Borneo - Malaysia

Nature at its best
The State of Sabah sits virtually at the epicenter of where life on this planet is thought to have first developed. Located on the north-east tip of Malaysian Borneo, Sabah is considered one of the most biologically diverse regions on Earth. Encompassing a number of eco-systems and contrasting terrains, this natural wonderland is bursting with exotic plant life, animal species and amazing scenery from above and below the surface of the surrounding waters. The major Indo-Pacific Ocean currents of the South China Sea to the west, and the Sulu and Celebes Seas to the east, cross Sabah’s coastline resulting in one of the most bio-diverse marine environments in the world.

The diving around Sabah, in particular the island of Sipadan, was described by the internationally renowned oceanographer and filmmaker, Jacques Cousteau, as “An untouched piece of art … a jewel”. The islands of Mabul, Kapalai, Lankayan and Layang Layang, are also included on listings of the world’s best dive sites.

As well as the exceptional diving, Borneo offers exciting land based adventures and unique wildlife attractions. These include: The Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre, The Labuk Bay Proboscis Monkey Sanctuary, The Sunbear Conservation Centre, treks to Mount Kinabalu, Kinabatangan River with its mangrove forests, Gomantong Caves and Sandakan Memorial Park.
General information:

**Climate**: Tropical. Average temperatures are between 25°-32°C with 85-95% humidity. The wet season is from November to February. Water temperatures range from 25°-28°C in winter and 28°-30°C in summer.

**Language**: Bahasa Malaysia. English is also widely spoken.

**Cultures and Religion**: The population of approximately 2.5 million is a cultural mix of 32 ethnic groups. Islam, Christianity and Buddhism are the main religions. Many traditional festivals and ceremonies take place throughout the year.

**Currency**: Malaysian Ringgits (MYR). Major credit cards are accepted at hotels, resorts and most shops.

**Banking**: Banks and ATMs are available in the major city centres.

**Water**: Local tap water in cities is considered safe for drinking. Hotels provide bottled water for their guests.

**Electricity**: 240 volt 50-cycle system.

**Telecommunication**: Quite good throughout the island.

**Medical**: Outpatient clinics are available. In case of emergencies, international visitors will be accepted at government hospitals.

**Car Hire**: Arrangements can be made at the airport or hotels.

**Entry requirements**: Valid passports must have a minimum of 6 – 12 months validity. Holiday tourist visas are not normally required. However as this could be subject to change please check with your travel advisor.

**Getting There**: International flights arrive into the capital Kota Kinabalu. This modern and bustling city is the gateway to Sabah’s many natural treasures.
Pulau Sipadan is a 40 acre island, formed by living corals growing on the peak of an extinct under-sea volcano that rises 600 metres from the ocean floor. Lying 5 degrees north of the Equator, at the heart of the Indo-Pacific basin, the oceanic island of Sipadan is covered in a thick lush forest and encircled by a white sandy shoreline.

Sipadan gained notoriety when the late, French oceanographer Jacques Yves Cousteau produced the documentary “Ghosts of the Sea Turtle” featuring Turtle Tomb, an underwater limestone cave. The cave, with its labyrinth of tunnels and chambers, contains the skeletal remains of hundreds of turtles. The turtles sadly drown after entering the cave. They become disorientated, rendering them unable to find their way out of the cave system.

Sipadan was officially declared part of an immense Marine Protected Area in 2005. The island is only accessible on a daily basis to a restricted number of divers and visitors with an approved entry permit. Visitors to Sipadan are accommodated on the nearby islands of Kapalai and Mabul.

Diving:
Walls surround 90% of Sipadan, with sheer drops that extend out of sight into the blue depths. More than 3,000 species of fish and hundreds of species of coral have been classified in this rich eco-system. Large numbers of green and hawksbill turtles gather here to mate and nest. It is not unusual for divers to see up to 50 turtles on each dive. The twirling, tornado-like formations of the resident schooling barracuda, jacks and big-eye trevally are on every diver’s wish list. Scores of huge bumphead parrotfish, dozens of black tips, white tips and grey reef sharks and schools of batfish are also highly anticipated on each dive. There is also a myriad of small and rare creatures hiding out in between the reefs and on the walls around the island.

Sipadan Entry Permit Approval
As diving at Sipadan is no longer guaranteed on a daily basis you will require a minimum 4 night stay at the nearby island of Kapalai or Mabul to ensure 1 days diving. An entry permit, issued by the government agency, Sabah Parks, is required. The quota for entry permits is limited to 120 per day.
Kapalai Island, a 45 minute boat transfer from Semporna, is the perfect place to stay and explore this unique area. Situated between the islands of Sipadan and Mabul, the sand-bar island sits on-top an extensive stretch of reef, known as the Litigan Reefs, bordering the deep vast Celebes Sea. The over-water village dive resort offers comfortable accommodation in a unique and picturesque setting. Access to Sipadan Island is just a 15 minute boat ride away. Amazing macro diving is available around Kapalai. Shore dives and snorkelling on the resort’s house reef is easily accessible from under the jetty.

Diving:
Kapalai offers fantastic small critter diving. The Litigan Reefs offer a safe haven for many juvenile species, away from the threat of dangerous reef predators found at Sipadan. The sandy bottom and sparse coral heads host an array of small and very colourful subjects. Rare species such as mandarin fish, dragonets, fire gobies, giant frogfish, wasp or leaf fish, ribbon eels and harlequin ghost pipefish are seen on a regular basis. The flamboyant, techno-coloured cuttlefish also reside here.

Where to stay:
Sipadan-Kapalai Dive Resort offers a truly unique style of accommodation. With no immediate land in sight, 59 timber chalets, perched on stilts, line the shallow sandbanks. Each fan-cooled chalet has a private balcony, bathroom and bar fridge. Boardwalks connect the individual chalets to the central dining area, a large sundeck, games room, gift shop and the dive centre. Wifi is available. Dive packages include 3 guided boat dives daily (excluding arrival and departure days) and unguided day or night dives on the house reef.
Mabul

Mabul is an oval shaped, tropical island, located one hour from Semporna and a 20 minute boat ride to Sipadan. Perched on the corner of a 200 hectare reef, on the edge of the Continental Shelf, Mabul is covered in coconut-palms and surrounded by sandy beaches. The sea-bed surrounding the reef, slopes out to a depth of 25-30 metres. A growing fishing village and several dive resorts, homestays and backpacker accommodation service this popular dive destination. Mabul provides access to the numerous dive sites around Sipadan, Kapalai and Si Amil.

Diving:
An almost endless array of small, exotic marine critters reside around the Mabul. Diving is in calm, shallow waters with an average depth of 10 metres. The numerous types of cephalopods include: cuttlefish, blue ringed octopus, mimic octopus and bobtail squids. Crustaceans include boxer crabs, sea stars and harlequin shrimp. Giant painted and clown frogfish are plentiful. Moray eels and snake eels and almost the entire scorpion fish family inhabit the area. Different types of gobies such as the spike-fin, black sail-fin and metallic shrimp goby can be found. An assortment of nudibranchs and many other interesting critters are easily spotted on this magical macro tour.

Mabul is considered to be one of the world’s best “muck diving” sites. A macro haven for diversity of tiny exotic marine life.

Where to stay:

Borneo Divers Mabul Resort

Borneo Divers Resort is situated along a white sandy beachfront. The 30 bungalow units are semi-detached and offer ensuite bathroom, air-conditioning and views of the beach. The resort has its own jetty, swimming pool, restaurant and bar, gift shop, library, TV room, underwater video and photo centre and wifi accessibility. Borneo Divers founded in 1984, is Borneo’s first professional dive operation. Mabul dive centre, located on the jetty provides easy access to dive boats and for snorkelling or diving on the house reef.
Sipadan Water Village

Sipadan Water Village features 45 over-water chalets, perched above the tranquil clear shallow waters. The chalets come in a variety of categories with timber boardwalks connecting the chalets to the main reception, bar/lounge and dining area. All chalets offer views over the reef and have a private sundeck with sun chairs, ensuite bathroom with toiletries and hair dryer, ceiling fan and mini bar. Some bungalows are air conditioned. There is a gift shop, broadband wifi access, spa facility and a Snorkelling and Dive Centre.

Sipadan Mabul Resort

SMART Divers Resort, on the south-east side of Mabul, is nestled in a coconut grove along the beachfront. The resort offers 40 air conditioned timber chalets, 18 semi-detached and 22 stand-alone chalets. All chalets have ensuite and deck/balcony. Resort facilities include a dining hall and bar, jetty bar, swimming pool and jacuzzi, TV room, wifi, gift shop, lock up dive gear storage area, underwater video and photo studio. The resort features the SMART-Tec Dive Centre catering for Tec and rebreather divers.

Mabul Water Bungalows

Mabul Water Bungalows is located on the southern tip of Mabul with 16 spacious water bungalows offering contemporary décor. The private bungalows are equipped with ensuite bathroom, private balcony, wifi, satellite TV, mini bar, hair dryer and safety deposit box. Resort facilities include a large, airy restaurant, Sundeck Bar, gift shop, business centre, and health spa. The Divers Deck and jetty is where dive boats collect divers and allows access to the house reef.

Sipadan Water Village
Layang Layang, also known as Swallows Reef, is a ring of 13 coral atolls in the midst of the South China Sea. The remote, isolated island has its own airstrip with flights from Kota Kinabalu operating 3 days a week. 300 kilometres north-west of Kota Kinabalu, this “man-made island” was originally constructed for use by the Malaysian Navy. The island has since been redeveloped into a dive resort attracting divers from all over the world. The pristine reefs, excellent visibility, diverse fish life and regular sightings of pelagics, has given Layang Layang a reputation as being one of the world’s best dive destinations.

**Diving:**
The diving season extends from March to August. The resort is closed outside of season. Layang Layang is a wall diving paradise. The sea floor, off the edge of the island, drops down to almost 2,000 metres and visibility can reach over 30 metres. Corals are healthy and plentiful with huge sea fans that filter the plankton from the passing currents. The reef has resident schools of barracuda, big eye trevally and is frequented by green and hawksbill turtles. The 20 metre deep lagoon offers great macro life including sea horses, pipe-fish and cuttlefish. The outer reef walls attract schools of grey reef sharks, scalloped hammerhead sharks (March to May), leopard sharks, silver tip sharks and the occasional thresher shark. Manta rays, marbled eagle and pygmy devil rays are also regular visitors. Divers may also encounter whale sharks, orcas and melon head whales. Spinner and bottlenose dolphins often accompany the dive boats to locations and sometimes hang around inquisitively while you dive and snorkel.

Where to stay:

Avillion Layang Layang, built in the style of a traditional longhouse, offers 86 rooms in a variety of categories. All rooms are air conditioned and equipped with ensuite bathroom, TV, fridge and balcony. The resort facilities include: a restaurant and bar, swimming pool, souvenir shop, conference room and wifi. The PADI dive centre has certified instructors and a team of qualified dive masters. Up to 3 boat dives a day are offered with major dive sites being accessed within 10 - 30 minutes.
Lankayan Island, located in the Sulu Sea on the north-east coast of Sabah is approximately 2 hours by road and boat from Sandakan.

This small, beautiful and remote island of white sandy beaches, swaying casuarina pines and beautiful sunsets has been declared part of the immense Marine Protected Area - Sugud Islands Marine Conservation Area. The unpopulated island paradise has only one dive resort and is an ideal destination for snorkellers. In season the Green and Hawksbill turtles come to Lankayan Island to nest and forage.

**Where to stay:**

Lankayan Dive Resort offers 23 elegant beachfront chalets. Constructed from local timbers and materials each spacious chalet has a private verandah, ensuite bathroom, air conditioning, mini fridge and tea/coffee making facilities. The main central building where meals and drinks are served, has a large open-air terrace overlooking the ocean. The communal centre has a lounge and TV area and a small gift shop. The Dive Centre offers 3 guided boat dives daily with unlimited, unguided dives on the house reef.

**Diving:**

Lankayan boasts colourful macro fauna with some rare subjects like the ornate ghost pipefish, jawfish and frogfish. Larger marine creatures include the leopard shark, marbled stingray, giant grouper, schools of bumphead parrot fish, yellowtail barracuda, parrotfish and scads. From March to May whale sharks can occasionally be sighted in the area. There are 3 accessible wrecks to dive. Sabah’s Turtle Sanctuary, Pulau Seligan, is nearby and green or hawksbill turtles may be encountered.

From June to September, guests can watch baby Green and Hawksbill turtles hatch on the island and make their way to the sea.
Land based adventures

The Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre, established in 1964, is the largest of its kind in the world. More than 4,500 hectares of virgin jungle has been set aside as a forest habitat reserve for these magnificent creatures. The majority of orangutans at the sanctuary have been orphaned or abandoned by their mothers at logging sites with some being rescued from illegal hunting and captivity. A special viewing platform has been erected to allow visitors to view and photograph the orangutans as they come in for their twice daily rations of bananas and milk.

The Sun Bear is the world’s smallest bear and one of the most threatened bear species on the planet. Once found throughout Asia, their numbers have dramatically dwindled due to deforestation, commercial hunting and the pet trade. All bears at the Conservation Centre are orphaned or ex-captive bears. The Sun Bear Centre aims to reintroduce the Sun Bears, named for the patch of bright yellow fur across their chests, back into their natural habitat. The centre is equipped with observation facilities and located adjacent to the Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre.

The proboscis monkey is indigenous to Borneo. The males of the species are characterised by their strange bulbous noses, flat top hairdo and pot bellies, whilst the females are smaller in size with upturned noses. Located in the heart of the Mangrove forest of Semawang – Sandakan, the Labuk Bay Proboscis monkey sanctuary is a privately owned reserve where visitors can observe these rare and amazing creatures. It is estimated that approximately 300+ wild monkeys live within the surrounds of the six square kilometre sanctuary.

Sandakan - Sepilok

Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre

Bornean Sunbear Conservation Centre

Labuk Bay Proboscis Monkey Sanctuary

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These massive caves are home to many bats and to swiftlets, whose nests are harvested as a Chinese delicacy. Outside, other birds such as serpent eagles, bat hawks and kingfishers can be seen. You might even spot an orangutan or two. The 90 metre high Simud Hitam (Black Cave) is a 5 minute walk from the registration centre. Follow the boardwalk to explore the cave. Bird nest collecting is usually conducted from February to August.

The floodplains of the Kinabatangan River with its shoreline of mangrove forests, is home to the greatest concentration of wildlife in Borneo. Numerous species may be viewed on a boat trip including orangutans, macaques, red and silver leaf monkeys, Borneo’s shy pygmy elephants, hornbills and the unique proboscis monkey. Overnight stays can be arranged at a tranquil river-side eco lodge for longer wildlife viewing.

Sandakan was once the capital of British North Borneo and was almost totally destroyed during WWII. The region retains some historical churches, temples and war memorials. Of note is Sandakan Memorial Park in Taman Rimba with an Australian Memorial dedicated to some 2,500 Australian prisoners of war (POWs), along with others who died at the War Camp or who perished on the infamous “Death Marches of Borneo”.

Kota Kinabalu

Kota Kinabalu is the capital of, and the gateway to, Sabah’s many natural treasures. Fondly known by the locals as KK, this modern, bustling city with its population of over 450,000 is situated by the sea, against the backdrop of the majestic Mount Kinabalu. Explore the shops, entertainment outlets, day and night hawker-style markets and department stores in the city area. Guided excursions, treks and tours to Mount Kinabalu at 4,095 metres, the Kinabalu National Park and Poring Hot Springs are all available from here. Tunku Abdul Rahman National Marine Park, with its five unspoiled tropical islands is just off the coast and can be reached within half an hour by speedboat from the city pier.

Where to stay:

Sepilok Nature Resort

Sepilok Nature Resort offers 23 spacious, timber chalets with lake or jungle views. Each air conditioned chalet has ensuite bathroom with hot/cold water, shower and bathtub, coffee/tea making facilities and private balcony. Meals and drinks are served in a central area of covered terraces with a comfortable lounge area, souvenir shop, tour desk and wifi access. Guided lowland jungle treks to discover different species of birds are available. The Orangutan and Bornean Sun Bear Rehabilitation Centres are nearby.
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