



Sabah's biggest city is softened by the South China Sea, with an ocean of marine life below the waves and streets filled with seafood on shore, finds Ewen Bell.

# kota kinabalu's water world



Main: Exploring the 'nightlife' on Gaya Island  
Left: A hawksbill turtle at the research centre on Gaya Island

**Every evening as the steamy air** of Kota Kinabalu cools down, the esplanade night market starts hotting up. The best of Borneo's west coast can be found here, in one place: one half is packed with seafood, fresh produce and jungle treats while the other prepares to cook up a storm for evening diners. The scene is fabulous, with tacky plastic umbrellas shading a bazaar of the bizarre.

Familiar fruits and generic greens are complemented by exotic extractions from the reefs and forests. Soft and curly fern fronds are gathered into bushels; spiky skins of *durian mira* are peeled open to reveal

red flesh, and chatty women sell seaweed strands dangling with seeds. Seafood outnumbers all else, with fish, shellfish, clams and snail arranged with a little ice. Colourful crabs have their claws tied tight.

This is where the locals come to shop. For those who fancy fast food instead of taking their catches home, the Kota Kinabalu night market offers fresh dishes: just follow the carts of fish rolling through the market until they arrive at the hot grills, where smoke fills the air. Most of what is sold in the produce section appears in these dinner stalls, sizzling over coals and served with rice and Sabah-

inspired salads dressed in blends of sweet lime and sour tamarind, sometimes with flakes of fish.

Dinner for two might cost AU\$20 once you factor in all the extras, but it depends on your preference for seafood items: tuna steaks, whole squid, reef fish and tiger prawns the size of kittens can be enjoyed at very reasonable prices. Those with more adventurous appetites can sample cutlets of stingray, steamed garlic snails and sea-cucumber slices.

It's the definition of fresh and fabulous, each dish arriving at the table layered in the smoky textures of the grill and ready for a generous side-serve of the local chilli sauce, a mild concoction that helps highlight the deep-ocean flavours. The cuisine takes its influences from China, India and the Philippines, melding them into the local seafood context.

The only way to find a fresher marine-based meal than this might be to take a boat from Jesselton Pier and head 20 minutes across the water to Pulau Gaya. There's an eco-resort on the island that has

undergone a dramatic upgrade in recent years, swapping bamboo floors for luxury villas and expanding its care of the marine environment with a program designed to protect and restore the surrounding reef systems.

The resort also has an exceptional Chinese restaurant that serves ecologically-grown seafood. As you enter the dining area, you pass through a cavern of marine creatures, presented in immaculate, illuminated tanks. It certainly makes its point: the seafood on the menu here couldn't be any fresher. The tanks are home to three kinds of crabs, prawns, grouper and sizeable red snapper.

Much of what is on show comes from the resort's own fish farm, a program on a modest scale that stocks the resort's most popular menu

items in a natural shelter within the resort's cove. The mature fish are nurtured on a diet of farmed fry which feed on phytoplankton. The spiny lobster and mantis shrimp, admittedly, are bought commercially but even then, the resort is selective about who it buys from, building relationships of trust with a select number of local fishermen. The intention is to avoid trawling altogether and steer clear of other harmful fishing techniques. The catch is delivered alive and in good health. It costs a little more to supply a restaurant with ecologically sound seafood, but it sends a positive message to the local community about marine conservation.

By the time your seafood arrives on the dinner table, the influence of a very fine Chinese chef has transformed the exceptionally fresh ingredients into a culinary masterpiece. Ahr Khiong is the man in charge: he's a modest fellow who was born in Sabah but trained to

cook Cantonese, Mandarin and Hakka styles, just to name a few. Like any good Chinese chef, Khiong has a few secret sauces, one of which is his *ba jao*, which he applies liberally to steamed red snapper. Lemongrass, tamarind, ginger, lime and shrimp are some of the essential ingredients: Khiong refuses to reveal any more than that. The result is something much lighter than an XO sauce, giving the gentle nature of reef fish a chance to emerge from the dish.

Aside from specialising in marine cuisine, the resort is the best chance for visitors to Kota Kinabalu to get wet and explore the marine life of Sabah. The island itself is a mass of jungle, fringed with mangroves and skirted by reefs. Common marine residents are well represented here, and some are in genuine abundance thanks to the efforts of a privately funded research facility nearby.

Keep walking past the luxury villas of Gayana Eco Resort and soon, you arrive at the facility's Marine Ecology Research Centre. The centre's current tasks include nursing injured turtles, resettling coral into artificial reefs and running educational programs on the conservation value of marine environments. Giant clams are the



Below: Sunrise at Bunya Raya Island Resort

Left: Dancers in traditional costume at the Sabah Fest





Above: Skewers at Gayana Eco Resort  
Left: Bunga Raya Resort on Gaya Island

main focus of the centre's reef restoration project, as there are several species that no longer appear in the waters off Kota Kinabalu.

The strong conservation component to Gayana Eco Resort translates into the guest experience. There are no motorised activities on offer here; you can kayak around the island, hike through the jungle, snorkel and dive on the reefs or lend a hand at the research centre. Gaya Island is about the peaceful enjoyment of a tropical setting.

There's only one kind of nightlife at Pulau Gaya: swimming beneath the water. Under floodlights strung alongside the resort's dive centre, the marine world glistens in a deadly display of the seafood chain. Barracuda patrol the sea floor, squid lurk near the surface and schools of fish shimmer in between. It takes a while for your eyes to adjust, and the difference between a trevally and a squid is not obvious, with so many

creatures flitting about in the light. The sinuous motion of the squid is what gives it away. Minutes go by as you watch the fluid fluttering until suddenly, the squid strikes, a darting blur. It's compelling viewing, and you don't even need to wear goggles to get among the action.

There are other places in Sabah where the marine life is more exotic, but none is as easy to access from Kota Kinabalu as this underwater sanctuary. There is no shortage of excellent hotels in the city, either, but few of these hotels or the nearby beach resorts can match Pulau Gaya for ecological indulgence.

From the comfort of a private villa here, you can step down into the sea and let the tropical waters work their wonder. It's good for your soul, good for your mood, and good for the local environment. •

*Photography by Ewen Bell*

## travelfacts

### gettingthere

Air Asia flies direct from Kuala Lumpur to Sabah several times a day; visit [www.airasia.com](http://www.airasia.com)

Malaysia Airlines flies daily to Kota Kinabalu via Kuala Lumpur from all Australian capital cities except Darwin, phone 13 2627 or visit

[www.malaysiaairlines.com](http://www.malaysiaairlines.com)

Royal Brunei Airlines flies from Brisbane, Sydney, Perth and Auckland via Bandar Seri Begawan to Kota Kinabalu, phone 02 8267 5300 or visit

[www.bruneiair.com](http://www.bruneiair.com)

Singapore Airlines has direct flights to Singapore and twice-weekly services from Singapore to Kota Kinabalu; phone 13 1011 or visit [www.singaporeair.com.au](http://www.singaporeair.com.au)

### gettingaround

Creative Holidays, phone 1300 747 400 or visit [www.creativeholidays.com.au](http://www.creativeholidays.com.au)

Explore Holidays, phone 02 9423 8080 or visit [www.exploreholidays.com.au](http://www.exploreholidays.com.au)

GAP Adventures, phone 1300 796 618 or visit [www.gapadventures.com/v&t](http://www.gapadventures.com/v&t)

Golden Holidays, phone 1300 737 232 or visit [www.goldenholidays.com.au](http://www.goldenholidays.com.au)

Flight Centre, phone 13 3133 or visit [www.flightcentre.com.au](http://www.flightcentre.com.au)

InterAsia Tours, phone 1300 133 001 or visit [www.interasia.com.au](http://www.interasia.com.au)

Intrepid Travel, phone 1300 364 512 or visit [www.intrepidtravel.com](http://www.intrepidtravel.com)

Jetstar Holidays, phone 13 1538 or visit [www.jetstar.com](http://www.jetstar.com)

Qantas Holidays, phone 13 1415 or visit [www.qantas.com/holidays](http://www.qantas.com/holidays)

Travel Indochina, phone 1300 138 755 or visit [www.travelindochina.com.au](http://www.travelindochina.com.au)

### wheretostay

Gayana Eco Resort, phone +60 8838 0390 or visit [www.gayana-eco-resort.com](http://www.gayana-eco-resort.com)

Le Méridien Kota Kinabalu, phone +60 8832 2222 or visit

[www.lemeridien.com](http://www.lemeridien.com)

Nexus Resort Karamunai, phone +60 8841 1222 or visit

[www.nexusresort.com](http://www.nexusresort.com)

Sutera Harbour Resort, phone +60 8831 8888 or visit

[www.suteraharbour.com.my](http://www.suteraharbour.com.my)

Shangri-La Rasa Ria Resort, phone +60 8879 2888 or visit [www.shangri-la.com](http://www.shangri-la.com)

### furtherinformation

Contact Tourism Malaysia on 02 9299 4441 (Sydney), 03 9654 3177 (Melbourne) or 08 9481 0400 (Perth), or visit [www.tourismmalaysia.gov.my](http://www.tourismmalaysia.gov.my)  
Sabah Tourism Board, phone +60 8821 2121 or visit [www.sabahtourism.com](http://www.sabahtourism.com)