

CROSSING CULTURES



I logged off in February for a scuba diving adventure to Borneo. Apparently the massage muse was in my carry-on. Not long after settling in to Sipadan Water Village (SWV) on the island of Mabul, I heard raves about the resort's massage therapist. I was focused on diving, not massage, but when I heard people talk about booking second massages with this woman, I had to meet her.

I cozied up on the deck at sunset with her and three other resort employees who did their best to interpret her Bajau, a Philippino language not familiar to this area. Hajjah (the title given to Muslim women after they've completed their pilgrimage to Mecca) Suhaida Sahibad is 50 years old, a tiny dynamo. (For scale, I'm 5'4") Her mother-in-law taught her massage therapy 11 years ago, and she's been a midwife since she was 18. She doesn't read or write, but she knows she's been given the gift to practice massage and she lives to share it.

SWV is built on stilts just offshore from the tiny island, home to an estimated 5,000 people who aren't living nearly as well as the resort clients they expertly tend. As the village medicine woman, Hajjah uses bodywork and herbs. She says the sea is good medicine for the body. She's delivered some 400 babies—all survived.

Hand gestures and exquisite facial expressions help her communicate clearly with her tourist clients. She comes to clients' rooms, immediately improvising, positioning them prone on beds or chaise lounges, using towels, sarongs, or other clothing as draping. She uses a blend of local palm and coconut oils infused with garlic and ginger. Hajjah said she does four to five 45-minute massages a day and always showers first, prays, exercises, and stretches.

The resort price for traditional Bajau massage is MYR90 (Malaysian ringgits, about \$30) for 45 minutes. Hajjah gets a 30 percent commission, tips, and MYR1,000/month. In comparison with other locals, she's doing very well.

I wanted to know the secret to the light in her eyes. Hajjah smiled at me and replied, "The secret is only one: just pray. Everything goes to God. God will decide everything." And what advice would she give to her American counterparts? "Have an open heart when you do massage. Always be sincere in what you do and always pray to God. Good things will happen to your customers."

Thank you, Hajjah.

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