

Tawau

A gateway to the Celebes Sea

Sipadan

Sabah. What images does it conjure? For some, it is the untamed wilderness of Borneo, a land of ancient rainforests, emerald seas, and vibrant wildlife. To others, it is a place steeped in mystery, where traditions remain alive against the backdrop of breathtaking beauty.

Tawau, on Sabah's eastern coast, embodies the heart of this narrative, offering a unique blend of natural beauty and authentic experiences. Many pass through Tawau en route to Semporna. While Semporna's dive spots often steal the spotlight, Tawau quietly enchants with its own hidden treasures. As Malaysia's largest cocoa producer, this charming town offers more than just a stopover.

Here, the rainforest and the sea exist in a perfect duet, the calls of hornbills compete with the gentle lapping of waves, and the dense canopy contrasts with the shimmering expanse of the Celebes Sea. This is where you can trek among towering Dipterocarps in the morning and dive into crystalline waters to explore coral kingdom in the afternoon.

Tawau Hills Park

Just a short drive from the town centre, Tawau Hills Park is a lush escape from urban life. Spreading over 28,000 hectares of pristine wilderness, it is a haven for nature enthusiasts.

At its heart lies a magnificent forest with a cathedral-like canopy of Dipterocarp trees, among the tallest tropical trees in the world. Its riverbank is a prime spot for kingfishers, hornbills and other rare bird species unique to Borneo lowland forests - a paradise for birdwatchers.

Rich in flora and fauna, Tawau Hills Park diverse landscapes encompass sulphur spring, lush lowland forests, cascading waterfalls, and rugged mountains. Wildlife is abundant here offering visitors opportunities to witness nature at its finest.

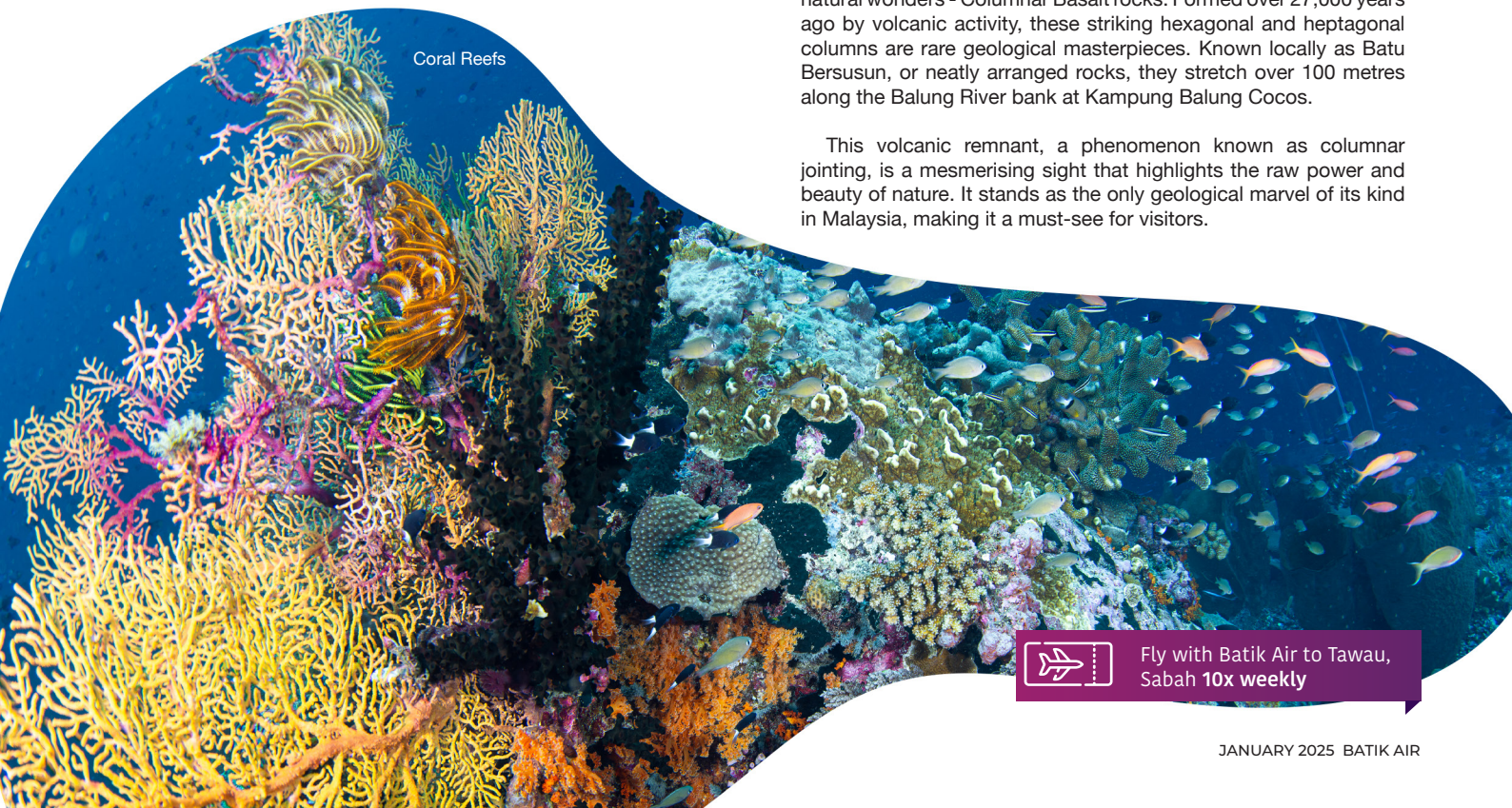


Bajau Laut

A geological marvel

Tawau is also home to one of Malaysia's most extraordinary natural wonders - Columnar Basalt rocks. Formed over 27,000 years ago by volcanic activity, these striking hexagonal and heptagonal columns are rare geological masterpieces. Known locally as Batu Bersusun, or neatly arranged rocks, they stretch over 100 metres along the Balung River bank at Kampung Balung Cocos.

This volcanic remnant, a phenomenon known as columnar jointing, is a mesmerising sight that highlights the raw power and beauty of nature. It stands as the only geological marvel of its kind in Malaysia, making it a must-see for visitors.



Coral Reefs



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Grilled Seafood



Visiting the Bajau Laut villages provides an extraordinary insight into a community deeply connected to the sea. Their culture remains largely untouched, with the ocean serving as both their livelihood and their home. For travellers, it is an opportunity to witness the art of harmony in water.

A chocolatey adventure

Tawau is a powerhouse of cocoa production. The Teck Guan Cocoa Museum, located in Quoin Hill, offers an engaging journey through the world of chocolate. Visitors can explore the fascinating history of cocoa, witness the process of chocolate making, and indulge in delectable chocolate crafted locally.

Here, visitors could also trek through the cocoa plantations and its lush forests to the breathtaking cascade of 75 foot-high Majestic Waterfall.

Seafood lover's paradise

The bustling Pasar Tanjung Tawau is a must-visit for seafood lovers. This market reveals the coastal identity. Stalls pile high with their freshly caught prawns, crabs, and fish. Whether you are sampling delicacies like salted fish or stocking up local spices, the market experience here is as authentic as it gets.

For a true taste of the sea, head to one of the many seafood restaurants in the centre of Tawau. From crabs to lobsters, snappers to stingrays, just pick your choice and get the chefs to cook the way you like it!

Semporna

A short journey from Tawau leads to Semporna, a coastal town that feels like the edge of the world. Serving as the launchpad for island-hopping adventures, Semporna opens the door to the hidden gems of the Celebes Sea, acting as the gateway to Tun Sakaran Marine Park.

A world class dive site

The legendary Sipadan Island, renowned as one of the world's best dive sites, is the crown jewel of diving in Malaysia's diving scene. The dive site is famous for its sheer drop-off, where the ocean wall plunges 600 metres below the surface. This dramatic landscape is teeming with marine life, ranging from schools of bumphead parrotfish to gigantic turtles. The thrill of diving in Sipadan is unlike anything else, with barracuda runs that leave divers in awe as they swirl in a shimmering vortex, schools of hammerheads and a colorful array of coral that stretches as far as the eye can see.

Sipadan's underwater world is an exhilarating experience, one that many travellers have only seen in nature documentaries like the BBC Blue Planet. For those who have dreamed of exploring the depths of the ocean, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.



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The Celebes Sea - A divers paradise





Tawau Sunset

Mabul Island

In the turquoise expanse of the Celebes Sea, Mabul Island offers a slice of paradise that echoes the allure of the Maldives, but without the hefty price tag. Once a quiet fishing village for the Bajau Laut people, or the sea gypsies, it has transformed into a renowned diving destination, celebrated for its muck diving and amazing array of macro life. Pygmy seahorses the size of your thumb, flamboyant cuttlefish and frogfish are some of the spectacular critters encountered here.

Beyond diving and snorkeling, the island offers kayaking in its sleek, transparent boats, providing a unique view of the underwater world as paddlers glide over the crystal clear waters.

Bohey Dulang

For the more adventurous, Bohey Dulang offers a challenging hike to its summit. Though the ascent is steep, the reward is a sweeping view of the surrounding islands of Tun Sakaran Marine Park. From this vantage point, the turquoise lagoon, pristine sandbars, and vibrant coral reefs stretch out, creating a postcard-perfect landscape.

With a unique lagoon-like formation created by seawater flooding craters from an ancient volcano, the sea around Bohey Dulang is framed by vibrant coral reefs, creating picturesque landscapes.

The Bajau Laut

The islands surrounding Semporna are home to the Bajau Laut, an ancient seafaring community known as the sea gypsies. Renowned as some of the world's best freedivers, they can descend to depths of 200 feet on a single breath, staying underwater up to thirteen minutes while wearing just handmade wooden goggles.

Living in stilted houses or on houseboats called lepa, the Bajau Laut have lived in harmony with the sea for generations. Their connection to the ocean runs deep, and it influences every aspect of their lives, from their fishing methods to the craftsmanship of their wooden boats.

Visiting the Bajau Laut villages provides an extraordinary insight into a community deeply connected to the sea. Their culture remains largely untouched, with the ocean serving as both their livelihood and their home. For travellers, it is an opportunity to witness the art of harmony in water.

The beginning of unforgettable memories

Tawau serves as the gateway to Semporna's breathtaking wonders. While Semporna's islands enchant visitors, Tawau's lush rainforests and fresh seafood offer the perfect prelude. Together, they create an unforgettable journey that begins the moment you land in Tawau.



The Bajau Laut Community



Semporna



CONTRIBUTOR

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Shannim Mohd Sa'ad is an adventurous traveller with a deep appreciation for diverse cultures and off-the-beaten-path destinations. Along her journeys, she enjoys riding motocross, Muay Thai training, and snowboarding. Writing is her passion, compelling to share her unique experiences. Follow her on Instagram @epicadventuress and her blog epicadventuress.com



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