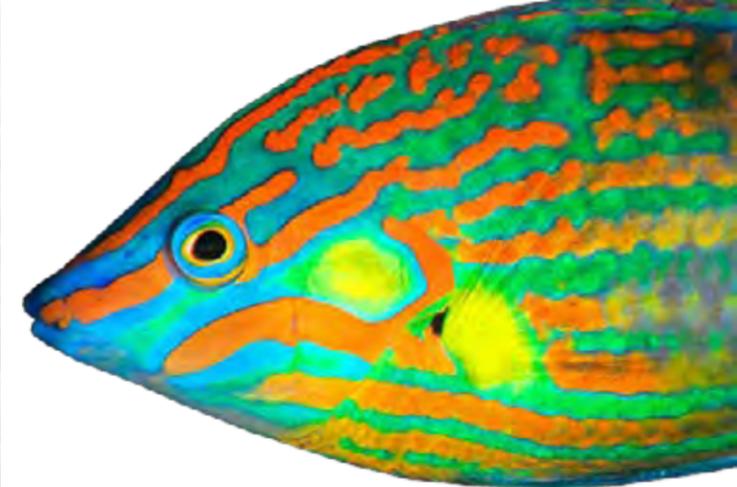


Reefs & Rainforests

Conservation Success Stories in Borneo's Sabah



Text and photos
by Andrea & Antonella Ferrari
www.reefwonders.net

Encompassing an area of roughly 460 square kilometers just off Northern Sabah's shores, right where Malaysian Borneo's landmass, small offshore islands and international waters intermingle with their Philippine counterparts in the Sulu Sea, lies the Sugud Islands Marine Conservation Area, or SIMCA, for friends. The island of Lankayan and its two neighbouring sisters Billean and Tegaipil have been declared since the year 2000 part and parcel of the protected area in what has since proven—beyond any doubt—to be an extraordinary landmark in the history of eco-tourism.





Bridled anemonefish;
Sunset on the pier at
Lankayan; Dive boat
racing to a dive site



Destructive practices such as cyanide fishing, reef bombing and deep-water trawling—which had been regularly employed in the area for several years by local and Philippine fishermen—are today no more allowed in the surrounding waters. Turtle eggs are regularly collected from nests dug in the sand and safely hatched under controlled conditions for reintroduction in the wild, and many other conservation programmes are now being—and will be in the future—vigorously implemented by Sugud Islands Marine Conservation Area's (SIMCA) managing company Reef Guardian, a private venture working in strict accordance with the Sabah Wildlife Department.

The area within the borders of SIMCA consists of a beautiful environment encompassing small uninhabited coral sand islands, patches of mangroves, huge seagrass beds, shallow sandy flats and an immense number of submerged coral reefs that host an enormous number of marine species, many of which are still wai-

ting to be scientifically described.

SIMCA's main topside landmarks are the uninhabited and sun-scorched islands of Billean and Tegaipil, and of course, the fabled Lankayan Island—the only one with a human presence. Lankayan boasts a world-famous, upper-class, and most of all, eco-friendly dive resort, sitting in splendid isolation on this tranquil little private island in the midst of the Sulu Sea.

Since our first visit to Lankayan more than twelve years ago, we immediately realized there was something special about the place. The island (or "Pulau" in Malay) is strategically situated between the coast of Sabah and the myriad of islands spreading from the Southern Philippines. Its very name means, in fact, "the last outpost". This labyrinthine maze of shallow turquoise waters and jungle-clad sandy cays has hidden and protected for centuries the secret sea lanes used by pirates, poachers, smugglers, and even assassins.

Marine life

Fish life is unbelievably abundant, luring in fleets of trawlers from both countries and the occasional big game fisherman. It was two of these, Ricky Chin and Kenneth Chung—two friends from the nearby coastal town of Sandakan—who discovered it several years ago during one of their big game fishing forays, and who made friends with Haji Bambi, the only man who back then was living there, after a life rich in adventures in the sea between Sabah and the Philippines.

To make a long story short, their meeting was at the origin of Pulau Lankayan as we know it today—a small, pristine tropical island on which a quiet, elegant resort caters to the needs of discerning divers and vacationers from the world over. A perfect holiday destination, the place—a tiny dot in the Sulu Sea about one-and-a-half hours by speedboat from the coastal town of Sandakan in Malaysian Sabah, on the island of Borneo—is a gorgeous, picture-



Batfish in coral garden; Sundeck at Lankayan Resort; Diver with large anemone

perfect cay, boasting pure white sandy beaches and a lovely, garden-like jungle interior, offering the exhilarating diving one has come to expect from Sabah's dive sites (shallow coral reefs, unsurpassed macro life, undescribed new species waiting to be discovered, big fish action, enormous biodiversity, interesting wrecks).

Add to the mixture an exquisitely styled, upscale resort, elegant and comfortable twin-sharing seafront chalets with private and well-appointed bathrooms, an open-air restaurant offering great food and a spectacular sundeck with an endless expanse of turquoise water just a few feet below, and you'll see why we love the place.

Here's a private exotic island where even non-divers can enjoy the perfect holiday, relaxing on the beach or snorkelling in the crystal-clear shallow waters of the lagoon, while sea eagles fly over, their piercing screeches tearing the sky

in the distance, and the jungle-shrouded mountains of Sabah tower on the horizon, bathed in golden glorious sunsets.

An informal, friendly, casual atmosphere adds to the pleasant feeling of "away-from-it-all" relaxation. Everything is so well spaced out and cleverly planned you might sometimes think you're all alone by yourself on the island.

Diving

The diving is at shallow to medium depths, always enjoyable, never risky or fatiguing. The dive center is well equipped and ideally situated at the end of the long jetty. The island staff are, if possible, even more cheerful and willing to help than in the rest of Sabah, Malaysia—a country remarkable for its extraordinary tradition of hospitality.

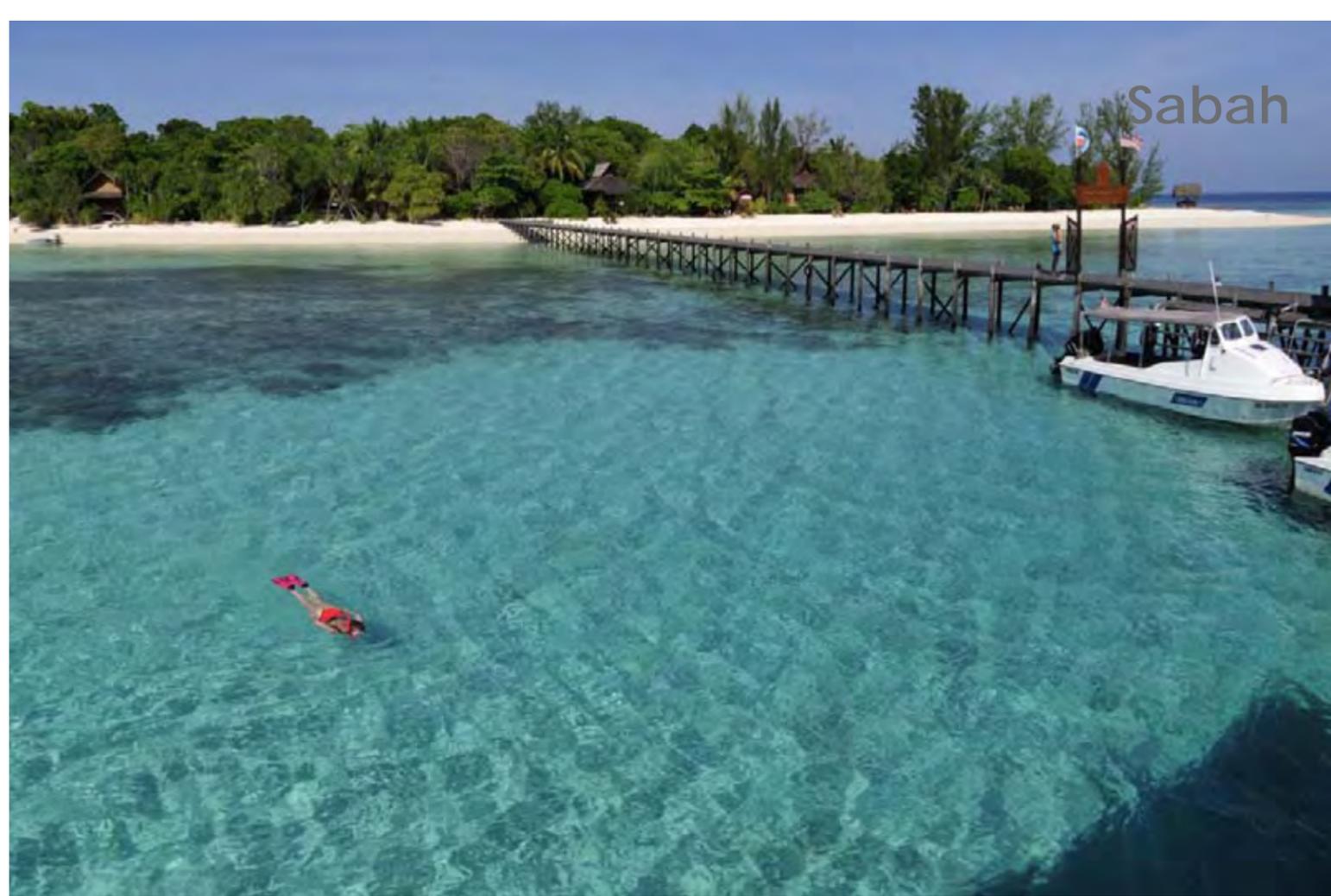
Small species here—many absolutely fascinating and quite a few still undescribed by science—reign supreme: resplendent gobies, unbelievably colourful nudibr-

branches, dwarf cuttlefish, fluorescent fire urchins with attendant crabs and huge lobsters dot the sand and coral bottom of each and everyone of the thirty-plus dive spots Lankayan offers at the moment.

The list of rare species regularly observed here includes robust and ornate ghost pipefish, frogfish, mandarinfish, blue-ringed octopus, wonder octopus and giant jawfish. Larger sightings along the reef include lots of harmless bamboo and coral cat sharks, blue-spotted rays, yellowtail and chevron barracudas, huge shoals of scads and robust fusiliers, giant bumphead parrotfish, a large variety of scorpionfish and lots of leopard (or zebra, as they are sometimes called) sharks.

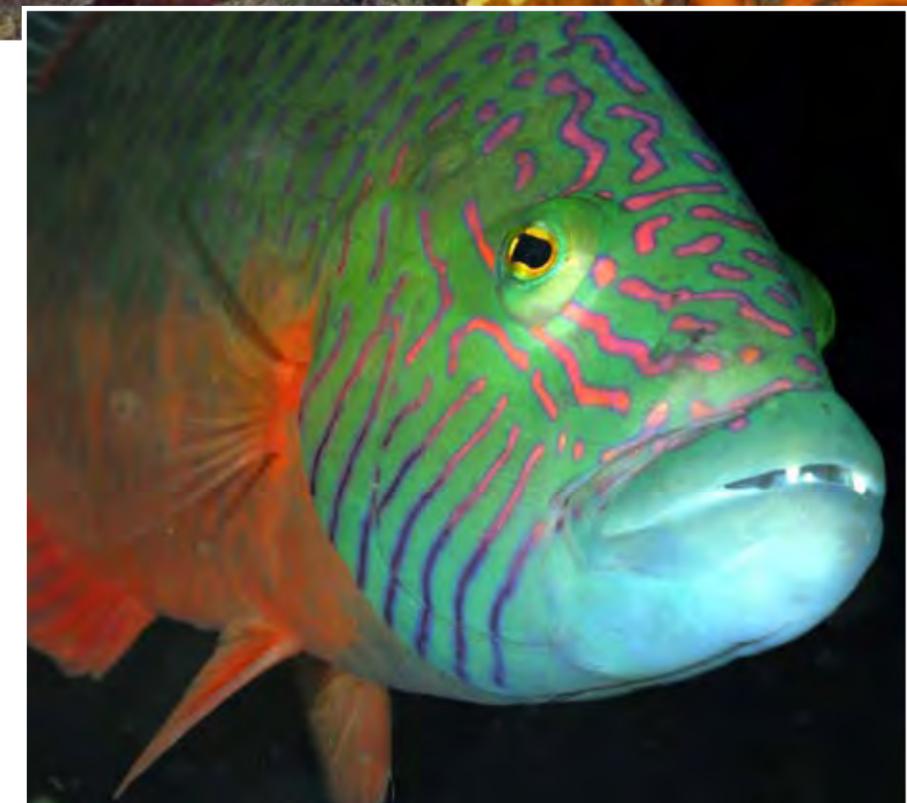
Chance encounters with bigger fish are not uncommon: very large adult blacktip sharks are commonly observed in several of Lankayan's outer dive sites, whale sharks patrol in season the open





Sabah

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: Linedcheeked wrasse; Lionfish; Snorkeler in bay at Lankayan; Mug shot of moray eel



water between the island and the mainland, while giant guitarfish—locally known as malumu—are a rarer sighting.

During our most recent trip there, we bumped into a three-meter long Galapagos shark leisurely cruising at a depth of five meters, and many of our Sabahan friends have told us about occasional tiger shark sightings.

A fascinating array of spectacular species is also encountered at the two wrecks in the vicinity of Lankayan: the imposing remains of a huge Chinese wooden fishing vessel sunk on purpose—now home to giant groupers, giant marbled stin-

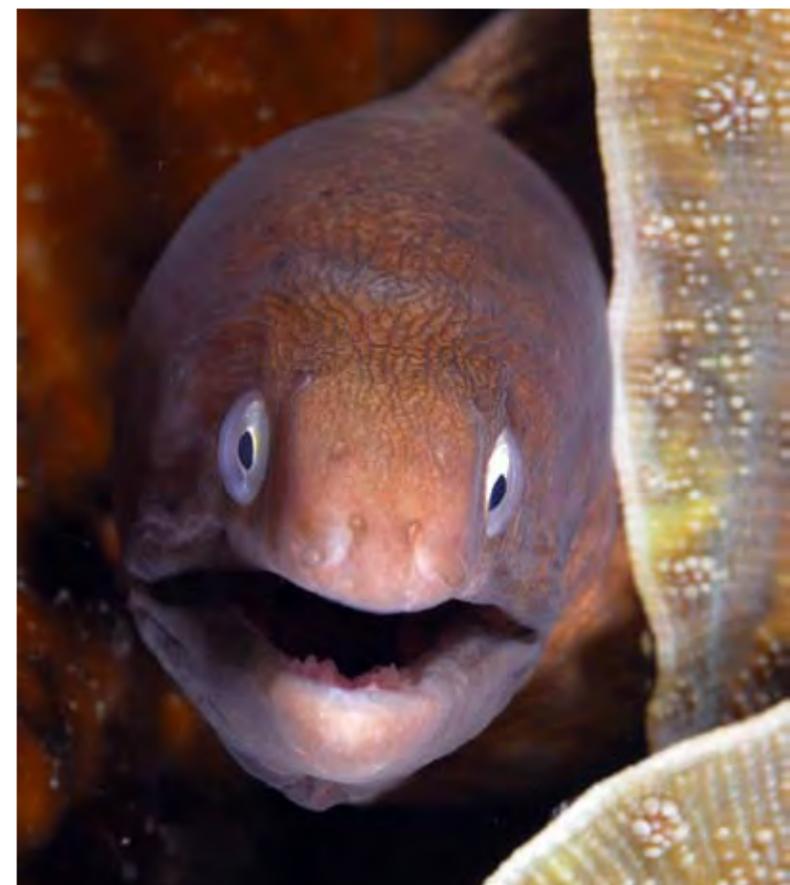
grays, frogfish, scorpionfish, lionfish and huge shoals of pelagics—and what is left (very little, alas!) of an historically significant armed barge belonging to the “Mosquito Fleet”, which served the Japanese and sunk during World War II.

One word of advice: due to its close proximity to the coast of Sabah with its attendant run-off from big muddy rivers and oil palm plantations, underwater visibility at Lankayan is usually far from perfect, even if there are unpredictable exceptions.

While this is of no consequence at all for macro photographers and videographers, it may prove quite frustrating

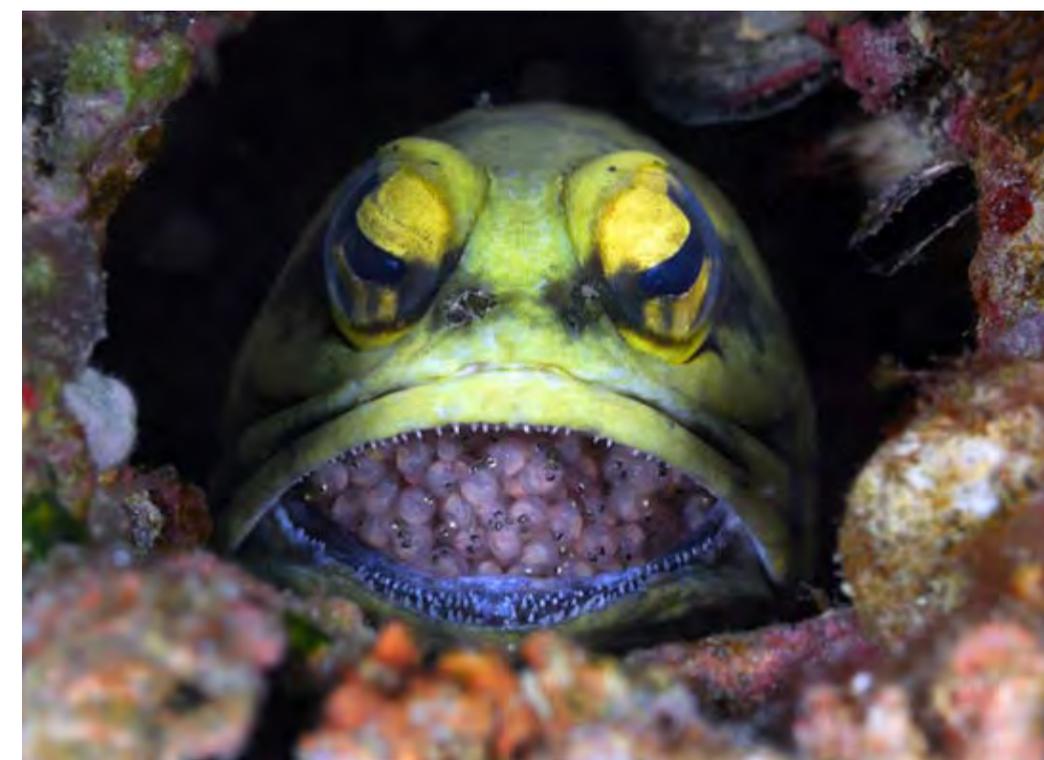
for wide angle lovers and big fish addicts, especially since it quite common encountering large animals during the course of a single dive (our record is five leopard sharks, one huge mangrove stingray, a whale shark and a roving pack of five adult blacktip sharks in one day!).

Lankayan is a macro life paradise with few comparisons but no destination for wide angle photographers, and divers must think of it more in terms of a successful conservation story than as a gin-clear water destination. As a tropical island destination for honeymooners, snorkellers, diving families and macro rese-





CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: Blenny; Eggs in the oven; Eye of blue spotted stingray; Goby on hard coral; Leopard shark resting; Scorpionfish; Map puffer fish



archers, it has however very few equals anywhere.

But to Ken Chung, managing director of PSR—the dive resort company which also owns and operates Kapalai resort, close to world-famous Sipadan Island, and the jungle resort in Sepilok—there is more to Lankayan than just tourism.

With the passing of time, Ken Chung realized the intricate environment of Pulau Lankayan and its surrounding coral reefs were going to be endangered soon. The very same marine life which attracted tourists and divers from all over the world was acting as a beacon for fishing boats, raiding these waters in always greater numbers.

Local fishermen and their counterparts from the Philippines would not hesitate to resort to highly destructive fishing methods, largely and for a long time in use on Sout East Asian coral reefs: fish bombing (in which home-made and quite dangerous bombs consisting of a bottle full of fertilizer are thrown in the water or on coral reefs), cyanide fishing (in which the noxious chemical is squirted using a spray bottle among the nooks and crannies of the reef to stun fish

later sold to Chinese restaurants) and trawling (with weighted nets which scrape the sea bottom floor, destroying everything in their path) would soon take their toll if left unchecked.

The first tentative conservation efforts soon paid off: feeding a resident population of baby and juvenile blacktip sharks encouraged the endangered predators to stick close to the island reefs, away from roving fishermen in the open sea; scores of hawksbill and green turtle eggs, laid in the sand by their mothers, would be dug out and hatched inside fences which protected them from predators, and hatchlings would be carefully released into the sea; the cutting of trees and shrubs on the island would be kept to a minimum, and all trash and refuse would be carefully disposed of.

We were there all the time, twice a year, to see and follow the growth of an eco-friendly mentality on the island. Year after year, we noticed how the steps taken in the right direction would not interfere with the functioning of the resort, the relaxed, laid-back atmosphere, which still unfailingly impresses first-





CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: Whale shark, the largest fish in the sea; Two baby sea turtles make their way to the open ocean; Copperband butterflyfish (inset); Two Coleman shrimp on fire urchin; Feather coral and sponges

sightings we missed but many others did not, and we were the first ever to capture on film the incubation of eggs in the oral cavity by the endemic Giant jawfish.

We swam with huge Whale sharks, we witnessed the violent courtship ritual and subsequent mating of Leopard sharks, and we found lovely Zebra crabs and Coleman's shrimps tucked among the venomous spines of fire urchins. Marine life was improving, the unmistakable signs were everywhere. The hard and sometimes dangerous job of resort manager, Ricky Chin—always ready to jump on a speedboat to chase away poaching fishermen—was giving welcome results.

But then it became clear a single private operation would not be enough to properly

time visitors.

The place was good—but it was getting better. Big fish

became the norm—the Giant guitarfish

patrol and manage such a huge area. More was needed.

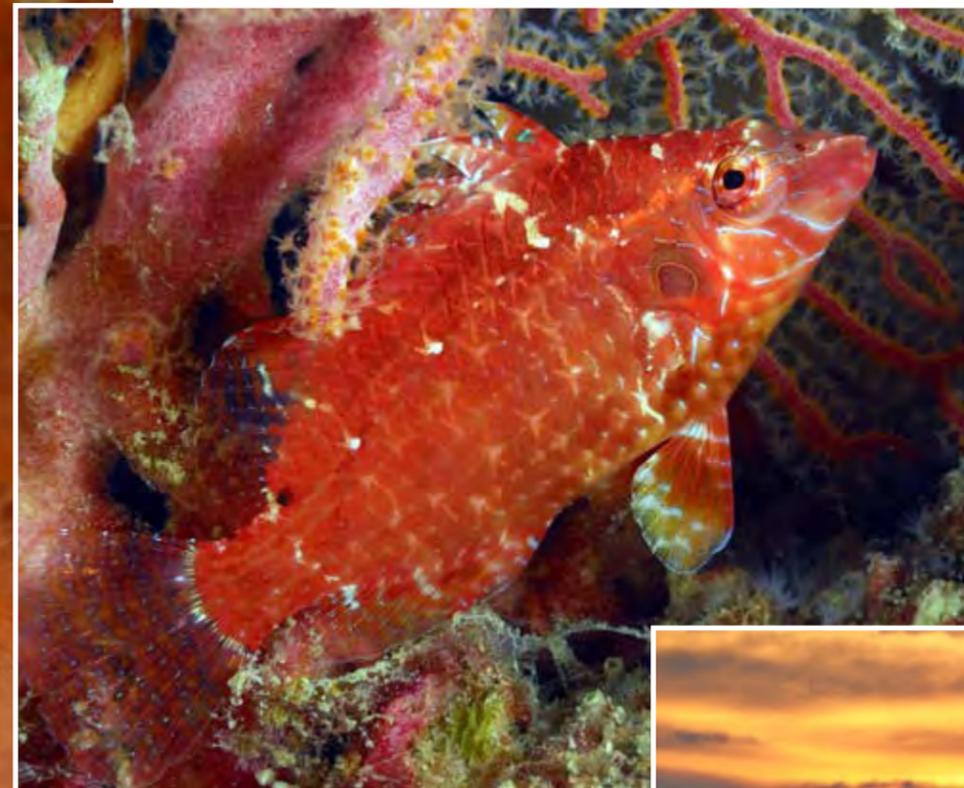
Reef Guardian

Enter Reef Guardian, the private company which now works side-by-side with the Malaysian Government and the Wildlife Department of Sabah to manage and conserve the area. A lot of hard work, tireless lobbying and clever political maneuvering succeeded at last in transforming the dream in reality. In 2003, the Marine Protected Area (MCA) of the Sugud Islands was finally officially declared. The playground of a lucky few had become a winning example of ecological conservation through the cooperation between private enterprise and the state.

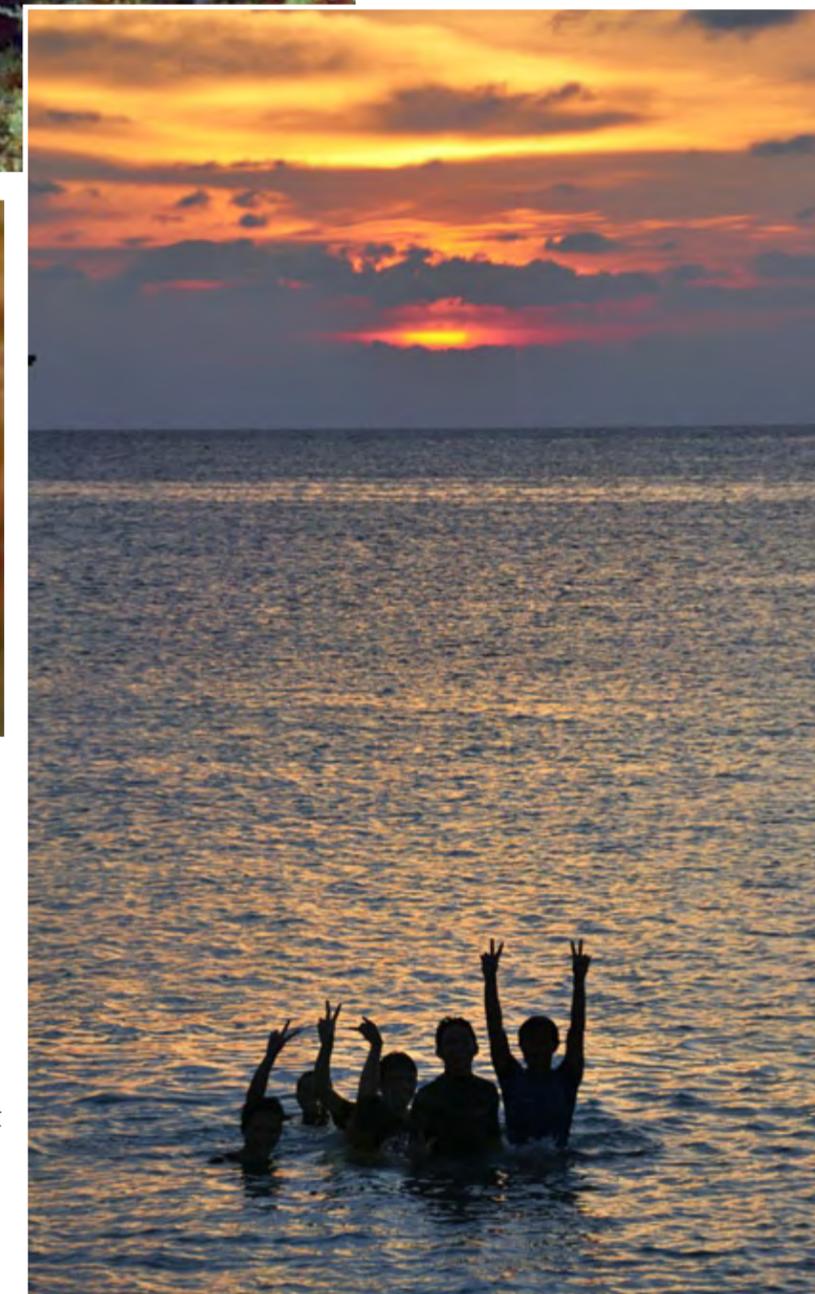
PSR, through its subsidiary, Reef Guardian, protects and conserves the natural resources of the area, reinvesting part of the profits into its management. Patrol boats have been bought and equipped staff members have been employed and well trained. Marine biologists have been invited to conduct surveys and a census of the marine life. New

methods of rubbish and non-solid waste disposal have been developed and researched, to first minimize and then completely





CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Hairy squat lobster; Hawkfish and fan coral; Enjoying a sunset swim at Lankayan; Nudibranch *Chromodoris coi*; Aerial view of the island of Lankayan



gile marine ecosystem of Lankayan for us all to enjoy.

The story of Lankayan shows what can be done when an individual with a thinking brain, a clear vision (and admittedly a lot of capital) can do when he sets his mind on eco-tourism and marine environment protection. Its success has recently led to the creation of a second eco-friendly upscale dive resort, this time on the neighboring island of Billean. From what we have seen—it will probably open in 2010—it promises to be even better than the original one on Lankayan.

Concluding thoughts

We have travelled and dived the world far and wide, but the story of Pulau Lankayan and the Sugud Islands Marine Conservation Area is still quite unique in our experience.

avoid the seepage of nitrates (the bane of island resorts with no sewer systems) in the surrounding, pristine sea waters.

The huge problem of phosphates coming from oil plantations on the coast and being flooded out to sea —where they lead to plankton and algal blooming, putting the survival of coral colonies at risk—by rains and rivers is going to be tackled soon. And many more steps will surely be taken in the future to preserve, defend and re-habilitate the splendid, fra-

Most dive resort operators are not really willing to embark onto such a far-reaching voyage, being contented to mind their own business, failing to realize the extent of consequences when the local government (and people) are not actively involved.

How many private entrepreneurs have actually succeeded in having the government declare a protected area around their own island or stretch of land? How many tourist and dive operators have actually tried and fought to do so? Protection of



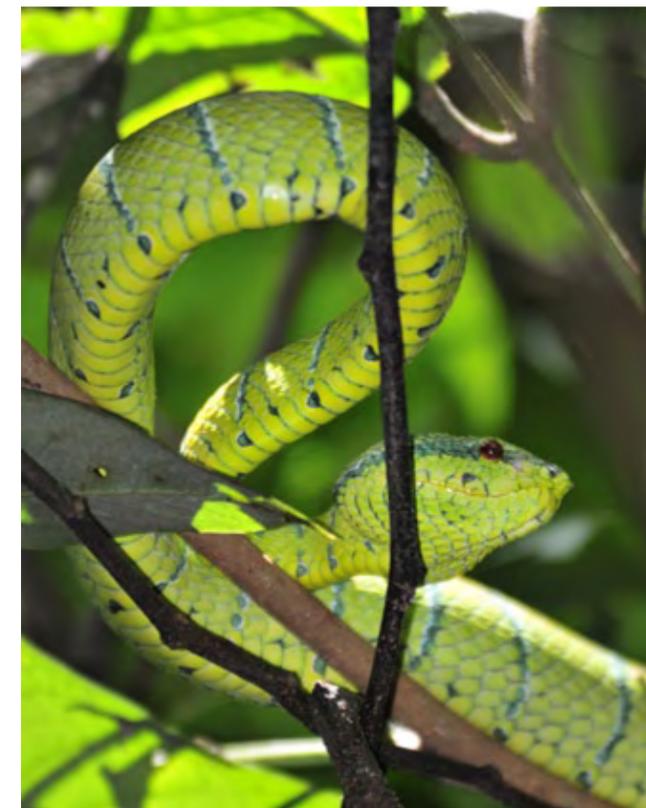
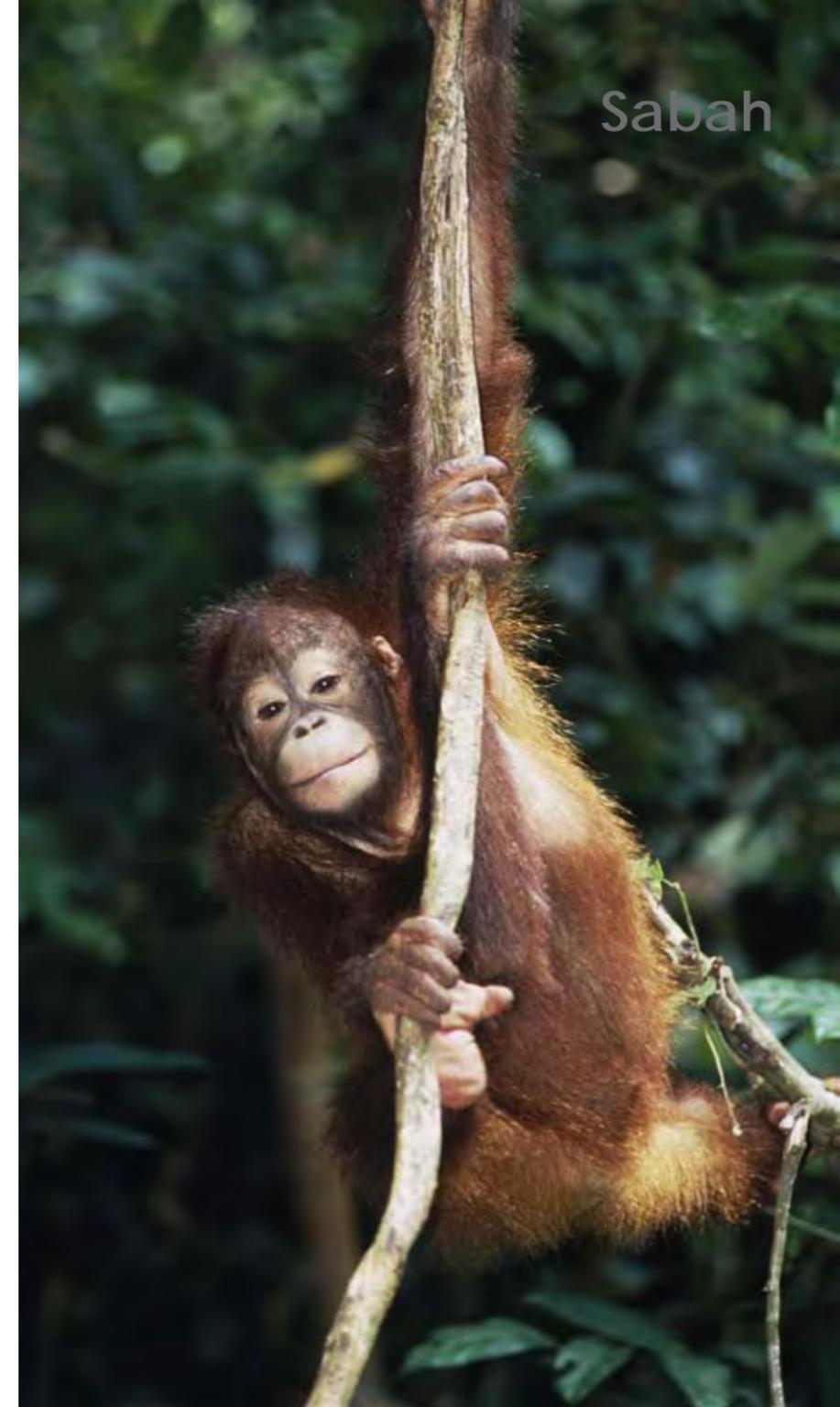
habitats as a whole is the first unavoidable step towards protection of single species, and habitat protection needs lots of money to be implemented correctly. The costs are high, but as the axiom says, “think globally, act locally”.

Patrols must be regularly mounted, staff must be properly trained in field procedures and regularly paid, expensive equipment must be acquired and maintained, research must be done and updated, data must be stored and analyzed.

Without money, there’s no protection, and without protection only destruction will follow. The proper management of a successful dive resort and operation such as Lankayan points the way in the right direction. The results are there for all to see. ■

Sepilok

In the forest realm of the Orang-utan



Text and photos by Andrea and Antonella Ferrari

The biggest mistake one could do while visiting the Sepilok lowland tropical forest would be watching the orang-utans, or rather, watching *only* the orang-utans. That is because this formidable stretch of wilderness—wisely preserved just a few miles from the modern bustle of Sandakan town—offers an unequalled opportunity to observe in comfort the utterly complex mechanisms of nature at work in the tropics.

big red-haired apes, their extraordinary prowess in tree-climbing and upside-down vine-dangling, and after having been dutifully moved to the depth of the heart by their soulful gaze (no other primate looks at you like an orang-utan does), the visitors should stay a little longer in the forest, to take a leisurely stroll along the well-marked trail in the company of a biologist and guide from the Rehabilitation Center.

It is then, and only then, that one will be able to hear the hypnotic, cycada-like song of the tree frogs, the booming, cackling call of the great hornbill, the soft rustle in the dead leaves on the forest floor at the passing of a bronze skink. Only then, the metallic shine of spider eyes will be apparent; only then, the dead brown little branch will start walking with the hesitant steps of the stick insect; and it is only then, that the bright green leaf buds on a low shrub will suddenly

take the coiled shape of the pit viper waiting in ambush. A little patience will repay the visitor with extraordinary gifts.

And after having experienced the tropical forest in its full complexity, even the orang-utans will appear in a new, full, more complex dimension, encompassing their role in the ecology of the forest and their extremely difficult situation at the present time, when their survival in the wild is severely endangered by logging, mining and general habitat encroachment by human beings. Their's is a complex problem, and one which touches us all: the preservation, not of a single species, but of full habitats is rapidly becoming one of the most important concerns of the new century.

Where to stay

So, to take the time needed to fully appreciate the ancient rhythms of

After having admired for as long as needed the delicate grace of the



Sepilok Calotes lizard

THIS PAGE: Orang-utans lounge in the trees of the forest at Sepilok's Rehabilitation Center; Green snake hides among the branches (above)





the forest, the best thing one could do is stay at least a few days at the Sepilok Nature Resort, a most beautiful compound bordering on the protected area (it is actually not uncommon to have orang-utans, macaques or

and grasses and a collection of more than 150 different Asian orchid species. The Orang-Utan Rehabilitation Center (where young captive or abandoned orang-utans are being helped by a highly trained and motivated staff to readjust to a life in the wild) and the actual Sepilok Forest Reserve are just a couple of minutes' walk away, and the Resort staff are happy to organize birding, trekking and river trips to the neighbouring areas (including the fauna-rich Sukau area along the Kinabatangan River).

Before venturing further away, however, one should first take advantage of the comforts offered by the Sepilok Nature Resort and fully explore the natural wonders of the Sepilok-Kabili Forest Reserve, which has enough to offer to keep one busy for months. Here, insects, amphibians, reptiles and birds abound; the trails are very well marked; and the local guides are friendly, reliable and extremely knowledgeable. Visits to Sepilok are also usually combined with dive trips to the beautiful island of Lankayan, which is owned and managed by the same company. ■

even pythons wandering around among the chalets) and perfectly integrated with the surrounding forest.

Set in a spectacularly landscaped private area of manicured lawns, orchid gardens and rolling hills, the fully airconditioned (and very comfortable) twin bed chalets feature beautiful lake or jungle view verandas and private bathrooms with hot water. The surrounding park, which would take half a day to explore, offers an amazing array of tropical plants

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Sepilok Resort restaurant overlooking a jungle lined lake; Orchids of the forest; Brilliant colored beetle found in the forest; Another splendid orchid on the grounds; Sepilok Resort bungalows; Pair of orchids (inset)



A trip to Borneo's hidden jewel Kinabatangan



Text and photos by
Andrea and Antonella Ferrari

The lowland riverine forest, encompassing the extensive Kinabatangan river basin and its 26,000-hectare wildlife sanctuary, has few rivals in the world for remoteness, richness of animal species and just sheer natural beauty. At the same time, this spectacular and mostly untouched wilderness of Malaysian Borneo is very accessible and easily explored — usually by small boat during the day or walking by night or late evening.

Departing from Sandakan harbour, visitors can easily reach the Sanctuary's headquarters in Sukau—where most of the lodges are located—by a scenic

one-hour long boat trip that ends at one of the riverside resorts' pier. More and more guesthouses, jungle camps and fully-fledged forest lodges have been recently popping up along the river's banks, all offering excellent accommodations (of varying level and cost, but

all very clean and very well organized), good standards and very tasty Sabahan food, often using locally acquired, fresh organic products such as delicious vegetables or fruit and big river prawns grown and farmed by the local Orang Sungai (river people). The best way to visit the

Kinabatangan river basin with its enormous, eerily beautiful oxbow lagoons and many small, twisting tributaries is by booking a week-long stay via a specialized wildlife travel agency in Sandakan; service is usually excellent and specific needs of visitors are normally very well

cared for. Regularly subject to tides and periodical inundations during the rainy season, in a perennial state of flux and sparsely populated along its banks by small fishing and farming communities, the Kinabatangan river basin represents a very unique natural environment, pea-





Sabah

cefully shared by humans and wildlife.

The Importance of a Good Guide

The Kinabatangan river basin is a wildlife photographer's dream come true, as most Borneo wildlife is not only richly represented in the area but also often easily sighted and photographed around Sukau, provided one knows where and when to look. This is obviously a destination where the services of an experienced local wildlife guide are a must, especially for those taking their exploring seriously.

We had a stroke of luck and had the time of our lives with Dennis Ikon, a native, self-taught enthusiast who is not only a very experienced rainforest guide but also a passionate wildlife photographer to boost, always ready to recognize a photographer's special need or request without even being asked; he certainly made the difference for us. He has worked many times with big-time, exceedingly demanding pros such as Frans Lanting, so he knows his trade well!

Remember to take with you

a good telephoto (VR-equipped or with a sturdy tripod) for all the big and not so big species you'll observe during the day from the safety your boat, and a good flash, and your macro lens of choice for all the weird and wonderful little critters you'll see at night.

Being in Borneo, a sun hat and a lightweight rain poncho are nice to have around, especially if you plan to spend a lot of time exploring the river by boat. Night walks are safe and easy (leeches are harmless and nothing to worry about), but bring a pair of strong, comfortable jungle or trekking ankle boots and a small torch with you, and be prepared to get very wet and very muddy.

Where to go & what to do in Sukau

The average day in Sukau starts just before dawn, with the faraway hok-hok of some distant hornbill welcoming the first warm rays of the sun over the steaming jungle. After a lovely breakfast at the lodge, visitors hurry down the river side jetty to board a small, low aluminum

canoe powered by both petrol and electric engines to start the day's explorations. The boats are lightweight, flat-bottomed and very stable, making an excellent platform for a photographer's tripod – the local boatmen employed by the lodges take great pride and are very good at switching from petrol to electric just at the right time to allow as close an approach to wildlife as humanly possible.

Most exploration takes place at a leisurely pace along the Kinabatangan muddy banks and up its small, meandering tributary, the extraordinarily scenic Menanggol. It's a good idea to book one's accommodation as close as possible to its mouth, as the winding course of the forest-canopied Menanggol is a favourite destination for wildlife enthusiasts and birdwatchers visiting the Kinabatangan area. So, to enjoy it at its most evocative, unpopulated best, it's better

CLOCKWISE: Harlequin gliding frog; Crab-eating macaque; Mouse deer; Wagler's pit viper; Proboscis monkey male on tree trunk; Mangrove snake resting among branches

PREVIOUS PAGE: Pied Hornbill; Visitors exploring the Menanggol tributary, an oxbow lagoon of the Kinabatangan





CLOCKWISE FROM INSET BELOW: A flower by the river; Buffy fishing owl at night; Stick insect; Water monitor; Rainforest katydid mimicking a leaf; Large Saltwater or Estuarine crocodile in the Menanggol

Sabah

offering wonderful opportunities for safe, comfortable and very fruitful night walks.

Even closer to the coast and branching out to the Sulu Sea itself, the immense estuary of the Kinabatangan is clogged in thick, labyrinthine, impenetrable forest of mangroves and Nipa palms—primordially beautiful and rich in species but not easily



explored or, thankfully, exploited. You will have excellent opportunities to admire this unique environment on your way to and from Sukau.

Encroached on all sides by rapidly developing oil palm plantations—the scourge of Borneo's primeval forests—and endangered by logging plantations, which severely curtail the larger animals' migratory routes and forest corridors, the Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary is never-

theless officially considered today to be one of the most important and pristine areas of wilderness in the whole world, and as such, it cannot be missed by wildlife enthusiasts. Floating down its murky, deep, slow-flowing waters is like taking a veritable trip back in time.

A treasure trove for wildlife lovers

But what about the animals one can hope to see? Well, we know very few areas outside of the African plains and the Venezuelan Llanos where one can hope to observe and photograph such spectacular amounts of tropical wildlife. Remember always, however...this is South-East Asia—not the Serengeti!

Commonly sighted reptile species here are estuarine or saltwater crocodiles (with some very big individuals occasionally sighted up close), reticulate pythons, mangrove and dog-toothed cat snakes, bright green temple pit vipers and very large water monitors, while among the 250 bird species found in the area one can sight, among others, several species of large hornbills (including the spectacular Rhinoceros hornbill), fish-eagles, buffy owls, kingfishers, cuckoos and darters. Among the large mammals, wild pigs, dwarf Bornean elephants, river otters, leaf monkeys, long-tailed

macaques, wild orangutans and proboscis monkeys are commonly observed, often up close and at length. In fact, the Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary is the best spot anywhere to observe the rare elephant of Borneo, a smallish and friendlier cousin of the Indian one which has recently been awarded its own species status.

This is also the land of flying snakes and flying frogs, while those interested in insects and spiders—often quite large and very colorful—will keep their cameras clicking away, especially if going out

at night and with a warm tropical drizzle shrouding the thick forest. All in all, the Kinabatangan river basin is a treasure trove of rare, endangered and fascinating tropical species, all to be found and often easily observed in a landscape of unrivalled beauty and isolation. As a choice destination for the discerning wildlife photographer and nature enthusiast, it truly has few equals anywhere, and one can only hope its currently protected status will keep it healthy and untouched for many, many more years to come. ■



to get there before anybody else, immediately after sunrise. If you're staying at a lodge close to its mouth you'll also be able to linger around for a longer time in the evening before going back for dinner and your night walk. If you can afford it and are serious about your wildlife photography, go for your own personal guide and boat. It will surely make a difference.

On foot or by boat

The thickly forested area around Sukau itself—this is prime virgin lowland dipterocarp country—makes extended exploration on foot rather difficult, but that around the village of Abai—somewhat downriver and closer to the coast and the sea—allows excellent walks on well-maintained forest trails and boardwalks,





Danum

The valley where time stands still



Sabah

Text and photos by
Andrea and Antonella Ferrari

—A pristine, virgin rainforest

The crown jewel of the untouched nature of Borneo, the legendary Danum Valley Conservation Area is the largest protected lowland dipterocarp primary forest in Sabah, Malaysia. This pristine, untouched area of extraordinary beauty holds an unique status among other protected areas. Before it became a conservation area, there were no human settlements within the area, meaning that hunting, logging and other human interference was non-existent.

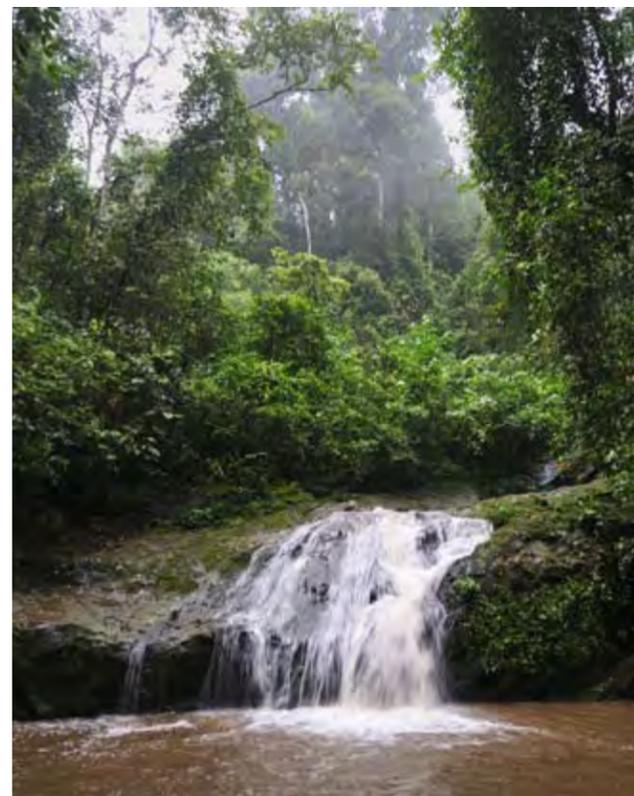
This makes the area one-of-a-kind among other protected areas in Sabah—evidenced at first glance by both the number of animal sightings and the sheer scope of its water-soaked, luxuriant rainforest. Danum Valley covers an area of 438 square kilometres and is currently managed by the Yayasan Sabah

Foundation, created in 1966 for conservation, research, education and physical training purposes. The nearest town, Lahad Datu—a quiet, smallish settlement at the crossroads between Sandakan and Tawau, which can be easily reached by car or twin-engine turboprop flight from both centers—is about 82km away (about a two-hour drive by four-wheel drive vehicles on mainly unpaved washboard logging roads in good weather, but be prepared for a much longer Camel Trophy-style slog if it has been raining!).

Given its formidable isolation and impenetrable rainforest cover, accommodation in the area is presently limited to two basic choices: the Danum Valley Field Centre, a research establishment reserved for scientists and education purposes only; while the other, rather splendid (and understandably rather expensive) Borneo Rainforest Lodge, has been created with conservation and low-environmental impact in mind for tourists to stay. From its beautiful, well-appointed chalets, visitors can take long, guided walks through lowland rainforest trails, while other activities include night walks (serious wildlife photographers should not miss these) and night drives (avoid these, which are crowded, noisy and not really suited to the local environment—rainforests are made for walking).

Visitors on the extensive rainforest canopy walk (above) and a view of the untouched primary Danum jungle (top right)





CLOCKWISE: Silver leaf monkey feeding at dawn; Perfectly camouflaged Borneo horned frog; A waterfall in the forest; Forest dragon lizard (male) on its perch; Jade tree frogs mating on a rainy night; A colorful Lantern bug (inset)

Fauna & flora with few equals

Danum Valley is a world-famous destination for passionate birdwatchers, but its undisturbed, virgin, thick lowland rainforest is home to many other animals including several large mammals, many beautiful reptiles and amphibians, and countless numbers of exceptionally attractive insects.

Mammals regularly sighted include wild Orangutans, gibbons, leaf monkeys, long-tailed and pig-tail macaques, wild bearded pigs, mouse deer and sambar deer. Lucky visitors may also occasionally encounter several species of wild cats (including the "dream date" of South-East Asian rainforests, the strikingly beautiful and incredibly elusive Clouded Leopard), the shy Bornean Pygmy elephant—which is much more easily observed, however, along the Kinabatangan river basin in the Sukau area—and even Malay Sun bears or Sumatran rhinos (but do not count on the latter!).

Birds commonly observed number several species of Hornbills (including Rhinoceros and Helmeted), bee-eaters, kingfishers, warblers, several species of forest raptors and many others too numerous to mention here, while among the many reptile and amphibian species encountered the impressive Reticulate python, at least two different species of Pit viper, the strikingly marked Paradise snake, the colorful Forest dragon lizard and the amazingly well-camouflaged Borneo horned frog all deserve to be mentioned.

A lot of first-time visitors to rainforests spend most of their time looking in the distance and hoping for the large animals, but the most interesting and fascinating denizens of this mysteriously beautiful environment are in fact the small, secretive, camouflaged inhabitants of the forest floor and canopy: diminutive reptiles,

amphibians and most often strange insects of all shapes and sizes, which are usually quite hard to spot and which are most easily observed during the guided night walks.

Rainforest Trekking

Long day and night walks are the best options to fully appreciate the Danum Valley rainforest environment. Despite the apparent drawbacks and discomforts—waking up at 5am, slogging in the mud for hours on end, being literally drenched in sweat and very often even rainfall,



dealing with the occasional but messy leech bite—this is really the only sensible way to enjoy the place and fully savour the wonders it offers. Get yourself a private guide



LEFT TO RIGHT: A Red-phase Silver monkey feeding in forest canopy. Giant stick insect; Giant Rhinoceros beetle on tree trunk; Harlequin gliding frog

Most important of all, take a pair of good hiking ankle boots along. This is where synthetic, breathable fabrics such as Cordura are strongly recommended, since they'll be constantly soaked, and boots in natural materials such as leather or canvas would rapidly rot or mould, often in a single night's time. A sun hat and a rainproof torch will be important

items to take along, too.

Since we're on the subject, do not let the local all-pervasive obsession and paranoia with leeches scare you—these fascinating, small rubbery creatures (did you know they can survive with a single feeding a year if needed?) are completely harmless and do not transmit any diseases. If you get bitten by one you'll feel no pain—maybe a little itching later on—but you'll certainly bleed freely and massively for quite a few hours, as their saliva contains both an efficient anesthetic and a powerful anticoagulant. The blood staining and trickling can look scary to the uninitiated, but it's no big deal, really. After a day's trekking in the rainforest you'd have to thoroughly wash your soiled clothes anyway!

On the good side, Danum Valley is almost completely mosquito-free, and that is really important since most serious tropical

diseases, such as malaria or dengue, are transmitted via the bite of these obnoxious little winged pests.

Impressive environment

Despite our lifelong experience in rainforests exploration and photography worldwide, we could not help being deeply impressed, and in fact, even awed by the beauty, richness and sheer isolation of Danum Valley. This is a virgin, primordial, occasionally demanding environment of steaming lush vegetation and glutinous ankle-deep mud, of steep ravines and gurgling clear forest brooks, of gigantic buttress trees and coiled, climbing lianas, perennially bathed in oppressive heat and humidity. Incredibly violent downpours are sudden and frequent, and even when bathed in searing sunshine the whole environment is perennially immersed in a prehistoric, Jurassic Park-like atmosphere.

Animal sightings are surprisingly frequent and near for a rainforest habitat, and photographic opportunities for professionals and serious amateurs are simply

enormous. We spent a whole week at the Borneo Rainforest Lodge, and we feel we have barely scratched the surface. Every few steps along the forest trails a new fascinating subject would be sighted, and it would not be uncommon for us to walk a few hundred meters only, in more than three hours, especially at night.

To the attentive, careful observer and thanks to its own specific nature, the Danum Valley environment offers an unique chance—the possibility not only to sight wild animals, but to pause at length and leisure and watch them actually behave i.e. feed, hunt, mate. This is a rare and precious gift, one which has to be treasured, and Danum offers it generously to those willing to listen to the sounds of the forests or put their eyesight to good use. Add to this the deeply moving, emotional impact of the untouched rainforest habitat and the creature comforts offered, at the end of a tiring day, by the beautiful Borneo Rainforest Lodge. Whoever thought up the open-air bathtubs on the wooden chalet balconies facing the rainforest and the river was a genius. You will understand why we have fallen in love with Danum Valley, and why we cannot wait to go back there—this time, for a longer stay! ■

from the Borneo Rainforest Lodge if at all possible—as everywhere else it will make the experience completely different—and bring cotton clothes only (no artificial fibers!), with long trousers, long thick socks to tuck them into, and long-sleeved shirts. Be aware that you'll be drenched most of time in your own sweat and/or rainfall—so it makes no sense trying to keep dry at all costs with nylon ponchos or raincoats, which also rapidly become unbearably suffocating in the heat.



View from the bathtub-equipped balcony of the exclusive Borneo Rainforest Lodge overlooking the Danum River