

It was July 1999 and we'd just overnighed in Kota Kinabalu en-route to Sipadan Island. We agreed that TARP was worth investigating and promised to return and explore the reefs now fading away behind us. Looking back now it's not surprising it took a couple of trips to Sabah before we discovered TARP. Just off the capital Kota Kinabalu in Sabah, Malaysian Borneo, it was and still is overshadowed by other more established diving locations in the region.

A few months later the adventure began. We soon realized these protected islands had much to offer. There are few places in the world able to combine the modern facilities of a bustling city with a stunning tropical marine paradise rich with history and marine life just eight minutes away by speedboat. Named after Malaysia's first prime minister and covering 50 square kilometres the Tunku Abdul Rahman Park was gazetted as a national park in 1974 with Sabah Parks, a government body appointed to protect the area's fauna, flora and marine ecosystems.

Gaya Island is the largest and arguably the most interesting of the five. It was the site of the British North Borneo company harbour, razed by the rebel Mat Salleh in 1881. Nowadays the 15 square kilometre island is mainly uninhabited other than the eastern shore, which has a community living in stilt houses. On the



# A HIDDEN JEWEL

: RICHARD & JOANNE SWANN

> THE LEFT WING OF THE PLANE DIPPED AND WE CIRCLED FOR ANOTHER VIEW OF THE FIVE LUSH TROPICAL ISLANDS SCATTERED BELOW. "THERE MUST BE SOME DIVING OPPORTUNITIES DOWN THERE. WE SHOULD HAVE EXPLORED THOSE REEFS – WHY DIDN'T WE?" RICHARD ASKED. I THUMBED THROUGH MY GUIDEBOOK FOR THE NAMES OF THE ISLANDS BENEATH US – PULAU GAYA, MAMUTIK, MANUKAN, SAPI AND SULUG – COLLECTIVELY KNOWN AS THE TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN PARK.

*Main: Mild currents allow divers a close look at the marine life.*

*Right: Striking seahorses can often be seen in TARP.*

*Far right: Hawksbill and green turtles inhabit TARP.*



Left: Rich soft corals and vibrant fish schools at Edgell Patches dive site. Below: Photography subjects are abundant throughout TARP. Right: Seahorses are plentiful and always a joy to discover.



Top to bottom: Occasional frogfish are always a diver's favourite; A bubbleshell sea slug; Bamboo shark takes shelter beneath the small coral overhang.

northern side are a couple of 5-star resorts and set in a secluded bay on the southern side is Downbelow Marine & Wildlife Adventures, a PADI 5 Star IDC Dive and Adventure Centre. Gaya is a wildlife enthusiast's melting pot of species, some of which are endemic to the island. Proboscis and macaque monkey, snakes and lizards, hornbills, tropical birds and insects thrive here.

**The Diving** A combination of climate and geology delivers remarkably complex biodiversity throughout Borneo and this is clearly visible above and below the ocean.

TARP's waters have abundant and fascinating marine life as well as stunning soft corals. Dive sites within the park are predominantly sloping coral reefs to around 30 metres, mangrove areas and sand flats with plenty of fish life and macro subjects for all levels of divers and photographers.

There's more than 50 dive sites close to Downbelow's dive centre, including the inner and outer reefs of TARP, nearby islands such as Pulau Tiga and offshore dive sites offering WWII wrecks. The great variety of multi level diving provides something for everyone.

**The Inner Reefs** Sheltered from the prevailing northeast or southwest winds, the inner reefs offer year-round diving and are a haven for macro critters. Nudibranchs are very common with many rare and varied species regularly encountered. Seahorses, ghostpipefish, frogfish, flounders, stargazers, mandarin fish, moray eels, lionfish, and many crustacean species are among the usual suspects and divers can frequently interact with cephalopods as they slowly fin along the reef. Although referred to as 'muck diving' many of these sites are in fact very pretty, with visibility ranging from eight to 20 metres.

Mid Reef is a great example. Situated in the centre of all the islands, this independent reef was probably once an island of its own. The shallow top reef, only four metres at low tide, is relatively barren with a handful of artificial coral blocks. On the eastern side the slope descends to 20 metres and meets a small fishing wreck. Fish schools gather around the wreck and the debris attracts a variety of scorpiforms such as stonefish, scorpionfish and lionfish. Shrimps and crustaceans are plentiful. Moving away from the wreck and following the reef slope divers can find stick pipefish, spotted stingrays and an array of creatures confident in their cryptic ability.



A few minutes swim away a wonderful section of shallow reef begins; layers of acropora coral bathed in filtered sunshine form a beautiful reef area at 12 metres. Here seahorses, cockatoo waspfish, razor fishes, moray eels, yellow-lipped banded sea krate, swaying anemones with their clownfish are often found. Surrounded by this beauty it's a challenge to end the safety stop and return to topside reality.

**The Outer Reefs** They're a kaleidoscope of colour and texture – large gorgonian fans, table corals, barrel sponges and staghorn corals are abundant. With slightly better visibility due to their location, these outer sites tend to attract pelagic species such as giant travelly and large schools of batfish, with occasional visits from eagle rays and blacktip reef sharks. All still only about eight minutes from the dive centre!

One of our favourite outer sites is Edgell Patches. The reef top starts at 10 to 12 metres. Large coral blocks and barrel sponges litter the shallow reef crest that slopes to 30 metres and the sandy seabed. Schools of yellowtail barracuda, yellow-striped snapper and fusiliers are among the reef's residents. During the day, bamboo and spotted cat sharks can occasionally be found sheltering under the small coral overhangs.

Turtles are fairly commonly encountered on inner and outer reefs year round and

when schooling krill mass through March and April, whalesharks can sometimes be seen feeding around the islands.

The park is also ideal for conducting PADI dive courses of all levels from beginner to professional qualifications. Many people choose to complete their dive courses or refresher programs before continuing on elsewhere or returning home.

One of the beauties of visiting TARP is the flexibility to fit any traveler's budget – just minutes from the park are backpacker lodges, city hotels, 5-star resorts and island retreats. This isn't only a divers paradise; there's great snorkeling, sea kayaking, trekking, plus lovely beaches. Some areas are more remote than others and offer better coral reefs. Jet ski rental and parasailing are also available.

**Other Places to Visit** Sabah's crown has many jewels and we were hooked! A few years after our early trips we decided to re-locate to Sabah. Drawn to the state not only for its fabulous diving, we also fell in love with the mountains, jungles and rivers. Sabah boasts the Kinabatangan River – a region with such wildlife biodiversity it's acknowledged by experts to be the most varied and easily accessible in all Southeast Asia.

The majestic Mt Kinabalu in the Crocker Range overlooks TARP. This great mountain has become an icon of natural

#### Getting There

Tunku Abdul Rahman Park is located 20 minutes by land and eight minutes by boat from Kota Kinabalu International Airport. Air Asia, Jet Star, Silk Airlines and Malaysian Airlines have daily flights from KL International Airport to KK.

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#### Useful Information

Climate: Tropical with year round diving, water temperature averages 28-30°, however March can see a seasonal drop to 25° lasting around 6 weeks. A 3mm full suit is recommended.

Electricity: 220 volts

Currency: Malaysian Ringgit.

Tipping is optional and not expected but appreciated.

Timezone: GMT + 8hrs

Communication: International mobile phone roaming. Wireless internet is available.

Visa: In most cases tourist visas are granted on entry. If in doubt, please check with your local Malaysian consular office.



history and successful conservation, whilst being the most accessible of high mountains to climb. With so many superlatives it's hard to believe all these wonders are within one small state – and we haven't even mentioned the endemic Bornean pygmy elephants and orangutans!

Even now Tunku Abdul Rahman Park seems to be Sabah's hidden jewel and this may be part of its appeal. So, if like us you're passing through Kota Kinabalu, take a few days to explore this little piece of paradise – we're sure you won't be disappointed.

*Top to bottom: Downbelows beach side dive centre on Gaya Island; Downbelow dive boats at Gaya Island; From TARP daily excursions to Pulau Tiga take less than one hour.*



**About The Authors**

Richard and Joanne are dive pros living in Sabah, Borneo. On realizing that the country is not only a biological melting pot, but also a hidden treasure for travelers and sport enthusiasts, they were eager to replicate the success of their UK adventure company in Sabah, Malaysian Borneo and introduce existing international clients to this wonderfully diverse part of the world. To see more of their work visit: [www.divedownbelow.com](http://www.divedownbelow.com)