



Malaysia's

Tioman Island

Text and photos by Jennifer Idol

— *Jewel in the South China Sea*



View of ABC Bay, Tioman Island (above); Malaysian cuisine (right)



Hollywood is attributed with recognizing the natural beauty of Tioman Island in the 1950s as an exotic tropical paradise. Having seen one of the films as a child, it created an impression of a place I would like to visit someday. I never imagined it would set the stage for my first experience diving in Malaysia. Tioman delivered an enchanting dream.

Malaysia is an independent country comprised of 13 states, represented as the stripes in the current flag, and three territories. Locals refer to the states as individual countries and think of Malaysia more like the United Kingdom. The crescent on the flag represents Islam, the official religion, though Malaysia is home to many religions.

Their flag has changed over time as has the country's ruling. Portugal, the Dutch, and the British Empire all established a presence, followed by the British East India Company, Japan and Chinese influence. Singapore has been a significant port from

its origins. Influence from the multitude of occupants pervades the culture making Malaysia both familiar and unique.

Diving in Malaysia is famously known for the Sipadan area on Borneo near Tawau in Sabah on the lower left side of the coral triangle. However, Tioman Island is a quiet secret just north of the state Johor in Pahang. Tioman is a unique ecozone with different species from those



Common mormon butterflies, *Papilio polytes romulus*, find nectar on local flora (above); Macaque monkey (left). PREVIOUS PAGE: Eastern skunk anemonefish on anemone



Tropical flowers decorate the walkways





View of resort area on Tioman Island (above); Nasi lemak is a local favorite for breakfast (left); Tioman Dive Resort rooms were clean, comfortable, and beautiful with standard seated toilets and a huge shower (below); Divemaster and diver prepare to descend to the KM Sipadan (bottom right)

Diving for all levels

Since, no major road is on this part of the island, all vehicular traffic occurs through scooters and bicycles on what looks like a large sidewalk. It makes the small village a

quiet reprise from urban living.

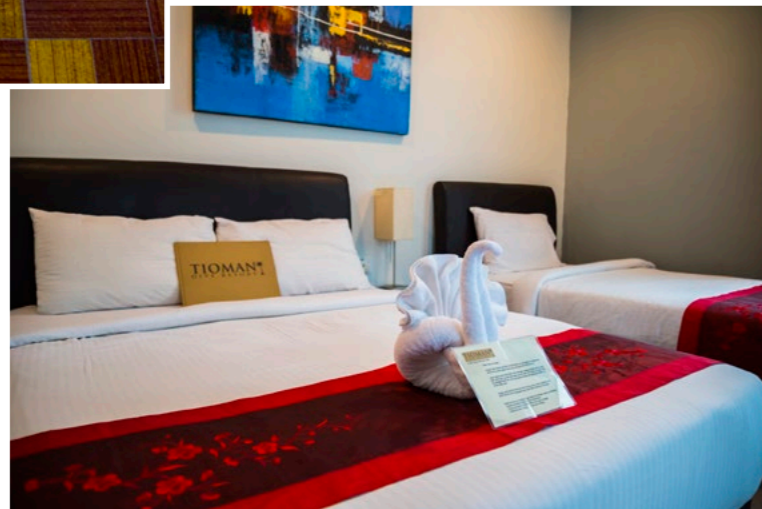
I bring my dive equipment to every destination, but always rent cylinders and weights. Malaysia works on the metric system, so rented gauges are in bar, depths are measured in meters, and temperatures are written in Celsius.

No wetsuit is necessary for most divers, though a full skin is recommended. I found the 26°C (80°F) water cold during monsoon season, but I also think the Caribbean is cold, so I wore a 5mm suit. The temperature is usually a bit warmer. Both shore and boat diving is available around Tioman.

east of the Wallace Line, an imaginary line created by British naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace.

I enjoyed learning about the culture, food, and history of the island. Tioman Island was first popular with backpackers in Salang. I stayed in the newer accommodations at Tioman Dive Resort in Air Batang (ABC bay) at the foot of the jungle. The villages are home to few buildings along the shoreline before the steep mountains rise with a lush rainforest.

Fortunately, travelers have not yet discovered the affordability of diving on the island. The biggest expenses for a dive trip here are airfare and time. Its seclusion has kept it a quiet island devoid of crowds, tourism, and the ecological pressures caused by development for these demands.



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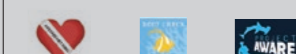
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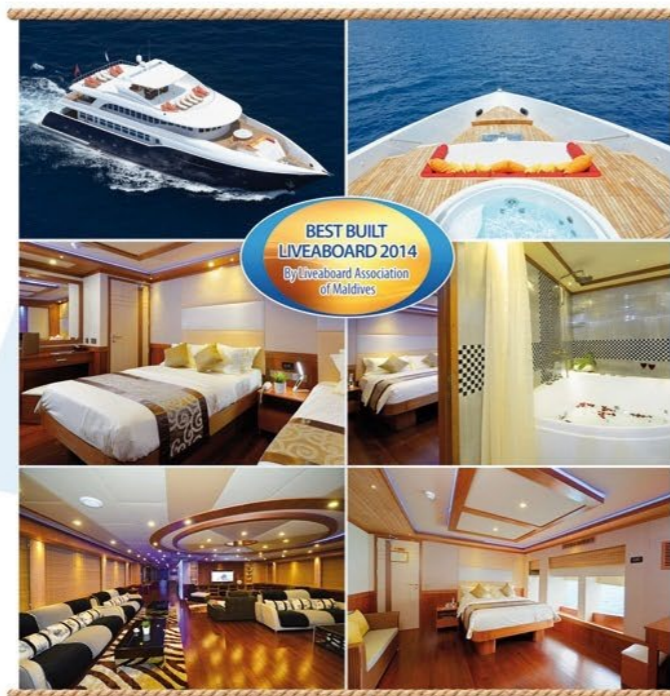


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Tioman



The reefs around Tioman Island are diverse, with corals densely bound together

Diving on Tioman is part of the South China Sea with maximum depth of 70m (230ft). Most dive sites are shallow, but deeper diving is available. The coral reefs cover granite boulders that support a diverse ecosystem and create swim-throughs such as on Labas Island.

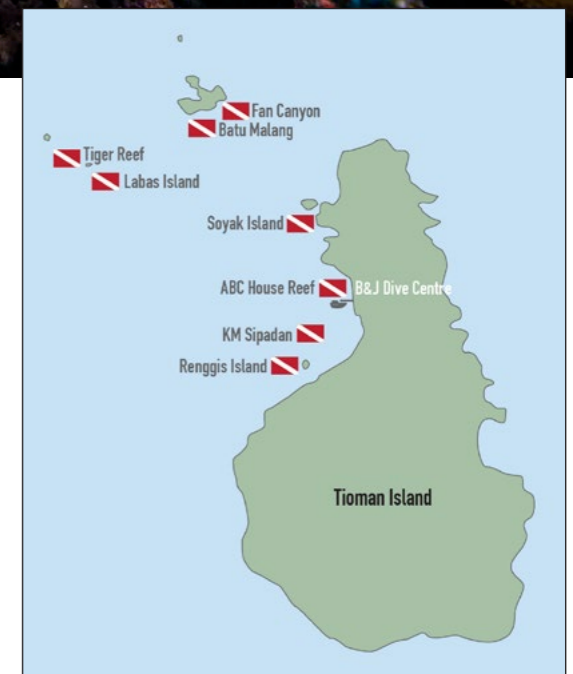
Tioman Island is situated in a north south position with attractive dive sites such as Fan Canyon, Batu Malang, and Labas Island in the north. However, those sites are open to wind and surge, so must be visited during the best season. I repeatedly saw requests for Tiger Reef on the dive site board at the store. Tiger Reef is an advanced dive named for the shape of the submersed pinnacle. It features strong currents that is little visited by divers, so it shows little human impact.

While I traveled during the monsoon season, the best season is from mid-March to late May and mid-

September to late October for the best visibility with smaller numbers of visitors. The clear water brought to Tioman comes from the Gulf of Thailand during their monsoon season when the winds are from the north. Plankton-rich waters bring nutrients necessary for reef life and poor visibility outside these times from Singapore. Europeans mostly travel to Tioman from April to August and again in October.

Renggis Island. I explored Renggis Island and KM Sipadan wreck, southern sites just a few minutes from ABC Bay. Renggis is also a snorkeling destination and home to sea turtles, cuttlefish, and sharks. Two blacktip sharks passed us on our dive and two sea turtles spent ample time hunting for food on the reef around the staghorn coral forest. This is the densest staghorn I have seen.

I saw my first anemone fish and



Dive sites around Tioman Island

anemones in the wild. They are very active fish that hide within the anemone for protection and swim just above the anemone when they feel safe. Observing them made me appreciate the photos I have seen even more since they are fast moving and always seem to look soft



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rather than sharply defined. Their orange is so vibrant it seems to glow from within. I understand how their cuteness entrances divers.

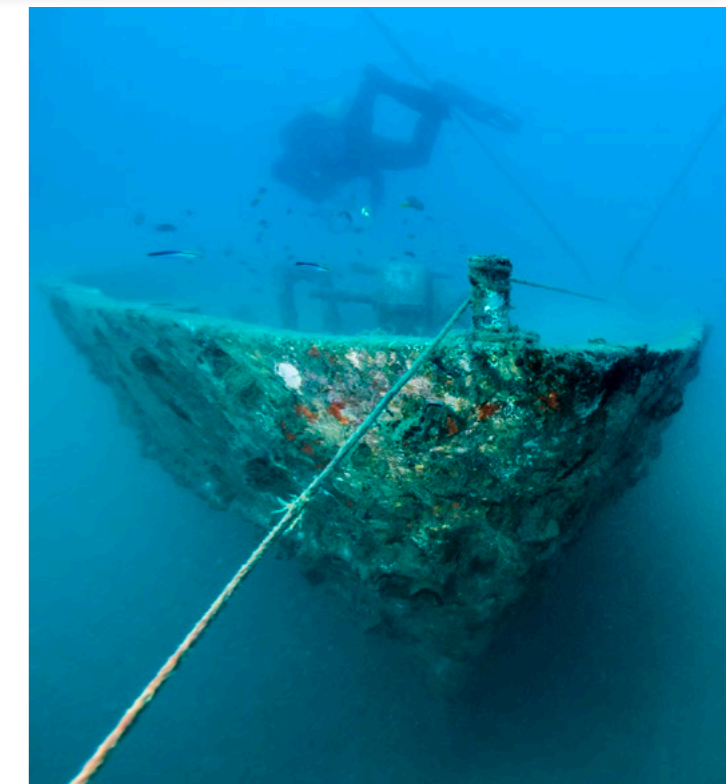


KM Sipadan. *KM Sipadan* is a deep artificial reef just north of Renggis Island that was sunk in 2012. Under the name *KD Sri Sarawak*, this was a

Red lionfish inhabit the *KM Sipadan*

Royal Navy warship that served from 1964 to 2005. This is the only dive I used nitrox to help with my allowable bottom time, though it is available on any dive to certified divers who prefer nitrox. Two Thai fishing boats are connected to this wreck. I spent my time exploring the *KM Sipadan*, observing nudibranchs and red lionfish. I reached the ship down the mooring line at 20m (66ft) and swam through the empty hull at 27m (90ft).

ABC House Reef. Most of my dives were spent on the ABC House Reef in front of the resort. Although known as a training destination, much of the natural resources are untouched and healthy. The bay protected the water from currents and waves. To escape rough seas, even the fishermen moored in the bay. No fishing is allowed in the water surrounding Tioman Island and the other eight nearby islands because of



Diver on bow of the *KM Sipadan* (above); False clownfish stay close to their anemone (left inset); Hawksbill sea turtle hunts for food on Renggis Island (top left)





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Shore diving was easy on house reefs; Detail of coral polyps; Reticulated puffer blends with coral; Close-up of hard coral (below); A red-margin shrimpgoby shares its burrow with an alpheid shrimp; A hermit crab inhabits an oversized shell



the marine park designation. The number of boats fishing in nearby waters is still numerous with many focused on specific fishing products such as squid. I was grateful some protection was in place.

The shore diving was easy with a sandy path between boulders in front of the resort leading to the major reefs, House Reef 1 and House Reef 2. Ghost Town is named after the artificial objects laid to attract reef growth. I was also told it is an unusual and unexplained site for how sculpture and rocks were left behind. I noticed the rebar in place on the way to House Reef 1 to encourage coral growth beyond the main biomass.

House Reef 1. This is a macro

world. Some of the unusual creatures I like to photograph like flat-head, puffers, lizard-fish, and porcupinefish seemed to regularly occupy House Reef 1. I was most surprised by the colorful boring giant clams buried in the granite boulders. Dozens of them reached for food in the current. A few were as big as a melon. Maxima giant clams on Renggis Island were the size of a basketball. They came in all colors, but I was most drawn to the blue and teal colored clams. They were quick to shut as I swam over them, but then reopened if I paused.

Between the reefs, a sandy

bottom hosts gobies, crabs, and shrimp. I nicknamed this the "Goby Desert" and relished watching them dart into their holes. As I looked closer, I also was able to see an alpheid shrimp cleaning out a hole while its host gobyshrimp watched for predators to warn of danger. These animal interactions were so captivating that my dives reached 90 minutes, easy to do in the shallow



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White-eyed moray eel (above); Staghorn damselfish (inset)

reefs. I could only pull myself out of the water long enough for meals. Shore dives did not limit me to the boat schedule.

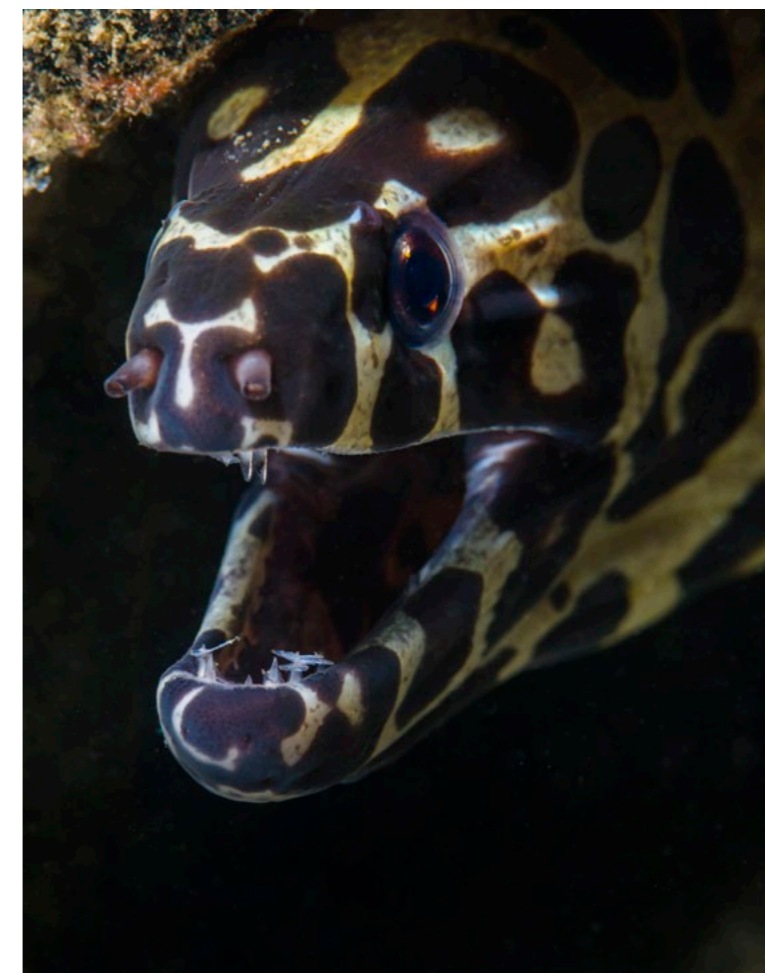
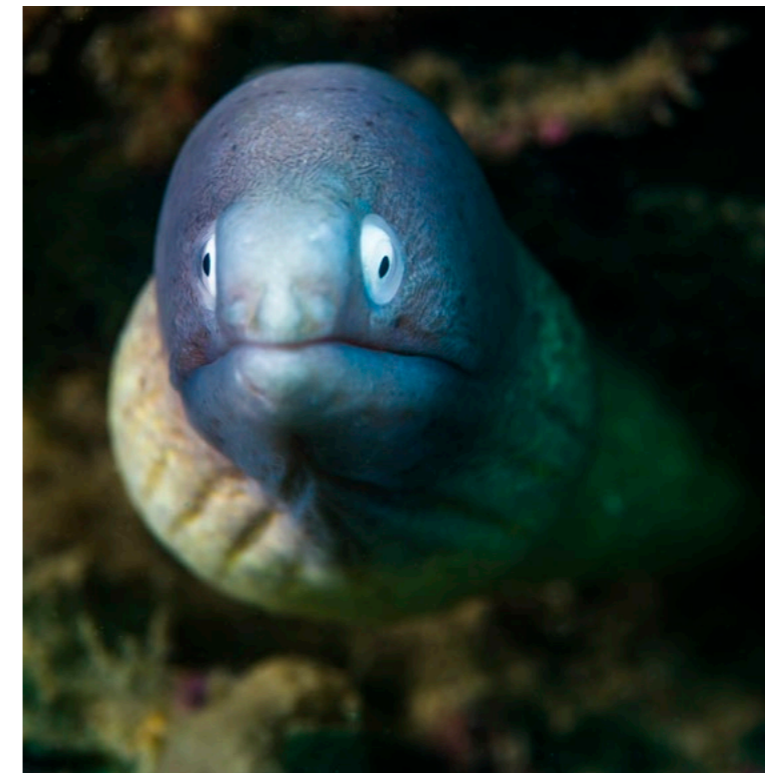
House Reef 2. House Reef 2 was my favorite as it featured eels, nudibranch, hard and soft corals, and more anemonefish. This reef seemed more diverse with more variety in the size and number of animals than on House Reef 1. I passed it again when I dived from the jetty back to the resort. You never know what you will find passing by the jetty, so I hopped in to look at the possibilities.

Life bound by environmental change

While the biodiversity on Tioman Island was rich and included healthy reefs with invertebrates, hard and soft corals, small fish, medium fish and large fish, it is not



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP FAR LEFT: Juvenile damselfish hides in coral; Hard corals grow atop the rocks; White-eyed moray eel hides in holes in the reef; A spotted moray eel hides under the jetty; Nudibranch eggs on reef; Chromodoris nudibranch (center inset)



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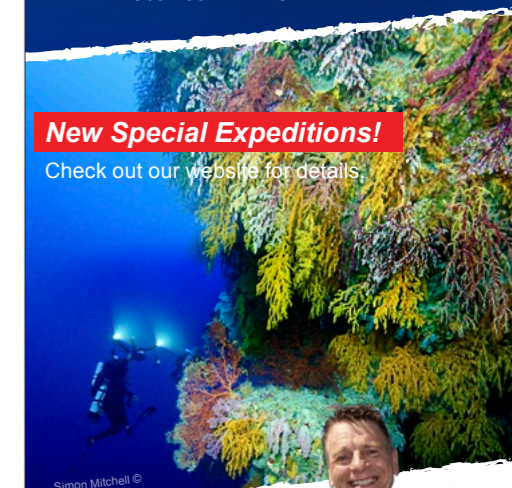
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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: White crown calcareous tube worms wave in the current, filtering the water for food; The reef appears calm on a night dive; While the B&J Diving Centre and Tioman Dive Resort work hard to help educate visitors and reduce their environmental impact, the affect of global climate change is apparent in some areas where corals are losing their symbiotic algae, which cause the skeletal structure to appear bleached (far right); This peppermint sea star was one of few I observed (right)

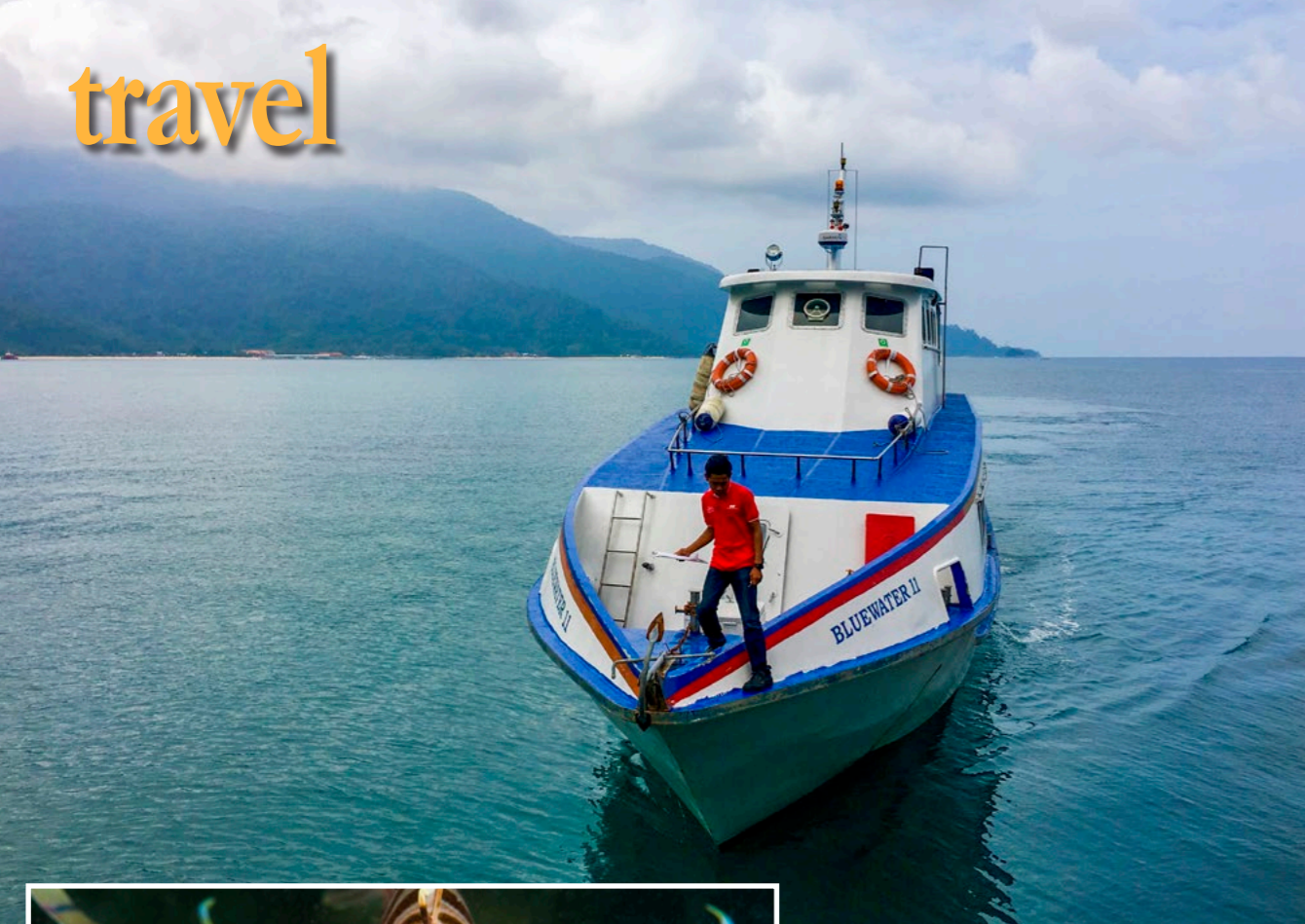
immune to the effects on the waters surrounding the island. For the last two years, the waters have been warmer than usual. Hard corals show signs of stress with some bleaching, especially noticeable on the staghorn. A 2010 bleaching event also severely impacted reefs reaching across the entire Coral Triangle. Last year, the island experienced a severe drought, limiting availability of fresh water.

B&J Diving Centre works hard to operate as an eco-resort to help educate visitors and reduce their impact. The center participates in the PADI Project AWARE program and has been awarded the PADI Green Star Award. This means the center has demonstrated a commitment to conservation that includes water conservation, energy use, environmentally friendly transportation practices, use of sustainable

materials, conservation leadership and a donation to conservation through Project AWARE. I found the center did not just earn participation in these programs, but it also embodied responsible behavior. The staff encouraged visitors to turn off lights, turn off air conditioners, and unplug, when not in the room.

The dive center also supports the reduction of plastic use.





Bluewater ferry carries passengers daily (left); Black-blotched porcupinefish (above)



RARE SIGHTING OF TINY MELASMA DWARFGOBY

I stopped to admire this translucent goby on my jetty dive in shallow waters and later was informed by a fellow photographer that he had long wanted to photograph one. He had seen many other varieties of pygmygoby but had yet to find one with these markings. *Eviota melasma* grows only to 3.3cm (1.5 inches) and is distinguished by gold ornate markings on the iris. They are said to be solitary and are found in the west Pacific. Many common names are attributed to this fish, such as black-spotted pygmy-goby, headspot dwarfgoby, headspot pygmygoby and melasma pygmy goby. ■



conducts several beach and reef cleanups throughout the year. Staff members recently recovered a ghost net left by one of the fishing vessels.

Where everybody knows your name

I love to experience the food and culture of a place

when I visit for a dive excursion. People were extremely friendly and happy to share their love of Malaysia. The island is small, so I got the sense that everyone knows more about everything than you would perhaps like if you lived here. The camaraderie was



Filtered water is available at the resort, so you can use the bottle provided, or refill your own container rather than using bottled water. Tupperware is available for taking to restaurants to store leftovers or grab takeaway food. Unfortunately, the island still uses styrofoam and plastic bags. I brought a dry bag and canvas tote for my needs.

B&J Diving Centre works hard with local vendors and visitors to help promote more sustainable practices. Trash can be observed throughout the island, but has greatly improved. Waste management is an ongoing education project for all of Malaysia. The center



Longsnout flathead buried in the sand (above); Lionfish (left); Star puffer (center right)

wonderful to see as neighbors seemed helpful and exchanged services.

Malaysian food did not seem exotic to me. Instead, it seemed more like a fusion of cultures, with which I was already familiar. This created its own unique flavors from Nasi lemak, roti canai, satay, to curry puffs, and Mamak's fried noodle. I tried as many foods as one could, eating a different meal each time. I highly recommend getting to the NS Corner early for pastries, especially the curry puff. No sign is outside this place. Only a glass case that says "Open" in the morning indicates you have found the right place. It closes once all pastries are sold. Coffee and tea can be ordered either



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There is diving for everyone, whatever level you are, with delicious cuisine between dives; I indulged in my favorite breakfast at the NS Corner (left); Roti is filled with ingredients of your choice, plus sauce (below); Mamak's fried noodle dish is the best in the restaurant next to the dive center (lower right)

customary in Malaysia, which is hard to accept because the price is so incredibly low for food. Staff will provide exact

Getting there

Reaching Tioman takes a little coordination due to its remote location east of the Malaysian peninsula. It is easier to reach from Europe and Asia than anywhere else, but is a worthy journey for anyone. Half the visitors come from Europe, with the rest of the majority from Malaysia, particularly from Singapore.

I recommend flying to Singapore and then taking a bus to Mersing where you can take the ferry to Tioman Island. Uber works in both



hot or cold, with or without sweet milk, and is served in small cups.

Restaurants on the island may resemble huts more than an expected commercial building. They are all open-air, with a collection of a few tables and chairs. Sometimes a restaurant had an obvious name outside, and other times, it did not seem to bear any name. The sandwich shop is clearly marked, Ketapang Roof. Sunset Bar offers pizza, fried chicken wings and chicken sandwiches when it is open.

Payment is accepted after you receive your food. Tipping is not

change for your meals and will not round up. Only the divemasters who help you receive tips at the diving center. There is also a tip jar on the counter if you prefer to leave a total tip at the end of your stay.



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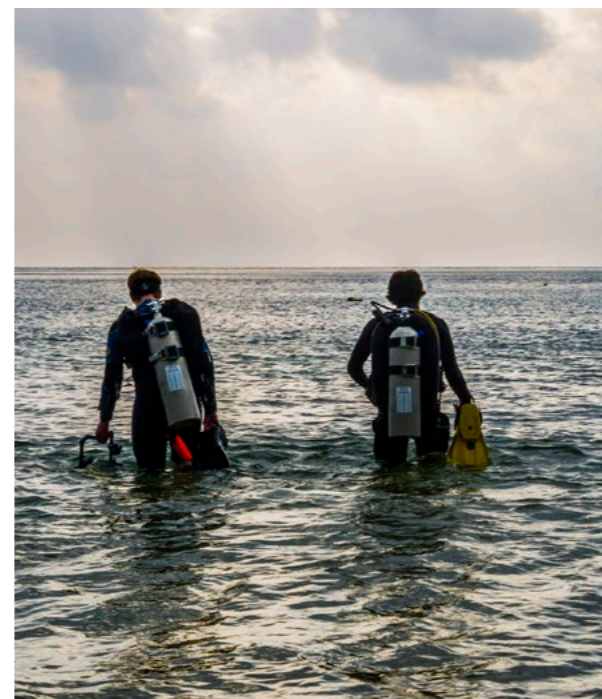
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The jungle on Tioman Island is densely vegetated (above); Location of Tioman on map of Malaysia (top right); Tioman ferry leaving Mersing (far right); Poultry is most often served with dishes, as pork is unavailable (left); Divers waded in for a shore dive on ABC House Reef (right)



Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, another arrival city.

Once in Malaysia, Transnasional is a leading bus company of the many operators. Bluewater is the ferry company that leaves port in Mersing to reach Tioman Island. Both can be booked through easybook.com, but tickets can also be purchased at the bus and ferry windows on location. Buses leave on time, but the ferry may run late and arrive an hour past when it is due, a consideration for scheduling your return bus.

Note the rules for ticket exchange when booking buses and ferries. Print your bus confirmation ahead of time and exchange it for a bus ticket at least an hour before your bus at the main bus station ticket window. When you reach the ferry, exchange your ferry pass at a counter (kaunter) for a reservation slip. Then pay the marine park fee and verify

your passport at the window at the end of the counters. Tioman Island has been protected as a marine park since 1985 to protect surrounding coral reefs by limiting boat anchoring to designated mooring areas and docks.

Lastly, show your reservation slip at the booth by the waiting area to receive a laminated boarding pass. Hand your boarding pass to the collecting crew member before boarding the ferry. Crew will help you place your luggage according to destination in a public storage place near the door. Keep small bags with you and do not lose sight of them or forget your belongings.

Find your seat assignment written on the reservation slip. Seat numbers are written on the port and starboard walls of the boat above the windows. The ferry takes two hours to reach the first dock on Tioman Island. The ferry and bus are both very inexpensive and easy to navigate for individuals or couples.

Until we meet again

Some of the guests and instructors came for a short trip and stayed a year or more. They fell in love with Tioman Island, an easy feat. The island itself is fabled to have been formed by a dragon queen who fell in love with the place and transformed herself into the island. My visit was all too brief, giving me just enough of a glimpse to know the reefs here are a treasure to be loved, carefully tended and not forgotten. ■

Special thanks to B&J Diving Centre at DiveTioman.com. Jennifer Idol is author of *An American Immersion* and an underwater photographer. She's earned 28 certifications and has been diving for over 20 years. A native Texan, she creates design and photography for her company, *The Underwater Designer*. Visit uwDesigner.com to see more of her work. Visit AnAmericanImmersion.com to learn more and buy her book.

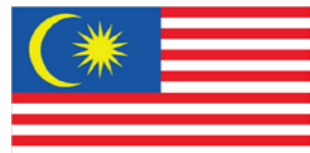
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Malaysia



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History Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural country developed from its history of inhabitants that includes 13 states and three federal territories. Original inhabitants date back 40,000 years followed by traders and settlers from India and China in the first century AD. Later inhabitants introduced Islam to Malaysia in the 14th century. Portugal conquered Malacca in 1511, followed by the Dutch in 1641. The British Empire established a presence in 1786 in Malaya and obtained Singapore in 1819. British ruled until the turn of the 20th century. Chinese and Indians immigrated during this time. During WWII, the Japanese Army invaded and occupied Malaya, North Borneo, Sarawak, and Singapore. The Malayan Union was established

in 1946. The British were forced from Malaysia during the leadership of the Malayan Communist Party. In 1963, the Federation of Malaya joined as an independent federation with present-day Sabah, Sarawak, and Singapore to create Malaysia. Singapore left the Federation in 1965. Some states maintain separate immigration controls and require passports for Peninsular Malaysians traveling between states. Tioman Island is part of Pahang, the third largest state in Malaysia. Government: Federal parliamentary elective constitutional monarchy. Capital: Kuala Lumpur

Geography Malaysia is located in southeastern Asia. Tioman Island is located east of peninsular Malaysia and is surrounded by the South China Sea. It has a coastline of 245km (152mi). Eight villages surround the island while the interior is sparsely inhabited and filled with the oldest rainforest in the world. The island itself is a mountain rising from the sea.

Climate Tropical, hot and humid. The water temperature is normally 27-31°C (81-88°F) year round. Most divers use skins or 3mm wetsuits.

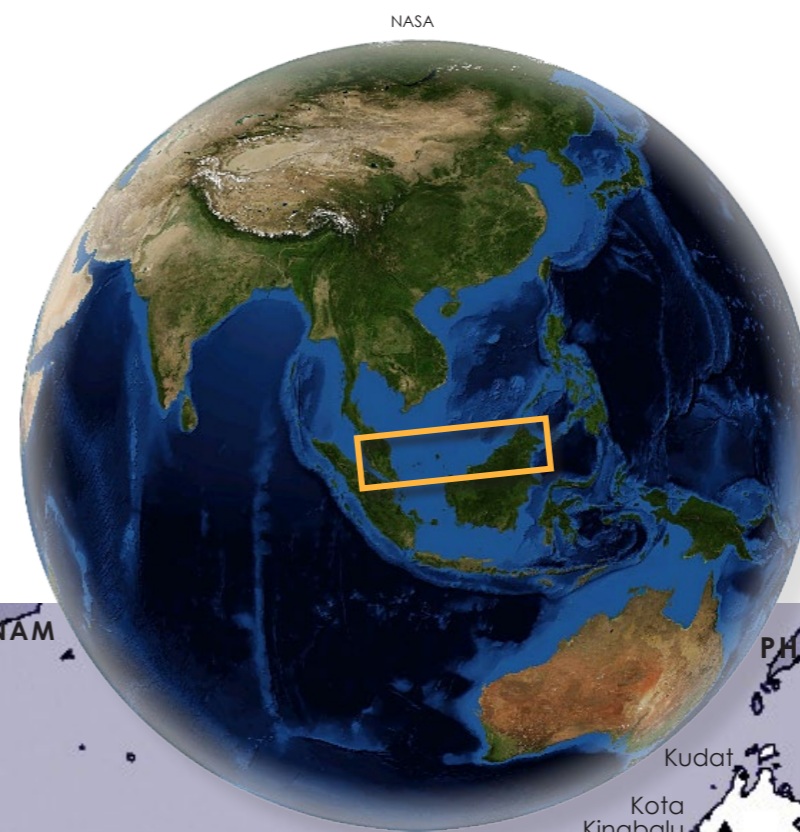
Environmental issues Air and water pollution from industrial development threaten natural

resources. Palm oil contributes significantly to deforestation of the world's oldest rainforest. Logging also contributes to deforestation. Most remaining forest exists only in national parks. Forests are predicted to be extinct in three years. Deforestation contributes to significant runoff during monsoon seasons. Illegal fishing, dynamite fishing, and animal trafficking also threaten wildlife. To help prevent ongoing deforestation, cease all worldwide palm oil usage.

Economy Malaysia is newly industrialized with goals to become an economic superpower and is among the world's largest exporters of palm oil. Industry outside agriculture includes auto, petroleum, electronic equipment, and liquefied natural gas. Mining and manufacturing also produce rubber and tin. Tourism is a growing industry.

Currency Malaysian Ringgit (MYR). Exchange at your local

RIGHT: Global map with location of Malaysia
BELOW: Location of Tioman Island on map of Malaysia



bank or in the airport exchange for current rates. Be sure to exchange for small change. Anything more than a ten is too big a bill. Ones and fives are preferred on the island. Exchange rates: 1USD= 4.41MYR; 1EUR=4.69MYR; 1GBP=5.52MYR; 1AUD= 3.34MYR; 1SGD= 3.15MYR

Population 31.66 million in Malaysia, with 432 on Tioman Island. Ethnic groups: 50.1% Malay, 22.6% Chinese, 11.8% Indigenous, 6.7% Indian, 8.8% other ethnic groups. Religions: 61.3% Sunni Islam (official), 19.8% Buddhist, 9.2% Christian, 6.2% Hindu, 3.4% other religions.

Language Bahasa Malaysia (Malay). English, Mandarin, and Tamil. Most in the tourism industry of Malaysia speak English including staff in restaurants, airports, buses, taxis, Uber and the dive centers. In Pahang, the state of Tioman Island, Pahang Malay is spoken, a dialect of Malay. However, another Malay variant is spoken in Tioman Island that is most closely related to Riau Archipelago Malay sub-dialect spoken on nearby islands.

Health Ensure routine vaccines are up-to-date and also Hepatitis A, Typhoid, and Japanese Encephalitis. Ask your doctor to prescribe an antibiotic for the risk

of bacterial diarrhea. Do not drink the water. However, filtered water is available at B&J Diving Centre to refill reusable containers. Zika virus is a risk. Prevent mosquito bites and bring insect repellents containing DEET, to be used if necessary. International Certificate of Vaccination required for yellow fever if arriving from a country with risk of yellow fever, some countries in Africa and Central and South America.

Decompression chambers

No chambers are on Tioman Island. Chambers are available in Kuala Lumpur (military), one in Penang, one on a navy base in Lamutt and in the Singapore hospital.

Divers Alert Network (DAN) can provide initial information regardless of membership. Only members receive financial coverage. DAN takes international or skype calls at: +1-919-684-9111, or you can call DAN Asia Pacific: +61 8 8212 9242.

Travel/Visa/Security

Passport valid for six months beyond intended stay is required. Visas are not required for Australian, British, Canadian, EU or US citizens' stays up to 90 days. All visitors must have proof of return sea or air ticket. Forefinger fingerprints will be taken upon arrival and departure.

Web sites

Tourism Malaysia
Tourism.gov.my

