocean as the now blazing sun beat down on us. Our plan was simple: Keep lapping the island until we spot mating turtles surfacing for breath. As we were all familiar with diving Sipadan, we knew some reefs were better for spotting turtles than others, so these we cruised slowly along with all eyes peeled.

It was hard to spot a turtle in the distance among the choppy waves and even harder to distinguish when it was a single turtle or a pair. Thankfully our driver turned out to be eagle-eyed and confidence always grew when he gave the call and maneuvered the boat carefully in the direction of a distant speck in the water.

第一趟的潜水之旅让我惊奇连连，因为看到了好几种不同的壁鱼，也看到了海马、火焰墨鱼，甚至连海龙都有；但是，那么多的垃圾和棕黑色的海水也令人唏嘘，能见度不到2米。当我们正潜到高脚屋区域边上的海域，而这里正是带走居民倾倒垃圾的水道。原先期望的是能见度超过25米的一片蔚蓝海水，因为在那样的环境之下，才能成功如愿地拍得一张张精采的海龟照片。

在马布岛上的Scuba Junkie渡假中心舒舒服服的睡了一觉之后，我们的潜水船在黎明前就已装载完毕，准备要出发前往世界知名的潜点——诗巴丹岛。我们跟沙巴国家公园董事会登记后离开码头，缓慢地绕着小岛航行，让清晨其他的潜水船充满疑惑，好奇着我们此行的目的。为何要这么早赶在人群前到达，然后又不潜水？答案很简单，我们不是来此体验原始珊瑚礁、一大群的鲷鱼、梭鱼和无数的鲨鱼，我们只有一个目标，那就是捕捉海龟交配的画面。

其实计划还算简单，我们先研究了潮汐表、月相、气象，也找了海龟专家交换了一下意见，备齐了想得到的所有知识之后，挑选了一个观看海龟交配的最佳时机，整装待发。在一切准备就绪之后，唯一能做的一件事就是苦苦地等待。诗巴丹岛有着天赐的良好环境，得以孕育出极为健康的海龟族群，如果够幸运，光是单次潜水行程，就有可能看到超过30只的海龟！不过，这次的目标可不是单身海龟。

在船上，潜水助理站在船头的守望位置，潜水员负责扫视地平线，而我和Scubazoo的摄影师Roger Munns就负责一寸一寸搜寻已经有着耀眼阳光闪烁的海面。计划就是这么简单：持续绕着这座岛屿航行，直到看到交配中的海龟浮上海面呼吸为止。因为我们船上这几个人对诗巴丹这里的潜水环境都十分熟悉，所以我们比其他一般潜水客更清楚哪些珊瑚礁比较适合观看海龟，也因此，经过这些地方时，我们就会缓慢巡行，大家也都眼巴巴地张望巡视。

要从一段距离之外，在一阵阵波浪起伏之中看到海龟，有点难，尤其还要分辨看到的海龟是一只还是一对更难！幸好我们的潜水员有着锐利的鹰眼，而且又能快、狠、准地锁定海中远处的一点，信心十足且谨慎小心地操控船只，向着疑似目标前进。

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这种交配时发生的狂热事件可能会对母海龟构成生命威胁，因为在公海龟一心要叠在上头想要交配时，会让母海龟无法游上海面去吸一口气而发生溺毙事件。



A group of male turtles all chased this pair of mating lovers

一群公海龟追逐着这对情侣

We learnt the hard way how close you can move a boat towards a pair of mating turtles and even when we thought we had the exact "safe" distance figured out, no two pairs behaved the same and some proved more timid than others. When they take flight, you just have to sit and scan the horizon, waiting for them to surface again somewhere in the distance for a breath and try all over again.

After several days of watching turtles, finding mating pairs and observing behavior, we thought we had it all figured out and knew where to be at certain times of the day and the stage of the tide for the best chance of encounters. However, the turtles always liked to prove who was really in charge and we had the occasional six-hour spell at sea without seeing even a single turtle and this really tested our patience.

After a week spending dawn to dusk patrolling the island with our sun scorched faces constantly scanning the undulating ocean surface, we began to get regular good encounters with turtles and worked out a system as follows: On spotting a mating pair, the boat would maneuver as closely as possible without spooking them. A snorkeller would then silently slip off the boat into the water with a large orange safety marker tied round them. The boat would then back off while Roger and I geared up with cameras ready while the boatman kept safe distance from the snorkeller. Meanwhile, the snorkeller would be watching the turtles as far away as possible so as not to spook them. If they dived, which they often did, he would have to duck-dive to keep a visual on them. We would then slip as quietly as possible into the water near the snorkeller and fin hard to catch up with the turtles. Sound easy, but very rarely was...

The behavior of turtles varied greatly. Sometimes we could drop next to a pair and they would immediately bolt off into the blue. On scuba gear, we would have to fin hard to keep up as the turtles swam at high speed, sometimes dropping down below 40m, only then to go straight up for a breath before diving down again. We had to be very careful of our dive profiles. More often than not, the turtles would take very little notice of us and continue about their business. We would typically use snorkel gear as tend to stay near the surface.

经历了几次的试验，我们终于学到了如何让船能够尽量靠近一对配对中的海龟。而即使认为已是在绝对“安全”的距离，实际上每对海龟的反应也都不一样。有些海龟可是胆小得很，当它们受到惊吓跑掉之后，你就必须再退回等待的步骤，继续扫描地平线上的动静，等着海龟再度游上远方某处的海面呼吸，而所有的流程就都得重新再来一次。

经过了几天这么看海龟、寻找交配海龟、观察海龟的行为之后，我们以为自己早已是海龟通了，可以知道在一天中的何时、何地，在何种潮汐状况下，最有机会碰上海龟。结果，海龟可不让我们这么认为，就是要让我们知道谁才是老大，所以，在我们信心满满地觉得一定会找到海龟时，它们硬是让我们在整整6个小时之内，连一只海龟的影子也见不着，这可真是耐心的大考验啊！

在一整个星期里，所有人天天从清晨到日暮，绕着小岛四处巡逻，每个人的脸也都晒黑了，就这样时时扫描着海面的动静。经过了这样的训练之后，我们终于能够规律地与海龟相遇，也终于理出了一套作业流程，那就是在看到交配中的一对海龟后，要让船在不惊动它们的情况下尽可能地靠近，让身上绑着大大橘色安全标记的浮潜人员悄悄下水，然后船就往后退开，与浮潜人员保持着一段安全距离，而Roger和我也就会把相机准备好。在此同时，浮潜人员会在不吓到海龟的距离之外看着它们，等到它们转而下潜时（它们常常这么做），浮潜人员就得鸭式下潜跟着，然后，我们会尽可能小声地溜进海里，游到靠近浮潜人员的地方，再努力跟着海龟游。听起来容易，但其实不能出一丁点差池。

海龟彼此之间的行为习惯大不相同，有时候，我们一出现在一对海龟旁边时，它们可是会立刻逃到海里去。有时候戴着水肺装备时，要跟上高速游水的海龟，可得卯起来游，尤其有时候它们下潜到40米深处时，又突然直上海面，吸了一口空气后，又再次下潜，在这样的游上潜下之间，必须得很小心地控制，注意自己上升及下降的速度。不过，大部分的海龟对于人类的出现其实都视而不见，都会继续忙着它们的事。直到后来，我们都是配着浮潜装备，就待在靠近海面的地方“守候”着海龟。

Towards the end of our trip, our patience finally paid off. We dropped next to a very serene looking pair that happily sat on the surface catching breaths. Once we got into the water we realized there were another seven male turtles all chasing this pair and not only nudging them now and again, but biting at the mounted male's fins trying to pull him off and literally jamming their heads between the mating pair trying to pry them apart. We had seen other males approach couples before and this was often when they bolted, but here the obviously worn out couple could not escape the attention of so many males.

The mating frenzy can get dangerous for the female turtle, as the males tend to pile onto the couple in their attempt to mate, making it impossible for the female to reach the surface for air. Turtles have been known to drown in this way. In the chaos of the battling, the turtles completely ignored our presence and allowed us to get close. The only problem we had was the turtles keep getting too close, a couple of times our poor assistant had to bid a hasty retreat as a short-sighted male tried to mount him!

Thrilled with the encounters we had witnessed, we left the island of Mabul after 14 calm, clear days in our little open-top boat with smiles on our weatherworn faces. These soon turned to grimaces though as the heavens really did open and a storm rolled in, sending the surrounding sea almost black in appearance. A final reminder of just who was ultimately in charge and how lucky we had been, thankfully nature had been on our side on this trip. ez

在这趟旅途接近尾声时，耐心终于得到了应有的回报！有一对看来十分恬静的海龟正待在海面上呼吸，在它们旁边下水之后，惊讶地发现原来还有另外7只公海龟追着这一对情侣，它们的伎俩不只是推着情侣俩，还会咬着上方男主角的鳍，试图要把它拉开，而且公海龟们还把它们的头挤在情侣中间，要把情侣俩“撬开”。之前也有碰到要游上来拆散情侣的公海龟，但通常是孤军一只，不过，像这次这么多只海龟一起行动，这对招架不住的情侣可就躲不开了！

这种交配时发生的狂热事件可能会对母海龟构成生命威胁，因为在公海龟一心要叠在上头想要交配时，会让母海龟无法游上海面去吸一口气而发生溺毙事件。而在这一场争夺战斗中，海龟们根本完全忽略了周围人类的存在，让大家有机可乘，能更靠近它们，这时唯一遇到的问题反而是距离太近！有好几次可怜的助理还得仓皇倒退，因为有一只近视的公海龟搞错对象，居然还想要骑到他身上去！

在14天晴朗的平静好天气之后，船上的伙伴脸上显现着风吹日晒后的痕迹，但却掩不住笑意，就这样带着与海龟相遇的兴奋，搭着小船离开马布岛。不过，漾着笑意的嘴角很快就转而紧抿下沉，因为才一下子的时间，暴风雨就席卷而来，四周的海顿时失去了色彩，成了黑茫茫的一片，像是在告诉人们谁才是真正的老大。而此次行程何其幸运，旅途中，天公作美，不仅享好了天气，还为海龟拍到了珍贵的镜头！

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要从一段距离之外，在一阵阵波浪起伏之中看到海龟，有点难，尤其还要分辨看到的海龟是一只还是一对更难