

Pom Pom Island

— *Macro Diving in Malaysia*

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Tropical seascape and islands around Pom Pom Island, Malaysia

Blessed with some of the richest waters in the world, Borneo's Pom Pom Island offers some truly memorable macro diving. If you want prolonged, up-close encounters with some crazy macro critters and the chance to photograph the tiniest nudibranchs in the world, Pulau Pom Pom, in remote Sabah, is the place to go!

Pom Pom has become increasingly known as a macro dive destination over the last few years. The area is especially famous for its beautiful beaches and the abundance of green turtles. Its more famous neighbour, Pulau Sipadan, has long been attracting

divers by the thousands to explore the steep, deep walls surrounding the island. Meanwhile, only a few in-the-know macro photographers are diving the rich, sloping, rubble reefs around Pom Pom. Their reward is jaw-dropping encounters with numerous species of nudibranchs and other rarely encountered macro life.

I have been on the Pom Pom carousel for the last four years and have just returned from another great trip. This time, my spotter and macro-enthusiast buddy, Ah Long, took me to a new site he recently discovered. The secret site, dubbed Macromania, was said to have revealed an astounding number of rare and spectacular macro life including what some consider the "Holy Grail" of nudibranchs—the *Melibe colemani*.

Equipped with my two stacked macro wet lenses, I was eager to start photo-



Chromodoris willani nudibranch at Macromania

Sea turtle in the blue around Pom Pom Island, Malaysia

PREVIOUS PAGE: Emperor shrimp on a *Nembrotha mileri* nudibranch at Macromania



Pom Pom



graphing the 3mm to 1cm long nudibranchs Ah Long assured me we would encounter on this dive site. Indeed, it proved to be a macro-lover's paradise!

Just short boat trip from the resort, the gentle slope stretches from a shallow plateau at 5m to beyond 45m. The site, comprised predominantly of rubble, is home to some extraordinary nudibranchs, with new ones being found on a regular basis.

Our dive group spent a minimum of 70 minutes on each dive at a maximum depth of 24m before being chased to the surface by our exceedingly irritated dive computers. There was just too much to shoot in too little time. Besides all the nudibranchs found, we also were able to spend some time with a tiger shrimp!

Giddy with anticipation, we headed back to the resort to check out our

shots, and were happy to have been rewarded for our endeavours. If you are a macro critter fan, this dive site is definitely a must. It is all about the small stuff here.

Macro wet lenses

Pom Pom Island's sea turtles are great to photograph, but the real challenge was shooting the small critters in the area. My Sony RX100IV camera is great for wide-angle, but to get close-ups of the tiniest nudibranchs and shrimps, I found I needed to add wet lenses (which can be added or removed underwater).

Macro photography gives a totally different perspective of the world of the smallest reef life—a world often unseen by divers. For those who take their time and train their eyes, those boring patches of rubble can prove to

be teeming with life! Equipped with my rig and a Nauticam SMC macro diopter, I went on the first dive.

However, I soon realized I needed another wet lens to be able to close the distance. In between dives, I stacked the Inon +8 on top. Then, all I needed to do was get close to my subjects and zoom in as much as I could to create a superb magnified image.

But it proved easier said than done, as some nudibranchs moved surprisingly fast, shrimps jumped around the rubble and hydroids with Doto nudibranchs swayed in the current. It takes patience, understanding of light, positioning, composition, and of course, luck to get THE shot.

On each dive, I spent countless long minutes waiting for the right moment to press the shutter button.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The "Holy Grail" of nudibranchs—*Melibe colemani*, at Pom Pom Island; Cleaner shrimp on soft coral; *Phylodesmium* nudibranch at Macromania

Doto nudibranch on hydroid (left); *Dendronotus nudibranch* at Macromania (below)



How to get there

There are daily flights from Kuala Lumpur and Kota Kinabalu to Tawau. From Tawau, continue the journey by a one-hour mini-bus drive to Semporna town. Speedboat transfer is from the Semporna jetty to Pom Pom Island. The boat ride takes about 45 minutes. ■

Many thanks to Celebes Beach Resort and Andy Chong for the numerous stays over the past few years. A big thank you to Nurul Yazid and dive guides Ah Long Yong and Axu Kokkonen for showing me the tiniest macro life on the reefs over and over again. See: Celebescuba.com.

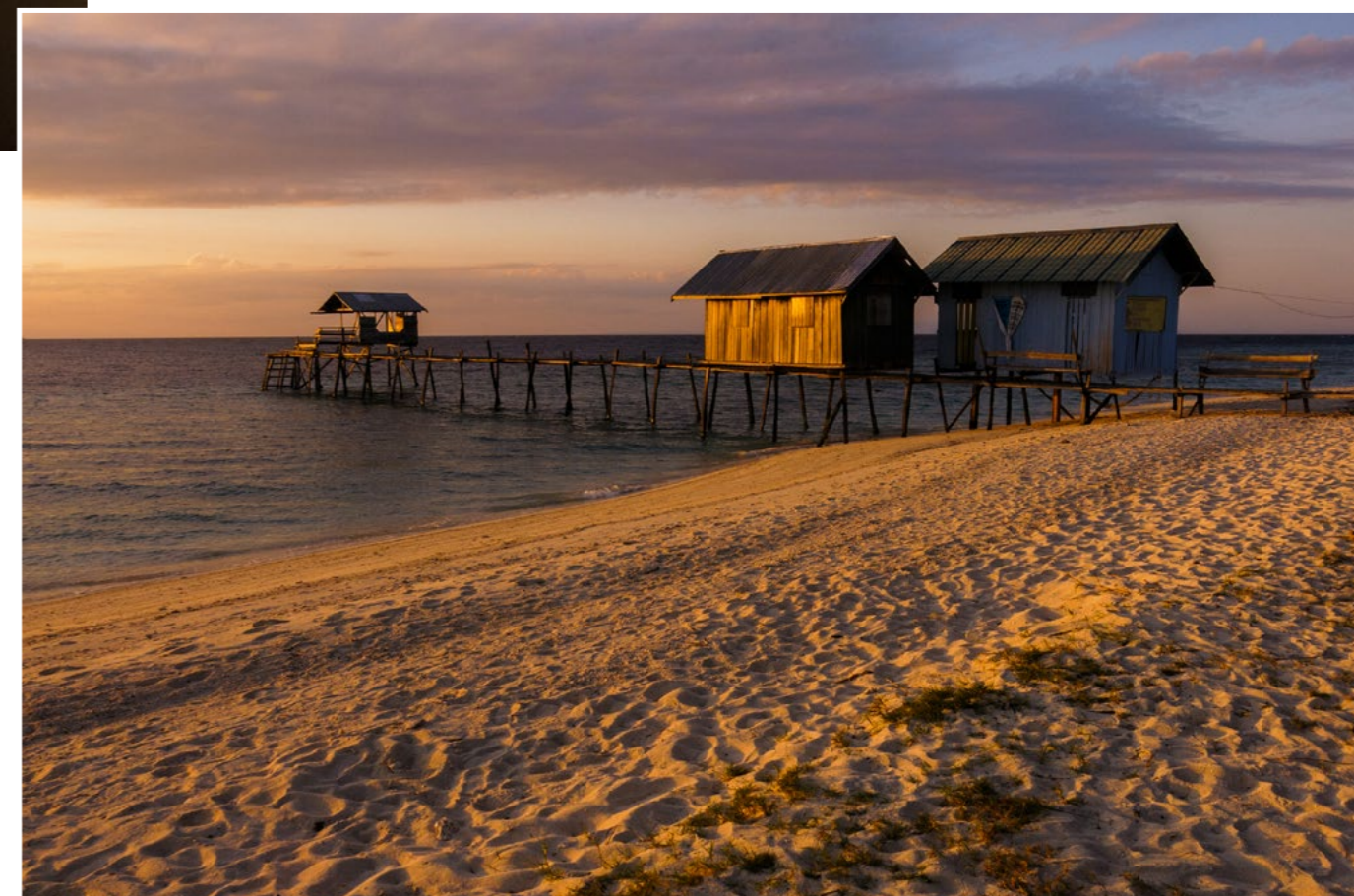
Thailand-based Elisabeth Lauwerys has long been passionate about exploring the marine depths. In 2004, she opened

Oceans Below Underwater Video Productions on Koh Tao. Since then, she has created the dive industry's first professional-level video training course; won numerous underwater video competitions; worked with the BBC and other production houses; created a new look for the PADI promotional videos; and has recently started making the transition from video to still photography. She continues to teach budding underwater videographers and

travel the world in pursuit of the most spectacular and diverse diving environments—all the while, equipped with her



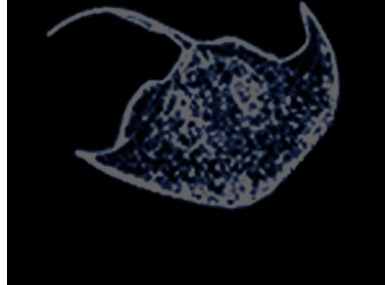
cameras and housings. To learn more about the author's work, check out: Oceansbelow.net.



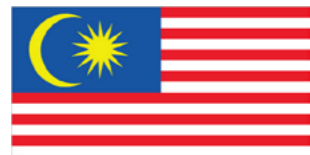
Chromodoris leopardus nudibranch at Macromania (left); The jetty at Pom Pom Island (above)



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 Malaysia
BELOW: Location of Pom Pom Island, Mabul Island and Pulau Rawa on map of Malaysia



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

Visa Passport valid for six months, with at least one blank page for entry stamp. No tourist visa required

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

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-

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.

Decompression chamber Decompression Chamber Kota Kinabalu Chamber (60) 88 251326

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