

# Clement Lee

Text and photos by Peter Symes

**Clement Lee is the embodiment of the entrepreneurial dive industry pioneer. A quarter of a century ago, he seeded what was later to become a flourishing recreational dive industry in the Malaysian state of Sabah. In this interview, we take a reminiscent look back at the challenges overcome and the awards won.**

*PS: When was the first time you saw and dived on Sipadan? Can you recall your first impressions and sentiments? Did you think that this could become one of the finest dive destinations on the planet?*

CL: We started Borneo Divers in 1983, but it was in 1984 we went to do a survey of a freighter in Ligitan reef, and after the survey, we went straight to Sipadan to check it out, because we could tell from the depth charts that it had to be significantly different from the other islands that we knew.

And already from the first

time we hit the water there, we saw that it was something special and that this was our future. What I saw was beyond description. It was like a living aquarium. We thought it was an adventure area, but at the same time, we also asked ourselves how to protect this pristine environment and the marine life.

*PS: What was there then? Was there any sort of tourist infrastructure in the area at all?*

CL: Semporna (the bustling town which is a point of disembarkation for the resorts on Mabul, Kapalai and others –ed.) was just a fishing village at the time, with no infrastructure and only very basic facilities. When we started off on Sipadan, we had to buy, hire and bring in everything from Semporna and Tawau (bigger towns some distance away –ed.) using chartered boats to bring it to the island. In a way, there was none at all. We had to start from zero.

*PS: What made you decide to go into recreational diving and build a dive operation?*

CL: There was no professional recreational dive industry at all

at the time. So, we needed to start it, but at the same time, we also needed to start dive tourism in the area. We brought in the first guests in 1984 and never looked back.

*PS: What obstacles did you have to overcome?*

CL: Oh dear... There were just too many. Since we are talking about Sipadan, it was everything from permissions to logistical issues and setting up infrastructure. Because we were the pioneers, nobody knew about recreational scuba diving or what the dive industry was all about, so there was no help to get. We had to organise everything ourselves. And at that time, things like the airport were not as good as they are today, and transfers from the airport took 3-4 hours in contrast to the hour it takes today. It was a quite a challenge, but I am glad to say that over the years, things have smoothed out and better infrastructure has been built.

*PS: What do you consider your biggest victories or achievements?*

CL: When we started, we knew where we going. The ques-

Clement Lee in his Kota Kinabalu office







tion was how we were going to achieve it? So, seeing Sipadan now being hailed as one of the best dive sites in the world and bringing it to the public, I consider that our biggest achievement in terms of the hard work that was put into it. Another is being able to sit down and work out how to protect the island

be improved, because the crucial number is not the number for visitors, but the number of dives. But we do feel that Sipadan is now protected for the future, and that we have already seen results in the form of improvements in the marine life.

*guest permits (120) for Sipadan obviously fall far short of popular demand. With all the resorts now in the area, how is it possible to distribute these permits fairly? Who has the final say?*

CL: This is quite a difficult question. There will never be enough, which means that some or even

a lot of guests will be disappointed if they don't get to Sipadan, but as I often tell my staff or fellow resort operators, "In order to see the rainbow we have to put up with the rain." It is a necessary sacrifice we had to make. So, in my explanations to my divers and colleagues, I always urge them to protect the underwater environment, and I ask them to think if they do one dive less, they are actually contributing to the protection of the environment.

In regards to the number of permitted visitors, it is still controlled by our National Security Council, which is an independent body that has the final say on the matter.

*PS: The number of resorts*

*PS: The limited number of day*

*PS: Sipadan seems to be better protected now, but do you think the latest protection measures and restrictions are the right ones? What can be improved?*

CL: Sipadan now has a limited quota of 120 guests per day, which in many ways, is a role model, although the system can



THIS PAGE: Images from Borneo Divers resort on Mabul Island  
TOP LEFT: Clement Lee enjoying breakfast with guests in the canteen





is no point in just transferring the problems of Sipadan to another island. That being said, there are quite a lot of islands in the area that are uninhabited, undeveloped and where the underwater life is of equal quality—in terms of macro life—to Mabul. The only problem is that this area once had some issues with dynamite fishing, but tourism will put a definite end to it, and thus improve the environment. So indirectly, tourism will improve the marine life. Meanwhile, curbing over-development in some areas will come down to the authorities.

*PS: A while back, there were rumours about shark finning taking place on Mabul? Was there any truth to it?*

CL: We need to get the perspective right. There wasn't shark finning as such where you cut off the fins and throw the rest of the fish back to the sea, and I can assure that that isn't the case. There are only three families on the island that have been involved with shark fishing, and they have been doing so for centuries, but they go far away from the island and into international waters to do their catches, and they sell the whole fish, and

they don't go out very often anyway. I've been living on Mabul since 2004, and now I actually see more sharks today than few years ago. Probably not because there are more sharks, but that they are less shy of people than before. I've checked with the fisheries departments, and while there are no formal catch limits in place here, there don't seem to be any concerns about the local shark populations either.

*PS: There were also some writings in the press about an aquarium to be built on Mabul? What was that about?*

CL: I know very little about this project. But it was actually about an 'Oceanarium' that was more like a museum. But if someone has the significant kind of money needed—which I doubt—the money is better spent elsewhere, such as Ligitan Island, which I said to the consultant on the project. But I have not heard anything about any developments.

THIS PAGE: Scenes from Borneo Divers resort. RIGHT: On the pier, Clement Lee prepares an underwater camera



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*PS: You are also the chairman of Sabah Tourism Association. How do you see Sabah's development economically in an ecologically sustainable way? Coming to the region as a tourist, one gets the impression that a lot of rain-forests have been and still are being cleared to give way for oil palm plantations. Are the conservation laws and measures strong enough to stand up against big economic interests?*

CL: In Sabah, we are helping to develop a nation, and we have to do what we need to develop the country, but as a member of the Sabah tourism board, I know that whatever we do, it's going in the right direction, because we are continuously working in an ecologically sustainable manner and promoting our region in terms of adventure and eco-tourism. We adopt the principle of less is more, in not going after the mass tourism, which we can't accommodate. We don't want to have to build a big theme park when we've got great nature.

In regards to the felling of the trees, it is to make room for oil palm plantations, which is the main source of our income. But I must also highlight that in those areas where forests are being cleared to make room for plantations, special reforestation programs are implemented under which new trees have to be replanted, so that the same acreage of forest is maintained and managed in a sustainable way. Also the conservation laws now regulating the oil palm indus-

try require the establishment of wildlife corridors and compulsory wildlife zones. I do believe that while we have made mistakes in this area in the past, we are now going in the right direction.

*PS: What is the key to successfully balancing being an entrepreneur and having a family?*

CL: (Laughter) This is a tricky one and a balancing act. I suppose that wife and husband must share the same ideology, principles and commitment at the same time but—believe me—it also calls for a lot of sacrifice. But if you share a vision, you also know where the sacrifices will take you.

*PS: What diving experience has had the biggest impact on you?*

CL: Diving has had a tremendous effect on me and has changed my entire life. It has made me more conscious about my surroundings and the environment. Before I took up diving, I did not know what was important and what effected me. I didn't care. Now, I am much more aware of the surrounding life. It has opened my eyes and made me much more alert. It changed my mind. I started noticing things, seeing the colours, and I started wondering about things I saw in nature. I now know where I am going and feel like I have to share my experiences with world. I can't imagine what I would be without diving. I never looked back after taking up diving.

*PS: What is your next ambition or dream?*

CL: Well...umm, to retire as a Malaysian diving ambassador. No, I am just kidding. I would like to see the local dive industry, which we have been nurturing since our beginnings in 1984, to continue to develop and serve as a role model for the many upcoming countries that are just about to develop their own dive industries, and (I hope) that Sipadan can be a good example of how a government can balance money and the environment and be prepared to make long-term and investments in the future and in a sustainable way. That is something I think we can be proud of.

*PS: Any other thoughts you want to share with us?*

CL: People who see me dive at the resort—and I regularly dive four dives a day just like many of them—often ask me if I ever tire of diving. No! I still get a lot of fun out of diving. And I still get a lot of joy out of seeing happy customers enjoying the underwater environment. This is very important to me, to continue to have this kind of fun. At the same time, I also let my staff dive, now that we do make money, but we make it from happy customers and not somebody unhappy, and we continue to do so. I have to show them how beautiful the underwater world is. ■



Clement Lee in front of the numerous international resort and dive industry awards he and his operations have garnered over the years. TOP LEFT: Sipadan Island