



The Tide Has Spoken

PULAU TIGA IN SABAH IS KNOWN AS "SURVIVOR" ISLAND, BECAUSE THE FIRST SEASON OF THE HIT TELEVISION SERIES WAS FILMED THERE. **DARYL YEP** SPENT A FEW DAYS THERE AND LIVED TO TELL ABOUT HIS ADVENTURES INCLUDING FROLICKING IN A MUDDY POOL AND SEARCHING FOR HIGHLY VENOMOUS SEA KRAITS



I was tempted to dive right in to the awesomely inviting turquoise waters as we arrived at the dock. The tranquil natural surroundings were reminiscent of an idyllic setting for a summer romance. The bright blue sunny sky, though scorching, was welcomed with much pleasure. We had in fact prepared for the worst after being informed that the past few days were cloudy with torrential rain. Sheer tranquillity, along with sun-drenched pristine beaches, is of the essence on an island escapade. Pulau Tiga, it seemed, had already fulfilled my simple desires.

The feeling of weariness I had earlier slowly dissipated. Somehow, the sound of crashing waves always has the miraculous ability to calm my senses. Any complaint suddenly became trivial. Now, I wasn't exactly being grouchy but seriously, travelling over five hours in three modes of transportation in a hot and humid day can somewhat sap one's strength, not to mention enthusiasm. The Kota Kinabalu International Airport was the closest we could get to Sabah before being whisked away by a van for a two-hour ride to Kuala Penyu, followed by a twenty-minute speedboat ride.

Though it took place a decade ago, avid fans of Survivor would probably still remember how corporate trainer Richard Hatch outlasted fifteen of his fellow Americans to become a millionaire after being marooned on Pulau Tiga for 39 days. Being the site of the very first season of not only Survivor US but also the UK version had generated wide publicity for Pulau Tiga and Malaysia as millions of viewers tuned in weekly to find out who was being eliminated.

Our arrivals were greeted by a large signboard that read "Survivor Island", naturally. Some of the props used during the filming of the reality show were also visible.

CLOSE ENCOUNTER WITH THE SLITHERY KIND

Our excursion to Snake Island was eagerly anticipated. Though not entirely without fear and anxiety. The infamous rocky volcanic outcrop, also known as Pulau Kalampunian Damit to the locals, is inhabited by hundreds of the Yellow-Lipped Sea Krait (*Laticauda colubrina*). The 20-minute speedboat ride to the island was probably too short a time for some of us who started to contemplate whether it was a good idea to set foot on the island at all.

To be apprehensive is understandable. Though I had posed almost cheek to cheek with a huge python for a shot, I reckoned that the highly venomous Yellow-Lipped wouldn't be as docile. Twice as poisonous as the King Cobra, a single bite from this sea krait would be enough to send someone to eternal slumber in no time. To paint a clearer picture, once bitten, one wouldn't even be able to make it back to Pulau Tiga alive. So, if Snake Island sounds dangerous, why are visitors still flocking to this place, you might ask? Honestly, the snakes are actually quite harmless

as they are rather inactive and lethargic during the day due to the heat. They will not attack humans unless stepped on or mishandled. They prefer to coil up among the rocks, tree roots and crevices in tree trunks and will only hunt for food in the sea at night.

Unlike true sea snakes that spend their entire life in the sea, the Yellow-Lipped come ashore to rest, digest their food, slough their skins, mate and lay eggs. They are hunted by the white-bellied sea eagles that circle low over the island. Hence, they head for the sea when it's high tide to minimise the risk of being caught by the eagles.

A few minutes later, our guide Nell found a pearly-blue snake with black bands resting among some rocks oblivious of curious intruders. Swiftly but gently he held the snakes for us to take a few close-up shots. Needless to say, as soon as we got what we headed there for, we made a dash to our boat knowing very well that it isn't a place for sightseeing.

On the way to Snake Island and on our way back, our boat passed by another island namely Pulau Kalampunian Besar or Sand Spit. It has been reduced to a strip of sand bar as a result of wave erosion.





Some land and sea-based challenges during *Survivor* were held there.

Both Pulau Kalampunian Besar and Pulau Kalampunian Damit, together with the main island, Pulau Tiga (meaning “Island of Three”) form the Pulau Tiga National Park. They were designated as forest reserve back in 1933 and finally gazetted as a park in 1978. It was only in 1998 that the Sipadan Dive Center signed an agreement with the park to develop the Pulau Tiga Resort which was completed in 2000.

If Pulau Kalampunian Besar and the creepy Pulau Kalampunian Damit are nothing to shout about, the same cannot be said about Pulau Tiga. It was apparently formed sometime on 21 September 1897 when a huge earthquake at Mindanao Island in the Philippines triggered a volcanic eruption at the northern part of Borneo. An island measuring 66 feet wide was formed as a result. The subsequent eruptions of the same volcano over the next 40 years and the eruptions of two adjacent mud volcanoes that expanded and coalesced formed the present Pulau Tiga.

The last eruption took place more than 60 years ago. Nevertheless, warm mud still oozes from these geothermal vents of the island. Pulau Tiga is currently about 4.5km long, 1.5km wide and covers an area of 20.7 sq km. Except for the resort and the Park Headquarters that occupy a small part of the island, majority of Pulau Tiga is still untouched vegetation.

A NATURAL SPA TREATMENT

Although nature and recreational attractions are aplenty on the island, no

trip to Pulau Tiga is complete without a dip in the mud volcanoes, not the eruptive kind but merely bubbling mud pool. The mud bath is said to have therapeutic effect, capable of curing rashes, for example. The prospect of getting a free natural spa treatment got all of us excited. We had to hike up the 1,100-metre scenic Pagong-Pagong Trail that leads to the Mud Volcano. The downpour last night made the trail extra slippery. After hiking for about half an hour, we were greeted by basically a large pool of mud.

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The muddy pond looked rather diluted, probably due to the rain. Not everyone would find the idea of coating themselves with natural mud appealing unless it's done in a spa. Some people are hesitant about jumping into the muddy pond. Perhaps, they are afraid that they might get sucked in, quicksand-style.

To prove that it's totally safe, Nell immediately stripped to his boxers and splashed into the pond, encouraging us to follow suit. The surprisingly cool mud was pleasant to soak in. Bubbles of thermal gas that rose to the surface every few minutes made “gloop” sounds.

Those who were convinced joined him to test the therapeutic effects of the mud, while others were satisfied to just observe from a nearby hut, built for visitors to leave their clothes and belongings.

As the mud in the pond was quite watery, any attempt to splatter it all over our body for a more realistic group photo was futile. All hope was not lost when Nell informed us that there is another small mud volcano with thicker mud which is specifically meant for “touching-up”.

If you want the mud to work its magic, don't wash it off before it is completely dry. Just lie on the sandy beach for a while before taking a dip in the sea to cleanse yourself.

WHAT ELSE TO DO?

Besides having props from *Survivor* scattered here and there on the island, names of the tribes were also being used. Hence, the beach on the northeast side of the island is called Pagong while the one on the southeast side is Tagi. Also, check out the Tribal Council.

Those who go jungle trekking at the various trails can see monitor lizards, macaque and proboscis monkeys, hornbills, sea eagles, and other flora and fauna. If you're lucky, you will find the Megapodes (*Megapodius Freycinet*), a ground dwelling bird that looks like a chicken but can meow like a cat!

Pulau Tiga also offers a number of dive sites but non-divers can enjoy snorkelling at a designated area near the resort, or try kayaking and fishing.