

## BORNEO TRIP:



### ORSSC DIVERS RESTORE SIPIDAN'S REPUTATION

"I've been a dive guide here for two years and have yet to see a hammerhead shark", commented Chris. Lucy our very attractive guide had been with the group for nine months with similar results. An impassioned, formal talk by the Scuba Junkie Resort manager, arguing against the destructive shark fin industry, helped prepare the ground for diving in waters known for its shark population. We are all surrounded and influenced by the media hype and summer shark air patrols in our own country, so it was good to be reassured by some facts, viz: In 2009 there were 5 shark deaths reported worldwide. There were 700 accidental discharges of firearm deaths and 19 000 drug abuse deaths in the US that year. It

was against this rational background that June, Steve, Mike, Debs, Ron and Iain followed our guides into "the deep blue" crystal clear, 800 metre deep waters off the coral reef of Sipidan's South Point dive site.

Rationality took a big hit when two or three 2.5 m brown hammerheads were sighted circling below us. The guides instantly went into their own ecstatic frenzy. I only saw two hammerheads, others three, but because I 'd descended to 31m on an interception course, my focus was on a beautiful brown animal which was so close, I had second thoughts about what I was doing. Was it eyeing us off for flight or food? They circled us for 4-5 minutes providing us with a never to be repeated thrill.

On a second trip to Sipidan our group were again rewarded with a second contact with hammerhead sharks. This time we were at about 33m and saw 8-10 of them well below us travelling in a determined path to their destination. No circling this time.

The whole experience at South Point was so stimulating that I think it knocked the Abrolhos off as my top dive spot. Many of the 18 dives were similar in planning, only the size and nature of the fish species changed.

In most dives, as soon as we were down on the 10m coral reef, we were counting white tip reef and grey reef sharks – all about 2m in length, on both hands. All senses were on alert as we were joined by unconcerned hawksbill and green turtles leisurely swimming under, over and across our drift path. A descent to 22m saw us observing the myriad species of colourful tropical fish as we drifted effortlessly along the rock and coral wall which plunged into blackness below us. When we swam at right angles to the wall for ten minutes or so, we were over the "deep blue" immersed in our hammerhead experience. A current drift dive is much more leisurely than diving back home so the dives lasted much longer, up to 56 minutes for even my demanding lungs. The same depth back home would be a 35minute dive. As we returned to the wall we ascended at a safe and leisurely rate so that we had degassed sufficiently not to require a safety stop. When the guides released their markers, the boat drove to us. No big swims back to the boat.

On most dives the tropical fish life was ever inspiring. To be inside a cylinder of solid circling barracouta or big eye trevally (Jacks) was a memory we will all have; big schools of batfish or lump-headed wrasse, the well disguised ugly crocodile fish, the coronet, pipe and trigger fish and giant grouper were my favourites. Those with cameras will have hours of culling to do to preserve the best for memory lane.

Advantage of the Scuba Junkies dive resources was taken by Rose and Gary when they completed a refresher course, and by Sam and Maryann in their try dive. What a great way to gain new unforgettable experiences. I bet Maryann will always remember her 14<sup>th</sup> birthday too!

Some Ironies of the trip were clear for all. While we saw some of the clearest and best diving at Mabul and Sipidan, we also saw a massive pollution problem. Close to the stateless Bajau settlements and tourist resorts the rubbish in the water was massive. Plastic bags and bottles chip and cigarette packs were prolific. While snorkelling near the old collapsed jetty Jan, Mary Angie, Bee and I were appalled at the unmentionables we saw. I'm sure I picked up my ear infection there!

Mabul Island has four tourist resorts juxtaposed with first second and third generation Bajau people (locally referred to as Sea Gypsies), originally refugees from the Philippines. The first generation Bajau have established houses on stilts. With their own infrastructure – some shops for tourists, other food shops for their own people serviced by a walk through. The true Sea Gypsies, a number of whom were temporarily on Mabul Island, live, eat and sleep on their own 10x3m Lepa boats. They move following the monsoons, always living and being sustained by the sea. They have no support from Government. Their living causes unsustainable fishing practices as well as pollution, but they have nothing else.

Despite the extreme poverty, you can wander through a Bajau village at dusk with perfect ease, and see dozens of small, sometimes naked kids, playing happily, and older kids playing basketball or groups of young girls sitting singing and adults in groups chatting together. The sense of community is very strong.

In contrast the second week in Kota Kinabalu was five star in all respects. The girls uncovered bargains in shopping sprees for the fittest only. Graeme Cole claims the record wait time for Heidi et al (originally 40 minutes, later stretched to 3 hours) while nails and bodies were buffed in luxury. Beers were warm and expensive but the food was a welcome break from chicken, rice and noodles. Not only did Jan organise the whole trip so efficiently, she added to her legendary status by organising a Five Island Cruise, a sunset cruise and a trip to the Monsopiad Cultural Village. Much of the success of this trip has to be attributed to Jan's quiet, unobtrusive organisation. Jan you are spoiling us! Stop it! But we all appreciate your time and effort. Keep it up! Thank you from us all.

One of the features of travelling in a group is getting to know others under different circumstance. One surprising feature was Debs penchant or desire for absolute freedom in her snorkelling trips. She said it was accidental, but once she "accidentally" arranged to tear off her bikini briefs in wild abandon as she plunged into the crystal warm water. With borrowed bikini briefs she tried the caper again but this time it just did not work. There were instances of Bee bashing a hole in her head and a fire hydrant cover when she was under time pressure, Angie head butting bathroom doors, June arguing with a fallen cylinder and a burst HP hose- not to ever mention a severe loss of dignity when leaping athletically onto a tropical beach from the boat. What reduced most of us to tears was the escapade of our seasoned traveller, Phil, as he ignored luggage security, without realising his omission. On the same flight a passenger went missing and we were counted again and again. The connection with "Mr Cellophane" was coincidental but offered much mirth.

This trip reinforces the benefits of being in the Dive Section. The relaxed atmosphere and easy camaraderie coupled with the common enthusiasm for diving meant that the whole experience was enjoyable for all. A life lesson really; when you participate in section activities, we all benefit.

REC Diver

