

Malaysia's
Pom Pom Island

— *Diving the Celebes Sea*

Text and photos by Larry Cohen
and Olga Torrey





OLGA TORREY

Pom Pom Island dive boat ready for departure (above); Light filtering through structure, Mataking House Reef (right).
PREVIOUS PAGE: *Hypselodoris bullockii* 2 nudibranch

Borneo is the third largest island in the world. It is the home to three countries—Indonesia to the south, Brunei and Malaysia in the north. The Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak are located on the island. Our journey to Pom Pom Island took us to the Tawau airport in the state of Sabah. This was a two hour and 40 minute flight. We then had to take a van another hour to the port city of Semporna. This is the starting point for all dive resorts in Malaysia.



OLGA TORREY

Clown fish on night dive in front of Celebes Beach Resort



Pom Pom

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Prior to the journey, my partner, Olga Torrey, and I were invited to do presentations at the Asia Dive Conference (ADCON) in Kuala Lumpur Malaysia and dive at Pom Pom Island with the Celebes

Beach Resort. This would be the perfect trip to see how my new camera system would perform.

It was the ninth year Ness Velu and her staff have been running the Malaysia International Dive Expo (MIDE). The expo has

many exhibitors including dive operators, gear manufactures, shops and training organizations. During the conference there were many speakers including Michael Aw from Ocean Geographic Magazine. Non-divers could





TOP LEFT TO RIGHT: Petronas Twin Towers; Fountain on Dataran Merdeka (Independence Square); Guard at the King's Palace; Kuala Lumpur is a major cosmopolitan city; View from the Petronas Twin Towers with Panasonic 8mm Fisheye lens (top far right); The Olympus 40-150mm lens was used to photograph a dance performance at the National Museum (inset far right); Mother and child watch dance performance (right)

try scuba in the pool with a PADI instructor. This is the first year Ness added the Asia Dive Conference (ADCON) were experts gave presentations on photography and technical diving. Olga and I were honored to be among the presenters that also included photogra-

pher with Scubazoo Christian Loader, editor-in-chief of Action Asia Magazine Steve White, technical dive instructor with Blue Label Diving Ben Reymenants, ITDA Regional Director William Ong and underwater photographer Ab Lee.

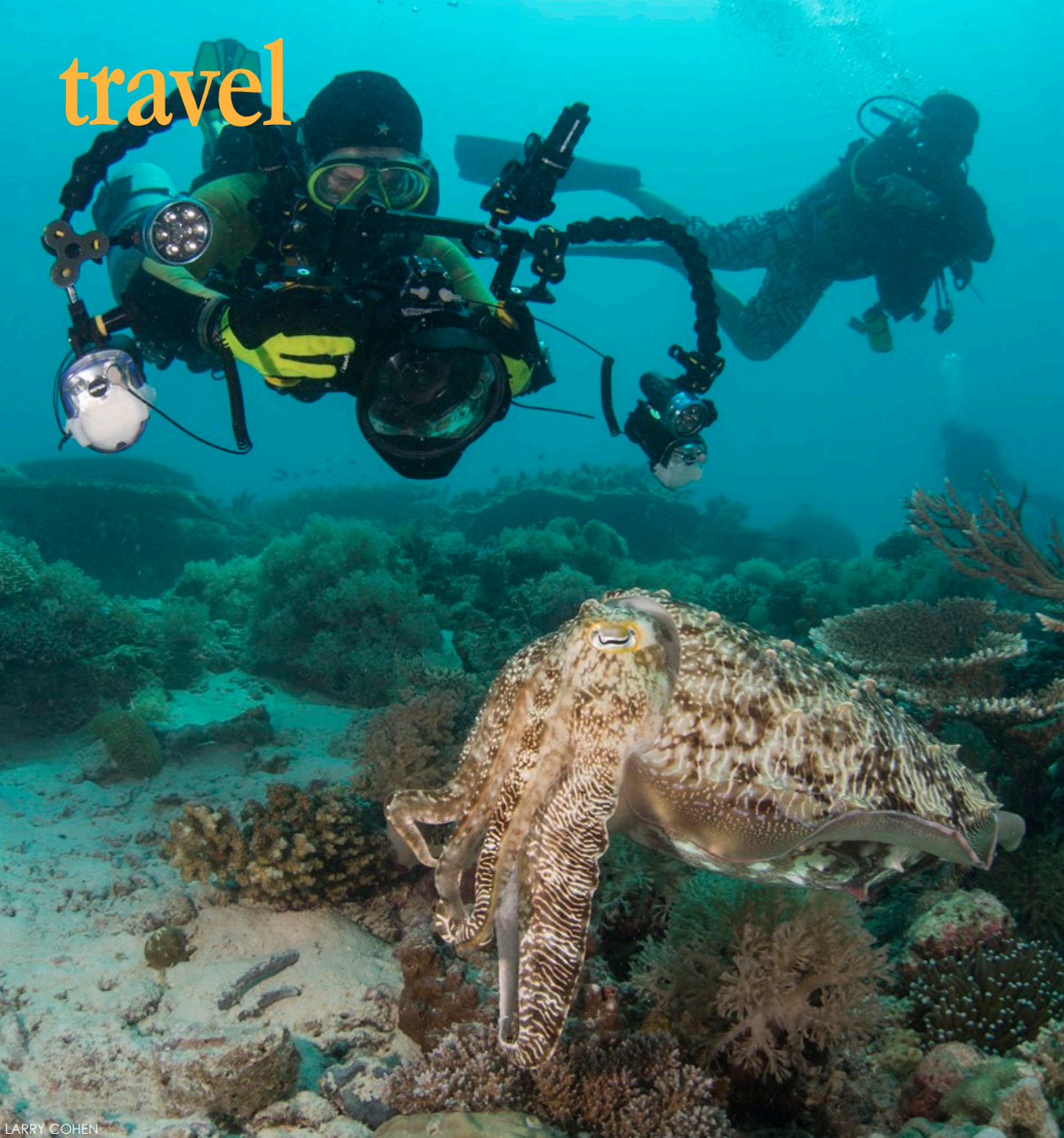
Kuala Lumpur is a major cosmopolitan city that is worth exploring with many photo opportunities. From Chinatown, the Petronas Twin Towers to the King's Palace, the architecture is varied and interesting. Working close, the 8mm fisheye could be used to create an interesting prospective with distortion. The

Panasonic 7-14mm allowed a wide view without the distinctive curve of a fisheye lens. The King's Palace is behind a gate, but from the hill, one could get a clear view. The Palace was in the distance, but by using the 40-150mm lens, it was possible to get an image without cropping.

Just like most major cities, the residents are the true soul of the city and need to be documented. Most people are extremely friendly and are more than happy to be photographed. Sometimes the problem was to get a natural candid look. When faced with a camera many people would look directly in the camera, smile and make gestures.

The 12-40mm f/2.8 PRO and Olympus 12-50mm f/3.5-6.3 ED M.Zuiko EZ were usually the lenses of

choice for these images. The lenses are wide enough for environmental portraits and street photography. The 40-150mm was useful when photographing scenes in the distance such as the dance performance at the National Museum.



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OLGA TORREY

Pom Pom



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LEFT TO RIGHT: *Chromodoris willani* nudibranch; Olga Torrey with cuttlefish, Mantabuan Island; Lionfish at Cleaning Station, leaf scorpionfish during night dive, and the pier at Celebes Beach Resort

small huts all along its length. Each hut was the office for a different resort. The Celebes Beach Resort's office was a nice space to relax out of the heat and have some water while the final paper work was taken care of.

To the right and left of this dock were many shacks on stilts. The residents of these structures are the Bajau people also known as Sea Gypsies. Once nomads who spent their entire lives on boats

traveling from island to island, they have now settled in the area. According to the January 2007 Monthly Statistical Bulletin, Department of Statistics Malaysia, they are the second-largest ethnic group in the Malaysian state of Sabah, making up 13.4 percent of the total population.

Using the 40-150mm lens, we were able to zoom into these people's lives. June is the rainy season in Malaysia. We were very

lucky and got little rain. The hour we spent on this dock, there was a downpour. The OM-D E-M1 and OM-D E-M5 are weather sealed. But not all Olympus and Panasonic lenses are. So it is important to keep your rig dry when using a non-weather sealed lens. Luckily the dock with all the dive resorts offices was covered. So was the small boat we boarded for the 45-minute ride to Pom Pom Island in the Celebes Sea.

Pom Pom Island

Pom Pom Island is small, with two resorts on the Island. Celebes Beach Resort is three and half years old at this writing. The clientele were mostly from Mainland China, Europe and Malaysia. Being from the United States, we were in the minority. The 16 rooms were in eight different buildings. The rooms were modest but clean and comfortable. The air-conditioning was strong and there was plenty of room to store extra gear.

The main pavilion housed the dining area and dive center office. The gear area had plenty of bins for gear storage and

places to hang wetsuits and BCs. There were also wash bins dedicated to certain gear. One was for cameras, another for regulators and another for wetsuits. At the time of our visit, air was the only gas available. Getting heavy gear onto the island was not easy. The staff at Celebes Beach Resort had been waiting patiently for their new nitrox system to be delivered. The nitrox system was installed just after our visit.

We had already met our dive guides for the week—Sherwin Shim, Jackson John and resort manager, Nurul Yazid—at ADCON and on the plane to Tawau.



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Clown frogfish

The waters around Pom Pom Island are known for macro life. Nurul, Jackson and Sherwin are skilled at spotting the tiniest of creatures. Exhausted from our travels we still decided to do a 6PM dive on our first day at the resort. The site directly in front of the resort is known as the Cleaning Station. I set up my housing with the 60mm macro and Olga had the Olympus 12-50mm lens with macro button on her Olympus OM-D E-M5.

Sherwin and Jackson started searching a gorgonian for pygmy seahorses. While they searched we took portraits of a nearby lionfish. Our guides



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banged on their tanks to get our attention. Using their pointers they pointed in excitement. I saw nothing. Not wanting to insult our guides, I blindly pointed my camera in the direction of their pointers. Figuring there was something really small, I manually set the camera to the closest focusing distance.

This would give me a life-size image on my camera sensor. This is known as shooting a 1:1 magnification ratio. I then moved in. When what looked to me like just a coral stem was sharp, I pressed the shutter release, expecting to have

nothing of interest in the frame.

Later, when looking at the images on the computer, everyone said you got the pygmy seahorse; I still did not see it. A life size 1:1 image of a creature that is smaller than your thumbnail was still too small. After doing some cropping, I finally saw that I got my first image of this tiny creature. Not a very good image but to my surprise it was in the frame.

For this subject I should have used the Aquatica +10 Wet Diopter Close Up Lens. This lens has a 67mm filter thread and would have been mounted



Pom Pom

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directly to my lens port. Then I would have been able to produce an image with a 50 percent increase in magnification. Of course, actually getting it in the frame is another matter.

Moving on, I was able to photograph many small creatures that I could see. Tiny clownfish would dart in and out of an anemone for protection. Anemones are poisonous to most marine life, but they have a symbiotic relationship with the clown fish.

Whenever you have on a macro lens, you see interesting large subjects. A large sea turtle and a blue spotted stingray allowed us to get extremely close. With the 60mm macro, all I could do was a turtle head-shot and a close-up of the ray's eye. Not bad for the first dive of the trip!

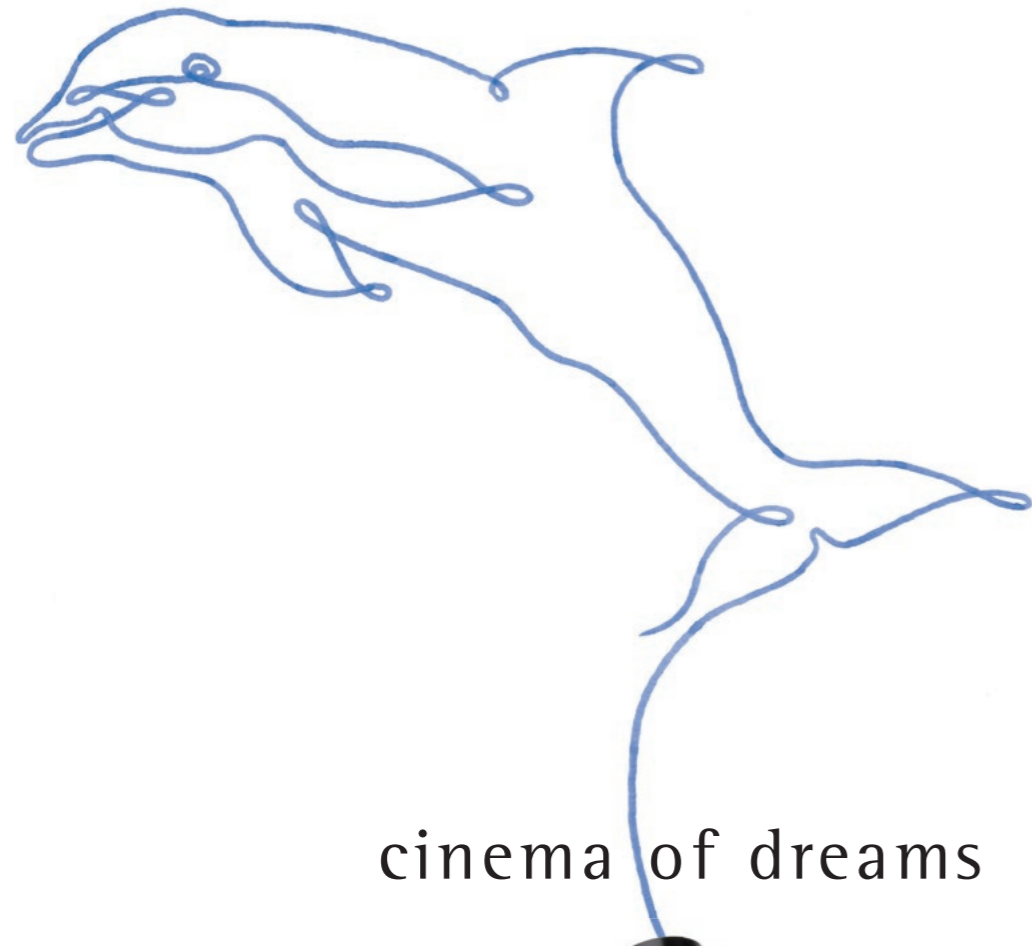


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TOP LEFT TO RIGHT: Huge barrel sponge at D'Wall; Close-up of blue spotted stingray with Olympus 60MM Macro lens; A large anemone with clown fish sits on deck behind cabin of Sipadan Mermaid wreck; Green sea turtle at Aquarium; Giant frogfish at Dulang Island's Two Sisters (above)



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Mataking Island

The first dive of day two was off Mataking Island on the Sipadan Mermaid wreck, also known as the Shipwreck Post. This artificial reef was once a liveaboard and is now an underwater post office. One can seal a postcard in a waterproof pouch and place it in the mail slot on the wreck.

The inscription on the main Post Office in New York City reads: "Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds." In Malaysia it could read, "Neither 5-knot current, nor high seas, nor

bad vis, nor gloom of night dives stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds!"

Setting my camera up with the 8mm fisheye lens, I was now in my comfort zone. The Sipadan Mermaid was a wonderful background for capturing images of the marine life that call this wreck home. A large anemone with clownfish sat on the deck just behind the cabin, and lionfish picked at the growth for food. Spotted hind, butterflyfish and other tropicals were easy to capture. Large schools of fish inside the wreck were good subjects. The

ship's engines were worth photographing. To add a human touch to the wreck photos, Sherwin and Jackson were willing models.

Diving in shallow water under piers is always very productive. These structures attract marine life and also add to the background. The pier known as Mataking House Reef was outstanding. The light filtering through the structure nicely illuminated schools of batfish and huge schools of bait fish. Scorpionfish rested on the bottom while trumpetfish did their best to look like part of the structure.

This site was very tide dependent. We did this dive when the

TOP RIGHT: Diver at mailbox on the Sipadan Mermaid wreck, also known as Shipwreck Post



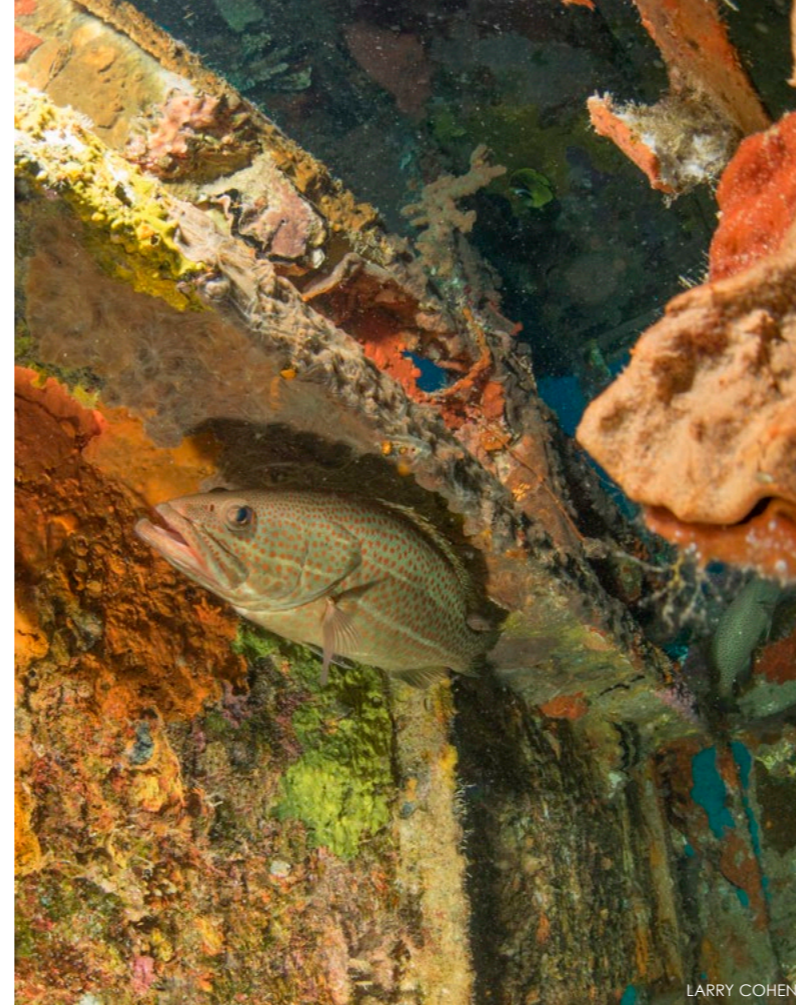
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tide was going out. So we had to deal with a two-knot current. The boat dropped us off up current, so we easily drifted under the pier. Once we got to our destination, we had to hold on for dear life. The technique that worked was to brace our backs against part of the structure so we could stay steady and frame our images.

After a brief rest back at the resort, we went out to dive the Sipadan Pom Pom Resort wreck. This was the supply boat for Pom Pom Island Resort. The boat was sunk on the house reef just a few days before we arrived. This gave us the opportunity to photograph a clean

wreck without marine growth. It was fun to place our models inside the wheel-house next to the engine throttles and around the construction machinery on the deck.

The boat sits right side up. In the stern we photographed our dive guides next to the propeller. It would be interesting to come back in six months to see how much marine growth develops on the wreck. Next to the wreck was a healthy reef filled with colorful hard corals and sea fans. Anemones with clownfish were layered on top of large plate coral, giving us plenty of opportunity to use wide-angle or fisheye lenses.



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TOLGA TORREY

LEFT TO RIGHT: Large schools of sweepers, slender grouper and lionfish on Sipadan Mermaid wreck; Sipadan Pom Pom Resort wreck was sunk a few days before we dove it; Divers at engine throttles and by propeller (far right)



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THIS PAGE: Cuttlefish at the Aquarium, Mantabuan Island; Using a 4-inch dome with Panasonic 8mm fisheye dome allowed this shy cuttlefish to be photographed (left); Cuttlefish and tridacna clam (below); Sea stars at North Point (center inset)

usually they were too far away to photograph. When we did get close enough, the turtles were not happy to be photographed and only gave us a few minutes to set up the shot. Being able to use the zoom, Olga had better results with the 7-14mm lens than I did with the 8mm fisheye. I decided I would add the Olympus M.Zuiko Digital ED 9-18mm f/4.0-5.6 lens and



they stayed their ground. This gave us time to properly set up our cameras for each photograph. One shy cuttlefish did back himself up into a small coral overhang. Having the small 4-inch fisheye dome attached to my housing, I was able to pull in my strobe arms and position my rig in front of the opening. I blindly fired the shutter and moved to a second opening on the side. I again fired blindly, figuring it was worth a try. To my surprise, I got two perfectly framed images.



Mantabuan Island

On our third day of diving, we decided to stay with the fish-eye and wide angle lenses. Heading to Mantabuan Island, we would dive in the Malaysian national park site known as the Aquarium. Our first dive would be on the side of the reef with large numbers of hard corals while our second dive would be in an area with soft corals. The area was also known for a large population of turtles.

Aquatica SW8 dome, 30602 extension ring and 30505 zoom gear to my underwater toolbox.

The highlight on these two dives was the cuttlefish encounters. These intelligent cephalopods are closely related to octopuses and squid. We saw them on both dives. They changed color and did not seem pleased to model for us but

We did see many turtles but

North Point. Our third dive of the day was on North Point. We went

down the wall to 120 feet and worked our way up. The coral was lush on the deeper part of the wall. As we reached the shallows, the

Green sea turtle with remora at North Point, Mantabuan Island



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THIS PAGE: Macro life at Two Brothers, Bohey Dulang Island. CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: School of juvenile striped eel catfish; *Nembrotha milleri* nudibranch (left inset); Boxfish; Giant frogfish on reef; Commensal shrimp on anemone

large school of juvenile catfish and a variety of different frogfish. We also saw leaf fish and orangutan crabs.

On the third dive, we went back to the Matakang House Reef and the pier. We tried to time this so we

reef showed signs of stress. El Nino, dynamite fishing and industrial run-off were the causes. Even though the coral was not in the best shape. There was a nice variety of tropical fish, nudibranchs and turtles. Still we wished we had nitrox, so we could have stayed deep longer.

Bohey Dulang Island

The next day we decided to arm ourselves with our macro lenses so we could capture the tiny creatures for which this area is known. Our destination for the first two dives of the day was Bohey Dulang Island's Two Brothers and Two Sisters. We joked, asking where the uncles, aunts and cousins where.

You could spend one hour and only move a few feet on these sites. The variety of nudibranchs was staggering. We also photographed many tiny fish including a boxfish that looked like a cartoon character. There was also a



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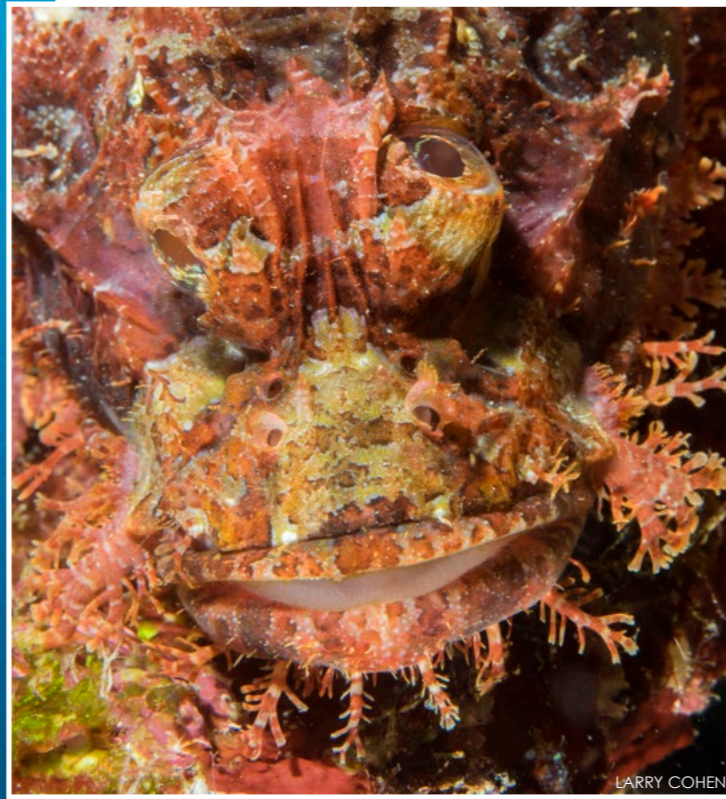
The W4 also features double computer strap anchors with anti slip, comfort front neck zipper, inner plush lining, seat and shoulder antislip reinforcement.



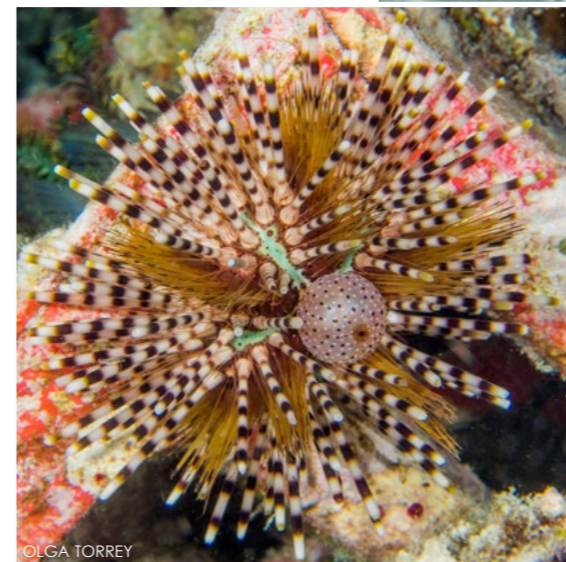
The WPAD™, or the Waterproof Personal Accessory Dock, is a soft artfully constructed docking station located on the right thigh used for attaching our expandable pocket.

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LEFT TO RIGHT: Celebrating Olga's 400th dive with a group photo; Mugshot of bearded scorpionfish on night dive in front of resort; Banded sea urchin (right inset); Juvenile golden batfish at Matakning House Reef pier



would have less current than our previous dive. This was also a special day being Olga's 400th dive. The Celebes Beach Resort staff created a Happy 400th Dive slate. We did group photos to celebrate this landmark dive in her career. Arranging a group of four divers is a bit of a challenge even if you are an experienced event photographer on land. Since there is no gravity restriction one could position some of the divers above the group without needing steps. Just like on land, the slate has to be angled down so it does not pick up the reflection from your strobes.

After the group photo we preceded to swim to the pier. We seemed to have miscalculated the tide. The current was even stronger than our first dive at this site. We were also now down current and I felt like a salmon swimming up stream. Jackson and Sherwin decided

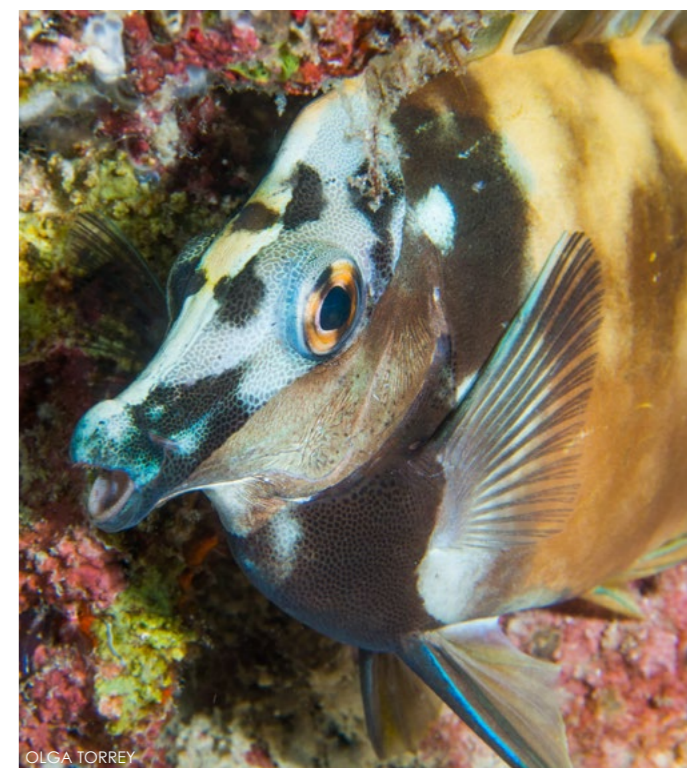
to help me by dragging me to the pier. I figured with the current this strong, being under the pier would not be productive. I tried to communicate that I wanted to stay in the area with less current. They proceeded to drag me to the pier as I was shaking my head nooooo! With the pier in site, they finally realized I wanted to go back to the reef. When they let go of me and the rocks, the three of us flew back in the current like an out-of-control airplane. Meanwhile Olga and Nurul, crawling hand over hand, did make it to the pier.

The current was so strong, Olga's Beneath The Surface Flex strobes arms swayed back and forth like they were being blown in a strong wind. She did get stunning photographs of the school of baitfish creating living patterns in

the current. Once I blew back to an area with less current, I concentrated

on shooting coral formations and sea fans. In some of the images, I used Sherwin as a model. Just like photos of wrecks, models add scale and a human element to the photo. We now know that sea fan is larger than the diver's head.

With one more day of diving left, we decided a forth dive was in order. I usually am not a fan of night dives. I enjoy balancing my strobe lights with the available light underwater to create a natural balance. When shooting inside a cave or shipwreck, we will use three to four strobes. This way we could still light the background by bouncing the extra



Nembrotha nudibranch, Celebes Beach Resort

Colorful reef fish at Cleaning Station



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look like moving Easter bonnets, inching along the bottom. Ghost pipefish, eels and other nocturnal animals come out to feed.

The autofocus on our cameras worked well in low light. But a good focus light helps especially on night dives. Since there was no available light, we used a fast shutter speed. This stops moving subjects and you do not see the effect of the focus light.

D' Wall. On our last day of diving, we headed back to Matakating Island to dive D' Wall. Large coral formations and sea fans were all along the wall and there were also huge barrel sponges. Blue sea stars, giant calms and shrimps could be seen at this site.

Mandarin Playground. That evening we did a twilight dive at Mandarin Playground back at Pom Pom Island. The plan was to photograph mandarinfish mating. You really need the patience of a saint, staying in one spot for what seems like an eternity. Finally the very colorful and speedy mandarinfish started to



OLGA TORREY

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: Octopus at Mandarin Playground, Pom Pom Island; Juvenile solar powered nudibranch at D' Wall, Matakating Island; Christmas tree worms, Celebes Beach Resort; Tires and other structures used to rebuild reef, Matakating Island; Mandarinfish at Mandarin Playground, Pom Pom Island; Hermit crab, Celebes Beach Resort

Saddled toby at Mandarin Playground, Pom Pom Island



Bell in Chinese temple (left); Entrance of Chinese temple (above)

dart in and out of the coral. The camera has to be ready since mating happens extremely fast. With all the other nudibranchs and colorful fish around, I only lasted at the site as long as an excited male mandarin fish. Being more patient, Olga stood her ground and was rewarded with a single male mandarin fish looking for his honey.

Topside excursions

The plan for our last day on Pom Pom Island was to go over to Bohey Dulang Island to hike up 600 meters to the peak. Due to bad weather, this was not possible. We did a small hike around Pom Pom Island and spent the day relaxing and sharing the week's stories with our new friends.

From the Kuala Lumpur airport, we drove two hours to the historic city of Melaka. This city is a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 7 July 2008. Malacca was a fishing village inhabited by local Malays people and was the location of the first Sultan. The local monarchy was abolished when the

Portuguese took control of the area in 1511. We visited and photographed historic buildings and forts in the very busy tourist area. The streets were crowded and families were stuffed into bicycle rickshaws decorated with Hello Kitty dolls.

In order to get clean photos without the hordes of tourists, we had to use the 40-150mm lens and shoot up from a distance. At times we did use the 12-40mm, 12-50mm and 7-14mm lenses. But this required patience. We had to wait until the extra people and Hello Kitty vehicles exited our viewfinders.

Exploring the side streets, we were able to find areas of interest that were less crowded. There was a Chinese Temple, which we were allowed to enter and photograph. A mosque up the street from the temple was closed, but we were able to photograph the exterior. We talked to two men that were freediving without gear in the river. On every breath hold, they would surface with coins and broken pottery from times long ago.

After diving in warm 30°C water with 100 feet visibility, it was time to head

back to New York, with 30 feet vis average and water so cold we need dry-suits. We are looking forward to heading back to Malaysia where both the water and the people are warm. □

Larry Cohen and Olga Torrey are well-traveled and published underwater photographers based in New York City, New York. They offer underwater photography courses and presentations to dive shops, clubs and events. For more information, visit: Liquidimagesuw.com

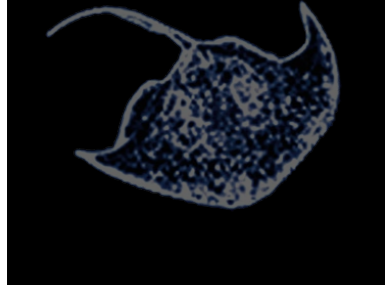


Ancient coins found by freedivers without gear in the river



Historic Melaka is an UNESCO World Heritage Site

fact file



Malaysia



SOURCES: U.S. CIA WORLD FACTBOOK, XE.COM, TRAVEL.STATE.GOV, POMPOMISLAND.COM, PANDA.ORG

History Great Britain established colonies and protectorates in the area of current Malaysia during the late 18th and 19th centuries. Japan occupied these areas from 1942 to 1945. The British-ruled territories on the Malay Peninsula formed the Federation of Malaya in 1948. In 1957, it became independent. When the former British colonies of Singapore and the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak on the northern coast of Borneo joined the Federation in 1963, Malaysia was formed. The new nation faced challenges in its first several years including a Communist insurgency, Singapore's secession from the Federation in 1965, Indonesian confrontation, and Philippine claims to Sabah. However, Malaysia was successful in diversifying its economy from dependence on exports of raw materials to expansion in manufacturing, services, and tourism during the 22-year term of Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad (1981-2003). Government: constitutional monarchy. Capital: Kuala Lumpur

Geography Malaysia is located in southeastern Asia. It includes the peninsula that borders Thailand and the northern one-third of the island of Borneo, which borders Indonesia, Brunei, and the South China Sea, south

of Vietnam. Coastline: 4,675 km. Terrain: coastal plains that rise to hills and mountains. Lowest point: Indian Ocean 0m. Highest point: Gunung Kinabalu 4,100m. Note: Malaysia lies in a strategic location along the Strait of Malacca and the southern end of the South China Sea.

Economy Malaysia, a middle-income country, has transformed itself since 70's from a producer of raw materials into an emerging multi-sector economy. Under current Prime Minister Najib, Malaysia is attempting to achieve high-income status by 2020 and to move farther up the value-added production chain by attracting investments in Islamic finance, high technology industries, biotechnology, and services. The government has also taken steps to liberalize some services sub-sectors as well as boost domestic demand and reduce the economy's dependence on exports. Nevertheless, exports—particularly of electronics, oil and gas, palm oil and rubber—remain a significant driver of the economy. Bank Negara Malaysia (central bank) maintains healthy foreign exchange reserves, and a well-developed regulatory regime has limited Malaysia's exposure to riskier financial instruments and the global financial crisis. In September 2013 Najib

launched the new Bumiputra Economic Empowerment Program (BEEP), policies that favor and advance the economic condition of ethnic Malays.

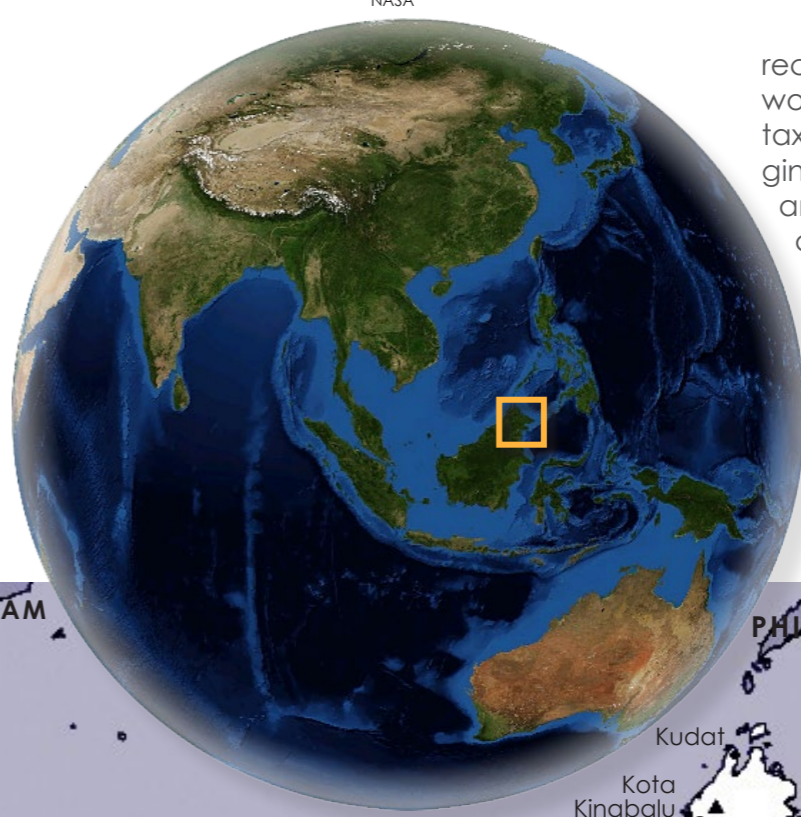
Climate Malaysia enjoys a tropical climate with high temperatures and humidity year round. There is an annual southwest monsoon from April to October, and a northeast monsoon from October to February. Natural hazards include flooding, landslides and forest fires

Environmental issues Malaysia has a relatively positive track record on the environment, but still faces challenges including deforestation, soil and coastal erosion, overfishing and destruction of coral reefs, as well as air and water pollution, and problems in the disposal of waste.

Currency Ringgits (MYR) Exchange rates: 1EUR=4.15MYR; 1USD=3.27MYR; 1GBP=5.32; 1AUD= 2.86MYR; 1SGD=2.57MYR

Population 30,073,353 (July 2014 est.) Ethnic groups: Malay 50.1%, Chinese 22.6%, indigenous 11.8%, Indian 6.7%, other

RIGHT: Global map with location of the Malaysian state of Sabah on the island of Borneo
BELOW: Location of Pom Pom Island on map of Malaysia



recommended that especially women travelling alone hail taxis by phone rather than flagging one down on the street and then checking the cab driver's license upon entry, as there have been recent violent incidents against foreigners by local taxi drivers. For more detailed information, check with your state department for the latest updates on security issues in Malaysia.

Health Contact your state's health advisory for updates on warnings and appropriate inoculations for travelers. In Malaysia, there is an intermediate degree of risk for food or water-borne diseases such as bacterial diarrhea, mosquito-borne diseases such as dengue fever, and water contact disease such as leptospi-

0.7%, non-citizens 8.2% (2010 est.) Religions: Muslim (official) 61.3%, Buddhist 19.8%, Christian 9.2%, Hindu 6.3%, Confucianism, Taoism, other traditional Chinese religions 1.3% (2010 est.) Internet users: 15.355 million (2009)

Language Bahasa Malaysia (official), English, Chinese (Cantonese, Mandarin, Hokkien, Hakka, Hainan, Foochow), Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Panjabi, Thai. There are several indigenous languages in East Malaysia; Iban and Kadazan are most widely spoken

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for stays less than 90 days. Note: There are strict laws against drug trafficking, including possession of heroin and marijuana, with convictions leading to a mandatory death penalty.

Travel advisory There have been recent attacks by terrorists and extremist groups against foreigners in the region. The U.S. State Department warns citizens to avoid travel to coastal eastern Sabah (Eastern Malaysia). However, the Malaysian government has placed added security (police and military personnel) at the resorts in this area. Direct transit with reputable tour companies is advised. In urban areas, it is

rosis. The highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza was identified in Malaysia but there is a negligible risk with very rare cases possible among visitors who get in close contact with birds (2013).

Make sure you bring adequate travel health insurance and repatriation funds.

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