

Malaysia's Pulau Rawa

Text and photos by Nick Shallcross





Located just a 20-minute speedboat ride from the coastal town of Mersing in Malaysia, Pulau Rawa offers a great alternative for those looking for a mixture of diving, beach time, relaxation and just to get away from it all.

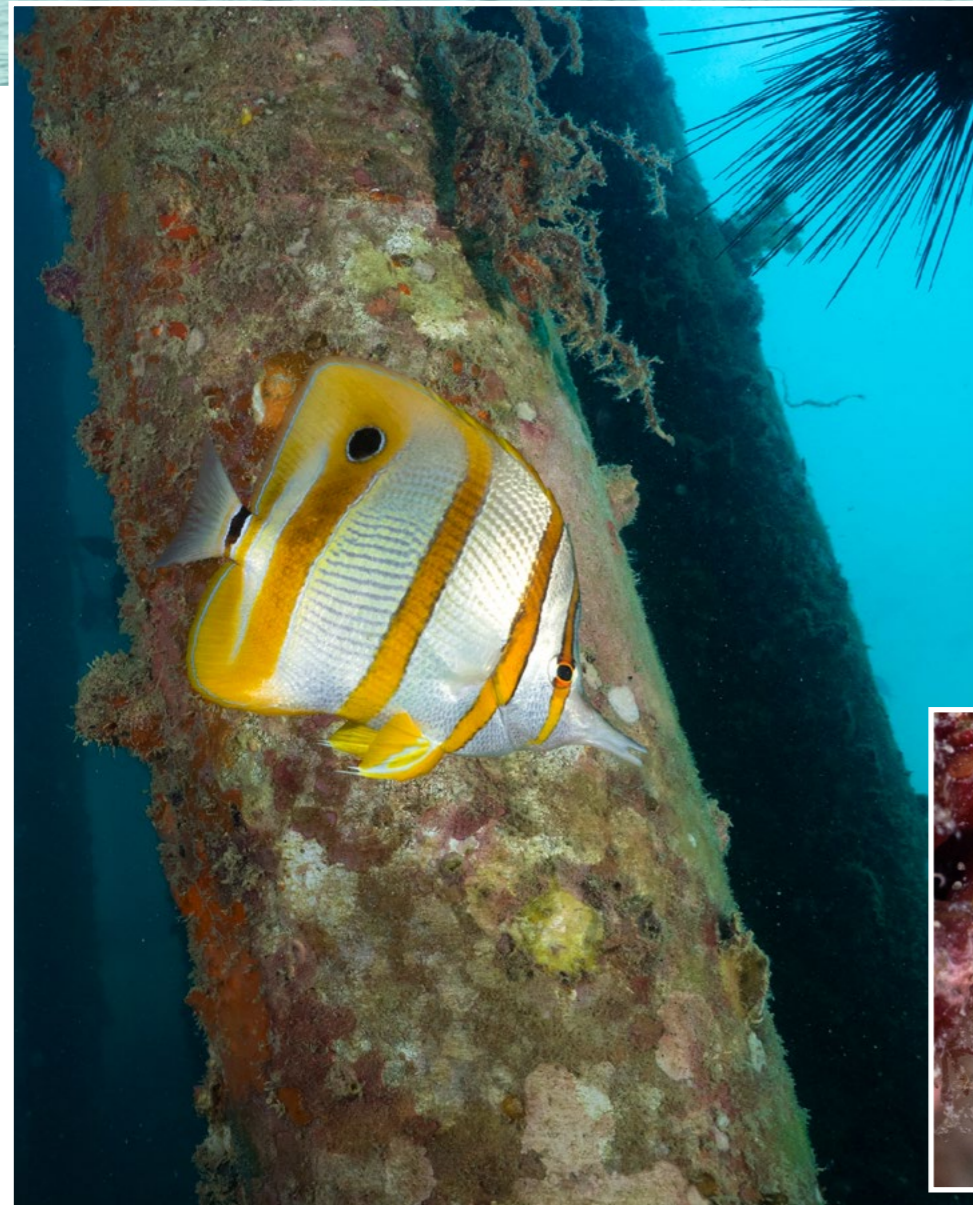
Malaysia is by far one of the most popular destinations in Southeast Asia to dive. It is home to world-class dive sites such as Sipadan Island, famous for its schooling fish, sharks and turtles; the islands around Mabul and Kapalai for their muck diving and strange critters; and the tiny island of Layang Layang for its schooling hammerhead sharks.

Some locations are also becoming more and more popular with backpackers and travelers looking to learn to dive. Places like Tioman and the Perhentian Islands are home to some great diving, and are the ideal locations to complete entry level dive courses or for experienced divers to kick back and relax.

These places are great for divers looking for a real adventure and some amazing diving, but some are a little off the beaten track or have nothing for the non-divers in your group. Not everyone wants to spend days travelling to remote areas, or to go to places where all you can do is dive, dive and keep diving. For these folks, Pulau Rawa is an attractive option.



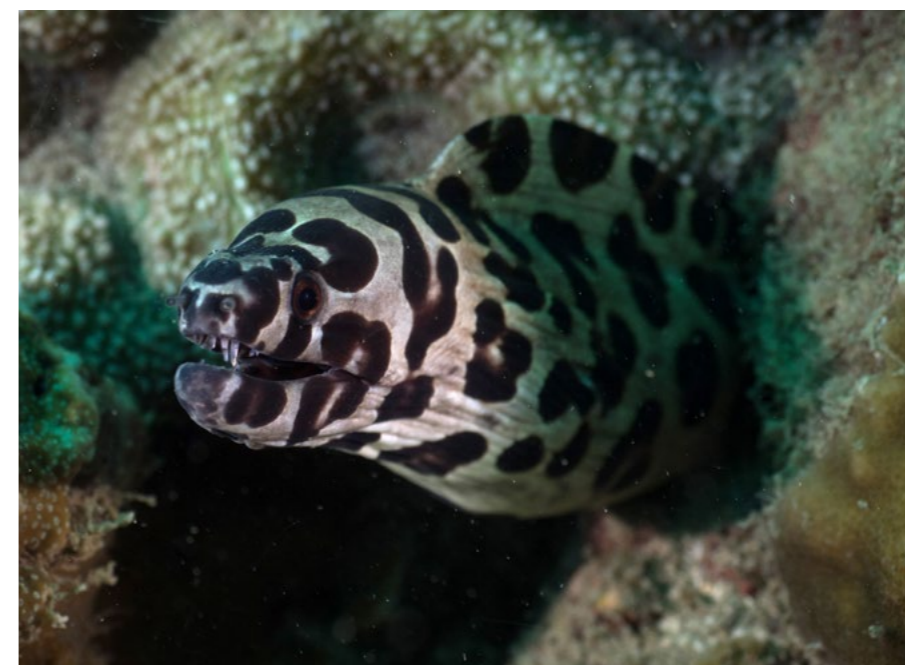
THIS PAGE: Scenes from Pulau Rawa Resort; *Hypselodoris nudibranch* (left inset); Beaked coralfish under jetty (far lower left). PREVIOUS PAGE: Anemonefish in anemone at house reef of Pulau Rawa





Pulau Rawa

Soft corals under the jetty at Pulau Rawa (far left); Close-up of anemone (left); Spotted moray eel (below); White sandy beaches of Pulau Rawa (lower right)



About the island

Pulau Rawa is very popular with families coming from Singapore (and Kuala Lumpur), for the weekend, as it is only a two to three-hour drive (depending how long it takes to get over the border) it is easily accessible for a few days away from the city. For those with families and young children, there is plenty to keep the little ones occupied, with beautiful white sandy beaches, slides going into the ocean and even a kids play room. Grown-ups are not left out either, with a beach bar and spa onsite, where one can get those all-important massages.

Arriving on the island, you are greeted by turquoise blue water, perfect white sandy beaches and the wooden bungalows of Rawa Island Resort nestled into the hill. The beautifully manicured resort

and relaxed atmosphere makes you feel at home right away, with the sounds of birds and fruit bats filling the air, including the sounds of the free roaming peacocks that are found all over the island!

The island is small, so it won't take too long to explore it all—with most of what there is to see concentrated along the west side of the island. There are no roads and no shops or restaurants except for those in the resort. But for folks who are more adventurous, there is a short island trek to the top of the hill where hikers are treated to a spectacular view from its highest point. It is from here that one gets a chance to see the rugged exposed cliffs of the east side of the island, dropping down into the crystal blue water.

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Pulau Rawa

Close-up of *Risbeccia tryoni* nudibranch (left); Glass shrimp on reef (above); Flatworm (right); View over Pulau Rawa's house reef and surrounding islands (lower left)



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Diving

Pulau Rawa is located in the Sultan Iskandar Marine Park, set up in 2013 to help protect the local marine environment. A small marine park fee of around US\$ 15 per day is charged to divers to help fund the protection of the marine park and can be paid in Mersing before leaving for the island. At the time of writing, the local marine department were in the process of reviewing the current fees to possibly make some changes.

There is only one dive operator on the island—Orca Scuba. Based in Singapore, they have teamed up with Rawa Island Resort to create Orca Scuba Rawa. The operator's main focus

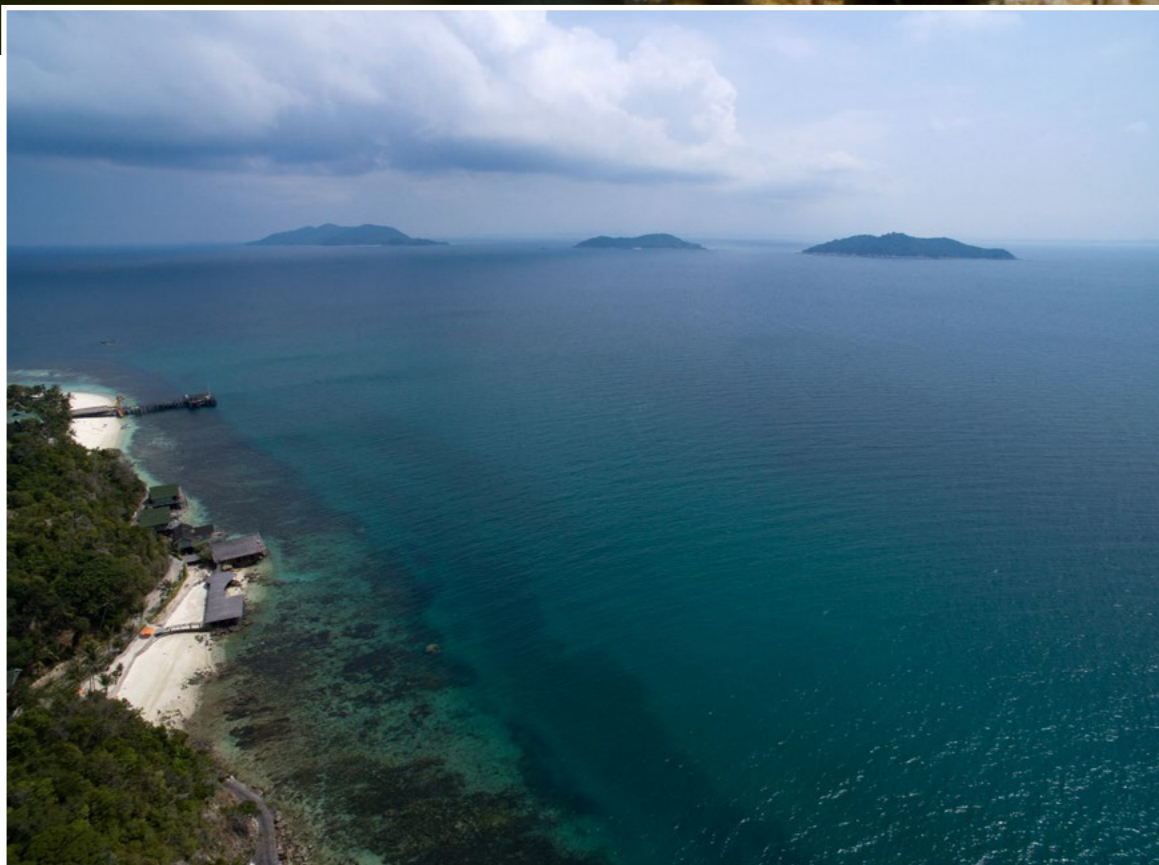
from the start has been to introduce families and children to the world of scuba diving and to provide the highest level of professionalism and safety possible.

For those in Singapore who wish to learn to dive, they can complete the theory and pool sessions before getting to Pulau Rawa, saving precious time on holiday. Once on the island, the operator's team of instructors can offer a wide range of PADI courses and programs for ages eight and up, meaning even the littlest in the family won't miss out!

House reef. Diving on the island is mainly done by shore entry, with

some boat drop-off dives too. All along the west side by the resort, there is a beautiful house reef, which is long enough to take three or four dives to see it all. The shallow depth of the house reef, with a maximum depth of around 12m, makes it perfect for dive training and try dives, or for experienced divers to do long, slow relaxing dives. My record on the house reef is over 90 minutes, slowly swimming alongside the stunning coral reef.

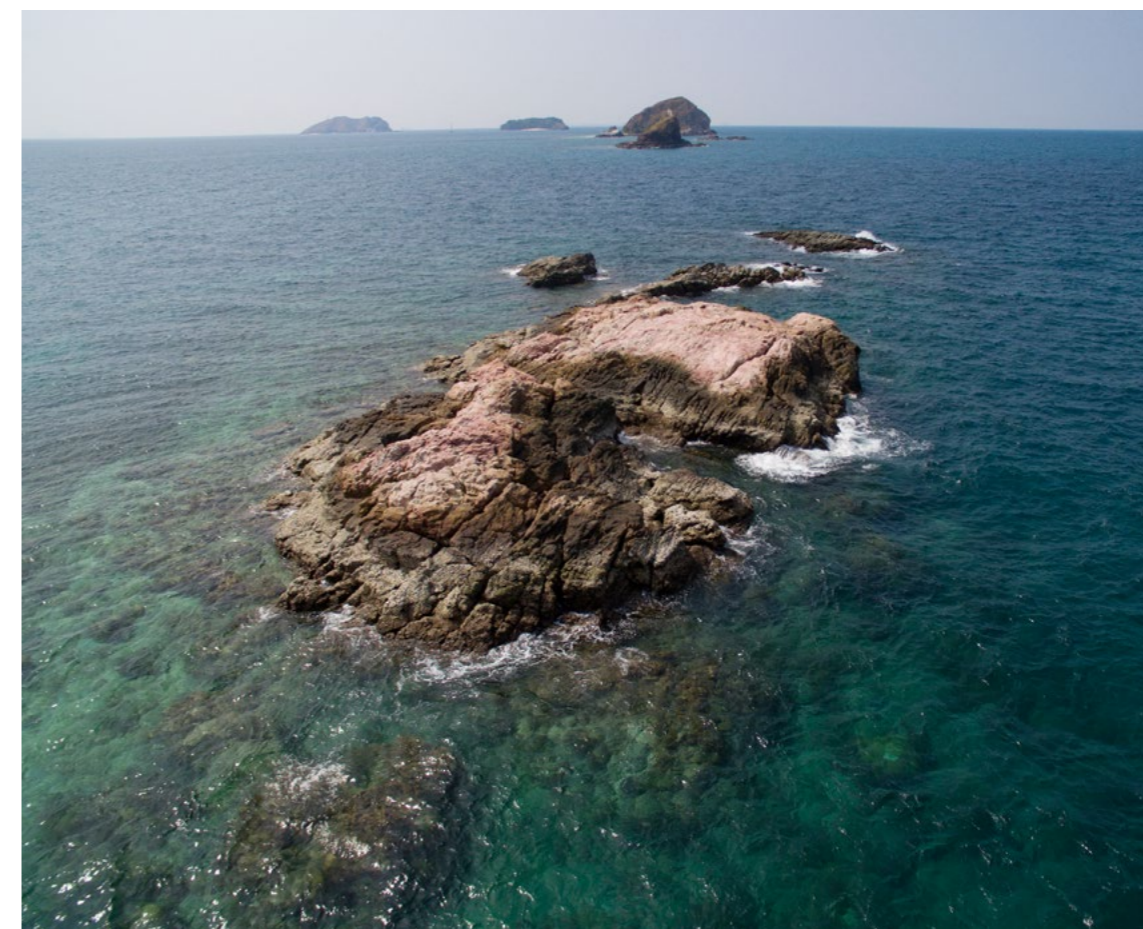
North and south end. If you are looking to do a little more explor-





Hard corals at house reef of Pulau Rawa (left); School of silversides under jetty at Pulau Rawa (below); View over north end of the island (lower right); Beaked coralfish (center)

Pulau Rawa

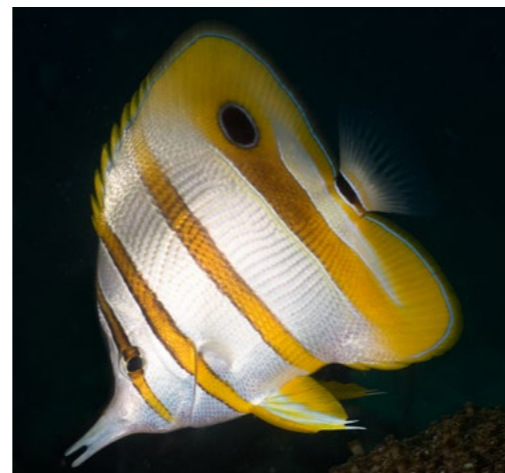


ing, you can get a boat drop-off round the northern or southern tips of the island. The journey only takes five or ten minutes, and you are then free to slowly swim back towards the house reef. On these dives, you can reach depths of up to 21m, and the topography changes from the shallow straight house reef, to

more dramatic boulders and coral heads.

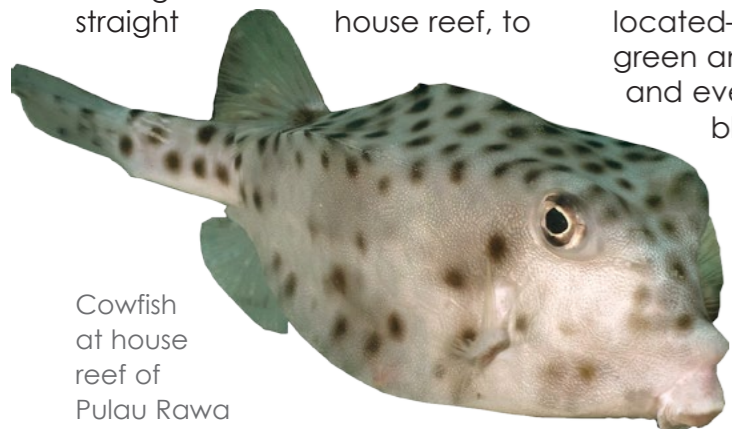
The conditions are usually very calm and relaxing, with gentle currents, if any, and good visibility reaching over 20m on a good day. My favorite dive is off the north end of the island—close to where Orca Scuba's dive center is located—where I have seen both green and hawksbill sea turtles, and even groups of juvenile

blacktip reef sharks. The corals at this end of the island are incredibly healthy, and as there has been almost no human influence on the area, are completely undamaged.



Marine life

The marine life around the island is very varied. Around the jetty on the house reef, you will find huge schools of batfish, saltwater perch and silversides. While exploring in the sand, I have found large



Cowfish at house reef of Pulau Rawa

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Diver over colony of staghorn coral (left); Purple dragon nudibranch at Dragon Rock (above)



Juvenile harlequin sweetlips (left inset); Hard coral head (right inset)

crocodile fish waiting to ambush their next meal, and the bizarre-looking and poisonous Indian walkman, also known as the demon stinger or devil stinger, which is closely related to stonefish.¹

For nudibranch lovers, keep your eyes peeled and you will be in luck.

I have seen various species of nudibranch from tiny Chromodoris, to long fluffy-looking purple dragon nudibranchs—so many, in fact, that one of the dive

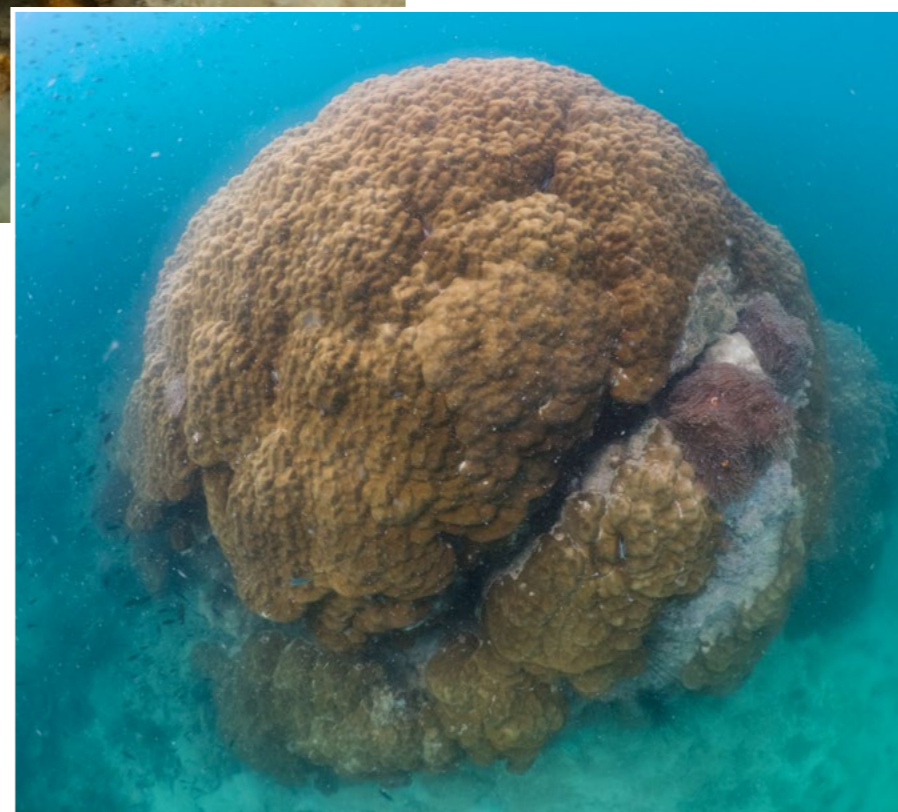
¹ WIKIPEDIA: EN.WIKIPEDIA.ORG/WIKI/INIMICUS_DIDACTYLUS

sites has been named Dragon Rock for its high number of these little purple critters.

I have also never seen so many juvenile harlequin sweetlips in one place. For those who have never seen one before, when they are in their juvenile form, they are about the size of your small fingernail and move around so fast that they almost look like they are vibrating their way along the reef rather than swimming. It is commonly said that they do this to mimic a poisonous flatworm to avoid being eaten by predators.

During my first walk along the beach, I noticed a large number of bright white cuttlebones, hinting that there would be plenty of cuttlefish on the reef. At certain times of the year, they are everywhere!

Pipefish, and sometimes even seahorses if you are



lucky, can be found in the sand just off the reef, as well as mantis shrimp hiding out in small holes on the sea bed. While exploring the sandy areas, keep an eye out for stingrays hiding underneath a thin layer

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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Batfish at jetty; Eyes of stingray buried in sand; Snake eel; Cowrie; Mantis shrimp



of sand. These little rays are all over the place and sit silently, with just their eyes and tail visible. Get too close, and they disappear in a puff of sand into the distance.

Look up and you may see schools of barracuda and fusiliers up above you. I was also told stories that divers on a neighboring island have seen dugongs nearby, making me spend most of all

my dives staring out into the open water to get a glimpse of one of these bizarre gentle giants, but with no luck.

About the resort

Rawa Island Resort offers full-board accommodations, with all of your food and drinking water included in the price of your room. Meals are served buffet-style, and the cuisine is absolutely delicious. I usually find myself needing a kilo or two less on my dive belt towards the end of my stay after being weighed down by all the food! Drinks can be purchased from either the main bar, or beach bar depending on the time of day, and there is a small gift shop selling souvenirs, sunscreen and other things, like beach toys.

For the non-divers, there are a number

of watersports offered, including snorkeling, sailing, kayaking and standup paddle boarding, with equipment to rent by the hour on the beach. An around-the-island kayaking trip is a great way to explore a little more.

For the divers, the dive center has high-quality equipment rental, so there is no need to bring your own if you want to travel light. It is advisable to book your diving ahead of time to avoid disappointment when you get to the island, as their time slots can fill up on busier weekends, especially for those wanting to complete courses.

Diving conditions

Diving on the island is best between March and November. Between November and February, the northeast monsoon kicks in, making the diving con-

ditions less than desirable, with poor visibility, strong currents and large waves—a stark contrast from the clear, calm blue water for the rest of the year. As soon as the wind changes back, the perfect conditions return, and the diving is great once again. The resort occasionally closes over this monsoon period to upgrade and perform maintenance on the rooms, while all diving ceases completely.

Pulau Rawa is for me the ideal location for a quick getaway from Singapore. There are not many dive locations of this quality so close where you can leave first thing and be diving before lunch, perfect for a long weekend of diving and an escape from the bustle of the city. ■

The author wishes to thank the amazing staff at Orca Scuba Rawa, and Rawa

Island Resort for their continued hospitality.

Nick Shallcross is a British underwater photographer and dive writer based in Singapore. He offers tailor-made workshops and courses in underwater photography. For more information, visit: NickShallcrossPhotography.co.uk.

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