

Singapore's

Pulau Hantu

Text and photos by Nick Shallcross

— *Surprising Urban Macro Haven*





PETER SYMES

Pulau Hantu



To get to Pulau Hantu by boat, one passes the vast container ships and oil tankers, large oil refineries and huge container docks of Singapore.

Singapore is not usually the first place that comes to mind when you think about diving in Southeast Asia. And no wonder—we are so spoilt for choice in this part of the world, with Thailand and Malaysia to our north and Indonesia to our south. Well, these places are great if you have some vacation time or a long weekend, but what if you are too busy to get away for so long, or just want a reason to get your gear wet? When I heard about a little island off Singapore’s southern shore, I had to check it out.

Located about 30 minutes south of Singapore by boat, Pulau Hantu is the go-to place for Singapore’s die-hard divers. Comprising two small islands that are connected together at low tide, its name literally translates to “Ghost Island” in Malay.

The names of the two islands—Pulau Hantu Kecil and Pulau Hantu Besar—stem from local legend. Two fierce

warriors, locked in a violent and ceaseless battle, woke up a sleeping jinn (sea spirit). Angered, the jinn cast a spell that pulled the warriors to the depths of the ocean. Undeterred, they continued duelling. The jinn distracted one of them, allowing the warriors to thrust their swords into each other. The gods decreed that the jinn should not have



Pulau Hantu is a haven for macro life and sea slugs, such as this *Flabellina nudibranch*

View over Singapore, a vibrant city and major hub of Southeast Asia. PREVIOUS PAGE: Eye of crocodilefish



View of Pulau Hantu from the bay; Beaked coralfish (left); Cuttlefish in defensive display, grow up to 10cm (4in) (right); Pipefish (below) grow up to 18cm (7in)

have the idyllic Pulau Hantu on one side, but turn around and behind you is one of the many islands converted into oil refineries. It is at this point that you start to wonder what you have got yourself into, and whether there will be

anything down there to see!

The water is a strange green, blue and brown colour, and the only thing visible from the surface are some kelp-like plants reaching the surface. Everything about it is as far from the crystal clear blue waters and white sandy beaches one would imagine in this part of the world.

Diving

As you descend, the seabed slowly emerges from beneath you. The floor is a thick, silty sediment, which lingers in the water column if disrupted, so good buoyancy is important if you want to avoid lowering the visibility further.

One can imagine what the reef would have once looked like, before the mass industrialisation of Singapore.



Slightly buried by the layer of silt, one can make out the old coral reefs, some of which still seem to be thriving. Quite amazing, given its close proximity to the oil refineries, but it wasn't the corals I was here to see.

Nudibranch heaven

At first, I was seeing just a few, then a few more, until all I was seeing were these slug-like creatures: Nudibranchs, and they were everywhere! In every shape, size and colour imaginable. Once you



Tiny *Chromodoris* nudibranch, up to 2cm long



interfered in earthly matters. Hence, the warriors were transformed into islands. It is believed that their ghosts still wander the islands.¹

Getting there

The journey to Pulau Hantu is one to remember, as you meander your way amongst vast container ships and oil tankers, past large oil refineries and huge container docks. Once at the island, you

¹ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pulau_Hantu





THIS PAGE: Tiny critters found at Pulau Hantu—various species of colorful nudibranchs, as well as a flatworm (right)



pelagic fish swimming by, this dive is all about the small stuff on the sea floor and some of the brightly coloured reef fish you would expect in this region like butterflyfish, angelfish and parrotfish.

Keep an eye out for the smaller critters on the reef as well. During a handful



Nembrotha yonowae nudibranch on tunicate

have trained your eyes on how to spot them, they can be found on almost every piece of rock or coral.

I have to admit, I am a little obsessed when it comes to nudibranchs, as are many underwater photographers, and this place was really ticking all the right boxes. From tiny green ones camouflaged with the algae on the seafloor, to large brightly-coloured ones making no effort to blend in with anything.

more colourful or interesting, or I would feel a tug at the end of my fin from my dive buddy to tell me that she had found one. There were literally so many, it was a challenge deciding which ones to photograph before my tank ran out!

Macro life

It's not all about nudibranchs, though. There is a variety of fish and other critters to see. Don't expect to look out into blue water and see large

of dives here, I have seen rare albino pipefish, vibrant blue-spotted stingrays, tiny juvenile cuttlefish and large crocodile fish just beneath the sand exposing only their eyes, lying in wait for their next meal!

Not long into one of my dives, I heard an excited noise coming from my buddy's regulator as she pointed frantically at the yellow outline of a seahorse. It was tucked away happily inside a little crack in the reef, so I moved on, only to find another a few minutes later. This time, it was out in the open, allowing me to snap a few shots before leaving it to go about its day.

Although it might not be for everyone, Pulau





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *Fundia* coral; Tigertail seahorse; *Hypselodoris* and *Jorunna rubescens* nudibranchs



love for nudibranchs, you will have some memorable dives here, exploring the silty sea bed for the next little critter to photograph.

Logistics and conditions

The boat I went out to the island on left the Republic of Singapore Yacht Club on the southern coast of the island, as do a few of the others. There are options to suit everyone, from small fiberglass speedboats that can carry up to six divers, to larger vessels like the one I dived from, with the capacity for 24 divers

anything from SG\$100 to SG\$150 (US\$72-108, EU€65-97); this price usually does not include equipment rental, which can be arranged in advance.

The diving at Pulau Hantu is suitable for divers at all levels, with maximum depths of around 12 to 18m. However, visibility can be very poor—as low as 1m at times, with the best reaching around 10m and an average of 3 to 8m. With this limited visibility, it is not the most popular place to learn to dive; however, it is an option for those who cannot get away long enough to complete courses abroad.

The island usually attracts experienced divers looking for some local diving on the weekends and is particularly popular with underwater photographers—although I do have one tip, leave your wide-angle lenses at home and only

bring your macro lens!

Depending on the time of day, you may experience a little current, if the tide is on the change, but it does not usually get too strong. Diving here can be done all year round and the water stays at a nice 28 to 29°C for most of the year. Pulau Hantu's close proximity to the city means you can head out for just half a day to escape from Singapore's high-speed city life and still complete two dives. ■



Hantu does offer some amazing macro diving. For those with cameras and a

with toilets and an air-conditioned cabin on board. Prices for two dives can be

Nick Shallcross is a British underwater photographer and dive writer based in Singapore. He offers tailor-made work-

shops and courses in underwater photography. For more information, visit: NickShallcrossPhotography.co.uk.