



Giant frogfish;  
flamboyant cuttlefish;  
cave goby;  
*Okenia* sp nudibranch;  
Taylor garden eel;  
*Izucaris masudai*.

# MALAYSIA'S LITTLE PARADISE

# MABUL

STEVEN WONG & TAKAKO UNO

FRIENDLY TURTLES, PELAGICS AND SCHOOLING FISH HAVE DRAWN THOUSANDS OF DIVERS FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD TO SIPADAN, A WORLD HERITAGE DIVE SITE. EAST MALAYSIA'S MABUL IS EQUALLY REMOTE BUT LESS WELL KNOWN. THIS SMALL ISLAND, LIKE SO MANY OTHERS OFF BORNEO, HAS LONG BEEN OVERSHADOWED BY SIPADAN – WHICH IS ONLY A 20 MINUTE BOAT RIDE AWAY. YET MABUL, LIKE A PRECIOUS STONE IN A GEM MINE, WAITS TO DELIVER ITS HIDDEN BEAUTY.

Visibility at Mabul and its neighbouring waters seldom exceeds 50 feet (probably 20 is the norm) and the bottom varies among coral garden, rocks, seagrass and sand. Terrestrial and man-made products, such as tree trunks, coconut shells, glass bottles, tin cans, fishing nets and linen sacks also share the backdrop of the ocean floor. But don't let the litter prejudice you. Any hesitation soon vanishes when a thorny seahorse reveals itself amongst the seaweed or a mantis shrimp emerges from its lair or a flamboyant cuttlefish does its elephant walk. This is a macro paradise.

To fully appreciate the tiniest and best camouflaged creatures in Mabul, it's necessary to look 'small'. The silty sea floor is home to incredible rhythms of life. Devil stingers, stargazers, crocodile fish and other ambushers hunt their prey with

perfect disguises. Garden eels, shrimp gobies, jawfish and other bottom-dwellers boldly venture out in the open for morsels and retreat to their burrows at the slightest danger. But not all the action lies on the bottom. Schools of purple anthias and filament wrasses dance within divers' bubbles. Fringe-headed blennies and arc-eyed hawkfish perch on the coral lattice, curiously watching the synchronized ballet. Nearby on an elephant ear sponge, a pair of gaudy-looking nudibranchs begin to lay their eggs in finest embroidery. Sharp-toothed garfish dash beneath the rolling surface, dining upon the chameleonlike cephalopods. A diver is merely an intruder in this intricate web of bio-mass.

At night, the sea reveals another facet of Mabul. The darkness of the ocean bottom sparkles with a thousands stars. These glittering are from the eyes of the

crustaceans, through which the diver's torch light is reflected. Shrimps and crabs busily forage for food, before dawn forces them to retreat to their diurnal hide-outs. Like cheerleaders with pompoms, boxer crabs continuously wave their anemone-attached arms, and bristle worms aimlessly prowl the sandy floor. Meanwhile, iridescent coral polyps and tube anemones bloom to the fullest, arm-trapping any micro organisms that pass by. Minute larval fish, worms and planktons wander blindly towards a diver's light. Nocturnal predators like the lionfish ravishingly satisfy their considerable appetites.

While most divers may feel that Mabul is primarily home to weird-looking creatures, larger animals and schooling fish are sheltered in these waters as well. Turtles, jacks and batfish are often encountered. Small squadrons of



# info

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humphead buffalo wrasses and an occasional eagle ray cruise through showers of silversides and bigmouth mackerel.

Sadly, dynamite fishing is prevalent in the vicinity of Mabul, and many patches of reefs are destroyed. Resort operators are understandably irate about these unlawful practices. Both the tourism board and the Malaysian military have been trying to enforce the no-fish-bombing regulations in these waters. When caught, heavy punishments may be imposed upon the offenders, such as having their boats confiscated and imprisonment. Yet to date, though minimised with some success, illegal fishing is still widespread in the remote islands of Malaysia, Indonesia and Philippines.

Not long ago, students of the University of Sarawak were performing seagrass and other bio-researches in Mabul waters when they came across a freshly bombed site. Besides the extensive coralline formations being 'de-structured', the students found many dead fish in assorted sizes and a dead turtle left to

rot. In a further incident, divers found an unexploded bomb in another devastated site. For some reason the bomb did not detonate; underwater photographers took a few pictures of the lethal apparatus, but decided not to investigate further.

The fragile ecosystem of Mabul can only sustain dynamite fishing and pollution for a limited period of time; its delicate creatures may quickly vanish unless care is taken to safeguard their environment now. The seascape of sister island Sipadan shows signs of over-diving. Mabul still teems with an incredible diversity of life, but how long will it remain a paradise? There is no sure answer.

Underneath Sipadan Water Village; Moz ghost goby; Bumblebee shrimp; Crocodile snake eel; Massed baitfish plus batfish; Cowry plus six cling gobies; Spikefin goby.  
Below left: Sipadan Water Village chalets; Rare blackfin lionfish.

# Mabul fact file

**GETTING THERE** From Kuala Lumpur or Kota Kinabalu in Malaysia there's connecting domestic flights to Tawau (about 1 hour on Malaysian Airlines).

Resort staff collect guests at Tawau airport and drive 2 hours to Semporna. From Semporna, the resort's speed boat takes about 40 minutes to Mabul Island.

**POWER SUPPLY** Electrical standard is 220V.

**CLOTHING RECOMMENDATIONS** T-shirts, shorts, casual & comfortable, long pants and jacket for evenings or cooler weather.

**HEALTH** As in most Indo-Malay areas, it's recommended to bring a good mosquito repellent, though some resorts provide coils, sprays and some also have aircons. Watch out for the little white flies (sand-flies) – the bites can be very itchy for ages.

**HIGH SEASON** Christmas & New Year, May through August. Diveable year round. The weather in Mabul Island is more or less similar year round, air temperature ranges from 25-33 degrees Celsius. Sudden downpours do occur, but the climate is quite stable, being a typical southeast Asia tropical island. Water temperature can range between 23-30 degrees Celsius.

