A Captain's Tribute to Old Borneo

Many sailors of my vintage may remember when Sabah was called Sarawak and British North Borneo. It now forms what is referred to as East Malaysia since gaining independence from Great Britain in 1963. It encompasses a large portion of the northwest and northeast of old Borneo Island and borders with what is now named Kalimantan which falls under the sovereignty of Indonesia. There is a small enclave between Sarawak and Sabah designated the Sultanate of Brunei. Brunei ceded much of its territory to the White Rajahs of Sarawak, resulting in its current small landmass and separation into two parts. In 1888, the British signed a "Treaty of Protection" and made Brunei a British protectorate until 1984 when it gained independence. It has since prospered due to the discovery of huge oil deposits in its offshore fields.

Modern Day map of Sabah

Ports of Sarawak

Modern Day Map of Brunei showing segregated areas.

The landscape of East Malaysia is mostly lowland rain forests around the coastal plains with areas of mountain rain forest towards the hinterland. It is a place of lush equatorial jungle terrain of immense beauty. Not only is it rich in tropical flora but also fauna with a wide variety of some of the rarest birds and animals. It lays claim to some of the finest scuba dive sites in the world and is surrounded by the South China Sea to the north and northwest, the Sulu Sea to the northeast, the Celebes Sea and the Makassar Strait to the east, and the Java Sea and Karimata Strait to the south. Sabah became a British Crown Colony in 1946 and in August 1963, was granted self-government by the British and became part of the Malaysia Federation.

Some of the most interesting years of my time at sea was spent as Master of 500 Teu container feeder vessel. Operated by Singapore interests, she was like a yacht, Gross Tonnage: 6100, Deadweight: 8530, LOA: 115m, BHP: 6000, 16.5 knots. I was coaxed back out of early retirement and served as her Master for two enjoyable years, during which we were engaged on a regular run which included Port Klang, Singapore, Pasir Gudang, Sibu, Miri, Bintulu, Labuan, Kota Kinabalu, Sandakan and Tawau, with occasional calls to Bangkok and Vung Tau. It was a remarkable experience because I considered these to be my home waters since I was a long-term resident of Asia.

Sarawak has four primary ports located at Kuching, Sibu, Bintulu, and Miri. The busiest seaport at Bintulu which is under the jurisdiction of the Malaysian federal government and mainly handles LNG products as well as regular cargo of all types. The remaining ports are under the respective state port authorities. The combined throughput of the four primary ports was 61.04 million tons in 2013. Sarawak has 55 navigable river networks with a combined length of 2,100 miles. For centuries, the rivers of Sarawak have been a primary means of transport as well as a route for timber and other agricultural goods moving downriver for export at the country's major ports. Sibu port, located 70 miles from the river's mouth, is the main hub along the Rajang River mainly handling timber products. However, the throughput of Sibu port has

declined over the years after Tanjung Manis Industrial Port began operating further downstream.

Visiting the various ports in Sarawak one could often observe the local people wearing traditional costume. There is a variety of traditional dress as it differs for each of the native Sarawakian ethnic tribes, but they are all colorful with exquisite weaving and embroidery, for both male and female. Wearing of the indigenous costume is usually reserved for formal occasions or weddings. The common sarong is still widely worn across all sections of society throughout Asia and is seen frequently.

Kuching was a bustling little port for its proportions. Navigation of the channel to/from the pilot station was well buoyed but restricted by two bars. The outer bar had a sandy bottom and was situated about 2 nautical miles East South East of Tanjung Po Lighthouse and charted a depth of 5.2 m above Chart Datum. The inner bar lies approximately 1 nautical mile South East of Muara Tebas with a depth of 4.3m above Chart Datum. The Tidal Range for the Port is 4.5 m, so it becomes necessary to calculate the stage of the tide before entering or departing the Port and crossing the river bars.

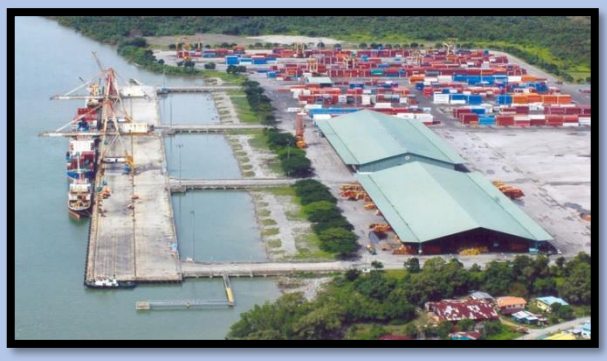
Kuching is known as Cat City – there are several anecdotes as to how the City got its name. The one I think is most plausible is that the town was named after a river called Sungai Kuching, which means Cat River. Another suggestion is that it is named after “Mata Kucing”, which is a fruit grown in Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia, rather like a Lychee. Literally translated the name means Cats Eye. The port itself is about 22 miles upstream from the estuary of the Sarawak River, so where one can proceed depends on the vessel’s draft. We usually headed for the container area which was at different stages of development. Logging was a major export and upon every call there was always a cluster of logger type vessels loading their logs into gaping cargo holds or on deck.

The Sarawak River is quite wide and meandering. Lush jungle encroaches right down to the soft muddy riverbank only broken by the occasional group of huts on Bamboo stilts. The river is fast flowing with speeds up 2 knots and can exceed that rate if there have been prolonged rains inland, when it is not uncommon to see small rafts of floating palms (like minute islands) that have been washed away which float freely downstream towards the South China Sea. This also includes the occasional log – some being rather large which can cause damage to ships, as they float inches below the surface and become a danger to propellers and rudders. The river is claimed to be home to large crocodiles, but I never saw one.

Traditional workboats called “Tambangs” are plentiful on the river darting every which way. These are like sampans except they have a completely covered structure, rather like a small house built on deck. They are the main form of river transport.

I always enjoyed the multiracial aspects of Kuching, its diverse culture, and culinary delights, especially their hot spicy Seafood Laksa that they produce in local restaurants which seemed to be their signature dish.

Kuching general cargo and container facilities. The wharfs can handle quite large vessels. It is understood that this section was scheduled for further expansion.



Sibu was another Sarawak river port, not too distant along the coast from Kuching. We did not call there often but it seemed to have the exportation of logs as its main source of revenue, which reportedly superseded rubber during the 1960s. Sibu itself is located at the confluence of the Rejang and Igan Rivers and is a thriving modern town with a busy commercial center, a bustling, crowded waterfront and is about 70 nautical miles upriver from the river mouth, and has a large ethnic Chinese population. Being the largest town on the river, Sibu is the political, economic, cultural hub of the central region of Sarawak. It therefore has a good variety of shops, markets and of course establishments focused on night life. Sibu can be reached by ocean going ships without difficulty as the Rajang River is in the main easily navigable. Its muddy colored waters meander through dense jungle and is quite wide in most parts. Ships calling at Sarawak river ports on a regular bases and being built for the specific trade, are usually designed with the bridge located higher than normal to provide visibility above the tree tops, thus enabling easier sighting of other conflicting river traffic when approaching bends in the river. The ship on which I served, had its normal bridge on the 6th deck so there was good elevation, which helped considerably when navigating these jungle rivers.

In this image of “MV Rajah Brooke”, a vessel built specifically for the trade by the Sarawak Steamship Company, shows a good illustration of the enclosed “Flying Bridge”, which does look like an afterthought it must be said. I believe this photo to be taken whilst alongside at Sandakan.

There are two river ports one the Ranjang River, namely, Sibu port itself and a few miles further upstream Sungai Merah port. Sibu port can accept ships with a gross tonnage of up to about 10,000 tonnes, while Sungai Merah port has a maximum limitation is around 2,500 tonnes. Sibu port is used mainly for handling logs, dressed timber and agricultural commodities while Sungai Merah port is used for handling

fuel oil products. Large quantities of logs are moved downstream on heavily laden barges, some motorized and some towed, to ships awaiting their cargo at the anchorages downstream.

There is a small but active shipbuilding industry mainly constructing wooden boats for river and coastal navigation. The 1970s and 1980s saw an expansion of this sector, due mainly to increasing exports of tropical timber from Sarawak. The industry developed its focus into steel boat building the smaller types of vessel in demand within the region such as tugs, barges, anchor handlers, offshore support vessels, small ferries, and express passenger boats for river use, and the like.

Small tug towing a barge laden with logs down the Rajang River to vessels anchored downstream. There is a considerable number of these tug and barge combos working in the river. Often, they are hidden below the tree line and difficult to detect by larger vessels proceeding upriver, hence good radio communication becomes essential to ensure safe navigation and collision avoidance.

View of a small shipyard on the banks of the Ranjang River, near Sibu. A variety of small craft seem to dominate the building inventory catering mainly for local domestic requirements.

One of the container facilities at Sibu Port. The width and long reaches of the Ranjang River are apparent in this image. The large building in the foreground is the Sibu Port Authority Head Quarters

Bintulu – approximately 110 nautical miles up the coast from Sibu. The Port of **Bintulu** is a modern coastal town in Sarawak and is its busiest Port, which serves as the capital town in the prefecture. Bintulu was a mere fishing village until the late 1960s until Oil and Gas reserves were discovered offshore. This triggered a rapid expansion of the port and it has now developed into the energy center of Sarawak with a good Container port as well as an Oil Palm Terminal for exports. It also offers good wharfage facilities for Oil, LNG, and Product tankers.

A Drone's view of Bintulu which shows the wide range of facilities that this port offers to international shipping.

Bintulu is a combination of old and new which has been well managed by local authorities to cater for the needs of a developing city whilst maintaining its cultural heritage

Many who have visited Bintulu will well remember the triple story shop houses in the old sector that line both sides of the streets of the township; full of character and Asian ambiance, a hive of activity both day and night which adds to the attributes of a thriving city.

Only just over 100 nautical miles distant from Bintulu lies the seaport township of Miri.

Miri is a small coastal town rather close to the Brunei border and unlike Kuching or Sibu, located far upstream. The significance of the town is dependent on Oil and Gas as the majority industry, although in recent years the Timber trade has made inroads and contributed substantially to the local economy. Miri is also the headquarters of the Malaysian energy conglomerate, Petronas. The town is used extensively as a transit point for personnel working

in the offshore oil fields with fast crew boats operate continuously to meet the demand of frequent crew changes on near coastal offshore rigs and installations. Therefore, the port may be considered as something of a nerve center for the Oil and Gas sector. There is also a small, but active shipbuilding and repair industry, mainly catering for offshore, coastal, and small bunker tanker vessels.

There is a reasonable anchorage with a good depth, used extensively for ships replenishing bunkers, however due to its exposure in the Northeast Monsoonal period the northeast and southwestern coastal regions of Sarawak can be subject to strong winds and rough seas coupled with hefty swells at times. I can recall heavy swells running just off the coast.

The layout and appearance of most of the Sarawak coastal towns are markedly similar; a busy wharf area usually consisting multiple jetties, rows of quaint Chinese shop-houses line the streets in the central business districts, more-substantial and high-rise buildings are in the governmental administrative and CBD areas. There is generally always the obligatory Chinese temple and several villages of timber or corrugated tin-built dwellings scattered along the riverbanks.

Typical “Kampong” style dwellings often seen in Sarawak, along jungle clearings that border the riverbanks. These are usually inhabited by the kaleidoscopic mixture of indigenous peoples.

Many a mariner will remember the hoi polloi of kids that frequently swam in the river along the riverbanks close to these small villages, oblivious to the numerous crocodiles and other nasties that lurked below the water’s surface out of sight, then wave madly to ships as they sailed by. However, fewer, and fewer of these compounds now exist due to urbanization by local ethnic groups, industrialization, and employment opportunities for the native peoples. Hence this sight is becoming a rarity in Sarawak and is quickly becoming relegated to the drifting hazes of nostalgia. On my last trip to the river ports of the region I was amazed at the speed at which these small holdings were disappearing.

The numerous street markets were awesome, where one could buy anything and everything. One of the best sellers was the wide range of native artifacts and carvings created by the most skilled of craftsmen. I must confess to having been an ardent collector of such memorabilia.

Between Miri and Labuan lies the **Sultanate of Brunei**, with its main port of **Muara,** which butts on to Brunei Bay. We were only ever in Maura for a few hours each call and due to ship's business, I therefore never ventured ashore. Anyway, it was unspectacular – an entrance to the port was off a small inlet with a single multi-purpose wharf. We used ship's cranes to load and discharge containers directly to/from trucks, as there was no shore cranage available at that time. However, it would appear, a much larger container park has since been established along with two portainer units located on the quayside. Upon our every call there was a large motor yacht moored alongside the jetty and guarded by the military, it seldom if ever shifted. A quite spectacular vessel and reportedly belonging to the Sultan of Brunei.

Brunei Bay lies to the east of Maura and is a large and protected, shallow embayment. It is a favored spot for the "Hot" layup of large container vessels and tankers, whilst awaiting employment.

Labuan Island – a medium sized Island, officially dubbed "The Federated Territory of Labuan". Most of the island is forested with the capital township and harbor being named Victoria. Following WW2, in 1946, it joined the British Crown Colony of North Borneo, which in turn became a part of the state of Sabah and Malaysia in 1963. Later, in 1984, the Government of Sabah ceded Labuan to the federal government which subsequently elevated it to a federal territory. It was declared an international offshore financial center and free trade zone in 1990. Due to its favored financial status many ships are registered in Labuan (including the Container feeder vessel I served on for 2 years).

Labuan is an interesting place to visit. Good hotels, restaurants, bars, night clubs, shopping Malls and of course marketplaces, there is a mixed population but mainly of ethnic Malay and Chinese origins. The Port is limited to a single commercial finger jetty which can accommodate vessels on both sides. However, the port infrastructure is limited, especially for the handling and storage of containers. This always ensured we had at least one night in port, rather a rarity for a container feeder ship, enabling all the crew to enjoy some quality shore time.

There is an offshore base with independent jetties and wharfage, which is kept busy as Labuan is a major player in the development and support of the nearby offshore fields and is a hub for these activities. There are also good dockyard and slipway amenities in the port itself.

On the downside, the approach channel buoys often dragged out of position, so day or night, extreme caution is required. Mooring gangs and linesmen at the main wharf were only available from 8am onwards, so night movements were restricted in some cases.

The small anchorage is frequently congested with coastal and offshore vessels which does, on occasion make it unsuitable for vessels of any size. I personally would never enter the port

limits after sunset due to congestion at the anchorage, the size and draft of my vessel, and because in the event of an incident there was little room in which to manoeuver once inside the designated anchoring area. Additionally, there were numerous unmanned small ships in the anchorage, many unlit, which made matters more challenging. Instead I preferring to adjust sea speed to time arrival for first light. Night departures for my ship were usual since the anchorage could be avoided if proceeding directly to sea. Provided the longshoremen were available, I was at liberty to sail at will since pilotage was not compulsory.

Piracy has always been an issue in this area so it is unwise to use the anchorage overnight if it can be avoided. Much better to stand off and wait for daylight or direct berthing. Piracy and oil theft are prevalent and there are illegal, small tankers that roam the waters, syphoning off fuel from smaller ships. The crews are bribed and paid off at a fraction of the true market value of the pilfered fuel oil. Once these rogue tankers have filled their tanks they sail to destinations unknown to on-sell the fuel oil at a substantial profit with the recipients receiving it in good faith, without any knowledge that they have purchased fuel from illegal sources.

Labuan does serve as a gateway for many “illegals” into Malaysia, mainly females who take the fast ferries to Kota Kinabalu, to act as hostesses in local bars, or work elsewhere in Labuan or KK townships. At the weekends Labuan was always a playground for many from Brunei, due to the liberal rules and availability of entertainment that was available, by comparison to their home state. The water taxis ran full at weekends. The introduction of the new Pandaruan Bridge (sometimes called the Pandaruan Friendship Bridge) completed in 2013 has eased travel between Brunei and Sarawak, with a total span of 19 miles the bridge links Temburing in Brunei with Limbang in Sarawak. This new causeway has had little bearing on the fast ferry service between Maura and Labuan.

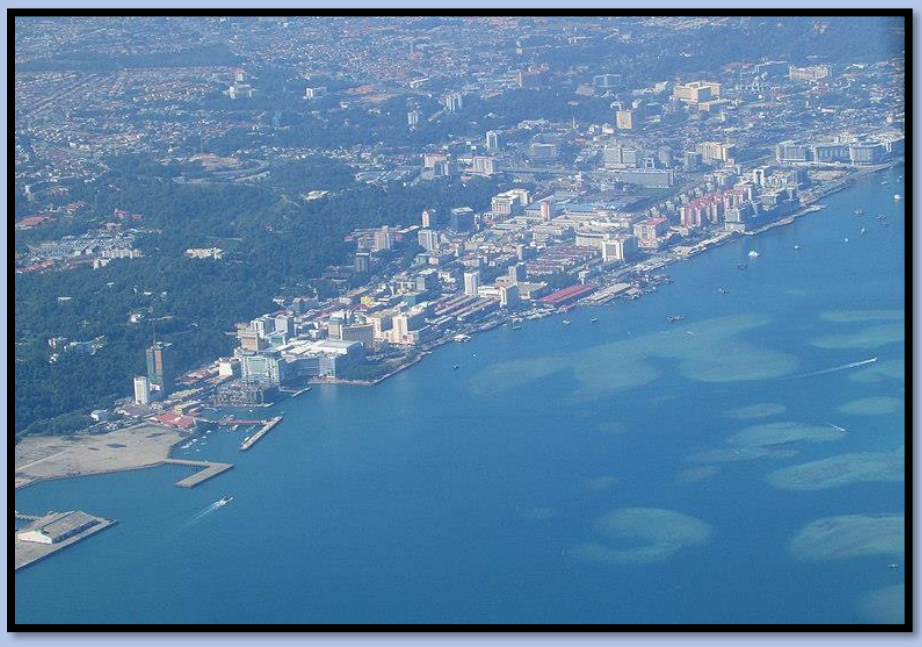
Many a good evening was spent at the Waterside Hotel which was a leisurely ten minutes stroll from the dock gate. There, one could enjoy a good meal with a wide variety of curries, satays, and other spicy Malaysian dishes from which to select and there was also a popular bar with live music. The venue was packed at weekends due to the influx of visitors from Brunei.

Kota Kinabalu – formerly known as Jesselton which stems from British colonial times. The British declared “Jesselton” as the new capital of North Borneo and in 1946 started to reconstruct the town which had been substantially destroyed during WW2. Following the formation of Malaysia, North Borneo was renamed as Sabah and in 1967, Jesselton was renamed “Kota Kinabalu”, Kota being the Malay word for Fort, and Kinabalu after the nearby Mount Kinabalu. It was always one of my preferred ports of call in Sabah. In comparison with other places I found Kota Kinabalu (KK) to be rather “lay-back” with no sense of urgency in its DNA. Like most other Asian cities and towns, it came to life after sunset when all the market stalls and lights added to its mystic and Asian charm. Shopping was relatively cheap when compared to many other Sabah towns, excepting perhaps Labuan. KK offered good hotels, a wide variety of restaurants, bars, and night life in general, typical of most Malaysian port

destinations. One place of never- ending interest was the central market, a beehive of activity and a riot of color.

An early morning arrival at Kota Kinabalu is a sight to behold. The heavens ablaze with pink and gold hues which provide a magnificent backdrop for Mount Kinabalu, silhouetted on the skyline as the sun gains amplitude in the eastern sky. This is a truly unforgettable sight. On a clear morning with the sun rising over the mountainous terrain, the approaches to the port are awesome. The pristine waters are alive with fish, the shoals skipping over the wavelets and the early morning fishermen from neighboring villages, in their dugout canoes, out in force with their nets during the morning calm.

Left, one of those spectacular Asian sunrises at Kota Kinabalu. Calm, peaceful and just breathtaking, as seen on almost a daily basis. A great start to a day.



A good aerial image of Kota Kinabalu showing the Township. The cargo wharfs are at lower left, with the container areas and Portainers just out of shot, which are located close to the large

warehouse which is located at the southwestern end of the main wharf. Due to the restricted access to the main wharf and limited infrastructure, congestion often prevailed with the movement and deployment of containers to and from ships. There always appeared to be a shortage of container trucks which caused delays at ship's side. Self-sustaining cargo and container ships using the port were necessary up until early 2000's as there was no shore cranage available; it was only after 2000 that two Portainers were introduced along with other improvements to container handling, which changed the situation for the better.

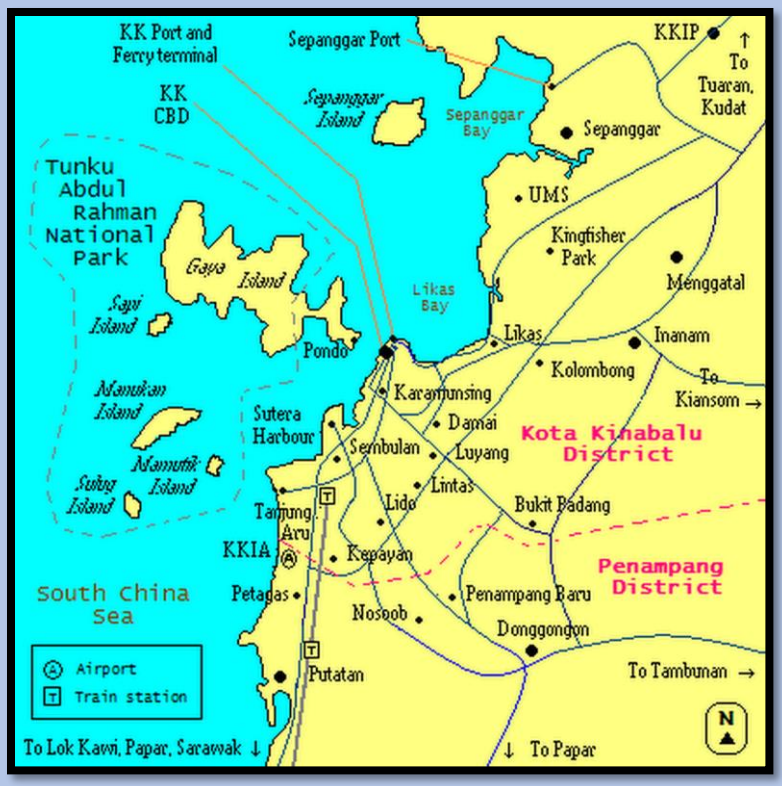
Just across the narrow waterway between KK Port and Gaya Island is the illegal Filipino refugee camp known as Kampung Pondo (just out of above picture to the right). Starting in the 1970s, Filipino refugees began to inhabit the island in their bid to escape from the war in the southern Philippines. The eastern side of Gaya Island supports a well-known illegal Filipino settlement, called Kampung Lok Urai, with stilt houses crowded along the waterfront. Reportedly it has a 6,000 population of largely Filipinos who provide Kota Kinabalu with a source of cheap labor. These illegal camps are considered a dangerous, high crime or "no-go" area by the police and KK locals. The ramshackle houses are linked by walkways and these stilted camps are reported to be the source of most of the flotsam seen drifting around the KK tide line areas. In 2014 there was a massive fire in the maize of stilted houses which wiped out more than half of the makeshift dwellings which acted as a catalyst to bring new momentum to the Malaysian government's plan for the deportation of the Filipino illegals.

Kampung Pondo. The illegal Filipino settlement just opposite the wharf at Kota Kinabalu Port.

The downside of the illegal stilted dwelling areas – the flotsam and rubbish discarded indiscriminately by those who occupy compounds, such as Kampung Pondo.

Sepanggar Bay Container Port is a newer facility about 10 Nautical Miles north of Kota Kinabalu Port. It also acts a base for the Malaysian Navy. It is situated in Sepanggar Bay, just northeast of Sepanggar Island, which is the larger of the three islands seen in below image (top left).

Sepanggar Bay Container Port – Kota Kinabalu



Kota Kinabalu showing its proximity to Sepanggar Bay Container Port.

There is a wide-open anchorage with good water depth located between Gaya Island and Sepanggar Island, which serves both KK and Sepanggar Port. If you fish whilst at the anchorage you are assured of a good catch as the fish give themselves up without any kind of fight whatsoever.

Kudat is a small settlement (actually, a township) at the northern tip of Sabah just over 100 nautical miles north of Kota Kinabalu. It features some of the most unspoiled parts of Sabah, especially beaches and offshore reefs. We called at this port infrequently. There is a single dogs leg jetty which comprises the port and is only suitable for small coasters. We always anchored about one mile from the port and discharged full containers, using ship's cranes into a motorized barge. I do not recall ever having backloaded empty containers at Kudat. I believe these may have been sent south to KK by other means once they had been deconsolidated.

Kudat Port's single finger jetty

Whenever possible I timed my departure from Kota Kinabalu so arrival off Pulau Kalampunian coincided with first light. If we were discharging at Kudat this seldom took us more than 1-2 hours at most so once completed, I wasted no time in weighing anchor and getting underway because I required the remaining daylight in which to negotiate the treacherous reefs, islets and rocks that were strewn about the narrow navigable passage between Kudat, south of Pulau Banggi and the entrance to the Sulu Sea in the vicinity of Turtle Island – this took about 6-7 hours. It was always wise to clear the area as quickly as possible because these waters were notorious for pirates, although I was fortunate and never encountered any piracy incidents.

Navigating through the narrow channel one needed to be on the ball, the biggest hazard being heavy rain which rendered the Radar almost useless and the channel zig zagged between the reefs and islets. In some places it was too narrow for two vessels to pass comfortably. It was always a pleasure transiting these waters as they were crystal clear and the reefs stark white, the beaches were silver white and a tropical paradise.

The passage was frequented by ships sailing in both directions and provided good ship to ship communications were established there was never any difficulty. However, in times gone by some had not been so lucky as there were several wrecks high and dry, which acted as good radar beacons. Once down to Turtle Island one was clear of the worst part of the passage.

The narrow inner passage used between the South China Sea and Sulu Sea

Another port we frequented was Sandakan.

Sandakan lies on the southern shores of the Sandakan Peninsula, at the entrance to Sandakan Bay and faces the Sulu Sea. Formerly it was the capital city of British North Borneo, before the capital was passed to Jesselton (KK) following WW2, and now ranks as the second largest town in Sabah after Kota Kinabalu. Sandakan is one of the main ports for oil, tobacco, coffee, sago, and timber exports and to a lesser extent there is a small shipbuilding industry. Fishing is also an active enterprise in Sandakan which acts as a marketing hub and distribution center.

The sleepy looking township of Sandakan CBD.

Sandakan has always been a major player for the exportation of dressed sawn timber. The timber is packaged for ease of handling and stowage. So, it is not unusual to see numerous ships loading assorted types of lumber at the anchorage. Sandakan also has a single concrete wharf that can accommodate 2-3 ocean going ships. This wharf is used for handling containers and other export cargoes. This meant that on most visits we had to anchor about a half mile away to await a vacant berth. This was no hardship since there were ferry services to and from the shore to the ships at anchor, usually arranged by the ship's agent upon request of the Master. However, when at the anchorage extra watchmen were deployed together with additional deck lighting because of the risks of pirates.

The wharf area butts onto the old township so it is always a beehive of activity, especially the market areas which are a mass of color and activity, both day and night. Many of the shops and businesses are operated by Chinese who emigrated from Hong Kong and Canton areas so Cantonese and Hokien is still widely spoken amongst these ethnic groups. As the capital of North Borneo in the 1880s, Sandakan become an active commercial and trading center. The main trading partners were Hong Kong and Singapore. Many Hong Kong traders eventually settled in Sandakan and in time the town was called the “Little Hong Kong of North Borneo”.

Sandakan is a great place for the freshest of seafoods and there are an abundance of excellent sidewalk cafés and restaurants specializing in seafood dishes. The town has its usual share of bars and several five-star hotels. In actual fact it is quite a tourist town and it attracts many tourists who flock to the city due to the nearby world class scuba diving resorts and of course to take a trip to the famous Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre which rescues and rehabilitates the apes. Another draw card for the ecotourist is taking a trip to Selingan Turtle Island, which is to the north of Sandakan about a one hour boat ride offshore, and is renowned for protecting, taking care of turtles, and releasing them back into the Ocean.

However, visiting any of the offshore islands is not without risk due to random kidnappings by Mindanao terrorist groups based in the Tawi Tawi Islands. Sandakan and its surrounding areas are what could be considered high risk areas for piracy. Piracy has a historic legacy in the Sulu and Celebes Seas. The Philippines was ceded to the United States as a result of the War between Spain and America in 1898, after which American troops embarked on an elimination campaign that extended American rule to the southern Philippines and effectively suppressed piracy until the end of WW2. Whilst piracy was suppressed during the war years, the end of WW2 saw the reemergence of piracy in the Sulu Sea, as a phenomenon that persists to this day. Pirate bands operated openly from the Tawi Tawi Group of Islands and frequently raid coastal towns along the coast of Sabah, as well as local and foreign shipping.

Sailing between Sandakan and Tawau was one of my delights, with steaming time well short of one day. Our route took us to the west of the Sibutu Islands and Sibutu Reef. The reef(s) are highly visible especially at low water. The waters around are bright blue, and crystal clear. These waters are also notorious for strong flowing currents, the direction of which is influenced by the prevailing monsoonal season. Whales frequent these areas and were often seen blowing and rising out of the water. These pods tended to linger in the area for some time, I assume feeding on the plankton and small crustaceans whipped up by the fast-flowing currents. It was always a time of great amusement as we sailed by with the whales all around, seemingly non-caring or oblivious to our presence.

Semporna is a small coastal township and is the southernmost port in Sabah, Close to Pulau Bum Bum at the tip of Semporna Peninsula around Darvel Bay. Like nearby Sandakan it was originally settled by Chinese traders so the Hakka language can still be heard. It does not feature a port as such, but rather a seafront area which is mainly for fishing boats and offshore scuba diving, and snorkelling vessels. It is a haven for the finest seafoods, which are readily available, cheap, and delicious. There is an anchorage about 400m off the Semporna pier which is about 40 ft long at the end of a coral causeway. There is a second pier of about 150 m long.

The only times we called at Sempora we anchored off as it was to land various crates of personal effects which were unloaded from the containers whilst on our deck by local labor, then loaded into small boats using our cranes.

Semporna is the gateway to diving in world-renowned island paradises like Sipadan, Mabul, Kapalai, Mataking, Sibuan, Mantabuan, Siamil and Pom Pom amongst others. There are many stilted dwellings that fringe the coastal area around Seporna, as well as stilted offshore resorts.

Tawau is the third largest city in Sabah after Kota Kinabalu and Sandakan. It is located on the Semporna Peninsula in the southeast coast of Sabah on the northern shore of Cowie Bay, and is bordered by the Sulu Sea to the East and the Celebes Sea to the south of Cowie Bay. By comparison with other regional cities Tawau is not so spectacular, nevertheless it is strategically positioned due to its proximity to the Kalimantan northern border, which is a great asset to its trade. The town is the cocoa capital for both Sabah and Malaysia which is reflected in the quantities exported from the port. Other major exports are Palm Oil and Timber.

There are two main wharf complexes for ocean going ships, a ferry terminal and several small jetties used by coastal craft. In addition, many ships anchor off the wharfs in Cowie Bay. Fleets of fishing vessels arrive and anchor off the fish market in the port every day, to discharge their catch. The open-air market is typical of those found in other ports in Sabah.

Wharf side at Tawau Port

The summaries of the various ports contained within this article are based on my memories and last visits made during the early 2000s. I should hasten to add, since then many upgrades to various ports may have taken place.

End

Note:

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