

Spratly Islands and Pulau Layang-Layang



Ir. Chin Mee Poon
www.facebook.com/chinmeepoon

Ir. Chin Mee Poon is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.

China's ongoing land reclamation works on Zamora Reef, Mischief Reef, Fiery Cross and two other reefs in the disputed Spratly Islands in South China Sea have raised many an eyebrow and protests, in particular from The Philippines and USA.

Spratly Islands consist of more than 750 reefs, atolls, cays, islets and islands, with a combined land area of only about 4sq.km. and spread over an area of more than 425,000sq.km. Surrounding countries, i.e. China, Taiwan, The Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei and Malaysia, all lay claim to all or parts of the Spratly Islands, turning the region into one of the most hotly contested regions in the world. All except Brunei have already taken measures to occupy some parts of the Spratly Islands.

The Spratly Islands are economically and strategically important. It is generally believed that the area holds potentially significant oil and natural gas reserves. In addition, the area is a productive fishing ground, sees heavy commercial shipping traffic and, should a country's claim be recognised, would boost its continental shelf substantially.

Our country lays claim to a small number of islands in the Spratly Islands that fall within our exclusive economic zone of 200 miles as defined by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Our navy currently occupies 3 islands—Swallow Reef (Pulau Layang-Layang), Ardasier Reef (Terumbu Ubi) and Mariveles Reef (Terumbu Mantanani).

Pulau Layang-Layang is about 300km north-west of Sabah. It is actually part of an oval-shaped atoll that measures 7km in length and 2km in width. About 3km of the coral reef becomes exposed when the tide is low.

Our government reinforced our sovereignty claim over the island by erecting a signboard on the coral reef in the middle of 1980. Three years later, land reclamation work started to



construct a permanent island over part of the atoll. In April 1986, our navy established a station on the 1.2km long x 200m wide island. In 1991, a holiday resort was built on the island. The island soon became a very popular diving destination in the South China Sea.

I first landed on Pulau Layang-Layang on the eve of Merdeka Day in 1997. I had gone there with two diving buddies to explore the undersea world around the island. Five years later, I made a second trip to that remote island. This time, our group had expanded to 15.

We flew from Kota Kinabalu in a 22-seater twin-propeller airplane which took just one hour to cross the sea. The air-strip occupies half the island longitudinally. The other half was occupied by the resort in the centre, flanked by the naval station on one side and a seabird rookery on the other. When my friends and I were not in the water, we spent a lot of time watching and interacting with the thousands of seabirds. We had a great time on the island.

The vast majority of the visitors to Pulau Layang-Layang are scuba divers; most of them are Europeans and Japanese. Malaysians only constitute about 10% of the visitors.

It is already 13 years since I last set foot on Pulau Layang-Layang. I really miss the colourful marine world and seabird colony there. ■