

BORNEO FROM BELOW



There's far more to Borneo than orangutans and pygmy elephants. In the first of its kind, a new video series is bringing the Malaysian coastline into our homes. **AARON 'BERTIE' GEKOSKI** is fronting the show



"TRUST ME, THIS PLACE is off the charts. It's the epicentre of marine biodiversity. Along every stretch of coast there are stories that need telling. There are sharks, nomadic sea-gypsies, more turtles than you'd believe, incredible macro life, plus of course Sipadan island! It's like nowhere on Earth!"

I'm sitting outside Starbucks in London's Covent Garden on a wet, biting cold day in December, being catapulted into a place so foreign it may as well be on another planet.

Simon Christopher puts his sandwich down and takes a breath. Co-founder and CEO of Scubazoo, "Pieman" is as renowned for his enthusiasm as he is for his voracious appetite.

This is the man who went from filming dive customers in 1996 to

building a leading underwater production company with his close friend, underwater photographer Jason Isley.

In the years that followed, cameraman Simon Enderby, underwater cameraman Roger Munns and 15 others joined them in their office in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah – that's Malaysian Borneo to you and I.

The journey was from a video-recorder with a bunch of tapes to filming for the BBC, National Geographic and Discovery Channel. The famous turtle mating scene in David Attenborough's *Life Story*? Scubazoo shot that. The Emmy Award-winning *Human Planet* piece about Borneo's freediving sea-gypsies? Also Scubazoo. When it comes to telling underwater stories, few do it better.

Pieman continued: "We're in the process of launching a new online channel that will give a platform to these stories. We want to bring our world into the homes of fellow ocean-lovers. Never before has anyone attempted a project like this – and we'd like you to front it."

What is it about the word Borneo? Few places carry such exotic connotations: jungles filled tree-to-tree with pygmy elephants, proboscis monkeys, sun bears and orangutans – headhunters, crazy-looking bugs, rainforests, mountains. And that's just above the water.

Borneo from below does little to dampen the romance. This huge coastline – Borneo is the third largest island in the world – is home to world-class muck-diving and coral reefs, and inhabited by some of the ocean's largest creatures, as well as its smallest and most bizarre.

It doesn't take much persuasion for me to join the Scubazoo team. I leave the UK laden with lenses, bound for Borneo.

Marvellous Mabul

Just an hour's boat-ride from the unprepossessing fishing town of Semporna, eastern Sabah, Mabul island is small enough to walk around in 20

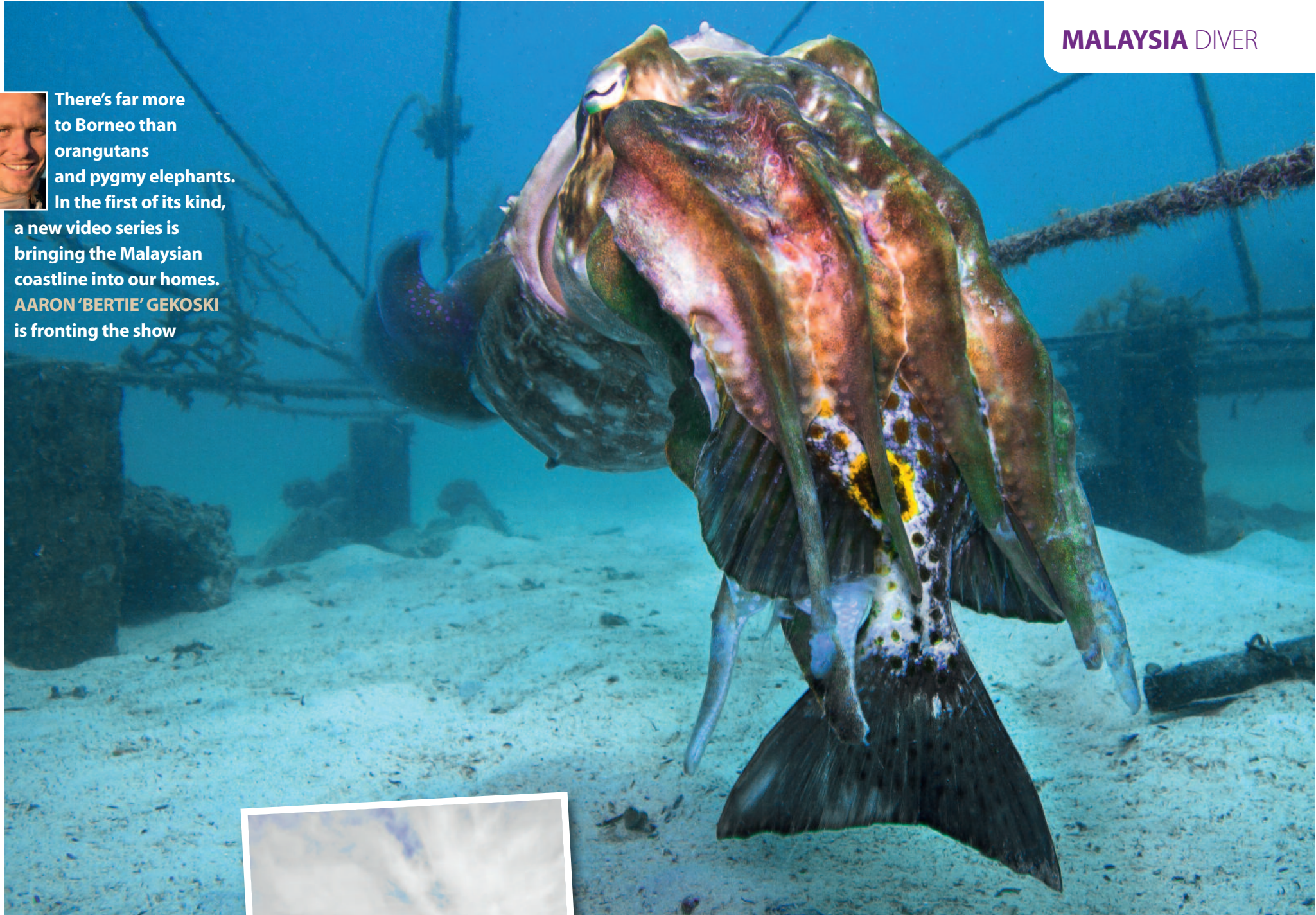
minutes, yet large enough to host a sizeable population of Bajau Laut (*aka* sea-gypsies) who have formed settlements here over recent years.

Set up by Scotsman Ric and eccentric German Tino, Scuba Junkie is the largest of a handful of operators on the island. In just over a decade since it opened, Scuba Junkie has grown into the busiest operator in Malaysia, serving up to 100 customers a day in Mabul alone.

Conservation lies at the heart of the company's success. A newly opened rehabilitation centre and turtle hatchery has not only had a marked impact on local turtle populations, but turned the community into conservation rangers.

Traditionally, turtle eggs are either eaten or sold at markets. Now, locals receive a financial reward for notifying Scuba Junkie when a turtle is nesting.

The eggs are then relocated to a safe environment by in-house marine



biologists Dave and Cat. The Irish couple even organise annual Turtle and Shark Weeks, and are in the process of setting up a Sabah Shark Alliance to help protect the area's shark populations.

In an attempt to combat Mabul's litter problems, Scuba Junkie's staff also undertake weekly beach-cleans with guests. In a relatively short space of time, locals have gone from eating out of nice biodegradable banana leaves to food coming wrapped in a shiny plastic coat. Keeping the island clean is a daily battle.

Because of the sheer volume of interesting stories, coupled with its proximity to Sipadan and other superb dive-spots, Mabul was the ideal place to launch *Borneo From Below*.

The plan was to be based here and produce short, weekly online videos about the area's main characters (both above and below the water) and key environmental stories, while offering

Above: A broadclub cuttlefish caught in the act of eating its dinner – a rabbitfish.

Left: Snorkeller with jack shoal.

Far left, from top: Bajau sea-gypsy; sea-snake.

viewers tips to improve their underwater photography.

Around the Island

While Sipadan grabs most of the headlines, the diving off Scuba Junkie's jetty turns out to be surprisingly fishy. Dive site Awas plays host to dozens of green turtles, some of them the largest I've ever encountered.

On artificial reef structures they endure divers with good grace, while wrasse pluck parasites off them.

On and around these structures are candy crabs, broadclub cuttlefish the size of rugby balls (I get lucky and snap one with a rabbitfish protruding from its mouth), frogfish, schools of snapper, ornate ghost pipefish and mantis shrimp.

And all located no more than a couple of minutes' swim from the jetty.

Other interesting sites around the island include Sea Ventures (which is a



converted oil-rig turned dive-centre with superb macro underneath), Lobster Wall (slope with lots of nudis) and Froggies Lair (lovely coral and great macro life).

At the impossibly pristine Si Ami Island, some 40 minutes’ boat-ride away, cameraman Will and I produce an episode on muck-diving.

We present Dave with a rather ambitious wish-list of 10 critters, which includes spiny devilfish, flying gurnard, stick pipefish, peacock razorfish, dragon sea-moth, seahorse and more.

Over the course of the day he finds us all but one of these. We even have time to head into the blue and search for the large schools of devil rays that are often seen here. Surface intervals are spent on the tropical, empty beach trying to master the art of palm tree climbing.

Two Heads Better than One

But perhaps the most exciting photographic subject isn’t found at Si Amil, but instead at nearby Kapalai – a sandbar with a luxury hotel on top.

Over breakfast one morning news spreads: a tiny two-headed nembrotha has been spotted by eagle-eyed instructor Nas. Despite much Googling, we can’t find any references online to two-headed hermaphroditic sea slugs.

With full filming schedules, the earliest we can head to Kapalai is in three days’ time. While nudis aren’t renowned for their speedy migrations, they can still travel a fair distance over the course of 72 hours. Sceptical, we embark on a mission to film it.

To our overwhelming surprise, Nas spots the double-domed slug in precisely

Above: The two-headed Nembrotha nudibranch – it doesn’t get about much.

Below: Jason Isley with milling bumphead parrotfish.

the same spot. Perhaps its heads pull in difference directions, bringing it to an eternal standstill?

Whatever the reason, I’m grateful to spend 42 minutes waiting for the funky critter to get into the right position for a head(s) shot.

Will finally drags me away as a solar-powered nudibranch has been spotted nearby, along with a juvenile painted frogfish the size of a pound coin.

It’s been one of the most extraordinary macro dives of my life.

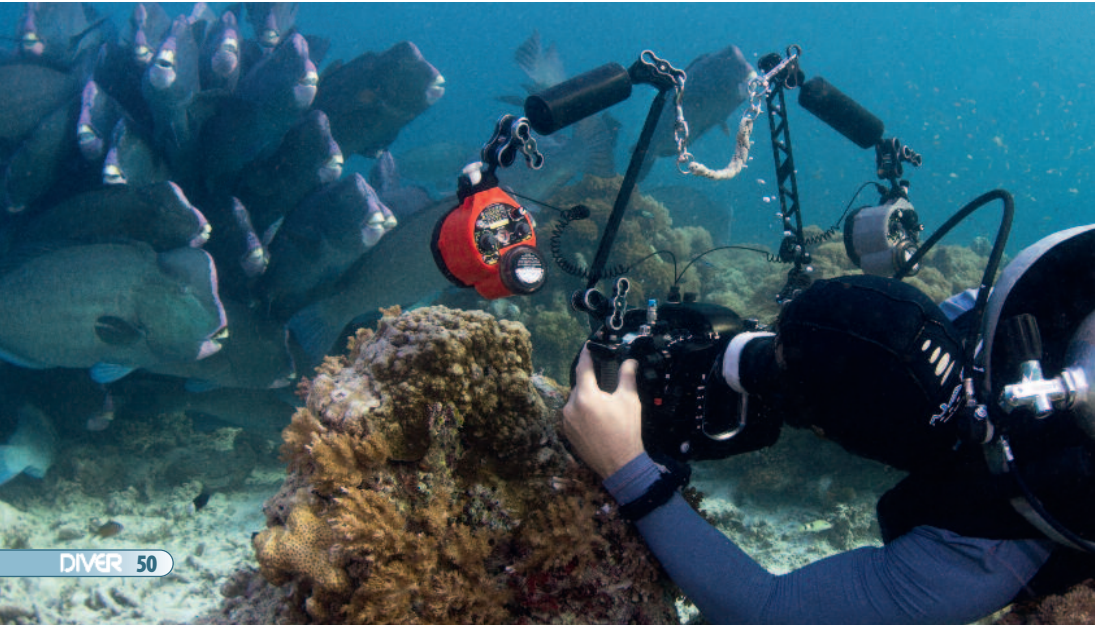
Sip-ly the Best

While the miniature life is outstanding, most people come to this region for the bigger things in life. And for these it doesn’t get much better than Sipadan.

It’s a shoe-in on lists dedicated to the world’s top dive-spots, and divers travel from all over to spend time with the resident schools of barracuda, bumphead parrotfish, jackfish and sharks, along with giant turtle populations.

Formed as a result of living corals growing on top of an extinct volcano cone, the island was famously referred to as “an untouched piece of art” by Jacques Cousteau. As our oceans are plundered at an alarming rate, rendering once-famous dive destinations fishless and broken, Sipadan has changed little in the 30 years since Cousteau made these remarks.

This, in part, is due to the protection offered by the Malaysian authorities ,who have banned fishing around the island and hand out only 120 dive permits a



day. Because of this, divers must book their trip there well in advance.

Having waited years for the chance to dive Sipadan, my first trip begins in ominous fashion. Storms and heavy rains make for an uncomfortable 20-minute boat ride. The gloominess is far from ideal for underwater photography. Dave assures me this is, in fact, a positive thing: Stormy Weather + Early Morning Start = Hunting.

We drop in on 40-50 bumphead parrotfish. A thick school of jackfish line up their unmistakable profiles. Whitetip reef sharks dart in and out of this silver wall, joined by a few plucky fish who clean themselves by rubbing up on the sharks’ scaly skin. It’s dark, it’s gloomy, and diving doesn’t get much better.

As the storms lift, we dive again in brilliant sunlight – this time in search of barracuda. Vast coral reefs and table corals larger than me confront us.

The hope is that they’re “tornadoing”: a schooling technique barracuda use to intimidate predators.

This is the iconic Sipadan scene and every visitor’s fantasy. Yet again the diving delivers, and we spend an hour with the barracuda, as they sporadically form scaly vortexes with us in the centre.

Best of the Rest

Over the weeks we explore more of the area’s top dive-spots, including the northern islands, such as Sibuan.

Hawksbill Highway’s blanket wall of coral is the perfect amphitheatre for four massive pharaoh cuttlefish.

Sipadan Barrier Reef, on the other hand (despite possessing few fish), provides some of the area’s most spectacular coral formations.

Along with diving, Will and I tackle some of the region’s back-stories. We film a local fisherman catching mantis shrimp with a piece of bamboo and fishing wire. The animals are stuffed into bottles and served as delicacies at local restaurants. We also visit a local fish-market churning out devil rays, dried seahorses and more.

I attend the Regatta Lepa, an annual celebration of the Bajau’s traditional boats (a fascinating, sweaty experience you can read about in a forthcoming article). We even get lucky as a hawksbill and green turtle nest on the same night.

Some 60 days later, we shoot the “turtle volcano” as the hawksbill hatchlings make their bid for freedom.

Unfortunately, not everyone will get to experience these moments, or Borneo, for themselves. It’s our hope that this series offers the next best thing: a chance to live vicariously through the eyes of those based here.

Because Pieman was right: there’s nowhere on Earth quite like it.

Pictured: Turtle at Sipadan.

Right, clockwise from top: Barracuda; ghost pipefish; toby in barrel sponge; *lepa lepa* boats at night; Bajau sea-gypsy bottles mantis shrimps.



* You can watch *Borneo From Below* weekly episodes by subscribing to Scubazoo’s YouTube channel www.youtube.com/user/ScubazooVideo. For all previous episodes, go to www.borneofrombelow.com, and for the latest news, “like” the Facebook page www.facebook.com/borneofrombelow. Scuba Junkie: www.scuba-junkie.com