There are only a few floating markets in Asia.

One of the liveliest but least known of them is the one kilometer marine causeway at Sitangkai, Tawi-Tawi.

From dry wares being peddled at the manmade strand to the fresh produce being brandished on the boats, the Sitangkai market is a riot that transports you to a totally different world.

The main sea highway of Sitangkai, Tawi-Tawi, Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, the Philippines

Getting to Sitangkai from Bongao, Tawi-Tawi is a 3-3.5 hour boat ride.

Upon getting off at the Tumindao pier, I strayed from our party as I caught this Madonna and Child by the deck.

Having no time to change the settings of my camera, I took a prayer of a shot at low light. At 1/6 seconds, this is my slowest handheld shot ever.

Except for some expected softness around the mother, the infant’s outline came out sharper than I could ever hope.

On the boat at the pier of Tumindao, Sitangkai, Tawi-Tawi, Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, the Philippines
The Bajao and Samal people of Tawi-Tawi are fearless boat people then and now who brave the turbulent straights of Malacca, Sulu and Celebes for hundreds of years.

These traditional boats are made locally in the islands, particularly in Bongao and Sibutu.

Made of hardwood cured and bent by smoking, they are a wonder to witness being manufactured (we were lucky to see how this is done in the traditional manual method by a singular man!!!) and manouvred in the ocean.

What you see here are water taxis as seen from the boat that has to dock at an offshore pier in Tumindau, about 3 kilometers off Sitangkai island. Colorful and powerful, the boats are a source of pride for the people of Sulu.

Tumandau port, Sitangkai municipality, the Southernmost islands (of the country), Tawi-Tawi province, the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, the Philippines
The farming of the seaweed cottonii, Eucheuma striatum, began in the Philippines in the 1960s under the auspices of the University of Hawaii, USAID and Marine Colloids, a US carrageenan firm.

However, mariculture started seriously only in 1973 when a cultivar was discovered by a Sitangkai farmer called Tambalang.

This variety was later recognized as a totally different species (and genus) and renamed Kappaphycus alvarezi var. tambalang in honor of Mr. Vicente Alvarez, a biologist of the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources who became the first Manager of Marine Colloids and Mr. Tambalang, the true pioneers of cottonii cultivation.

Today, the Philippine still leads in the red seaweed farming and carrageenan manufacturing in the world.

at Tandubanak, Sibutu island, Sitangkai municipality, Tawi-Tawi province, the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, the Philippines
In our last afternoon in Sitangkai, we took on the boast that this local refreshment parlor has the best halo-halo in Tawi-Tawi (mixed fruits, beans, crushed ice, condensed milk, young coconut and ice cream- think of the Malay/Indonesia es kacang or es teller).

The sundae was exceptionally delectable (the claim is true!).

Most of all, the view from the second floor window directly over the floating fresh food market is enviable.

No complaint could be heard from me as I took in all the sights.

I am a Filipino who travels more than the next guy but what I experienced cannot be more exotic and surreal.

at the floating market highway of the island of Sitangkai, Tawi-Tawi province, the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, Sulu archipelago, the Philippines
I was on an open traditional temper boat when I took this shot.

My subject of course was the sun-bleached cottonii seaweed being dried on the platform of this traditional house on stilts in Sibutu island. (This is an official business trip after all).

The picturesque chance just presented itself: boards of attractive paint of teal over clear still waters at 8 early in the morning. The sun was not yet harsh and high so the reflections were long and lazy.

in barangay Ungus Ungus, Sibutu island, municipality of Sitangkai, Tawi-Tawi province, the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, Sulu archipelago, the Philippines
Freshly caught— that was what they were. Sitangkai is in the basin of the Sulu Sea teeming with marine life.

Being Muslim, the people of Tawi-Tawi rely on fish for protein.

Beef is practically non-existent as the islands in Sitangkai are small. Goats and chicken are also few.

But when you have a bounty of the sea right at your doorstep, you would not really miss terra firma meat.

in the public market of the island of Sitangkai, Tawi-Tawi province, the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, Sulu archipelago, the Philippines
The Bajaos are the seafaring gypsies of Sulu.

They are excellent boatbuilders and deep-sea divers. Like the Samal people, the Bajaos find it unimaginable to live on "enchanted" and "wild" land (kappat).

The Samals however opt to live in real houses albeit on stilts by the reef.

Taking the superstition to the extreme, most Bajaos prefer to live in houseboats (koboh).

A telltale sign of the Bajao women is their affinity to wear a purung or scarf wound around their head.

The floating market highway of the island of Sitangkai, Tawi-Tawi province, the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, Sulu archipelago, the Philippines
Such a loss these baby sharks are. However in the sea culture of the Bajao and Samals of Tawi-Tawi, sharks are their enemies at sea so the creatures become fodder to the people as well.

Eye for an eye.

No wonder then that the name they apppellate to the shark is saitan as derived from Satan, the devil.

The hunt for sharks in the islands are thankfully limited as the delicacy is only among the local Bajao and Samal populace.

at a dock in Barangay Tandubanak, Island of Sibutu, Municipality of Sitangkai, the province of Tawi-Tawi, Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, Sulu, the Philippines
In the late 80s, a Cebuano folk singer had a monstrous hit, Baleleng. Up to now, the song remains popular and it was not until years later, when I first visited Sitangkai, that I realized that the strange dialect was Samal.

The 2nd line above is the giveaway. It means Baleleng is going to Sitangkai from Sibutu.

My mistake now was that I forgot to ask the full lyrics and translation of the traditional Samal folk song.

Sometime soon I will. At the island of Sitangkai, Tawi-Tawi province, the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, Sulu archipelago, the Philippines
We were on our way back to Sitangkai from Sibutu island when the sky suddenly dimmed. It was high noon and the clouds descended obscuring the brightness.

What happened next was strange- the heavens turned soft blue. Without any water movement, the horizon disappeared and the water and sky wed together and the horizon disappeared.

This was exactly what I saw- surreal!

Sibutu island, Municipality of Sitangkai, Tawi-Tawi province, the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, Sulu archipelago, the Philippines
The boy was waving the fish he most probably caught by himself.

Life is hard in Sitangkai. As evidenced in his scabied knees and torn shirt, the poverty incidence is high, probably around 60%.

While food may be abundantly at their doorstep, access to necessities in life is no easy matter.

The floating market highway of the island of Sitangkai, Tawi-Tawi province, the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, Sulu archipelago, the Philippines

It was past 7 in the morning and we were getting ready to survey Sibutu island. The scene that greeted me is entirely out of context for most Filipinos. Yes, morning scenes are busy everywhere.

In Sitangkai however, where about 50,000 people live not on land but the reef, the traffic is not on land.

Except for a man-made causeway, all roads are waterways. I don't think they have any name.
In the water streets of the island of Sitangkai, Tawi-Tawi province, the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, Sulu archipelago, the Philippines

Let me tell you about the story of 5 "vicious" dogs.

Notorious of having bitten at least 2 strangers, they scare everyone.

The problem is, the bathroom is separated from the house and can only be accessed through the yard where these guard dogs roam.

There is one technique to chase them away though.

Just shout "Tubig init!".

When they were young, their owner used to splash them with hot water whenever they get too unruly, with an accompanying scream "Tubig init!" (Hot water!).

Strange, funny but true.

Pavlovian techniques work!
I've been meaning to get a good picture of the jackfruit for the longest time.

It is the favorite fruit of my brother who's been dreaming of this sweetest of yellow manna in the States.

When in Sitangkai, from my 2nd floor vantage point, I spotted a vendor quartering the fruit, I knew I had to make this shot.

As a bonus, the boy noticed me and gave me a knowing smile.

So Jack, this is for you! (in the floating market highway of the island of Sitangkai, Tawi-Tawi province, the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, Sulu archipelago, the Philippines)

I really meant to document how seaweed is bleached and dried under the sun in Sibutu.
Instead I got sidetracked by these pigeons feeding off the maggots squirming beneath the bed.

It takes 2-3 days for freshly harvested seaweed at 90-93% water to dry to about 40%.

Meantime, the cycle of life streams on: insects bear eggs on the wet succulent algae and birds feast over them.

Photo in barangay Ungus Ungus, Sibutu island, municipality of Sitangkai, Tawi-Tawi province, the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, Sulu archipelago, the Philippines

The main thoroughfare in Sitangkai is a narrow waterway that is only about 20 feet wide. Business thrives most densely when the big ferry arrives from Bongao.

When we turned up that day at around 4 in the afternoon, the water streets spilled with boats and the man-made causeways teemed with crowds. People simply gravitate towards this center of the town.

Whether to gawk at passersby or to buy for their dinner (refrigerators are rare in the island which has no municipal electricity), the sea of faces was a warm familiar welcome to the urbanity in me.

Picture at left taken in the floating market highway of the island of Sitangkai, Tawi-Tawi province, the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, Sulu archipelago, the Philippines
It was high noon and the tide was ebbing.

Families were harvesting the seaweed which they have cultivated for 45 days.

The boat I was in literally crawled over the coralline reef. Navigating was most hard as the water was too low.

What I remembered most was the most eerie feeling of silence. Except for the occasional swish made by the farmers the mirror sea was still.

Sitangkai, the Southernmost islands of the country in Tawi-Tawi province, the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, the Philippines

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Sitangkai Photos and text by FARL